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Challenges to speaking skills encountered by English-majored students: A story of one Vietnamese university in the Mekong Delta

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Article info.	ABSTRACT
	Along with the demand of global integration, learning foreign languages for international communication has become more and more vital to Vietnamese students. Therefore, English speaking skills is an indispensable course in English language curriculum at tertiary level. However, it is not easy for English learners in this context to achieve their fluency and proficiency in English speaking skill due to certain internal and external factors. Therefore, this study is to investigate challenges of speaking skills faced by English-majored freshmen in a Vietnamese university. The data obtained from the questionnaire with 131 students, individual interviews with lecturers, and class observation. The findings show that English freshmen faced both internal and external challenges, especially the latter ones regarding the limitation of English speaking environment and extracurricular activities. Possible measures are proposed to tackle such challenges in helping students speak English more effectively.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of Vietnam, the achievement of English speaking proficiency has been more and more concerned by most English-majored graduates thanks to its indispensable role in international communication relationships arisen from the recent trend of global integration. Such the impact has brought about the fluency and proficiency of English speaking skills as one main objective in the tertiary curriculum of English language program at most Vietnamese universities. It is, however, still challenging for numerous English language undergraduates to fully achieve speaking skills, especially for first-year students in the tertiary context of Can Tho University (CTU) in Vietnam. Additionally, there have been few studies of this concern in this context. Consequently, with regard to helping English-majored freshmen learn speaking

skills more effectively, the current research is aimed to explore the current situation of teaching and learning English speaking of English-majored freshmen at CTU in terms of difficulties encountered by these EFL freshmen and possible measures to tackle such challenges. Explicitly, two following researched questions guided the study:

1. What difficulties do English-majored freshmen at CTU encounter when they learn speaking English?

2. What are feasible solutions to such difficulties?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Speaking competence of English as a foreign language

Different views of speaking competence in English as a foreign language (EFL) have been raised. As mentioned by Bachman and Palmer (1990), one's

speaking competence of a language is expressed by his linguistic competence, knowledge of encountering linguistic communication difficulties, as well as linguistically emotional reactions. Sharing the same concern, Nunan (1999) also discusses language speaking competence as one's ability to have adequate vocabulary and syntax mastery to speak that language. Nunan further emphasises the speaker's communicative competence in relation to the combination of linguistic competence, sociolinguistic and conversational skills in speaking process. Regarding speaking competence from another aspect, Johnson (1995) particularly indicates second language learners need to obtain communicative abilities to involve their class activities and learn from these activities.

2.2 Characteristics of English speaking competence

The competence of English speaking skills has variously characterised. Canale and Swain (1980) summarise it in three parts of competence, namely grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic. As Jones (1996), Burns (1998), and Richards (2006) categorise, second language's speaking activities include talking as interaction, talking as transaction, and talking as performance. In particular, talking as interaction is implied to meet social functions, and talking as transaction is for purposive situations while talking as performance refers to transmitting information to audiences with well-structured language. However, the current study is mainly focused on talking as interaction in English classrooms.

2.3 Challenges to English speaking performance

Several factors hindering EFL learners' speaking performance have been discussed with respect to both internal and external factors. Concerning internal factors from language learners themselves, Littlewood (1984) concerns this with lack of motivation in speaking English. Sharing this view, Ur (1996) indicates other three possible challenges to learners' speaking skills, namely learners' worries of making mistakes, which lead to their fearful of criticism, learners' low or uneven participation, or learners' fear of other good learners' domination. These internal challenges have been found in the studies by Rabab'ah (2005), Dil (2009), Le (2011), Ngo (2011), Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal (2014), and Izadi (2015) as the most significant limitations of EFL learners' speaking performance. Additionally, Le (2011), Ngo (2011) and Izadi (2015) further emphasise other related

internal factors which are limitations of vocabulary, grammatical structures, sentence formation which cause their use of mother tongue instead of speaking the target language.

