

## PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG VIETNAMESE STUDENTS

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**Abstract.** Speaking English is one of the most difficult abilities for EFL students since there are many factors, both external and internal that condition the learners' will and skill to perform orally. This paper is aimed at investigating through a literature review the psychological barriers that face EFL students, particularly Vietnamese learners in performing their speaking. The research findings from the investigation show that phenomena like anxiety, low self-esteem, low self-confidence, lack of motivation and ineffective teaching methods are the factors that in many cases lead to poor or even nil language competence and performance. The results prove that students are usually afraid of making mistakes or being judged, they tend to feel tense and nervous, diffident in oral presentations and sometimes they feel confused with their thoughts. The study also proposes some suggestions in order to soften the impact of these factors on the student's language learning process.

**Keywords:** Psychological factors, speaking skills, Vietnamese students.

### 1. Introduction

As social beings, humans need to communicate with each other, and it is through language how an effective communication is achieved. Language can be defined as: "the expression and communication of emotions or ideas between human beings by means of speech and learning, the sounds spoken or heard being systematized and confirmed by usage among a given people over a period of time." (The New Practical Standard Dictionary of the English Language.) Nowadays the necessity of good communication urges people to acquire global languages and English has become one of the most important and influencing ones, being now a global lingua franca. In a globalized and interconnected world, the teaching and learning of the English language are playing an increasingly important role, since it is spoken by the majority of people in several countries. As the rising requirements from foreign companies, international trading, the tourism industry and the students' demand to study oversea, English has gained higher status and become a compulsory subject in all levels of education (Nguyen, 2011). Hence, many countries have included English in their educational programs, and in some cases as a mandatory subject, with the purpose of developing highly qualified human capital proficient in the language. Vietnam is not an exception. The need for English in this country is increasing as well. Actually, Vietnam has nationally introduced English to grades 3-5 in primary schools as an elective subject since 2003 and as compulsory in 2006 (Cao, Hoang & Ta, 2016), thus Vietnamese people have the influence of this language since early ages. When learning a new

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language, there may be barriers that affect the learners' progress. These barriers can be external or internal. The external factors include the environment, school, family, the instructors, etc, while the internal aspects commonly involve psychology. This internal (psychological) factor is mentally or spiritually related to the students' acquisition. It includes some variables such as self-esteem, attitude, anxiety issues, motivation, shyness, aptitude, confidence, etc. (Mirhadizadeh, 2016). This paper is aimed at exploring the psychological factors that affect students' speaking skills and corresponding solutions for Vietnamese students. It is also focused on giving pedagogical solutions and recommendations to help them overcome these psychological factors.

## **2. Content**

### **2.1. Nature of Speaking Skill**

Speaking is one of the four language skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking). It is a means of communication through which people convey ideas, feelings and information by using the mouth to create recognizable sounds. These sounds come from a huge vocabulary with agreed-upon meanings; these sequences of sounds are called words, and each represents one or more objects or concepts (Holloway, 2022). This skill allows the speaker to convey his message in a passionate, thoughtful, and convincing manner. In almost any situation, speaking is the most frequently used language skill.

Speaking is considered a "productive skill". Also, it is closely associated with listening as an interrelated way for achieving effective communication. Every speaker is simultaneously a listener and every listener is a potential speaker (Abd EL Fattah Torky, 2006). Speaking involves producing and receiving information, it is an interactive process. Its form and meaning depend on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their experience, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking (Setyani, 2013/ 2014).

The interactional nature of spoken language requires the ability to use motor-perceptive skills, which are concerned with correctly using the sounds and structures of the language, and interactional skills, which involve using the previous skills for communicative purposes (Abd EL Fattah Torky, 2006). This means that EFL students should acquire knowledge of how native speakers use language in the context of structured interpersonal exchanges. Speaking requires that learners understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language, a good speaker synthesizes this array of skills and knowledge to succeed in the act.

Speaking is a bridge between the student and the outside world. In order to build that bridge, in speaking activities the teacher must give them practice opportunities for purposeful communication in meaningful situations. In this process, teachers must analyze the students' difficulties. Students often get difficulties because they have limited knowledge, lack of confidence, and not sufficient skill (Setyani, 2013/ 2014).

