

# The Characteristics of Successful Speaking Activity

<sup>1</sup>Apasraphon Hongwilai and <sup>2</sup>Siriprapha Kawboonsai

Faculty of Education, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand.

Email: <sup>1</sup>Muayryyyy56@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>frofern.fair@gmail.com

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the characteristics of successful speaking activity. Speaking is often seen as a talent that is inherent in a person. “The ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language”. It is a fundamental skill that is widely used as a way to measure the capability of language learner. It promotes the position of speaking in a second or foreign language has often been viewed as the most demanding of the four skills. This skill is the most important indicator for students' success in learning foreign language. Nevertheless, speaking is usually considered as a difficult skill. This is because speaking combines aspect of other language skills such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

Unfortunately, in various cases, it is proven that foreign language learners in Thailand have difficulties in English speaking. English especially speaking for Thai people quite challenging to be learned. Although most of the high school students have studied English for at least 6 years, the ability and the competence in speaking English are still low. Even worse, this is also the case for college alumni who took special major in English but have not been able to express their ideas into English actively after graduated. It explains “Indeed, one frustration commonly voiced by learners is that they have spent years studying English, but still they cannot speak it”. So we have to find the characteristics of successful speaking activity for the students.

**Keywords:** Characteristics; Success; Speaking Activity

## Introduction

Speaking refers to the communication activity that requires the interaction between at least two people. In this situation, someone who involve in speaking activity can give simultaneous contribution to the communication discourse that occurs in particular situation and they also can change and develop the topic of discussion being discussed as the communication takes place.

According to Carter and Nunan speaking defines as reciprocal and physically situated face-to-face interaction. Reciprocal means that speakers can give simultaneous contribution to the discourse and respond to each contribution as soon as possible. Whereas, physically situated face-to-face interaction means that speakers can see each other thus they can



understand some physical context and physical signal to show their attention to the interaction and their intention for responding the utterances. (Ronald Carter, David Nunan, 2001)

The definition above explains that speaking is a reciprocal action which means that the speaker and the interlocutor can make direct contribution to the discourse or to the information exchange. This situation will bring the speakers to the topic development or exchange because in oral communication people usually make less predictable interactions such as making initiation for developing topic, making clarification about some information, or closing the interaction. Moreover, beside of its unpredictable activity speaking is known also as dynamic and transient activity because in speaking activity conversations occur immediately and these utterances/conversations are impermanent which can change as soon as the speaker produces the other utterances. Furthermore, speaking also defines as physically situated face-to-face interaction which means that both of speaker and interlocutor can see each other. They can use physical context and physical signal for indicating their attention or intention to the interaction and for making some contribution or for responding the topic being discussed.

On the other hand, McDonough and Shaw see that speaking is not an oral form of written language because it requires learners' ability to use its subskills to form a complete competency of spoken language. (Jo McDonough, Christopher Shaw, 2003)

With this argumentation can be concluded that speaking differs from oral form of written language because to achieve speaking competency learners are not only required to be able to speak but they also need to be able to master speaking sub-skill such as pronunciation, stress, intonation, turn-taking ability, and so on. When the speakers involve in speaking activity, speaking sub-skills will give some important contributions for maintaining or managing speakers' relation with the other speakers in speaking activity. This relation is useful for delivering their message clearly and for communicating successfully.

Furthermore, spoken language differs from written language not only because of the involvement its sub-skill but also because of its different characteristics. Spoken language is considered as more dynamic and transient activity than written language; therefore as the spoken discourse has been said it will disappear as soon as possible and it cannot be exactly repeated in the same way. Meanwhile, written language is permanent that the readers can read it anytime they want or they can reread it many times without worrying about missing any essential information in the text. This argumentation derives from Hughes explanation that the nature of speaking is different from the nature of writing in the aspects of production and in the social aspects. In aspect of production spoken language is context dependent, unplanned, transient, oral/aural, and dynamic; whereas in the social aspect spoken language is locus of change, inter-personal, informal, stigmatized, rhetorical, and primary. (Rebecca Hughes, 2002).

