

# FACTORS AFFECTING ENGINEERING STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN PRACTISING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS AT COLLEGE OF URBAN WORKS CONSTRUCTION

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**Abstract:** Speaking is one of the most important skills to be developed and enhanced as means of effective communication. However, many students do not have enough motivation to practise speaking English though motivation is one of the vital factors determining the success or failure of language learning. This paper aims to discuss factors affecting first-year engineering students' motivation in practising English speaking skills at College of Urban Works Construction (CUWC). The participants were 90 first-year engineering students and 8 English teachers. The findings showed that there were four groups of factors that affect students' motivation: (1) Students' factors; (2) Teachers' factors; (3) Classroom factors; (4) Other factors. Besides, some suggestions on how to promote the motivation in practising English speaking skills for engineering students of CUWC were given.

**Key words:** motivation, speaking; factors, practice, engineering students

## 1. Introduction

These days, Vietnam is in the integration with international labour market when considerably participated in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) as well as more foreign investors focus on this potential market. This requires students not only have specialized knowledge but also need to be proficient in English, especially English speaking skills to get more job opportunities. English has become a common language not only for business, diplomacy, science but also for communication. Obviously, practising speaking English regularly helps them to be able to communicate with different people in the world as well as to success in the competitive job market. However, in reality, most of engineering students at CUWC are not motivated to speak and do not actively participate in speaking activities.

Because of the importance of motivation in foreign language learning, this research was conducted to investigate engineering students' motivational degree in practising English speaking skills (ESSs) and factors affecting their motivation. On the basis of the research results, some suggestions were provided to improve CUWC first-year engineering students' motivation in practising ESSs.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Motivation in practising English speaking skills

Motivation is considered as a key factor affecting the success or failure of language learning. It is as a psychological trait which helps people achieve a goal. The definition of motivation has been given differently by different researchers. For example, Gardner (1985) defined motivation as the extent ones strive to acquire the language because of the desire to do

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so and the satisfaction derived from it. In addition, Dornyei explains motivation as a function of a person's thoughts that encodes the information into belief, and then drives to the action (Dornyei, 1994). Another definition was clarified by Harmer (2001, p.51), "motivation is some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something". Obviously, once we have our own goals which are really attractive and important to us, we try to reach them. This action is driven by motivation. It can be said that motivation is the whole energy of an individual to create activation and intention to a job/task. It also refers to the efforts that learners make to learn a foreign language as well as to practise ESSs. Talking about the role of motivation, Mayer (2003) affirms "When students are motivated to learn, they try harder to understand the material and thereby learn more deeply, resulting in better ability to transfer what they have learned to new situations" (Mayer, 2003, p. 459, cited in Liu, 2010). If students are highly motivated to possess a better speaking ability, they can develop their goal orientation concerning practising speaking and be determined to achieve these goals.

## **2.2. Factors affecting students' motivation in practising English speaking skills**

In order to help students to be more interested in practising speaking English, it is essential to explore factors influencing their motivation. These factors, as documented in the literature on second language learning motivation, come from students (language proficiency level, learning styles, personality), teachers (speaking activities, teaching methods), classroom factors and other factors (the goal for learning speaking, job opportunity, parents and peers).

Firstly, the motivation toward learning ESSs is considerably affected by students, especially their English proficiency level, personality and learning styles. Wechsumangkalo & Prasertrattanadecho (2002) emphasized that the English proficiency level could positively or negatively influence students' learning motivation. Doan (2011) showed that the aptitude and the students' shortage of vocabulary were the major causes which reduce students' motivation in learning ESSs. Rubin & Thompson (1994) concluded that introverted learners were shy, worried about their ability and less engaged in classroom activities, whereas extroverted ones tended to be more active in classroom and in daily-life communication. Obviously, the rate of progress varies according to the individual characteristics of each learner.

