Improving English conversation skills through online conversation lessons and classroom interactions with native speakers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to improve the oral English performance of Thai lower-secondary students. It attempts to address the following questions: a) Can the employment of online conversation lessons help to improve learners' conversation skills compared to face-to-face classroom interactions with English speakers; b) Are there any differences in the performance improvements contributed to by the two learning approaches?; c)Which learning approach better improves the learners' conversation performance?; and d) What are the strengths and weaknesses of each learning approach in developing conversation skills? The participants in this study were 50 Grade 8 students from Rajaprachanukroh Songkhla Province School in academic year 2014. They were purposively sampled and divided into two groups: on learning through online conversation lessons and the other via classroom interaction with an English speaker. They were individually interviewed to assess their oral English performance before the treatments and after completing the lessons. Students' interviews and conversations practices were video-recorded for close analysis following Conversation Analysis (CA) principles and rated in the following features: fluency, vocabulary, appropriacy, pronunciation, and grammar. The research instruments employed in this study were oral communication tasks for pre- and post-tests. The research findings based on statistical and CA analysis shows that the students' oral English performance considerably improved through the use of online lessons and classroom interaction with an English speaker. The learners engaged in classroom interaction, however, became significantly more fluent and had a wider range of vocabulary than those learning through online conversations, even though their performance in pronunciation were similar. Thus, it was recommended that teachers utilize online lessons not as the sole language learning activity but as a supplement to classroom interaction to strengthen particular speech features.

Keywords: Online conversation lessons, classroom interaction, speech features, oral English performance

1. Introduction

This study is to compare the speaking improvement of learners using online English conversation lessons and those learning through face-to-face interaction, to determine whether there are performance differences between learners learning conversation via online lessons and those through face-to-face interaction with English speakers, and to

discover how each learning approach can differently benefit learners' development of their conversation skills. The research questions are:

1) Can the employment of online conversation lessons help to improve learners' conversation skills compared to face-to-face classroom interactions with English speakers?

2) Are there any differences in the performance improvements contributed to by the two learning approaches? Which learning approach better improves the learners' conversation performance?

3) Which aspect of the learners' conversation performance can be better strengthened by each approach?

2. Background

English has long been used as a language for global communication. With the upcoming merger of the ASEAN community, its role as a global language has been even greater emphasized especially in the Thai educational system. The Ministry of Education of Thailand in particular, has released the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008) as a guideline for primary and secondary levels, which enforces learning English as a foreign language from Grades 1-12. The focus has been placed on developing learners' positive attitudes towards learning the language and ability to efficiently communicate in English and use it as a medium for life-long autonomous learning (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Regardless of the level of learners, the aim is to enable them to express ideas, engage in English conversation on various topics, and search for information necessary for higher studies and future career choices. According to the current curriculum, young learners especially at the lower secondary level are expected to be able to know 2,100 to 2,250 words and talk about everyday topics such as oneself and family, environment, food and drink, health, weather and climate (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Nevertheless, according to Prapphal (2003), even though Thai students learn English from primary or even kindergarten level, many still fail to use the language with confidence in real-world speech events or when required to talk about everyday topics. Regardless of the established curriculum, it is apparently insufficient for second language learners to spend only a few hours a week learning English in classes that typically focus very little on

conversation (Brooks, 2009; Wei & Zhou, 2002). Outside the classroom they also lack opportunities to interact in English and failure to persist the speech act (Salmani Nodoushan, 2014). Certainly, these hindrances can be overcome if we as teachers try hard not only to create classroom environments which involve them in more intense English speaking activities, but also to encourage them to engage in autonomous learning afterwards. Fujii (2012) noted that as teachers allow students to share their ideas with one another and possibly generate some new vocabulary words, the adaptation to features of natural conversation will follow and can be strengthened further as the learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their language learning by engaging in after-class tasks of their choice (Nunan, 1996).

Apart from increasing classroom spoken interaction, learners are therefore encouraged to take advantage of bountiful computer-mediated language learning (CMLL) materials. Through the Internet learners of various groups can access a wide variety of target web-based English learning materials with much ease. The availability of online resources has made language practice even more convenient especially for EFL learners, most of whom have limited opportunity to get exposed to English outside the classroom. Numerous websites now offer online English conversation lessons, giving the learners the opportunity to improve their conversation skills right at their fingertips. In fact, there are numerous websites providing English conversation lessons for EFL learners' self-study free of charge.

