

PUBLIC SPEAKING DIFFICULTIES FACED BY ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS AT HAI PHONG UNIVERSITY AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Nguyễn Thị Tuyết

Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Hải Phòng

Email: tuyetnt@dhhp.edu.vn

Ngày nhận bài: 04/6/2025

Ngày PB đánh giá: 03/7/2025

Ngày duyệt đăng: 09/7/2025

Abstract: Public speaking is an ideal way for students to display their knowledge, especially English-majored students, through which students have the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned at university. However, a large number of students may still feel afraid and lack confidence when speaking in public. Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the difficulties that English-major students of Hai Phong University encounter when speaking in public. The author used a survey questionnaire to collect, analyze students' opinions on the difficulties and then suggest some useful solutions for them to improve English public speaking as well as their overall English proficiency at university.

Keywords: Difficulties, English public speaking, Hai Phong University students, solutions.

NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN KHI NÓI TRƯỚC CÔNG CHÚNG CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC HẢI PHÒNG VÀ GIẢI PHÁP ĐỀ XUẤT

Tóm tắt: Nói trước công chúng là một cách lý tưởng để sinh viên thể hiện kiến thức của mình, đặc biệt là sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh, qua đó sinh viên có cơ hội thể hiện những gì mình đã học ở trường đại học. Tuy nhiên, một số lượng lớn sinh viên vẫn cảm thấy sợ hãi và thiếu tự tin khi nói trước công chúng. Do đó, nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm xác định những khó khăn mà sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh của Trường Đại học Hải Phòng gặp phải khi nói trước công chúng. Tác giả đã sử dụng bảng câu hỏi khảo sát để thu thập và phân tích ý kiến của sinh viên về những khó khăn và sau đó đề xuất một số giải pháp hữu ích để cải thiện nói trước công chúng bằng tiếng Anh của sinh viên cũng như tăng hiệu quả học tiếng Anh của sinh viên tại trường đại học.

Từ khóa: Khó khăn, nói tiếng Anh trước công chúng, sinh viên Trường Đại học Hải Phòng, giải pháp.

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, mastering a common global language, especially English, has become more urgent than ever. Many researchers have shown that one of the main goals of learning a language is to be able to use it in multi-purpose communication, especially when directly communicating with others, of which public speaking is considered an indispensable element. According to Pourhosein G. A. (2016), communication between people is a complex process through which they need to inform someone about something or convey meaningful information, in which they must be able to be a speaker and listener at the same time. When talking, they need to pay attention to be good at words as well as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and fluency, which doesn't seem to be easy. In that case, public speaking might be much more difficult job, especially for students learning English as a foreign language. Furthermore, among language skills, speaking skill in general and public speaking skill in particular is not of much interest in classrooms. Additionally, learners often focus only on reading and writing skills (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). This is also a common situation for English major students at Hai Phong University, who can find it easy to be good at grammar but have difficulty in English public speaking fluency.

Therefore, this study aims to determine the role, benefits of public speaking skills for English major students at Hai Phong University, and find out the difficulties they face, which is guided by the questions "What are the benefits of English public speaking?" and "What are the difficulties that English major students at Hai Phong University encounter when speaking English in public?". The author then proposes practical solutions to help them improve their English public speaking skill.

2. Literature review

2.1. English speaking

2.1.1. Definition of speaking

Speaking is defined in many different ways by researchers when it comes to language learning. Bygate (1987) considers speaking as the production of auditory signals to elicit different verbal responses in the listener, that is, the systematic combination of sounds to form meaningful sentences. According to Nunan (1995), speaking means saying words orally, communicating by talking, making a request, or making a speech. Efrizal (2012) states that speaking includes speeches or sentences whose speaker's intention is identified and processed by the receiver to understand their purpose. Actually, speaking is the process in which people use verbal and non-verbal symbols based on different contexts to create and share meaning (Chaney, 1998). It is also

an interactive process of creating meaning through producing, receiving, and processing information (Burns and Joyce, 1997). Speaking is the first way children acquire language and is part of everyday activities for many people. However, speaking depends on the complexity of the information to be communicated and that speakers often find it difficult to express what they intend to say (Brown and Yule, 1999). It also requires responses from the speaker or other listeners and it takes place in the form of turns and when speaking, they should pay attention to the gestures, intonation, stress or pauses that other speakers are making as there are cues to understand the meaning of what they are trying to say (Bueno, Madrid, & McLaren, 2006).

