

Promoting EFL Speaking Practice through Digital Reading

MICHAEL GENTNER

Office of General Education, Panyapiwat Institute of Management, Nonthaburi, Thailand

Author e-mail: mthomasgentner@gmail.com

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Abstract

This purposive homogeneous study explores the relationship between reading and speaking in the EFL context and attempts to integrate the two language skills in a manner that encourages learners to practice and develop their receptive and productive capacities with greater enthusiasm. To this end, tertiary-level learners from two universities in Thailand representing six English-prominent fields of study were presented with a questionnaire, participated in structured interviews, and took part in five in-class online reading and speaking lessons designed and evaluated by this author. The study questions focused on the English reading habits of service industry and communication majors for whom English proficiency figures prominently in employment pursuits. The goal was to discover reading patterns and sources and forge links that would combine reading and speaking classroom activities. The two language skills are connected but rarely considered an alliance and thus are paired less frequently than most other language skill combinations. The results of this descriptive-correlational study found the majority of participants derived their English readings from online sources. Oral narratives read from online information sources proved to be an efficient blend of receptive reading and productive speaking performances that found favor with participants as task models.

INTRODUCTION

The four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are typically grouped into productive (speaking/writing) and receptive (listening/reading) skill categories. In functional environments, they are often paired as communicative or corresponding (speaking/listening or reading/writing) though each skill has a core of related features (Peregoy & Boyle, 1991).

Rarely are pairings or combinations of reading/speaking and listening/writing discussed or studied. Reading was for centuries considered a solitary act which required a healthy amount of silence and isolation. Speaking, in contrast, required an audience and an ebb and flow of intonations acting as an orchestration of a vis-à-vis exchange. In more concrete terms, reading



and speaking were separated by their life spans. The spoken word was heard but once then forever lost to the winds. Reading was always visible as it transformed the brevity of invisible sound into an immortal presence. Reading is the most straightforward and painless way to acquire vocabulary and mentally rehearse sentence structures for future conversations. Those who retain a considerable amount of vocabulary through reading are incidentally equipped with expanded vocabulary usage in speech acts (Mart, 2012). Reading has neither speed limits nor accents to cloud the mind and cares nothing for volume, connected speech, or need for repetition. Yet its relationship to speech acts is as undeniable as it is vital.

The modern influx of cell phones, as much a reading as a speaking device, and the increasing number of global subscribers suggest the combination of these two language skills are always in close proximity on a world-wide scale. Thus, their collaboration has every cause for sparking the interest of second language lesson planners. The continuous threat of foreign language anxiety in productive English skills such as speaking shows signs of waning when the verbal exchanges are restricted to select participants in a social media venue. Research suggests that social media exchanges act as initiators for English reading and oratory development, and the continued use and practice of such opportunities weakens the affective filter which promotes more confident and effective discourse potentials (Chotipaktanasook & Reinders, 2016).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the outside class English reading habits of service industry and communication majors?
2. What influence might digital mobile communication contribute to reading-inspired speaking opportunities?
3. What types of classroom activities involving speaking by way of reading would learners find engaging?

LITERATURE REVIEW

It can be argued that any language skill groupings and their perceived compatibility may be exaggerated. A study examining the relationship of the four communication skills in TOEIC examination results found such little commonality amongst the skills that a conclusion was reached claiming an absence of evidence that one skill can make itself felt in another (Liu & Costanzo, 2013). The study did however provide a measured overlap in the relationship to these unique skills. Data shows the closest interrelationship pairing to be listening and reading (0.726), followed by listening and speaking (0.634), speaking and writing (0.592), reading and speaking (0.537), and listening and writing (0.535). The merging of speaking and reading activities in ELL institutions has yet to generate a significant amount of interest among EFL researchers, nor with second language practitioners. Hence, a lack of prodigious literature on the subject matter.

