Power distance reduction and positive reinforcement: EFL learners' confidence and linguistic identity

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This paper is based on a classroom research project undertaken at a small-sized private university situated in Bangkok. The study involves quantitative research approach. Its primary objectives are to examine confidence and attitude levels of Thai undergraduate students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at three different stages, before and after interventions in a listening and speaking in English class with the notions of Hofstede's power distance and Skinner's positive reinforcement. Research results reveal positive impacts on students' levels of confidence in oral English communication and attitudes towards teaching and learning of English to some degrees. The results also offer implications for EFL teachers in not only the Thai context but also in Japanese and Korean contexts.

1. Introduction

The recent roadmap of an ASEAN Community by 2015 (Fernandez, 2010) will increasingly spread use of English as an international language (EIL) and/or a lingua franca (ELF) among the ASEAN societies. However, many Thai students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) remain inadequately competent in speaking the language partly because they lack self-confidence and feel shy to speak up (Chutima, 2008; Muangyot, 2009; Ratanavichak, 1997; Suwanasophon, 1996). Past research shows that in both EIL and ELF contexts, feeling confident or secure can neutralize the low level of non-native speakers' English competence (Tananuraksakul, 2010) and concomitantly boost their dignity or self-worth (Tananuraksakul, 2011b; 2012). Building up their confidence is therefore of the essence because it is one of the key affective domains facilitating language learners' spoken production (Krashen, 1981) and significantly contributes to their willingness to speak in a foreign language (MacIntyre, Dornyei, Clement & Noels, 1998). Given that they will encounter a process of identity negotiation in the same context (Beinhoff, 2008), preparing Thai students for this particular matter is also essential.

A lack of confidence characterizes 69 students enrolled in my Listening and Speaking in English Course during the first semester of 2010 (from June to September). Prior to the first lesson, they were asked to complete a survey on confidence in speaking English (with a five-point Likert type scale). Although the overall outcome showed that the students' level of confidence was moderate, they strongly disagreed they were good English speakers. This was the first stage of the present study (See Subsection 4.1 below).

On the one hand, it seems that hierarchical power structures among in-group and out-group members exist in many social contexts. Take Salmani Nodoushan's (2012, p. 126) research implication in the Iranian social context an example. The social structure of power greatly influences the consequences of individuals' actions towards their supervisor or someone in a higher position. On the other hand, affective variable is one of the factors relating to achievement in learning a foreign language (Salmani Nodoushan, 2011). In order to promote Thai students' confidence, I therefore intervened in my class with the notions of both power distance and positive reinforcement. The argument behind these notions is that my position of power as the teacher can be used to help boost my students' confidence in their oral English performance and linguistic identity in English.

Several teachers of English in Thailand have examined which teaching strategies are suitable to help promote their students' confidence in oral English performance. For example, Onjun (2007) employed storyline method to increase eighth graders' confidence in speaking English. Chutima (2008) implemented competency-based language teaching (CBLT) technique to enhance undergraduate students' English speaking skill and self-confidence. Kongcharoen (2008) developed tourism content-based lessons to promote English listening and speaking skills and self-confidence, while Muangyot (2009) instructed his English class with task-based learning on tourism. Thotead (2008) used experiential task–based activity to boost second-year undergraduate students' confidence in speaking English. In spite of these studies, , there has been no attempt to apply the notion of power distance to promote EFL learners' confidence in spoken English. As such, the primary objectives of this study are to investigate (1) levels of the students' confidence in oral English performance at three different stages, and (2) attitudes towards teaching and learning in the Listening and Speaking in English Course during stages 2 and 3.

2. Background

2.1 . the notion of power distance

Power distance (PD) is one of the five dimensions of culture developed by Hofstede (1997) in the 1970s when he worked for IBM, a large multinational

corporate. PD is used to classify a county's cultural attitudes or work-related values and refers to the degree a society accepts differences in power. The society with high PD culture practices a high regard for authority while the one with a low PD culture tends to exercise personal responsibility and autonomy. An understanding of this notion appears to facilitate cross-cultural communication and has been applied to investigation into many areas, particularly international business, international education and planning and human behaviors.

