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# Enhancing Oral English Communication Ability of Thai EFL Undergraduates via Interactive Reading Comprehension Teaching (IRCT)

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## Abstract

This paper reports on the effectiveness of Interactive Reading Comprehension Teaching (IRCT) in improving the oral English communication ability of Prince of Songkla University (PSU) undergraduates. It is based on a pre- and post-test quasi-experimental study employing IRCT, composed of self-study reading assignments and a structured peer-teaching project. The participants who were purposively sampled to partake in the study included 105 second- and third-year undergraduates from various faculties who were enrolled in a functional reading course, of which 46 was assigned to the control group and 49 was treated as the experimental group. One-on-one and group oral assessments were administered to both groups at the end of the course after IRCT implementation. The results showed IRCT had a very positive effect on the oral communication skills of the students in the experimental group, significantly improving their confidence and motivation toward speaking English. The students' opinions from a questionnaire also revealed high speaking improvement, reinforced by evidence from close observations, interviews, and student work samples. IRCT was, therefore recommended as a reading-based approach to improving students' oral English communication.

**Keywords:** Interactive Reading Comprehension Teaching Methods, Oral English Communication, Self-Study Reading Assignment, Small-Group Peer Teaching Project

## 1. Introduction

As English has become the leading means of global communication, a good command of the language has undoubtedly become imperative for partaking in any international arena of the fast-changing world and entering a highly competitive workforce. However, despite the Ministry of Education of Thailand enforcing the inclusion of English in every school's curriculum and taking initiatives in promoting effective English Language Teaching (ELT) at every educational level (Punthumasen, 2007), the English proficiency of the majority Thais has often

been infamously ranked low by most global measures. The Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2017), for instance, reported that Thailand ranked 53rd out of 80 countries with 49.78 points, and 15th of 20 among Asian countries with Singapore being top-ranked at 66.03. The traditional grammar translation approach adopted by most teachers in Thai schools has left little room for the development of students' oral communication skills (Boonpattanaporn, 2017), demotivating them to learn to speak English (Punthumasen, 2007). Most students were hardly given enough opportunities to use the language in the classroom (Choomthong, 2014). Students also reported lack of interesting English class materials (Prapphal, 2003) and poorly equipped classrooms for effective learning (Wongrak, 2017).

To address some of these ongoing problems and improve the widely adopted teaching approach which focuses primarily on reading and grammar, a more interactive teaching method such as interactive reading comprehension teaching can be added to encourage students to orally communicate the knowledge gained from their reading and translation via individual and group assignments. The beneficial integration of speaking into teaching reading has long been documented (Bright & McGregor, 1978; Krashen & Terrell, 2005; Oya, Malano, & Greenwood, 2009; Zhang, 2009; Mart, 2012; Hwang et al., 2016). Students who have acquired large reading vocabulary are inclined to develop more speaking vocabulary for speaking fluency (Laufer, 1997; Oya et al., 2009), and successful orators have always been readers of extensive literature (Bright & McGregor, 1978). McCarthy (1990), Laufer (1997), and Folse (2004) stressed that without words to express a wide range of meaning, L2 communication cannot effectively happen. Vocabulary shortage makes learners stumble when speaking and more reluctant to speak, which can be overcome by encouraging learners to read more (Akbar, 2014). As pointed out in Krashen and Terrell (2005), via reading, learners can not only find words memorably used with force and point, but comprehend subject content better for more successful oral communication.

Therefore, reading teachers should engage their students not only in extensively reading interesting materials appropriate for their levels, but in meaningful activities to verbally communicate what they have read. Through extensive reading, learners advance their ability to guess the meanings of unknown words and phrases from context clues and to structure their sentences, transferable into speaking (Hedge, 1985; Hill, 1979). Learners who spend a lot of time reading and articulating what they have read for others are likely to speak well. L2 teachers are encouraged to develop a teaching method that can not only teach reading, but improve students' oral communication ability at the same time (Davies & Pearse, 2002). This method is referred to in this study as Interactive Reading Comprehension Teaching (IRCT). IRCT is a teaching method that introduces learners to extensive reading and articulating ideas about the reading for sharing with others, and whereby learners are constantly assessed through individual and group oral activities. The purposes of this study are to determine the effectiveness of IRCT in improving oral English communication ability among undergraduate students and to explore their opinions on IRCT with the research questions being outlined below:

1. Can IRCT help improve the oral English communication ability of the undergraduates of PSU? If so, how?
2. What are the students' opinions on IRCT?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Population and Study Sample*