When there is adequate guidance in the classroom, preparation, and practice of the language, the results are perceivable: students talk a lot, participation is even, motivation is high and language is of an acceptable level.

### **2.2. The context in Vietnam**

In the age of highly developed technology, English has become a global language. Therefore, to bring Vietnam to integrate into the world's economy, the training of children to become global people is very necessary and important (Van, 2013). In order to be able to access world knowledge, it is necessary for Vietnamese people to learn at least one foreign language since early ages, in this case the English language.

Today, Vietnam's economy is gradually transforming into a market economy, where foreign investors have opportunities and freedom to participate in the activities of investments

and economic development. The presence of more multinational companies confirming their position, especially in the field of economics, creates a great deal of opportunities for English proficient students (Hoi, 2019). Hence the number of people interested in learning English has increased over the years; first, because it is an indispensable requirement for students and workers to get involved in the continuously changeable technological processes, and second, because mastering a foreign language represents for Vietnamese people, an opportunity to improve themselves and extend their capacities.

The period from 1986 up to present is characterized by the rapid growth and expansion of English in Vietnam. This English boom began in December 1986, when at its Six National Congress the Vietnamese Communist Party initiated a general economic reform known as *Đổi mới* (Renovation), opening the door of Vietnam to the world. In the context of renovation and the open door policy, English becomes the first (nearly and only) foreign language to be taught in Vietnam. It is one of the six national examinations students have to pass to get the Secondary School Certificate and is a compulsory subject for both undergraduates and graduates at the tertiary level (Van, 2018).

English is taught in schools, universities, and evening foreign language centers across the country. There are now more teachers and students of English than of any other subject. Currently, there are some English programs, which have been carefully and professionally studied, and introduced to the Vietnamese education system with standards adapted to the majority of students. For example, the English program Phonics-LBUK (Learning Box UK) has become popular in the early grades of primary schools in the country (suitable for children aged 5-10 years), with more than 100,000 pupils learning. With friendly and easy-understanding structure, this program helps children speak standard intonation pronunciation, creates habit using English as the second language when entering to the environment completely in English (Van, 2018).

Despite learning English from primary school until university, except mentioning extra study in English language centers, many students applying for jobs do not gather the requirements for English skills and communication ability (Phan, 2009). Actually, according to the Vietnam General Statistics Office, in 2020 the number of unemployed people was 2.2 million (O'Neill, 2022), and among other reasons for such a large number, the lack of English skills at work is one of the main causes that makes individuals unable to find or choose the desired job.

There are several reasons for the aforementioned situation. Firstly, the programs used for learning foreign languages is too deep in grammar and vocabulary, while the practice of reflexes and communication is not focused. Second, the inequality regarding the level of English language among the students in the same class leads to the following situation: students at the elementary level cannot keep up and at higher level they lose interest. Third, students have issues like lack of confidence, anxiety and low self-esteem. And finally, the learning environment is also affecting the ability to communicate in English. Currently, Vietnamese students only use English during the compulsory school hours, and are almost neglected in other contexts (Ca & Dahn, n.d.).

### **2.3. Psychological factors**

It is clear that psychological factors play a significant role in the acquisition of second and foreign languages in students, particularly in the speaking domain. As a result, it is crucial to highlight the following psychological factors supported by different theories.

#### **2.3.1. Motivation**

Motivation is the psychological factor that represents an impulse that generates the action, and plays a significant role in achieving any kind of goal. It is also one of the most important

aspects in the acquisition of a second language. Maintaining a high level of motivation during the period of language learning is an effective way to make the whole process more successful. Actually, success or failure in language learning seems largely dependent on students' motivation to learn the target language.

Motivation provides the students the primary stimuli for initiating the second language learning, and later it becomes the driving force for them to be persistent in a tedious learning process, so that learners may be able to complete long-term goals if there is sufficient motivation (Dörnyei, 1998). One who has strong motivation might take a part in speaking. It can be inferred that a student might speak well as a result of motivation that pushes to speak. So, motivation has the main role in knowing someone's ability in speaking. For example, one who has strong speaking motivation will practice and train himself to speak fluently and accurately in order to be a better speaker. On the contrary, one who has low motivation in speaking will rarely practice and train himself to speak fluently and accurately. So, it might influence his speaking ability to stay the same or even get worse.