In addition that the motivation level will be increased or decreased is partly due to the teachers. Noels et al. (1999) investigated that teachers with active role in supporting student's autonomy and providing useful feedback about students' learning progress, is related to students' extrinsic and intrinsic motivational orientations. Harmer (2001) also affirmed the teacher as a motivator toward students' practice of speaking. Being experienced with updated methods, the teachers know how to encourage students and have a good choice of speaking activities (Kayi, 2006) so that their students can develop communicative competence and eager to take part in practising speaking English. In the context of Vietnam, Phan (2010) found out that the support from English teachers, especially their teaching methods had a significant impact on students' motivation in learning English.

Classroom also has an impact on students' motivation in learning speaking. Ehrenberg et al. (2001) identified that the large class can reduce the amount of teacher' time in controlling students' practice, does not give much chances for students to interact with each other. This

creates unpleasant atmosphere which considerably affect students' motivation. What is more, the usage of many different teaching materials for supporting communicative activities brings positive changes to students' speaking learning. Doff (1988) mentioned to visual aids (pictures, flashcards, charts, magazines), authentic objects as supporting materials for a more interesting speaking class. Students will have less engagement in speaking English if the teacher do not apply modern media, except for the board and textbooks (Aduwa-Oiegbaen & Iyamu, 2006).

Among many other factors, job opportunity, the learning goals, parents and peers are considered as the influential factors toward students' motivation. It is inevitable that setting up different learning goals makes different level of motivation. Students will be motivated and put more efforts in practising speaking when they orient their own realistic goals. In contrast, the demotivation appears if students lack goal setting for their career in the future. Hence, job opportunity has become the main energy source stimulating students to practise speaking. A new research on the 'English in Latin America' by British Council shows that improved employment prospects as the main motivation for non-English speakers to learn English. 75% of participants in this survey agreed job opportunity is the main reason that inspired them to learn English. Bartram (2006) agreed that parents' attitudes toward foreign language learning could affect insightfully children's motivation and achievement. Whereas, Newton & Mwisukha (2009) emphasized that there was a significant relationship between peer group influence and students' academic achievement levels. According to Phan (2010), the social comparison with classmates and peers was the most introjected stimulation for students to improve their English.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The survey was conducted at College of Urban Works Construction with 90 first-year engineering students. The questionnaires were delivered to them by the researcher at break time and were collected after completion. In addition, 8 English teachers at different ages were also invited to individual interviews.

Table 1 presents specific information on the student and teacher participants. From the table, we can see that most of students are male and their age range from 18 to 20, while teachers' ages are from 26 to 50.

**Table 1.** Summary of participants

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
English teachers	From 26-35 36-45	44	21	23
First-year engineering students	From 18-20 21-23	855	815	40
Total		98	89	9

#### **3.2. Methods**

This research used a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. According to Creswell (2003), a mixed method is useful to capture the best of quantitative and qualitative approaches; moreover, it avoids the limitation of each single approach and produces a deeper understanding of the research problem over a large population. To investigate the

factors influencing first-year engineering students' motivation in practising ESSs, the quantitative approach was applied and data were collected through the questionnaire. The questionnaire, with a total of 15 questions including both closed and open-ended questions was for seeking richer data and the answers of research questions. Before delivering the questionnaire to the main participants, it was piloted on a group of 10 students at CUWC for revising its content and solving students' misunderstanding some terms. To maximize data validity, the considerations about collectors (the researcher), time (break time) and location (the CUWC) are carefully emphasized. Those factors had certain impacts on how participants give out information and answers in a survey (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

The interviews were conducted with 8 English teachers who are teaching English at CUWC. They were asked about factors affecting students' motivation and some suggestions for developing students' motivation in speaking English. It would be easier to clarify the participants' answers by asking them for a further explanation if their answers were unclear or incomplete. Each interview lasted about 15 minutes and carefully taken notes by the researcher. The aim of interview is to clarify the information gathered from the questionnaire as well as to explore deeply the research issues.

