

Research article

An Investigation of Speaking Anxiety and Proficiency Challenges among Thai University Students in English Language Learning.

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors influencing speaking proficiency among 48 second-year non-English major students enrolled in an English Speaking course at Thai university. The research focuses on emotional and psychological issues, low speaking proficiency, and the learning environment as key issues faced by students when studying English. Although not statistically significant, the results indicate that emotional and psychological factors, such as anxiety and lack of self-confidence, have some effect on students' ability to speak English. Additionally, students self-reported low speaking proficiency with a significant mean score of 3.90 ($p=0.000$), indicating a need for improving speaking skills. Regarding the learning environment, students disagreed with the idea that it was a major issue, with a mean score of 2.32, suggesting that while some issues exist, the learning environment was not a primary factor in their struggles. The findings highlight the importance of addressing emotional, psychological, and skill-based barriers in English speaking proficiency. Implications for teaching include creating anxiety-reducing activities, incorporating more speaking practice, and focusing on interactive and task-based learning approaches. The study emphasizes the need for further investigation into students' motivation and teaching preferences to enhance speaking skills.

Keywords: English proficiency, speaking skills, emotional and psychological issues, language anxiety, learning environment

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Introduction

Although there have been extensive efforts to teach English in Thailand, many students still struggle with speaking proficiency. Despite English being mandatory in Thai schools for several years, a report by Southeast Asia Globe (Abhasakun, 2021) indicates that Thailand consistently ranks among the lowest in Southeast Asia for English skills according to the Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI). Many students cannot speak fluently or understand English in real-world contexts, with persistent issues ranging from overreliance on rote memorization to insufficient focus on practical conversational English (Abhasakun, 2021).

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), most Thai undergraduates remain at the A2 level, which denotes only basic communication skills. Students at this level often lack the fluency and confidence necessary for effective communication, struggling with complex conversations and spontaneous responses across diverse topics. Despite mandatory English courses required for graduation, many students fail to meet the Ministry of Education's required B2 proficiency level, which is essential for demonstrating competent language use (Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021).

While recent reforms have targeted teaching quality improvements, traditional methods that emphasize grammar rules and reading comprehension over speaking and listening skills leave students ill-prepared for real-life communication situations (Abhasakun, 2021). Large class sizes, limited English immersion opportunities, and an insufficient number of adequately trained teachers further compound these systemic problems. As English conversation skills become increasingly vital in a globalized world, improving these competencies is crucial for enhancing Thai graduates' employability and global competence in international contexts.

English speaking anxiety, knowledge and skill deficits, and inadequate teaching methods are deeply interconnected factors affecting students' fluency and confidence. Anxiety stemming from fear of judgment and making errors creates hesitation and reluctance to participate, while limited vocabulary and inadequate grammar knowledge compound speaking difficulties. To effectively address these barriers, educators must create supportive and encouraging environments using student-centred approaches that emphasize meaningful interaction, peer collaboration, and authentic real-world practice to reduce anxiety and systematically improve skills. Instructors should foster classrooms where students feel safe making mistakes and learning from them, utilizing diverse instructional materials and engaging activities to enhance speaking abilities (Franco, 2023). This study investigates the specific problems Thai university

students encounter when conversing in English, with findings informing the design of targeted conversation lessons to elevate oral proficiency to the required B2 level.

Research Questions

1. Do psychological and emotional factors significantly affect Thai university students' abilities when speaking English?
2. Do students perceive their English speaking skills and knowledge levels as inadequate?
3. Do students perceive the learning and teaching environment in their English courses as adequate for developing speaking proficiency?

Research Objectives

1. To investigate whether psychological and emotional factors significantly affect students' abilities when speaking English.
2. To investigate whether students' English speaking skills and knowledge levels are perceived as inadequate.
3. To investigate whether students perceive the learning and teaching environment in their English courses as adequate for developing speaking proficiency.