For instance, Alavi and McCormick (2004) studied a cross-cultural analysis of the effectiveness of the learning organization model in school contexts. They made an argument that this model may be associated with cultural dimension of PD. Paulus, Bichelmeyer, Malopinsky, Pereira & Rastogi (2005) used the concept of PD to examine a project-based team activity's intra-and inter-group interactions between members from different national cultures in a graduate course of educational technology in the US. Yetim and Yetim (2006) applied Hofstede's collectivism, individualism, PD and uncertainty avoidance to investigate SMEs' employees' job satisfaction in a Turkish context. Taylor (2000) explores how PD affects public response to crisis in six European countries.

According to Hofstede (1997), PD culture in Thailand is considered relatively high as it ranks 64. Hipsher (2010) affirms Hofstede's assumption through his observations that in general Thai society accepts differences in power which can be exemplified in educational practices. For instance, teachers hold a position of authority over their students and they are highly respected in the society (Tananuraksakul, 2011a). Teachers are addressed as *Khun-Krue* or *A-jarn* referring to someone who bestows the gift of knowledge on students. As a result, Thai parents do not normally question what teachers are teaching to their children as parents may lose face (Hallinger, Chantarapanya, Sriboonma & Kantamara2000). Students are required to wear school uniforms and unlikely contradict their teachers because they are expected to be passive in a classroom where it is well and formally structured.

In addition, the majority of Thai people have a nickname, which is not necessarily related to their first or formal name. The nickname reflects their *sabai-sabai* or easy-going culture. They use their nickname among family members and friends to demonstrate their close relationship or extend a form of relations with new faces. Thai formal names usually have positive and traditional meanings. As such, it is a cultural norm for teachers to formally call their students by their first name.

It appears that PD culture has an impact on Thai students' learning in an EIL context. Deveney (2005) found that Thai students are passive learners and

want the answers instead of the questions. They neither take risks nor initiate discussions. More importantly, they hate making mistakes. Schertzer (2010), an EFL teacher in Thailand, is convinced that Thai students "are terribly afraid to stand out" (p.12) that they will only give their thought-provoking and sophisticated answers when they are placed in a situation where it is unavoidable. These typical characteristics of Thai students prevent them from fluency in oral English communication.

2.2. Power distance reduction and positive reinforcement

The implication of PD outlined above is that the level of PD in Thai culture or the authoritative position of teachers can create barriers in improving students' speaking skills. Reducing PD between a teacher and his or her students may facilitate English language learning and oral production. In this present case, the teacher can call their students their nickname. Along with use of nickname, the teacher can positively reinforce their students with a different degree of praise every time they put an effort to speaking either correctly or incorrectly, such as okay but you need to work it on a little more, pretty good, good, excellent and well done. The reinforcement is drawn from Skinner's (1954) behavioral psychology. Giving praises has proven to promote EFL learners' attitudes towards and confidence in use of English (Tabsawad, 2007; Kelly, 2010). These were treatments used to intervene in my speaking class.

Hadley (2001) suggests that only a few accounts of PD in classroom interactions have been published. Among these are studies of EFL students in Japan and Korea, with PD ranking 54 and 60 respectively. Kasuya (n.d.) and Hadley (2001) who are both Japanese teachers of English share similar views on the importance of conscious awareness of the effect of high PD on Japanese students' English language learning in a traditional classroom. Such awareness will allow teachers to tune their teaching approaches suitable for their students' positive participation in their language classroom. In fact, Hadley (2001) herself has learned to craft a personal teaching style to compliment her students' affective needs in the classroom which helps facilitate their English language achievement.

Jambor (2005, 2009), a Canadian teacher of English in Korea, has a similar view arguing that high PD practice in a Korean classroom impacts on Korean students' English language achievement. Jambor concludes that it is necessary for second language teachers to understand Korean culture in general so that they can adjust their teaching methods successfully in the classroom.