According to Barrs (2012), computer-mediated language lessons can actually complement face-to-face classroom-based learning. While face-to-face learning of EFL learners remains mostly in the classroom setting and relies much on teachers' instruction, online learning can be done conveniently from inside and outside the classroom through available technology applications and language training websites with little reliance on teachers. Mayer (2003) suggests that CMLL can in fact facilitate learners in improving vocabulary skills better than face-to-face learning. Audiovisual texts provided online would allow for recurring practice and help correct learners' misunderstanding of the target language whereas in face-to-face teaching the learners are often deprived of such opportunity and have to pay close attention to teachers.

As the objectives of interaction in second language classrooms have been shifted from solely improving students' accurate production of linguistic forms to including the active

production of meaningful talk with the goal of improving their L2 fluency, it becomes especially important for teachers to understand the organization of the learners' talk and learning experiences in the classroom. Conversation analysis (CA), as theorized and practiced by Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Schegloff, has particularly started to play an important role in an L2 classroom as it offers an effective means for recording and transcribing the nature of talk in interaction (Seedhouse, 2004). CA is the study of recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction to discover how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk, with a central focus on how sequences of action are generated. Thus, CA perspective emphasizes enabling teachers to recognize the patterns of communication that establish and maintain second language classroom interactions and help learners to fulfill their talk in the interactions.

The language teaching material design of CA in particular presents dialogues in audio or video clips together with transcription allowing learners to experience their authenticity while learning linguistic expressions (Wong 2002 cited in Seedhouse 2004 : 228).

With the application of CA, teachers are also able to select authentic online conversation lessons to appropriately suite learners' needs and make the best use of bountiful online resources as supplementary learning materials for learners' autonomous learning.

Given the great number of online language learning resources today, there has however been a dearth of studies specifically assessing their effectiveness, especially in facilitating learners' development of conversation skills, compared to traditional face-to-face classroom-based teaching. Therefore, this study aims to determine whether the employment of online conversation lessons can really help to enhance learners' conversation skills compared to face-to-face classroom interactions with English speakers, and in what ways, if it can. It also attempts to unveil how each learning approach can lend itself to the improvement in different aspects of the learners' conversation skills.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were fifty class 8 students from Rajchaprachanukroh 43 Songkhla province school under the Bureau of Special Education, Office of the Basic Education Commission. They were taking English as a core course of a foreign language required for secondary level students. The ages of students ranged from 13-15. They were

selected by the purposive sampling method for the quasi-experimental treatment. The students were divided into two groups of twenty-five. One group was assigned to learn speaking through face-to-face interaction with English speakers and the other via online conversation lessons.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments used in this study were lesson plans and oral communication tasks.

There were 6 lesson plan prepared by the researcher. Each lesson plan had duration of 150 minutes including the topic of introducing oneself and others, interview, food and family.

The oral communication tasks were pre-test and post-test. In the pre-test conversation, the participants were asked about their personal information and the conversations were recorded for subsequent assessment. After the treatment students were engaged in post-test to see individual improvement.

3.3 Procedure

The data was collected from the fifty student samples. In the beginning, the pre-test was conducted as all of the students were asked to converse with an English speaker to determine their conversation performance. The performance was assessed by the English speaker and videotaped for subsequent scoring by the researcher in the following features: frequency (speech flow), vocabulary (use of words and accuracy), appropriacy (turn responding), pronunciation (segmental sounds), grammar (range of structures used). The scoring rubric had been adapted from Barraja-Rohan (2011), O'Loughlin (2001), Luoma (2004), and Tsang & Wong (2002) (See Appendix). After the pre-test conversation, the students were engaged in weekly conversation lessons on the following topics: introduction and leave taking, likes and dislikes, family, and community. The training was take place three hours a week over the course of four consecutive weeks. One group of students was practice English conversation online in a computer lab with guide books containing specific instructions, conversation scripts, and exercises prepared by the researcher. At the beginning of the first session, the researcher as teacher was oriented them towards the training goal. The teacher was available during their practice only to help them with technical problems, allowing them to maneuver freely through the lesson until they master the target conversation. The students in the other group learnt

conversation on the same topics through classroom face-to-face interaction with an English speaker and they were provided only with the scripts and exercises.

There were 6 lessons prepared by the researcher for both groups. In week 5, after the students complete their training, they were engaged in a post-test conversation with the same English speaker as in the pre-test. The test was measured by the English speaker and videotaped by the researcher. The score was analyzed by the two raters through the use of the same rubric, as in the pre-test.

