Integrating English speaking tests in an EFL classroom: What teacher can learn from

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Abstract

Thai universities have reformed their English language curriculum from grammar-based to communicative-oriented to equip students with communicative competency and skills before entering a job market. As a result, English language teachers not only seek effective and creative teaching and learning activities for their classes, but also utilize appropriate methods that can truly assess their students' communicative language ability. This classroom-based study highlights use of oral language assessment to measure students' speaking performance. The study examined how speaking tests were integrated to an English for a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom at a Thai university. The tests focused on two types of speaking tasks called monologic and dialogic speaking tasks. Based on the questionnaire data, the teacher extracted the students' opinions about the integration of the monologic and dialogic speaking tasks in the mid-term and final speaking tests and their self-perception of speaking ability before and after taking the tests. These data revealed appropriateness of difficulty of test tasks, test length, and score weight. In addition, the speaking tests create students' positive attitude toward English speaking and students' speaking ability.

Key Words: Second language assessment and testing, oral language assessment, EFL classroom-based assessment, communicative language teaching and testing, speaking performance

INTRODUCTION

Effects of globalization, world trade, and technology have driven the Thai government to reform its education policy. Under the National Education Act of B.E. 2542 (1999), which aims to promote knowledge-based society and competitive economy for sustainable development of the country (Ministry of Education, 2004a), English language instruction has been to improve language proficiency of Thai students (Wongsotorn, 2003; Wongsotorn, Khiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2003) and equip students with useful learning processes and strategies to enhance the use of English for academic and social purposes (Ministry of Education, 2004b).

The policy reformation have developed pressure on English instruction particularly at a higher education level, as it is highly expected to prepare students before entering job markets. Now instead of taking two English courses, university students must take at least four compulsory English courses. The changes are aimed to equip Thai students with English knowledge as well as language and study skills before entering to the real-world industry (Wiriyachitra, 2004; Wongsotorn, Khiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2003). Despite the sensible changes, there has been a lack of research and reports on the implementation of the reformed language policy in relation to teaching and assessing English language performance at a classroom level.

BACKGROUND

Consequences of the reform have generated challenges on English instruction in the country. In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, Thailand has adopted communicative language teaching (CLT) to help facilitate language learning processes and improve communicative competence in both social and academic areas of language (Ministry of Education, 2004b; Nonkukhetkhong, Baldauf & Moni, 2006; Phungphol, 2005). As a result, English curriculum was designed to move away from traditional grammar-translation to communicative methods, promoting interaction among students and between students and the teacher through communicative tasks that can help students develop their language knowledge and skills (Ministry of Education, 2004a).

The CLT approaches have also influenced ways the teachers use to assess and evaluate their students' language ability. Assessment and evaluation of learning have been strongly encouraged to shift from conventional assessment by using multiple choices to an authentic assessment where learning outcomes are assessed from the student's assignments (Ministry of Education, 2004a). There seems to be an increased use of alternative assessment (e.g., self-assessment, writing, or speaking portfolios) and performance-based assessment (e.g., speaking or writing tests) to measure learners' performances on communicative English tasks (McNamara, 1996, 1997). Because these kinds of assessment are quite novel for Thai-speaking teachers of English who mostly have experienced grammar-translation kind of teaching and learning, they need to be introduced clearly and implemented effectively. For example, learners' responses from a performance-based test are less restricted than those from a traditional test, its scoring is considered subjective. This should definitely challenge the teachers to explore ways to select, adapt, or develop testing tasks and/or a scoring scale that really meet their course objectives.

Even though the shift to more performance types of assessment exists in Thai educational system, there is evidence showing how such language assessments have caused troubles to the teachers of English in Thailand. A survey of problems faced by native-Thai teachers of English in teaching and assessing English skills in Thai higher education (Ratanapinyowong, Poonpon, & Honsa, 2007) has revealed that Thai teachers of English lack knowledge and skills in assessing speaking (e.g., how to choose and use criteria, writing a speaking test, what to focus on in assessing speaking). Other critical issues involve students' tension, excitement, lack of confidence during taking a speaking test as well as class time constraint and number of students in test administration (face-to-face).