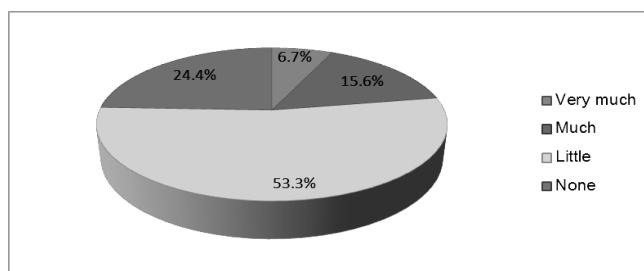
### 3.3. Data analysis

After collecting the questionnaire response from students, the data were synthesized, categorized, and analysed based on the list of questions in relation with the research questions. These data were calculated and then summarized in form of statistic frequency and percentage by using Microsoft Excel Program. The results were presented in text, tables and figures. In addition, results from the interviews were coded and categorized into different themes or key words so that the researcher could easily match them to research questions.

## 4. Findings and discussions

### 4.1. Students' interest in practising ESSs

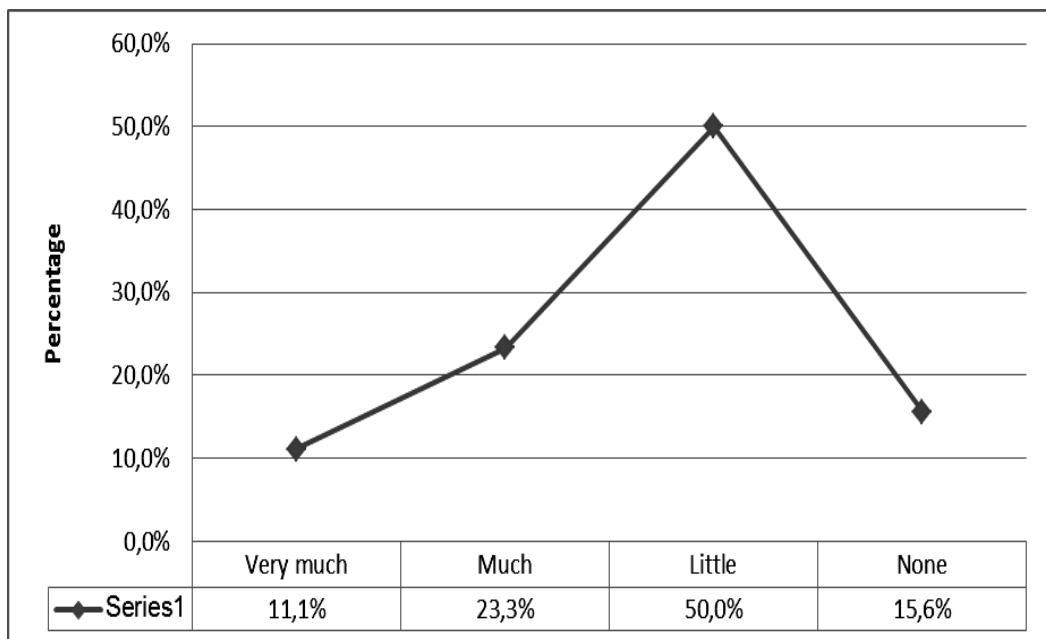
Interest plays an important role in promoting students to explore the new language and become more excited to actively participate in speaking activities. However, the study revealed that more than a half of student informants (53.3%) had little interest in practising ESSs. Only 6.7% of them like learning speaking so much whereas the one with no interest were much higher, 24.4%. Some students said that they tended to prefer learning grammar than speaking. They would like to focus on their professional knowledge because it directly serves their career in the future. This showed that many engineering students lacked the interest in speaking English, which may be the cause of their low level of participation in speaking activities.