From that statement can be elaborated that the characteristic of spoken language in the aspect of production can be changed depends on its context. Spoken language is unpredictable that speakers can easily move from one topic to the different topic. Moreover, spoken

discourse is temporal which means that the utterances being spoken can't be repeated in the same way because they disappear as soon as the speakers said them and it delivers through oral/ aural communication which makes spoken language dynamic and actively change for its spontaneous material. This condition makes the materials being discussed in speaking activity can be changed easily based on speakers' willingness. On the other hand, in the social aspects the characteristics of spoken language not only require topic exchange between speakers but also topic exchange between discourse and the things around it.

Moreover, the interaction in speaking activity always occurs between more than one people and commonly using informal language; therefore, the speakers not only need the ability to adapt themselves with other speakers or the ability to repairs misunderstanding that occur between them but they also need to understand communication style which used by the speakers in order to communicate in effective way.

Furthermore, in "A Communicative Grammar of English" Leech and Svartvik remark that a conversation is not limited on giving and receiving information only but also including social interaction and participant cooperation as the basic characteristic of conversation. (Geoffrey Leech, Jan Svartvik, 2002). This statement explains that communication between the speakers aimed not only for exchanging information but also for maintaining social interaction and speakers' cooperation during the conversation thus demand the speakers to master the ability for managing turn-taking technique in communication.

Therefore, founded on the three definitions of speaking above can be concluded that the characteristics of spoken language is different from the characteristics of writing language in the aspect of production and in the social aspects. Speaking is known as a communicative activity that requires reciprocal and physical face-to-face interaction between at least two speakers and in order to master speaking competency learners not only have to be able to master speaking skill but also to be able to master its sub-skills for maintaining social interaction between the speakers and for achieving a successful communication.

### **1. Definition of Speaking.**

There are four skills that must be mastered by students, which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. According to Jeremy Harmer, the four skill are divided into types. Receptive skill is a term used for reading and listening, skills where meaning is extracted from the discourse. Productive skill is the term for speaking and writing, skill where students actually have to produce language themselves. (Jeremy Harmer, 2002:265).

Speaking is a very important skill. As human being, we need to socialize with one another. One way to socialize is to communicate. There are some ways to communicate. One of the ways of communication which used most frequently in human's daily life is speaking. We can communicate our feelings, ideas, or just information we have to others directly by speaking. Thus, without an ability to speak well we cannot tell others clearly what ideas we have in mind, what information we have or even what is our opinions toward something.



The term speaking has many definitions. Some linguists give definitions of what speaking is. "Speaking is productive skill in the oral mode. It is like the other skills, is more complicated than it seems at first and involves more than just pronouncing words". (British Journal of Art and Social Sciences, 2011:38). Nunan defines speaking as an ability to carry out a conversation in the language. It means that a good conversation will occur if people have ability in using good language or good speaking thus people can add to their understanding toward each other, they encouraged to express their ideas or opinion by their own language.

*McDonough and shaw said "Speaking is a skill used by someone to produce utterance when genuinely communicates may involve expressing ideas and opinions, expressing a wish or desire to do something, negotiating and/or solving a particular problem; or establishing and maintaining social relationship and friendship." (Jo McDonough and Christopher Shaw, 2003:157).*

In line with the definition above, Cameron state, "Speaking is the active use of language to express meaning so that other people can make sense of them. Therefore, the label of productive use of language can be applied to speaking". (Lynne Cameron, 2001:40) From this definition, the writer sees that speaking is a productive skill, speaking is not just saying something through speech organs, speaking is thinking how to articulate our ideas through words.

From the four definitions above, it can be synthesized that speaking is the ability to express our ideas, feelings, or opinions orally in a conversation. It is a productive skill because when we speak something it means that we think about something. A good speaking event is when the delivered messages can be understood and is needed by the listener.