Learning from what the Thai teachers of English, especially at a tertiary level, are facing is a springboard for the current study. In attempt to find a means to encourage the

teachers to use oral language assessment in their English classes, this classroom-based study aimed to examine how oral language assessment can be integrated in an English language class. In particular, this classroom-based study was guided by two research questions.

1. What are students' opinions about the integration of speaking tests in their English class?
2. What is students' self-perception toward their own speaking ability before and after taking the speaking tests?

METHODS

An Overview of the English for Information Science Course

English for Information Science is a 45-hour English course designed for Information Science students. The main objective of the course was to have students practice four English skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing) for understanding through materials (e.g., newspaper, prints) in Information Science. The course was firstly offered for Information Science major students in the second semester of 2009 academic year. Lessons focused on integrated skills and authentic materials used in different types of media (e.g., newspaper, blogs, websites). Grading of the course was based on five scores: attendance and in-class participation (10%), midterm examination (30%), final examination (30%), speaking tests (10%), and group project (20%).

Participants

The study included 45 undergraduate students, 37 females and 8 males, majoring in Information Science and enrolling in an English course at a Thai university during the second semester of 2009 academic year. All students were second year students who took and passed two foundation English courses offered in previous semesters.

Research Instrument

Two questionnaires were developed to elicit students' opinions about the integration of the speaking tests. The first questionnaire was developed as a first-class questionnaire to investigate students' need. Only data related to students' self-perception of their speaking ability was used in this study. The second questionnaire was developed to ask students' opinions about the speaking tests. It consists of four parts: demographic information (completion), students' opinions about test integration (4-Likert scale), students' self-perception of their English ability (7-Likert Scale), and open-ended comment.

Two speaking tests were employed in the study, one as a mid-term test and the other as a final test. Both tests were designed from the same test specification. They consist of two different tasks. The first task, called the dialogic speaking task, required the students to work in pair to prepare a 3-minute dialogue using phrases they had learned from this English course. The students were given a chance to rehearse the dialogue before taking the test. The second task, called the monologic speaking task, asked individual students to speak their opinions about a topic for one minute to express a prompt

Data Collection

The students were asked to complete the first questionnaire at the beginning of the course. By the end of the course, after taking final speaking tests, the students were asked to complete the second questionnaire.

For the speaking tests, the students took the first test as their mid-term speaking test and the second test as their final speaking test. In each test, the students were to perform their dialogue in front of the teacher before taking a monologic test task in a language laboratory equipped with recording machines. Due to limited seats in the laboratory, the students were divided into three groups. Each group took the test one after another, but followed the same administration. Each student drew a topic before preparing their response for 1 minute and talk for another 1 minute. Their monologues were recorded.

Data Analysis

Data from both questionnaires were analyzed. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data from the questionnaire. Frequency distribution and percentage were mainly employed with the Likert scale. Open-ended responses were grouped into what the participants thought about the integration of the speaking tests.

RESULTS

To answer the research questions, the results are reported into two areas. The first area addresses students' opinions about the integration of the speaking tests. The second one focuses students' self-perception toward their own speaking ability before and after taking the tests.

Students' Opinions about the Integration of the Speaking Tests

The results show that the students had different degrees of their agreement on topics related to the integration of the speaking tests (see Table 1), including difficulty of test tasks, appropriateness of test duration, students' application of skills and knowledge, score weight, and importance of the speaking tests.

