PERCEIVED OBSTACLES TO FLUENCY IN SPEAKING ENGLISH AMONG MA STUDENTS IN BANGKOK
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ABSTRACT
This research aimed to investigate the perceived obstacles to fluency in speaking English among MA students in Bangkok and to find out methods they plan to use to improve their fluency in speaking English. The participants were 57 second-year students at a public university pursuing the degree of Master of Arts in an international program. The pilot study was done before collecting data. Data was collected using the survey method with closed-ended questions and a 5-point Likert Scale to rate the respondents' perception levels. The data was input and analyzed by using SPSS to calculate frequency, percentage, mean scores and standard deviation. The findings indicated that the respondents' largest perceived obstacle to fluency in speaking English was vocabulary knowledge, followed by grammatical knowledge. The results also showed that the respondents chose two major methods to use to improve their fluency in speaking English 1) finding a job that allows them to use English speaking skills more, and 2) practicing English speaking with Thai and foreign friends, and watching movies in English with subtitles.

THEORIES OF SPEAKING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE
2.1.1 Definition of speaking
There are many definitions of speaking. Several researchers define the meaning of speaking in various ways as follows:
Speaking is a way to convey information or express one's thoughts and feelings in a spoken language. Speaking refers to an interactive process of generating meaning that deals with producing, receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997).
Ur (1996) mentions that speaking is likely to be the most essential skill used either for business or pleasure, so people try to talk with speakers of that language. Bygate (1987) explains that interactive skills involve people making decisions about communication while keeping desired relations with others.
In Vallette's (1997) words, speaking is regarded as a social skill. As communication is considered the goal of second language acquisition, the development of correct speaking habits is a focus. Speaking not only engages one in pronunciation and intonation, but also creates one's understanding. Moreover, speaking needs correct and idiomatic use of the target language.
2.1.2 Components of speaking

Students who learn to speak English need to know and understand the key components of speaking which consist of accuracy and fluency in a language. These factors can help students improve their speaking. 6

Weir (1993) points out that developing speaking skills has to focus on fluency, appropriateness, accuracy and range. Fluency is defined as smoothness of doing something. A speaker is able to use communication strategies easily when he or she encounters difficulties. Appropriateness comprises politeness, right timing when responding, the use of proper language in requesting clarification and expressing disagreement. Accuracy requires both intelligibility and grammar. Range means adequate and varied vocabulary and structures.

Practicing is necessary for speaking skills, like the proverb which states that practice makes perfect. Students must practice to speak English as often as possible so that they can speak English fluently and accurately. For learning to speak English, learners are required to know some vital components, which is what aspect influences how well people speak English. According to Syakur (1987), speaking is a complicated skill dealing with at least the elements of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency.

2.1.3 Fluency in a language

One factor that obstructs students from good speaking is the lack of language fluency. Speaking fluency is one of the major components in second language learning. As a result, students need to understand it and speak fluently in order to express their speaking proficiency. Many researchers have an explanation of the meaning of fluency as follows:

Fluency is considered as similar to overall speaking proficiency. Fillmore (1979) states four ways that speakers may be fluent. They must have the ability to speak with few pauses, the ability to speak consistently using semantically dense sentences with few unnecessary words, the ability to know what to say in various contexts and unfamiliar situations, and the ability to create speech for communication. According to Cohen (1994), speakers should have fluency in the language and use vocabulary and structure in suitable situations.

For Beardsmore (1972), oral fluency needs communicative competence to formulate more than one sentence with accurate and proper pronunciation in real time. Adding details of sentence structures, choosing and inserting words or vocabulary are required as well. He states that each sentence has to be combined into connected 7

speech. He explains the specific criteria for oral fluency, consisting of fluency (ability to show speakers' communicative proficiency and to speak naturally and continuously), accuracy (structural and lexical), relevance, intelligibility, pronunciation, variety of structures and words.

Fluency is a way that students will be able to speak easily and flowing when compared to native speakers. They also give more explanations of fluency at four levels. They are 1) stopping, slow speech, noticeable pauses between words, use many attempts, 2) uneven speaking, some noticeable pauses between words, seems to require effort, sometimes stopping, tend to but not necessarily have slower speech rate than level three, 3) relatively smooth and easy speech but speech rate slower than native or recognizably non-native, and 4) relatively smooth, native-like speech rate (Day& Shapson, 1987).

