

Thai EFL University Students' Beliefs in English-Speaking Fluency

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Article information	Abstract
<p>Article history: Received: 2 Mar 2023 Accepted: 25 Jul 2024 Available online: 6 Aug 2024</p> <p>Keywords: Students' beliefs English-speaking fluency Thai EFL university students</p>	<p><i>Though there is an urgent need to improve Thai graduates' ability to speak English fluently, very few studies have focused on students' fluency in language teaching in Thailand. The study investigated 86 third-year university students' beliefs regarding English-speaking fluency, including the characteristics and importance of fluency and the factors promoting and hindering students' English-speaking fluency. Through a mixed-methods design, i.e., a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journal entries, the results revealed that majority of the participants perceived fluency as referring to the flow of speech with few reasonable pauses. Most of them believed that fluency was important for speaking skills, that it enabled effective communication, that fluency should be prioritized over accuracy, and that those who could speak English fluently looked impressive. However, the findings showed different views among the student participants on whether accuracy can lead to fluency. Moreover, a large proportion of them still believed that speaking accurately was also important for effective communication. Interestingly, the findings also showed that some of the participants believed that fluency constituted a high rate of speech which is not supported by the literature. They believed that exposure to English, living in a good English environment, delayed corrective feedback from the teachers, using media, and participating in speaking activities could improve their English-speaking fluency. Contrastingly, individual affective factors including anxiety, lack of motivation and confidence, lack of linguistic knowledge, and immediate corrective feedback hindered their English-speaking fluency. The results also raise an awareness about Thai EFL university students' beliefs regarding English-speaking fluency for teachers, educators, students, curriculum designers, and material creators.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

English is considered a medium used widely and internationally not only for communication but also for job opportunities and academic purposes (Yuh & Kaewurai, 2021). However, many Thai university students who are part of the country's future manpower are not able to communicate in English fluently and appropriately (Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021). Compared to workers in neighboring countries like Malaysia, Thai employees' English-speaking skills are

rather low even though their professional skills are equally high (Kaur et al., 2016). Thai students may feel insecure in competing against other candidates with higher English proficiency from other countries in the job market. Therefore, improving Thai workers' English communication skills could be beneficial to securing their place in the global work market (Choomthong, 2014). Many sectors involved in Thai education aim to enhance Thai students' English proficiency, particularly speaking skills, to meet both global and local demands (Khamkhien, 2010).

While both accuracy and fluency are the two aspects that can predict whether students will be successful in their speaking, the problem is that teachers generally focus on accuracy over fluency as they believe that accuracy is the priority (Srivastava, 2014). In Thailand, students encounter various problems regarding the improvement of their speaking skills. Their teachers rely on teacher-centered methods, and the overuse of L1 in teaching and providing negative feedback to students (Yuh & Kaewurai, 2021). Learners learn English primarily in its written form causing them to not be able to speak English effectively (Choomthong, 2014; Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2019). This implies that fluency might not have been promoted sufficiently in Thai EFL classrooms.

To improve students' speaking skills, fluency should be considered one of the most important aspects. To become a successful English speaker, fluency development should be a part of the listed criteria (Hedge, 2001). It is noteworthy that speaking fluency is one aspect of communicative competence. Speakers who are able to speak fluently can deliver their speech continuously, preventing comprehension difficulties for their interlocuter, and getting their intended message across more effectively (Yang, 2014a). A fluent speaker can also communicate more smoothly, spontaneously, naturally and impressively (Rahayu, 2022). Dinh and Tran (2020) revealed the results of their study that 99 % of the student participants agreed that speaking fluency is significantly necessary for their future jobs. Similarly, Yang (2014a) found that the majority of teachers and students in the EFL context considered speaking fluency to be vital in the EFL communicative classes. Therefore, EFL learners should be trained to speak English fluently (Yang, 2014b).

Apart from teachers, curriculum and teaching materials, students are the most important factor in the classroom (Srivastava, 2014). Students' beliefs about teaching and learning refer to their understanding about teaching and learning including their teaching and learning preferences for how they are taught and learn and what the teachers' and the students' roles are (Chan & Elliott, 2004 as cited in Lee & Branch, 2018). During the learning process, students' beliefs tend to be influential on their perceptions and behaviors (Brown & Harris, 2012; Huisman et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding students' beliefs could predict their actions and enable teachers to adjust the curriculum and lessons to meet students' satisfaction regarding improving their oral fluency. Although teachers' beliefs in several aspects (e.g., Alghanmi & Shuki, 2016; Farrell & Yang, 2017; Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018) have been widely studied and some research on students' beliefs (e.g., Hu & Tian, 2012; Huisman, et al., 2020) has gained more attention, students' beliefs on oral fluency have largely been understudied. To improve students' fluency in speaking, students' beliefs regarding oral fluency should be investigated. Therefore, this study aims to explore Thai EFL university students' beliefs in oral fluency and also provide more useful information in this aspect to help improve students' speaking fluency in order to enhance their overall speaking performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Fluency and its importance

Fluency is considered a goal for speaking courses (Richards, 2008) and it can predict students' success in foreign language learning (Ho, 2018). Fluency is considered one of the most important aspects for promoting effective communication (Dinh & Tran, 2020; Hedge, 2001; Yang, 2014a, 2014b). As speakers with fluency are able to communicate more effectively, it is necessary to promote speaking fluency in EFL classrooms (Yang, 2014a). Fluent speakers can deliver their speech fluidly, avoid comprehension difficulties for their listeners and get their intended message across more effectively (Goh & Burns, 2012; Yang, 2014a, 2014b). It is also the key element of a successful English speaker (Hedge, 2001) and of communicative competence (Yang, 2014b). Several scholars have defined the meaning of fluency which are as follows.

