



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERFECTIONISM AND ENGLISH SPEAKING ABILITY OF THAI UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Aninchana Eiamsamran¹ and Tanawan Raksapongpanich²

¹Graduate student, Faculty of Education, Rangsit University (e.aninchana@yahoo.com)

²Department of Bilingual Education, Faculty of Education, Rangsit University (asawarachan@hotmail.com)

ABSTRACT

The main aim of this research was to study the relationship between perfectionism and English speaking ability of Thai undergraduate students. A mixed method approach was used in conducting this study. The quantitative research instrument was HMPS self-rating scale. The qualitative research instrument was a semi-interview. The subjects of this study were 50 undergraduate students majoring in English from one college in Nakorn Nayok province. All 50 students participated in HMPS self-rating scale, and 5 selected students participated in semi-interview. The study found that there was no significant relationship between self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) and English speaking ability, as well as other-oriented perfection (OOP). The significant finding was that the lower the level of socially-prescribed perfectionism (SSP), the higher the English speaking ability.

Keywords: Perfectionism, English Speaking Ability, Thai Undergraduate Students

1. Introduction

Given that Thai graduates complete approximately sixteen years of education with English as one of their compulsory subjects, it is surprising that the majority of them are not able to use English efficiently, especially through oral communication. According to EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), Thailand has continuously been placed in a group of very low proficiency countries from 2011 to 2016. EF EPI was firstly created in 2011 as a standardized measurement of adult English Proficiency, comparable between countries and over time. Only countries with minimum of 400 test takers were included in the index. The EF EPI has five proficiency bands, from very high to very low. According to EF EPI result from 2011 to 2016, Thailand has continuously been ranked very low proficiency of the English language. According to Chumchaiyo (2001) study, many Thai people are able to speak English confidently after four to five months of learning, with the fastest learners only requiring two months. A lot of research has been conducted in order to find possible causes of this problem. There are several possible factors that have been identified as being responsible for this dissatisfaction. However, this study brings the readers' attention to another possible factor that might prevent Thai undergraduate students from improving their English speaking abilities. The factor is related to a psychology construct called 'Perfectionism,' which is a personality trait of people who strive for flawlessness, fear of making mistakes, and who are highly concerned about the evaluations of others



(Greenspon, 2014). The relationship between perfectionism and language learning has been studied for many years. The results of the correlational analysis conducted by Pishghadam and Akhondpoor (2011) indicated a negative significant relationship between skills of reading, speaking, listening, GPA, and perfectionism. The students that were perfectionists got lower scores in the skills of reading, speaking, and listening. Another study investigated the relationship between perfectionism and listening comprehension among EFL students of one university, they found that students with high levels of perfectionism face the difficulties with comprehending the overall message of the listening task since they expect themselves to understand every word (Moradan, Kazenian, and Niroo, 2013). Although one study of Ghorbandordinejad (2014) did not find perfectionism was a great significance in the EFL learning process, its result showed that maladaptive perfectionists were not as successful as adaptive and non-perfectionists regarding their performance on the final English exam. Those with higher levels of perfectionism were less likely to have higher language achievement (Dashtizadeh & Farvardin, 2016). However, perfectionism does not seem to provide only negative impact on language learning, especially with self-oriented perfectionists or students who set high standard for themselves. Individuals with higher personal standards were thought to have better work habits. They generally put a lot of time and effort into what they do, rather than procrastinating and putting things off (Ram, 2005). Self-oriented perfectionists possessed irrational expectations and high standards for themselves that led to the internally motivated desire to be perfect, and the students who were motivated intrinsically perform better in EFL learning (Chen, Kuo, and Kao, 2016). Mostafa, Yailagh, Manijeh, Kianpoor, Fatemeh, and Sirus (2015) investigated that self-oriented perfectionists owned a powerful motivation to achieve perfection which is called intrinsic motivation. Another study conducted to investigate the relationship between self-oriented perfectionism, cultural intelligence and translation ability of undergraduate students majoring in English translation studies also found that increasing EFL learner's cultural intelligence (CQ) and self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), through using different teaching and learning techniques, seems to increase learners' translation ability and the quality of their performance (Parvizi, 2016). Self-oriented perfectionism was positively correlated with academic achievement. The students with self-oriented perfectionists obtained high academic achievement more frequently than the others. It also indicated that socially-prescribed perfectionism was negatively correlated with academic achievement, and other-oriented perfectionism was not significantly correlated with academic achievement. Thus perfectionism might give both positive and negative effects on student's English speaking ability (Ning, 2008). Therefore, this thesis is conducted in order to study the relationship between perfectionism and English speaking ability of Thai undergraduate students as perfectionism might have an impact on English speaking ability of these students.