2.2 PERCEIVED OBSTACLES TO FLUENCY IN SPEAKING ENGLISH

Perceived obstacles refer to students' recognition and understanding of problems that block them from speaking English fluently. Students who learn to speak the English language unavoidably experience the same difficulties. Regarding this, there are many barriers that have an impact on students' fluency in speaking English in the class such as the knowledge of vocabulary and the knowledge of grammar, pronunciation, listening ability, and anxiety in speaking English.

2.2.1 Knowledge of vocabulary

It is accepted that vocabulary knowledge is one of the major factors for successful communication in language and many researchers have similar definitions about vocabulary.

For Diamond and Gutlohn (2006), vocabulary is defined as the knowledge of words and their meanings. They say that if learners lack a strong vocabulary base first, they will not be able to accomplish understanding and use of language. So, learners should be able to remember words, and know their meanings.

Wilkins (1972) states that "...while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." This means that a student cannot communicate effectively because of their weakness of vocabulary knowledge. 8

On the contrary, lacking knowledge of grammar, he/she can communicate, even though not effectively.

Moreover, vocabulary helps students produce language. According to Hubbard et al. (1983), a student who knows a large number of word meanings can express accurate meanings as he/she wants to. Similarly, Cardenas (2001) indicates that vocabulary is used as an important tool to find out how much a student can communicate successfully.

Stewick (1972) mentions that vocabulary knowledge is one of the most important things in learning a new language. Students who succeed in learning a foreign language are required to have the ability to know the sound system for speaking clearly and understandably, use correct grammar, and adequate vocabulary.

The fundamental unit in communication is the word. Knowing the estimated 1,000 most frequently used words will satisfy three-quarters of communicative needs. Two methods to memorize new vocabulary; jotting down the new words and translating them into the mother language, and guessing the meaning from the context and using a dictionary to find out the different meanings of unfamiliar words (Hurd, Lewis, & Pleines, 2005).

2.2.2 Knowledge of grammar

Grammar is one of the key components of speaking English for language learners. Many students who lack grammar knowledge may feel reluctant to speak English with others. In other words, limited grammar forms can make a speaker less confident while speaking English. Therefore, the researchers illustrate similar ways of knowledge of grammar as follows:

Hurd et al. (2005) indicate that grammar knowledge is very important as well, because grammar is a combination of words into a larger form and a sentence. Thus, users have to mainly focus on the grammatical structure so as to convey the correct meaning of what they say because grammar has an effect on meaning.

Additionally, Kianiparsa and Vali (2010) mention that lack of grammatical structure knowledge is one the obstacles of language learners as they will be unable to understand each other when communicating in a foreign language without grammatical rules. Apart from the speaker and the listener, messages come from 9

words combined by using nouns and verbs, and correct grammatical structures are necessary for communication.

Students' needs to arrange a correct sentence to communicate are in line with Heaton (1978), who suggested students must have the ability to manipulate structure and discriminate appropriate grammatical forms in appropriate ones. Learners have to learn correct grammar rules for use in oral and written forms.

2.2.3 Pronunciation

Pronunciation refers to producing the sounds of speech, including utterance, stress, and intonation in response to some standard of rightness or acceptability.

Gerard (2000) mentions that pronunciation is the phonological process which enables students to generate clearer spoken language. It involves grammatical elements and principles that determine how sounds vary and patterns in a language. Pronunciation consists of phonemes and supra segmental features. A speaker who fails to pronounce accurately in a range of phonemes has difficulty to make other people understand what he or she wants to communicate.

According to Varasarin (2007), students with accurate and clear pronunciations can make it easier for people to understand what he or she wants to communicate, and pronunciation is considered as essential for language learning.

Additionally, Liu (2007) points out that if students' pronunciation is poor, others will be unable to clearly understand what they said. So mainly focusing on this linguistic aspect like pronunciation is also vital for students. Mispronunciation can become students' obstacle to speak.

2.2.4 Listening ability

Speaking is always closely related to listening, therefore for people who learn to speak the English language it is necessary to practice listening skills at the same time. Good listening will be able to help learners improve their English speaking more effectively.

Doff (1998) states that if we develop listening skills, speaking skills can be developed. To achieve successful communication, students have to understand what is said to them. 10

In Krashen et al.'s (1983) view, competent speaking is combined with listening. Speakers can speak fluently in a second language after they have received productive and understandable input.

