

Exploring Thai EFL Learners' Preferences for Speaking Activities

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the preferred speaking activities of Thai EFL learners and to explore the rationale behind their preferences. The participants were 44 first-year English major students enrolled in the *Listening and Speaking in Daily Life* course at the University of Phayao, Thailand. The participants were selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and analyzed through descriptive statistics and content analysis. The results showed that Thai EFL learners most preferred engaging in language games (79.55%), conversations (70.45%), role plays (65.91%), pronunciation drills (61.36%), and describing pictures (59.09%). Other speaking activities were less preferred. Findings from the interviews with 11 participants further supported these preferences, revealing that learners found the top five activities to be motivating, relaxing, and enjoyable. Participants noted that these activities encouraged group work, provided more opportunities to speak the language, and helped them improve their speaking skills. Understanding learners' preferred speaking activities can help educators design teaching strategies and materials that resonate with students' needs, fostering a more supportive and effective language-learning environment.

Keywords: preferred speaking activities, rationale, Thai EFL learners

Introduction

Many researchers (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Rao, 2019; Tipmontree & Tasanameelarp, 2021) believe that speaking activities, particularly communicative ones such as discussions, role plays, interviews, dialogues, oral presentations, and language games, can significantly improve EFL learners' speaking ability. Teachers can assign various speaking activities to their students, such as conversations, interviews, discussions, role-plays, dialogues, presentations, and language games. While some of these activities may be interesting for learners, others may not be for various reasons. Samperio (2017) has identified several factors that influence students' preferences for speaking activities, including learning styles, motivation, interest in studying the language, perception of the significance and usefulness of the speaking activity, anxiety, classroom environment, student behavior, language level, and language learning goals. Furthermore, Mon (2019) and Rao (2019) emphasize the importance of considering students' interests and perceptions of the types of classroom speaking activities, as this can increase learners' motivation, facilitate learning, and help create a friendly and enjoyable classroom environment, leading to active participation and willingness to engage in assigned speaking activities. Samperio (2017) explains that it is equally important to recognize that preferences are subjective and can change throughout the process of studying a lesson or course. The factors that influence preferences constantly change and may vary for each individual. According to Dornyei and Ushioda (2011), learners' preferences for classroom activities are associated with motivational factors that influence their choices, engagement, effort, and determination. This suggests that speaking activities

that are interesting, motivating, and beneficial to students will encourage them to participate actively and willingly in the assigned tasks. Therefore, being aware of language learners' reasons for their preferences in speaking activities can assist teachers in selecting appropriate activities and introducing ones that are rarely used in the classroom, especially if learners perceive them as beneficial in achieving their goal of becoming proficient speakers of the language.

Understanding Thai EFL Learners' Speaking Challenges and Preferences

Developing English-speaking skills is a persistent challenge for many Thai EFL learners. Despite years of formal English education, learners often struggle with oral communication due to a lack of confidence, limited practice opportunities, and traditional classroom approaches emphasizing grammar over communication (Baker, 2015; Khamkhien, 2010). Cultural factors, such as avoiding public mistakes and prioritizing "saving face," further hinder learners' willingness to speak (Adamson, 2004). Research shows that activities aligned with learners' preferences can boost motivation and participation in speaking tasks (Nation & Newton, 2009). However, limited studies focus specifically on Thai EFL learners' preferred speaking activities and their alignment with cultural and educational contexts. Without this insight, teachers may implement methods that fail to engage learners, reducing the effectiveness of speaking instruction.

This study addresses this gap by exploring Thai EFL learners' preferred speaking activities and the reasons behind their choices. By identifying engaging and beneficial activities, it aims to provide actionable recommendations for teachers and curriculum designers to enhance speaking instruction in Thailand.

Objectives

1. To determine the preferred speaking activities of Thai EFL learners.
2. To examine the rationale behind learners' preferences.

