

THE ENGLISH LISTENING-SPEAKING CORNERSTONES

หลักสำคัญพื้นฐานในการสร้างเสริมทักษะการฟัง-พูดภาษาอังกฤษ

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Abstract

This quantitative research aims to improve students' language competency. Four-different-area focus tools: "True Calling" (pronunciation), "Drop Me Off" (stressing), "Pick Me Up" (listening comprehension), and "Speak It Out" (speaking) were used to help students mitigate their weak learning areas and strengthen both receptive (listening) and productive (speaking) skills. Prior to the experiment, TOEIC test were used as a pretest and post test. Sixty-seven students in the Conversational English classes were chosen to be participants. This research began with the pronunciation, stressing, Listening comprehension, speaking tools consecutively. This research also includes the interview sessions of three American educators. In addition, the questionnaire helped the researcher understand the participants' background language competency and individual interests towards the focused communicative skills. The results show that the participants performed better in some areas. In further research, some factors should be focused more on the background environment, with native English speakers (as peers) and on more demanding immersion situations.

Keywords: Listening-speaking skills, scaffolding, English communication

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อพัฒนาความสามารถทางภาษาของนักศึกษา โดยการเน้นทักษะการฟัง การออกเสียง การเน้นเสียงหนัก-เบาและการพูด โดยใช้เครื่องมือ 4 ชนิด คือ "True Calling" (การออกเสียง) "Drop Me Off" (การเน้นเสียงหนัก-เบา) "Pick Me Up" (การฟัง) และ "Speak It Out" (การพูด) เครื่องมือเหล่านี้จะช่วยลดจุดอ่อนในการเรียนของนักศึกษา ในงานวิจัยนี้คือ นักศึกษา จำนวน 67 คน ที่เรียนในรายวิชาสนทนาภาษาอังกฤษ การวิจัยมีการสอบ pre-test และ post-test โดยใช้ข้อสอบ TOEIC หลังจากนั้นเครื่องมือ 4 ชนิดดังกล่าวได้ถูกนำมาใช้โดยเริ่มจากการออกเสียง การเน้นเสียงหนัก-เบา การฟัง และการพูดโดยลำดับ ในงานวิจัยนี้มีการสัมภาษณ์ผู้ให้การศึกษาชาวอเมริกัน 3 ท่าน นอกจากนี้แบบสอบถามภูมิหลังความสามารถในภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาทำให้เข้าใจ ความสนใจด้านทักษะการฟัง-พูดของนักศึกษาแต่ละคน ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่า กลุ่มตัวอย่างมีพัฒนาการในบางทักษะ

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แต่ขณะเดียวกันมีความก้าวหน้าน้อยในการใช้เครื่องมือบางอย่าง แต่ถึงกระนั้น กลุ่มตัวอย่างต้องการเวลามากกว่านี้ เพื่อพัฒนาทักษะทางภาษาของตนเอง ในการศึกษาครั้งต่อไป ควรมีการพิจารณาปัจจัยที่เกี่ยวข้องกับสิ่งแวดล้อมภูมิหลัง โดยผู้ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาแม่ (เป็นผู้ประเมิน) และใช้สถานการณ์ที่ทำให้กลุ่มตัวอย่างตั้งใจปฏิบัติมากขึ้น

คำสำคัญ: ทักษะการฟัง-พูด วิธีการที่ช่วยพัฒนาทักษะ การสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษ

Introduction

Inappropriate pronunciation, the problems of stressing, problem in listening and in speaking often occur among EFL students and seem to be a multi-dimensional task in EFL classroom teaching. Brown (2001) wrote that communicative competence should be the goal of a language classroom and the focus should be on using language in “fluency, accuracy in authentic language and contexts, and real world” (p. 69).

Accordingly, several problems of majority EFL students are in listening and speaking. First, young EFL students start absorbing the deviant pronunciation/enunciation from some non-native English speakers. Some theories postulate that young children have great advantages in learning languages, normally at the age of 12-15. After puberty, the ability to acquire language skills gradually declines and the learners almost never “sound like natives or foreign accent” or it is said “the number of years of exposure contributes greatly to the overall communicative fluency of the learners, starting age determines the levels of accuracy achieved, particularly in pronunciation” (Brown, 2000: 59; O’Brien, 2004: 1; Nunan, 1999: 41). The second problem is the inadequate teaching of the stresses, pronunciation, and sound systems resulting in “faulty stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns

cause greater difficulty for hearers...” (Nunan, 1999: 107; Elliott, 1997: 95).

