

An Investigation of University Students' English-Speaking Problems and Needs

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Abstract

International trends, compounded with the effect of globalization, have made English communication skills become much more crucial for university students. Of the four aspects of English skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking instructions have not been adequately provided to university students in Taiwan. Nonetheless, there is a national educational goal that university students should be able to speak adequate English outside of school and in the workplace after they graduate. The purpose of the study was to investigate English-speaking problems and needs experienced by university students. The target population for this study was students at a selected university in northern Taiwan. This study employed a qualitative approach. Specifically, students were interviewed to gather useful information regarding their English-speaking problems and learning needs. Results of the investigation pinpointed problems associated with the current instructional delivery and design of English-speaking courses. In addition, students' specific learning needs were identified. Appropriate teaching strategies were suggested to improve instructors' teaching effectiveness. Comparisons with other universities in Asia were made to explore cross-cultural differences. With the aim of helping instructors of speaking courses to achieve maximum improvement, practical recommendations were offered for instructors to modify their pedagogical designs and deliveries to address the problems and needs of students.

Keywords: English Speaking, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Teaching, English Learning, Course Design, Learning Problems

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Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has made it even more significant to have a solid command of English. As the global importance of English and its proportion of non-native speakers have continued to increase, higher education in Taiwan has prioritized university students' English proficiency levels. Certainly, it is becoming increasingly essential for Taiwanese university students to possess adequate English skills in order to carry out effective international communication.

The National Development Council outlined new policies to enhance Taiwan's proficiency in the English language and improve the country's overall national competitiveness. The initial goal was to develop Taiwan into a bilingual nation by 2030. The Ministry of Education in (MOE) Taiwan has been actively promoting Taiwan's bilingual policies (Ministry of Education, 2022). The policies aim to accelerate the integration of bilingual education, the expansion of English language proficiency testing, and the improvement of civil servants' English proficiency. Nevertheless, simply achieving adequate scores on standardized English proficiency tests does not always lead to the acquisition of practical English skills. English benchmark policy for graduation in Taiwan's higher Education places perhaps an even stronger emphasis on standardized test scores. Although there is a social consensus about the implementation of the graduation benchmark for English in Taiwan's higher education, but the policy has not achieved the MOE's goals to raise college students' overall English proficiency. For many students, these tests induced fear, pressure, anxiety, and frustration. The policy did not bring about any meaningful changes in the educational settings as intended. Nonetheless, the MOE seems keen on continuously encouraging universities to set their graduation thresholds using standardized English proficiency tests. Students' passing rates would also continue to be one of the indicators for college evaluation (Chu & Yeh, 2017). It has been suggested that the English graduation requirements might have to be modified in the subsequent policies for more meaningful and practical results. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the policies also aim to increase international interaction and boost the development of multicultural education. Thus, changes in the English education system in Taiwan need to be made to catch up with global trends.

An important shift from general English to practical English is taking place. Of the four aspects of English skills, namely listening, reading, writing, and speaking, instructions in the area of speaking have not been provided to Taiwanese university students sufficiently. In short, speaking skills is the most deficient aspect of Taiwanese university students' overall English competency. In reality, however, students need to enhance their English-speaking skills continuously to engage in effective international communication (Nickerson, Gerritsen, & Meurs, 2005).

International trends, compounded with the effect of globalization, have made English communication skills become much more crucial for university students. There is a national educational goal in Taiwan that university students should be able to speak adequate English outside of school and in the workplace after they graduate. In Taiwanese higher education, the expansion of English language proficiency testing has been widely implemented. Nevertheless, simply achieving satisfactory scores on English standardized tests is no longer adequate for students in the 21st century. Of the four facets of English skills, namely reading, listening, writing, and speaking, instructions in speaking have not been adequately provided to Taiwanese university students. Speaking skills is still one of the most underdeveloped aspects of Taiwanese university students' English competency. English speaking is a

challenging learning objective for EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners owing to the lack of practicing environments (Chen & Hwang, 2022). This still holds true in the Taiwanese EFL context.