## **2. The Objective of Speaking**

Speaking is a purposeful activity. Just like other activities such as listening, reading, and writing. We have reasons and objectives in speaking, the objective of our speech can define the strategy we use to do it. Just as stated by Richards and Renandya that Speaking is used for many different objectives and each objective involves different skill, the different objectives of speaking are as follow;

- a. In casual conversation, for example, our objective may be to make social contact with people, to establish rapport, or to engage in harmless chitchat that occupies much of the time we spend with friends.
- b. When engage in discussion with someone, the objective may be to seek or express opinions, to persuade someone about something, or to clarify information.
- c. In some other situations, we use speaking to describe things, to complain about people's behavior, or to make polite request.

Each of these different objectives for speaking implies knowledge of the rules of how spoken language reflects the context or situation in which speech occurs. (Jack C Ricahrds and Willy A Renandya, 2002:201)

### 3. Elements of Speaking

According to Jeremy Harmer, there are elements which recognized in speaking skill. These elements explain that the ability to speak fluently presupposes not only knowledge of language features, but also the ability to process information and language “on the spot”. Elements which categorized as language features are as follows:

#### a. Connected speech

To be able to use connected speech is the ability to modify sounds when we speak. To modify sounds are by modifying (assimilation), omitting (elision), adding (linking r), or weakening (through contractions and stress patterning).

#### b. Expressive Devices

Expressive Devices is the use of pitch and stress, vary volume and speed, and the use of paralinguistic (physical and nonverbal language) in producing utterance in order to convey the truth meaning of the message meant by the speaker. By using expressive devices, speakers will be able to show their feeling to whom they are talking to.

#### c. Lexis and Grammar

The ability to select the appropriate words and to use different phrases in different contexts when we speak is very important, because sometimes there is an utterance which should be said differently when we speak in different situations and to different addressee. Therefore, it is very important for learners to know a variety of phrases for different functions such as agreeing or disagreeing, expressing surprise, expressing shocks etc.

#### d. Negotiation Language

We use negotiation language to give clarification or reformulate what we are saying in order to be clearer, especially when we see that we are not being understood. Negotiation language is used because sometimes the listeners did not understand what we have said. It can be because they did not hear or we talk too fast. (Jeremy Harmer, 2001:269-270)

Besides the language features are discussed above, another element which also very important is mental/ social processing.

To become effective communicators, those elements explained above are very important to be considered. A good speaker should understand the knowledge about language features in speaking such as grammar, diction, knowing how to express while speaking etc. and moreover, is that he needs to understand the process of speaking itself. Therefore, all those elements above should be included in every language teaching program in where speaking skills being stressed.

### 4. Components Underlying Speaking Proficiency

To be said proficient in speak English, English language learners need to know not only the linguistic knowledge, but also the culturally acceptable ways of interacting with others in different situations and relationships. Those abilities that underlying speaking proficiency is also



called as “communicative competence”, Canale and Swain propose that communicative competence includes;

a. Grammatical Competence

Grammatical Competence is a competence that includes in grammar (morphology, syntax), vocabulary, and mechanics. In speaking, mechanics refers to basic sounds of letters and syllables, pronunciation of words, intonation, and stress. In speaking, the learners must understand how words are segmented into various sounds and how sentences are stressed in particular ways. Thus, grammatical competence enables speakers to use and understand English-language structures accurately. (Jack C Ricahrds and Willy A Renandya, 2002:207)

b. Discourse Competence

Discourse Competence is concerned with intersentential relationship. In discourse, whether formal or informal, the rules of cohesion and coherence apply which aid in holding the communication together in a meaningful way. In communication, both the production and comprehension of a language require one’s ability to perceive and process stretches of discourse, and to formulate representations of meaning from referents in both previous sentences and following sentences. With discourse competence, learners can manage turn taking in conversation.

c. Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistic competence is the competence which involves knowing what is expected socially and culturally by users of the target language; that is, learners must acquire the rules and norms governing the appropriate timing and realization of speech acts.