To begin with, Goh and Burns (2012) define fluency as speech that is delivered coherently with few reasonable pauses and hesitations, preventing listeners from experiencing comprehension difficulties. This is supported by Bailey (2005) who defines fluency as the ability to speak continuously with confidence at a rate related to the norms of the native speakers community. Moreover, Wood (2007) states that fluency can be accessed through temporal variables of speech e.g., speed and pauses. In short, speakers with fluency are able to communicate fluidly, confidently, and with few pauses and hesitations.

Furthermore, Lennon (1990) defines fluency both narrowly and broadly. In a narrow sense, fluency is speech that is produced at a rate similar to native speakers which is not hindered by, for example, pauses, hesitation, self-correction, false starts or repetition. The focus is on the flow of the speech (Richards, 2006). This is relevant to the definitions given by several scholars that have been previously mentioned (e.g., Bailey, 2005; Goh & Burns, 2012; Wood, 2007). However, in a broad sense, fluency also covers "oral proficiency" (Lennon, p. 389). Similarly, Richards (2006) also stated that in a broad term, fluency is the natural use of language with a meaningful interaction and having comprehensible and ongoing communication. Likewise, Wood (2010) stated that in a general sense, fluency refers to using spoken language effectively similar to native speakers with a high overall level of speaking proficiency.

Tavakoli and Hunter (2018, p. 343) further classified fluency into four levels. First, a very narrow level involves speed, breakdown, and repair. Next, a narrow level includes ease, flow and continuity separating from accuracy and complexity. Another level is a broad level which refers to L2 speaking ability, for example, speakers who can speak English confidently and are able to communicate their intended message effectively. The last level is a very broad level which involves mastering the language and general L2 English proficiency.

2. Fluency activities

Richards (2006) pointed out that practices for promoting fluency are different from those focusing on accuracy. Fluency activities focus on the natural use of language and successful communication by using language that is meaningful and unpredictable along with the use of

communication strategies in a communicative context. Tavakoli and Hunter (2018) mentioned five types of fluency practices in their study including formulaic sequences, pre-task planning time, task repetition, the 4/3/2 techniques, and awareness-raising activities which are supported by many scholars. To begin with, Wood (2010) stated that generally formulaic sequences are defined as “multiword units of language which are stored in long-term memory as if they were single lexical units.” (p. 38). Wray (2000) supported the focus on formulaic sequences which can increase students’ fluency and confidence. Several studies (e.g., Üstünbaş & Ortactepe, 2016; Wood, 2007) focused on improving students’ oral fluency through the use of formulaic sequences. Familiarizing students with formulaic expressions can help them retrieve the expressions easily from memory when they come across the situations in which they can use such expressions (Zafar, 2013). It also helps speakers to manage their speech under time pressure (Davies, 2014).

Pre-task planning time is supported by Goh and Burns’s (2012) who included a stage for providing input or guide planning in his model for teaching speaking. This allows time for students to plan what to say and how to say it in advance. For example, teachers can provide them with the language structures they need for the task (Willis, 1996). Several studies (e.g., Abdi et al., 2012, Mohammadipour & Rashid, 2015) focused on using the pre-task planning time to promote fluency. For task repetition, several studies (e.g., Bozorgian & Kanani, 2017; Dawadi, 2019) revealed the positive effect that task repetition has on promoting students’ fluency and speaking skills. Through rehearsal and recycling the language several times, it has an impact on increasing fluency in their oral speech (Goh & Burns, 2012).

Furthermore, the 4/3/2 technique which was created by Maurice (1983) allows students to prepare what to talk about on a given topic. They will talk about the same topic three times, but the time they spend talking with three different partners gradually decreases from four to two minutes. When the learners talk about the same topic repeatedly, their confidence in their speaking ability increases. Previous studies (e.g., Macalister, 2014; Yang, 2014a) found that 4/3/2 activities could promote students’ speaking fluency. Lastly, Tavakoli and Hunter (2018) pointed out that awareness-raising activities can improve students’ oral fluency by raising their awareness of characteristics of fluent speech in native speakers, for example, listening to and commenting on how native English speakers perform their tasks (Mohammadipour & Rashid, 2015).

3. The influence of corrective feedback on fluency

Harmer (2001) pointed out that the corrective feedback plays an important role in promoting fluency. How teachers respond to the way students speak in the activities focusing on fluency affects both how they speak in that activity and how they perform later in the fluency activities. During the fluency practice, teachers should focus not only on the content but also on the form and should correct students’ mistakes after they finish speaking. The aim of providing feedback during fluency practice is whether it can help keep the conversation moving forward. Several studies (e.g., Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Pili-Moss, 2014; Rahimi & Dastjerdi, 2012) revealed that delayed elicitations did not interfere with the flow of students’ communication. Consequently, the focus on meaning was continued during the fluency practice. More studies

on corrective feedback are relevant to the aspect of fluency. The findings of Fitriana et al.'s (2016) showed that students preferred three types of corrective feedback: explicit, meta-linguistic clue and elicitation. Interestingly, majority of the participants did not like immediate feedback because it often interrupted their fluency which is in line with the research findings by Ha et al. (2021).