Considering the importance of effective international communication, the English-speaking curriculum should be carefully examined and formulated strategically. There have been some implications for developing English-speaking curriculum. First, the curriculum of speaking should be well-designed. Second, lecturers should design English-speaking curricula integrated by technology and social media that makes students enriched with culture, knowledge, and experience from around the world. Third, lecturers should facilitate their English-speaking curriculum with the English-speaking community so that the students will have more chances to speak English inside and outside the class (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020).

Taking the inevitable trend of globalized education into careful consideration, adequate English-speaking skills are becoming significantly more critical for Taiwanese university students to partake in international exchanges. Ensuring the quality of English instructions provided to students to develop adequate English speaking is not just beneficial for their studies, but also raises students' overall employability and competitive edge in the international job market. This is especially important during a time that cross-cultural communication is more frequent and wider in range than at any time in the past. The purpose of the study was to investigate English-speaking problems and needs experienced by Taiwanese university students.

Methodology

This section presents the research methods employed in the study. The selection of the target population and participants are introduced in the following paragraphs. Data collection and data analysis procedures are also explained in this section.

The target population of this study was the students at a selected university in the northern part of Taiwan. Three English-speaking classes with a total of 63 students took part in this study during the Spring semester of 2023. The 63 students were from 16 different academic programs. Seventeen groups of three to five students were interviewed to collect data for the study.

A qualitative approach was utilized to conduct the study. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the instrument for data collection (Creswell, 1994). The instruments used included interview questions about students' English-speaking problems and needs. Additionally, the interviews were designed to acquire useful information regarding students' perceptions of the quality of English-speaking instruction.

Six interview questions in total were designed by the researcher. The questions concerned the students' problems associated with the English learning environment, appropriateness of English classes for speaking skills, causes of low-level English-speaking skills, perceived difficulties associated with English speaking, specific needs in the area of English-speaking instruction, and proposed solutions. In an effort to assure the quality of the interview questions, two EFL researchers with experience in conducting qualitative studies were asked to assess the validity and reliability of the contents. Minor changes in the wording were made

based on the feedback from the two researchers. The interviews used the six prearranged questions.

The interviews were conducted at the beginning of March 2023. Each group interview, completed entirely in English, lasted about 25 to 30 minutes. In the case that the participating students' responses were not sufficiently clear, follow-up questions were asked to seek further information.

Results

Group interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants. This section summarizes students' interview responses.

Question 1: What problems can you identify with the English learning environment, especially concerning English-speaking instruction, at your university?

Due to various cultural behavioral reasons, students are not active in speaking activities. This was expressed by a surprising number of students. The word "shy" was brought up many times when students responded to this question.

Courses that supposedly should be taught using EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) are not really carried out entirely in English. Despite the course description given by the academic unit and the instructor, many courses do not completely adhere to the all-English policy. This is especially evident in courses taught by instructors that are not adequately fluent in English.

Domestic students have little opportunity to interact with international students. Despite the increasing number of foreign students on the campus of the selected university, students felt that actual interactions with their international counterparts are infrequent. This is considered a waste of opportunity for students to engage in meaningful communication.

Students in speaking classes possess varying levels of speaking proficiency. Although this is a common problem for foreign language classes, its negative effect is even more apparent in speaking classes. Activities could be dominated by certain students' monologues or diminished by other students' inactivity.

Question 2: How appropriate and adequate are the general English courses for speaking skills at your university?

The great majority of students stated that the general English courses are not adequate in preparing them for effective oral communication. Traditional English classes in Taiwan have emphasized test scores for decades. Instructions on reading and listening take up the great majority of class time. For students to pass graduation threshold exams, which encompass reading and listening, most instructors still emphasize reading and listening over speaking. Speaking, among the four skills, is still largely neglected. Therefore, these classes are considered neither appropriate nor adequate for students to improve their speaking skills.

Class size is generally too big for speaking activities to be effective. Most students feel that 20 students or more are too many for a speaking class. They pointed out that they receive less

individual attention and feedback from the instructors. Moreover, they feel that their opportunity to practice public speaking is proportionally less when the class size is larger.

