

The Listening and Speaking Abilities of First Year Students Enrolled in the English for Communications Class Using the B-SLIM Model

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were: (1) to study the English speaking capability of first year Early Childhood Education students enrolled in the English for Communication course (2) to find out about their listening/speaking abilities using the B – Slim model as part of an in – class application (3) to compare their listening/speaking competencies before and after applying this method to the course. The population samples were: (1) 72 first year Early Childhood Education students enrolled in the English for Communication course in the first semester of 2013, the tools applied (Pre-Post) consisted of the B – Slim model application, Mor Kor Or3 lesson plans and speaking/listening tests. In conclusion, the results indicated significantly higher scores for students exposed to the B – Slim model relative to those exposed to Mor Kor Or 3 ($p < 0.01$).

Keywords: B – Slim model, listening and speaking abilities, research outcome

Introduction

English for Communication course is a mandatory subject for students who major in Early Childhood Education. Based on the university curricular, the course content in the textbook focused on all four key aspects (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) of communicative English for everyday life; each chapter was divided into different functional and situational activities. For the first year early childhood education students, whose primary focus was on situations, events, activities related to children, the survey on their perception towards the course was not very resounding. Certainly, there were many factors behind the students' lack of enthusiasm and motivation; when reading each unit and performing

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according to TQF instructions, the students oftentimes found it irrelevant to their major. From thoroughly observing how the students responded to Mor Kor Or 3's teaching instructions, it appeared that there were many factors behind the students' disinterest and lack of engagement when learning each unit and performing activities according to TQF instructions; this observation led to this conducting this research. With the objectives to find out of their capacities, preferences related to the use of teaching methods/techniques and sources resulted in the selection of B-Slim instructional model as a tool. Since the overall levels of the students were varied, ranging from low to lower intermediates with only a handful of intermediates, it was imperative to divide them into groups based on their English capacities. Pre-tests and post-tests based on key criteria indicated in Mor Kor Or 3 and B – Slim instructional model were used in order to find out pros and cons when using the two instructional methods. Mongkol S. (2010) stated that using B-Slim model increased high school students' enthusiasm and motivation chiefly from knowledge sharing and analytical/ thinking process as one of required steps. When coupled with suitable materials/sources, it appeared that students' engagement was enhanced and they were more engaged.

So what is B – Slim? It is a planning model for second language teaching in classroom settings. Dr. Olenka Bilash, a renowned education professor at University of Alberta, had presented a cycle of planning, teaching and evaluating for teachers to use in classroom. B-Slim consist of five parts of understanding instructions for a lesson in which each part correlates and generates results. As seen in several of the case studies, many teachers were unaware of how to provide their students with the structure and support they needed in order to be successful in their learning. Technically structure and support go hand in hand in order to make teaching successful. In many ways, B-Slim instructions can be referred as comprehensive teaching as its steps comprise planning & preparation>getting it>giving it>using it>proving it>assessment & evaluation.

Focus on HOW and WHAT to prepare (mixed lower intermediate level with intermediate, asked the students about their previous learning backgrounds...mostly low-lower-intermediate-; minimal speaking opportunity).

The “Giving it” is attracting SS attention. This step focuses on the uses of vocabulary, sentence structure, prepositions, word order, pronunciation, grammar, culture etc.

Methodology

1. Testing the 36 samples using Mor Kor Or 3
 - 1.1 Listening/speaking pre-tests of 10 – 15 minutes were given to each student.
 - 1.2 Used lesson plans based on Mor Kor Or 3

1.3 Listening/speaking post – tests (same ones as pre – test) of 10 – 15 minutes were given to each student at the end of the semester.

1.4 Applied the mean, standard deviation, and t- test to compare the results between pre – tests and post – tests.

2. Testing the 36 samples using the B-Slim model

2.1 Listening/speaking pre – tests of 10-15 minutes were given to each student.

2.2 Used lesson plans based on the B – Slim model.

2.3 Listening/speaking post – tests (same ones as pre – test) of 10-15 minutes were given to each student at the end of the semester.

2.4 Applied the mean, standard deviation, and independent and dependent t – tests to compare the results between pre-tests and post-tests.