There are two types of motivation, it can be extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation is caused by factors from outside of students. It can be from teachers, parents, friends, environment, etc. Actually, that factor can influence upon students' extrinsic motivation in teaching and learning process (Yulis, 2016). Intrinsic motivation is generally related to the talents and intelligence of the learners. Intrinsic motivation can emerge as a characteristic since someone was born, so motivation is part of a trait that is driven by endogenous factors (Istanti, 2013). Students who are more intrinsically motivated toward speaking activities are more likely to undertake that activity voluntarily, to learn more complex contents or skills and to be more creative during the performance. On the other hand, learners who are more extrinsically motivated tend to perform the activities with the main purpose of obtaining reward or expecting evaluation or competition.

The theory of motivation is closely linked to the concept of learning. A lot of need is obtained from culture; the need for achievement, need for affiliation and need for power. When someone's needs are very urgent, then he/she will try hard to motivate him/herself. Motivation is a crucial aspect of the teaching-learning process. Without motivation, students cannot do their best.

When students are not motivated, it is impossible for them to improve their speaking ability because they do not have the willingness to participate, ask questions, experiment, or accept correction. If learners are demotivated they will be less creative, will not be able to work independently, and will not enjoy the process of speaking. These students can even become numbed or frustrated with their progress. Demotivation has a detrimental impact on students' foreign language learning outcomes. Also, demotivated students will make no effort to speak in class, will show no interest and have poor concentration. Lack of motivation leads to a lower level of language competence.

### **2.3.2. Self-esteem**

Self-esteem is the degree to which students feel satisfied with themselves and feel valuable and worthy of respect. Perceived competence is a belief that one has skills in a particular area (e.g., writing, speaking, spelling) (APA, 2020). Self-esteem and perceived competence are necessary for students to take risks in their learning process and bounce back any failure or adversity. Low self-esteem or lack of confidence leaves students doubting their ability to succeed, making them hesitant to engage in learning or take appropriate academic growth risks. Self-esteem is often built through estimable acts and achievements, even small ones.

In the context of learning to speak, self-esteem is one of the personal traits that become an influencing factor. It may either make students succeed or fail in mastering a good English speaking skills. Students with good self-esteem will be confident to utter English sentences and

words. They are more active and want to participate more. Contrastingly, students who have low self-esteem will be less motivated to speak and tend to have slower development in speaking because they are frequently reluctant to talk, shy, and not sure to say particular words in English (Maryansyah & Wadison, 2017).

Self-esteem becomes one of the big challenges for students to deal with their speaking performance, mostly faced by adult students in university level (Bernadet, Suhartono & Salam, 2019/2020). This is because adult students have lower self-esteem compared to younger ones. Adult learners are worried about making mistakes or being judged while speaking. People with low self-esteem are more troubled by failure and they tend to exaggerate events as being negative. For example, they often interpret noncritical comments as critical. They are more likely to experience social anxiety and low levels of interpersonal confidence. This makes social interaction with others difficult as they feel awkward, shy, suspicious, and unable to adequately express themselves when interacting with others.

There are many factors that act directly upon the student's self-esteem (Branden, 1994 as cited in Aisyah, 2020): (1) Teachers' self-esteem: Teachers with high self-esteem will help students develop their problem-solving strategies. Teachers will build trust in students based on their classroom control, understanding, joint cooperation, involvement, mutual respect and caring; (2) Expectations: Teachers who want students to give their best must convey what they expect. Students will feel nurtured, supported and inspired; (3) Class environment: The way students are treated by the teacher in the classroom may make them feel valued. There are some factors embedded in the class environment such as a student's dignity, justice, self-appreciation, attention and discipline; (4) Competence and skills: Learners arrive in any class with significant differences in ability. Effective teaching methods will make them learn only by building strengths, not by focusing on weaknesses; (5) Cognitive individuality: Each student learns in different ways and has different cognitive styles. Developing accurate and effective teaching methods is going to be enormously important for the student's self-esteem and for them to adopt their own cognitive style.