Finally, some EFL students’ listening comprehension has been hindered on the continuum. Basic pronunciation has not been taught in a technical manner resulting in being unable to divide words into syllabic units and to pronounce each syllable of the words correctly in an EFL environment. This situation is a serious impediment to EFL students’ learning English; their English competency eventually reaches a plateau.

Literature Review

Real world content plays a major role in second language acquisition, foreign programs: *Friends* or *CSI Miami*. These real world contents indicated that the value of visual learning through video helps second language learners to develop their listening-speaking and vocabulary skills and have a mind-set of cultural knowledge in communication called “indiscrimination” in the concept of communicative competence: words, sounds, and structure of the language (Weyers, 1999: 340; Saville-Troike, 2006: 100).

Theoretically, Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 182; Saville-Troike, 2006: 45; Brown, 2000: 278; 2001: 361; Lightbown & Spada, 2003: 39; Rost, 2008: 8-9) focuses on

the production of a language, several stages in the acquisition of a second language. First, learners perceive all types of information “input” or “zero option.” Learners perceive and understand data (comprehensible input) with their own interpretation. Second, all data are recorded and internalized as learners’ acquiring the language, also called *intake* (Grove, 1999: 819); they understand an advanced message compared to their competencies. Finally, the learners are able to produce the meaningful language fluently through interaction in order for accomplishing tasks (Lightbown & Spada, 2003: 40). However, similar to Savignon’s interpretation of form and accuracy without the provision for opportunities improving communication skills in the target language; Brown (2000) believed target language may possibly be far from learners’ competencies expressed as *i+2* or *i+0* being either overwhelming or totally not challenging (p. 278).

Tananuraksakul (2013: 105, 112) believed that power distance (PD) and positive reinforcement directly affected the improvement of students’ listening-speaking skills in her research. PD, developed by Hofstede in 1970, refers to “the degree a society accepts differences in power” which is divided into high PD, authoritative position, and low PD, the self-governing and personal responsibilities. The researcher found that a high PD influenced specifically the students’ confidence in their oral skills. At a low level of high PD together with positive reinforcement, it evidently builds up students’ positive beliefs in their phonetic skills reinforces and improves those skills.

Objectives

This research attempted to improve each skill of EFL students: pronunciation/enunciation, stressing, listening comprehension, and speaking and to strengthen them with related skills. The intent of the research includes the following:

1. To discover EFL students’ strengths and weaknesses in communication skills
2. To strengthen and constantly develop their listening-speaking skills for their future progress in English.
3. To monitor and use effective methods of teaching as creative modals suitable for facilitating the students’ learning abilities.

Research Methodology

Participants

All 67 freshmen English major students at Huachiew Chalermprakiet University (HCU), taught in semester 2 (2010, 2011 academic years) were the subjects.

Instruments

This research looks at the tools as scaffolding that aim to alleviate the problems as well as to develop the students’ learning at their level of development (zone of proximal development [ZPD]) (Ko, Schallert & Walters, 2003: 303; Lightbown & Spada, 2003: 65; Saville-Troike, 2006: 72). The instruments are the combination of pronunciation and stressing tools “True Calling-Drop Me Off,” listening comprehension “Pick Me Up,” and speaking “Speak It Out.”

“True Calling-Drop Me Off”

This tool adopted the combination concept of Natural Approach and Communicative Competence in terms of accuracy (Elliott, 1997:

95; Weyers, 1999: 340) in the way of accentuating on sound of syllables. It is a vocabulary sheet with unfamiliar words (for the students) in real life situations written by Goodman D.J. et al in *Advancing Vocabulary Skills* published by Townsend Press in 1990. The list is divided into items. Each item contains a word and multiple choices which show separated syllables of the word differently. All participants listen to their instructor's pronunciation three times then repeat the word and draw a stress sign above the syllable of the word stressed. The learners "hear before they try to produce language" and "know how to say it appropriately and accurately in any given situation" (Richards & Rogers, 2001: 179; Brown, 2001: 24; Saville-Troike, 2006: 55). This tool also adopts the concept of imitation from parents or caretakers' correct pronunciation, even though learners may not understand the meaning (Brown, 2000: 38), yet assimilate "a phonological code" (Pinker, 1994: 156).

"Pick Me Up"

The "Pick Me Up" tool design was based on the real-life situations of a native English speaker and a graduate non-native English student of a university in Minnesota and the communicative approach with grammatical abilities, understanding the relationships of interlocutors, meaningful contents, and communicative circumstances (Brown, 2000: 38; Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 35; Saville-Troike, 2006: 44; Taguchi, 2005: 5). In this research, ten questions for listening comprehension were raised. The participants had to answer the

questions after hearing a message read, and the correct answers were calculated for scores. The comprehensible contents with expressions and idioms, including vocabulary (as the content tools) conjoined in the listening were the focus. Key words played another major role in order for students to be ready for the listening practice and to use "content schema" (Jung, 2003: 563) to help master the tasks. Then, they can improve and elevate their listening skills in the later listening sets.

