

The Needs of Air Cadets in An English Speaking Course

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Abstract

This study investigated the needs of air cadets ($n = 362$) in an English speaking course. The research was initiated to investigate the cadets' needs in learning to speak English to inform the development of a new English speaking course in a particular military context where English is used for specific military purposes. Data on needs were collected by using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Cadets were asked to fill out a needs analysis questionnaire relating to course content, teaching methodologies and activities. Then, 32 cadets were randomly selected and interviewed to explore specific issues arising from an analysis of the questionnaire data. The analysis of data revealed that the cadets needed to study with a good-natured teacher who did not place them in stressful situations and who didn't focus too much on scores and textbooks. They needed a teacher who provided equal opportunities for everyone to speak and who could apply authentic materials to classroom learning activities. They also needed to learn English conversation in various contexts such as everyday life, military situations, presentations and when attending international conferences. Adequate time for practicing was also needed. The implications of these findings for course development in spoken English are also briefly summarized.

Keywords: needs analysis, air cadet, spoken English, curriculum development

Introduction

English language is widely used as a medium in communication around the world (Lathifah, 2015), and the ultimate goal for learning English is to enable more effective communication. A macro skill that is very influential in learning English is speaking. It can be used in many fields, such as education, tourism, and economics. Therefore, if learners can speak English accurately and appropriately, they can be successful in learning language (Mahripah, 2014).

Many organizations, in both the private and government sectors give priority to people who can communicate in English in order to internationalize their operations. This includes the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF). In an era where there is widespread use of information and communication technologies, the air force needs personnel who are skillful in communication with the use of modern technologies and who can access information efficiently. English oral communication is also a crucial tool through which the personnel always use on air force missions overseas. As a result, English language has been adopted as a core medium of communication in developing the air force to be 'One of the Best Air Forces in ASEAN'.

Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy (NKRAFA) prepares officers for the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF). It is a boarding school for male cadets. Every graduate of this academy will be appointed to serve as a commissioned officer (pilots and executives) in RTAF. NKRAFA provides a five-year program of study in the faculty of engineering and science. There are six departments in the engineering faculty (aeronautical, civil, industrial, mechanical and electrical) and two departments in the science faculty (material and computer sciences). The cadets are required to complete both military and academic programs to obtain a bachelor's degree.

English language is a compulsory subject in every semester from the 1st year to the 4th year. The English courses vary in each year of study. For example, in the 1st year, freshmen cadets study English courses for everyday life. Sophomore cadets learn English that relates to cultures. Junior cadets study aviation English, and Senior cadets study military English courses. One of the main objectives of all courses is to develop students' communicative skills in English. The cadets are encouraged to use English effectively via activities that are integrated in the lessons. Although the cadets are assumed to be competent in English grammar, they are not necessarily confident to speak in English. In fact, from my experience as a lecturer and researcher at NKRAFA, most cadets have limited speaking skills. Hence, the research reported in this paper was initiated to investigate the cadets' needs in learning to speak English

to gain insights which could influence the development of a new English speaking course in a military context where English is expected to be widely used. This study aimed to investigate the following questions:

1. What are the needs of the cadets in an English speaking course?
2. What are the cadets' perspectives about factors (e.g. contents, teachers, teaching methods, materials and environments) that can strengthen the development of their speaking skills in an English language course?

English Speaking Skills

Speaking English is complex because it is based on both linguistic and topical knowledge. Because speakers have to arrange the words and sounds meaningfully, speaking can be seen as the act of expressing thoughts, ideas, opinions and feelings by using audible symbols or visible bodily actions (Subandowo, 2017; Tarigan, 1990).

Speaking is one of the most important skills in language learning (Ur, 1996). However, it is challenging for learners in an EFL context because they do not use English every day. They study and practice English only in the classroom where English is practiced in set contexts. Moreover, some EFL learners have limited knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Thus, it can be challenging to teach speaking skills in an EFL context (Ariyanti, 2016; Ahmedi & Leong, 2017) where learners do not have everyday exposure to the language and have few opportunities to practice speaking English.