In short, speaking is not just combining sounds or saying oral words to form intended sentences or speeches, but also an interactive process that depends on both verbal and non-verbal symbols as well as the complexity of the communication context. The ultimate goal of speaking is to acquire a language and be understood by the listener.

2.1.2. The importance of speaking skill

Among the four main language skills, speaking is considered to be the most essential and crucial skill to acquire a foreign language as it is the skill that the students will be judged upon most in real life situations (Brown & Yule, 1983).

Along with listening, reading, writing, speaking is one of the four fundamental language skills and even considered one of the most challenging skills that English learners encounter (Bueno, Madrid, and McLaren, 2006). According to Brown (1994), speaking is one of the most demanding skills for English learners because of the contractions, vowel reductions and omissions along with the use of slang, idioms, stress, intonation as well as the need for interaction with other speakers. Furthermore, speaking is the most effective communication skill as most of the communication is done through speech. Actually, speaking is the most important means of communication and there is no doubt that mastering all four language skills is necessary to become a well-rounded communicator, but the ability of skillfully speaking may bring him/her with many distinct advantages such as making an impressive speech in different situations, participating actively in discussions, developing critical thinking among people, etc. It is clear that the ability to speak a language in general or English in particular is equivalent to knowing that language (Bailey and Savage, 1994) because speaking prepares the major data for the speaker to comprehend the language contact (Efrizal, 2012). In brief, speaking is closely related to the development of English language, so practice together with exposure to

speaking skill is a useful means to develop as well as improve accurate sense of competence, confidence and mastery of speaking skills.

2.2. English public speaking

2.2.1. Definition of public speaking

In Encyclopedia.com. (2019) public speaking is an activity of delivering speeches or lectures. Dolman (1922) defined public speaking as the process of making a presentation directly to an audience in a structured, purposeful manner to inform, influence, or entertain them. It is a formal, direct presentation by an individual to a group of listeners, which is a real communication and much different from a theatrical performance. According to Liu (2011), public speaking is simply the act of speaking in front of a group of people. Public speaking opportunities are often intended to educate, persuade, or entertain the audience, and at the end of each speech the audience can draw out an important, meaningful message for themselves. Actually, public speaking is sharing information, ideas or opinions on a specific issue that interests the audience. The task of the public speaker is to attract the audience's interest and attention to that issue for a stipulated period of time. Ezeukwu (2000) asserts that public speaking is a face-to-face communication setting in which one person speaks while the number of the others listen. However, in some cases, the audience members may

also contribute to the speech by discussing or asking questions. Generally, public speaking whether live or via electronic means of communication usually takes place at a certain time, in a specific place, for a determined purpose, and for a particular audience through various techniques of influence, information, and entertainment

2.2.2. Importance of English public speaking

Mardesich (2023) confirmed that public speaking can increase the speaker's confidence very quickly and help them overcome their fear and insecurity when speaking. Especially when speaking English in public, it will help them gain a deeper understanding and practice of the English language knowledge they have learned. English public speaking is a great way to develop the speakers' critical thinking in English as a good presentation requires the speaker to carefully write down his or her thoughts for evaluation from the audience as well as think effective ways to communicate and enhance the performance. Actually, English public speaking may promote the language proficiency through using appropriate vocabulary, actively practice pronunciation, fluency as well as effective communication strategies including having appropriate body language and maintaining audience engagement, which can help the speaker to achieve higher levels of English language acquirement. It is clear that

