Speaking Difficulties Encountered by Low-Proficiency EFL Students at Ubon Ratchathani University

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Abstract

In English as a foreign language learning contexts, speaking has been generally assumed as one of the most challenging skills to master. The purpose of this study is to reveal the speaking difficulties encountered by five low-proficiency students of Ubon Ratchathani University who got 4 out of 10 in the final speaking exam of English Oral Communication in the first semester of the academic year 2016. This study analyzed the two (among three) key aspects of oral language production mentioned by Skehan (1996) and Ellis (2009), namely fluency and accuracy. From the analysis of the turn-taking using a tool called the next-turn proof procedure (NTPP), it is revealed that most students have problems with fluency in the forms hesitation, which includes restarts, repeats, false starts, self-corrections, pauses (filled and silent pauses), and silence. In terms of accuracy, the major problem faced by the students is the inability to use appropriate grammatical structures and produce well-formulated utterances. Another major problem is poor comprehension. The use of an inappropriate selection of words during speaking and is also found to be one of the other accuracy problems.

Keywords: low-proficiency students, speaking difficulties, fluency, accuracy, next-turn proof procedure

1 Introduction

Speaking or spoken language production is one of the most difficult aspects of language learning (Brown & Yule, 1983). It is considered as the most important skill among the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) because people who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language (Ur, 1996). According to Davies & Pearse (1998), the important goal of all English language teaching should be to give learners the ability to use English effectively and accurately in communication. Using the language is far more important than just knowing about it for "there is no point knowing a lot about language if you can't use it" (Scrivener, 2005: 146). In a foreign language learning context, especially English, speaking has been given a serious attention by both teachers and learners because, as Luoma (2004) says, "*speaking in a foreign language is very difficult and competence in speaking takes a long time to develop*" (p.1). Thornbury (2005) points out that second or foreign language speaking differs from first language speaking in terms of the lack of grammar and vocabulary knowledge of learners. He argues that the process of building utterances accurately and retrieving words does not yet become automatic in second or foreign language speaking. That is why, despite years of learning English, many English language learners still struggle to communicate fluently and accurately because they lack the necessary knowledge (Tuan & Mai, 2015).

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Speaking Performance in an Institutional Talk

It is important to note that institutional talk, such as the teacher-student interaction in the classroom, has some distinct features which have drawn the attention of many researchers to study this type of interaction. Kurhila (2004) believes that institutional talk is characterized by being goal-oriented and containing contributions shaped by the institutional goals. In relation to this study, when the students take the speaking test, as part of the institutional talk, their responses and speaking performance are expected to be of a particular quality based on the standard set by the teacher. In other words, for the students, to be understood is not enough. They have to meet the pedagogical goals or the criteria set by the teacher (which is usually in a form of a speaking rubric) if they want to get the best score possible.

2.2 Key Aspects of Language Production

In both second and foreign language learning contexts, fluency and accuracy complexity have been considered to be the two (among three) key aspects of language production (Ellis, 2009), and improving these main areas is thus a core goal of language instruction (Skehan (1996).

2.2.1 Fluency

One of the most desired goals a teacher wants to achieve in teaching speaking is oral fluency. Fluency can be defined as the ability to express oneself in an intelligible, reasonable and accurate way in real time without undue pausing or too much hesitation (Hughes, 2002; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2002), fluency is "*the ability...communicate ideas effectively, and produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown of communication*" (p. 141).

2.2.2 Accuracy

Paying attention to correctness and completeness of language form is another important aspect of oral proficiency. This is called accuracy, which is generally defined as the ability to avoid errors in performance (Ellis, 2005). Skehan (1996) defines accuracy as the production of target language according to its rule systems, while Housen and Kuikken (2009) regard accuracy as "error-free" speech. There are a number of things that learners should focus on in their production of the spoken language, mainly, the grammatical structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

2.3 Most Common Speaking Problems

2.3.1 Previous Studies

A number of empirical studies have examined ESL and EFL students' concerns and difficulties they encountered in English oral activities. Gan (2012) found that there were six major problems in oral English skills perceived by the ESL students at a tertiary teacher training institution in Hong Kong. They are inadequate vocabulary, grammar hindrance, imperfect pronunciation and intonation, inadequate opportunities to speak English in class, lack of a focus on language improvement in the curriculum, and input-poor environment outside class.