3. Compared both results, analyzed and differentiated the differences for clarification and benefits derived from using the B – Slim model when compared to Mor Kor Or 3 moving forward.

How the B – Slim model benefited the study:

1. Planning and preparation based on the B-Slim instructions:

1.1 Identified the levels of competency for both experimental (B – Slim) and control (Mor Kor Or 3) samples and mixed low competency with intermediate levels.

1.2 Stressed the importance of the words which contain...sh, ch, th, fl, fr, dr, pl, v, z, th, k, s, sk ,d, t, st, te, ce, se, f, fe, ve, x positioned at the beginning and at the end of the words (pre and post tests indicated that the majority of the students either didn't know how to pronounce nor their meanings, which related to parts of speech as well as sentence structure/ collocation). Additionally, the pronunciation of the character “h”, which many often misunderstood that it was pronounced he:ch/hoch instead of e:ch/ech was the root of incorrect pronunciation of “how”.

2. Giving it...Build on what learners know: due to the fact that the students were familiar with anything related to what they had experienced, interacted and were interested in, teachers used the materials related to children such as pictures of animals in a zoo, pictures of things/objects in a house, describing the appearance of people, cartoon characters/super heroes; showed cartoon animations which contained the aforementioned words; students worked in small group of three to pronounce words, make sentences and also listen, and try to capture the differences of the words that were difficult to pronounce such as rice/lice, right/light/like, with/wit, sheet/cheat, play/pray, rag/lag/lack, divorce/voice, zinc/sink, six/sick, food/foot/fruit/flute, those/dose , crap/crab/clap, full/fool, free/ fee/ flea etc.

In addition, position and functions of words like: respond (v)/response (n), present (v/n/adj.)/presence (n) were explained and each group was asked to produce sentences containing the emphasized words, for example...I always respond to you when you ask; his response was not appreciated., his presence (n) is being felt; he is present(adj.): I got a present (n) from my father; my house (n) houses(v) everybody in the family; Don't place(v) the valuable things in that unsafe place(v); Tom is presenting a presentation etc.. Another key method used was selecting words that ended with ...ture, ile, ire such as mature, file, require ; the majority of students struggled to pronounce correctly and commonly made mistakes since these contained characters R and L, Th, ones of many difficulties for Thais.

In helping the cause and crosschecking their understanding, the students knew the differences of the meanings of each word for which teacher had each group produce sentences containing the emphasized and difficult words. The teacher then praised, shared to other groups to disseminate the knowledge and/or provide useful suggestions and comments to correct errors. Though this should be done in a very cautious and constructive manner, as losing face is one of the main factors that has potential to deteriorate students' confidence, eagerness and self-esteem(Maslow's hierarchy of needs Maslow), and consequently could lead to fear of responding and engaging full conversations.

3. Getting it, using it and proving it.

During these stages, the teacher applied the following steps and to support the continuity of the process and benefit the learners:

3.1 Using a few simple fill in the blanks exercises and quizzes: the teacher had students do the exercise individually from a Power Point exercise with pictures in which the students were instructed to fill in the commonly mistaken/wrongly used words and also put them in correct order in order to get points. With this, it was discovered that the majority of the students were more motivated when having to compete against one another. Hence, it did not hurt having them compete for an inexpensive prize/award to make the session more challenging and more tempting. During this stage Word Formation (prefix) was added to the teaching and learning processes because when teaching prefixes, students were able to learn 2 words at the same time i.e. safe/unsafe, legal/illegal, patient/impatient, sexual/bisexual, write/rewrite, direct/indirect etc. It was discovered that knowing 2 words with opposite meanings helped the students in the area of word choices and having a higher vocabulary is useful when forming sentences. Each group selected a short and preferred Thai current news article/story/ fairy tale/comic book then translated it into English using Google Translate, which was widely used by the students. After completion, they then exchanged and compared the translations; the teacher then made corrections, pinpointed the errors and provided solutions to each group. This activity also worked wonderfully and was fun as the students realized that Google Translate was unreliable due to the fact that it has tendency to translate everything