Problem Statement

While previous studies have separately examined language anxiety, skill deficiencies, and teaching methodologies in EFL contexts, limited research systematically investigates how these factors interact in hindering English speaking proficiency among Thai university students. Despite Thailand's low English proficiency rankings and the Ministry of Education's B2 graduation requirement, quantitative data on students' perceptions of psychological barriers, skill adequacy, and learning environment quality remains scarce. This study addresses this gap by examining these three variables among second-year non-English majors to provide evidence for targeted interventions. Despite ongoing English instruction in Thailand, many students struggle with speaking proficiency and cannot communicate fluently in real-world contexts due to teaching that emphasizes grammar and reading over practical conversation. Psychological factors like anxiety, fear of judgment, and low confidence hinder communication, while limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge create a reinforcing cycle of anxiety and skill deficits. Large class sizes, limited immersive practice, and inadequately trained instructors compound these challenges.

As English communication becomes vital for academic and professional success, this research investigates these problems and offers recommendations for improving speaking skills through effective teaching methods and supportive environments.

Conceptual Framework

This study assumes that psychological and emotional factors (e.g., anxiety, confidence, motivation) may directly influence students' ability to speak English. At the same time, students' perceived inadequacy in English speaking skills and knowledge may further limit their performance (Ellis, 2008; Krashen, 1982). Moreover, the perceived inadequacy of English courses may indirectly contribute to lower abilities by failing to provide sufficient support. These variables interact and reinforce each other. Psychological factors can exacerbate skill deficits, while inadequate knowledge increases anxiety. The learning environment may indirectly influence both psychological states and skill development (see figure 1.).

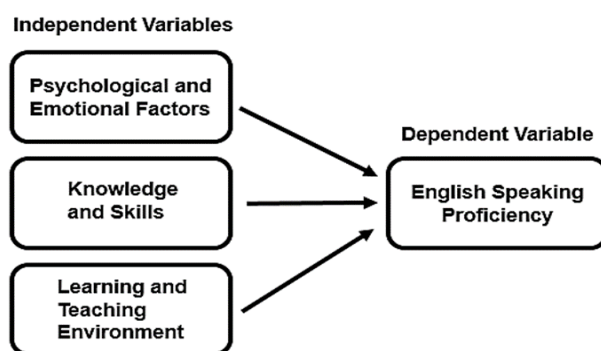


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: Factors Affecting English Speaking Proficiency

Literature Review

The ability to speak a foreign language is essential in the globalized world. However, many learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) face significant problems in developing proficiency, especially in regard to speaking. Research has identified a range of factors that affect students' speaking abilities. Three key barriers have been identified, namely speaking anxiety, lack of knowledge and skills, and ineffective teaching methods. This literature review explores these factors in detail, providing a comprehensive discussion of their impact on EFL students and highlighting strategies that can mitigate their negative effects.

One of the most prevalent issues in language learning, especially in speaking, is speaking anxiety. Speaking anxiety refers to the fear that students experience when asked to speak in a foreign language. Research consistently shows that this anxiety has a profound effect on students' performances when speaking foreign languages (Pahargyan, 2021; Rumiyati & Seftika, 2018). Anxiety in speaking can appear as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, each of which can severely impact a student's ability to communicate effectively in English.

Communication apprehension refers to the fear of speaking in general, whether in front of an audience or during one-on-one conversations. This form of anxiety often arises in students who feel insecure about their language skills and worry about being judged by others. As Pahargyan (2021) notes, many students experience heightened anxiety during class presentations. Even in an online class, the fear of being evaluated on their speaking ability remains a significant stressor. Students often worry about making mistakes, mispronouncing words, or failing to articulate their ideas clearly. This self-consciousness can cause students to avoid speaking altogether, thereby affecting their development in oral communication.

Another form of anxiety that impacts speaking is test anxiety. This fear is commonly caused by the pressure of formal assessments, such as oral exams or presentations. Test anxiety is often compounded by the fear that mistakes during an exam will negatively impact grades. This form of anxiety can be especially debilitating for students, as it leads to physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, or even memory loss during speaking tasks, further impeding their ability to perform well. This results in a cycle of avoidance and low self-esteem, which undermines students' speaking abilities and reduces their overall language learning motivation (Umisara et al., 2021).