Shumin (2002) indicates that when one person speaks, the other will pay attention to what the speaker said through the listening process. As a matter of fact, every speaker becomes both a listener and a speaker. A person cannot respond to the speaker if he or she does not understand what is said. Thus, this shows speaking is closely related to listening.

2.2.5 Anxiety in speaking English

Anxiety is regarded as a very negative factor in learning a second language or a foreign language, especially in learning to speak the language. That is students feel nervous, apprehensive or worry that disturbs their speaking performance either before or while practicing English speaking in class.

In the explanations of anxiety, there is a difference in meanings between general anxiety and specific anxiety. General anxiety is part of the personality of individuals who feel worried in various situations, while specific anxiety means one's anxiety which occurs only in specific circumstances, for instance language learning. Additionally, when anxiety is limited to language teaching or learning, it is categorized as specific anxiety. Broadly speaking, anxiety means individual feelings of stress, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with a stimulation of the autonomic nervous system, whereas anxiety is a major barrier to conquer when people are learning to speak another language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) say that students with anxiety will face the problem of learning the language in class, resulting in ineffective performances. Consequently, they do not want to participate voluntarily in class because of nervousness, apprehension, and even fearfulness. With such conditions, worried students have no chance to practice the language. Thus, anxiety has become the major obstacle in developing language skills, particularly in speaking. They also tend to make more mistakes and fail to perform well in speaking skills when they are nervous. For MacIntyre (1999), language anxiety is the worry and negative emotional reaction 11

stimulated when learning or using a second language. The mentioned definitions appear to be widely accepted by many researchers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.2.1 What are perceived obstacles to fluency in speaking English among MA students in Bangkok?

1.2.2 What methods do they plan to use to improve their fluency in speaking English?

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is as follows:

1.3.1 To investigate perceived obstacles to fluency in speaking English among MA students in Bangkok.

1.3.2 To find out methods they plan to use to improve their fluency in speaking English.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS
The results from this study can be summarized as follows:
5.2.1 Demographic information of the respondents
There were 57 respondents who participated in this study. The findings showed that most of the respondents were female (*N = 44, 77.20%*), aged mostly between 26 – 30 years old (*N = 22, 38.60%*), with a GPA of 3.01-3.50 (*N = 27, 47.37%*).
5.2.2 Perceived obstacles to fluency in speaking English
The results of the study revealed the respondents' perceived obstacles which inhibit them from fluency in speaking English ranked in order from the highest to the lowest levels as follows:
5.2.2.1 Obstacle ranked No.1: Vocabulary knowledge

The results showed the respondents' perceived obstacles related to vocabulary knowledge was at a high level (*Mean = 3.42*) and ranked highest among all five barriers. Most of them agreed that item 2 "You are unable to express accurately because of your limited knowledge of colloquial language i.e. idioms, expressions or slang words" was the biggest problem. On the other hand, item 4 "You are unable to find easier words to replace difficult ones when you speak" was the least problem.
5.2.2.2 Obstacle ranked No.2: Grammatical knowledge

According to the study, the respondents' perceived obstacles related to grammatical knowledge was at a moderate level (*Mean = 3.19*) and ranked second among all five barriers. The highest ranked obstacle was item 8 "When you speak, you tend to switch unconsciously from past tense to present tense", whereas item 9 28

"You usually use wrong sentence structures, which leads to meaning changes and this makes other people misunderstand what you are saying" came out last.

5.2.2.3 Obstacle ranked No.3: Listening ability

With regards to the respondents' perceived obstacles related to listening ability, the results showed a moderate mean score (*Mean = 3.02*), while this problem was ranked third among all five barriers. However, it was found that most of the respondents agreed that item 20 "Different English pronunciation style affects your understanding of messages sent" was the top ranked obstacle. Whereas, they thought that item 22 "You usually feel frustrated when you listen to any native English speaking instructor" was the least problem.

5.2.2.4 Obstacle ranked No.4: Pronunciation

In terms of the respondents' perceived obstacles related to pronunciation, the results show a moderate mean score (*Mean = 3.01*). This problem was ranked fourth among all five barriers, which was very close to the third ranked obstacle regarding listening ability. Most of the respondents perceived that item 14 "You are unable to speak with correct pronunciation in front of the class within a limited time", and that item 15 "You have to speak carefully in order to focus on pronouncing certain words (especially those less common words)" were the two biggest problems. Also, they realized that item 16 "You are often not understood by English native speaking instructors because of your poor pronunciation" was the least problem.