The population of this study consisted of second and third-year undergraduate students registered in the reading course 'Functional Reading (890-222)' at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai. One hundred and five students participated in the study (41 males and 64 females). Fifty-six students (20 males and 36 females) of one section were selected as the control group, while the other 49 (21 males and 28 females) were treated as the experimental group. Their ages were between 20 – 24 years old. The majority of the experimental students were from the Faculty of Management Sciences (45%) and Faculty of Sciences (24%). The rest belonged to the Faculty of Engineering (22%) and Natural Resources (8%). Students in the control group were from the Faculty of Management Sciences (48%), Sciences (34%), Engineering (11%), Law (3%), Natural Resources (2%), and Liberal Arts (2%). Only two sections of this course were purposely selected as the participants in this study. The reason that the second and third year undergraduate students studying the Functional English Reading course were chosen was that they had

already gained English skills adequate for handling assessment challenges. The other was to make the Functional Reading course more practical, interesting, and beneficial, better preparing the students for entering the workforce.

## *2.2 Research Design*

The study employed quasi-experimental design with pre-and post-speaking tests. The control group was mainly engaged in reading selected materials and answering questions based on the materials mainly in writing. The control class was teacher-fronted with students doing reading silently while listening to the teacher's lecture and occasionally responding orally to the teacher's oral presentation about the reading lesson. The experimental class was more interactive as students were required to occasionally read aloud, interact with their peers, and respond to the teacher orally. After class, as part of their self-study students in both groups were asked to select two books to read under the teacher's supervision and complete a written summary report assignment. While the students in the control group were required to submit the written summary only, those in the experimental group were asked to also talk about the reading individually with the teacher and to teach others about it.

## *2.3 Research Instruments*

To determine whether and how IRCT can help improve the oral English communication ability of the PSU undergraduates, aside from observations of students' overall in-class performance throughout the semester, individual oral English assessments were administered to the participants in both groups before and after the experiment. The post-test was given to each participant by the end of the 13th week of the semester. Both pre-and post-speaking tests were video-recorded. The scoring criteria comprised grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, coherency, managing conversation, and language use. On the scale of 1-5, Level/band 5 denotes excellent performance, level 4 represents good performance, level 3 indicates fair or acceptable performance, level 2 stands for poor or deficient performance and level 1 for very poor or unacceptable performance. Each band/level includes a set of descriptors for the accuracy of the speaking performance assessment.

Aside from individual oral assessments, students in both groups were also asked to submit a written report about their reading of selected literature; however, those in the experimental group were asked to teach young learners about what they had read in consultation with school teachers for two periods. Their group teaching was video-recorded for subsequent assessments by the first author.

To get the students' opinions and comments on IRCT, a questionnaire was used, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with students randomly selected from the experimental group after the post test. Adapted from Saezhong (2005), the questionnaire comprised 10 statements with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree). Internal consistency of the questionnaires was measured with Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The alpha reliability of this instrument was 0.95.

## *2.4 Data Collection*

The data was collected via the following procedures:

### *Step 1: Pre-test oral English assessment*

Every participant from both experimental and control groups took a pre-test during the first two weeks of the semester to determine their speaking ability. The interviewer randomly picked questions from the following categories: self-introduction topics such as their family, best friends, hobbies, vacation, weekend activities, life philosophy, and motto; social issues such as poverty and global warming; spoken English improvement; students' career plans, and questions on controversial issues such as city/country life, mercy killing, abortion, and capital punishment. The time allotted for the interview was 5-7 minutes per student to allow to answer at least nine questions. The assessment criteria included grammar, pronunciation, coherence, managing conversation, language use and fluency.

#### Step 2: IRCT lesson design, implementation and assessment

The IRCT-treated class was constantly engaged in orally responding to questions related to the reading, and required to do self-study reading and to teach others about the reading.

#### Step 3: Self-study reading and one-on-one assessment

Students were instructed to read at least two English literature books they found most interesting within 12 weeks. The class teacher was notified of their choices before the self-study began. The reading was required for the students in both groups daily using the reading techniques taught in class, along with a written report summary handed to the teacher during the oral assessment. The students were expected to finish reading in seven weeks after which an oral exam was taken. The first author who was the class teacher presided over the oral assessment interview about the reading. The interview began with a simple warm-up and gradually moved to more complex issues requiring critical thinking. Scores were given on the criteria shown in an oral evaluation sheet which includes grammar, vocabulary, coherence, confidence, fluency, and overall understanding.

#### Step 4: Small group project and group oral assessment

The whole class was split into small groups of five. Each group was asked to read and do research on chosen topics. Only the experimental group was asked to prepare a two-hour lesson plan to teach others about what they have read, wherein members of each group had to equally take part in the teaching process. The students were asked to video record their teaching for subsequent evaluation. Each group was also asked to report and give feedback on their teaching to the course instructor during the submission of the video clips.