2. Background of the study

2.1 Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a self-esteem issue. People who are perfectionistic have the view that mistakes they make are signs of personal defects, which make them less acceptable to others (Greenspon, 2014). Moreover, some



psychologists have found that perfectionism correlates with depression, anxiety, eating disorders and other mental health problems (Benson, 2003). This study was conducted based mainly on widely accepted studies from Dr. Paul L. Hewitt, a professor of Psychology at University of British Columbia and a registered clinical psychologist, and Dr. Gordon L. Flett, a psychologist and a Psychology professor at York University.

According to one of Hewitt and Flett's studies, there are three dimensions to perfectionism including self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), other-oriented perfectionism (OOP), and socially-prescribed perfectionism (SPP). The details of each perfectionism dimension including its characteristics and its effects on individuals are stated in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Hewitt & Flett Perfectionism Dimensions with Description

Perfectionism Dimension	Attitude and Behavior of Perfectionist	Result
Self-oriented (SOP)	Setting standards for oneself and stringently evaluating and censuring one's own behavior.	Endangers self-criticism and self-punishment
Other-oriented (OOP)	Having beliefs and expectations about the capabilities of others.	Other-directed blame, lack of trust, and feelings of hostility toward others.
Socially-prescribed (SPP)	Having belief or perception that significant others have unrealistic standards for them, evaluate them stringently, and exert pressure on them to be perfect	Variety of negative consequences

Source: Perfectionism in the Self and Social Contexts, (Hewitt, P.L. & Flett, G.L., 1991).

2.2 Propagators of Perfectionism

Perfectionism does not come with people when they are born. Dr. Tal Ben Sharhar, an author and lecturer who taught two of the largest classes in Harvard University's history, Positive Psychology and The Psychology of Leadership, noted that the social environment is a source of perfectionism (Li, 2013).

Lev Semionovich Vygotsky's cognitive development is based on two key ideas. First, that intellectual development can be understood only in terms of the historical and cultural contexts children experience. Second, that development depends on the sign systems that individuals grow up with: the symbols that cultures create to help people think, communicate, and solve problems (Slavin, 2003). According to Vygotsky's cognitive development theory, there is a strong possibility that both parents and teachers influence a person's personality. The first group to have a major impact on an individual is the family. Unlike many animals, we cannot survive by ourselves, and as babies we are utterly dependent on our family. Our experiences in the family are so intense that they have a lifelong impact on us. They lay down our basic sense of self, establishing our initial motivations, values, and beliefs (Henslin,



2007). According to one study regarding the relationship between parenting styles and perfectionism by Gong et al. (2015), authoritarian parenting predicted both perfectionism. Children raised by parents who were rigid and controlling were more likely to develop perfectionism. Mothers who reported perceiving other people's demands as excessive had children with very high self-expectations and had children who perceived other people's demands as excessive. Higher maternal depression, anxiety, and obsessive compulsiveness predicted higher self-oriented perfectionism in children (Cook, 2012). It is not just parenting styles that can generate perfectionism in children, perfectionistic parents tend to transfer this personality trait to their children. Parents' perfectionism causes serious challenges for their children, diminishes their self-esteem and forms feelings of non-existence. In addition, this creates deep feelings of failure and anger (Kalantarkousheh, 2013). When parental perfectionism increases in the egocentric perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and community-based perfectionism, student achievement decreases. Accordingly, parents play an important role in their children's academic achievement (Esmaili, Pour, and Ansari, 2014). Moreover, psychologically controlling parenting may play an important role as an intervening variable in the transmission of maladaptive perfectionism from parents to their late adolescent children (Soenens & Elliot, 2005).