Without a certain degree of self-esteem, learners are unable to produce language because they doubt in their abilities to perform orally at all. Students who have a lower level of self-esteem will not find it enjoyable to learn how to speak, they will not feel motivated and will be afraid to express themselves orally when needed; as a result, they could lose marks concerning their academic level in speaking.

### **2.3.3. Anxiety**

Mastering communication skills is considered the most important goal in modern-day EFL contexts. Nevertheless, becoming communicatively competent and fluent is particularly difficult for foreign language learners as it is influenced by a number of factors including affective ones (Hanifa, 2018). Among these affective factors which have an impact on foreign language learning, especially speaking, anxiety emerges as a devastating one, having a negative effect on the students oral performances.

Anxiety causes physical and psychological problems, affects motivation, concentration and achievement negatively, increases errors in the learning process, prevents transferring their real performance and studying efficiently and decreases their interest towards language learning. High levels of anxiety can discourage students from participating in classroom activities or studying at home, and may even cause them to lose their self-confidence and motivation for learning English. Anxiety is still proven to be a major factor affecting foreign language learning.

Students can experience strong emotive reactions such as nervousness and confusion, trembling, and panic when speaking. What seems to distinguish speaking is the public nature of

the skill; this poses a threat to peoples' self-concept, self-identity, and ego, which they have formed in their first language as reasonable and intelligent individuals (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Language anxiety is best defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986, p. 133).

Language anxiety may not only bring harm to the second language learning process, but it could also reduce a person's motivation to learn a language. Motivation as one of the affective factors, can also be said to influence the pace and achievements in acquiring a language, especially that of a foreign language (Chalak & Kassaian, 2010). Anxiety and motivation are closely related to each other in the acquisition of second language which can then manifest in language competence and performance. Students who experience fear of public speaking (which is a sign of anxiety in language learning) tend to be less autonomously motivated.

The effects of language anxiety on language learning can be classified into some categories based on how they affect students: academically, socially, cognitively, affectively, or personally. When learners express levels of language anxiety they tend to exhibit low academic performance. Also, they seem to be less interested in social interaction using a second language. Moreover, anxiety prevents the information from reaching learners' cognitive processing system, and hence losing great part of language acquisition. Finally, anxiety affects learners' personalities by making anxious students more worried, forgetful, miserable and insecure.

Students with low communicative competence will experience high communication anxiety. Students with high communicative competence who are likely to perform well at all times can also be affected by anxiety. As a result, a highly proficient student of English may not perform well in an oral test because of being overly affected by nervousness and anxiety during the test (Heng, Nadzimah & Binti, 2011).

#### **2.3.4. Confidence**

As a practical output, speaking has so many barriers such as psychological, physiological, physical, systematic and attitudinal. Some of them are internal as psychological and attitudinal barriers, while some others are external like physiological, physical and systematic barriers. Lack of self-confidence can be thought under the both titles of psychological and attitudinal barriers that makes learner hard to speak in foreign language and even in mother tongue (Gürler, 2015). Self-confidence, as a facilitator to speak fluently and accurately both in mother tongue and target language, is gaining importance in communication especially in speaking.

Self-confidence significantly contributes to the learner's willingness to communicate in a foreign language. Speaking requires a high level of self-confidence which means the state of being sure of doing something, and not being shy and aggressive in social situations (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English).

It is related to selection, motivation, perseverance, vulnerability, and patterns of subjective expectations, ambition and ambitious influence of one's self (Ansari & Oskrochi, 2004). Therefore, a person with high self-confidence is more likely to achieve positive and successful outcomes. Thus, self-confidence as a belief in something will work well and succeed. Self-confidence as a belief that someone has it in his/her ability to succeed in a task, based on whether he/she is able to do that or not a task in the past (Adalikwu, 2012). So, when students are confident about their abilities irrespective of their past experiences, they will succeed in their learning. This psychological factor is a set of beliefs about one's talents and abilities. Students who are confident are successful in their learning because they believe in their abilities and never give up. Highly self-confident students tend to be more inclined to involve themselves in the conversations and other spoken activities in the classroom including the oral

production of stories in English. That is, self-confidence is very important for EFL learners to perform their language skills in real-life situations.