Fear of negative evaluation is another major contributor to speaking anxiety. This fear stems from concerns about being judged or ridiculed by peers or teachers, especially in language learning settings. Woodrow (2006) found that students from countries such as China, Korea, and Japan, tend to experience higher levels of anxiety. This is partly due to cultural norms that emphasize accuracy and perfection in language learning. The pressure to perform without errors can prevent students from taking risks and engaging in spontaneous conversation, both of which are critical for language acquisition. In such environments, the fear of making mistakes often overrides the motivation to practice and learn.

Although, anxiety undoubtedly plays a significant role in hindering students' speaking abilities, lack of knowledge and skills is another factor that influences language performance.

Many students face difficulties in speaking English due to inadequate vocabulary, poor grammatical understanding, or the inability to express their thoughts clearly. These deficits often cause frustration and self-doubt, which exacerbate anxiety and further affect students' progress in speaking (Susanto et al., 2017).

A common reason for anxiety when speaking is a lack of vocabulary. Without sufficient vocabulary, students may not be able to form coherent sentences, express their ideas, or engage in meaningful conversation. Damayanti and Listyani (2020) found that lack of vocabulary, along with insufficient preparation for speaking tasks, contributed significantly to speaking anxiety. Inadequate vocabulary often leads to pauses during speaking, making students feel self-conscious. Furthermore, students who have problems with grammar rules may find it difficult to produce grammatically correct sentences, further amplifying their anxiety.

Students' speaking difficulties are often compounded by the pressure of being assessed on fluency and accuracy. As noted by Umisara et al. (2021), students who lack the skills to speak fluidly in English often avoid verbal activities altogether, fearing that their performance will be criticized. This avoidance, in turn, prevents them from gaining the practice necessary to improve their skills. The fear of making mistakes becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, where students' language deficiencies reinforce their anxiety.

An important aspect of language proficiency that is often underdeveloped is the ability to engage in spontaneous communication. This skill requires consistent practice and exposure to authentic language. However, many students fail to gain sufficient practice outside of structured classroom activities. The overuse of mother tongue in classrooms, especially in non-immersion settings, limits exposure to English. In addition, students in traditional classrooms may not engage in real-world speaking activities such as debates, group discussions, or presentations, which are important for developing speaking fluency. This lack of practical experience can leave students unprepared for real-life communication scenarios. When faced with such situations, students often experience heightened anxiety, fearing that they will not be able to communicate effectively (Chand, 2021; Riadil, 2020).

Effective teaching methods are crucial in improving students' speaking abilities and addressing the issues associated with anxiety and skill deficits. Unfortunately, traditional teacher-centered approaches often fail to engage students in meaningful speaking practice. Studies show that the overemphasis on written exams and grammar exercises, does not provide the necessary environment for students to develop their speaking skills. These outdated methods can reinforce anxiety, as they do not encourage active participation or reduce the fear of making

mistakes in front of others. These methods alongside large class sizes inevitably impact communication skills (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2014).

In order to reduce the barriers of anxiety and skill deficits, educators must adopt student-centered approaches that promote interactive and communicative activities. Research shows that creating a positive, supportive classroom environment is key to alleviating anxiety and improving language learning. Instructors who use role-playing, group discussions, and peer feedback create opportunities for students to practice speaking in low-pressure situations. This type of learning environment encourages students to take risks and make mistakes without fear of judgment. This helps to build confidence and reduce anxiety (Damayanti & Listyani, 2020).

Peer support can help reduce speaking anxiety. Studies have shown that when students work collaboratively with their peers, they feel less isolated and are more likely to engage in speaking tasks. Peer seeking refers to students' tendency to reach out to their peers who appear to be struggling with understanding the class material or managing their anxiety. Siagian and Adam (2017) found that students who engaged in peer-seeking strategies, such as practicing with classmates before class or during group activities, experienced lower levels of anxiety and greater success in speaking tasks. Peer interaction allows students to learn from each other and provides a safe space for experimentation with the language.