English public speaking plays an important role in developing our position in society, especially in today's global context. A good outcome will come to us if we are an effective, confident and convincing English speaker. Especially for students, this ability helps them gain confidence in a variety of contexts, articulate ideas clearly and communicate successfully in international contexts such as conferences, seminars and training courses, which may really enhance their prospects of success. Generally, this will certainly enhance their opportunities to interact with global audiences, whether in an academic, professional or diplomatic setting (Crick,2022)

2.3. Previous Studies

In recent years, a growing number of studies have examined the role of public speaking in the development of English proficiency in university students. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), foreign language anxiety, including public speaking anxiety, is an important factor influencing learners' willingness to communicate and their overall performance in using a second language. Similarly, Horwitz et al. (1986) highlighted that communication anxiety and fear of negative evaluation are among the most common sources of anxiety for language learners, which may inhibit their public speaking abilities.

Other studies, such as O'Hair, Stewart, and Rubenstein (2007), have highlighted that effective public speaking

requires not only language competence but also audience awareness, logical organization of ideas, and confidence in speech delivery. Koshy (2020) argues that repeated negative experiences in foreign language use can exacerbate foreign language anxiety, making students more reluctant to engage in public speaking tasks. Meanwhile, Ezeukwu (2000) emphasizes the importance of understanding the needs and expectations of the audience in order to tailor speeches appropriately and build confidence.

Despite acknowledging the importance of public speaking for language development and future career success, many researchers have found that students continue to face many difficulties, including psychological barriers, fear of making mistakes, and lack of strategies to handle interactions with audiences (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Woodrow, 2006). These findings suggest that more research and targeted interventions are needed to help students overcome their challenges and develop greater confidence and competence in public speaking in English. Particularly in the Vietnamese educational context, research examining the public speaking experiences of English-major students, who are expected to achieve high communicative competence, remains scarce. Therefore, this study addresses an important gap by identifying the challenges faced by English-major students at Hai Phong University in their

English public speaking tasks and proposing practical solutions to improve their confidence and effectiveness in public speaking.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted with the use of a quantitative method. At first, the author designed the questionnaire in the form of eight different questions which find out the students' general feelings about speaking English in public, the benefits of this public speaking and the difficulties they encountered while making the speech in public. Next, the data collected will be quantified so that it can be easily counted and evaluated. The questionnaire was distributed to 80 third-year English majors of Hai Phong university including 16 males and 64 females aged between 20 and 21, who

have participated in presenting in different classes. The data then were analyzed to find the percentage based on the indicators which reflects the difficulties facing the students making English public speaking .

4. Results of the research

4.1. Students' feeling when speaking English in public

The questionnaire enquired from the participants what feeling they had in English public speaking. According to the results presented in figure 1, the majority (78.75%) answered that they recognized nervousness as the main concern when they were faced with the task of English public speaking. Only 17 students among 80 ones identified pleasant experience they get when it comes to English speaking before the public.

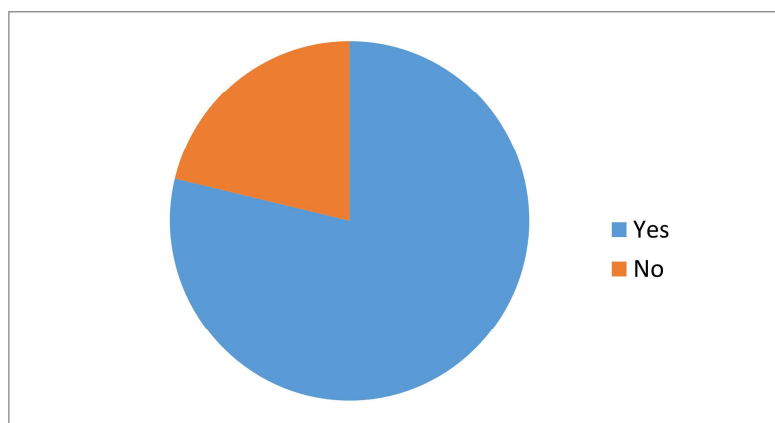


Figure 1. Do you feel nervous when giving an English speech in public?