Apart from playing an important role in enhancing students' speaking skills, teachers have to deal with other factors affecting the development of these skills such as: (1) performance conditions; (2) affective variables; (3) listening ability; (4) topical knowledge; and (5) providing feedback. Performance conditions include time pressures, planning, the quality of performance and the amount of support (Nation & Newton, 2009). Affective variables relate to second language acquisition and motivation, self-confidence and anxiety (Krashen, 1982). In terms of listening ability, learners are not able to respond if they cannot comprehend what they have been told. Topical knowledge is the knowledge about the topic that they are going to be speaking about. If they lack knowledge about the topic, it is hard to speak about those matters confidently and fluently. Finally, feedback involves guidance and support provided to learners by teachers. Feedback is very important because it is used by teachers in correcting mistakes. However, the teachers have to decide when the feedback should be given. It can be provided depending on the stages of lessons, tasks and the types of mistakes the learners made. Appropriate feedback can also motivate learners to continue speaking (Ahmedi & Leong, 2017).

For these reasons, speaking skills are not easy to develop, especially in EFL contexts where the learners have limited linguistic competence and less chance to use language after class. In order to successfully teach speaking skills, teachers have to plan and implement effective activities. Moreover, they have to ascertain the real purposes of learning English for a particular group of learners. Is the purpose for test taking or for using language in real situations? When the purpose is known, teachers are in a better position to design learning activities that meet the needs of learners.

Needs Analysis

Brown (2009), and Boroujeni and Fard (2013), defined needs analysis as the processes involved in collecting data for particular purposes; for example, data obtained from the analysis of learners' needs to be used to improve teaching and learning processes. As West (1994 cited in Jie, 2013) stated, in an English course, needs analysis is rooted in the requirement of developing the English course for specific purposes. Since the learners in each particular context have different characteristics and backgrounds, as well as diverse purposes in learning English, an analysis of particular needs is necessary to create a specific course for a particular group of English learners. To confirm this idea, Albassri (2016), and Al-Hamlan and Baniabdelrahman (2015) proposed that the purpose of a needs analysis is to connect the needs of the learners and the objectives of the English curriculum. Furthermore, the findings of a needs analysis can be used to investigate what the curriculum lacks, and to identify whatever else is important for the learners who are studying the course. Importantly, the analysis of needs can be used to find out the present and future needs of the learners. It can also be used to investigate learners' attitudes towards the course; that is, the English skills they want to improve and whatever else they want to get from the course.

Therefore, a needs analysis is an important part in designing particular courses for a specific group of learners. The precise purposes of learning can be identified in order to cater for the real needs of the learners. Therefore, in the study reported here, the needs of learners in an English speaking course were surveyed and analyzed in order to obtain the core information needed to design an English speaking course that could serve the real needs of cadets in the workplace situations they are likely to encounter as officers of the Royal Thai Air Force where speaking English is used for particular purposes.

Methodology

The population in this study consisted of 362 cadets in their 1st-5th year in the 2017 academic year. All were required to answer the questionnaires while 32 cadets (7 freshmen cadets, 7 sophomore cadets, 8 junior cadets, 6 senior cadets, and 4 cadets from the 5th year) were randomly selected for individual interviews with the researcher.

The questionnaire employed in this study focused on the cadets' needs in speaking English. It consisted of 30 items about (1) needs in relation to the course content (7 items), (2) needs in learning and teaching approaches and activities (15 items), and (3) needs in materials and teachers (8 items). The cadets were asked to respond on a five point scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = not agree, and 1 = strongly not agree). Before finalizing the questionnaire, three experts in the English teaching field were asked to check the validity of contents by using the IOC value (Index of Item-Objective Congruence).

The interviews focused on the cadets' needs from the English speaking course and their perspectives on teaching strategies that would encourage them to use English speaking skills (content, activities, teaching methods and media used in teaching). There were two main questions used in the interviews (outlined in the Results section). The content validity of the questions was established by asking three experts in English teaching to read and assess the items.

The responses to questions were tabulated (using SPSS Statistics 22.0) along with the frequency, mean and standard deviation of the data. The interview data were analysed and presented descriptively.

Results

The results were presented for each of the research questions:

RQ1. What are the needs of the cadets from an English speaking course?

RQ2. What are the cadets' perspectives towards factors (e.g. contents, teachers, teaching methods, materials and environments) that can strengthen learners' English speaking skills in an English speaking course?