Based on the above voices merely through observations, the hypotheses of this study are that after use of the treatments in the classroom, the students' level of:

1. confidence in oral communication in stage two is higher than stage one;
2. confidence in oral communication in stage three is higher than stage two;
3. attitudes towards teaching and learning in stage two is high; and
4. attitudes towards teaching and learning in stage three is higher than stage two.

3. Method

3.1. participants

Sixty-nine (N=69) students enrolled in my Listening and Speaking Class in three different groups participated in this research during semester 1 in 2010. 51 students were female (n_f=51) while 18 were male (n_m=18). Sixty two of them studied in the second year while seven were in their third year. Thirty seven were in their early twenties (between 21 and 25 years old), 31 students' age was lower than 20 and only one student was over 31.

3.2. Instruments

The study involves quantitative data collections at three different periods. The main research tools were two questionnaires: (a) confidence related to oral communication, and (b) attitudes towards teaching and learning. The former was a replicated survey of Park and Lee's (2005) confidence for Korean learners of English (the item "I think that I will get a great TOEIC score some day" was omitted due to its irrelevance in the Thai social context). The latter was constructed based on the implication of PD for the present context and the psychological practice. Both surveys used a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, eliciting the students' responses to 19 statements covering confidence in spoken English and attitudes towards teaching and learning.

The independent variables of the study included the use of PD reduction and positive reinforcement as treatments. The dependent variables were confidence in oral communication, attitudes towards teaching and learning of English, and achievement in speaking in English.

Means (M), standard deviation (SD) and t-test dependence were employed to interpret data. All data were then statistically analyzed by SPSS program and interpreted according to descriptive ratings below.

5-point Scale	Descriptive Rating
4.20 – 5.00	strongly agree
3.40 – 4.19	agree
2.60 – 3.39	neutral
1.80 – 2.59	disagree
1.00 – 1.79	strongly disagree

3.3. procedures

Before the experiment: I explored my 69 students' level of confidence in oral communication during the first week of the semester.

During the experiment: From week two to week seven, I instructed my classroom according to lesson plans that I prepared (a commercial textbook base with a mix teaching method of CLT and ALM) and intervened in the classroom with the two treatments of power distance reduction and positive reinforcement. In doing so, I learned each student's nickname and ensured to use it in the class and commend any little or much effort he or she made when speaking in English. An important point to address here was that I praised the students according to the levels of effort they made and English they produced, ranging from OK but you need to work on it a little more, to pretty good, to good, to very good, to excellent. I also placed an emphasis on speaking with clear pronunciation reflecting their own linguistic identity rather than imitating native accents. This emphasis follows Smith's (1983: 8) ideology that "[use of English] is the means of expression of the speaker's culture, and not an imitation of the culture of the UK, the US or any other native-English-speaking country… and is not owned by its native speakers".

In week eight, the students completed the attitude survey that I constructed to meet the research purpose and the repeat confidence survey. From weeks nine to fifteen, intervention in the classroom remained until the final week of 16. Then the students completed the two repeat surveys.

After the experiment: I analyzed all data collected during the experiment using the SPSS program, interpreted the analysis with *M*, *SD*. and *t*-test dependence and then discussed it in the next section.

4. Results and discussion

The aims of the study were to examine whether the treatments intervened in the Listening and Speaking in English Class would promote students' confidence in their speaking and attitudes in teaching and learning. Research findings of the three stages are reported and discussed in this section.

4.1. the first stage (before the experiment)

The survey results of the students' confidence in oral communication in the first stage are

shown in Table 1 (M_1 = 3.28). Their overall confidence was neither low nor high, yet they strongly disagreed that they were good English speakers (statement 2). To an extent, this particular outcome indicated the students' belief about their own abilities and low level of confidence in speaking in

English. The belief about their language learning may negatively affect their learning behavior (Cotterall, 1995) and learning outcomes (Weinert & Kluwe, 1987). By the same token, learners who achieve in learning will develop insightful beliefs about their own abilities (Anstey, 1988). The analytical argument prompted me to intervene in my class with the treatments of PD reduction and positive reinforcement.