5.2.2.5 Obstacle ranked No.5: Speaking anxiety

The results showed that the respondents' perceived obstacles related to speaking anxiety was at a low level (*Mean = 2.62*) and ranked fifth among all five barriers. This meant speaking anxiety was the least problem of the respondents. However, the biggest problem was item 26 "You are fearful of making mistakes and losing face when speaking English". On the other hand, item 27 "You do not dare to participate in English class because you are afraid of using English" was the least problem.29

In summary, RQ 1: What are the perceived obstacles to fluency in speaking English among MA students in Bangkok?

The obstacles perceived by the respondents ranked in order from highest to lowest levels were

1) Vocabulary knowledge (*Mean = 3.42*)
2) Grammatical knowledge (*Mean = 3.19*)
3) Listening ability (*Mean = 3.02*)
4) Pronunciation (*Mean = 3.01*)
5) Speaking anxiety (*Mean = 2.62*)

5.2.3 Methods students plan to use to improve fluency in speaking English

In order to improve the respondents' fluency in speaking English, they planned to use the following two major methods. First, "Finding a job that allows you to use English speaking skills" was chosen the most. "Practicing English speaking with Thai and foreign friends, and "Watching movies in English with subtitles" ranked second and third, respectively. Some of them were interested in "Listening to news in English from radio programs and other media", which was ranked fourth. However, the respondents ignored the method of "Becoming an English tutor" to develop their speaking skills.

In summary, RQ 2: What methods do they plan to use to improve their fluency in speaking English?

The two major methods the students plan to use to improve their fluency in speaking English were

1) Finding a job that allows you to use English speaking skills (*N = 20, 35.10%*).

2) Practicing English speaking with Thai and foreign friends *(N = 13, 22.8%)*, and watching movies in English with subtitles (*N = 13, 22.8%*).

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5.3 DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings of this study in relation to previous studies concerning the perceived obstacles to fluency in speaking English.

5.3.1 Perceived obstacles to fluency in speaking English

From the findings of the study, the following perceived obstacles to fluency in speaking English were discussed from highest to lowest levels.

5.3.1.1 Obstacle ranked No.1: Vocabulary knowledge

Most of the respondents perceived that limited vocabulary knowledge can hinder them from fluency in speaking English. Vocabulary knowledge has become the biggest problem among all five barriers. Even if the respondents have learned the English language for many years, the problem of insufficient vocabulary is still found. This showed that knowledge of vocabulary is the major factor for successful communication. The findings support the study of Hubbard et al. (1983), stating that a student who knows a large number of word meanings can express the exact meanings he/she wants. To lessen the problem of inadequate vocabulary, teachers should design a vocabulary course and seek vocabulary learning strategies in order to improve students' vocabulary knowledge, whereas students should focus more on finding ways to learn words, for example, reading a lot of texts or other materials to help stretch their knowledge of vocabulary.

5.3.1.2 Obstacle ranked No.2: Grammatical knowledge

The findings showed that grammatical knowledge was considered as the second worst problem perceived by most of the respondents. Inadequate grammar knowledge can also obstruct students' speaking fluency. The problem is that when speaking English, they are concerned about sentence structures which block them from speaking effectively. The results are consistent with Kianiparsa and Vali (2010), who said that lack of grammatical structure knowledge is one of the obstacles of language learners, and using nouns, verbs, and correct grammatical structure are required for communication. In order to develop fluency in speaking English, learners who need good grammar knowledge should review and practice grammatical lessons regularly. On the teacher's side, he or she should find interesting grammar instruction strategies to stimulate students to learn English effectively. 31

5.3.1.3 Obstacle ranked No.3: Listening ability

The problem of listening ability was the third ranked obstacle to fluency in speaking English. However, they agreed that "Different English pronunciation styles affect their understanding of messages sent" was the biggest problem. The findings are in line with the study of Khamprated (2012), which investigated the problems and causes of English listening and speaking among Thai students. Her results found that students faced the problems of speakers' different accent and fast speaking. As listening closely relates to speaking, learners should practice listening skills a lot to improve listening ability which will help strengthen their oral fluency. Simultaneously, a teacher should provide listening practice to students in the English class and test their listening skills regularly.