Literature Review

The Importance of Considering Students' Preferences for Classroom Activities

Experts and researchers emphasize the vital role of classroom activities in language learning and the importance of understanding students' preferences and perspectives. Moore (2001) and Nunan (1991) argue that incorporating students' opinions when selecting activities enhances learning, engagement, and motivation. Similarly, Samperio (2017) and Qamariah (2017) highlight the importance of considering students' preferences and perceptions of speaking activities to select tasks that stimulate interest and encourage active participation. Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) further assert that learners' preferences strongly correlate with motivational factors influencing their effort, engagement, and determination. Teachers who align classroom activities with students' preferences can significantly boost motivation, which plays a critical role in language learning success. As Dornyei (2001) notes, "Without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot achieve long-term goals, and appropriate curricula and good teaching alone cannot ensure student achievement" (p. 65). By considering students' preferences and views on speaking activities, teachers can create engaging and effective learning experiences, fostering greater motivation and improving learners' overall achievement.

Related Studies

Several studies have examined EFL learners' and teachers' preferences for classroom activities, emphasizing the need to align these with learners' needs to enhance speaking skills. Plengkham and Wasanasomsithi (2023) found that Thai learners often favor interactive activities, like role-plays and group discussions, which provide meaningful contexts for using English and foster motivation. These preferences reflect common challenges among Thai EFL learners, such as low confidence and fear of public mistakes. Similarly, Mahmoodi et al. (2021) highlighted Iranian medical students' preference for diverse activities, including group work, media use, and immediate feedback, underscoring the importance of tailoring curricula to learners' needs. Mon (2019) also revealed that activities such as conversations, group discussions, and role-plays improve fluency and confidence while promoting an engaging classroom environment.

Other studies, like Samperio (2017), identified discrepancies between teachers' chosen activities and students' preferences, with learners favoring traditional methods while teachers prioritized communicative tasks. Qamariah (2017) emphasized the importance of group work and role-playing in reducing anxiety and fostering participation. Huang and Hu (2016) noted that students preferred interactive and communicative activities, such as games and discussions, over traditional teacher-centered methods, as they were seen as more engaging and effective for improving speaking and listening skills. Activities that aligned with students' interests and real-life needs enhanced motivation, participation, and confidence, with cultural factors like a desire to "save face" shaping preferences for low-risk tasks.

While these studies underscore the value of considering students'

preferences, most focus on international contexts rather than Thailand. Thailand's unique cultural and educational factors likely influence preferences for speaking activities, yet this remains underexplored. Given the emphasis on speaking in Thai English curricula, understanding local preferences could provide insights to improve engagement and learning outcomes. Therefore, further research in the Thai context is needed to examine how students' preferences relate to motivation and achievement.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-method design. It involves collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data to provide a better picture by enhancing descriptions for a deeper understanding of the phenomena. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) assert that mixed methods allow researchers to benefit from the strengths of both approaches, enabling the exploration of not only numerical trends but also the deeper, contextual factors behind them. In the context of studying Thai EFL learners' preferred speaking activities, this design is particularly appropriate as it enables the researcher to quantify learners' preferences through questionnaires while using interviews to explore the rationale behind those preferences. This dual approach ensures a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the data, aligning well with the complex, multifaceted nature of language learning.

1. Participants

The study targeted students enrolled in the *Listening and Speaking in Daily Life* course at the School of Liberal Arts, University of Phayao, Thailand, during the first term of the 2023 academic year. The participants were 44 first-year English major students, both male and female, selected using non-probability sampling, specifically convenience sampling. This method was chosen due to the

researcher's direct access to these students and the practicality of conducting the study within the existing course framework. This course was particularly suitable for the study as it focuses on enhancing speaking skills through real-life situational activities, incorporating vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation practice.

2. Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect data to address the study's two objectives. Based on a thorough review of related literature summarized in Chapter II, the researcher adapted the questionnaire and designed 2 questions for the interview. These tools were assessed and validated by three experts specializing in teaching listening, speaking, and communication courses using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) and were modified based on their suggestions before using to collect data.

2.1 Questionnaire

The data on participants' preferences for speaking activities were collected using a questionnaire adapted from Samperio (2017), who conducted a similar study but not in the Thai context. The original questionnaire included non-speaking activities, but the author selected only the speaking activities commonly used in the classroom. The final version consisted of 11 speaking activities for participants to choose from.