Based on these previous studies, parents who are perfectionists tend to develop perfectionism in their children and also have an impact on their children's learning achievement. Additionally, schooling plays a vital role in development and defining the way one sees themselves outside of the family unit. At school, children learn universality that the same rules apply to everyone, regardless of who their parents are or how special they may be at home (Henslin, 2007). Dr. Tal Ben Sharhar introduces an interesting perspective on the roles teachers play in breeding perfectionism among students. He mentioned that very few teachers, organizations, and schools reward the journey and effort a person makes in order to reach goals. No one rewards failure which is an inevitable part of every journey. They recognize only when one goal is accomplished. He added that rewarding effort, hard work, and failure allow students to see the reality of being human – being imperfect (Li, 2013). Inappropriate praise and criticism from teachers may contribute to perfectionism among students (Ginsburg & Kinsman, 2015). One study of Dr. Carol investigated that teacher's instructions can contribute to perfectionism. The students had their intelligence praised tend to develop perfectionism, while students who were praised on their effort do not seem to develop such a trait. In addition, the latter ones performed better during the experiment (Ragan, 2014). Another study carried out by Lowe (2013) about perfectionism in the classroom environment and the roles of teaching styles and teacher self-efficacy also indicated that higher ratings of perfectionist personality traits will correlate with more rigid, authoritarian teaching styles and higher teacher self-efficacy ratings. Not only parents and teachers from part of social environments which seem to be propagators of perfectionism, but also people (friends to strangers) in social media. People use Internet to connect with others through social media sites or apps such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Users of social media sites can follow just about anyone they want to on these sites. With access to everyone's profiles, users can also see how many likes and followers others have. This is when people develop perfectionism (Vynalek, 2016). Social media provides much more control over the way one presents himself or herself and this may



create an added pressure for perfectionists to look and be perfect, which may leave students prone to poor psychological outcomes (Hellmann, 2016). According to a 2016 Girls' Attitudes Survey, girls told the researchers that lack of body confidence not only stopped them wearing certain clothes and having their pictures taken, but also prevented them exercising, speaking up in class and socializing (Burns, 2016). In a more recent study conducted by Dr. Rauch and colleagues, the team found that social interaction on social media sites, specifically Facebook, may have a negative impact on face-to-face encounters for individuals who already have high levels of anxiety (Whiteman, 2015). Regarding the above studies, social environment factors including parents, teachers, and people in social media sites can contribute to the propagation of perfectionism among students.

2.3 Speaking Skill in Second Language Acquisition

The four necessities, or skills, in language – reading, writing, listening, and speaking play a vital role in any quest to learn a language (Sadiku, 2015). These four skills are separated into two categories as receptive skills (input) and productive skills (output). Reading and listening are input skills while speaking and writing are output skills (Bastias, Sepulveda, Munoz & Lorena, 2011). This study focuses on the issues students have with their output skills. Although learners must start by developing input skills before they are able to produce a new language, output aids learning because it provides a domain for error correction. When a second language user speaks or writes, he or she may make an error. When this error is corrected, this supposedly helps the learner change his or her conscious mental representation of the rule or alter the environment of rule application (Krashen, 1982).

3. Objectives of the study

To study the relationship between perfectionism and English speaking ability of Thai undergraduate students majoring in English in Nakorn Nayok.

4. Research Methodology

Is there a relationship between perfectionism and English speaking ability of Thai undergraduate students majoring in English in Nakorn Nayok?