"Speak It Out"

After experiencing and understanding the concept of the pronunciation-stressing and listening tools, the participants had to demonstrate the progress of their speaking skills with proper pronunciation, stressing, and listening comprehension. This required proper pronouncing, accurate academic speaking, and fluency with meaningful contents. The evaluation was based on scoring in the form of pronunciation/enunciation (sounds), accurate generalizations based on outside sources, speaking with supporting evidences, the elements of academic speaking (consequences), and clarity of expressions.

TOEIC

The listening sections of the aptitude test were used for pretest and post test. The scores of the tests detected the participants' abilities before and after the experiment, this showed the progress of the participants' English competency.

Procedures

Participants took the pretest of the TOEIC aptitude test (64 items of pictures, questions

to answer, short conversations, and short talks). The scores were allocated and kept confidential. The test was reused for the post test. The scores showed the tendency of the skills cultivation from the four tools.

In the first week, the “True Calling-Drop Me Off” tools were used in the pronunciation section. The participants had the vocabulary sheets with multiple choices of syllabic division. They have to distinguish sounds on a regular basis. Carruthers (1987) points out, “Pronunciation...should be isolated and taught one at a time...attention paid to voicing...will result in immediate improvement in the pronunciation” (p. 193).

In the second week, the participants had to divide the words into syllables on the pronunciation-stressing Set II (40 items) and again mark the stressing sign on stressed syllables in the words.

From week 3-10, the participants spent eight weeks experiencing listening different true stories of a native English speaker and a graduate non-English speaker. The researcher created ten questions from the story each week. Each participant had only a blank paper to respond to questions 1-10 and to answer the questions briefly but to the point. At this point, taking notes was introduced and highly recommended. Arnold, 2000: 778, 784; Kwai, 2011: 78; Gannaway, 2011: 9; Moore & Carreon, 2011: 7 states that ... listening is the core of language acquisition in terms of gaining comprehensive input as “raw materials” necessary for the speaking process to begin, understand the contents, and “pay attention.” The par-

ticipants basically experienced new vocabulary, proper names, phrasal verbs, idiomatic expressions in everyday lives of the native English speaker.

At the end of the semester, the last couple of weeks were reserved for speaking. Each participant made his own individual speech (in the class) under categories: adventure, stories, travel, basically from applicable commercials, related to the course. The evaluation used to measure the progress concentrated on grammar, pronunciation, appropriate word choice, and speaking techniques. The speaker raise questions for the participants to clarify because “the listener had a task to perform and could not do so without clarity on the part of the speaker” and to “express meaning spontaneously creating language (Grove, 1999: 826; Salaberry & Lopez-Ortega, 1998: 518).

Results and Findings

The outcome of this research was on the positive side on the continuum. At this point, the results and findings will be analyzed in different organizational formats, based on pronunciation, listening, speaking, pretest-post test, and statistical grade results and their summary.

A question is raised: What effective teaching methods will help solve the problems? Brown (2001) wrote that communicative competence should be the goal in “fluency, accuracy in authentic language and contexts, and real world” (p. 69). The problems of stressing, listening, and speaking seem to be a multi-dimensional task in the EFL classroom teaching:

First, EFL students started absorbing the deviant pronunciation and enunciation from non-native English speakers. Second, the teaching of stressing at fundamental levels is insufficient

(supra-segmental phonology). Last, basic pronunciation has never been taught properly and in a technical manner.

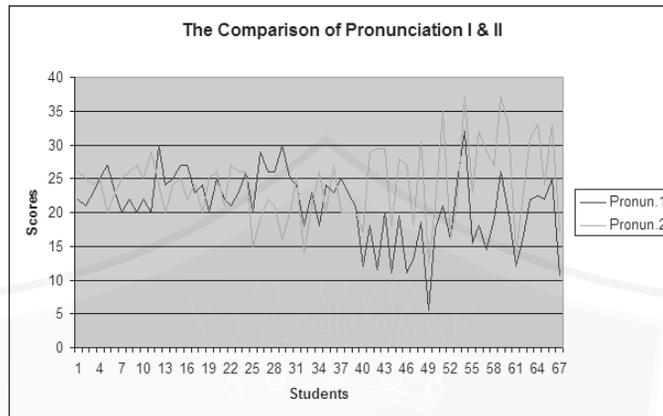


Figure A The Comparison of Pronunciation I & II

These participants were unfamiliar with the syllabic units when working on the pronunciation tasks. Three interesting issues must be analyzed, based on the above graph. The pronunciation I and II (*True Calling-Drop Me Off*) consisted of 40 items. Both tests had exactly the identical items. A score of 24 items correct was passing. On pronunciation test I, 23 students scored

≥24 (60% or more). On pronunciation test II, 37 students scored ≥24 for a percent of 60%. A comparison between test I and II showed a gain of 14 students passing (20.9%). The majority of participants' scores under 24 points may be attributed to three different factors in the matter of new unknown words, liaison, and background syllabic unit experience.