2.2 Interview Questions

The interview aimed to explore learners' preferences for speaking activities, focusing on the rationale behind their choices and the specific activities they prefer. It also provided supplementary insights to support the questionnaire data. Participants were volunteers, and their involvement was entirely voluntary, with informed consent obtained before the interview. The interview questions the author

designed consisted of two main questions: (1) What activities do you enjoy in the classroom? (2) Why? Follow-up questions were asked when needed. To encourage honest responses, confidentiality was emphasized, and participants were assured that their participation would not impact their course performance.

3. Data Collection

After obtaining ethical approval to conduct this study, the researcher provided participants with information about the study, including the research title, objectives, and process. Participants were given a consent form to read and sign if they agreed to participate. They were asked to complete the questionnaire within 15 minutes. Following this, volunteers were invited to participate in the interview, and appointments were scheduled with those who agreed. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online at scheduled times, with each interview lasting 15 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded for content analysis.

4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, with the frequency percentage of each speaking activity in a bar graph. The results were interpreted based on relevant theories and findings from previous studies reviewed by the researcher. The qualitative data was analyzed through content analysis, which involved transcribing, coding, and categorizing the data into meaningful units.

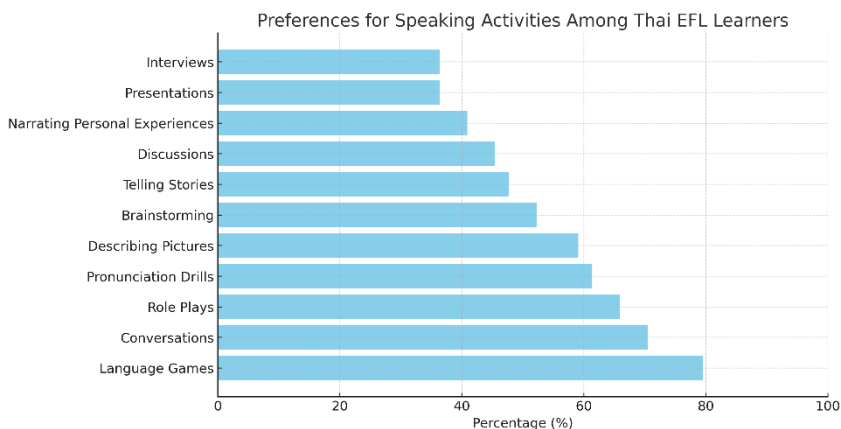
Results

1. Objective 1. To determine the preferred speaking activities of Thai EFL learners.

Figure 1 shows the results obtained from the questionnaire regarding the speaking activities preferred by Thai EFL learners.

Figure 1

Speaking Activities Preferred by Thai EFL Learners



Note: Data represents the percentage of preferences for various speaking activities among Thai EFL learners.

As shown in Figure 1, many respondents preferred engaging in Language games (79.55%), followed by conversations (70.45%), role plays (65.91%), pronunciation drills (61.36%), describing pictures (59.09%), and brainstorming (52.27%). Some learners also preferred other speaking activities, though with less than 50% frequency: telling stories (47.73%), discussions (45.45%), narrating personal experiences (40.91%), and, finally, interviews and presentations (36.36%). These results indicate that Thai EFL learners have diverse preferences for speaking activities, with a clear preference for certain activities over others. The top six most preferred activities, as shown in Figure 1, are predominantly communicative.

Additionally, Table 1 further supports these findings, providing a substantial and definitive response to the first objective of this research.

2. Objective 2. To explore the rationale for learners' preferred speaking activities.

Table 1

Summary of the Results of the Interview Regarding the Learners' Rationale for the Preferred Speaking Activities

Speaking Activities	Frequency	Reasons
Role Plays	11	It is fun to work with a team. It motivates students to speak. It provides the opportunity for learners to practice the language.
Conversations	10	It provides an opportunity for learners to practice the language. It helps develop students' speaking skills.
Language games	9	It is fun to work with a team. It creates a relaxed classroom environment. It encourages students to use the language.

Table 1 (Con.)

Speaking Activities	Frequency	Reasons
Pronunciation drills	5	It helps students improve their pronunciation.
Brainstorming	2	It helps students analyze topics. It encourages them to speak.
Narrating personal experiences	1	It allows students to share their experiences.