Another important aspect for improving speaking outcomes is training. Instructors need to be equipped with the knowledge to create an environment that supports speaking development. As Nakitto (2007) suggests, teachers should use instructional materials effectively and employ techniques that encourage active student participation. In many cases, teachers who do not use appropriate materials or fail to engage students actively in speaking activities may inadvertently contribute to their anxiety and skill deficiencies. Classroom management plays a role in promoting speaking practice. Instructors should establish clear expectations for speaking activities and ensure that students feel comfortable making mistakes. Through managing classroom dynamics effectively, instructors can ensure that all students have the opportunity to speak and receive constructive feedback.

Speaking anxiety, lack of knowledge and skills, and inadequate teaching methods are interconnected factors that can significantly impact students' ability to speak English fluently and confidently. Although anxiety often stems from fears of judgment and lack of preparation, skill deficits in vocabulary and grammar also have an effect on speaking performance. In order to address these issues, educators must adopt student-centered teaching approaches that emphasize interaction, peer support, and real-world speaking practice. Furthermore, teachers

should be trained to create supportive classroom environments and use diverse instructional materials to engage students in speaking activities. The correct approaches can help students overcome their anxiety, and improve their speaking skills.

Research Methodology

This section outlines the methodology used in the study to investigate the factors influencing speaking proficiency among 48 second-year non-English major students enrolled in an English speaking course at a Thai university. The research design, participants, data collection, and data analysis methods are outlined below.

This study mainly employed a quantitative research design, supported by informal interviews, to explore the levels and factors associated with English speaking issues among Thai university students. A questionnaire-based survey was used as the primary data collection method. The primary data collection instrument was a questionnaire, that was based on existing frameworks. It had been used in previous studies and was reviewed for validity by experts in the field (Afshar & Asakereh, 2016; Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2014). This was divided into three main sections, focusing on anxiety, knowledge, and teaching. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was distributed in a paper-based format at the start of the English speaking course. Thematic analysis was applied to informal interview data to identify recurring patterns and provide contextual support for the quantitative findings. To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, content validity was established by reviewing the questionnaire with experts in language learning and education. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire. A score of 0.70 or above was considered acceptable for the survey. The Cronbach's Alpha was shown to be .88 and deemed reliable for data collection. The questionnaire was translated from English to Thai and then back translated to Thai to ensure accuracy.

The participants of this study were second-year undergraduate students enrolled in a non-English major English speaking course at a Thai university. A total of 48 students participated in the study. The students were Chinese language majors of Thai nationality with 43 female and 5 male students aged between 19 and 20 years of age. The research focused on gathering data from students who were in the early stages of developing their speaking skills and who may have experienced varying levels of difficulty when speaking English. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling with the sample size based on recommendations by Krejcie and

Morgan (1970) which is commonly used in educational research and is appropriate for small to medium population sizes in university settings.

This study adhered to ethical guidelines ensuring participant privacy and rights. Informed consent was obtained before questionnaire completion, with participants informed about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and withdrawal rights without consequences. Data was anonymous, securely stored, and accessible only to the research team. Results were used solely for academic purposes without participant identification in publications.

The study acknowledged limitations including potential self-report bias affecting data accuracy and limited generalizability, as the sample focused on non-English majors at a single university and may not fully represent all Thai university students. Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into factors contributing to speaking anxiety in a Thai university context.

Results

The following section reports the study's findings.

Table 1 The results of the three variables examined in this research

Variable	$\bar{x}$	SD
Emotional and Psychological	3.64	.88
Knowledge and Skills	3.90	.88
Learning and Teaching	2.32	.71
Environment		

The results of the study were related to the problems participants face when studying English. The summary was based on the following interpretation: 1.00-1.80=Strongly Disagree, 1.81-2.60=Disagree, 2.61-3.40=Neutral, 3.41-4.20=Agree and 4.21-5.00=Strongly Agree. In relation to the variable, emotional and psychological issues when speaking English, the mean score was shown to be 3.64 with a standard deviation of 0.88. This result indicates an agreement above the neutral level. This suggests that participants agreed that emotional and psychological issues were an issue when speaking English. However, the result was not shown to be significant ($t = 1.92$, $df = 47$, $significance = .061$). In regard to the low level of knowledge and skills when speaking English, the mean score was found to be 3.90 with a standard deviation of 0.78. This result also indicates agreement above neutral. The students agreed their level of knowledge

and skills in speaking English were low. The result was also shown to be significant ($t=4.42$, $df=47$, $significance=.000$). For the learning and teaching environment for English, the mean score for the variable was found to be 2.32 with a standard deviation of 0.71. This result shows a general level of disagreement for this variable. The result suggests that students did not find the learning and teaching environment for English to be at a particularly poor level.