The videotaped conversations from both, the pre- and the post-test interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent comparative analysis. The comparative analysis threw light on the strong and weak areas of the students and difficulties they faced during these sessions.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Learners' performance improvement via online conversation lessons and classroom interaction with English speakers

The videotaped conversational activities and the pre- and post-tests scores obtained from face-to-face interactions between participants later showed that classroom interaction learners have improved the participants' oral performance over participants who had engaged in online lessons. However, both groups of learners have improved their oral performance.

As shown in Table 1, regarding the first research question which compared the improvement of classroom interaction with English speaker and online conversation lessons, the results analyzed by the *t*-test indicated that both groups have similar score from the pre-test which showed that the students have the same proficiency of English speaking skills.

Table1 *Comparison between the pre-test of Group 1 learners who participated in classroom interaction and Group 2 participants in online conversation lessons*

Features	GROUP				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	1 (n=25)		2 (n=25)				
	Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.			
Fluency	1.20	0.41	1.16	0.37	0.36	48	0.72
Vocabulary	1.16	0.37	1.24	0.44	-0.70	48	0.49
Appropriacy	1.24	0.44	1.24	0.44	0.00	48	1.00
Pronunciation	1.56	0.58	1.52	0.71	0.22	48	0.83
Grammar	1.08	0.28	1.16	0.37	-0.86	48	0.39
Total 25	6.24	1.64	6.32	2.15	-0.15	48	0.88
Total 100	24.96	6.56	25.28	8.62	-0.15	48	0.88

After the treatment the students who were assigned classroom interaction performed better in all speech features except in pronunciation where both groups were equal (2.32 for Group1 and 2.36 for Group2). However, there was only frequency that sig. at 0.05 (0.02) which indicated the differences in the classroom interaction, which has developed more than the learners who attained online conversation lessons.

Table 2: *Comparison between the post-test score of Group 1 learners who participated in classroom interaction and Group 2 participants in online conversation lessons*

Features	GROUP				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	1 (n=25)		2 (n=25)				
	Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.			
Fluency	<u>2.16</u>	0.94	<u>1.60</u>	0.71	<u>2.37</u>	48	<u>0.02</u>
Vocabulary	1.96	0.79	1.68	0.80	1.24	48	0.22
Appropriacy	2.04	0.84	1.68	0.80	1.55	48	0.13
Pronunciation	<u>2.32</u>	0.99	<u>2.36</u>	0.64	-0.17	41.033	0.87
Grammar	1.96	0.84	1.56	0.71	1.82	48	0.08
Total 25	10.44	4.12	8.88	3.48	1.45	48	0.15
Total 100	41.76	16.50	35.52	13.92	1.45	48	0.15

As the second research question, the differences in the performance improvements contributed to by the two learning approaches shown in the first group of students participated in classroom interaction which enhance the oral English proficiency in post-test has increased at the level of 0.01(t=6.36), indicated by the difference between the overall pre-test and post-test mean scores, i.e.,6.24 and 10.44 respectively. (Table 3)

However, indicated by the pre- and post-test score differences, the degree of improvement varied among the features; fluency appeared to be the most improved, whereas pronunciation appropriacy of turn responding, grammar and vocabulary were readily developed through face-to-face interaction with English speakers. Segalowitz & Freed (2004) suggested that for young learners, the fluency or speech flow is easier to improve and the more frequently learners occupied in meaningful conversation practice, the better their language performance and interaction will become.

Table 3: *Comparison between the pre-test and post-test score of Group 1 learners who participated in classroom interaction*

Features	GROUP 1				(post-pre)	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Pre-test		Post-test		Mean			
	Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.	Difference			
Fluency	1.20	0.41	2.16	0.94	0.96	6.08	24.00	0.00
Vocabulary	1.16	0.37	1.96	0.79	0.80	5.66	24.00	0.00
Appropriacy	1.24	0.44	2.04	0.84	0.80	5.66	24.00	0.00
Pronunciation	1.56	0.58	2.32	0.99	0.76	4.88	24.00	0.00
Grammar	1.08	0.28	1.96	0.84	0.88	6.06	24.00	0.00
Total (25)	<u>6.24</u>	1.64	<u>10.44</u>	4.12	<u>4.20</u>	6.36	24.00	0.00
Total (100)	24.96	6.56	41.76	16.50	16.80	6.36	24.00	0.00

As the result shown in Table 4, the online conversation lessons had improved the learners at the level of 0.01(6.03), indicated by the difference between the overall pre-test and post-test mean scores, i.e., 6.32 and 8.88 respectively.