4. The roles of affective factors on fluency

Affective factors are regarded as one of the most important factors for students in the language learning process (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Illyin et al., 2021; Ni, 2012). These factors can indicate whether students will be successful in language learning (Illyin et al., 2021) and affect the input and the output of second language (Ni, 2012). However, in foreign language teaching and learning, affective factors relate to two aspects: individual factors of learners including motivation, self-confidence and anxiety and the relational factors among learners themselves, between the teacher and the learners, learning environment, and teaching methods. Importantly, anxiety, motivation, and confidence are influential on students' fluency (Illyin et al., 2021). Several explored the impact of individual affective factors on students' fluency. Rahayu's (2022) study revealed that being afraid of making mistakes, lacking confidence and having anxiety were their students' difficulties in improving their speaking fluency. Dinh and Tran's (2020) findings showed that their teacher and student participants also agreed that affective factors were their major problem in improving their English-speaking fluency. Students with high anxiety can perform poorly. It reduces their motivation and causes language performance difficulties (Ni, 2012). Teacher should create a fun and relaxing classroom environment to reduce students' anxieties. Studying in a good language environment can encourage students to learn language effectively (Minghe & Yuan, 2013) and speak English fluently, accurately and actively (Thituyetanh, 2015).

5. Linguistic knowledge and fluency

Rahayu (2022) pointed out that linguistic knowledge including grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary is vital for students to consider when speaking English and it has an impact on students' speaking fluency (Santos & Rossana, 2022; Wang, 2014). Wahyuningsih and Afandi's study (2020) revealed that the lack of knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation hindered students' speaking skills. The participants who possessed a large amount of vocabulary could speak English effectively. Students who can use more vocabulary tended to have better speaking proficiency. They did not struggle with finding the appropriate vocabulary for communication. Moreover, students who lack grammar knowledge were not able to form the sentences to deliver their intended message when speaking. Therefore, the lack of grammatical knowledge could also possibly have an impact on students' fluency. Teachers are encouraged to find teaching strategies for teaching grammar for speaking which can be done through chunks of sentences in order for students to learn grammar naturally. In addition, as pointed out by Tavakoli and Hunter (2018), fluency as a broad term refers to L2 speaking ability. In this way, it also includes vocabulary and pronunciation aspects. Foster and Skehan (1996) likewise pointed out that vocabulary and pronunciation are also important for English-speaking fluency.

6. Students' beliefs

Kember (2001) pointed out that students hold beliefs regarding the nature of knowledge and conception of teaching and learning. Similarly, Richardson (1996) mentioned that students' beliefs regarding learning and teaching are influential on how they learn and their actions during the learning process (Davis, 2003; Hu & Tian, 2012; Huisman et al., 2020). When teachers become aware that their students' beliefs could be harmful to their language learning, they can help students reshape such misunderstandings through discussion. Teachers can help students become more open to teaching methods and teaching materials. Understanding students' beliefs can help teachers create more opportunities to collaborate with students (Oda, 2004) and teachers can understand more clearly what students expect from them that can help them improve their teaching (Ramazani, 2014). Students' beliefs need to be examined closely to consider whether they are useful for their language learning (Davis, 2003). This implies that investigating students' beliefs regarding their learning not only helps teachers understand students' beliefs, but also helps students reshape some of their beliefs. Therefore, understanding students' beliefs regarding fluency can help researchers gain insights into their beliefs in many aspects in terms of fluency, which in turn can help enhance students' fluency appropriately and satisfy their needs.

7. Research related to students' English-speaking fluency

Many studies (e.g., Huisman et al., 2020; Kinchin, 2004; Lee & Branch, 2018) have focused on exploring students' beliefs regarding many aspects in the classroom. Dincer's (2017) study explored 60 EFL university students' beliefs about being a good English speaker in Turkey. The study revealed the majority of students believed that a good English speaker was able to speak English fluently and their goal was also to speak English fluently. This is in line with the results of Nazara's (2011) study which revealed that all of the student participants in the study expressed that their desire was to speak English well and fluently. This emphasizes the importance of fluency among EFL learners. However, studies on students' beliefs about fluency were very scarce. Only few studies focused on students' beliefs and were related to oral fluency, while few others focused only on factors affecting students' oral fluency.

As mentioned above, previous studies focused mainly on factors affecting students' English fluency. Alaraj's (2017) study revealed that the difficulties students faced in increasing their speaking fluency were caused by insufficient vocabulary, a lack of listening practice and psychological problems such as lack of confidence in speaking, and thinking in their L1 before speaking. Dinh and Tran's (2020) study explored key factors influencing the second-year university students' oral fluency in English-speaking classes. The findings revealed that the group of affective factors influenced their oral fluency, followed by other factors; automation, error correction and performance factors. Rahayu's (2022) study showed that most of the student participants agreed that affective factors had a major influence on enhancing their speaking fluency.

Though the previous studies involved speaking fluency and revealed difficulties interfering with the improvement of students' speaking fluency, there are other areas regarding fluency

which have not been yet investigated. This includes beliefs regarding many aspects of English-speaking fluency such as the characteristics of fluency and the importance of fluency. More importantly, the factors that can promote their English-speaking fluency belong to an area that has not been explored sufficiently.

It is commonly known that students' beliefs are influential on their practices in their learning environments (Richardson, 1996). Therefore, this study aims to investigate Thai EFL university students' beliefs about English-speaking fluency in order to address gaps in the literature. While speaking fluency is an important element for communicative competence and is a part of what makes successful English speakers, research on students' beliefs regarding English-speaking fluency has been understudied, particularly in the Thai EFL context. As a result, this study could provide a better understanding of students' beliefs that can help improve Thai EFL students' English-speaking fluency. This in turn can help them meet the expectations of international workplaces and secure their jobs in the global market.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. The research questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions.

- 1) What are Thai EFL students' beliefs about English-speaking fluency?
- 2) What are the factors that students believe can promote their English-speaking fluency?
- 3) What are the factors that students believe can interfere with their English-speaking fluency?