Table 1 presents the speaking activities preferred by Thai EFL learners and the reasons for their choices. Participants acknowledged the language-learning benefits of these activities. All interviewees favored role plays, describing them as enjoyable and effective in encouraging active language use. Most respondents also expressed a preference for conversations and language games, citing their ability to provide a low-pressure environment for practicing English, particularly when working with friends. These activities were also seen as motivating learners to speak English. Some of the students' responses are provided below, as follows:

“I think language games are fun to remember vocabulary too.” S9

“I like role-play because it’s a class activity that I enjoy because I play various roles and use a lot of English.” S11

“This game is fun and creates excitement and unity because I have done this activity with friends, making me know and talking to new people and getting to know more friends.” S11

Some also expressed that they liked pronunciation drills because these helped them achieve the primary aim of speaking the vocabulary correctly.

“It helps me practice my speaking skills, vocabulary, and pronunciation of words.” S5

“I think it helps with speaking because when I don’t speak correctly the first time I learn a word, I can speak correctly next time.” S3

“I like it too because it makes me pronounce words correctly.” S8

Two students reported enjoying brainstorming activities as they helped them analyze topics and encouraged speaking. Additionally, one student preferred narrating personal experiences, as it provided an opportunity to share her own stories.

Discussion

Speaking Activities Preferred by Thai EFL Learners

This study found that Thai EFL learners have a variety of preferences for speaking activities when learning the English language. The top five preferred activities, as shown in Figure 1, were language games, role plays, conversations, pronunciation drills, and describing pictures. The data in Table 1 supports this, indicating that the top four activities preferred by most students align with those in Figure 1, although presented in a different order. The preferences for communicative activities among participants reflect the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which encourages the inclusion of activities that enhance students’ communication skills. Previous studies by Leong and Ahmadi (2017); Rao (2019); and Tipmontree and Tasanameelarp (2021) have suggested that communicative activities such as discussions, simulations, role plays, interviews, conversations, and language games can significantly improve EFL learners’ speaking abilities. Similarly,

Qamariah (2017) highlighted the importance of incorporating various speaking activities in the classroom, particularly communicative ones, to enhance students' speaking skills. The positive learners' responses to group work activities, such as role plays, games, oral presentations, and discussions, presented in this study align with the findings of previous research, highlighting the effectiveness of interactive learning methods.

Pronunciation drills were a unique activity in this study, as most participants preferred them despite their non-communicative nature. This indicates that students view these drills as essential for learning, recognizing their role in preventing misunderstandings and enhancing communication. Pachina (2020) noted that while memorization alone does not ensure a deep understanding of language, pronunciation drills can benefit beginners by improving accuracy. Since the participants were first-year university students at an A2/pre-intermediate level, exposure to pronunciation drills and listening practice was crucial for developing their communication skills. Students who favored these drills believed they were vital for improving speaking abilities and achieving effective communication.

Some students preferred speaking activities such as brainstorming, storytelling, discussions, narrating personal experiences, interviews, and presentations, though fewer than 50% selected these options. While these activities are generally communicative, they often require higher speaking proficiency and effort, making them challenging for some learners. This aligns with the findings by Mon (2019), and Huang and Hu (2016), which show that students tend to prefer recreational activities (e.g., English dubs, song cloze, role plays, and games) over conversational ones. Although teachers often prioritize conversational activities for their effectiveness in promoting linguistic development, accommodating students'

preferences can create a more engaging and productive language-learning environment.

Rationales for Thai EFL Learners' Preferences for Speaking Activities

The interview results revealed several reasons for Thai EFL learners' preferences for specific speaking activities. Respondents favored role plays, conversations, and language games due to their enjoyment of group work, opportunities to practice the language, motivation to speak, and perceived improvement in speaking skills. Group activities not only enhance language learning but also promote teamwork by encouraging students to share ideas, learn from peers, and contribute to task completion.