One could easily draw a distinction between a solitary action like reading and the social

interaction of speaking when the reading material is in book, magazine, newspaper, or other print formats. Yet speaking and reading share a dependency in the same types of facilities used to process phonologically difficult words. Evidence of this is the match between phonemes that create the same problems of articulation in both reading and speaking episodes (Garner, 2000). Phonemes considered difficult for readers to receive in the mind's ear, and speakers to properly articulate, are a match. Those with difficulties in reading are likely to have weak speech perception and consequently, more extensive complications in corresponding lexical items (Zhang, 2009; Li & Song, 2007). According to Ehri (2005), readers create phonemic images of what is read and incorporate these images into a pronunciation framework where phonemes and phoneme clusters offer clues to their proper articulations. Learners over time develop the skills to process the suitable pronunciation of unfamiliar words with little hesitation. These grapheme-phoneme correlations act as a mnemonic system for the retention and proper elocution of more complex phonemic alignments and syllabifications (Oya, Emmanuel, & Jackie, 2009).

According to Grape (1991), the integration of reading and speaking skill sets are dependent on a number of mutual components: a) automatic recognition skills; b) vocabulary and structural knowledge; c) formal discourse and structure; d) content/world background knowledge; e) synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies, and e) metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring (p.379). Varghese (2015) adds a cautionary note on the effect of outside influences such as linguistic, sociocultural, psychological and educational factors that all work in an elaborate fashion to either assist or complicate the integration of multiple skill sets.

The sudden proliferation of online reading from phones, tablets, and laptops finds learners across the globe in a near continuous state of receiving information by way of written correspondence, with recurrent opportunities to respond in elocutionary affirmations, rebuttals, or alternative reactions to the sender (Gentner, 2018). When the vocalization of written dispatch is demanded, or the verbal sharing of text content with those in our company is compelling, readings from social media or contextual internet-based sources are no longer an insular form of communication (Manurung, 2015). As a matter of course, what is read is often recurrently transferred to speech for the benefit of the group or articulated at short notice for the concern of those in the immediate surroundings. Communicative-based lesson possibilities materialize as the natural proclivity to discuss what is read through digital media origins becomes a plentiful source of authentic English discourse (Howarth, 2008).

Whether uttered verbatim from an original English script or coded and translated from the local vernacular to the target language, the potential for mobile devices as reading-induced speaking instruments could challenge its more established academic role as an instrument for information collection and digital distribution.



METHODOLOGY

Methods and participants

Requests for participation in the study were made at two private universities in the Bangkok metropolitan area where this author was employed. A project-specific approach was adopted by Thai instructors in the participant recruitment process. This procedure called for a set number of participants from specific major fields of study who voluntarily gave oral consent to the author allowing for collected data to be processed for eventual publication submission. The initial phase of the project called for the collection of data from 150 non-English major undergraduate students. A proportionate number of participants from each university system were accepted representing six major fields of study that, upon graduation and entrance into their desired fields of employment, would call for a respectable level of English proficiency. English majors, by definition, are exposed to a diverse range of English reception and production opportunities over their four years of course review and assessments.

This study sought to examine the preferred English reading habits and subsequent verbal representations of majors who shared the need for functional English proficiency as an instrumental employment requisite rather than English for a more form-focused categorization. Non-English majors with needs for English discourse and correspondence were considered more likely to self-supplement their English input and output contingencies since their major fields of study slanted more toward non-EFL related subject matters. To this end, a quota sampling of majors in the fields of Avi (aviation industry), HTM (hospitality/tourism management), ITM (international tourism management), Public Relations, Communication Arts, and Broadcasting was selected in light of the importance of EFL fluency in these fields. Twenty-five randomly selected learners from a pool of pre-screened applicants from each of the six selected majors were commissioned for this study. Three of these major classifications were under the umbrella category of Communication Arts. As a consequence of this relationship, the differences in both written and verbal responses to the questionnaire and interviews were negligible and the statistical data from the three Communication Arts divisions were combined to form one set of figures. A similar process blended the HTM with ITM majors since the results showed evidence of duplication and every sign of data saturation. The corresponding data disparities were trivial to the point of making their statistical separation insignificant. After the adjustment, the 150 study participants were part of the three abridged Communication Arts, Aviation, and Hotel/Tourism Management study groups. Numerically consistent sophomore and junior-level male and female learners were selected from both institutions to draw down the possibility of external variables that might compromise the generalizability of the findings. It was determined that freshman level learners may not have had the opportunities for exposure to English readings in print or digital form as a result of the focus on college entrance examination preparation. The use of mobile phones and sources of blended learning is curtailed in secondary school settings where the merging of Mlearning into lesson planning has yet to make its mark. Their experience with the digital citizenship of a collegiate community was undemonstrated and research into their patterns of English reading was deemed premature. Senior level learners, in both institutions of study, use this final year of study to train in work-apprentice service industries and are exposed to an alternative learning atmosphere.