2. Research design

This study was a mixed-methods study. The quantitative research method was conducted using purposive sampling. The inclusive criteria of this study were that the participants must be the third- year students from English major aged above 18 years old who attended English courses related to speaking skills. In this study, a total of 86 third-year university students majoring in English voluntarily completed the questionnaire. These participants had already attended many courses which focused on English-speaking skills in their department; therefore, they all had prior experience in studying English-speaking courses. In addition, to collect qualitative data, six students who volunteered were interviewed using a semi-structured interview and were asked to write two reflective journals. It is important to note that the context of this study was a university in a province in the southern part of Thailand. The university's goal was to produce professional and skillful graduates to enter workplaces that demand future employees who are able to communicate in English effectively.

3. Research instruments and procedures

The survey questionnaire regarding students' beliefs in English-speaking fluency consists of different aspects including the characteristics and the importance of English-speaking

fluency (4 items and 5 items), and factors promoting or hindering English-speaking fluency (17 items and 9 items). The language used in all the instruments were in Thai and the interviews were also conducted in Thai. The questionnaire was constructed based on the existing literature regarding beliefs in English-speaking fluency (e.g., Bailey, 2005; Dinh & Tran, 2020; Goh & Burn, 2012; Rahayu, 2022; Richards, 2006; Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018). The questionnaire was then checked for its content validity by three experts. The Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) was employed to evaluate each item. The items that had scores below 0.5 were revised whereas the items that had scores equal to or higher than 0.5 were maintained as they were. The instruments including the questionnaire were verified by three experts for their content validity with a Cronbach coefficient of 0.86. Moreover, the semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit information from the participants through asking questions about their beliefs in relation to English-speaking fluency. The reflective journals were also deployed on two occasions to allow students to explain their beliefs regarding English-speaking fluency. It is noteworthy that both the interview questions and the questions asked in the reflective journals were also verified for their content validity by the experts in TESOL. The interview questions involved their views on a fluent speaker, the impact of fluency on speaking skills, the importance of improving students' English-speaking fluency in the classroom, the roles of teachers in enhancing students' English-speaking fluency, factors promoted or interfered with students' English-speaking fluency, and accuracy vs fluency.

4. Data analysis

The data from the questionnaire were analyzed based on the frequency analysis (Larenas et al., 2015). All the audio files from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed. The transcriptions were sent to the participants in order to ensure the accuracy of their views. Through a qualitative approach, thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data in this study. The data were then classified into themes to answer the research questions. This study employed an abductive approach (Phipps & Borg, 2009) which refers to the initial categories relating to the literature review being retained while the data emerging from the interviews were added. The data from the students' reflective journals were coded and analyzed through thematic analysis based on the themes from the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. The data from different instruments were then triangulated to ensure the validity of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. What are Thai EFL university students' beliefs about English-speaking fluency?

Table 1
Students' beliefs regarding English-speaking fluency

Students' beliefs regarding English-speaking fluency	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Mean	SD
1. Fluency refers to the flow of speech with a few reasonable pauses.	0	6.98	17.44	34.88	40.70	4.09	0.93

Students' beliefs regarding English-speaking fluency	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Mean	SD
2. Fluency is separate from accuracy.	4.65	11.63	18.60	31.40	33.72	3.78	1.17
3. In order to speak fluently, speakers need to speak correctly.	5.81	23.26	27.90	20.93	22.09	3.30	1.22
4. Speakers who speak fast speak fluently.	4.65	16.28	26.74	23.26	29.07	3.56	1.20
5. Promoting students to speak English fluently is important for improving their speaking skills.	0	1.16	6.98	31.40	60.46	4.51	0.68
6. Students' fluency should be given more focus than accuracy.	1.63	4.65	16.28	32.56	45.35	4.16	0.94
8. Speaking English fluently enables effective communication.	0	3.49	4.65	33.72	58.14	4.47	0.75
9. Speaking with grammatical accuracy helps speakers communicate effectively.	1.16	0	18.60	33.72	46.51	4.24	0.84
10. Speakers who speak English fluently impress listeners.	0	2.33	10.47	29.07	58.14	4.43	0.78

Note. 5 = Strongly agree, 4 agree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 2 disagree, 1 strongly disagree

Characteristics and importance of fluency

From Table 1, 75.58 % of the participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that fluency referred to the flow of speech with few reasonable pauses. The mean score was 4.09. According to the interview, the student participants expressed their views which supported the results from the questionnaire. Student A believed that speakers with oral fluency must speak without hesitation. Similarly, Student B said that “speakers with fluency are able to communicate with other people. They understood the message of their interlocutor and did not take much time to respond. They do not need to think firstly in Thai and then translate into English”. Students C, D, E and F also believed that speakers with English- speaking fluency could speak spontaneously. The majority of the students believed that fluency refers to speech being delivered fluidly with few reasonable pauses. This is consistent with the meaning defined by several scholars (e.g., Bailey, 2005; Goh & Burns, 2012; Yang, 2014b). This implied that generally most of the students shared the same view that the flow of speech is key to oral fluency.

Another interesting result was that 52.33 % of the participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that speakers who speak fast were speaking fluently. The mean score was 3.56. This revealed that some of the participants perceived fluency as having a high rate of speech. Santos and Rossana (2022) and Browne and Fulcher (2017) argued that students try to speak English fast because they misunderstand that speaking quickly is similar to speaking fluently. However, a speaker who speaks steadily but not fast can be considered a fluent speaker. Meanwhile, 26.74 % of participants neither agreed nor disagreed with this belief. During the interview, Students D and F expressed that to be able to speak English fluently, the speakers do not need to speak fast. While speed is a part of fluency, it is not the only aspect to be considered. It also involves rate, hesitation, repetition, and correction (Santos & Rossana, 2022). However, overall, the participants agreed that speakers who speak fast usually speak fluently. It is worth noting that this belief is not supported by the literature.