word by word; often times the Thai words and English words are irrelevant. For examples, when you type the name of a person...says Mr. Somsak with the Thai last name of พรหมนุ่ม then the translation would be **Soft Carpet** or วิเศษสุด is equaled to **Driest** (แห้งสุด) etc. However, Google Translate does offer many strong points apart from just being a translation source, it offers synonyms and provides samples sentences in which parts of speech can be learned. Speaking further on the activity, it helped broaden the students' knowledge and at the same time, changed their perceptions into exploring other dictionary sources or useful translated applications. With this, it enables teacher to evolve further by explaining and clarifying other key parts in the sentence such as differences in sentence structure between Thai and English and important parts of speech, particularly prepositions as this is one of Thais' weak points. This activity virtually allowed the teacher to emphasize the significance of words like...**in, on, for, to, with; for example** ผมแต่งงานกับคุณ = **I am married to you** (not with you), ผมอาศัยอยู่ที่กรุงเทพ = **I live in Bangkok (not at Bangkok)**, ฉันชอบอ่านข่าวสารใน/ทาง Facebook = **I like to read news on Facebook (not in or not by Facebook)**.

3.2 Commonly used, but often misunderstood, phrasal verbs were added when teaching, for example: I **stand by you** (doesn't mean I am standing near next to you; I always **look after** you (doesn't mean searching for); I could not **catch up** with him (doesn't mean trying to catch someone); As the enemy advanced, we **fell back** (doesn't mean fell down on the back); Would you like to **go out** with me (means asking someone out for a date not just go out and about) etc. In this step, students in groups were asked to make sentences with phrasal words and the teacher corrected and praised them.

3.3 Proving it...this step is done primarily to crosscheck learners' understanding and progression and entails written tests/quizzes as well as oral tests. The contents on the tests were designed to make certain that what learners had been taught was fully understood. The key parts of the written tests and oral tests were sampled and used as follows:

3.3.1 Teacher shows the picture of a chaotic zoo below and has the students describe what is happening/happens with correct sentence structure, parts of speech and grammar, respectively. Each student then orally presents what has been written while the teacher checks based on the said criteria. Points are given based on the percentage of correctness and appropriateness of the formed sentences, pronunciation and sentence diversity (using adjectives, adverbs, mix of vocabulary).



Figure 1 Chaotic Zoo

3.3.2 Teacher then questioned each student on what was written to cross-check if what was written was genuinely done. This was a win-win approach as it enabled the teacher to recognize cheating and helped overcoming student's fear and shyness when speaking. In this step, limited time on answering is enforced with an aim to improve students' awareness when having to speak in real situation. Furthermore, students who made the highest marks were praised and recognized. From observations, high-marked students seemed very pleased as they felt they had achieved something worthy and equally important by being recognized. (Maslow's hierarchy of needs, <http://www.businessballs.com/maslow.htm>).

Results

The statistical results were divided into 4 parts as presented in the 4 following tables: Table 1: Basic statistical application based: experimental (using B – Slim) and control (using Mor Kor Or 3) population samples' listening & speaking abilities (pre & post test results)

- Pre listening & speaking abilities test scores of the experimental samples were moderate, while the control samples were relatively low. However, post- tests results indicated that listening & speaking abilities of the experimental samples had improved, while the control samples had only slightly improved.

Table 1 Basic statistical application based: experimental (using B – Slim) and control (using Mor Kor Or 3) population samples' listening & speaking abilities (pre & post test results)

Group	Pre test		Post test		\bar{D}
	$\bar{\chi}$	Competency level	$\bar{\chi}$	Competency level	
B-slim (experimented)	39.87	moderate	64.39	Good	24.50
MKO3 (controlled)	35.55	rather low	49.32	moderate	13.80

Table 2 t – test for independent samples analytical based: compared the difference of listening & speaking abilities test results (pre & posttests) from both categories using the t – test for independent samples. The results indicated that the experimental samples had a higher statistical difference of 0.01 when compared to the control ones.

Table 2 t – test for independent samples analytical based

Group	N	D	S	df	t
B-slim (experimented)	36	24.50	6.48	78	16.48**
MKO3 (controlled)	36	13.80	6.48		

Table 3 t – test for dependent samples analytical based using the B – Slim model: compared the differences of listening & speaking abilities test results (pre & posttests) of the experimental samples by applying the t – test for dependent samples. The pre – post test results indicated that the experimental samples had a higher statistical difference of 0.01, reflecting an improvement in listening & speaking abilities.