4.2. Benefits of English public speaking on students

As seen in Figure 2, all 80 participants in the research agree or even

strongly agree that speaking English in public can help them be equipped with better competence to be able to find jobs in present and in the future after university graduation. No one hesitated

or disagreed with this effect of the public speaking. Furthermore, majority of the students also asserted that public speaking in English played a significant role in helping them be able to communicate more fluently in English. 40% of them surveyed strongly agreed and 58.75% agreed with this while only 1.25% of them disagreed with this effect of the public speaking. With the benefit related to the future, 87.5% of respondents consented that being good at speaking English in public would be a

foundation giving them opportunities to get further academic study or usage after graduating from the university. It is clear that most of the students who participated in the survey shared the same opinion that speaking English in public was highly appreciated as it brought them the benefits of getting more fluency in English, the ability of finding better jobs as well as the opportunity for further academic study, which would be useful for their future careers.

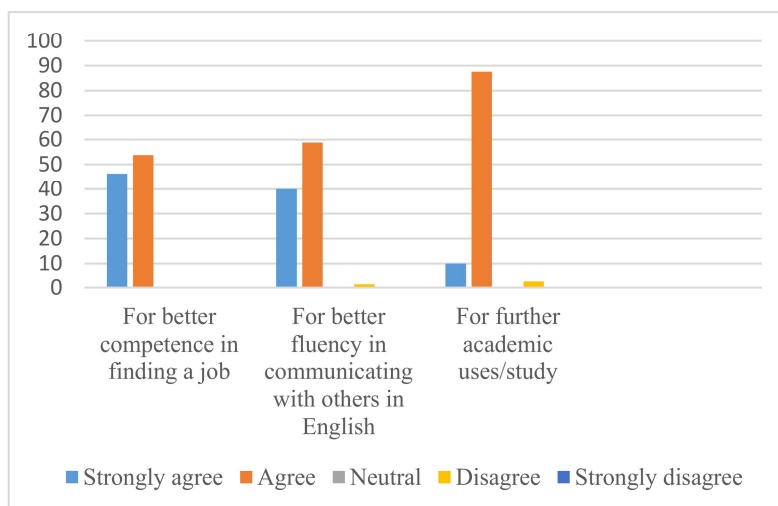


Figure 2. Benefits of English public speaking

4.3. Difficulties of English public speaking

The figure below provides the actual proportion of difficulties that encountered English major students of Hai Phong University when they make English speeches in public. Notably, more than 70% of students voted that questions or feedbacks from the audience such as friends or teachers after a speech had a great impact on their

psychology. They felt worried about preparing appropriate answers to please the audience. Meanwhile, a small percentage, only 18.75% of participants considered the big size of the crowd as a hindrance to their ability to perform well in English public speaking. For 51.25% of participants, the feeling of fear when speaking also became a factor that prevented them from overcoming themselves to speak confidently in front of a crowd in English. In particular, 25% of the

students worried about being laughed at and judged when they made mistakes. Regarding the attention, 23.75% of students found it difficult to keep the audience listening them until the end of the speech. Briefly, English public speaking was not an easy task for Hai Phong University English major students

because they had to face several difficulties such as anxiety about not being able to answer the audience's questions, as well as fear of speaking, being ridiculed by the audience when making mistakes, big crowd and inability of keeping the audience's attention throughout the speech.