Additionally, as shown in Table 1, 91.86 % of the participants, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that speaking English fluently enables effective communication. The mean score was 4.47. During the interview, Student B believed that fluency was important for speaking skills because if there is a lack of fluency, miscommunication with others may occur. Student C added that if she needed to talk about important issues and was not confident and fluent in her speaking, she might lose opportunities and waste time. This idea is supported by Goh and Burns (2012) and Yang (2014a, 2014b) who stated that a fluent speaker can deliver their speech fluidly preventing comprehension difficulties for their listeners and get their intended messages across more effectively.

Furthermore, 87.21 % of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that speakers who speak English fluently would impress listeners. The mean score was 4.43. Student D believed that speaking English fluently was an attractive trait. Student B insisted that “if we can speak English fluently, we look confident.” Similarly, Student E believed that in her view, if someone wanted to work abroad or get a job with a high salary, their English should be fluent. She added that those who speak English fluently look confident. Interestingly, Student F believed that fluent speakers often look reliable and well-educated. Ur (2012) pointed out that speaking fluency was the primary goal for many L2 learners. Dincer (2017) revealed that the participants in his study viewed a good English speaker positively. Tavakoli and Hunter’s (2018) four approaches in defining fluency from very narrow to very broad perspectives are relevant here. In the current study, the participants viewed fluency in a broad sense to some extent. At this level, fluency refers to L2 speaking ability which includes people who speak English confidently, can communicate their intended messages effectively, and maintain conversations successfully. However, the majority of them also viewed fluency as being a flow of speech with reasonable pauses, which can then be considered a narrow sense of fluency (Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018).

Fluency vs Accuracy

According to Table 1, 65.12 % of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that fluency was separate from accuracy. The mean score was 3.78. It is noted that 43.02 % agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that in order to speak fluently, speakers needed to speak with

correct grammar, whereas 29.07 % of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. The mean score was 3.30. The results showed that some of the participants still did not have a clear view or still disagreed with the belief that accuracy can lead to fluency. For example, Student A did not think that focusing on using correct grammar could lead to fluency. She further added that “when speaking in daily life, we do not focus much on grammar rules. We just need to get the message across. If we focus on grammar rules, we will speak with hesitation because we are worried about using correct grammar”. She said if she was not as concerned about grammar, she could speak more fluently. However, Student E expressed that those who know grammar rules were more confident in speaking than those who did not. Because they were confident, they were able to perform better. This shows that there are different views towards this issue.

Meanwhile, 80.23 % of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that speaking correctly by following grammar rules would help speakers communicate effectively. The mean score was 4.24. This implies that for them, it is undeniable that accuracy is also important for speaking effectively. However, 77.91 % of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that students should focus on their English- speaking fluency over using correct grammar. The mean score was 4.16. During the interview, Student B believed that “we should start promoting fluency over focusing on grammar in the classroom”. Likewise, Student C pointed out that “we should focus on fluency in the classroom, it is time for us to practice and increase our confidence”. Meanwhile, in Student E’s reflective journal, she added that when teachers focused highly on using correct grammar, she was afraid of speaking out. Student F agreed that promoting fluency should be a priority as it takes time to practice. This implies that the majority of the participants believe that fluency should be focused on over accuracy.

Derakhshan et al. (2016) stated that students tend to think that knowing grammar can help strengthen their speaking skills; however, it is important to note that the grammar translation method which emphasizes grammar is not effective for strengthening speaking skills. Richards (2008) stated that fluency is considered a goal for a speaking course and that with the introduction of communicative language teaching in the 1980s, communicative syllabuses were likely to replace grammar-based syllabuses. However, teachers in Thailand still focus on teaching grammar, relying on rote-learning, and using a teacher-centered approach (Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2019). Teachers generally focus on accuracy over fluency as they believe that accuracy is the priority (Srivastava, 2014). This possibly formed the students’ belief that although fluency should be focused on for speaking skills, the correct use of grammar was one of the keys for success in studying English. In fact, speaking competence consists of both accuracy and fluency (Derakhshan et al., 2016; Wang, 2014). Therefore, it is the teachers’ responsibility to plan their lessons accordingly to develop both students’ speaking fluency and accuracy and to be aware of the stage each aspect should be focused on (Bailey, 2005; Wang, 2014).

2. What are the factors that the students believe can promote their English-speaking fluency?

Table 2
Students' beliefs regarding factors promoting students' English-speaking fluency

Students' beliefs regarding English-speaking fluency	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Mean	SD
12. Focusing on English speaking fluency in the classroom can improve students' English-speaking fluency.	0	1.16	11.62	40.70	46.51	4.33	0.73
14. Teacher support can increase your English-speaking fluency.	1.16	3.49	15.12	41.86	38.32	4.13	0.88
17. Students can improve their fluency in speaking through self-study.	0	0	12.79	37.20	50	4.37	0.70
18. Students can improve their fluency in speaking through watching media such as movies, YouTube, Facebook, Tiktok, etc.	0	2.32	9.30	31.40	56.98	4.43	0.76
19. Students can improve their fluency in speaking through singing English songs.	0	3.49	11.63	29.07	55.81	4.37	0.83
20. Students can improve their fluency in speaking through practicing talking to themselves.	1.16	1.16	13.95	36.05	47.67	4.28	0.84
21. Students can improve their fluency in speaking through talking to foreigners.	0	0	10.47	24.42	65.12	4.55	0.68
22. Students can improve their fluency in speaking through talking to Thais in English.	2.32	2.32	15.12	34.88	45.35	4.19	0.94
25. Students can improve their fluency in speaking through speaking activities.	0	1.16	11.63	36.05	51.16	4.37	0.74
27. Students can improve their fluency in speaking through fixed expressions.	1.16	2.32	17.44	34.88	44.18	4.19	0.89
28. Environment support can increase students' English-speaking fluency.	0	2.32	13.95	20.93	62.80	4.44	0.82