Hosni (2014), who conducted a study on speaking difficulties encountered by grade 5 students in basic education schools in Oman, found that there are three major speaking difficulties encountered by the students at this level, namely linguistic difficulties, mother tongue use, and inhibition. From the observation and interview, it is revealed that the students struggled to find appropriate words and build sentences when they try to communicate in English.

A study by Maulana, et al. (2016) on the students' views on EFL speaking problems revealed twelve major causes of speaking faced by junior high school students in Indonesia, namely (1) lack of vocabulary, (2) poor pronunciation, (3) nervous to speak, (4) afraid of making errors, (5) not confident to speak, (6) lack of grammar knowledge, (7) not used to speak in English, (8) difficult to express words and sentences, (9) reluctant to speak, (10) difficult to pronounce English words, (11) not being brave to speak, (12) afraid of being laughed by friends.

2.3.2 Hesitation Phenomena as Fluency Problem

According to Filled Pause Research Center (FPRC), hesitation phenomena are an integral part of an unscripted, spontaneous speech. In other words, it is rare for a natural speech to be free from hesitation phenomena. There are six major types of hesitation phenomena that have been so far identified by FPRC, they are false starts, restarts, repeats, self-corrections, pauses (filled [lexicalized and unlexicalized] and silent pauses), and word-lengthening.

2.3.2.1 False starts

A false start happens when a speaker begins an utterance and then abandons it completely without finishing it. It is generally followed by a pause which may then be followed be a new utterance or a complete stop in the conversation. The example is: *"I said, uh... She said..."* (Rose, 1999).

2.3.2.2 Restarts
A restart is defined as a repetition of a sequence of one or more words at the beginning of an utterance. The example is: *"When did you... uh- when did you go?"* (Rose, 1999).

2.3.2.3 Repeats
Leech and Svartvik (1994) mention that when a speaker iterates a lexical item in mid-sentence, it is called a repeat.

2.3.2.4 Self-corrections
In some occasions, a speaker may utter one word, and then suddenly give a replacement which is to be understood to constitute a retraction of that word. This phenomenon is called self-corrections (Rose, 1998).

2.3.2.5 Pauses
Pauses can be subdivided into either filled pauses or unfilled (also called silent) pauses. The filled pauses may be further categorized as either unlexicalized--that is, filled with some non-verbal utterance like *uh* or *um*--or lexicalized with such phrases as *well...*, *like...*, and *you know...* (Rose, 1998).

2.3.2.6 Word-lengthening
This kind of hesitation phenomena occurs when a speaker stretches out the enunciation of a word past its normal length: The example is: *"Have you ever been to the-- uh... museum?"* (Rose 1998).

3 Data and Method

3.1 Research Question
This study looks closely at the teacher-student interaction during a speaking test. The research question to which this study aims to give answers is:

> What are the speaking difficulties encountered by the low-proficiency students at Ubon Ratchathani University (henceforth UBU) during a speaking test of English Oral Communication (henceforth EOC) seen from the aspects of fluency and accuracy?

3.2 Participants and Setting

3.2.1 Teacher
The native-English teacher participated in this study is a teaching staff at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, UBU whose one of his responsibilities is to teach EOC.

3.2.2 Students
There were five selected students out of thirty-three in Section 2 of EOC class at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, UBU. These students have passed Foundation English for LA Students which is used as a prerequisite before taking EOC. The five female students whose recordings analyzed in this study were chosen based on the scores of the final speaking test of EOC.

3.2.2.1 Setting and Teaching Material

EOC is one of the compulsory courses offered at UBU. The purpose of this course is to help prepare the students with sufficient English ability to cope with everyday dealings while they are still a student and after they graduate. One of the requirements to pass this course is to take the final speaking exam. The speaking exam consists of two parts. The first part is a picture description (there is no interaction with the teacher) and the second one is a conversation between the teacher and the students on the selected topics (i.e. animals, vacation, travel, and gadget). This study focuses on the second part since the researcher wanted to know the students' problem in interacting with the teacher.