Table 3 t – test for dependent samples analytical based using the B – Slim model

experimented	N	$\bar{\chi}$	S	df	t
Pre experimented	36	39.88	8.57	39	23.89**
Post experimented	36	64.41	4.91		

Table 4 t – test for dependent samples analytical based using Mor Kor Or 3: compared the differences of listening & speaking abilities test results (pre & posttests) of the control samples using the t – test for dependent samples. The pre-post test results indicated that the controlled samples had a higher statistical difference of 0.01, reflecting an improvement in listening & speaking abilities’.

Conclusion & Discussion:

According to the aforementioned 4-table results, it can be concluded that:

- The differences of listening & speaking abilities test results (pre & posttests) from both categories using the t – test for independent samples. The results indicated that the experimental samples had a higher statistical difference of 0.01 when compared to the control ones.
- Applying the B – Slim model, the pre – post test results indicated that the experimental samples had a higher statistical difference of 0.01, reflecting an improvement in listening & speaking abilities.
- Using Mor Kor Or 3, the pre-post test results indicated that the controlled samples had a higher statistical difference of 0.01, reflecting an improvement of listening & speaking abilities.

Table 4 t – test for dependent samples analytical based using Mor Kor Or 3

(control)	N	$\bar{\chi}$	S	df	t
Pre control	36	39.56	5.11	35	13.44**
Post control	36	49.38	7.85		

As indicated by the data, both instructions supported the sampled students' listening & speaking abilities. However, overall the sampled students appeared to do better with B – Slim instructions due chiefly to the suitability of materials used, diversity of applied techniques, and the B – Slim instructional sequences which periodically cross-check and reinforce the whole process and its progression. Regarding Mor Kor Or 3, which is text book based, the students appeared to have had less involvement and engagement when following the text book materials which focus on situational English, even though teaching plans were followed accordingly. In brief, learning situational English did not truly appeal to them as much; even though the lesson plans were useful and productive, they were not fully engaged when compared to the those in the of B-Slim model group. In contrast to Mor Kor Or 3, B – Slim was more detailed and each step of the instructions was corresponded and sequenced: however, finding out the students' weaknesses and strengths when preparing and planning are essential (done by using pre-tests of both oral, written, observation and take notes). Together with applying diverse and different techniques, design activities based on pre – test and questionnaires given at the beginning of the class can also help tremendously and result in improved scores on listening & speaking tests. Apart from focusing on B – Slim as the core teaching model, STAD (Student Teams – Achievement Division) was also applied, as this method helped foster cooperative learning among the groups which coincided and emphasized group/individual learning similar to the B-Slim model. Realistically, it is impractical to remember every technique, materials, activities and teaching guidelines in just one semester. However, based on the results, the B – Slim steps were demonstrated to serve as an ideal formula to follow. In order for the B – Slim model to be successful, continuous practice and opportunities to improve English are required for non-native speakers to improve.

Suggestions

1. Regardless of how efficient and how useful the materials, curriculum, classroom environment/management, teaching techniques and plans are, an improvement for students is unlikely if the teacher/trainer is not capable, or possesses limited English communication capacities. Having strong capabilities in key aspects such as pronunciation, using proper/suitable vocabulary, forming correct sentences with suitable collocation and grammar, and correct parts of speech are the keys to successful learning. After all, how could one improve if one is taught by an incapable person? Similarly it is advised that learners find ways and opportunities to practice and engage in conversation and be willing to leave the comfort zone by not being afraid to make mistakes when speaking, as fear and anxiety can hinder your thought process.

2. Regarding future research directions on improvement of Thais' English language proficiency, it is recommended that the B-Slim model, as well as other useful and effective new methods of teaching i.e. Flip classroom, 21st century teaching/learning (teach less and use more activities/more practices with student-centered approach) etc., be factored into consideration. Moreover, the new one-standard-for-all method to assess the English-language proficiency of students, as well as foreign teachers, is a bid to raise the quality of English-language teaching and learning to weed out unqualified teachers based on Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR). This would be put into use by the Ministry of Education in order to improve Thailand's quality of education and should be followed closely when conducting future research(s).

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