Note. 5 = Strongly agree, 4 agree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 2 disagree, 1 strongly disagree

The findings from the questionnaire revealed that there were many factors that the participants believed could promote students' English-speaking fluency. Over 80 % of the participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statements of items 12, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 27 and 28, and that these factors could promote their English-speaking fluency. The factors included focusing on fluency in the classroom, teacher factor, practicing fluency through self-study, media use, singing English songs, talking to themselves, talking to foreigners, talking to Thais in English, practicing fluency through speaking activities, repetition, fixed expressions and living in an environment where people used English. However, it is worth noting that item 21 which relates to their beliefs about talking to foreigners as a way to improve their English-speaking fluency was rated with the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 4.55$) followed by item 28 which concerns with their belief that environment support could increase their English-speaking fluency ($\bar{x} = 4.44$), and item 23 regarding their belief that students could improve their fluency in speaking through watching media ($\bar{x} = 4.43$). On the other hand, compared to other highly ranked items in Table 2, items 14, 22, and 27 which are related to practicing English-speaking fluency in the classroom were rated with the lowest mean scores ($\bar{x} = 4.13$, $\bar{x} = 4.19$, and $\bar{x} = 4.19$, respectively). This implied that students viewed that practicing their English-speaking fluency outside the classroom freely seemed to be more effective than practicing their fluency in a classroom setting. To provide a better understanding of the data, the following sections provide an in-depth discussion on the key important findings of the study.

Talking to foreigners and good English environment

As shown in Table 2, talking to foreigners was the factor with the largest proportion (65.12 %) of the participants who strongly agreed that it supported students' English-speaking fluency. The mean score was 4.55. Furthermore, 62.80 % of the participants viewed that having a good English environment support can increase students' English-speaking fluency. The mean score was 4.44. The data from the questionnaire was consistent with the data from the interviews which are as follows.

During the interviews, most of the participants stated that talking to foreigners would increase their fluency. Student A claimed that providing more activities that allowed students to talk to foreigners would encourage them to speak more, be more confident and speak more fluently without embarrassment, fear or worries. Talking to foreigners provided her with more direct experience in using English. She wanted to have more foreign teachers, so she could practice the language and speak English fluently. She said "talking to Thai teachers makes me feel embarrassed as they might know that I have made some mistakes. On the other hand, when talking to foreign teachers, I try to communicate to get my message across. This likely increases my fluency".

Meanwhile, similar to A, Student B thought that having foreign teachers could help her speak English more. Students C and D further added in their reflective journals that talking to foreigners could enhance their fluency by enabling them to use the language naturally. The majority of students believed that exposure to the English language by talking to foreigners, being a volunteer at international events, and living in an English environment that encourages them to use English everyday would increase their fluency. Generally, the environment in most

EFL countries means that students only learn English in the classroom. They communicate in their mother tongue in their everyday life. This can reduce students' motivation to speak English. On the other hand, living in a positive language environment can promote students to learn a language effectively (Koran, 2015; Minghe & Yuan, 2013; Thituyetanh, 2015).

Interestingly, nearly half of the participants 45.35% of the participants in the study strongly agreed that students can improve their fluency in speaking through talking to Thais in English. The mean score was 4.19. Apart from encouraging students to speak to native speakers, students should be encouraged to talk to their classmates and their English teachers in English (Koran, 2015). Rahayu (2022) suggested that teachers should create a good English atmosphere in the classroom. In this era, advanced technology, including mobile applications and the Internet, can be used to promote supportive teaching and learning environments, and also promote communication among teachers and students worldwide, resulting in a potential increase of the students' accuracy, fluency and confidence in their speaking skills (Abugohar et al., 2019).

Providing delayed feedback

One of the interesting issues from the interviews was the role of teachers in providing corrective feedback. Students generally believed that getting feedback from the teachers would strengthen their fluency. However, all of the participants pointed out that the teacher should provide feedback after they have finished speaking.

To begin with, Student A stated that providing corrective feedback allowed students to recognize their mistakes and learned from them. Students would be able to improve on their mistakes the next time they spoke. This is in agreement with the results of Pili-Moss's (2014) study which explored the role of delayed feedback in fluency activities. The results revealed that delayed elicitations did not hinder the flow of students' communication. Teachers should correct students' mistakes after the students have finished speaking particularly in the fluency practice (Harmer, 2001). Likewise, Nguyen and Nguyen's findings (2022) revealed that 65 % of the Vietnamese EFL pre-service teacher participants viewed that delayed corrective feedback was the most useful strategy whereas immediate feedback seemed to interrupt students' speech production. Delayed feedback can be considered as a sign of teachers showing respect towards their students. It also tended not to hinder the students' flow of thought and fluency. Similarly, Rahimi and Dastjerdi (2012) revealed the results of their study that delayed feedback had a positive impact on the improvement of Iranian EFL students' fluency and accuracy. It is noted that when the aim of the activity was to promote fluency, teachers were therefore recommended to use delayed feedback.

Using English media

As shown in Table 2, 56.98 % of the participants strongly agreed that students can improve their fluency in speaking through watching media. The mean score was 4.43. The data from the questionnaire were similar to the data from the qualitative data. All of the participants believed that students could improve their fluency in speaking through watching media such

as movies and YouTube, and using online applications. To begin with, Student B believed that watching movies could increase her English-speaking fluency. She said that she basically chose a favorite character from a movie and then repeated their dialogues. This included imitating their pronunciations and intonations. She stated that she unconsciously recognized the sentences and was able to use and reproduce such sentences automatically in real life a feat that similar to what students C, E and F had done as well.