3.3 Data and Data Collection Procedure

The data were obtained from the teacher's one-on-one conversation on the second part of the speaking exam (which lasted around 5 minutes) with the students in the teacher's office. The conversations were video-recorded by the teacher using the computer in his office. The students' speaking performance was assessed using the following rubric prepared by the teacher.

7-8 points for highly intelligible, fluent, and accurate speech (8 being exceptional)
5-6 points for somewhat intelligible, fluent, and accurate speech
3-4 points for moderately intelligible, fluent, and accurate speech
1-2 points for below average if you can understand less than half of the performance
0 point for attempting the tasks, but without being understood
0 point for being unable to even attempt the tasks
0-2 points (based on the degree of how strictly they follow item 3 in the instructions above)
It should be noted that the teacher's highest point for this test is 10. However, for some unknown considerations, the teacher uses 7-8 points as the highest range of scores in the rubric. When this range of points was converted into the grading matrix used at UBU, it is found that 5 or below 5 point equals to an F, which means that those who get 5 or below 5 fail the test. Surprisingly, the teacher's description in the above point range does not reflect the quality of an F as it is described as "moderately intelligible, fluent, and accurate speech."
After the speaking test, the teacher completed the score sheet. This sheet was then used by the researcher to decide the participants of this study.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
	N27			fx						
1	GRADING MATRIX									
2	This matrix is for converting a holistic letter grade into a buffered point grade.									
3	1) Enter the total points possible. 2) Find your holistic letter grade. 3) The buffered points are to the left.									
4										
5	Total Points Possible:				10 < Change only this number. Everything else is automatic.					
6										
7	Letter	Low	High	Buffered	Decimal	Buffered	Letter	Min Points	Neg. Buff.	
8	A	80	100	83	0.83	8.3	A	8	-1.7	
9	B+	75	79	78	0.78	7.8	B+	7.5	-2.2	
10	B	70	74	73	0.73	7.3	B	7	-2.7	
11	C+	65	69	68	0.68	6.8	C+	6.5	-3.2	
12	C	60	64	63	0.63	6.3	C	6	-3.7	
13	D+	55	59	58	0.58	5.8	D+	5.5	-4.2	
14	D	50	54	53	0.53	5.3	D	5	-4.7	
15	F	0	49	43	0.43	4.3	F	0	-5.7	
16										
17										

From the teacher's score sheet, the researcher found five students who got 4 out of 10. These students, in relation to the research question, are the low-proficiency students who are believed to have encountered speaking difficulties during the speaking test. The recordings of these five students were then labeled as Video 1, Video 2, Video 3, Video 4 and Video 5.

3.4 Data Analysis
As speaking does not only require the ability to produce a certain form of utterances but also to exchange information between two parties, analysis on the turn-taking is needed. In conversational analysis,   the Next-Turn Proof Procedure (henceforth NTPP) is utilized to enable the researcher to see how any first action in interaction works as an action template which later creates a normative expectation for the next action and a template for interpreting it (Seedhouse, 2004). This very tool is also used in this study as a main tool for the data analysis. The number of the turns presented in the data analysis does not specifically follow a particular consensus. Rather, they are presented in a unit where enough understanding of the context allows the researcher to do the analysis. Some excerpts only have three or four turns, while others have longer turn-taking.

4 Results

4.1 Fluency and Hesitation Phenomena
This study reveals that most students have problems with fluency, marked by the appearance of hesitation. There are several types of hesitation identified in this study, namely restarts, false starts, repeats, self-corrections, and pauses (filled pauses and silent pauses). These types of hesitation phenomena have been identified in the study by Filled Pause Research Center (FPRC). The turn-taking analysis in this study also revealed another phenomenon which is believed to be a significant factor in determining the fluency level of the students. This phenomenon is called silence.

4.1.1 Restarts
The first category of hesitation phenomena found in the excerpts is restarts. They are basically a repetition of the same part of the utterances, either one word or two words, usually at the beginning of the utterance as can be seen in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 1 (Video 2)

Tr:	*I have been to the zoo. Yes.*	1
St:	[Unintelligible]*… Do you like… do you like… do you like err… dog?*	2
Tr:	*Yes, I like dogs=*	3
St:	*=Okay*	4

Here the student spends some time before she can tell the object of the sentence. She repeats the phrase "Do you like" three times which signifies a restart.

