



Building Young Learners' Confidence in Speaking English A Case Study of BELTEI International Schools

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ABSTRACT

Many EFL/ESL teachers in Cambodia still find it challenging to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL), particularly when working with younger children. The purpose of this study is to determine the potential and problems associated with training young students to speak English confidently. The study will use a qualitative approach to interview instructors and students about their challenges, primary reasons, and existing methods for helping students practice speaking English. The most important elements affecting early learners' development are vocabulary and grammar, according to a research conducted with 177 students in levels 1 through 6 and 27 teachers. Motivation, pronunciation, level of difficulty, style of instruction, and fear of making mistakes come next. Teachers nowadays face a wide range of challenges, including shy students, limited L1 competence, mixed-ability classrooms, and poor motivation. Despite these challenges, children enjoy speaking English in their free time. Examples of contemporary teaching strategies include student-active learning, games, conversation, and cooperative learning. Teachers usually provide a comfortable learning environment, encourage conversation among students, and provide clear instructions. However, cooperative learning is not widely used. Students say that using bilingual dictionaries, speaking in class, and answering questions after reading are all great methods to learn. Teachers must reduce students' anxiety and inspire them more.

Keywords: *Anxiety of Speaking, Confidence, Motivation, Young learners*

INTRODUCTION

English language teachers play a vital role in building their students' confidence, which enables them to engage actively in class activities and communicate effectively. One effective technique for improving speaking skills is role-playing. However, beginners often face challenges in developing confidence, which can hinder their participation in classroom activities (Rosmayanti et al., 2023).

Examples of activities in EFL classrooms include games, quizzes, group discussions, brainstorming sessions, role plays, simulations, collaborative creative writing, presentations, and speeches (Crosthwaite et al., 2015). Riasati (2018) found that self-confidence significantly impacts students' willingness to participate in speaking activities, alongside other personal traits such as individual personalities, self-esteem, opportunities in language classes, and fears related to evaluation and making mistakes. Students who participate in classroom activities like speaking, asking questions, sharing ideas, and engaging in discussions can enhance their speaking skills. The course also emphasizes the importance of active participation and engagement in the target language during class (Crosthwaite et al., 2015); (Sudarwati et al., 2022).

The influence of particular teaching tactics on students' confidence in speaking English was the main subject of Sri Rahayuningsih (2022)'s research. Although this study offers insightful information, it also draws attention to a research gap. A common focus of earlier research on teaching English was on theoretical frameworks or generic instructional practices. In his research, on the other hand, focused on certain instructional strategies that had an immediate impact on students' confidence. With this focused approach, we may gain a better understanding of the elements that support language acquisition confidence.

The current study intends to determine the elements impacting the confidence that young learners have while speaking English, pinpoint the difficulties that teachers have in helping pupils gain confidence, and gather practical tips to improve speaking abilities. The conclusions of this study thesis will be extremely useful for teachers, school administrators, and researchers. Teachers may utilize the findings to develop successful techniques for teaching English speaking to young learners, therefore increasing their students' speaking and conversational skills. School administrators and researchers may use the findings to improve classroom structure and the teaching-learning environment, ultimately improving the quality of English language training for young students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language acquisition rates differ among students, with factors like determination, effort, and perseverance playing a key role in success. Internal factors such as age, prior experience, and individual learning styles also affect

how students learn English. Age is particularly important; children who already have strong literacy skills tend to acquire new languages more effectively. Additionally, younger learners often benefit from informal learning settings that provide ample time and exposure to develop language proficiency (Fazey et al., 2014).

Experience plays a vital role in language acquisition, and individuals with a foundation in general language skills are better equipped to learn a new language. Teachers are instrumental in fostering a supportive learning environment by cultivating self-esteem and confidence in children. Learning styles, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and physical behaviors, are shaped by factors such as genetic makeup, cultural background, and prior experiences. Aligning teaching methods with students' individual learning styles can lead to success, independence, and a lifelong commitment to learning. The study found that students have diverse motivations and varying levels of exposure to English as a second language (Andari, 2023).