A Pearson correlation analysis examined relationships between psychological and emotional factors, knowledge and skills, and learning and teaching environment. Results revealed a strong positive correlation between psychological factors and knowledge and skills ($r = .719$, $p < .001$), indicating these variables are closely interconnected and reinforce each other. However, the learning and teaching environment showed no significant correlations with either psychological factors ($r = .032$, $p = .830$) or knowledge and skills ($r = .051$, $p = .730$). These findings suggest that while psychological barriers and skill deficits are strongly related, students' perceptions of the learning environment operate independently of their emotional states and perceived proficiency levels (see Table 2).

Table 2 Pearson correlation analysis of study variables.

Variable	Psychological & Emotional	Knowledge & Skills	Learning & Teaching Environment
Psychological & Emotional Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000	.719** .000	.032 .830
Knowledge & Skills Sig. (2-tailed)	.719** .000	1.000	.051 .730
Learning & Teaching Environment Sig. (2-tailed)	.032 .830	.051 .730	1.000

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study aimed to investigate issues that Thai students face when studying and speaking English. As English proficiency is a requirement for university graduation

and future employability, the findings provide data on the factors that influence language learning experiences. The study revealed that emotional and psychological issues impact the students' English-speaking abilities, with a mean score of 3.64. This indicates a general agreement that issues were present. The standard deviation of 0.88 suggests some variability in the extent to which students experience these challenges, but overall, the data suggests that emotional factors, such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, or lack of self-confidence are problems. Although this result was not statistically significant ($t=1.92$, $p=0.061$), it is noteworthy that the agreement level was close to the threshold for significance. This suggests a need for further investigation. Previous studies have highlighted that language anxiety is common and can significantly impact oral performance (Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021). These emotional barriers are relevant in Thai classrooms, where cultural norms based on face-saving and fear of embarrassment might exacerbate students' reluctance to engage in English communication. These findings align with the general understanding that emotional readiness plays a role in language acquisition, especially in speaking activities that require a level of confidence.

The second key finding concerned students' self-reported low knowledge and skills in English speaking. A mean score of 3.90, suggest students agreed that their speaking proficiency was inadequate. Furthermore, this result was shown to be statistically significant ($t=4.42$, $p=0.000$). This aligns with the widespread recognition that after several years of formal English instruction, Thai students often have problems with fluency and confidence when it comes to speaking. As previously mentioned, Thailand consistently ranks poorly in international English proficiency tables. This discrepancy between years of study and actual proficiency is largely attributed to the traditional teaching methods employed in Thai schools, which prioritize grammar and reading comprehension over practical speaking skills (Abhasakun, 2021). This study supports this view, as the students' low level of speaking proficiency may be due to an overemphasis on written skills and a lack of opportunities for communication in English.

In relation to the learning and teaching environment, students generally disagreed that the teaching environment was a significant issue, with a mean score of 2.32. This suggests that the teaching and learning environment is not seen as a primary factor in the students' difficulties. The standard deviation of 0.71 indicates that there was some variability in students' perceptions of their learning environment. Factors such as large class sizes, limited speaking practice, and the lack of immersive opportunities may still contribute to these difficulties. However, they were not perceived as major issues in this study (Abhasakun, 2021). The result of this variable does not reflect the findings related to knowledge and skills. The fact that students disagreed with

the notion of a poor learning environment suggests that other factors, such as motivation levels, may play a role in limiting their oral proficiency. The role of motivation could therefore be an area for further study.

Informal interview data provided further context to the survey findings by exploring students' perspectives on emotional barriers, language skills, and the learning environment in relation to English speaking. The overall results indicate that emotional and psychological issues remain a factor in students' language learning experiences. A mean score of 3.64 suggests a general agreement that students experience anxiety, low confidence, or fear of making mistakes when speaking English. Although this was not statistically significant ($p = .061$), interview responses supported the presence of emotional discomfort, particularly in classroom speaking tasks. Many students reported feeling nervous when speaking in front of others and expressed concern about losing face or being judged for incorrect pronunciation or grammar. These comments align with cultural expectations around performance and saving face in Thai society.