Many students found these activities enjoyable and engaging, especially when working with friends. Role plays, in particular, fostered creativity in verbal and non-verbal communication by allowing learners to act out roles such as receptionist, tour guide, tourist, or mother. This aligns with Mon (2019), who highlighted the benefits of small group work, games, and discussions in building confidence, fostering peer learning, and encouraging respect for diverse perspectives. Similarly, Qamariah (2017) emphasized the positive impact of group work on boosting confidence and fostering active engagement.

The researcher, also an EFL teacher, supports the view that group work increases motivation through peer support, especially for students with lower speaking proficiency or passive tendencies. Group interactions create opportunities to negotiate meaning, clarify understanding, and request repetition, thereby enhancing communication skills. Sha'ar and Boonsuk (2021) further note that Thai EFL learners can overcome cultural and social barriers, including fear of mistakes, in a supportive, communicative classroom environment.

Since EFL learners often have limited chances to use English outside the classroom, communicative activities within the classroom become crucial. This finding aligns with Qamariah (2017), who noted that students value diverse speaking activities as they provide a safe environment for practice. Learners reported feeling hesitant to speak outside class due to fears of being judged or perceived as arrogant. Classroom activities such as role plays and language games helped reduce anxiety, foster motivation, and improve speaking skills. Motivation, a key factor in language learning, fosters a positive attitude and inspires learners to achieve their goals (Dörnyei, 2001). Language games, in particular, create a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere, reducing anxiety and encouraging active participation. This aligns with Mon (2019) and Rao (2019), who found that language games enhance communicative competence and provide meaningful contexts for language use.

Other students preferred pronunciation drills, which they believed improved their pronunciation of English words. While often seen as a traditional method, Pachina (2020) argues that effective and engaging pronunciation drills can be beneficial, particularly for beginners. As the participants in this study were first-year, pre-intermediate-level students, these activities were essential for helping them communicate clearly with peers and teachers.

A small group of students preferred brainstorming and narrating personal experiences, as these activities encouraged self-expression and sharing of viewpoints. This aligns with Bruner's (2004) assertion that sharing personal experiences promotes well-being and supports language practice in meaningful contexts.

Teaching speaking is essential in language learning, and the classroom provides an ideal space for learners to develop these skills. Thai EFL learners recognize the value of speaking activities, which significantly contribute to their

development. Understanding learners' preferences helps teachers design engaging lessons that motivate students and foster proficiency. While teachers often rely on personal beliefs, teaching styles, or textbook recommendations, aligning activities with learners' preferences is equally important. By doing so, teachers can foster motivation, encourage participation, and improve outcomes. Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) confirm that learners' preferences are closely linked to motivational factors that influence their engagement, effort, and persistence.

The findings from the qualitative data support the quantitative results, as shown in Figure 1 and Table 1. Preferences for interactive activities like role plays, group conversations, and language games are supported by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes real-world communication and fluency over accuracy (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) highlights the value of group work and peer interaction, where learners benefit from collaborative scaffolding and social engagement. Additionally, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci, & Ryan, 2017) underscores the role of competence and relatedness in learner motivation, as evidenced by students' enjoyment of group activities in a supportive, low-risk environment. These theories collectively reinforce the importance of communicative, learner-centered, and engaging activities for effective language development."

Recommendations

Implications of the Study

This study highlights the importance of speaking activities, like role-plays, conversations, and language games, in improving English speaking skills among Thai EFL learners. Such activities reduce anxiety, build confidence, and encourage active participation by fostering a supportive, judgment-free environment, aligning with Sha'ar and Boonsuk's (2021) findings. The study suggests that a student-centered approach, tailored to respect cultural norms like avoiding the loss of face, can effectively address barriers such as fear of mistakes. These insights highlight the need for interactive and engaging classroom practices that motivate learners and enhance oral proficiency, providing valuable guidance for educators and curriculum designers in the Thai EFL context

Suggestions for Further Research

This study utilized a small, convenience-based sample of Thai EFL English major students, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research with a larger sample size, as well as the inclusion of non-English major students, could help determine whether the results hold across diverse demographics. Additionally, while a variety of speaking activities were included, time constraints within the single-semester timeframe meant that some activities were implemented only once or twice. A study focusing on a smaller set of frequently used speaking activities, conducted with a larger sample and over an extended period, could provide deeper and more comprehensive insights.

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