Students who have a low self-confidence are afraid to ask questions, utter their opinion or explore their ability; they are usually less active in the classroom and are afraid of making mistakes while learning. They not believe themselves to be capable learners. This factor may debilitate academic achievement.

In order to build students' self-confidence the teacher should tell them explicitly (verbally and non-verbally) that s/he indeed believes in them and teachers should have them make lists of their strength, of what they know or have accomplished so far in the course (Brown, 2007).

### **2.3.5. Ineffective teaching methodology**

A teacher is an important figure in the teaching and learning process. She/he is supposed to follow accurate and effective methodologies for the students to acquire all the knowledge they need in their process. The main purpose of teaching at any level is to bring out a significant change in the learner. Transferring knowledge requires teachers to use the appropriate method and pedagogy that best suit the learner and suit the objectives and desired outcomes. Teaching strategies play a significant role whether in producing progress as they are effective or in obstructing the language learning process, as they are inadequate.

Most of the traditional methods were teacher-centered with no activity for the learners, making them passive and therefore obtaining knowledge from the teacher without building their engagement level with the subject matter and the approach is least practical, more theoretical and memorizing (Tebabal & Kahssay, 2011). When the teacher-centered approach is applied in the classroom students do not have the opportunity to use their communication skills because the instructor is the primary information giver. Students do not share what they have learned; this type of instruction can be boring for students leading to demotivation; learners are not allowed to express themselves and direct their own learning; and finally, Teacher-centered Instruction does not empower learners' autonomous skills and subsequently lifelong learning skills.

Another error committed while teaching English and particularly during speaking classes is that the medium of instruction is mostly L1 (Quadir, 2021). Although L1 should not be completely expelled out of the EFL classes, its usage should be reduced. It is recommended to use L1 when the teachers' level is higher than that of the students, or when the students do not master the target language. The overuse of the mother tongue during the English classes can lead to a habit that both learners and teachers will resort whenever a difficulty is encountered; L1 may be misleading sometimes when learning the TL; EFL students may transfer errors from the L1 to the TL; and it reduces the amount of students' exposure to the English language.

As a result of inadequate methods of teaching or the conventional practices still conducted in some EFL classrooms, students' inherent motivation to gain proficiency in the speaking skill is affected. In other words, among the attributions of students' demotivation to speak English are consistently teaching factors, such as instructors' disagreeable behaviors and personalities, instructional styles and teaching methods and poor linguistic competence.

## **2.4. Recommendations**

This study focuses on the psychological factors that affect learners' speaking performance in Vietnam. One of the biggest barriers among EFL students currently is the psychological. When analyzing the students' situation in terms of language learning, what affects them is not only the lack of vocabulary or grammar but also some internal factors that condition them such as anxiety, lack of confidence, lack of motivation and low self-esteem.

In light of this study, some recommendations are made, not only for instructors but also for learners. Teachers are encouraged to (1) create an anxiety-free language learning environment:

fortunately, teachers have several tools available to help students overcome this blockage; (2) create a learning community that provides the environment for optimal motivation and a collaborative atmosphere: the teacher can develop a climate of trust not only within the whole class but also in the relationships between individual students, and adopt several solutions to reduce the level of student anxiety. Students are encouraged to (3) identify barriers in order to overcome them: facing and reducing the fears will help get the language practice needed to improve; (4) build up confidence and work on self-esteem to overcome shyness. By creating a comfortable and healthy environment, and identifying and addressing language learning fears, students will be able to continue their journey towards fluency confidently.

### 3. Conclusions

Speaking skill has become a vital tool in developing marketable human capital in the competitive global economy, so the teaching, learning and practice of this skill is a main target in Vietnamese schools. As this study has highlighted, there are some psychological factors that have an impact on the speaking performance of the English language learners in Vietnam. The present paper inquired into the psychological issues that learners face while performing speaking skill. The results indicated that inhibition, anxiety, fear of peer judgment, lack of self-confidence, lack of motivation and lack of encouragement by the surrounding environment are the most affecting factors that affect students' speaking proficiency. Also, recommendations were given for teachers to help students overcome these problems, and for learners to soften their impact in the learning process.

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