The degree of improvement overall had slightly improved from the pre-test and post-test. Pronunciation was the most developed from mean score 1.52 and increased to mean score of 2.36. Therefore, the online pronunciation resources such as conversation lessons were beneficial for students' pronunciation development (Cheng, 2003; Hismanoglu, 2010).

Table 4: *Differences between pre-test and post-test scores of Group2 Online conversation lessons*

4.2 Performance improvement based on close conversation analysis

Close analysis of the videotaped conversations in the pre-test and post-test additionally affirmed that young learners were developed in their conversation skills. The learners' improvement was observable in the speech features as smooth expression, hesitation in response, high pitch volume, the absence of pause or smile characteristics of not responses prior to the answering second pair-part turn, sequence opening, extending and closing, turn size and repair initiation, which are illustrated in the following excerpts indicated from the pre- and post- test interview with a foreign teacher.

In Excerpt 1, the pre-test interview of foreign teacher Emily's interaction with Suchada before the lesson started. After opening the dialogue with a greeting, the teacher asked numerous general questions and Sushada responded to the questions, as the teacher directed and closed the conversation.

Excerpt 1 [Pre-test: Foreign teacher- Student]

1	T:	Good afternoon
2	Su:	Good afternoon
3	T:	What is your name?
4→	Su:	(.)My name is Suchada Suksawat
5	T:	How old are you?
6	Su:	=fourteen year old.
7	T:	Ok, fourteen years old.
8→	Su:	°fourteen years old°
8	T:	Where are you come from?
9→	Su:	((smile))
10	T:	Where are you come from?
11→	Su:	=Songkhla°
12	T:	What is your favorite food?
13	Su:	=Cake
14	T:	What is your favorite sport?
15	Su:	=Volleyball
16	T:	Do you play volleyball?
17	Su:	=yes
18	T:	How many brothers and sisters do you have?
19→	Su:	°three°
20	T:	What time do you go to sleep?
21→	Su:	((smile)) *mai ru* ((tr:.don't know))
22	T:	What time do you go to sleep?
23→	Su:	((*ke arai*))(.)
24	T:	What time?((T show picture of sleeping))
25→	Su:	*sam tum* ((tr:.nine pm))

26   T: Thank you

As shown in the excerpt 1, in line 4, Suchada paused for a short period of time before responding to the turn. In lines 8, 11, and 19, the student's utterance in low voice indicated an unsure response to the question. In another sequence, in which the teacher asked the time of sleeping, the student just smiled and responded in Thai language. Therefore, the teacher repeated the question again but still, the response was in Thai language. Thus, in line 24, the teacher asked question and showed a picture of the act of sleeping, to which the student delivered the answer *sam tum* (when translated in English, means nine pm). Lack of vocabulary leads to distract in interaction (Blacke, 2000), even though the student understands the turn but the limitation of vocabulary involves misunderstandings.

However, in post-test, shown in excerpt 2, the same student was more confident. She promptly delivered appropriate responses to the foreign teacher. There was no hesitation and mistake in speech except in line10 which there is a grammatical mistake. However, the turn-response was understandable by the foreign teacher.

Excerpt 2 [Post-test: Foreign teacher- Student]

1   T: Hello what is your name?

2   Su: =hello, my name is Suchada Suksawat

3   T: How old are you?

4   Su: =I am fourteen years old.

9   T: Where do you live?

10→   Su: =I live Songkhla.

11   T: What is your favorite food?

12   Su: =I like cakes and pizza.

13   T: Okay. Do you have any brothers and sisters?

14   Su: =I have two sisters.

15   T: Thank you.

As shown above, the student was clearly more confident this time and answered all the questions appropriately. There was no hesitation and the improvement is clearly shown.

5. Conclusion

The study investigated the improvement of classroom interaction with English speaker and online conversation lessons to enhance oral performance through the assessment of rubric, containing five distinct features; namely, fluency, vocabulary, aprropriacy, pronunciation, and grammar. The result of this study concludes that the online conversation lessons and classroom interaction with English speakers were flexible and practical ways to utilize, for the purpose of developing good communication skills. A teacher and learners can better utilize it by the application and sharing of real life experiences and situations within a healthy learning environment

Thus, the roles of a teacher is a facilitator and a guide, encouraging learners through linguistic interaction with others and using technology as an aid of educational and language learning activities as it allows for a great number of opportunities to communicate in the target language.

Further studies examining the online conversation lessons and classroom interaction, should consider learners with different levels of proficiency and close-supervised training may be needed for particular group of students. The rubric used for assessment in student's performance should be made more relevant to naturally occurring conversations.

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