**Figure 1.** Students' interest in practising speaking English

#### 4.2. Students' effort in English speaking class

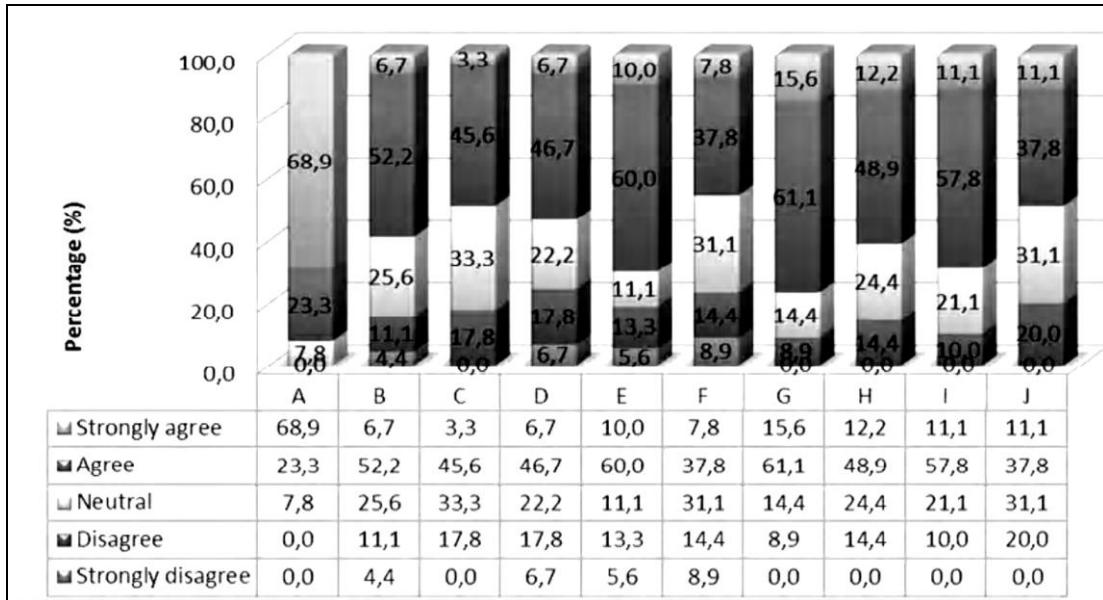
To be a successful language learner, students need to set up practical goals and make a great effort during a long-term learning process. Though, once the students do not have much interest in learning speaking English, they often ignore the practice of speaking and do not try hard to achieve their learning goals. Therefore, it is an understandable fact that a half of student participants (50.0%) put their effort into speaking class with a low level; even a few seemed to lack efforts in their learning. A smaller percentage of student informants (23.3% and 11.1%) had much or very much efforts in English speaking class. 15.6% of students affirmed that they learnt to speak English due to the requirement from their college and did not concern much about the practice. The survey' results were presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Students' efforts in English speaking class

#### 4.3. Factors affect students' motivation in practising ESSs

Factors	
A. English proficiency level B. Personality C. Learning styles D. Teachers' teaching methods E. Speaking activities	F. The influence of important people (parents, friends) G. The goals for learning speaking H. Job opportunity I. The classroom atmosphere J. Teaching materials (visual aids, audio, textbooks)



**Figure 3.** Factors affecting students' motivation in practising ESSs

Based on the study' results, the researchers identified and classified factors that significantly influence students to participate in speaking activities in the classroom into four groups. They were students' factors, teachers' factors, classroom and other factors.

#### 4.3.1. Students' factors

In the first group, the results were obvious in which most of student participants showed their approval for the influence of their English proficiency level. Over 90% of them strongly agreed or agreed that they were motivated to speak English confidently if they possessed a good English proficiency level. Only 15.5% and 17.8% of students neglect the influence of personality and learning styles toward learning English speaking while a half of students admitted that their personality and learning styles made their motivation changed.

In the interviews with the teachers, the majority of teachers (7 out of 8 teachers) also said that one of the main factors having a big impact on their students' motivation in speaking English was from students, especially their English proficiency level, followed by personality and learning styles. They said "Students" average marks of English were rather low, ranged from 5 to 6. The shortage of vocabulary, grammar as well as the mistakes of pronunciation made them difficult to speak out their ideas in English". Besides, many introvert students often kept silent and felt shy, which caused the worry about their oral abilities. Most of them were not instructed the appropriate practice of speaking in high schools. It was understandable that the low level of English, the shyness, diffidence along with the shortage of speaking practice caused students to become passive and less engaged in speaking activities.

