THE PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST-YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS TOWARDS THE USE OF INFORMATION GAP ACTIVITIES IN SPEAKING CLASS

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Abstract: *English speaking skill is considered as an important skill in language learning. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the perception of first year non-English majored students at Khanh Hoa University as well as the effectiveness in using information gap activities in English speaking lessons. The results show that learners feel more confident, active, and enthusiastic in participating in activities and their motivation improves as well. In addition, learners' speaking ability is also significantly improved.*

Key words: *speaking skill, information gap activities, perception, effectiveness, first year non-English majored students*

1. Introduction

It is undeniable that English has been an essential means of communication in every aspect in society nowadays. Hence, in Viet Nam, learning speaking English becomes more necessary for Vietnamese people to be able to integrate into the international market economy. This is a challenging task for teachers in teaching speaking. Based on ten years of the researcher's experience in teaching English for the non-English major freshmen at Khanh Hoa University (UKH), I have found out some common problems among lots of students in speaking English. Students have very little talking time. Additionally, they find it difficult to express their ideas fluently and clearly because of their limitation in vocabulary, structures and pronunciation. Moreover, they are passive and less motivated to participate in English speaking tasks. They feel embarrassed and uncomfortable when the teacher asks them to speak or interact with their friends. They are not confidence in using English to present their own opinions.

To help my students tackle the problem and be able to communicate effectively in a real and enjoyable learning environment, I need to make an innovation in my speaking class. There have been many studies conducted on the impacts of IGAs in speaking English recently and the findings stated that IGAs have positive effects on the students' language proficiency. Applying IGAs in the speaking lessons helps to promote students' willingness to talk since they find reasons to speak. All learners have equal chances for talking and they keep thinking and share the information to reach the task objective [3, p.208]. They gain their high motivation in English speaking. Moreover, through information gap tasks, learners feel more enjoyable, confident and active in interacting with their peers to collect the information. [4, p.129, 1]. In another research conducted by Asrobi, Seken & Suarnajaya (2013), the results reveal that IGAs help promote cooperative relationships among students. They work together to clarify, negotiate meaning, solve problems, gain information or make decisions (Handayani, 2011). Despite the effectiveness of the IGAs, the researcher wants to find out whether or not IGAs are useful and appropriate to her students. Besides, the overwhelming majority of the research

projects about the usefulness of IGAs in speaking class have been conducted in other parts of the world. However, in my university no researchers examine the perceptions of first-year non-English major students in applying IGAs in teaching speaking. Accordingly, it is necessary for me to conduct a research on IGAs to exploit the perceptions of first-year non-English major students at UKH towards the implementation of IGAs in speaking lessons and the changes in their attitudes to the use of IGAs before and after carrying out the study.

With the objectives mentioned above, my research questions are:

* What are the perceptions of non-major freshmen at UKH towards the use of IGAs in speaking lessons?

* How teaching speaking with IGAs affect students' speaking skill?

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Description of the context and material

Sixty-two first-year non-English majored students at Khanh Hoa University were chosen as participants in this study. They were all the age of eighteen. They come from different parts in Central Vietnam. All participants have learned English for at least seven years at schools and now they are in the first term of the 2021-2022 academic year. Moreover, carrying out the research became more convenient since the researcher is also the teacher of the class in this first term. The study took place over a 10-week period of time. I delivered the *Consent Form, the Information to Participants Involved in Research and* pre-questionnaires to 62 participants. Then, I started to introduce 10 information gap activities in the speaking lessons. The topics for these information gap tasks were taken from the textbook "*Life A1-A2*" by Helen Stephenson, Paul Dummett and John Hughes. For each information gap activity, I told the instructions to the learners. Also, I reviewed or pre-taught new words or structures utilized in the context. I gave the examples of what they had to do during the activity. Afterwards, the students in pairs did the task. They had to talk with others to complete the information. Finally, the learners made their performance in front of the class. Then the teacher took notes typical

mistakes and gave the feedback at the end of the activity.