4.1 Research Design

This study was conducted by using mixed methods of research. The researcher conducted quantitative research method prior to qualitative method. There were two phases involved in this thesis during the collecting data process. Perfectionism self-rating scale papers were answered by all participants during the first phase. After obtaining the results from the questionnaire, the researcher selected participants who received the highest scores and the lowest scores for the interview session. In the second phase, the researcher conducted a one-on-one semi-interview with selected participants to examine their English speaking ability.



4.2 Sample and Population

The population of this study was Thai undergraduate students majoring in English language in tertiary institutions in Nakorn Nayok province, Thailand. There are 4 tertiary institutions located in the province. The sample for the questionnaire session of this study was 50 students from one tertiary institution in Nakorn Nayok province. They were 26 students from 1st year, 15 students from 2nd year, and 9 students from 3rd year English major under faculty of Education. All students under the English major in this institution were included in the study except 4th year students who were out for training. The sample for the interview session of this study were 5 English major students in their 3rd year who received the highest and lowest score in each of three perfectionism dimensions.

4.3 Research Instruments

Two instruments were used to conduct this study including HMPS and a semi-interview.

4.3.1 Hewitt Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HMPS)

Hewitt Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HMPS) was used to investigate the level of perfectionism from three dimensions including self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), other-oriented perfectionism (OOP), and socially-prescribed perfectionism (SPP) of the samples. The HMPS consists of 45 items and measures SOP; 15 items, OOP; 15 items, and SPP; 15 items. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (disagree) to 7 (agree) (Cuyper, K.D., Claes, L., Hermans, D., Pieters, G. & Smits, D., 2014). The criteria used to measure is the higher the score, the more unhealthy perfectionistic attitudes and behaviors are exhibited by the respondents. HMPS used in this study was translated into Thai language to make sure that all the respondents understood all 45 items.

4.3.2 Semi-Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for in-depth information relating to the participants' English speaking ability. The interview questions were taken Park & Lee (2004) study. The original questions consisted of 30 items about anxiety and confidence related to English oral performance. The researcher modified some of the questions to match with the nature and characteristic of the samples.

4.3.3 Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

The translated version of both instruments were checked by 3 experts under index of item-objective congruence (IOC) method and were edited until all items reached the IOC standard before being used in this study.

5. Results and Discussion

The researcher's purpose in conducting this research was to study a relationship between perfectionism and English speaking ability of Thai undergraduate students in Nakorn Nayok. HMPS and a semi-interview were



used in order to determine whether relationship exists between students' perfectionism level and their English speaking ability. The interview data was analyzed by using a thematic method of analysis

5.1 The Relationship between Perfectionism Level and English Speaking Ability of 5 Selected Students.

In this study, the perfectionism level was measured based on HMPS which organized perfectionism into three dimensions of perfectionism. The 3rd year students who got the highest score and the lowest score in each dimension were chosen to participate in the semi-interview session in order to investigate the relationship of their perfectionism level and English speaking ability.

5.1.1 The Relationship between SOP and English Speaking Abilities.

The findings of this study showed that the student with the highest score in self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) had as low self-confidence as the student with the lowest score in this dimension. The result of this study was inconsistent with Ning (2008) which found that self-oriented perfectionistic students obtained high academic achievement than others. In this study, the student who had the highest score in SOP did not speak English better than others. Their English speaking ability was of a similar standard. The researcher found that even though the English speaking ability of the student who got the highest score in SOP and the student with the lowest score in this dimension was similar, the one with the lowest score could speak English with less apprehension compared to the one with the highest score. This was in agreement with the study of Dashtizadeh & Farvardin (2016) that indicated that second language learners who enjoyed high levels of learning motivation were not likely to be perfectionists and the other way round. The result from this study was consistent with Mostafa et al. (2015) which found that self-oriented perfectionistic students possessed an intrinsic motivation to achieve their goal. In this study, the student with the highest score in SOP expressed her ambition to improve her English unlike the student with the lowest score in SOP. Although the student with the highest score had an ambition to improve her English, it seemed not to be strong enough for her to put the ambition into action. The student confessed that she usually failed to follow her plans to spend time practicing English speaking.