Table 1 Percentage of agreement and disagreement on the issue of test integration

Contents	Strongly Agree 4	Agree 3	Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree 1
1. The monologic speaking tests were more difficult than the dialogic speaking tests.	13.3%	55.6%	31.1%	0%
2. You like the monologic speaking tests more than the dialogic speaking tests.	8.9%	26.7%	53.3%	11.1%
3. Time duration of the monologic speaking tests (1 minute per response) was appropriate.	37.8%	46.7%	15.6%	0%
4. Time duration of the dialogic speaking tests (3 minutes per dialogue) was appropriate.	20.0%	60.0%	17.8%	2.2%
5. You applied English skills and knowledge learned in class to the monologic speaking tests.	40.0%	57.8%	0%	2.2%
6. You applied English skills and knowledge learned in class to the dialogic speaking tests.	42.2%	53.3%	2.2%	3.2%
7. There were insufficient speaking activities for you to practice speaking in class.	6.7%	44.4%	42.2%	6.7%
8. Speaking tests are necessary for studying English for Information Science.	68.9%	31.1%	0%	0%
9. Score weight of the speaking tests (Mid-term 5%, Final 5%) is appropriate.	40.0%	51.1%	8.9%	0%
10. The speaking tests should be remained in this English course.	62.2%	37.8%	0%	0%

With regard to difficulty of the speaking test tasks, most students (55.6%) agreed that the monologic speaking tests are more difficult than the dialogic speaking tests. It seemed that most of them (53.3%) did not like the monologic speaking tests better than the dialogic speaking tests. As far as the test length is concerned, most students agreed that both types of test tasks have appropriate amount of time. In other words, 46.7% of students thought that one minute is appropriate for producing a response for a monologic speaking test. And 60% agreed that three minutes are sufficient for performing a rehearsed dialogue for a dialogic speaking test. In relation to students' application of English skills and knowledge, most students (57.8%) believed that they applied what they learned in class to the monologic speaking tests, so did they with the dialogic speaking tests (53.3%). Most of them (44.4%) reflected that there were not enough activities for them to practice speaking in class. However, this fact was not agreed by 42.2% of the students. When talking about weight of scores, both speaking tests were considered to have appropriate weight of scores by most students (51.1% Agree and 40% Strongly Agree). Finally, the importance of the speaking tests is concerned. Most students strongly agreed that the speaking tests were necessary (68.9%) and then should be remained in the English course (62.2%). None of them thought that the tests were not necessary or should be eliminated from the course.

Students' Self-Perception of their own Speaking Ability

The questionnaire data reveal interesting students' perception of their own speaking performance before and after taking the tests. As shown in Figure 1, at the beginning of the course, or before the students knew and took the speaking tests, 2 out of 45 students viewed their speaking ability as Beginner, 12 as High Beginner, 16 as Low Intermediate, 14 as Intermediate, and 1 as High Intermediate. No students considered themselves as Advanced or Native. However, after taking the speaking tests, there was a change in students' self-perception toward their speaking ability. There were a lower number of students perceiving their speaking ability as High Beginner and Low Intermediate. On the other hand, a larger number of students considered themselves as Beginner, Intermediate, and High Intermediate.
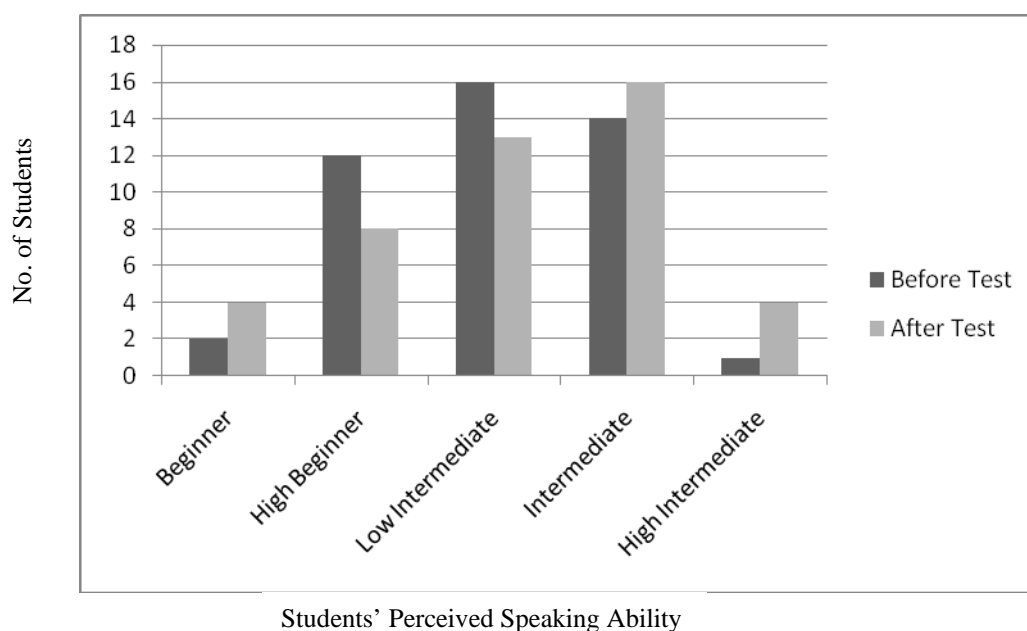