There is an awkwardness in communicating with other classmates in English once they know each other. This is typically not a problem at the beginning of the semester when the students are not familiar with each other. However, they begin to feel awkward using a foreign language to communicate with each other after several weeks.

Question 3: What do you think are the reasons for Taiwanese students' low English-speaking skills?

Cultural factors including ranking, hierarchy, and prestige influence educational policies. University ranking is taken very seriously by administrators in Taiwanese higher education. A part of this ranking is determined by students' scores on standardized tests. As a result, a stronger emphasis is placed on training students to achieve higher test scores and pass certain exams. In the subject of English, this would mean further enhancing students' reading and listening comprehension skills.

Mistakes and the prospect of "losing face" prevent students from speaking up. Students feel that making mistakes in the presence of other classmates is rather discomforting. This concern hinders their desire to speak more during class time.

Students have traditionally been instructed to "listen first" in a teacher-centered learning environment. This is especially true in K-12 education in Taiwan. Once they get into postsecondary education, they are then expected to think critically and speak their mind. This—along with the fact that English is a much more direct language than Chinese—makes it very difficult for certain students to adapt in a short time.

Students also pointed out that the focus of English education has largely been on grammar and vocabulary acquisition. Actual communication skills have never been truly taught. Although the goal of communication is often mentioned, it is not reflected in how English is taught in Taiwan.

At the current time, the education system generally favors test scores over real-life applications. Test scores can immediately show students' proficiency levels. However, real-life communication skills are much harder to measure and quantify in order to show results.

Question 4: What are your main problems with speaking English?

Students feel compelled to overcome their accents. Despite the majority of English speakers in the world speaking the language with an accent, there is an over-glorification of having perfect English pronunciation in Taiwan. This can be seen as an underlying factor that impedes students' confidence and willingness to speak up.

As previously mentioned, an overwhelming number of students reported feeling afraid of making mistakes or embarrassing themselves when speaking English. Students are not willing to speak up until they feel confident that their response is free of mistakes. They also believe that the lack of sufficient practice leads to their low levels of confidence.

On a different note, a small number of students reported having to translate between Chinese and English when speaking. This is not an uncommon phenomenon among foreign language learners. Moreover, several students reported limited vocabulary as a problem that makes their speaking disfluent.

Question 5: What specific needs do you have in the area of English-speaking instruction?

Fluency is found to be a common goal for most students. Even though most students identified speaking accuracy to be more important than fluency, they indicate a stronger desire to speak more fluently. Surprisingly, students simply demand more opportunities to improve their speaking skills. Students feel that the previous English education they received did not provide ample opportunities for speaking practice. This is a somewhat reasonable claim considering the academic culture in Taiwan.

Students expressed the desire for a stress-free learning environment conducive to developing English-speaking skills. This echoes their fear of making mistakes in front of classmates. It also highlights once again the cultural factors mentioned earlier.

In addition to conversation skills, which are the primary content of most speaking classes, students expressed the need for more specific instructions. Specifically, students pointed out that public speaking, presentation, and negotiation skills should be taught in English-speaking classes. They believe these specific skills are of benefit for their career in the future.

Question 6: What are the solutions and suggestions that can improve the current situation to enhance the English-speaking skills of students at your university?

Students suggested that speaking instructors should actively coach them and motivate them to speak well. They pointed out that instructors should also take on the role of a coach. They expressed that in addition to providing instructions, instructors should constantly give feedback to better students' speaking performance.

For speaking courses, students should be placed in different classes based on their speaking proficiency rather than standardized test results, which are largely based on reading and listening skills. This could ensure that in-class communication and instructions are appropriately suited for students' actual speaking proficiency.

Classes should be more interaction-based, learner-centered, and outcome-oriented. English courses should strive to equip students with actual communication skills. More English-speaking classes should be offered to non-English major students. This is especially emphasized by students from non-English programs as they found the number of courses offered to them to be extremely scarce.