The results are presented here in two parts. (Table 1) presented and commented on the data from the questionnaires. The second part of this section described and commented on the data obtained from the interviews.

Table 1: Needs of cadets in an English speaking course

Topics	Mean (μ)	Std. Dev. (σ)
1. I need the speaking contents related to negotiation in various situations.	4.26	0.73
2. I need the speaking contents related to daily life communication.	4.34	0.74
3. I need the speaking contents related to discussion and presentations.	4.06	0.87
4. I need the speaking contents related to joint military exercises.	4.09	0.91
5. I need the speaking contents related to taking care of the foreign guests from different countries.	4.09	0.77
6. I need the speaking contents related to military missions and coordination.	4.20	0.81
7. I need the speaking content related to pronunciation.	4.20	0.85
8. I need the speaking content related to (project base) (interview with the famous people, current news).	4.03	0.80
9. I need the speaking content related to role plays.	4.04	0.77
10. I need the speaking content that can be used in authentic situations.	4.30	0.76
11. I need the speaking activity related to group discussion or seminars.	3.88	0.89
12. I need the speaking activity related to not focusing on the language rule explanation/ lecture.	4.16	0.88
13. I need the speaking activity related to group speaking.	3.88	1.05
14. I need the speaking activity related to pair speaking.	3.91	0.97
15. I need the speaking activity related to individual speaking.	3.79	1.03
16. I need the speaking assessment related to various ways of assessment.	4.09	0.71
17. I need to practice speaking person to person with a teacher.	4.17	0.90
18. I need to practice speaking from pictures.	4.19	0.83
19. I need practice from TV program listening and talk in front of the classroom.	4.16	0.88
20. I need up-to- date speaking programs.	4.23	0.86
21. I need complementary books or software.	4.16	0.83
22. I need authentic teaching materials.	4.40	0.73
23. I need time in learning and practicing speaking.	4.33	0.65
24. I need feedback from teachers after finishing speaking activities.	4.28	0.76
25. Before having an assessment, I need to be informed by a teacher beforehand.	4.23	0.84
26. I need a teacher who always provides an equal chance in speaking.	4.33	0.75
27. I need individual feedback.	4.21	0.85
28. I need teacher teaching which is less stressful and doesn't focus too much on scores.	4.50	0.69
29. I need a teacher who evaluates speaking by performance.	4.17	0.84
30. I need a teacher who does not stick to textbooks too much.	4.39	0.72

The questionnaire data indicated that the cadets needed a relaxed teacher who did not focus too much on scores (Q28, $\mu = 4.50$). They also needed materials that were adapted from authentic materials and situations (Q10, $\mu = 4.30$). They concluded that they needed a teacher who did not stick to textbooks (Q30, $\mu = 4.39$). The contents should relate to daily life conversation (Q2, $\mu = 4.34$). Time provided in practicing an activity was considered to be a very important issue amongst the cadets (Q23, $\mu = 4.33$). Moreover, they agreed that every cadet in the same class must have an equal chance to practice speaking (Q26, $\mu = 4.33$).

To investigate separately according to the topics, the cadets needed the contents related to daily life conversation (Q2, $\mu = 4.34$), negotiation in various situations (Q1, $\mu = 4.26$), military missions and coordination (Q6, $\mu = 4.20$), and pronunciation (Q7, $\mu = 4.20$). For the learning and teaching methods and activities, the cadets needed materials adopted from authentic sources and situations (Q22, $\mu = 4.40$). They also needed to practice speaking in real situations (Q10, $\mu = 4.30$). An up-to-date speaking program was needed in the course (Q20, $\mu = 4.23$). They needed to practice English speaking by describing pictures (Q18, $\mu = 4.19$). Practicing individually with a teacher was also needed by the cadets (Q17, $\mu = 4.17$). They also needed feedback after completing a speaking activity (Q24, $\mu = 4.28$). Lastly, they needed to practice speaking in the front of the classroom after watching current news or a video or reading books (Q19, $\mu = 4.16$).

The research also employed semi-structured interviews (two questions) conducted individually with 32 randomly selected cadets.