2.2. Evaluation Methods

In this study, three research instruments used for data collection were questionnaires, semi-structured individual interview and results from the final oral exam. The questionnaires were delivered to the experimental group students. The purpose of this method was to collect the information on changes in respondents' perceptions and attitudes towards the exploitation of IGAs in speaking periods. The second instrument was semi-structure individual interviews with open-ended questions. It was employed to double check the results of the questionnaires and deeply understand participants' perceptions towards using IGAs in speaking periods. The interviews were done after the post-questionnaire and were recorded to gain the post treatment information from learners objectively. Each interview lasted between 20-25 minutes with 5 key questions and was conducted in Vietnamese so that students could express their opinions freely and clearly without worrying about language barriers. The content of the interview questions were focused on collecting information on students' perceptions in using IGAs in speaking class and the usefulness of IGAs towards their speaking skill. After the interviews, the contents were transcribed for data analysis. Besides, in an attempt to examine the effectiveness of IGAs on the students' speaking ability, the study followed a quasi-experimental method design. These students were divided into two groups: the control group taught conventionally and the experimental group. A pre-test and post-test activity of speaking skill were designed and given to evaluate the effect of IGAs on the students' oral interaction. The pre-test scores were collected from students' first introduction class. They were asked to introduce themselves in a maximum of 3 minutes. At this time, the teacher took notes on a speaking rubric for each student. The post-test results were collected after students were exposed to the IGAs, again based on the same grading, speaking rubric. During the semester, the experimental group was given a topic to be discussed. Students worked in

groups or in pairs and discussed a task assigned to them, for example: greetings, talking about their family, describing and finding places in town, finding the differences between two pictures, etc. At the final exam, based on the topic of speaking test, the students were asked to speak about their family, their hometown, or make a description about place and person, etc in a maximum of 3 minutes. The results were compared with pre-test scores.

In conclusion, in this paper, the author applied three various data methods to see the research matters from different angles.

3. Result

As mentioned above, the questionnaire and the interview were exploited to investigate students' perceptions as well as attitudes towards the use of IGAs in speaking periods. Thus, a huge amount of data were collected and the following table will show the perceptions of students on the IGAs in speaking class.

Table 1. Students' perceptions on the IGAs in speaking class

Item	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	IGAs have significant effect on students' motivation.	0%	0%	6.5%	29%	64.5%
2	IGAs provide a relaxing and interesting atmosphere.	0%	9.7%	0%	58%	32.3%
3	Students enjoy learning English speaking when teacher uses IGAs.	0%	0%	3.2%	35.5%	67.7%
4	IGAs help students develop their language proficiency.	0%	3.3%	0%	58%	38.7%
5	IGAs help students feel more confident to speak in English.	0%	9.7%	22.6%	51.6%	16.1%
6	IGAs help students have more chances to practice English in the classroom.	0%	16.1%	9.7%	48.3%	25.9%

The result in the first statement indicated that 64.5% of the participants strongly agreed that IGAs affect students' motivation and 29% of them agreed that, but only 6.5% were neutral. The majority of the respondents acknowledged the usefulness of IGAs because they become more eager, more active and engaged in the speaking class thanks to these tasks. They were enthusiastic and made more effort to achieve the task objectives. In addition, in the interview, most students agrreed with this statement. Below are some extracts from the collected data.
"I really feel like I am into the activity in which guessing the name of the famous people or exchanging the personal information. They are exciting activities." (Lan, interviews)
"I feel motivated in the speaking class through IGAs because I have a real purpose for talking. For instance, in the activity about filling the family tree, I need to exchange and

collect information needed with my friend to complete the task. Without my contribution, the task cannot be completed." (Tien, interviews)

Statement 2 confirmed that the majority of the students (90.3%) said that IGAs provide a relaxed and interesting atmosphere and only 9.7% disagreed with that statement. Most of the participants claimed that the class atmosphere they experienced with IGAs was stimulating. In the interview, Linh shared that, "The atmosphere in the speaking class is relaxing, which makes me feel that learning English is very exciting."

The analysis of the third statement positively indicated that 67.7% of the respondents strongly agreed, 35.5% agreed and 3.2% were neutral that students enjoy learning English speaking when the teacher uses IGAs. They were happy to use the language they learned. In statement 4, it is noticed that 58% of the participants strongly

agreed, 38.7% agreed that IGAs help students develop their language proficiency, but only 3.3% disagreed with that. When being asked in the interview about whether IGAs could help the participants develop their language proficiency, most of them mentioned the benefits of IGAs in helping them reinforce vocabulary and grammatical structures they studied in classroom. Below are some extracts from collected data.

"I can easily remember the words and grammar points and know how to use them in the context since I have opportunities to apply them in communicative situations. These activities bring the language to life." (Tien)

"I hate learning words and grammar rules by heart. However, when I often communicate with my partner through information gap tasks, this knowledge comes to my mind gradually and naturally." (Lan)

In comparison with the perceived improvement in grammar and vocabulary, the respondents a little bit less frequently reported the benefit of IGAs on the pronunciation development. They believed that their pronunciation became better. In terms of fluency, many students stated that information gap activities helped to increase speaking fluency. Vy, in the interview shared that, "learning new words helped them become more fluent because the more words they know, the easier it is to express themselves."