4.1.2 Repeats

Excerpt 2 (Video 2)

Tr:	*Do you like going to the zoo?*	1
St:	*I like… I like… zoo… I like zoo.*	2
Tr:	*Why do you like the zoo?*	3
St:	*Err… animal… I like animal.*	4

The repetition of the same words (*I like zoo*) as shown in the above excerpts are considered undesirable as they are not required (the student's message is understood). Here the repetition is not used by the student to emphasize message, but to echo what has been previously said (the form of the utterance) with less hesitation.

4.1.3 False Starts

Excerpt 3 (Video 2)

Tr:	*Five. Animals. Do you like going to the zoo?*	1
St:	*Err… I like… I like…* [Unintelligible] *I… I don't like.*	2
Tr:	*You don't like the zoo?*	3

Before changing the beginning of her utterance, the repeats the beginning of her false start. The student's false start has turned out into a less favorable response due to the pedagogical goal of the teacher which expects a "yes" answer to enable the teacher to ask relevant follow up questions. Another false start can be found in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 4 (Video 2)

Tr:	*Any more questions for me?*	1
St:	*Err...... do… err... holiday or…?=*	2
Tr:	*=No, about animal.*	3

In the above excerpt, the student's utterance was supposed to be started with the word "do" to ask for a clarification (a question). However, she drops the first part of the utterance and decides to use the content word "holiday" only with a raising intonation to ask for clarification.

4.1.4 Self-corrections

Excerpt 5 (Video 1)

Tr:	*Yeah, if you* go *anywhere, where would you go?*	1
St:	*I…* *err… I would go to…err… Japan.=*	2
Tr:	*=Yeah? Why?*	3

St: *Err… Japan is a big city and with cool weather. I have… ehh… I*   4
      [Unintelligible] *seen people and different place.*

In the above extract, the student corrects herself which is clearly shown by the use of the marker "ehh" which is common in spoken and informal conversation.

4.1.5 Pauses
The type of pause which is presented here appears before or after entire speech acts, sentences, clauses, or words, but tends to occur at significant grammatical locations. They are of two types namely filled pause and silent pause.

4.1.5.1 Filled Pause

Filled pauses can be found in many turns throughout the conversation of each student with the teacher.

Excerpt 6 (Video 2)
Tr:	*Why do you like the zoo?*	1
St:	*Err…… animal… animal*	2
Tr:	*Okay. What's your favorite animal?*	3
St:	*--- err…… animal err……cute.*	4
Tr:	*A what?*	5
St:	[Silence:10]	6
Tr:	*What is your favorite animal?*	7
St:	*--- err……*	8
Tr:	*Do you have any pets?*	9
St:	*Err… yes… yes…=*	10
Tr:	*=What pets do you have?*	11
St:	*Err… Ubon* [the name of a province in Thailand]. *Ehh=*	12
Tr:	*=Hah?*	13
St:	[Silence:10]	14

As what can be seen in turns 2, 4, 8, and 10 above, the student uses a lot of unlexicalized non-verbal utterance "*Err.*" The "*Err*" response appears not only when the student is asked a more complex questions like a Wh- question as in turns 1, 3, and 7, but also when she is asked a simpler question like a yes/no question as in turn 9. However,

4.1.5.2 Silent Pause

While most students use filled pauses as framing act, there is also an example where the student's paused is not filled. It is called 'silent pause' as what the following excerpt reveals.

Excerpt 7 (Video 5)
Tr:	*You stayed for one week at Central Plaza* [the name of a shopping mall]?	1
St:	*--- [Unintelligible] …… I…… camping with friend.*	2
Tr:	*At Central Plaza?*	3
St:	*Yes.*	4

In the above extract, the student creates a few-second unfilled gap between the words "I" and "camping." The six-dot mark indicates that there is a significant 'silent moment' which is not filled by the student.

5 Fluency and Silence

Apart from the hesitation phenomena mentioned above, the present study also found a phenomenon where silence is utilized by the students.