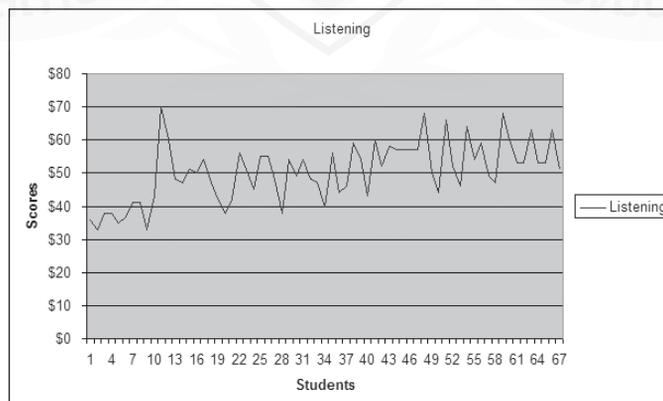


Figure B Listening

The listening tool (*Pick Me Up*) consisted of eight formal tests with one total score of 80. A score of 40 points correct was passing. 58 students (86.56%) scored ≥ 40 (50% or more), showing a good level of listening comprehension. This revealed that the majority of the participants understood the contents and answered the questions satisfactorily. This is matched to question 11 on the questionnaire in that participants (42.5% (34) of all participants) paid close attention to pronunciation, stressing, and vocabulary when listening. And 41.25% of the participants (33) preferred jotting down key

words while listening as well.

In 1987, Richards explained that listeners generally focus on prepositions when expressing and making use of knowledge to decode the meaning and use the knowledge of syntax (dividing clusters) together with grammatical skills in the target language and “real world knowledge” to construct their own comprehension. Yet, both syntax and grammatical skills are complicated for some listeners. Hence, listeners may apply the knowledge of the real world as a “bypass” to help them understand incoming discourse (p. 162).

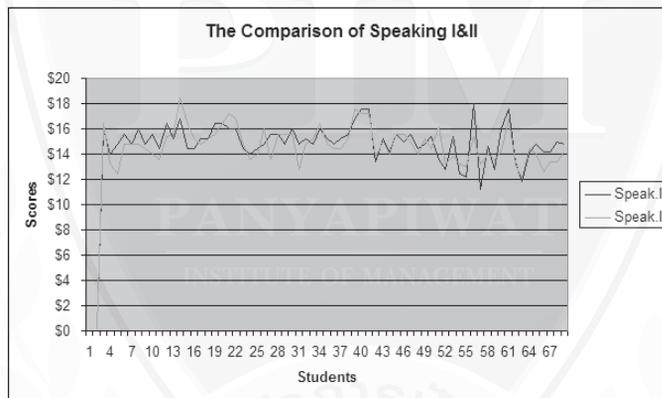


Figure C The Comparison of Speaking I & II

The speaking test (*Speak It Out*) I and II each total score was 20. A score of 15 (75%) was passing. On speaking test I, 34 (50.75%) students scored ≥ 15 (75% or more). On speaking test II, 29 students scored ≥ 15 for a percent of 43.28%. A comparison between test I and test II of each student showed that 5 students' scores lower than 15, for a percentage of -7.46%. Interestingly, a few participants showed small progress in 2-3 scores—the participants at 12th,

24th, and 49th. 16.4% difference between these two groups can be analyzed in that the gap of speaking competency is significant but reveals the readiness of participants to improve their speeches. Considering the categories of speaking, the topics were general and of wide choice for the participants. Also these topics were relevant to their interests. This would give more self-confidence for the participants when they spoke with opportunity and freedom to use the second

language in an open-ended setting...to elicit the greatest amount of speech production” (Weyers, 1999: 342).

As Gannaway (2011) mentioned in the interview, Scarcella (1987) also suggested that the possible activity that promotes social interaction of language learners is through

“social-drama” (student-centered). It may help the learners to develop “vocabulary, grammar, discourse strategies, and strategies for social interaction, to promote cultural understanding, and to elicit oral production” (p. 208-9) and “to emancipate the language barrier,” besides learning the language in regular classrooms.