In statement 5, 67.7% of the respondents acknowledged that IGAs helped students be more confident in using language, 22.6% of them were neutral and 9.7% disagreed with that. In the interview, when being asked: "What do you think about the usefulness of IGAs towards your speaking skill?", Quynh shared that "Now I feel more confident because I can make simple sentences or conversations with my friends in English without being nervous about making mistakes in grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation like I used to before". Similarly, Lan claimed that, "at first, the limitation in my speaking ability really discouraged me to speak. However, when I took part in IGAs, I had more opportunities as well as the reasons to speak. Then, my

speaking ability get better gradually. The feeling of "I can do things I could not do before" really encouraged me". Linh also said that she reduced the nervousness in speaking when she communicated with her partners. Additionally, Tien stated that learning speaking was much more enjoyable when they and their friends worked together so that they could help each other learn faster. This also fostered their confidence with using English to speak.

Moreover, statement 6 supported the fact that the majority of the participants (74.2%) stated that IGAs help students have more chances to practice English in the classroom, whereas 9.7% were neutral and 16.1% disagreed with that. Many respondents claimed that their participation in speaking tasks increased much more than before. They got more chances to speak and contributions were fairly distributed. As Tien stated in the interview that, "My partner and I have equal opportunities to speak in the target language." Vy shared in the interview that, "Thanks to the information gap activities, I have more chances to participate in class and practice English orally than I used to."

In addition, to investigate the effectiveness of using IGAs in teaching speaking, the t-test was used. The author calculated and analyzed the data based on the students' scores on the pre- and post-tests in the experimental and control groups. The illustration of data analysis and interpretation was presented below.

Table 2. Summary of pre-test results

Group	Control	Experimental
N	31	31
M	6.06	6.21
SD	1.69	1.81
Mean difference	0.15	
t statistics	-0.33	
t-critical	2.00	
Degree of freedom	60	

As shown in Table 2, the means of the control and experimental groups were 6.06 and 6.21 respectively which revealed that the results of the pre-test of the two groups revealed that the mean of the experimental group was slightly higher than the mean of the control

group. The standard deviation of the control group was 1.69 and 1.81 for the experimental group. In addition, the value of t statistics was smaller than the value of the t-critical (0.33 < 2.00). This indicates that the two groups were quite similar in terms of their initial speaking skill before the treatment.

Table 3. Summary of post-test results

Group	Control	Experimental
N	31	31
M	6.26	7.24
SD	1.56	1.41
Mean difference	0.98	
t statistics	-2.53	
t-critical	2.00	
Degree of freedom	60	

According to Table 3, the mean of post-test was 6.26 for the control group and 7.24 for the experimental group. The standard of deviation was 1.56 for the control group and 1.41 for the experimental groups. Furthermore, the table of t-critical with 60 degrees of freedom for 0.05 level showed t-critical of 2.00. The value of t statistics was greater than that of t-critical (2.53>2.00). This results implies that the experimental and control groups were significantly different at the end of the research period and the null hypothesis of the study is rejected.

In order to make the research more persuasive, the development within each group was also calculated. Paired t-test analysis was exploited to examine the differences between the pre-test and the post-test within each group separately. Table 4 shows the results of the paired t-test in the control group and Table 5 shows the results of conducting paired t-test in the experimental group respectively.

Table 4. Summary of Paired T-test of Control Group

Control Group	Pre-test	Post-test
N	31	31
M	6.06	6.26
t statistics	-1.15	
t-critical two-tail	2.04	
Degree of freedom	30	

Table 5. Summary of Paired T-test of Experimental Group

Experimental Group	Pre-test	Post-test
N	31	31
M	6.21	7.24
t statistics	-4.95	
t-critical two-tail	2.04	
Degree of freedom	30	

As can be seen from Table 4, the value of t-statistics was 1.15. The table of t-critical with 30 degrees of freedom for 0.05 level, showed t-critical of 2.04. The value of t-statistics was smaller than that of t-critical (1.15<2.04). These results state that the difference between the pre-test and post-test in the control group was not significant enough.

According to Table 5, the value of t-statistics was 4.95. Considering the degree of freedom (30), the t-critical was 2.04 in the table. The result of t-statistics was greater than that of t-critical (4.95>2.04) which means that the pre-test and post-test were different from each other in the experimental group and this difference was statistically significant. The students taught with the IGAs achieved significantly better scores in speaking than those who were taught using the conventional technique.