Besides the challenges related to internal factors, some difficulties for EFL learners' speaking skills also arise from various external factors. One of the factor that inhibits EFL speakers is their teachers' use of mother tongue in English speaking class (Littlewood, 2007) which partly influences learners' speaking motivation. Additionally, Harmer (1991) states that teachers' mistake correction while their learners are speaking can be considered to limit the learners' confidence in speaking performance. As a result, it is necessary to have positive ways to correct learners' speaking mistakes combined with appropriate stimulation to learners (Baker & Westrup, 2003). In the same vein, Folley (2005) and Rabab'ah (2005) discover from their studies that teaching methods can be challenging to learners in terms of teachers' limitation of how to teach speaking skills.

Another external hindering factor to speaking skills of EFL learners is the content of teaching syllabus and English teaching curriculum. In other words, as mentioned in Gan's (2012) study, learners' speaking performance can be limited if the content of English teaching curriculum does not focus on communicative skills. In another study, Ambu and Saidi (1997) also share this concern by indicating inappropriate distribution of time for teaching speaking skills and teaching syllabus without satisfying English learners' communicative needs. Furthermore, Al-Abri (2008) considers this concern with regard to lack of speaking activities in the content of teaching curriculum as another challenging factor for learners' speaking performance. This researcher then proposes possible supplementary activities for English speaking skills enhancement such as songs, poems, short stories, or conversation talks instead of focusing much on textbook activities.

In addition to the aforementioned external challenges, the limitation of English learning environment also contributes to EFL learners' speaking performance. As justified by Harmer (1991) and Ur (1996), those who learn English as a second language and have the same mother tongue tend to use their native language to communicative even in their English classrooms since it seems easier to express what they really want to exchange, especially when they are asked to discuss unfamiliar speaking topics (Harmer, 1991). Sharing the same concern, Kabir (2014) further indicates large classes as an inhibiting factor for EFL learners' speaking

performance in relation to EFL learners who have limited time to show their speaking ability (Nguyen & Tran, 2015).

Furthermore, challenges to speaking performance of EFL learners partly emerge from the limitation of extra-curriculum activities. As explained by Kabir (2014), extra-curriculum activities can help EFL learners improve their speaking abilities. In the study by Gan (2012), this concern is also significantly raised as one of inhibiting factors for most student participants' speaking performance in Hong Kong University. Gan further reveals that it seems strange and unpopular for these students who are all Chinese to speak English outside their classes, so building an out-of-class English speaking environment for these students is necessary and should be enhanced to improve EFL learners' speaking skills.

2.4 Previous studies

A number of empirical studies have examined the same research concern related to difficulties encountered by university EFL students while participating in oral classroom activities. For example, Gan's (2012) study explored obstacles to speaking skills confronted by English-majored students in Hong Kong University and found that the students in this context significantly encountered several problems leading to their limitation of fluent speaking performance such as lacking vocabulary, focusing much on grammar structures, having limited in-class speaking opportunities, and out-of-class English speaking environment. The study then pointed to a need to incorporate sufficiently intensive language improvement components in the current program. Another study by Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal (2014) investigated the difficulties that may be encountered at six Jordanian public universities by collecting the data from a survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and revealed that most student participants faced challenges with the limitation of oral skill, lack of speaking time, and crowded classes as the most highlighted factors. Izadi (2015) examined the views of lecturers and students of English speaking difficulties in the context with Iranian as their native language. The study particularly analysed the difficulties with regard to linguistic problems, negative emotions, and opportunities to speak English. The main factor emerged from the finding was linguistic problems, and the study proposed several solutions to tackle them with the focus on lecturer's and students' efforts which were also justified and reconfirmed as feasible measures in Kabir (2014) in Bangladesh tertiary context along with more supports from administrators for the same vein.