Understanding the sociolinguistic side of language helps learners know what comments are appropriate, how to ask questions during interaction, and how to respond nonverbally according to the purpose of the talk.

d. Strategic Competence

Strategic Competence refers to the ability to know when and how to begin a conversation, how to take the floor, how to keep conversation going, how to end the conversation, and how to solve comprehension problems in a conversation.

The four competences explained above is essential for English learners to be mastered in order to perform English speaking skill effectively. The components which underlying speaking proficiency are linguistic competences and the knowledge of how native speakers use the language in context.

The linguistic competences are; grammatical competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence, while sociolinguistic competence is the competence relates to the learners’ understanding of how native speakers use language in context.

5. Goal for Successful of Speaking

According to Brown and Yule, “The intention of teaching is that the student should be able to ‘express themselves’ in the target language, to cope with basic interactive skill like

exchanging greeting and thanks, apologies, and to express 'his needs', request information, service, etc.

#### 6. Techniques for Teaching Speaking

Before discussing about the techniques of teaching speaking skill, it is essential to know that based on linguistic study human are born with the ability for acquiring the language.

This basic ability is given by God through the existence of human brain. In the early age of human development, the process of acquiring first language begin by receiving language input through the interaction of the language users around them.

Furthermore, by the development of their speech organ human begin to produce utterances from the language input which is known as language output. Based on input and output theory Harmer suggests the three stages of language teaching and learning to teach productive skill such as speaking that aimed for increasing communicative competence: first, Introducing new language; second, practice; third, communicative activities. (Jeremy Harmer, 2001:271) From that classification can be elaborated that in the first stage teachers should explain clearly the information about the target language including: its meaning, the way to use the language, the grammatical form of the language, then the pronunciation and the written form of the target language. Moreover, in the second stage, teachers should provide a chance for learners to practice the language. In this stage learners will practice to communicate using the target language in more controlled way. Finally, in the third stage teachers should stimulate the communication between learners and learners or between learners and teachers through learning activities. In this activity learners will practice to use the target language in less controlled way or they are allowed to modify the target language based on their own creativity.

#### 7. The Objective of Teaching Speaking.

Since the development of modern world and competitiveness among global countries, the need for developing educational quality in Indonesia seems to be important. The intention for developing Indonesian educational quality can be seen from Educational Ministry serious action on developing Thai educational curriculum in simultaneous way. Teaching is profession. Thus, teachers should pursue professional development to sharpen their teaching skills and maintain the quality of profession. Teaching speaking skill is a very important part of first foreign language learning. McDonough said that " with the recent growth of English as an international language of communication, there is clearly a need for many learners to speak and interact in a multiplicity of situation through the language, be it for foreign travel, business or other professional reason." (Jo McDonough and Christopher Shaw, 2003:156)

However, today's world requires that the goal of teaching speaking should improve students' communicative skill because, only in that way, students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules appropriate in each communicative circumstance. (Hayriye Kayi, 2006:132)



Furthermore, there are some experts' argumentations about the objective of teaching speaking. Most of them agree that the objective of teaching speaking should be speaking competency or on the other word capability to communicate through the target language.

In consequence, some of experts' argumentations about the objective of teaching speaking which have been mentioned above lead to the conclusion that most of experts agree that the objective of teaching speaking is developing communication competency or fluency in speaking. On the other hand, cannot be neglected that some of speaking sub-skills also give some contributions to the successfulness of communication even though these subskills are not the main objective of teaching speaking. The argumentations about the objective of teaching speaking according to the experts actually in line with the objective of teaching speaking in Indonesia that aimed to achieve transactional and interpersonal function.