Several studies (e.g., Al Murshidi, 2020; Li & Wang, 2015) revealed the positive impact of using English movies on promoting speaking skills. Furthermore, the participants also believed that the formulaic language that they learned through movies also increased their oral fluency which is in line with Wray (2000) and Wood (2007) who highlighted the importance of formulaic expressions in enhancing speaking fluency. Moreover, Students B, C, and E believed that singing songs could improve their fluency through memorizing lyrics and imitating the singers' pronunciations. Interestingly, five of the participants mentioned in the interview or the reflective journals about their use of online applications to practice English with foreigners to enhance their English fluency. Thituyetanh (2015) stated that "if students are exposed to an English environment such as teachers speaking English all the time, English tapes, English books and newspapers for them to use, they can pick up language naturally and unconsciously" (p. 52). With the recent advancement of modern technology, it is not difficult to implement English media which are available freely and easy to access in order to improve students' speaking fluency.

Speaking activities

As shown in Table 2, 51.16 % of the participants strongly agreed that students can improve their fluency in speaking through speaking activities. The mean score was 4.37. According to the qualitative data, most of the students believed that speaking activities could increase their fluency. They preferred doing the speaking activities over grammar practice through exercises. The activities that they believed could promote their speaking fluency included presentations, games, discussions and roleplays. Student A stated that "teachers should provide plenty of opportunities for students to do presentations in English" which was similar to Student B's and E's beliefs. Apart from this, student A claimed that while playing games, students were themselves, relaxed and more confident to speak. It could increase students' confidence and fluency. Ur (2012) stated that designing activities to improve students' fluency is important. When students are assigned to do real-life speaking activities in a classroom atmosphere, they feel less anxious. Moreover, Student E viewed that providing a topic that allowed students to discuss their ideas and interests could also improve students' English fluency. Student F believed that asking and answering questions in English could improve students' English-speaking fluency. Richards (2006) stated that the characteristics of activities that promoted fluency included enhancing the use of natural meaningful language which is unpredictable and focuses on getting the message across. Apart from this, speaking activities including games, describing pictures, information gaps and problem-solving activities are all beneficial in promoting students' English-speaking fluency (Dinh & Tran, 2020) as these activities allow students to communicate meaningfully.

3. What are the factors that the students believe can interfere with their English-speaking fluency?

Table 3
Students' beliefs regarding factors interfering with students' English-speaking fluency

Students' beliefs regarding English-speaking fluency	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Mean	SD
29. Lack of confidence in speaking English can interfere with students improving English-speaking fluency.	0	0	13.95	22.09	63.95	4.50	0.73
30. Students' being embarrassed of their pronunciation can interfere with their English-speaking fluency improvement.	0	1.16	8.14	34.88	55.81	4.50	0.73
31. Lack of motivation in speaking-English can interfere with students improving English speaking fluency.	0	2.32	13.95	31.40	52.33	4.45	0.70
32. Students' being afraid of losing face in front of their friends can interfere with their improvement of English-speaking fluency.	0	1.16	10.47	37.20	51.16	4.34	0.81
33. Lack of vocabulary knowledge can interfere with students improving English-speaking fluency.	0	0	0	33.72	53.49	4.38	0.72
34. Lack of knowledge of grammar rules can interfere with students improving English-speaking fluency.	2.32	4.65	27.91	32.56	32.56	4.40	0.74
35. Lack of knowledge of how to pronounce words can interfere with students improving English-speaking fluency.	0	3.49	15.12	43.02	38.37	3.88	1.00
37. Teachers' immediate corrective feedback can interfere with students improving English-speaking fluency.	5.81	5.81	24.42	30.23	33.72	3.62	1.28

Note. 5 = Strongly agree, 4 agree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 2 disagree, 1 strongly disagree

As shown in table 3, over 80 % of the participants strongly agreed or agreed with the items 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, and 35. This revealed that the lack of confidence in speaking, being embarrassed of their pronunciation, lack of motivation in English-speaking, being afraid of losing face in front of their friends, lack of vocabulary knowledge, and lack of pronunciation knowledge were factors interfering with their improvement of their English-speaking fluency.

Affective factors

According to Table 3, 63.95 % of the participants strongly agreed that a lack of confidence in speaking English can interfere with their English-speaking fluency improvement. The percentage of students who strongly agreed that being embarrassed about their pronunciation interfered with English-speaking fluency improvement was 55.81. Furthermore, 52.33 % of the participants strongly agreed that a lack of motivation in speaking English can hinder their English-speaking fluency. Lastly, the percentage of the participants who strongly agreed that being afraid of losing face in front of friends can interfere with English speaking fluency was 51.16. The mean scores for these questions were 4.50, 4.50, 4.45 and 4.34 respectively. These results from the questionnaire show that the majority of the participants believe that affective factors have an influence on their English-speaking fluency. This is also supported by qualitative data from the interviews and reflective journals. Students A and C believed that their lack of motivation interfered with their fluency. Student A stated that “I do not have motivation to practice speaking... Instead of practicing English, I was distracted by social media. When I rarely practice my English, my fluency decreases”. Students B, D and E stated that their anxiety and lack of confidence had a negative effect on their fluency. For example, Student B stated that “some of my friends also teased me when I used English, so I didn’t feel confident in speaking English”. Likewise, Student D stated this belief through her journal that a lack of confidence in her accent and her anxiety of making mistakes when speaking greatly hindered her fluency. This is supported by Rahayu (2022) who revealed in his research findings that the majority of EFL student participants viewed that affective factors including anxiety and lack of confidence were major obstacles in improving their speaking fluency. Similarly, Illyin et al. (2021) stated that the individual factors of learners which include feeling, motivation, anxiety, and confidence possibly have an impact on fluency in speaking skills and on the students’ way of learning. Therefore, the findings of this study support the existing literature in that affective factors are indeed the major factors interfering EFL learners’ speaking fluency. Moreover, it adds more useful data regarding factors the students believed could hinder their speaking fluency in the Thai EFL contexts to the literature. EFL teachers should take this issue into consideration seriously in order to reduce students’ anxiety and enhance their confidence and motivation, which can in turn improve students’ speaking fluency.