In the context of Vietnam, Le (2011) also examined the same research concern in the context of Ba Ria - Vung Tau University where students faced challenges in English speaking skills. The findings emphasised the challenges with regard to (1) learners' issues such as learning styles, worries and language proficiency; (2) lecturers' issues, namely teaching methodology; and (3) teaching facilities. Another study related to difficulties for students' speaking skills was Ngo (2011) at Thai Nguyen University. The study mainly focuses on three possible challenging aspects: psychology, linguistic, and social-culture. From then, the same suggestions as Kabir (2014) and Izadi (2015) were recommended for both lecturers' and administrators' assistance to improve students' speaking performance. Additionally, although Nguyen and Tran's (2015) study was slightly different from previous studies with respect to high school students' English speaking barriers, the findings similarly analysed challenges stemmed from learners' weaknesses in speaking English and proposed the necessity of teachers' ready supports by diversifying their teaching activities.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The whole population of this study is 131 EFL first-year student participants. Data collected by the questionnaire to these student participants. Twelve of them were then asked to two focus group interview sessions. Additionally, three lecturers currently teaching the four English speaking classes for these students were invited to individual interviews. The details of the participants are summarised in Table 1 and Table 2 as follows:

Table 1: Characteristics of student participants

Characteristics		Number	Percentages
Gender	Male	21	16.0%
	Female	89	84.0%
Time of English study	03-06 years	28	21.4%
	07-10 years	92	70.2%
	Over 10 years	11	8.4%

Table 2: Characteristics of lecturer participants

Characteristics		Number
Gender	Female	03
Time of teaching English	< 01 year	02
	over 10 years	01
Nationalities	American	02
	Vietnamese	01

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Table 3: The reliability of the survey questionnaire

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of items
Difficulties related to internal factors	.702	6
Difficulties related to external factors		
Lecturers' teaching methods	.745	6
Teaching curriculum/ syllabus	.701	5
In-class English learning environment	.794	7
Extra-curriculum activities	.740	3

A mixed method combining with both qualitative and quantitative data had been used to analyse the research data. To design the quantitative data, the questionnaire was specifically developed for the present study comprised 26 items on a 3-point Likert scale, ranging from agree (1), not sure (2), disagree (3) because questionnaires are considered as useful tools for collecting data from a large number of respondents (Hinds, 2000). To collect qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the lecturer participants to gain insights into the research questions since interviews are the best ways to find out what other people think in mind (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, class observations were conducted to four classes to gain insights and develop relationships with participants that cannot be obtained in interviews or the survey questionnaire (Merriam, 1998; Gay and Airasian, 2000). Moreover, focus group interviews were also included to obtain qualitative data with the purpose of exploring the student participants' views of their difficulties of speaking skills in reality because this research tool

is to help the researchers save time and money with a number of individuals participating simultaneously (Bryman, 2004). Specifically, the reliability of the questionnaire was quite high with the overall Cronbach's alpha of .811 and the specific Cronbach's alpha items were from 0.70. The details are shown in Table 3.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Difficulties related to internal factors

Difficulties encountered by EFL freshmen in speaking skills in the current study include difficulties related to internal factors and external factors. For the first type of factor, the major difficulty revealed by the participants is *lacking vocabulary to express ideas in speaking English* with over two third of agreed responses (79.4%). Another problem agreed by nearly 65% is *the limitation of English speaking strategies*. However, the difficult factor related to *limited chances to involve speaking activities* receives fewer responses with only 43.5%. Significantly, most of them disagreed with *being shy in speaking English* as the significant hindering factor (71.8%) (Table 4).

The interviewed lecturers and focused group students also pointed out that their students faced obstacles of pronunciation, vocabulary, confidence, and shyness when they practised speaking English. The class observations further revealed that using mother tongue in English speaking class still existed in the current research context.

The findings are in line with those of the previous studies (Dil, 2009; Le, 2011; Ngo, 2011; Al-Jamal, 2014; Izadi, 2015) regarding lack of confidence and motivation as inhibiting factors for EFL students in speaking performance.