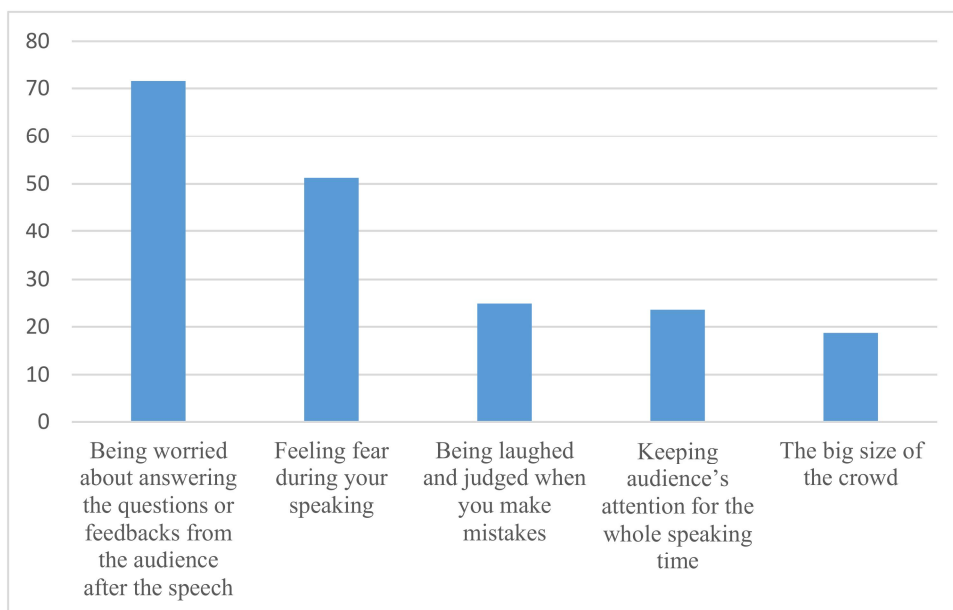


Figure 3. Difficulties encountered when making an English speech in public

4.4. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce and expand on previous research regarding the role and challenges of public speaking in the development of English proficiency among university students. Being consistent with MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) and Horwitz et al. (1986), a significant proportion of participants in this study reported feelings of anxiety and fear when delivering English speeches in front of an audience. Fear of negative evaluation and fear of making mistakes led to reduced

confidence and a tendency to avoid public speaking activities.

Despite these negative feelings, students demonstrated a strong awareness of the benefits of practicing public speaking in English. They recognized that it can enhance their employability, improve their fluency, and develop their communicative competence, which further emphasizes findings by O'Hair, Stewart, and Rubenstein (2007) regarding the essential role of public speaking skills in academic and professional success. However, as Koshy (2020) noted,

repeated negative experiences in foreign language use can exacerbate language anxiety, which may further discourage students from participating in public speaking tasks.

Beyond linguistic skills, the results of this study highlight the importance of psychological and social factors in shaping public speaking performance. Students reported particular difficulty responding to audience questions and maintaining audience engagement, which reflects the challenges identified by Liu and Jackson (2008) and Woodrow (2006) regarding interaction management during public speaking. As Ezeukwu (2000) emphasized, understanding the audience's needs and expectations is crucial for building confidence and tailoring messages effectively - an area where many students in this study still struggled.

To sum up, although students are well aware of the advantages of practicing English public speaking, they continue to face significant challenges in handling spontaneous language production, managing audience interactions, and overcoming anxiety. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions that not only develop language proficiency but also build confidence, reduce performance anxiety as well as equip students with the psychology to handle diverse situations to engage audiences effectively in real-life speaking situations.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusion

Public speaking and making presentations in English are common requirements for English-major students at Hai Phong University, serving as important criteria for teachers to evaluate their learning progress. While students generally recognize the value of public speaking for academic and career development, they often struggle with psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes, fear of negative audience reactions, and anxiety about audience size and attentiveness.

One key factor is glossophobia, or public speaking anxiety, which is common among foreign language learners (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). According to Koshy (2020), negative past experiences can intensify this anxiety. To address these issues, students should adopt an audience-centered speaking approach. By analyzing their audience's needs, interests, and expectations, and by carefully considering the purpose, time, location, and co-speakers, they can build confidence and prepare more effectively.