Instrumentation

In order to facilitate data interpretation through a method-appropriate strategy, a nine-item closed-ended questionnaire was administered to each of the 150 tertiary-level participants. Questions one through six were preliminary data inquires on outside-class English reading practices consisting of one pre-coded 5-point symmetric Likert scale, one pre-existing multiple choice, and four dichotomous (yes/no) questions. These six questions were considered exploratory queries since their intention was to examine the possibility of further research in an area related yet distinguished from the present study. The three remaining inquiries, consisting of one Likert scale and two pre-existing multiple choice questions, had a direct bearing on the present research and were thus coded and included in the research findings.

Following the examination of the questionnaire responses, four interview questions were devised to offer participants an opportunity to elaborate on their questionnaire selections. Thirty study participants were randomly selected from the original 150 participants for these inquiries. Two structured questions, requiring short answer responses were followed by two unstructured open-ended questions that afforded respondents the freedom to talk at length about their personal in-class networking persuasions. Considerations were made regarding how an instructor in the position of interviewer might dampen the desire for a respondent to speak freely on a subject that might have the instructor casting an admonishing eye over any classroom misdemeanors or mobile phone improprieties. Therefore, interviews were conducted with the assistance of a senior-level student with advanced English capacities. The interviews were conducted in English and Thai to maintain the continuity of the interviews and to ensure that the essence of their opinions were not lost in translation.

The empirical analysis consisted of five discourse potential lesson plans created to combine online reading with oral narration. Classroom participation and the duration of each speech event were considered the measures for assessing the favorability and merits of these task types. Participants were asked to select their material from online sources based on the theme and objective of the exercise, speak within a specific timeframe, and incorporate intonations, facial expressions, and body language to add to the energy of the task. Low effort and minimal time output signaled a low level of satisfaction, while mid and high-level effort and time usage were noted accordingly. The five task types consisted of the following:

- **Translations:** Learners connected to movie and music sites to choose regional films and songs. Learners read an English version of the film synopses and song lyrics whereby the class would decode the translations to their original language and make predictions of the movie and song titles.
- **Predictions:** Learners read true stories from their mobile phones on Entertainment news, historical dramas, sporting events, and supernatural phenomenon. Half of a story was read while the remainder of the class would write the second half of the story, including the conclusion, to make accurate predictions about the story.
- **Cut up codes:** Akin to storyboarding, this activity allowed one member of the class to



read a sentence of a story; leaving the predicate of the sentence for the next learner to complete. The following learner would attempt to guess the predicate while the reader would guide the class with clues to the wording of the sentence predicate.

- **Facelessbook:** A Facebook profile of a student in the class or a celebrity is selected by students, coded into English, and the information about the person is read to the class. Learners decode the information and make a prediction about who was under discussion.
- **Summaries:** Speakers read the summary of popular folk and fairy tales. They are asked to use intonations, body language, and facial expressions to offer both verbal and non-verbal information. From the content clues, the class identifies the title of the story

RESULTS

Questionnaire respondents acknowledged the relevance of English communication skills for future service industry employment by selecting work and talking with foreigners as the principal reasons for studying English as a second language. The frequency of English language reading outside the classroom environs was substantially low considering its availability and possible contribution to the overall proficiency of a language learner. In a clear measure of how firmly established digit reading has become in lives young adults, sixty-eight percent the of study participants selected online material as their largest source of English readings.