#### Step 5: Post-test oral English assessment

By the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> week before the final written examination, both groups sat for an oral English post-test with questions based on the reading course textbook through a one-on-one interview with the first author. The results of the oral English pre-test and post-test were compared.

#### Step 6: Students' opinion survey

The students' reactions and opinion about learning through the IRCT were elicited. A semi-structured interview was conducted after the post-test. Only 10 students from the experimental group were randomly selected for the interview.

#### Step 7: Students' final written exam

Final written exam scores of the course Functional Reading (890-222) were obtained and compared to see which of the two groups performed better overall.

### *2.5 Data Analysis*

The data obtained from the different instruments were analyzed and interpreted quantitatively and qualitatively. The paired sample *t*-test was employed to compare the scores from pre-and post-tests within and between groups. Pearson correlation was also used to determine the relationship between IRCT implementation and students' oral English communication ability. The data obtained from the semi-structured interview and the teacher's observations was analyzed and classified according to the types of comments students gave on learning through IRCT.

## **3. Results**

The results were presented according to each research question.

### *3.1 Impacts of IRCT on Oral English Communication Ability of Students*

The pre-and post-test scores showed oral performance improvement in both groups of students even though the experimental group treated with IRCT improved to a higher degree as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics – Oral English Communication

		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE Mean</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Sum</i>
Control	Pre-test	56	18.91	2.89	.39	13	25	1,059
	Post-test	56	22.57	2.41	.32	17	28	1,264
Experimental	Pre-test	49	19.31	3.94	.56	7	26	946
	Post-test	49	26.61	2.99	.43	18	31	1,304

A paired sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the degree of improvement. The results of the comparison between pre-and post-test scores within the control group, i.e., pre-test ( $\bar{X} = 18.91$ ,  $SD = 2.89$ ,  $N = 56$ ) vs. post-test ( $\bar{X} = 22.57$ ,  $SD = 2.41$ ,  $N = 56$ ) were significantly different,  $t(55) = 12.40$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .74$ , showing substantial improvement in oral English communication skill. The mean increase was 3.66, with the 95% confidence interval for the difference between the means of 3.10 to 4.25. The effect size was large based on Cohen's conventions (1988). However, the paired sample *t*-test results of the experimental group were more significantly different,  $t(48) = 18.77$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .88$ . The post-test score ( $\bar{X} = 26.61$ ,  $SD = 2.99$ ,  $N = 49$ ) was much higher than the pre-test score ( $\bar{X} = 19.31$ ,  $SD = 3.94$ ,  $N = 49$ ). The mean increase for the experimental group was 7.31, with the 95% confidence interval for the difference between the means of 6.52 to 8.09 as presented in Table 2. The effect size was larger than that of the control group score. The results support the hypothesis that oral English communication performance of students taught through IRCT improved more significantly after the experiment.

Table 2: Paired *t*-Test

	Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>	95% CI of the Difference				
Pre-test – Post-test				Lower	Upper			
Control	-3.66	2.21	.30	-4.25	-3.10	-12.40	55	.000
Experimental	-7.31	2.73	.39	-8.09	-6.52	-18.77	48	.000

### 3.2 Relationship between IRCT and Students' Oral English Communication Ability

To confirm the association between IRCTA and students' oral English communication ability, the opinions of students regarding the teaching method used were utilized as independent variables and the one-on-one interview post-test score of the students in the experimental group was treated as dependent variables. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation between IRCTA and Students' Oral English Communication Ability

	IRCTA
Pearson Correlation	.379**
Oral English communication ability Sig. (2-tailed)	.007
N	49

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Interactive Reading Comprehension teaching methods correlated significantly with students' oral English communication ability at the 0.01 level of significance. The experimental students showed a positive attitude toward speaking English after they experienced IRCT. This result supports previous work (Garcia, 2000; Chang et al., 2020; Shakibaei & Keivan, 2014; Yoro, 2007; Zhang, 2009) which has indicated an important relationship between these two variables.

### 3.3 Students' Perspectives towards IRCT

The survey was administered to determine whether the teaching methods used were an effective integration of speaking into a reading course. Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics of the participants' perspectives toward the methods adopted. On average, the participants showed positive responses in all the 10 items.