The context in which a language is learned and the process of introducing a second language are examples of external influences (Leow & Zamora, 2017); (Richards, 2014); (Yuefang Sun, 2019). Formal and informal settings may be distinguished in the environment, and induction and explanation are referred to as techniques (Fazey et al., 2014). Social characteristics are also tied to external influences. The two settings of social elements are referred to as macro-social and micro-social. Micro-social studies concentrate on the lowest level of formality interaction relationships and the learning environment of second language learners. Macro-social, on the other hand, concentrates on higher-level learning scenarios, such political engagement. Three categories of external variables include motivation, teaching, and availability of native speakers. Success in language learning depends on motivation, which can come from both internal and external sources. Setting, parents, and educators may all be very important in encouraging motivation. Parental guidance is crucial for vocabulary development and can accelerate learning. Having access to native speakers is also crucial for language learning since they may act as mentors and provide constructive critique. Second language learners may make less progress in the oral and auditory domains if they do not have sufficient access to native speakers (Sugita McEOWN et al., 2017); (Rivlina, 2019).

Speaking issues impair pupils' language skills, which has an impact on their academic achievement. Language-related issues like incorrect grammar and pronunciation as well as psychological ones like lack of drive and mistake-apprehension are the causes of these problems. Hendra Heriansyah (2018) study found that fear of making mistakes, anxiousness, lack of bravery, and dislike of the classroom were the five main contributing causes. Students ought to start an English club in order to get past these obstacles.

Maji et al (2022) looked at the challenges twelfth-year students at SMKN 3 Sorong experienced when speaking English. Using a case study approach, it was discovered that the primary problems were linguistic in nature, including a lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and ignorance of grammar. Less important nonlinguistic variables were using one's mother tongue, being timid, anxious, fearful of making mistakes, and poor motivation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used action research and topic analysis (Mohajan, 2018). This qualitative design allowed for the identification, recognition, and interpretation of themes and patterns in qualitative data. The quantitative approach was also used to descriptive data, such as frequency and proportion (Veng & Loeung, 2024). Convenience sampling and an interview tool were employed to guarantee that participants identified at their employment were included in the study (Ugwu, Chinyere. N., 2023). Semi-structured questionnaires were provided to university lecturers and students who are actively developing their English speaking skills.

The researcher conducted interviews and surveys with 177 persons who are involved in developing their confidence in speaking English in class. The researcher has taken five major steps to ensure that valid questionnaires are understandable and answerable, including clearly defining interview questions, having questions reviewed by experts, selecting participants who will participate in promoting speaking skills in an ESL/EFL context in schools, piloting the interviews, and changing the modes (Majid et al., 2017).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data were collected from teachers and students at BELTEI International School (BIS). There were a total of 177 participants of whom 93 were females. Among them 27 were teachers, and 150 were students. They were selected from three BIS campuses namely B3, B11, and B13. Teachers and students were all teaching or learning at BIS from level 1 to level 6. Table 1 shows the details of participants by types and locations.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Campus			Total	
	B3	B11	B13	Total	Female
Teachers	10	7	10	27	12
Students	35	67	48	150	81
Total	46	75	59	177	93

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Factors Affecting Young Learners' Ability in Speaking English

The following results address the first research question: "What are the factors affecting young learners' ability to speak English?" These are presented as percentages and frequencies for each item. Table 2 outlines the primary factors influencing young learners' speaking abilities in English, as identified by teachers.

Data collected from 27 teachers who completed the questionnaire indicate that the most significant factor affecting young learners' speaking skills is "vocabulary" (77%); followed by "motivation" (59%). Other factors include "pronunciation" and "grammar" (40%); "level of difficulty" (29%); and "teaching method" (25%). The factor considered to have the least impact is "students' age" (7%) as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Factors Affecting Young Learners' Ability in Speaking English Perceived by Teachers

	Vocabulary	Students' Age	Teaching Method	Types of Speaking Topic (Interesting)	Grammar	Motivation	Pronunciation	Level of Difficulties
Teachers N=27	77%	7%	25%	14%	40%	59%	40%	29%

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Data from 150 students who completed the questionnaire indicate that the challenges they encounter while speaking English include "too many difficult words" (vocabulary, 76%) and "lack of knowledge about grammar rules, leading to a fear of making mistakes" (54%). Additionally, 51% of students reported that "it is easier to speak my native language than English." Table 3 shows the details.