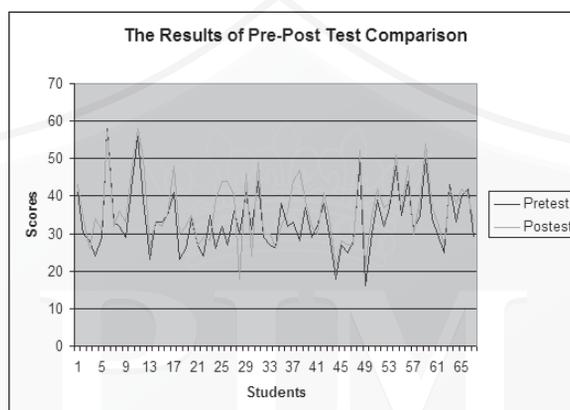


Figure D The Results of Pre-Post Test Comparison

The pretest and post test consisted of identical 64 items. A score of 32 (50%) correct was passing. On the pretest, 37 (55.22%) students scored ≥ 32 (50% or more). On the post test, 47 students scored ≥ 32 for a percent of 70.15%. A comparison between pretest and post test showed a gain of 10 students passing, for a percent gain of 14.93%. This percentage implies that most participants comprehend and know how to apply the skills they have practiced in pronunciation, stressing, and listening comprehension into the post test.

Similar to these participants’ language improvement, the graph displays the 24th-27th and 37th-38th participants’ large scores of nine to fourteen scores improvement on the post

test (14-20%). 7.5% of participants showed elevation of language competency. Statistically, these scores reveal that the tools helped the participants improve their language competency. These participants were exposed to English when they were younger than seven years old, focusing on all English skills and socializing with native English speakers, according to the questionnaire. The result confirms that in this group the participants’ language background was built properly, including their interests in the English language field.

Unfortunately, there were two (the 28th and 30th) participants, (around 3% of 67 participants) who had decreased scores at eight to twelve scores (10.9% and 18.75%) respectively on the

post test. This signifies that the two participants may need extra hours of consistent exposure to the English language.

Conclusion

The four scaffolding tools played some significant roles in these participants' learning progress. Several factors: "Practice, time, and environment settings" (Kwai, 2011; Gannaway, 2011) may have contributed to the results found in this study. New vocabulary caused the participants struggled new vocabulary in listening, in terms of comprehension. In regular language classrooms, instructors must provide a lecture based on the strategies of word guessing and based on context to the learners.

As a consequence, this research specifically responded to the objectives in discovering the students' competencies, refreshing knowledge and improving the students' skills, and searching for effective methods of teaching the second language learners:

1. The scaffolding tools helped find individual's target language ingenuity and pinpointed precise levels of the skills: syllabic units, pronunciation, stressing, listening comprehension, and speaking that the students primarily need in order to enhance their language learning reaching individual ultimate goals.

2. The scaffolding tools allowed the students to revive/practice/improve how to distinguish syllabic sounds, word pronunciation, and stressing through vocabulary to explore the main contents in listening practices and utterances.

3. The scaffolding tools were creative

methods to rectify such skills barriers, even though it takes times to cultivate and improve. The results elicit earning progress of the students. Hence, the students enable to apply the skills to deal with a bewilderment of pragmatic, phonetics, and semantics in complicated academic contents at a higher level of language competency.

In the light of a second language learning progress, educators have to realize the needs of learners as a whole and endeavor to help them ameliorate their English competency by creating related programs and learning environments (immersion) which are "feasible, cost-effective or context-appropriate learning is possible in most L2 teaching/learning situations" (Arndt, Harvey & Nuttall, 2000: 62). These key elements are, for example, native English speakers (native English teachers and peers), an English-speaking environment, and facilities accessing the target language.

In the interviews with American educators, both Kwai and Gannaway agreed on the value of the immersion setting. Kwai saw it as an "English Zone, International Campus, or International Building" where everything is in an English environment that would help second language learners to acquire "enunciation of pronunciation that is actually very native, very local to English." On the other hand, Gannaway focused mainly on the instructional aspect. She believed that immersion is the key to helping students' language improvement, especially when it is implemented through regular classroom teaching—the target language

used in the instruction. However, Vogel (2009) concentrated on low-English-competency students, insisting that there must be moments when the students can use their first language to assist their target language learning—immersion with some usage of a first language in clarifying in the learning process.

For further research, it would be interesting to concentrate on an immersion setting in our institution. The institution may consider positive outcomes (and also risk factors) which can contribute to and enhance the effective domain in language teaching through immersion education.

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