For the first question- ‘What content, activities and supplementary materials do you want to add in the speaking course?’- most cadets suggested that they needed contents related to daily life conversations and new vocabulary. They did not need to learn much about language rules or grammar. The contents also needed to focus on the joint military exercises including presentation, briefing, discussing and public speaking. Moreover, they needed practice in speaking in aviation contexts, academic presentations and aviation communication that they could use in their respective jobs. For example:

I prefer practicing public speaking, speaking in aviation contexts, such as communicating with air traffic controllers. And I need to have an ability to present in English smartly. (AC1)
I would like to study and practice speaking English that is used in everyday life in different situations such as making friends from different countries in military missions and the vocabulary used in the meeting agenda. (AC9)

I do not need to study formal English speaking. The content should focus on everyday English conversations in various situations. (AC15)

I do need to learn about how to enhance presentations. (AC3)

I would like to study informal everyday English conversations with relaxing teachers. I think that the main duty of a teacher is to motivate a student to speak. (AC21)

I need to study English that I can use in presentations which is not too academic. I also need to practice public speaking and learn how to communicate in the meeting or conference. (AC6)

In terms of materials, many cadets recommended that the speaking course contents should be derived from authentic events.

Teachers have to present English speaking dialogues through movies. The learners can simulate the accents and pronunciation by watching movies. I love learning through authentic materials. (AC1)

I need to learn speaking by watching clip video. (AC 14)

I love learning speaking English by listening to songs, watching movies or videos. (AC 15)

I need to learn by playing games and watching movies (AC 18)

I love having a discussion after watching some fun clip videos. (AC 21)

The second question was: ‘In your perspective, what kinds of teachers, teaching methods, materials and environment can strengthen learners’ English speaking skills in an English speaking course?’

The cadets’ responses indicated that a teacher must understand the nature of learners. She/he had to create good rapport and encourage the learners’ speaking confidence. The teacher must correct the learners’ mistakes as well as accept spoken English with Thai accents from the learners. They should not blame cadets when they make mistakes. Furthermore, they suggested that a good teacher should treat every learner equally and with kindness. The teacher must support learners to practice speaking with authentic sources and situations. For example:

Teachers should have good rapport with cadets. They should be kind to all cadets. (AC3)

I love learning with a teacher who gives equal importance to all students. (AC7)

Teachers should not be too strict. (AC13)

The teacher must be friendly and forgive students when they speak incorrectly. (AC22)

Teachers should encourage students to be confident. They have to correct [appropriately] when students speak incorrectly. And they must accept English spoken with a Thai accent. (AC28)

Interestingly, many cadets agreed that native and non-native English speakers had both strengths and weaknesses. While native speakers can be good models with pronunciation, Thai teachers can explain grammar rules in Thai. For example:

I like to study with a Thai teacher because if there is a problem I can ask immediately. (AC14)

I like to study with foreign teachers because I can learn pronunciation and accent. (AC16)

I can learn from both Thai and foreign teachers. Thai teachers can explain difficult grammar clearly. (AC27)

I can learn from both Thai and foreign teachers. Thai teachers explain the content better while foreign teachers have better accents. (AC32)

For teaching/learning activities, the cadets needed recreational activities, such as watching movies and listening to songs. The activities should motivate the learners to speak English. Furthermore, good teachers should be able to encourage a shy learner to speak out. They also mentioned that good teaching materials should be adopted or adapted from authentic sources, such as movie excerpts, songs and short video clips, because they can promote discussion activities. Moreover, adequate time to practice speaking and feedback to learners after the speaking tasks are also important.

Good teachers should be able to motivate students to speak as well as give feedback to students. Also, I would like to learn English through movies. (AC1)

I want to study with a teacher who provides enough time for practicing and have feedback after speaking tasks. I also think that listening to songs and watching movies can enhance my speaking skills. (AC15)

I would like to study with teachers who can guide me correctly as well as give me effective feedback. (AC24)

In terms of the learning environment, the learners agreed that a good learning environment arises from relaxed and kind teachers and not necessarily from the physical environment in which learning occurs. Furthermore, some learners can be guided to engage in activities outside the academy which may motivate them to speak out.

I need teachers who can create a supportive speaking environment both in and outside classrooms so I can practice at any time and at any place. (AC4)

I think that a good environment is an environment that does not pressure students. (AC15)

In my opinion, a good environment is a relaxing environment with kind teachers. (AC16)

The academy is not suitable for practicing speaking. There is nothing to motivate me to speak. The academy should cooperate with other institutions in arranging speaking activities. (AC26)

Discussion and Conclusions

The responses of the cadets indicated that contents, time, feedback, environment and teacher are important factors in meeting their needs in a spoken English speaking course.