#### 4.3.2. Teachers' factors

In terms of teachers' factors, speaking activities and teaching methods were emphasized by many student participants. Most of them (70%) agreed that their motivation in practising ESSs was partly increased or decreased due to speaking activities, solely 11% was not sure

about the influence of this factor in their English speaking. Obviously, communicative activities allow natural learning with much practice in real situations and improve students' motivation significantly (Littlewood, 1981). More than 50% of students highly appreciated teachers' teaching methods. However, this factor did not exert much influence on making students lose the engagement in English followed by nearly 25% of students. They said that practising speaking was a long-term process of developing internal interest and depended much on students' efforts irrespective of the poor or good teaching methods.

In addition, many English teachers believed that speaking activities which were replicated frequently would make boredom and unexcitement for students. Whereas, students would be inspired and enthusiastically participate into practising speaking if the teachers used various activities in class. They revealed "because of the limited time for speaking in an overcrowded class, it's difficult to employ many different activities aiming to encourage the students to actively participate in practising speaking". However, students would be inspired when the teacher have an equal usage among activites such as question and answer, role-play, picture discription, interview, games, discussion and problem solving. Using appropriate teaching methods could motivate their students to speak as Kassing (2011)'s study admitted that there was significance correlation between the teachers' motivational teaching practices and increased level of the learners' motivated behaviors in learning English. Obviously, the choice of speaking activities and teaching methods considerably affected students' motivation.

#### **4.3.3. Classroom factors**

Two main factors significantly influenced how well students got engaged in practising speaking English in class were classroom atmosphere and teaching materials according to 68.9% and 48.9% of students respectively. A pleasant and supportive atmosphere in class is essential and helps students freely share their ideas with one another, which will motivate them to easily take part in speaking activities. This was agreed by 6 out of 8 teachers interviewed. They revealed that an overcrowded class without the support of classmates along with a strict teacher would negatively affect their students' study. This finding is consistent with Ahmad et al' (2013) studying result. More interestingly, the variety of teaching materials (pictures, newspapers, flashcards, charts, real objects) partly contributed to the development of students' motivation in practising speaking English according to the explanation of more than a half of teachers.

#### **4.3.4. Other factors**

The results revealed that the goal for learning speaking was considered as the most influential factors toward students' motivation with the agreement level of 76.7% of students and 6 out of 8 teachers interviewed. The variety of learning goals also made the different levels of motivation for the practice of speaking skills. In my interviews, the teachers affirmed that the students would be responsible for their learning if they set up concrete goals for their own learning and be aware of the necessary of learning ESSs. The more concrete and realistic goals are, the higher motivation for learning speaking English is and vice versa. What is more, most of first-year engineering students had a desire to find a good job after graduation. Hence, job

opportunity had become the great energy source promoting them to practise speaking English. This view was agreed by nearly 60% of students and 5 teachers (62.5%) in this survey.

Parents and peers had an important impact on stimulating students to practise ESSs, which was approved by more than 40% of students surveyed and a half of teachers interviewed. The teachers supposed that the positive encouragement, support and collaboration from parents and peers were necessary and useful to students' efforts to achieve their goals. Nearly 23% of students disagreed that this factor had much influence on their motivation in practising ESSs because they are adults who are aware of deciding to do what are the good things for themselves.

In summary, the results from questionnaire and interviews indicated that there was a variety of factors that affect the students' motivation in speaking English. Both teachers and students agreed that students' motivation was affected by students themselves, teacher, classroom and other factors. They were classified and arranged in the order: 1) Students' factors: English proficiency level, personality, learning styles; 2) Teachers' factors: speaking activities, methods; 3) Classroom factors: classroom atmosphere, teaching materials; 4) Other factors: goals for learning speaking, the influence of parents and peers, job opportunities.

#### **4.4. Suggested solutions for promoting students' motivation in practising speaking English**

The present findings revealed that CUWC first-year engineering student lacked interest as well as did not put many efforts into their practice of speaking. It was obvious that their motivation was influenced by four groups of different factors. The highest concern of each group was students' English proficiency level, speaking activities, the classroom environment and the goal for learning speaking. Hence, it was necessary to pay much attention to the following points.