Table 1
Results of Students' Confidence in Oral Communication in the First Stage

Statements	M_1	SD
1 I can learn to speak English.	3.03	.804
2 I am a good English speaker now.	2.51	.964
3 I am a good student.	3.14	.625
4 I am an important member of my group.	3.59	.773
5 My group needs me to come to class every week.	3.77	.877
6 I don't feel shy speaking English to my classmates.	3.00	.924
7 I don't feel shy speaking English to my foreign professors.	3.17	1.043
8 I don't feel shy speaking English to my Thai professors.	3.12	1.037
9 I think I will speak perfect English someday.	3.99	.931
10 I think I will get an A in this class.	3.23	.957
Total	3.28	.410

4.2. the second stage (during the experiment from weeks two to seven)

Based on Table 2, the overall level of students' confidence in oral communication in the second stage (M_2 = 3.36) was similar to the first stage (M_1 = 3.28). This result rejected hypothesis one, which answered the first objective. However, when considering each statement, statements two, nine and ten indicated a higher level of confidence. As compared to the first stage, they thought they spoke better (statement two), would speak much better in the future (statement nine) and would be able to get the best grade (statement ten). The analysis suggests that to some extent, PD reduction and positive reinforcement positively influenced the degree of the students' beliefs about their own abilities, conveying a little more confidence after the experiments during weeks two and seven. Therefore, to some extent the treatments intervened in the class were suitable for this group of students.

Table 2
Results of students' confidence in oral communication as compared to the first stage

Statements	M_1	M_2
1 I can learn to speak English.	3.03	3.22
2 I am a good English speaker now.	2.51	2.91
3 I am a good student.	3.14	3.23
4 I am an important member of my group.	3.59	3.58
5 My group needs me to come to class every week.	3.77	3.97
6 I don't feel shy speaking English to my classmates.	3.00	2.87
7 I don't feel shy speaking English to my foreign professors.	3.17	3.10
8 I don't feel shy speaking English to my Thai professors.	3.12	3.07
9 I think I will speak perfect English someday.	3.99	4.20
10 I think I will get an A in this class.	3.23	3.51
Total	3.28	3.36

Table 3 shows that the overall level of the students' attitudes towards teaching and learning of the Listening and Speaking in English Course in the second stage was high (M_2 = 3.83). This outcome supported hypothesis three, which answered the second objective. They strongly agreed that they enjoyed it when I called them by their nickname instead of their formal name and when I corrected their spoken errors. Importantly, they agreed that they felt very good when I praised them in the classroom and that they felt more competent in speaking in English than at the start of the semester. The analysis suggests that to a great extent the treatments intervened in the class positively influenced the students' attitudes towards teaching and learning of English and that they were suitable for this group of students.

Table 3
Results of Students' Attitudes towards Teaching and Learning in the Second Stage

Statements	M	SD
1 I feel eager to attend this class.	3.93	.754
2 I feel at ease with the instructor.	3.84	.797
3 I like it when the instructor calls me my nickname instead of my first name.	4.30	.713
4 I like it when the instructor corrects my spoken errors.	4.25	.830
5 I appreciate it when the instructor tries to speak in English only in the classroom.	4.14	.959
6 I feel very good when the instructor commends my spoken English in the classroom.	4.13	.821
7 I feel that I can speak in English better than the first week of the semester.	3.75	.812
8 I feel good about my English accent or my English enunciation.	3.26	.741
9 I gain more knowledge from this course.	4.20	.759
Total	3.83	.549

4.3. The third stage (during the experiment from week nine to week fifteen)

Table 4 displayed below revealed that the overall outcome of students' confidence in oral communication in the third stage was high (M_3 = 3.40), and it was higher than the second stage (M_2 = 3.36), which supported hypothesis two and answered the first objective. Despite the fact that the students gained more confidence in this stage, the t-statistic was not significant at the 0.05 level (t = 1.014). When considering each statement, the students specifically thought they could learn to speak English better as stated in statement one. Their belief about their own ability to speak English remained high as indicated in statement two. The analysis suggests that to an extent PD reduction and psychological reinforcement positively influenced the students' confidence in oral communication and that they were suitable for this group of students.