Excerpt 8 (Video 2)

Tr:	*Yeah, go ahead. Ask me question.=*	1
St:	*=Err… do you like… do you like err… zoo?*	2
Tr:	*Yes I like the zoo.=*	3
St:	*=Okay……err…*	4
Tr:	*Any more questions?*	5
St:	[Silence:4]	6
Tr:	*Any more questions for me?*	7
St:	*Err…… do… err…… [Unintelligible] holiday err…?=*	8
Tr:	*=No, about animal.*	9

In the excerpt above, silence can be found in turn 5. Silence is considered undesirable here as the student fails to provide a response to the teacher's question. A response is indeed desired here as the teacher repeats the same question in turn 7. Silence is also found in Video 4.

6 Accuracy

In terms of accuracy, there are two main aspects which need to be given a special attention by EFL teachers. They are related to the use of appropriate grammatical structures and well-formulated utterances, as well as the use of appropriate vocabulary.

4.3.1 Inability of using appropriate grammatical structures and producing well-formulated utterances.

One of the major findings of the present study is the students' difficulties in using appropriate grammatical structures and producing well-formulated utterances. They are two main problems related to grammatical structures identified in this study. The first type is the use of a poor grammatical structure which does not hinder comprehension as shown in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 9 (Video 1)

Tr:	*Who did you go with?*	1
St:	*Err… I go to Kao Yai with my family.*	2
Tr:	*Okay. How long did you stay there?*	3
St:	*I am stay is one weeks.*	4

As can be seen in the above excerpt, the teacher's question is in past simple, but the student's response is in present simple. The turn-taking shows that the teacher does

not do anything with the student's utterance. It is not desired, but repair is not done here.

The second type, however, does affect the teacher's comprehension as can be seen in Excerpt 10 below.

Excerpt 10 (Video 1)

Tr:	*Okay. Do you have any questions for me?*	1
St:	*Err… what would you like to visit world?*	2
Tr:	*Hah?=*	3
St:	*=[Laughing] What would you like is last summer [Unintelligible]?*	4
Tr:	*Hah? I don't understand*	5
St:	*[Laughing] err…err…I ask vacation or…?=*	6
Tr:	*=Vacation=*	7
St:	*=Vacation. But I don't understand the question.*	8
St:	*Err… what you visit to like in the world?*	9
Tr:	*Hah? Where?*	10
St:	*Oh…oh… where.*	11
Tr:	*Okay.*	12

In turns 2 and 4 above, the student uses grammatically incorrect sentences to convey her message. This results in, the appearance of what I call here as the "Hah? Phenomenon" which indicates the teacher's inability to understand the student utterances (he clearly mentions it in turns 3 and 8).

4.3.2 The use of inappropriate selection of words during speaking

In terms of vocabulary accuracy, one student is found to struggle with the parts of speech. She cannot differentiate between a noun and an adjective as shown in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 11 (Video 3)

Tr:	*Have you ever gone abroad?*	1
St:	*Again, please.=*	2
Tr:	*=Have you ever gone abroad? Have you ever gone to another country?*	3
St:	*[Unintelligible] I… I have already American.*	4
Tr:	*Hah?*	5

In turn 4 above, the student says 'American' instead of 'America' to refer to the country as asked by the teacher in turn 3. In turn 5, the teacher signals that there is something wrong in the student's utterance by saying "Hah?"

4.4 Poor Comprehension
Often times the communication cannot be continued to a level where ideas can be exchanged smoothly without interruption due to poor comprehension.

Excerpt 12 (Video 2)