Students also consistently identified their low level of English-speaking knowledge and skills as a major issue. The mean score of 3.90, which was statistically significant ($p = .000$), was supported by interview comments indicating that many students felt underprepared for speaking tasks, despite years of English education. Interviewees frequently noted a lack of confidence in vocabulary use, sentence structure, and real-time communication. Some attributed their difficulties to a curriculum that prioritised grammar and reading over speaking. Others noted that they rarely had opportunities to engage in meaningful spoken English, either inside or outside the classroom.

Regarding the learning and teaching environment, the mean score of 2.32 indicated general disagreement that it was a major problem. Interview data confirmed that students generally viewed their instructors positively and appreciated the structure of their English classes. However, some mentioned that the lack of interactive speaking activities and limited individual attention may still hinder oral development. A few respondents suggested that more student-centred and communicative approaches could improve participation and reduce anxiety. Overall, the informal interview data reinforced the statistical findings: emotional and psychological factors and low speaking proficiency are primary issues for students, whereas the learning environment was not perceived as a significant barrier.

The findings of the current study align with previous research on English speaking anxiety among Thai university students. The moderate anxiety levels found in this study are consistent with Akkakoson (2016) and Choompunuch et al. (2021), who reported moderate

anxiety levels among Thai EFL learners, though Bhattacharaiyakorn and Phettakua (2023) found higher anxiety levels. Choompunuch et al. (2021), found a negative correlation between speaking ability and anxiety, supporting the cyclical relationship between anxiety and skill deficits. The identification of limited vocabulary and grammar as major barriers is strongly supported by Akkakoson (2016), who found vocabulary limitations to be the major source of speaking anxiety. Bhattacharaiyakorn and Phettakua (2023), reported grammar (72.55%) and vocabulary (53.94%) as the most significant anxiety factors. Additionally, Akaraphattanawong et al. (2024) confirmed through qualitative analysis that linguistic competence issues are central themes causing foreign language classroom anxiety. The current study's finding that students did not perceive the learning environment as a major issue contrasts with Akaraphattanawong et al. (2024), who found that institutional factors and competitive environments influence anxiety levels.

The findings of this study highlight the need for supportive, anxiety-reducing learning environments in English language teaching. Instructors should integrate confidence-building activities such as low-pressure speaking exercises, peer interactions, and personalized feedback. Given students' acknowledged low proficiency, methodological shifts emphasizing oral communication through interactive, conversation-based activities and task-based learning involving real-world scenarios are essential for improving speaking proficiency. Examining systemic issues related to motivation and passive learning preferences remains crucial. The study reveals how emotional and psychological factors like anxiety and lack of confidence impede communication engagement. While not statistically significant ($p = .061$), these challenges warrant further exploration. Students' perceived inadequate speaking proficiency, with low knowledge and skills being statistically significant ($p = .000$), aligns with concerns that despite years of instruction, Thai students struggle with spoken English due to emphasis on grammar over practical speaking skills. Improved methodologies incorporating interactive and conversational practices are essential to addressing proficiency gaps.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could build on the findings of this study by further examining the emotional and psychological factors influencing speaking abilities. More targeted investigations into language anxiety, fear of judgment, and the impact of cultural norms on English communication would provide a clearer understanding of how these emotional barriers affect students across different educational contexts. Additionally, examining the role of motivation

and its relationship with speaking proficiency would be valuable, especially in that the learning environment was not a significant issue. Further studies could also explore the effectiveness of various teaching strategies, such as task-based learning, peer interactions, and confidence-building activities, in improving English-speaking skills. Investigating the broader systemic issues within the Thai education system, including class sizes, teacher training, and the integration of immersive English language experiences, would also contribute to enhancing the overall English language learning experience for Thai students. Through addressing these issues, future research can provide more comprehensive solutions to help students overcome language barriers and achieve greater fluency in English.

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