Firstly, the students must be aware of the important role of English as well as of practising ESSs to their study and careers. They should realize what they need and set up realistic goals for their own learning. This helps them make more efforts during the English learning process, especially investing more time for their self-study. Reading is the effective way of increasing the number of vocabulary. Students could use them to practise ESSs with friends, via speaking learning sites or even by themselves. Listening to English songs and programs on TV or the Internet is also the way to be familiar with English pronunciation, stress, intonation.

The teacher plays a vital role in inspiring students to practise speaking in and out of the class. The flexible and clever usage of speaking activities is essential, which aims to give more chances for students to speak, to exchange ideas and correct their mistakes together. With an overcrowded class, the teacher should organize speaking activities in pairs or groups aiming to increase the amount of students' talking time in English speaking classes and bring the feeling of comfortable to them. Many preferable activities were suggested such as *role play, games, questions and answers, discussion, picture description, extra curriculum activities*. Holding a field trip with foreign instructors at construction and technical companies or a short course abroad might be a good choice for creating many various chances of practising ESSs. Moreover, the students would be more motivated and excited about the class if their teacher were

enthusiastic, friendly and thoughtful in teaching. A good teacher as a motivator would know how to give feedback effectively by using good scores, compliments, rewards or punishment policy for each different student. The teacher should understand their students' needs and helps them set up achievable goals during the course.

Thirdly, creating a pleasant and supportive learning environment was extremely essential for students to effectively acquire a new language in general and have more motivation to speak English in particular. Most of students agreed that an English class should be no more than 25 students because this gave chances for them to speak more, interact more and create more learning projects. It can be said that engineering students usually spend much time on their major in a strict atmosphere; hence, joining extra curriculum activities at construction companies or meeting foreigner experts to practise their speaking skills seems to be their desire. Moreover, the teacher need to take advantages of technology and high-speed Internet connections to bring about a new virtual learning environment in which students could learn to speak anywhere via some sites such as *VOA special English*, *BBC*, *italki.com*, *coeffee.com*, *speaking24.com* or communication softwares (*MSN Messenger*, *Facebook*, *Skype*). Using flexibly authentic materials (sign, posters, magazines or graphic), audio materials (radio, records) and visual aids such as map, pictures, graphs and charts along with the textbook in speaking class was also one of the ways to arouse students' interest, encourage their participation and make a good impression for engraving the lesson.

Finally, in terms of other factors, helping students set achievable goals for themselves is necessary. They should be motivated to focus on their continued improvement and have responsibility for their goals. Opening many potential job opportunities and popularizing the requirements of a brilliant applicant, including ESSs would help students have an insight of their career prospects and plan for practising speaking to attain job's criteria. Apart from the teacher, the encouragement and positive supports from parents and peers would become the great motivation for students to happily practise speaking English.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper aimed to explore engineering students' motivation and factors affecting their motivation toward the practice of ESSs at CUWC. The results showed that most of first-year engineering students lack the interest and did not make much effort in practising ESSs in and out of the class. There was a variety of factors that had a big impact on their motivation in speaking such as Students' factors, Teachers' factors, Classroom factors and Other factors. This study also gave some suggestions for promoting engineering students' motivation in practising speaking since English speaking ability seems to be only the criterion that makes a difference among engineering students. Hopefully, the study was useful for teachers who want to overcome challenges in English classes, attempt to meet their students' needs and encourage them to speak more. It could contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning ESSs at CUWC.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1

#### 9. Do you have a desire to practise English speaking regularly?

- a. Yes  b. No

#### 10. Which difficulties do you often face when practising speaking English?

- a. Grammar mistakes   
b. Pronunciation mistakes   
c. Limited time for speaking activities   
d. Lack of vocabulary   
e. Unable to find ideas   
f. Uninteresting speaking activities   
g. Large class

Others (*please specify*):.....