Table 4: Difficulties related to internal factors (n= 131)

When speaking English, …	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %
I lack vocabulary to express ideas	79.4	16.8	3.8
I do not know English speaking strategies	62.6	27.5	9.9
I have limited chances to involve speaking activities	43.5	27.5	29
I lack motivation in speaking English with classmates	35.9	26.7	37.4
I feel afraid of making mistakes and being criticised by classmates	34.4	43.5	22.1
I feel shy	3.1	25.2	71.8
Mean value	43.2	27.8	29

4.2 Difficulties related to external factors

Regarding the second type of factor, namely external issues affecting EFL speaking learners in the current study; there were several external factors investigated as follows.

4.2.1 Lecturers' teaching methods

As indicated in Table 5, most student respondents disagreed with the difficulties caused by their *lecturers' teaching methods* with the disagreed responses which were much higher than the agreed ones. In particular, the same percentage of student respondents highly disagreed with their lecturers

who did *not create interesting speaking activities and correct mistakes of speaking* (67.9%). Additionally, the results indicated that the participants denied challenging factors caused by their lecturers' *speaking activities* with few responses (around 14%). Although the number of the participants responding to challenging issues related to lecturers' *mother tongue* or *teaching grammar and vocabulary* is fewer than to other issues, their unsure answers account for higher percentages (between 32% and 40%). (Table 5).

Table 5: Difficulties related to lecturers' teaching methods (n= 131)

When learning English speaking skills, I find that…	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %
Lecturers did not create interesting activities in class.	6.9	25.2	67.9
Lecturers did not correct mistakes of speaking.	15.3	16.8	67.9
Lecturers did not give English speaking communicative and interactive activities.	7.6	26	66.4
Lecturers did not give activities which require students to practise or use new vocabulary	13.7	24.4	61.8
Lecturers use mother tongue in class.	16.8	32.1	51.1
Lecturers focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary.	16	39.7	44.3

The interviewed lecturers also confirmed their teaching methods which were not appropriate for all students in speaking classes. Sharing this concern, the class observations also indicated that lecturers could not manage all students, and some students seemed to feel less interested in speaking activities by doing their own things such as using smart phones, or chatting with classmates in Vietnamese. The findings on difficulties related to teaching methods in the current study reveal some different results with those by Foley (2005) and Miller (2010) who mention lecturers' limitation of speaking competence which influences students' speaking performance.

4.2.2 Teaching curriculum and syllabus

Compared to the internal factors, challenges caused by this part saw higher disagreed responses than agreed ones. In other words, the agreed respondents accounted for between over 10% to just under 23% (Table 6)

Table 6: Difficulties related to teaching curriculum/ syllabus (n= 131)

I find that…	Agree %
Teaching curriculum limit learners' English speaking practice	22.9
The assessment of speaking practice was not regularly applied	22.1
The content of teaching syllabus did not focus on communicative achievement.	18.3
The textbook lack English speaking activities	18.3
Speaking skills is separately taught from other language skills	11.5

Sharing the concerns related to teaching curriculum and syllabus, the findings from lecturers' interviews and focus group interviews revealed that the curriculum of English language program generally and the syllabus of speaking skills particularly of the current context inhibited EFL first-year students in terms of the time for speaking skills which was not logically distributed due to the combination of listening and speaking skills. The results are shared with those of Ambu and Saidi (1997) who also mention challenging factors related to insufficient time of teaching.

4.2.3 In-class English learning environment

The significant factor related to in-class English learning environment which was agreed by nearly two thirds (68.7%) is the limitation of native lecturers teaching classes of language skills in the current context. Other issues with fewer agreed responses consisted of the domination of better students (35.1%), immovable tables and chairs (22.9%) (Table 7).