In addition, Ezeukwu (2000) emphasized that public speaking should focus on informing, persuading, or entertaining the audience. Students should thoroughly research their topics, anticipate possible questions, and mentally prepare responses. Structuring their ideas clearly and logically helps keep the audience engaged and reduces

confusion, enabling students to manage questions with greater ease.

Furthermore, O'Hair, Stewart, and Rubenstein (2007) highlighted that audiences interpret messages based on their own backgrounds and beliefs, which can lead to misunderstandings or even laughter and criticism. Therefore, students must use clear language, coherent arguments, and appropriate grammar to help the audience grasp their intended messages. Being aware of cultural and psychological differences also helps them adapt and remain composed when facing unexpected audience reactions.

In summary, with thorough preparation, logical structuring, and a confident mindset, English-major students can improve their public speaking skills, build trust with their audience, and communicate effectively. Mastering these skills will enhance their future career opportunities in an increasingly globalized and digital world.

5.2. Recommendation, limitation and further studies

To help English majors at Hai Phong University overcome public speaking challenges, teachers should provide audience-centered training, anxiety-management workshops, more practice opportunities, and instruction on structuring speeches and handling questions, along with consistent feedback and reflection to support their continuous improvement.

This study offers valuable insights into the challenges faced by English-major students in public speaking but is limited to a sample of 80 students at Hai Phong University, which may affect its generalizability to other contexts. Additionally, it did not explore in depth factors such as students' personality traits, teachers' feedback styles, or classroom environments, all of which could influence public speaking confidence and performance. Hence, future research should expand to include more diverse participants from various universities and majors to gain a broader, more representative understanding of these challenges..

REFERENCES

1. Bailey, K., & Savage, L. (Eds.) (1994), *New ways in teaching speaking*, Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
2. Brown, G., & Yule, G. (1999), *Teaching the spoken Language*, Cambridge University Press.
3. Brown, H.D. (1994), *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language*, Pedagogy. Prentice Hall Regents, Englewood Cliffs.
4. Bueno, A., Madrid, D., & McLaren, N. (2006), *TEFL in Secondary Education*, Granada: Editorial, Universidad de Granada
5. Burns, A., & Joyce, H. (1997), *Focus on Speaking*, Sydney: National Center for English Language Teaching and Research.

6. Bygate, M. (1987), *Speaking*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
7. Chaney, A. (1998), *Teaching Oral Communication in Grades K-8*, USA, A Viacom Company.
8. Crick, N. (2022), *Rhetorical public speaking: Social influence in the digital age*, Taylor & Francis, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003316787>.
9. Efrizal, D. (2012), Improving Students Method at Mts Ja-alhaq, Sentot Ali Basa Islamic Boarding School of Bengkulu, Indonesia, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*.
10. Ezeukwu Gab E (2000), *Essential of Public Speaking*, Enugu: Feloks Communications.
11. John Dolman (1992), *A Handbook of Public Speaking*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York.
12. Koshy, B. (2020), Xenoglossophobia among second language learners, *International Journal of Creative Research Thought*, 8(2). ISSN: 2320-2882, Retrieved 20/04/21.
13. Liu, Meihua (2011), Anxiety in Oral English Classrooms: A Case Study in China, *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching*.
14. MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994), *The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language*, *Language Learning*.
15. Mardesich, A. (2023), *Techniques for Reducing Public Speaking Anxiety in Adult English Learners*, Available: <https://repository.usfca.edu/capstone/1532>.
16. Nunan, D. (1995), *Language Teaching Methodology: A Textbook for Teachers*, NY: Phoenix Ltd.
17. O’Hair, D., Rubenstein, H., & Stewart, R. A. (2007), *A Pocket Guide to Public Speaking* (second ed.), Boston, Bedford/St. Martin’s.
18. Pourhosein Gilakjani, A. (2016), What Factors Influence The English Pronunciation Of Efl Learners, *Modern Journal Of Language Teaching Methods*.
19. Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001), *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.