4. Discussion

Firstly, as can be inferred from the results of the data analysis, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group. The participants in the control group were better in the field of speaking skill but this improvement was not statistically significant. Moreover, the improvement in the control group is natural because it also received a traditional treatment. However, when the results of the control group were calculated and compared to those of the experimental group, the t-value in the experimental group was greater than the t-value in the control group.

Secondly, the information from the questionnaire and the interview indicated that most of the students have positive response towards the exploitation of information gap activities in speaking lessons. The perceived benefits from the participants in this study include the increase in students'

participation, language proficiency, confidence and motivation to speak in the target language. This confirms the results in Putri's research (2014). He applied both qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate the effects of using information gap activities in improving the speaking skill. The result of the research revealed that the students' opportunities to talk in English increased. They had more time to practice speaking by actively taking part in the discussion. Therefore, in the context of the study, this finding is very encouraging. The students have equal opportunities to communicate during the English lessons. In other words, their participation in the class improves.

In addition, the findings of this study are in line with the results of other previous studies on examination of the impact of information gap activities on speaking skill. Jondeya (2011) conducted an investigation on information gap technique towards developing speaking ability for the eighth graders in Gaza Governorate Schools. The results revealed that the implementation of information gap tasks is considered as an effective technique to be used to improve students' speaking skill. Moreover, another research conducted by Karimi (2010) proved that the students' degree of studying increases when they learn new words by the implementation of information-gap tasks in the speaking sections. These activities are useful for enhancing the students' oral proficiency.

Furthermore, the increase in learners' confidence and motivation in speaking English reported by the participants in this research is correlated with the results in Ismaili's (2016) and Putri's (2014) studies. These researchers claimed that the learners key findings indicate the positive attitudes of the non-major first year students towards IGAs. The participants perceived that IGAs help them to increase their participation, improve their oral ability such as vocabulary, grammar, fluency and pronunciation and develop their confidence as well as their motivation. Futhermore, learning atmosphere was also interesting and relaxing with the use of IGAs in speaking class.

felt motivated and confident to express their ideas in the target language. They were interested in talking and sharing their opinions with their friends in a relaxed learning atmosphere. More opportunities to communicate to other friends also developed students' confidence. The students became more active in speaking activities and they were very happy to exploit the language they know to express their ideas in English. Similarly, Rosmaliwarnis (2007) pointed out that IGAs inspired the students to ask many questions to know more when they were in real communication. Students have motivation to talk since they can be free to respond the missing information. The research findings from the study can lead to the conclusion that IGAs can motivate learners and make them become more confident.

To conclude, by examining the results and comparing the present study with previous studies, the findings prove that in general, using IGAs had a beneficial impact on promoting students' participation, improving students' speaking skill, confidence and motivation in speaking English. It can be said that the school and classroom culture in Khanh Hoa University has affected the success of the innovation. Particularly, I had more freedom to be as innovative as I can even though I still had to base on the syllabus guidelines. When teaching English speaking to these students, I could make any adaptations or changes to the materials which I thought it would be the most suitable for my learners and help them develop their English ability.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored the students' perceptions and benefits in implementing IGAs in speaking lessons. The In addition to the positive results, it still remains few shortcomings due to the limitations of time and sample size. Hence, it is recommended that more studies on the same topic should be carried out in the future to overcome the limitations in this study.

The findings in this research are useful for teachers in general and those working at Khanh Hoa University in particular to have better understanding about the positive

influence of IGAs on learners' speaking. Thus, they can apply them into the speaking lessons to make students be interested in learning speaking. It can be concluded that the benefits from the use of information gap tasks are completely worth doing.

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NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN NGỮ NĂM NHẤT ĐỐI VỚI VIỆC SỬ DỤNG HOẠT ĐỘNG KHOẢNG TRỐNG THÔNG TIN TRONG GIỜ HỌC NÓI

Đỗ Hàng Uyên Thy

Trường Đại học Khánh Hoà

Tóm tắt: Kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh được xem là một kỹ năng quan trọng trong quá trình học ngôn ngữ. Do vậy, bài nghiên cứu này được thực hiện để điều tra nhận thức của sinh viên không chuyên năm nhất tại trường Đại học Khánh Hòa cũng như tính hiệu quả trong việc sử dụng hoạt động khoảng trống thông tin trong các giờ học nói tiếng Anh. Kết quả cho thất rằng, người học cảm thấy tự tin và năng nổ hơn, vui vẻ hơn khi tham gia vào các hoạt động, cũng như động cơ học tập được nâng cao. Ngoài ra, khả năng nói của người học cũng được cải thiện đáng kể.

Từ khóa: kỹ năng nói, hoạt động khoảng trống thông tin, nhận thức, tính hiệu quả, sinh viên không chuyên ngữ năm nhất