Immediate corrective feedback

As can be seen in Table 3, almost 63.95 % of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that teachers’ immediate corrective feedback could hinder their English-speaking fluency. The mean score was 3.62. Furthermore, during the interview, all of the participants indicated that the teachers’ immediate feedback interfered with their fluency. Student A stated that providing immediate feedback made them worry whether what she said would be correct. Students B,

C, D and E also shared similar beliefs. They said that it made them feel concerned and lose confidence. They panicked and then spoke English with great hesitation afterwards. Student C added that “my hands started shaking and I forgot what to say when my teacher immediately corrected my speech.” This is also consistent with Ha et al.’s (2021) and Fitriana et al.’s (2016) observations in their studies which revealed that majority of their participants did not like immediate corrective feedback because it interrupted their performance. Likewise, Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) revealed that the teacher participants in their study viewed that immediate correction also decreased students’ confidence. Similarly, Dinh and Tran’s findings (2020) demonstrated that interrupting students’ speech production by overcorrection hindered the improvement of students’ oral fluency. It is noted that the findings of the present study showed that the students believed that delayed corrective feedback promoted their speaking fluency, whereas immediate corrective feedback hindered the development of their speaking fluency. In short, teachers should decide carefully when to correct students’ errors, so as to not interrupt the flow of their students’ speech. Moreover, students’ learning styles should be taken into consideration when teachers provide OCF in order to meet their expectations.

Lack of linguistic knowledge

According to Table 3, the percentage of the participants who strongly agreed or agreed that a lack of vocabulary knowledge, pronouncing words incorrectly, and a lack of grammatical knowledge interfered with speaking fluency were 87.21, 81.39, and 65.12 % respectively. The mean scores for these aspects were 4.38, 3.88, and 4.40 respectively. This was also supported by data from the interviews. Some students stated that apart from grammar, lacking linguistic knowledge including vocabulary and pronunciation affected their fluency improvement. For example, Student D said “I remember a time when I wanted to use the word “pandemic” with a foreigner. But at that time, I did not know this word and so I couldn’t get my message across to him.” Furthermore, both Students D and E believed that in order to speak English fluently, students need to have a great deal of vocabulary knowledge. A lack of vocabulary knowledge can indeed negatively impact students’ speaking fluency (Santos & Rossana, 2022). EFL students should be able to store a great deal of vocabulary in their long-term memory and be able to access the vocabulary quickly to enhance their speaking fluency (Wang, 2014).

Apart from this, Student B also added that mispronouncing words and stressing words incorrectly affected fluency. Students E and F stated that if the teacher helped correct students’ mispronunciation, they could improve their fluency. This showed that pronunciation affected their fluency. Foster and Skehan (1996) stated that vocabulary and pronunciation are important factors for speaking fluency. This is in line with the research findings of Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020) as well, which showed that a lack of knowledge in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation were major problems in the improvement of a learner’s English-speaking ability.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the study provided useful information for students, educators, and curriculum designers to understand what students believed regarding English-speaking fluency. Moreover,

the students held the belief that fluency was important and should be emphasized in the classroom. However, many of them also believed that grammar was also essential for speaking skills, while others pointed out that worrying too much about using correct grammar could interfere with their fluency. This raises awareness for the teachers to balance the focus of both accuracy and fluency in improving students' speaking skills. It is also noteworthy that fluency is thought to be separated from accuracy in a narrow sense, which includes aspects of ease, flow, and continuity. Certain activities promoting oral fluency suggested in the literature, for example, pre-task planning time, task repetition, the 4/3/2 technique, and awareness-raising activities should be brought into the classroom. Corrective feedback for enhancing students' fluency should be given appropriately, positively and done after students have finished speaking. This will likely increase their self-confidence and fluency. Delayed feedback should be employed when avoiding interrupting the flow of students' speech. However, when teachers decide to use immediate corrective feedback, they should take student individual learning styles and emotional states into account since this study found that immediate corrective feedback could make students anxious. This does not entirely mean that teachers should avoid giving immediate corrective feedback, rather teachers should tailor the timing of OCF to suit individual students. Prolonged exposure to the English language is a challenge for EFL contexts; however, with advanced technology, teachers and students can make use of online applications to help them practice English with foreigners all over the world. Meanwhile, they can also learn the language naturally and pick up formulaic expressions from real life situations and the media. Furthermore, affective factors which seem to be a serious problem interfering with students' speaking fluency should be given more attention. Providing students more time for speech preparation can reduce their anxiety. Apart from this, teachers should also provide more positive feedback in order to increase their confidence. Moreover, teachers should encourage students to use the vocabulary they are taught for their oral production regularly, as this would help them acquire new vocabulary faster. Additionally, teachers can improve students' pronunciation by being good models of correct and intelligible pronunciation and ask their students to imitate them. This can help them naturally and gradually develop their English pronunciation resulting in higher levels of confidence when speaking.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This sample of the study might be too small to reflect the whole population. However, the sample of the study was purposively selected due to their prior experiences in attending courses related to speaking skills. Despite that, it was hoped that the use of data triangulation could sufficiently validate the findings. Further studies should be conducted to compare teachers' and students' beliefs about speaking fluency. This will identify the gap between these two groups and determine potential solutions to address the issues involved. This can improve language teaching and learning particularly with regards to speaking skills.

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Ethics approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University Research Ethics Committee (REC 064/65).

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