Table 3. Difficulties Students are Facing When Speaking English

	There are too many difficult words	Time is too short	It's easier to speak my own language than English	The teacher always corrects me whenever I make mistake	It's embarrassing if I speak incorrectly in class	I do not know the grammar rules, so I am afraid of making mistakes	I do not have anyone to talk to in English	I find it is difficult to understand people speaking, so I do not know how to reply	I feel really nervous whenever I speak, so I avoid using English	I think speaking is not important as writing or reading
Students N=150	76%	22%	51%	44%	32%	54%	37%	38%	33%	16%

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

In this area, both teachers and students concurred that “vocabulary” (77% for teachers vs. 76% for students) and “grammar” (40% for teachers vs. 54% for students) are significant factors influencing young learners’ ability to speak.

Additionally, the study investigates the motivations behind students’ desire to speak English. Data from 150 students reveal that the primary reasons for speaking English include “it is useful and beneficial for getting a job” (86%); followed by “the desire to study abroad” (77%); “communicating with foreigners” (71%), “recognition as an international language” (67%); “a sense of pride when speaking English” (60%); and “understanding other cultures and people” (52%). Details can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Reasons Make Students Want to Speak English Responded by the Students

Reasons make students want to speak English	Frequency	Percentage
English Speaking will be useful for me when I want to get a job	130	86%
I make effort to speak English for my future (study abroad)	117	77%
I try to speak English because I want to communicate with foreigners	107	71%
I speak English because it is an international language	101	67%
Whenever I speak English, I feel happy and proud of myself	90	60%
I study English to understand other culture and people	79	52%
Speaking in English give me a feeling of success	67	44%
I speak English because I receive compliment from my family	62	41%
An educated person is supposed to be able to speak English	57	38%
Other will respect me if I speak English well	49	32%
I try to speak English because I want to sing English songs	43	28%

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Current Problems Facing by Teachers in Building Young Learners Confidence in Speaking English

Data from 27 teachers indicate that the primary issues include “students being shy” (74%); “limited knowledge of the students’ first language” (59%); “mixed ability classes” (51%); “lack of student motivation” (48%); and “students having short-term memory” (33%). Further details are provided in Table 5.

Table 5. Current Problems Facing by Teachers in Building Young Learners in Speaking

	Students lack of motivation	Students' schemata	Mixed ability class	Classroom management	Students do not have text books	Students L1 knowledge is limited	Students are too young	Students have short term memory	Students make a lot of mistakes	Students are shy
Teachers N=27	48%	11%	51%	22%	3%	59%	29%	33%	14%	74%

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Teachers’ opinion about their students’ attitude towards speaking English Majority of teachers (74%) who answered the questionnaire thought that students enjoy speaking English while nearly one fifth (18%) of them felt that student were “Boring” to speak English and few of them had no idea. Table 6 shows the detail.

Table 6. Students’ Attitude towards Speaking English Perceived by Teachers

	Very Enjoyable	Enjoyable	Boring	Very Boring	No Idea
Teachers N=27	0%	74%	18%	0%	7%

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Half of the teachers (51%) who answered the questionnaire had no idea on how often their students speak English at home or else where, only one fourth of them (25%) thought that their students speak English every day. Table 7 shows the details.

Table 7. Students’ Attitude of Speak English at Home or Elsewhere Perceived by Teachers

	Everyday	Once a Month	Twice a Week	No Idea	Once a Week
Teachers N=27	25%	7%	11%	51%	3%

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Nearly half of the students (43%) who answered the questionnaire said sometimes speak English, and more than one third (39%) of them always speak, some of them (10%) occasionally speak and 6% of them rarely speak English during their free time. Table 8 shows the details.

Besides the above frequency, students thought that they speaking English because they want to “Understand other culture and people”; “Be an outstanding student and teach English to their siblings”; “Read English documents”; “Get the scholarship”; and “Use the technology”.

Table 8. Students' Attitudes of Speak English during Their Free Time

	Always	Sometimes	Occasionally	Rarely
Students N=150	39%	43%	10%	6%

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Strategies to Build Young Learners' Confidence in Speaking English

The results below are responding to the third question “What are the strategies to build young learners' confidence in speaking English?” It is presented in the form of percentage and frequency.

Current techniques used by teachers to teach young learner to speak English. Majority of teachers who answered the questionnaire said that current techniques they are using to teaching young learner to speak English were “Use a variety of student-active teaching activities” (74%); “Encourage cooperative learning activity”(70%); and more than half of them said “Introduce game and conversation in English”(66%); “Allow more time for students to think when speaking”(62%) and “Do not interrupt when students speak” (62%) and “Reduce levels of speaking difficulty” (55%). Table 9 shows the detail.