5.1.2 The Relationship between OOP and English Speaking Abilities.

The research did not show the expected results that HMPS suggested that would be characteristic of someone suffering from other-oriented perfectionism. Neither the student with the highest mark in the OOP nor the student with the lowest mark in OOP demonstrated any characteristics of this OOP traits. When comparing the student with the highest score of the OOP and the one with the lowest score of the OOP, the result did not show any differences in their English speaking ability. This findings were in agreement with the study of Ning (2008) which mentioned that other-oriented perfectionism was not significantly correlated with academic achievement. The only significant difference that was found between the student with the highest score of OOP and the student with the lowest score of



the OOP was that the latter one appeared to be more relaxed than the prior one when speaking English during the interview session.

5.1.3 The relationship between SPP and English speaking ability

The results from this study demonstrated a significant relationship between socially-prescribed perfectionism and English speaking ability. The researcher found that the student who obtained the highest score in the SPP had a higher level of confidence in her knowledge and application of the English language compared to the other students. However her ability was significantly suppressed by her low self-confidence and her concern for other's evaluations which did not make her English speaking ability better than the others. This was consistent with Pishghadam & Akhondpoor (2011) saying that more perfectionistic students prefer to remain silent waiting until they are certain on how to express their thoughts before speaking. On the other hand, the student with the lowest mark in SPP had an outstanding English speaking ability compared to the other participants. She was more confident speaking English than the others, and she could speak it with ease. The researcher found that the lowest score SPP student had lower levels of stress when speaking English than the highest score SPP student which might be due to her lack of self-consciousness. The findings were in agreement with Moradan, Kazenian, and Niroo (2013) study showing that learners with high levels of perfectionism face difficulties with the listening task since they expect themselves to understand every word. Although Morandan et al. study concerned listening skill while this study was about speaking skill, it indicated similar characteristics of students who had high levels of perfectionism. The research appears to suggest that those suffering from high levels of SPP may struggle to improve their spoken English due to less self-confidence and being more self-conscious. On the other hand, students with lower levels of SPP can perform better in speaking English and have less anxiety in doing so.

6. Conclusion

The study discovered that all three dimensions of perfectionism exist in Thai undergraduate students majoring in English. Although it does not have a direct impact on their English speaking ability, it has an impact on their attitude and behavior toward their English speaking practice, which in turn affects their competence levels. The results only indicate a slight difference in English speaking ability between students who exhibited high level of SOP and OOP and the students who suffered less from the aforementioned dimensions. This is to say, both SOP and OOP did not have a significant relationship with English speaking ability. However, there was significant evidence suggesting that the student who suffered less from SPP had better English speaking ability than the student who had higher levels of SPP, and in turn was the most outstanding English speaker among all participating students. This result also supported the Krashen (1982) study regarding affective factors relating to the second language acquisition (SLA) process which found that people who have lower anxiety and more self-confidence can perform better in SLA.



7. Recommendation

In order to measure perfectionism levels of the sample, a shorter version of HMPS self-rating scale developed by Hewitt in 2008 could be used. The paper contains only 15 items which may be more user-friendly and preferable for the respondents when collecting the data from non-voluntary sample. This may help in obtaining more accurate data from the respondents. Future researchers may use English speaking tests where actual score is given to each sample by the English teacher or authorized people in addition to the interview with the sample. The tests will strengthen the reliability and accuracy of the data which represents the student's English speaking ability. Greater diversity in sampling may have provided data more representative of the entire Thai population of undergraduate English students. Instead of comparing students from within the same institution, the future researcher may select the sample from different institutions, where the students experience different environments and teaching methods. Finally, further researchers, who are interested in conducting research relating to this field, may like to look at potential solutions to lessen perfectionism levels in students who suffer high levels of perfectionism in order to improve their English speaking ability.

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