Question 7. The most important reason for me to learn English

major/response	work	school	talk with foreigners	study overseas	entertainment	personnel satisfaction
Communication Arts	64.7%	2.35%	25.8%	2.35%	1.17%	3.52%
Avi	35.7%	0	39.2%	14.2%	3.57%	7.14%
HRM	45.9%	5.4%	27%	13.5%	5.4%	2.7%

Question 8. How often do you read English outside the classroom?

major/response	never	rarely	sometimes	often	very often
Communication Arts	1.17%	11.7%	63.5%	18.8%	4.7%
Avi	0	21.4%	42.8%	25%	10.7%
HRM	0	13.5%	62.1%	18.9%	2.7%

Question 9. Which source of English do you most often read from?

major/response	magazines	books	newspapers	online material	other
Communication Arts	4.7%	15.2%	5.82%	74.1%	0
Avi	17.8%	32.1%	0	50%	0
HRM	2.7%	27%	0	67.5%	0

Interview results

Two structured and two semi-structured questions were asked of 30 randomly selected learners:

1. What percentage of your EFL classroom time is spent connected online?
2. How much of this online interplay contains elements of the English language?
3. What do you think are the positive aspects of using a cell phone during class time?
4. In what ways does cell phone use during EFL class time distract from the lessons?

Observations and interview responses suggest that the average EFL classroom learner is engaged in interface activity for better than ninety percent of the class time; with less than ten percent of this time used for English language output. The three test groups displayed parallel responses to questions one and two and, for purposes of avoiding repetition, were combined. The use of online translation dictionaries was the principal reason for English usage. Questions three and four also found similarities and repetitive responses from each of the three study groups when describing the advantages and disadvantages of mobile phone use in the EFL classroom. Of the thirty interviewees, five common themes for both advantages and disadvantages were replicated without quantifiable diversity. The following are abridged collections of participant interview responses from each of the three participant categories on interview questions three and four. The Thai/English code-switching and grammatical entanglements were cleansed and renovated to present the participants' opinions faithfully:

Question 1 What do you think are the positive aspects of using a cell phone during English class time?

- It's not interesting trying to learn things on social networking sites, it's our chance to escape learning and just have fun and chat...I don't want to struggle to find things in English during class time...we can get the information we need from the classroom teacher. I just want to take pictures of the English writing on the board and some in the class will translate it and pass it to us...'
- I use my phone as a dictionary when I need to know a word and I take a picture of what's on the board because I don't like writing. But when we take out our phones, networking just starts happening and we get interested in what is going on with our friends...'
- I switch back and forth between social networking, social media, and finding



translations of English and things about the lesson. Some students pretend to be getting lesson information from their phones and writing it on paper...we laugh at their acting skills, but I am good at switching between class work and social things on my phone...'

- I don't really have a need for using my phone for any kind of social media to help with class work. Our assignments are generally from the textbook and we follow along. If there is something to prepare in advance, I sometimes use my phone at home to ask classmates to clarify the assignment, then I just Google the things I want...'
- In class I use my phone to check the dictionary when I see a word in the textbook or on the board that I don't know. My classmates are all here so I don't have to contact them...it's easier to walk to their desk. I send messages to friends who are late and ask them why they are late...'

Question 2 In what ways does cell phone use during class time distract from the lessons?

- Sometimes I'm listening to what the teacher is saying or a presentation on the screen and suddenly my phone will shake me...I sometimes just look and it's finished and other times I start messaging back and I forget what the teacher or classmate is talking about...'
-
- Students in front of me often play games on their phone during class... I watch them when the teacher feels boring to me... my friends send me photos and funny things that I like to see. So I think my friends' phones are the most distracting to me...'
- I get help from other students who send me important things about the class... I know it is distracting but I can't always follow what the teacher says and I need my friends to help me... I think this is a good distraction...'
- We use our phones a lot when the teacher is reading the book to us...we know some things already so we feel bored and want to do something different...when the class is interesting many students listen and don't play with their phones much...'