Discussion

Learning problems identified by the students themselves could be of benefit to instructors. This also holds true in the EFL context. A relatively similar study was conducted in Indonesia to investigate English-speaking problems found by the students and explored some implications for speaking curriculum development (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). That study also utilized a descriptive qualitative approach and part of the data was taken from semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that the problems encountered by the

students in speaking English cover the lack of appropriate vocabulary, the lack of grammar mastery, the lack of correct pronunciation, the lack of input of English outside the class, the lack of confidence, and the lack of English-speaking curriculum development. Except for grammar mastery, the other findings are noticeably similar to the present study. It is interesting to note that students from Indonesia and Taiwan share similar problems in English speaking.

Sung (2009) conducted a survey study to identify attractive quality attributes of English language teaching at an Indonesian university and a Taiwanese university. Students from the two universities from two different East Asian countries showed different preferences in English language instruction. Despite the different learning presences, however, students in the aforementioned studies revealed similar learning problems in terms of English speaking.

Another quantitative study that made use of students' questionnaires revealed Saudi EFL learners' speaking challenges (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022). The study also contributed to finding solutions to the challenges the Saudi EFL learners encounter in their English-speaking skills. The study concluded that Saudi EFL learners need enough time to practice English-speaking skills in the classroom. They also revealed that should speak English outside the classroom as well. These motivations are not different from that of the Taiwanese students in the present study. Similarly, the Saudi students also revealed that the syllabus and teaching materials of the English-speaking skills courses need development to match the needs of the learners in their daily lives and to meet the demands of the labor market. These once again match the needs expressed by the Taiwanese students in the present study.

A very recent study on the topic of English speaking was conducted in another Southeast Asian country, Thailand (Sukrutrit, 2023). The study investigated students' perceptions of speaking English in front of the class versus speaking English via self-recorded videos posted on a private Facebook group. The study revealed that very similar to their Taiwanese counterparts, most Thai students are shy and have less confidence in speaking English. It was also revealed that most Thai students prefer speaking English via self-recorded videos posted on the private Facebook group as opposed to speaking English in front of the class. Surprisingly, this finding is different compared with another study by Sung (2022) that Taiwanese students showed a noticeable preference for direct interactions with their classmates than using a chat-based communication platform. For perspectives, another study revealed that the English exit examinations policy and practice in Thailand might raise awareness of the importance of English and motivate Thai students to improve their ability, but it is not likely to guarantee expected English proficiency levels (Wudthayagorn, 2022). As discussed earlier, the situation is not dissimilar in Taiwan.

Some instructors may not have been sufficiently trained to teach speaking effectively. An interesting revelation points out international students' contrasting desire to carry out communication with domestic students using Mandarin. Foreign instructors should recognize cultural differences while engaging students in speaking activities. Although not an aim of the present investigation, many instructors were found to be lacking the necessary pedagogical and language skills of teaching professional courses using EMI. Despite this, a study conducted in China found that non-native English-speaking instructors could communicate with students about their learning difficulties better. Their instruction was considered more intelligible but rather teacher-dominated (Qiu & Fang, 2022). This sheds

light on the advantages of non-native English-speaking instructors' advantages as long as they possess satisfactory speaking competence.

Conclusion

In Taiwanese higher education, speaking, among the four skills of English proficiency, is still the most neglected skill despite the well-promoted benefits of international communication competence. Despite all established and well-recognized goals of practical English education, real-life applications of English skills are an ideal but not a reality at present. Traditional educational goals, compounded with cultural attitudes, influence students' performance in English speaking. Taiwanese university students' mindset and confidence level influence their willingness and ability to perform in English speaking tasks. The current English curriculum in Taiwan's higher education needs adjustments in its practical focus and instructional approach.

A considerable portion of class time in general English classes should be devoted to speaking practice. English-speaking classes should be divided based on students' speaking competency rather than standardized test scores on reading and listening. Instructors today need to further shift away from teaching test-oriented content to teaching practical communication skills. Lastly, universities should strategically utilize the presence of international students to help facilitate students' language exchange.

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