Table 4: Students' Perspectives toward the IRCTA

	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. The IRCTA motivate me to speak English.	49	2	5	3.82	76
2. The IRCTA are interesting for me.	49	2	5	3.96	87
3. The IRCTA help me develop my English pronunciation.	48	2	5	3.83	83
4. Reading Comprehension approach improves my English speaking abilities.	49	2	5	3.92	76
5. The IRCTA help me increase and improve my vocabulary and grammar in English.	49	2	5	3.82	95
6. The IRCTA help me have fun in and outside the class.	49	2	5	4.06	85
7. I have more confidence to speak English after I went through the IRCTA.	49	2	5	3.94	85
8. The IRCTA provide more chance to speak English.	49	2	5	3.90	82
9. The IRCTA motivate me to think more analytical in speaking English.	49	2	5	3.78	87
10. The IRCTA help me to speak English more fluently and correctly.	49	2	5	3.88	83

It should be noted that all measures are based on a 5-point Likert's scale where the lowest score is 1 (strongly disagree), and the highest score is 5 (strongly agree). The participants strongly agreed that they enjoyed IRCT in and outside class with the highest mean score of 4.06 (Item 6). They also concurred that the techniques used were interesting (Item 2), and helped to improve their confidence in English speaking (Items 4 and 7). In addition, the participants' positive reactions towards ICRT were evidenced in their interview with the course instructor, suggesting IRCT be integrated into a reading course. Reaffirmed by the teacher's observation, students indeed gradually improved via IRCT especially in their confidence level and oral English communication ability.

## 4. Discussion

Based on the results attained, the following points relate to students' development of oral English communication ability.

Firstly, reading materials outside the main textbook is an effective strategy for improving reading comprehension and developing English communication skills for second and third year general students of PSU as suggested by Arias (2007) and Awais and Ameen (2013). Students were motivated to choose from a wide range of titles, the genre they like, and to read at their own pace and convenience. Students were expected to read thoroughly, making sure to prepare well for the one-on-one oral assessment with the course instructor. This interactive self-study approach greatly enhanced the confidence level and English-speaking abilities of the students, who were, otherwise, very introverted. Hedge (2000) and Harmer (2001) supported this finding as they stated that the success of the communicative approach depends on how well teachers can make their students use the language in meaningful contexts, authentic, and real-life situations. Similarly, Davies and Pearse (2002) state that developing activities to help students really communicate in English is the primary goal of an English course, and teachers are encouraged to help their students to communicate effectively outside the classroom in various contexts.

The small group teaching is even more effective in improving oral communication of second and third year students. Aksaranukroh (1989), Douglas and Myers (2000), Foto and Ellis (1991), Murcia et al (2013), and Remache (2016) suggested that English communication teachers emphasize not only linguistic competence, but also the ability to use the language in real-life situations. Regarding students' opinions on IRCT as seen in Table 3, even though the methods were apparently demanding for several students, it seems their shyness decreased and they showed a very positive improvement in speaking ability. Students benefited from the interaction they had in the one-on-one oral interview and small group teaching.

## 5. Conclusion

The results showed that IRCT was effective in developing undergraduate students' oral English communication skills, even though it might require a great deal of commitment and responsibility on the part of both course instructors and students. The latter have to fulfill several requirements and meet deadlines while the instructors are expected to keep up to date with supervision. However, integrating oral communication into a reading course through IRCT has brought reading to the next level. It is no longer just reading and working on given exercises, learning how to scan and skim or looking for synonyms and phrases, but about learning by doing, preparing oneself and coordinating with others in preparation to face real-life tasks. It is recommended that IRCT be integrated into a reading program at the university level and schools be prepared to accommodate students' needs for quality books. Libraries and self-access learning centers should include a substantial number of supplementary reading materials for students from different disciplines to practice reading for knowledge and pleasure. Further studies can also examine the effects of the proposed IRCT on enhancing reading skills.

## 6. Educational Implications

### 6.1 Reading Course Instructors

Teachers responsible for teaching reading courses at a university are advised to include extensive self-study as a mode of reading outside the classroom that is often neglected in foreign language classes. With proper supervision on oral assessment after reading, students will have the opportunity to engage face-to-face with their instructor. This will boost courage and confidence in developing English speaking ability.

### 6.2 Learners

Students will be challenged by IRCT in a reading course. They not only have to read with the help of dictionaries and smartphones to check for word meanings and prepare a summary of the story, but also engage in oral communication with their instructor. The other challenging requirement is to work with others to prepare a topic, read, and create an appropriate plan for real-life teaching in English. Such exposure to an authentic situation will compel and enhance their English speaking skills, instill confidence, teamwork, leadership and personal development.

### 6.3 Reading Curriculum

Supplementary reading materials should be an integral part of any reading curriculum so that students can read at their own pace. Curriculum developers on reading may consider IRCT integration if they wish to develop reading habits and equip students with stronger English communication skills for real-life situations.

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