Empirical findings

Participation levels and content length was the basis for empirical evidence was measured by the ratio of participants to non-participants and the length of reading from online sources. The data revealed that each of the five tasks was well-received and showed great similarities in the degree of acceptance and involvement. The level of participation in each of the five task-themes exceeded expectations: Translations (92%), Predictions (90%), Cut-up Codes (88%), Facelessbook (85%), and Summaries (85%). The length of speaking also surpassed predictions as it was initially believed that learners would use more specific language in an attempt to end their time in front of the class at a faster pace.

Table 1
Read/speak activity participation

Activity	Translations	Predictions	Cut-up codes	Faceless book	Summaries
Participants	92%	90%	88%	82%	85%
Length of Speaking	50 words +	30-49 words	20-29 words	less than 20 words	
	50%	23%	16%	11%	

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the recent past, institutions both local and governmental have made great efforts to bring an enthusiasm for reading to the youth of Thailand. Book fairs, expos, and notepad giveaways are few of the most recognized of these efforts. Yet, it was only through the advent of cell phone technology that Thai learners of all ages unexpectedly began reading in earnest. With hopes of Thai learners making improvements in English speaking skills to rival those of their ASEAN counterparts, occasions for the blending of digital reading and speaking opportunities may present the catalyst needed to motivate language learners. The pairings of reading with writing and speaking with listening made more sense before the phenomenon of digital citizenship came to be. Where books, magazines, and other printed vehicles have failed to rally a desire to read, electronic devices (most pointedly the cell phone) have made avid readers of us all. Perhaps the time has come for educators to explore the potential of these interdependent skills to enhance one another and begin edutaining with reading and speaking activities that are better attuned to the modern EFL classroom dynamic. Though the initial response to combining digital technology with English verbal production was favorable, future studies could expand on the idea of generating original text and translations from L1 sources rather than English script reading content from internet sources. How such readings could be better assessed and what criteria a researcher chooses in the evaluation process would make a valuable study as would an investigation of how pronunciation discrepancies could be addressed and managed through mobile-induced oral narratives and voice-recognition technology. Finally, the use of tablets, Kindles, and other tech-savvy devices and apps were considered for this project but none were employed by the test subjects. The cell phone has fast become the learner's only true handheld companion. What difference might alternative devices and forms of networking have on reading/speaking classroom ventures?

SUMMARY

In an attempt to combine the learners invariable online reading habits with reported or declarative speech, this paper weighed the results from three data collection instruments to discover the habits and opinions of cell phone use in the classroom and how these



inclinations might be combined with speaking activities. The findings may assist instructors who struggle with traditional English speaking activities that generate only a modest interest. The questionnaire results determined, in no uncertain terms, that most research subjects only occasionally read in English in hard copy form, preferring material accessed from mobile devices. In spite of the academic and employment requirements for English proficiency in their chosen fields of study, many remained indifferent to the idea of reading as a worthwhile second language communicative tool. The interviews discovered that a significant amount of EFL in-class mobile communication time is spent away from English language information and is instead centered on activities that could be labeled distractive. The empirical evidence found a number of well-received lesson constructs involving the reception of English correspondence through mobile devices and the reporting of this information as a classroom activity in an illocutionary manner.

As one of the leading tourist destinations in the world and a hub of international trade and tourism in the ASEAN sphere, the frequency of English interactions and the desire of many in tertiary learning environments to find employment in its markets, create a greater demand for English communicative skills for those who wish to work within these industries. Social media is firmly tethered to these international enterprises which assist in the promotion of sales and services to global and local audiences. Thailand ranks ninth in the world for Facebook users with forty-seven million subscribers. Instagram and Twitter climbed twenty percent in 2017 with eleven million and nine million members respectively (Fredrickson, 2017). Yet opportunities for rehearsing verbal communication through digital text in language classrooms have only recently attracted the attention of EFL educators. Future classrooms will likely see a sharp rise in digital interplay and networking opportunities that will, in one form or another, become a basis for reading and speaking activities.