1. Contents

The cadets reported that they needed contents that provided them practices on how to pronounce words correctly because of their shyness in pronouncing words in English. They were afraid of losing face in front of others. They needed contents that guided them to pronounce English in phrases, clauses or sentences, not just single words. Intonation was needed to be included in the course contents.

Moreover, the contents needed to be related to conversations about daily life, briefings, negotiations in various situations, and the English used in military missions. Everyday English was needed when the cadets went abroad for conferences, meetings or study. Therefore, the course contents needed to include greetings, asking for information, shopping or dealing with problems. They also needed contents that could be applied to working routines, such as English used in joint military exercises. Hence, course development needed to involve an analysis of job descriptions in the air force and the development of contents that mirrored the real situations in which the cadets would work in the future.

In addition to that, the cadets reported that movies, songs, and TV programs (authentic sources) motivated them to learn because of their interest in these activities. Hence, the course development should identify suitable media to replace routine 'drill and practice' exercises which quickly lead to boredom.

2. Time

The cadets claimed that they needed more time to prepare (review/rehearse) before engaging in speaking activities in the classroom. They felt pressured with military and physical training, and other academic studies and did not have adequate time to prepare and practice before and after classes. Because of these time constraints, activities need to be selected carefully to make sure they were relevant and could be completed in a study period.

Additionally, the cadets complained about time not being provided equally for all cadets to practice speaking in the classroom. Some weaker cadets were not confident and hesitated to show themselves up amongst their friends. Thus, teachers have to help them overcome the problem by providing small group work activities that enable every member in the group to speak. Teachers can start with easy and short dialogues to motivate learners and provide chances for shy learners to practice.

3. Feedback

The cadets also reported that their speaking skills could not improve if they did not know about the individual mistakes they made. They mentioned that feedback to the whole class was not effective. Teachers also needed to concern about the personality of learners. Timid learners who are shy to speak in front of their peers may need individual feedback after class. In other cases, detailed feedback on small errors may need to be limited since the cadets may feel that their efforts have not been successful

4. Environment

The cadets commented that the learning environment in the academy was not supportive for learning English speaking skills because of the time constraints for physical training and other academic pursuits. While some cadets did practice in their own time in the evening, many practiced speaking only in the classroom. One way to overcome this problem and encourage an English speaking environment could be to initiate an English speaking day starting with short talks with friends or teachers (not just with English teachers).

5. Teachers

Besides planning and implementing effective learning activities, teachers have to understand the personality, condition and limitations of individual cadets. Moreover, teachers should have good rapport with the cadets because a positive learning environment can be created by kind and supportive teachers. The cadets were stressed in many learning activities, so they needed to study with relaxed teachers who were not focused only on scores.

Furthermore, the cadets reported that they had no strong preferences for either native speakers or Thai teachers. English native speaking teachers can be good role models for pronunciation, accents and naturalness, and can introduce cultural aspects into the classroom. Thai teachers can be better at explaining complex language rules as well as clarifying the meaning of some confusing vocabulary.

Concluding Comments

This study investigated the needs of the cadets in an English speaking course and their perspectives on factors encouraging English speaking skills in an English speaking course. The results from the research can be used in creating and improving English speaking courses with regard to teachers, teaching methods, time, contents, activities and materials and learning environment. Furthermore, the study confirmed that the teacher is one of the influential factors in encouraging and motivating the students' speaking skills.

While the findings mentioned above will influence the revision and improvement of the spoken language program at NKRAF, further initiatives are being considered to build on the understandings reported in this paper. These include:

1. A bilingual teaching project to encourage the cadets to communicate with others (teachers or friends) in other subjects which will help create a wider English speaking environment.
2. An activity-based approach using authentic materials which enhance motivation to learn.
3. Replacing assessment based on paper testing and grades with assessment based on performance criteria to reduce the cadets' stress in learning spoken English.
4. Integrating spoken English into military subjects so that the cadets can practice language in preparation for their future jobs.
5. For future research, it should have the collection of the reflections of graduates about learners' needs in English speaking courses and those of prospective employers of graduates.

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