Table 4
Results of Students' Confidence in Oral Communication as Compared to the Second Stage (p>0.05)

Statements	M_2	M_3	t	p
1 I can learn to speak English.	3.22	3.47		
2 I am a good English speaker now.	2.91	3.12		
3 I am a good student.	3.23	3.30		
4 I am an important member of my group.	3.58	3.62		
5 My group needs me to come to class every week.	3.97	3.71		
6 I don't feel shy speaking English to my classmates.	2.87	2.89		
7 I don't feel shy speaking English to my professors.	3.10	3.08		
8 I don't feel shy speaking English to my Thai professors.	3.07	3.14		
9 I think I will speak perfect English someday.	4.20	4.24		
10 I think I will get an A in this class.	3.51	3.42		
Total	3.36	3.40	1.014	.314

Table 5 shown below tells us that the overall level of students' attitudes towards teaching and learning in the third stage (M_3 = 3.86) was as high as the second stage (M_2 = 3.83), so the result conflicts with hypothesis four, answering the second objective. However, when considering each statement, their attitude level towards their English accent was particularly higher. The analysis suggests that to an extent PD reduction and positive reinforcement influenced the students' not only positive attitudes towards teaching and learning of English but also their positive perception of or beliefs about their own English accent. Their English accent has an impact on their identity, given that accents are not just phonetics but they are deemed an identity (Yea, 2010) and accents are a vital part of one's identity (Marcia & Grobstein, 2010). It is important that the students have positive perceptions of their

English accent or linguistic identity in English firstly because of the influence of their first language, which is Thai, and secondly because of the process of identity negotiation they will experience in any EIL context.

Table 5
Results of Students' Attitudes towards Teaching and Learning as Compared to the Second Stage

	Statements	M_2	M_3
1	I feel eager to attend this class.	3.93	3.97
2	I feel at ease with the instructor.	3.84	3.85
3	I like it when the instructor calls me my nickname instead of my first name.	4.30	4.29
4	I like it when the instructor corrects my spoken errors.	4.25	4.08
5	I appreciate it when the instructor tries to speak in English only in the classroom.	4.14	3.98
6	I feel very good when the instructor commends my spoken English in the classroom.	4.13	4.08
7	I feel that I can speak in English better than the first week of the semester.	3.75	3.88
8	I feel good about my English accent or my English enunciation.	3.26	3.55
9	I gain more knowledge from this course.	4.20	4.21
	Total	3.83	3.86

5. Conclusion

The study examined whether intervention in the Listening and Speaking in English Class with PD reduction and positive psychological reinforcement would influence undergraduate students' confidence in oral communication as well as attitudes towards teaching and learning in a Thai EFL context. Although the small number of participants limits the investigation, it offers an insightful direction for teachers of EFL. They need to be consciously aware of the degree of PD in their students' culture. Breaking down the high degree of PD can help boost the students' affective sides to some degrees, especially confidence in oral communication, and can simultaneously facilitate their language learning processes. Adding a control group is recommended for further research.

The research analyses of the three stages can imply that to some extent use of PD reduction along with positive reinforcement can not only boost Thai EFL learners' confidence in oral communication and positive attitudes towards their own accents but also develop their beliefs about their own abilities in speaking English. This means in a Thai EFL context, teachers can reduce cultural power distance in a listening and speaking class, calling their students by nickname instead of first name and commending them when they make an effort to speak English. The implication can also extend to other EFL

contexts with high cultural PD, such as Korean and Japanese in that PD reduction and positive reinforcement can gradually build up students' confidence in speaking English. The implications of this study are in agreement with Arnold's (2009) arguments that "attention to affect [in language learning] can bring many positive changes to the classroom and that [EFL] learning and teaching will be more effective if they are affective (p.148). Moreover, the students' developed beliefs about their own abilities through the language learning process in the classroom appear to facilitate their learning (Anstey, 1988).

Acknowledgements

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