Figure 1. Students' self-perception of their speaking ability

DISCUSSION

Based on the students' opinions about the integration of the speaking tests, what the teacher can learn from is related to appropriateness of the test tasks and test administration (i.e., difficulty of test tasks, appropriateness of test duration, students' application of skills and knowledge, score weight, and importance of the speaking tests). Both types of test tasks (i.e., dialogic and monologic test tasks) seem to be appropriately used in the course. Although the students perceived task difficulty at different levels, this should not be a great concern because a test should include both easy and difficult tasks in order to allow the more difficult tasks to differentiate better students from poorer ones. Similar to the first point, the students viewed that length and score weight of the tests is reasonable. They also positively agreed that the speaking tests are important for their study. This belief is supported by the fact that the students thought they applied English skills and knowledge they had acquired from the course to complete the test tasks. However, the teacher should be concerned about giving enough opportunities to the students to practice speaking in class.

The students' self-perception of their own speaking ability reveals constructive evidence. The decreasing number of students who perceived themselves as High Beginner and Intermediate in addition to the increasing number of the students who perceived themselves as Intermediate and High Intermediate demonstrate that the speaking tests used in the English course create a positive washback. In other words, it seems that the tests make the students to be confident in their own speaking ability. This evidence contrasts with problems of students' tension, excitement, lack of confidence during taking a speaking test as found in the study by Ratanapinyowong, Poonpon, and Honsa (2007). Then it can be said that to integrate oral language assessment in an English class, teachers should consider appropriateness of tests in terms of task difficulty, test duration, score weight, as well as learning activities that familiarize students with speaking.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on what the teacher can learn from employing oral language assessment to measure students' speaking performance at a classroom level. By examining the students' opinions about the integration of the monologic and dialogic speaking tests in the English course and their self-perception of speaking ability, the teacher has learned that, according to the students who are the direct stakeholders of the tests, the tests are appropriate in terms of their task difficulty, duration, and score weight. More importantly, the use of the speaking tests has produced students' positive attitude toward English speaking and their speaking ability.

The evidence found in this study suggests both pedagogical and assessment implications. Pedagogically, preparing and designing more activities for the students to practice speaking should be encouraged. Although it seems to be unfeasible to use a lot of speaking activities in limited class time, activities that are appropriate for autonomous learning should then be considered. For an assessment purpose, the findings from the students' opinions and self-perception indicate that the monologic and dialogic speaking tests should be remained in this course for many reasons. First, the students thought that the tests are necessary for students who study Information Science as their major. Second, they believed that what they have learned and practiced speaking in class helped them perform well in the speaking tests. More importantly, the integration of the speaking tests seemed to yield positive attitude of the students toward their speaking ability.

The current study has proved that a classroom-based research really benefits two major stakeholders of teaching and assessing English: teachers and learners. The teachers can learn what works or what does not work for their classes so that they can change or improve their instruction or assessment. This change or improvement will then maximize students' advantages in learning English and developing their communicative competence.

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