Table 7: Difficulties related to in-class English learning environment (n= 131)

I find that…	Agree %
The number of native teachers in language skill classes is limited	68.7
Some of better students dominate speaking English in class	35.1
Speaking classes are crowded	25.2
The arrangement of tables and chairs in class prevents students to join interactive activities.	22.9

The interviewed participants also mentioned limited number of native teachers in language skill classes as the most challenging external factor for students' speaking performance. Additionally, the class observations indicated that the results of interviews with lecturers and students shared the same findings as those of the survey questionnaire with respect to crowded classes and immovable tables and chairs which prevented students' speaking performance. These findings are in line with the previous studies of Harmer (1991), Ur (1996), Kabir (2014), and Nguyen and Tran (2015) in terms of hindering factors for students' speaking practice.

4.2.4 Extra-curriculum activities

The majority of student respondents agreed with regular use of mother tongue in English speaking class (73.3%) as the main factor limiting their speaking proficiency since all of them share the same nationality, and it seemed easier to express their own views in Vietnamese when they dealt with unfamiliar speaking topics. Despite the lower rate of responses, the result depicts a noticeable concern for limited chances to involve in programs for English practice after class, constituting around 44% of respondents (Table 8).

Table 8: Difficulties related to extra-curriculum activities (N= 131)

I find that…	Agreed %
My classmates and I often use Vietnamese to communicate after class because it is easy to understand and express ideas.	73.3
There are limited places for English speaking practice after class like English clubs, English communities	44.3
There are limited English use programs for students.	42

The interviewed lecturers also confirmed the challenges related to limited English speaking clubs, English programs to encourage students' speaking performance. Particularly, one lecturer mentioned, "*Organising field trips for students to practice English should be permitted by the administrators, but it was not easy to propose*". These findings are not different from those of Gan (2012) and Kabir (2014) in EFL contexts of Iran and Hong Kong regarding the supports for students' speaking performance out of their scheduled classes.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study with English-majored freshmen of Can Tho University shows that the difficulties for these students' speaking skills arise from both internal factors which are related to learners and external factors regarding lecturers' teaching methods, teaching curriculum and syllabus, in-class English learning environment, and extra-curriculum activities. However, the results highlight several factors, namely students' lack of vocabulary and English speaking strategies, limited number of native teachers, limited English speaking environment as the most inhibiting factors for students' speaking skills. From such inhibiting factors for EFL freshmen's speaking skills in the current study, various suggestions are proposed as follows.

With regard to *external factors*, the following concerns are recommended. First of all, it is recommended that should flexibly apply different teaching strategies that may reduce their use of mother tongue in their classes such as integrating various speaking activities for students of different levels of speaking performance, updating information related to English programs, cooperating with other lecturers of language skills to organise more English programs and share teaching experiences. Secondly, the university and the school administrators should reconsider the improvement of curriculum and syllabus regarding teaching textbook to provide students with frequent opportunities of speaking. Meanwhile, there should be more consideration into supplying more well-equipped facilities, and organising weekly or monthly English practice programs to encourage students' involvement. Furthermore, more international cooperation should be considered to increase the number of English speaking teachers in the current context as another effective strategy to encourage both lecturers to upgrade new teaching methods of English speaking and students to practice speaking English with native speakers in real contexts.

Regarding *internal factors*, the researchers recommend these following issues for English-majored freshmen. First of all, they are recommended to raise their awareness of independent learning style. Secondly, it is also required that EFL first-year students need to learn how to think and speak English in class or after class by joining English speaking clubs in campus and off campus.

Further research also needs to be conducted with English-majored sophomores or juniors to have deeper insights into challenges related to external factors. In addition, there should be studies to investigate possible teaching English speaking strategies

for first-year students to improve confidence and active in communication. Furthermore, follow-up research should be undertaken to propose appropriate models to enhance students' speaking performance such as a model of English community in campus, a model of extra-curriculum English use activities, comprising English speaking clubs, field trips to English speaking countries, and English speaking contests.

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