Table 9. Current Techniques Used by Teachers to Teach Their Students' Speaking Skills

Current Techniques	Teachers, N=27
Use a variety of student-active teaching activities	74%
Encourage cooperative learning activity	70%
Introduce game and conversation in English	66%
Allow more time for students to think when speaking	62%
Do not interrupt when students speak	62%
Reduce levels of speaking difficulty	55%
Set up a good friendly learning environment	48%
Encourage a culture of speaking in class	48%
Avoid correct students' mistake after they speak	44%
Follow-up the task with more questions	44%
Set clear speaking instructions	44%
Provide equal change of speaking for every student	44%

Tolerance of mother tongue usage	40%
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Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Effective strategies perceived by teachers in teaching speaking to young learners. This section explores more on three types of idea related to the strategies teachers used to teach speaking to young learners. These were: (i) most used strategies, (ii) rare used strategies and (iii) the strategies that teachers think that the most effective one.

Table 10 shows that “Promoting a culture of speaking in class” was considered by teachers (37% most used and 19% most effective), followed by “Set up a good friendly learning environment” (33% most used and 4% most effective) and “Set clear speaking instruction” (8% most used and 11% most effective). The data also show that there are few strategies that teachers thought as most effective but they do not most use, for example “Do not interrupt when students speak”(15% most used and 11% most effective), and “Encourage cooperative learning activity”(15% most used and 7% most effective). Table 10 shows the details.

Table 10. Teaching Strategies Perceived by Teachers as Most Used, Rarely/Never Used and Most Effective When Teaching Speaking to Young Learners

List of strategies teachers used when teaching speaking to young learners	Teachers, N=27		
	Most used	Rarely/ Never	Most effective
Encourage a culture of speaking in class	37%	4%	19%
Allow more time for students to think when speaking	33%	4%	0%
Set up a good friendly learning environment	33%	4%	4%
Set clear speaking instructions	30%	0%	11%
Provide equal change of speaking for every student	19%	7%	4%
Do not interrupt when students speak	15%	7%	11%
Introduce game and conversation in English	11%	19%	4%
Encourage cooperative learning activity	11%	4%	7%
Tolerance of mother tongue usage	11%	15%	4%
Avoid correct students' mistake after they speak	4%	7%	4%
Use a variety of student-active teaching activities	4%	0%	0%
Follow-up the task with more questions	4%	4%	0%
Reduce levels of speaking difficulty	0%	7%	0%

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Besides the above strategies, some teachers also suggested way to improve the teaching of speaking to young learners such as “Let the students speak English as much as possible”, “Use encouragement”, “Improve quality of speaking by reading”, “ Use role play”, “Don’t worry about grammar”, “Give new English sentence everyday” and “Allow more time for students to speak”.

Effective methods perceived by students in learning speaking skills. Data from 150 students show that the effective methods in learning speaking were “Speaking in the class and Understand key vocabulary” (70%), followed by “Using English-Khmer dictionary to help” (65%), “Speak at home with my friends”(62%) and “Answer questions after reading” (57%). Table 11 shows the details.

Table 11. Effective Methods Perceived by Students in Learning Speaking Skills

	Answer questions after reading	Using English-Khmer dictionary to help	Working in pairs/group	More time to speak	Speaking in the class	Understand key vocabulary	Using English dictionary	Choosing my own speaking topic	Speak at home with my friends
Students N=150	57%	65%	43%	54%	70%	70%	48%	41%	62%

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

CONCLUSION

According to the study, vocabulary and grammar are the most important aspects influencing young learners’ speaking skills, followed by motivation, pronunciation, challenges, teaching techniques, and fear of making mistakes. Shyness, low L1 knowledge, mixed ability courses, and a lack of enthusiasm all present obstacles for teachers when training pupils to communicate. Student-active activities, cooperative learning, games, and discourse are some of the techniques employed. Students prefer to talk in class, use bilingual dictionaries, and ask questions after reading.

RECOMMENDATION

To promote English language learning in Cambodia, proposals include encouraging students to speak out in class, offering teacher training, strengthening classroom management abilities, and providing enough reference literature. These

approaches are intended to lessen fear of errors, shyness, and anxiety, improve teaching methodologies, reduce mixed ability courses, and provide a welcoming learning atmosphere. The study's goal is to help Cambodia's education system grow, notably by inspiring young students to speak English.

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