THE AUTHOR

Michael Thomas Gentner, Ph.D obtained his doctorate in TESOL as well as certifications in CELTA and TEFL. He has taught English in Korea, Japan, China, Cambodia, and Thailand. He lectures, writes, and speaks on topics related to teaching EFL in areas of limited resources. He is author of the series Teaching English in ASEAN, which includes editions from each of the countries that comprise ASEAN and the plus three nations of Japan, Korea, and China. His research has been published in the Asian EFL Journal, Thai TESOL Journal and other notable periodicals.

mthomasgentner@gmail.com

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APPENDIX A
แบบสอบถาม

จงทำเครื่องหมายวงกลมในคำตอบที่ท่านเลือก

วิชาเอก.....ชั้นเรียน.....เพศ ชาย หญิง

1. บ่อยแค่ไหนที่ท่านสนทนาด้วยภาษาอังกฤษ นอกมหาวิทยาลัย
ไม่เคย น้อยมาก บางครั้ง บ่อย บ่อยมาก
2. เมื่อสนทนาภาษาอังกฤษ ข้าพเจ้ามักสนทนากับเจ้าของภาษา
ใช่ ไม่ใช่
3. เมื่อสนทนาด้วยภาษาอังกฤษ ข้าพเจ้ามักสนทนากับผู้ที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษา
ใช่ ไม่ใช่
4. ไม่แน่ใจว่าผู้ที่ข้าพเจ้าสนทนาด้วย เป็นเจ้าของภาษาหรือไม่
ใช่ ไม่ใช่
5. ข้าพเจ้าอยากเรียนและพูดภาษาอังกฤษเหมือนเจ้าของภาษา
อเมริกัน อังกฤษ ออสเตรเลีย อื่นๆ ไม่มี
6. ข้าพเจ้าอยากเรียนภาษาอังกฤษแบบที่สามารถติดต่อกับเจ้าของภาษาได้ทั่วโลก
จริง ไม่จริง
7. เหตุผลสำคัญที่สุดในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของข้าพเจ้า คือ
 - ก. เพื่อการทำงาน
 - ข. ตามหลักสูตรของโรงเรียน
 - ค. เพื่อติดต่อกับชาวต่างชาติได้
 - ง. เพื่อศึกษาต่อต่างประเทศได้
 - จ. เพื่อความบันเทิง
 - ฉ. เพื่อความพึงพอใจส่วนตัว
 - ช. เหตุผลอื่น.....
8. บ่อยแค่ไหนที่ท่านอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ
ไม่เคย น้อยมาก บางครั้ง บ่อย บ่อยมาก
9. ส่วนใหญ่ท่านอ่านอะไร
 - ก. แมกกาซีน
 - ข. หนังสือ
 - ค. หนังสือพิมพ์
 - ง. ข่าวสารในอินเทอร์เน็ต
 - จ. อื่นๆ.....



APPENDIX B Questionnaire

○ Circle the answer

Major..... Class 1 2 3 4 Sex M F

1) How often do you speak English outside the campus?
never rarely sometimes often very often

2) When I speak English I usually speak to native speakers. *Y N*

3) When I speak English I usually speak to non-native speakers. *Y N*

4) Not sure if I use English more with native or non-native speakers. *Y N*

5) I prefer to learn and speak English like a native speaker:
American British Australian Other..... None

6) I prefer to learn the kind of English that will help me communicate with native speakers around the world. *T F*

7) The most important reason for me to learn English is:
a. For work
b. Must learn for school
c. Communicate with non-Thai speakers
d. To study overseas
e. For entertainment
f. For personal satisfaction
g. Other reason.....

8) How often do you read English outside the campus?
never rarely sometimes often very often

9) What do you usually read?
h. Magazines
i. Books
j. Newspapers
k. Internet material
e. Other.....