#### 8. The Characteristics of Successful Speaking Activity

Every teacher expects to accomplish a successful learning process and in order to know whether their learning process success or fail, teachers need to know the characteristics of a successful learning process. In "A Course in Language

Teaching" Ur reports that a successful speaking activity has some characteristic such as:

a. Learners talk a lot. As much as possible of the period of time allotted to the activity is in fact occupied by learner talk. This may seem obvious, but often most time is taken up with teacher talk or pauses.

b. Participation is even. Classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants: all get a chance to speak, and contributions are fairly evenly distributed.

c. Motivation is high. Learners are eager to speak: because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to achieving a task objective

d. Language is of an acceptable level. Learners express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy. (Penny Ur, 1996:120)

Therefore, from the explanation above can be elaborated that in a successful speaking activity learners will talk a lot during the learning process and there is no domination of minority students in speaking activity and every learner participate actively during learning process or on the other words learners will equally share the opportunity to talk and to make contribution during learning process.

Moreover, learners' motivation to speak during speaking activity is high because they are interested in the topic being discussed then they want to give an active contribution in order to accomplish learning objective. The last characteristic is learners' mastery of acceptable language level which means that learners' language are easy to understand with the other participants and they level of language accuracy are good enough.



In addition, McDonough and Shaw stated: “successful completion of this type of activity (communication game activity) clearly depends on the effective communicative use of the language and of the sharing of information amongs the participants”. (Jo McDonough and Christopher Shaw:2003) From that statement can be elaborated that in communication game activity the objective of speaking activity only can be accomplished successfully if learners can communicate effectively through the target language thus with this ability they also can share the information successfully.

In conclusion, based on the elaboration of the experts above a successful speaking activity can be indicated by some characteristic such as the amount of communication that occurs the learners, learners’ active contribution during learning process, learners’ motivation to accomplish the learning objective, and learners’ ability to communicate effectively through the target language.

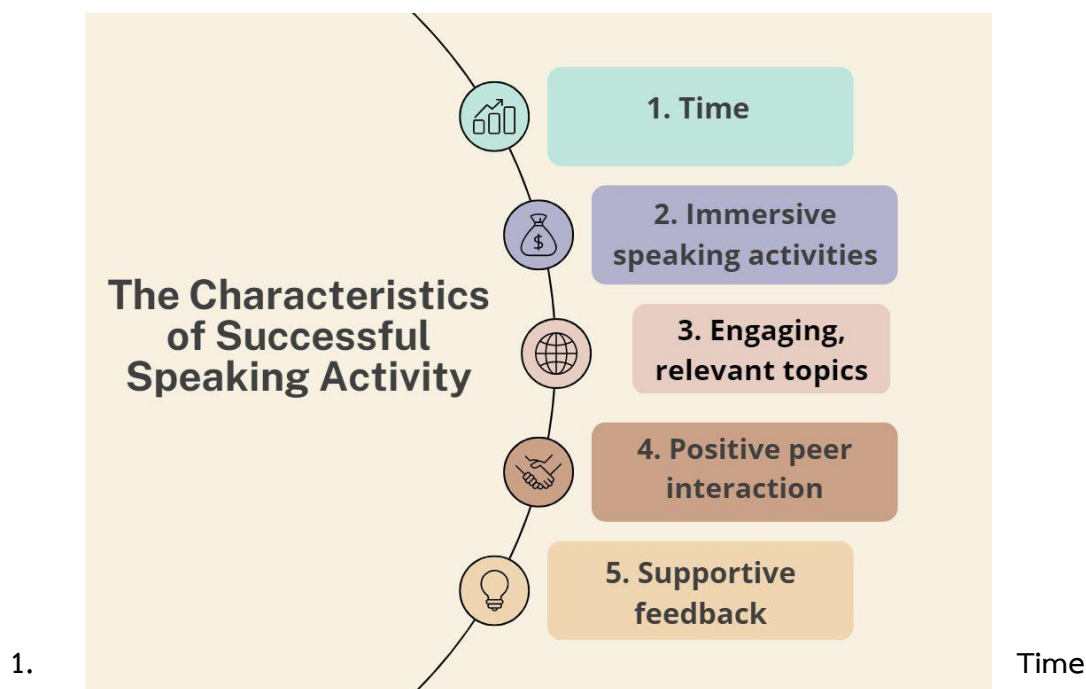
### **Knowledge from the Study**

What can we as teachers do to help students overcome their anxieties related to speaking? Caroline Thiriau introduces how to create ‘safe speaking environments’ by combining five key elements. Many students measure their progress in English through their confidence and ability to speak spontaneously when faced with situations in the ‘real world’, such as, helping a tourist with directions in the street or greeting a colleague from overseas at work. If the student struggles, they feel that they have made no progress in English despite studying for many years.