#### 11. How often does your teacher motivate you to take part in speaking activities?

- a. Always  b. Usually  c. Sometimes  d. Rarely  e. Never

#### 12. Which activities does your teacher often use to encourage you to practise speaking English?

Please tick (✓) on the number column for your answers

Activities	Level of frequency 1-Never → 5-Always				
	1	2	3	4	5
a. Role play					
b. Discussion and problem solving					
c. Practice conversation in pairs					
d. Games					
e. Questions and answers					
f. Picture description					
g. Presentation					
h. Interviews					
i. Extra curriculum activities (a field trip with foreign instructors, short course abroad)					
Others:.....					
<i>1 = never 2 = rarely 3 = sometimes 4 = usually 5 = always</i>					

**13. Which form of work arrangement do you think is the most effective?**

- a. Individual work  b. Pair work   
 c. Group work (4-5 person/group)  d. Whole-class work

**14. What factors affect your motivation in practising speaking skills?**

Please tick (✓) on the number column for your answers

Factors	Level of agreement 1-Strongly disagree → 5-Strongly agree				
	1	2	3	4	5
a. English proficiency level					
b. Personality					
c. Learning styles					
d. Teachers' teaching methods					
e. Speaking activities					
f. The influence of important people (parents, friends)					
g. The goals for learning speaking					
h. Job opportunity					
i. The classroom atmosphere					
j. Teaching materials (visual aids, audio, textbooks)					
k. Others:.....					
<i>(1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4= Agree, 5=Strongly agree)</i>					

**15. What should the teachers do to motivate you in speaking English?**

- a. Being enthusiastic and thoughtful in teaching   
 b. Being experienced with updated teaching methods   
 c. Giving feedbacks regularly (good marks, compliments, rewards and punishment)   
 d. Using enjoyable activities and games   
 e. Using clear instructions   
 f. Combining textbooks and authentic materials effectively

- g. Creating pleasant classroom atmosphere
- h. Creating more opportunities for real communication
- i. Others:.....

**Please give your suggestions for promoting students' motivation toward the practice of English speaking?**

.....  
.....  
.....

## APPENDIX 2

### INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

#### (For English teachers)

1. Do you think that first-year engineering students should practise speaking English? Why?
2. Are your students interested in practising speaking English in class?
3. What factors affect your students' motivation in practising speaking English?
4. Which speaking activities should you use to motivate your students to practise speaking English?
5. In your opinion, what should we do to create an appropriate speaking teaching and learning environment?
6. Do you have any other suggestions for promoting students' motivation in practising English speaking?

## **NHỮNG YẾU TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐẾN ĐỘNG CƠ LUYỆN NÓI TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN KỸ THUẬT TRƯỜNG CAO ĐẲNG XÂY DỰNG CÔNG TRÌNH ĐÔ THỊ**

**Tóm tắt:** Nói là một trong những kỹ năng quan trọng nhất cần được phát triển với tư cách là một phương tiện giao tiếp hiệu quả. Tuy nhiên, nhiều sinh viên không có đủ động cơ để luyện nói tiếng Anh mặc dù họ biết rằng động cơ là yếu tố quan trọng quyết định sự thành công hay thất bại của việc học ngôn ngữ. Bài báo này thảo luận các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến động cơ luyện nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên năm thứ nhất khối kỹ thuật tại trường Cao đẳng Xây dựng Công trình Đô thị. Đối tượng nghiên cứu gồm 90 sinh viên kỹ thuật năm nhất và 10 giáo viên tiếng Anh trường Cao đẳng Xây dựng Công trình Đô thị. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng có 4 nhóm yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến động cơ luyện nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên: (1) Yếu tố sinh viên; (2) Yếu tố giáo viên; (3) Yếu tố lớp học; (4) Yếu tố khác. Ngoài ra, tác giả đưa ra một số khuyến nghị để nâng cao động lực luyện nói tiếng Anh cho sinh viên kỹ thuật.

**Từ khóa:** động lực, nói, nhân tố, sinh viên kỹ thuật