5.3.1.4 Obstacle ranked No.4: Pronunciation

The respondents recognized that pronunciation was the fourth ranked barrier to fluency in speaking English. This was assumed that they were not much worried about pronunciation. This data supports the findings of Liu (2007), who indicates that students with poor pronunciation cannot make other people understand what they said. Thus, pronunciation is also important for students, while mispronunciation can become their barrier to communicating. To get rid of this problem, listening practicing is very important and necessary to a language learner because listening will help them develop listening ability and be familiar with different accents of speakers. However, in order to pronounce accurately and make other people understand clearly, a teacher, especially a native English instructor, will play an important role to teach students pronunciation.

5.3.1.5 Obstacle ranked No.5: Speaking anxiety

According to the results of the study, speaking anxiety was the least problem perceived by most of the respondents. Although most of them disagreed that speaking anxiety was their obstacle in fluency in speaking English, there were two biggest problems related to speaking anxiety 1) fear of making mistakes and losing face when speaking English, and 2) nervousness any time when speaking English in front of the class. This data is in line with MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), who say that students with anxiety tend to make more mistakes and fail to speak well when they are nervous. Therefore, speaking anxiety is considered as a barrier to obstruct 32

students' fluency in speaking English. Learners can practice speaking as much as possible to reduce fear of speaking and make them more confident when they have to communicate with others. Meanwhile, a teacher will be the most important one in the class, for example the teacher should create a good atmosphere in learning English so that all students feel free to participate in all activities during the class.

5.3.2 Methods students plan to use to improve fluency in speaking English

The results of the study showed that the two major methods chosen by most of the respondents to improve their fluency in speaking English were "Finding a job that allows you to use English speaking skills more," followed by "Practicing English speaking with Thai and foreign friends," and "Watching movies in English with subtitles." The fourth ranked method was "listening to news in English from radio programs and other media." Ritthira and Chiramanee (2014) conducted the study of the problems and negative factors affecting the development of English speaking and techniques to improve speaking skills. Their findings showed that most students improved English speaking by watching movies in English and listening to songs in English.

To develop oral fluency in the future, the students chose other methods other than the two major ones, which was dependent on which each student preferred. However, no one selected to be a tutor because they might think that teaching the English language requires proficiency in all four skills, especially speaking. After doing the second part of questionnaires, they recognized that they have faced all five obstacles which can obstruct them from speaking fluently.

5.4 CONCLUSION

From discussions of the study, the following conclusions can be made.

5.4.1 In terms of the perceived obstacles to fluency in speaking English, it was found that limited vocabulary knowledge was the biggest problem among all five barriers. In order to solve this problem, students should pay more attention to practice vocabulary skills, while teachers can design vocabulary courses to strengthen students' vocabulary knowledge. The second ranked obstacle was inadequate grammatical

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knowledge. Most of the respondents were not much concerned about the problem of listening ability and pronunciation, followed by speaking anxiety, which was the least problem.

5.4.2 To improve students' fluency in speaking English, two major methods selected by most of the respondents were "Finding a job that allows them to use English speaking skills more," followed by "Practicing English speaking with Thai and foreign friends," and "Watching movies in English with subtitles."

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH
The following recommendations are made for future research based on the findings and conclusions of this study.
5.5.1 The participants of this study were only 57 MA second-year students in the 2015 academic year. For further study, other groups of students should be included to make the number of respondents larger because they may have different kinds of obstacles. Also, the findings will be useful for teachers to design the English curriculum and improve materials for students.

5.5.2 An open-ended question or an individual interview should be added as research tools to obtain in-depth information from the respondents. This is because some respondents may not pay attention to the closed-ended questions and not give all answers truthfully. In addition, this study was analyzed by only descriptive statistics that might not be sophisticated enough. For further study, inferential statistics should be adopted in order to achieve better results.

5.5.3 This study investigated only the perceived obstacles to fluency in speaking English. Apart from all five barriers from the results of the study, there will be other factors to impede the speaking fluency of the students. This research is just the preliminary study to help readers recognize the obstacles that can block the students from English speaking fluency. Further studies should focus on other aspects such as teaching vocabulary, which is the biggest obstacle found in this study, in order to expand the students' vocabulary knowledge. In addition, the study of teaching strategies for grammar, listening, pronunciation, and speaking fluency should also be conducted after the teachers have understood the students' problems from this study.