Tr:	*What pets do you have?*	1

St: *Err… Ubon* [the name of a province in Thailand]. *Ehh…*   2
Tr: *Hah?*   3
St: *Pets* [Self-repetition]   4
Tr: *What pets do you have?*   5
St: *--- Yes, I… yes I… pet* [Unintelligible] *zoo?*   6
Tr: *Hah?*   7
St: [Laughing] *pets…* [Self-repetition]=   8
Tr: =*Pets like like dogs, like cats, like birds.*   9
      [Silence:1]   10
      Do you have a pet?=   11
St: =*Pet?*   12
      Yeah.   13
      [Silence]   14
Tr: *Like dog, like cat.*=   15
St: =*Cat?…* ⌈*meaw?* [cat]⌉ ⌈*chai mai?* [right?] [Laughing]⌉   16
              ⌊[Laughing]⌋   ⌊   *Yeah… cat… yeah* [Laughing]⌋   17
Tr: *Do you have a cat or dog?*   18
St: *I… errr… dog.*=   19
Tr: =*You have a dog?* ⌈*What…*⌉   *what is his name?*   20
                        ⌊[Unintelligible]⌋   21
St: *--- Fa.*   22
Tr: *Fa? Like your* ⌈*name?*⌉   *Fa? Your dog is Fa?* [Laughing]=   23
St: ⌊*Mai chai* [no, it isn't]⌋[Laughing] =*mai… mai…* [no.. no…]   24
      dog … dog?=
Tr: =*Yes.*=   25
St: =*Oh,…* ⌈[Laughing]⌉ *err… Kabi.*   26
Tr: ⌊[Laughing]⌋ *Kabi. Okay.*   27

In this excerpt the teacher's initiation (which is a question) is in turn 1. To respond to "What pets do you have?" question, the student needs to be given several repairs and confirmation questions by the teacher. The expected response is eventually given by the student in turn 19. Similarly, to respond to the teacher's question in turn 20 (*What is his name?)*, the student has to produce several turns before the confirmation that her response is correct is finally given by the teacher in turn 27.

5 Discussion

5.1 Summary of the Findings
This small-scale study reveals both fluency and accuracy are the main problems encountered by the low-proficiency students at UBU. In terms of fluency, the turn-taking analysis shows that most students are trapped to be in hesitation. This can be seen from the occurrence of false starts, repeats, restarts and pauses. In terms of accuracy, the major problem faced by the students is the inability to use correct grammatical structures in their utterances which unfortunately hinders or decreases comprehension. Two major findings which have not been clearly identified in previous studies are presented in this study. They are silence and poor comprehension. Silence is put under fluency since it deals with the ability to produce continuous speech. Seen from the turn-taking perspective in an institutional talk, every teacher's question requires an answer from the student. If the student is unable to respond, the teacher will usually repeat the question or ask other questions.

The second phenomenon, that is poor comprehension, has not been identified yet whether or not it can (or should) be under fluency or accuracy problems. The main reason is because, in all excerpts mentioned above, the student understand what the teacher asks or want her to do. Her only problem is not being able to respond it fluently and accurately. The poor comprehension phenomenon, however, shows a completely different situation. The student does not comprehend the teacher's questions, which leads her to give unexpected responses. As for the silence phenomenon, since the researcher solely depends on the turn-taking analysis, it is still arguable whether the students' silence is caused by their not understanding the questions or not being given enough time to respond, or by other unknown factors.

With regard to the related previous studies, there are two problems that the researcher found to be quite similar to what were found by Gan (2012), namely inadequate vocabulary and grammar hindrance, which are closely related to linguistics difficulties as mentioned by Hosni (2014). Six other speaking problems mentioned by Maulana, et al. (2016) were also found to be closely related to the findings of the present study. They are lack of vocabulary, lack of grammar knowledge, difficult to express words and sentences, and reluctant to speak.

6 Conclusion

This study examines the difficulties encountered by the students in a speaking test. It specifically looks at the fluency-and-accuracy-related problems of five low-proficiency students at UBU. As discussed in part 5 above, students need to be prepared to speak in a more fluent and accurate way in order to improve their speaking performance. In particular, they need to be trained to produce eligible utterances by reducing the number of unnecessary pauses or hesitation and poor grammatical structures. This is not only to help them get better scores or simply to pass the course, but also to prepare them to become a competent speaker of English language. In order to undercover the causes of these speaking problems, further studies are needed.

Symbol and Conventions Used in This Study

Notation	Denotation
…	Short pause
……	Long pause
---	Silence before starting the utterance
err	Filled pause
=	The two parties almost speak at the same time
[Unintelligible]	The utterances cannot be understood
[ ]	Additional description of a particular situation
⌐ ¬	The two parties speak at the same time; or one party interrupts the turn of another party.
[Silence: *n*]	The length of silence in seconds. "*n*" is replaced by a number in the excerpts.

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