In the classroom, however, it can be difficult to get students to actively participate in the speaking practice activities which are designed to prepare them for such situations. So, as educators we are faced with a paradox: students measure their own progress through their comfort level/ability to speak but can be reluctant to do the very thing that will help them improve – speaking practice.

Typical blockers for participation in speaking practice in class are factors like fear of judgement from peers and/or the teacher, lack of confidence, embarrassment, and inability to formulate ideas in English on the spot. What can we do to help students overcome this anxiety?

Research tells us that students learn better in contexts where they feel confident, motivated, supported and able to experiment with language (Dornyei, 2005). So, in order to give students, the best chance of success in developing their speaking, we need to create safe speaking environments. We can do this by combining five key elements:



How often do we find that speaking practice has to be squeezed in at the end of the lesson, or in between other parts of the syllabus which have taken priority, such as grammar, vocabulary, reading skills? The result can be that speaking practice is rushed with little time for students to formulate and express their ideas or receive feedback. Is it possible to dedicate more time to speaking in the syllabus and in the classroom?

#### 2. Immersive speaking activities

Cognitively-engaging, collaborative tasks involving problem-solving, decision-making and/or the creation of a piece of work, in which every student contributes to the final result, can improve learner engagement and confidence. In a language learning context, speaking activities with these traits can relieve some of the anxiety around speaking practice because producing the language is not an end in itself but, rather, the ‘tool’ used to achieve the collaborative goal.

#### 3. Engaging, relevant topics

We all know that it is difficult to formulate ideas about a topic you know or care little about. Engagement with speaking activities is more likely when materials connect to the learner’s experiences and background knowledge (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004). However, it can be difficult to find topics that suit our classes, especially when students have such wide-ranging interests. Can we flip this around and involve the students more in selecting topics for discussion?

#### 4. Positive peer interaction

Classes are rarely homogenous in terms of level and personality types, which is what makes them fun to teach, right? For students, peer pressure can be a cause for anxiety. For example, students may feel embarrassed to speak in front of stronger students. Conversely stronger students may not see the value in practicing speaking with weaker students. Can we turn peer pressure into peer support and create an atmosphere in which learners encourage each other, where they feel comfortable trying out new language, experimenting with new forms and making mistakes? What can we do to foster a learning environment where classmates respect and value each other's contribution, and create a cohesive learner group?

#### 5. Supportive feedback

If students are reluctant to speak because they are afraid of looking or sounding silly, of making mistakes and of being judged, can we make feedback less about error correction and more about support and encouragement? Can we take the fear out of feedback by creating environments in which experimenting with language is encouraged and 'errors' are opportunities to learn?

### Conclusion

In teaching speaking the students are asked to be more active in speaking activities. Also in the curriculum, speaking becomes an important competence that should be mastered by the students. Finally, speaking skill is very important to be taught by in the school, especially. "There are three main reasons for getting students to speak in the classroom."

Firstly, speaking activities provide rehearsal opportunities, chances to practice real life, speaking in the safety of the classroom. Secondly, speaking tasks in which the students try to use any or all of the languages they know provide feedback for both teacher and students. Then thirdly, the more students have opportunities to activate the various elements of language they have stored in their brains. As a result, the students will be able to use words and phrases fluently without very much conscious thought.

Teaching speaking depends on there being a classroom culture of speaking, and that classrooms need to become very crowded classroom because of speaking. In other words, students will be much more confident speakers and their speaking ability will improve if the teaching process in the classroom is attractive. The teachers their selves who need to arrange the speaking activities to be applied in the



classroom. So, the quality of teaching speaking will be very influenced by the speaking activities applied by the teacher in the classroom.

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