Creating an English speaking environment at Lao Cai high school for gifted students

Duong Minh Nguyen*

*Giáo viên Tiếng Anh Trường THPT Chuyên Lào Cai, tỉnh Lào Cai

Abstract: *The article presents the results of a study that shows the critical role of creating an English speaking environment for English learners at Lao Cai High School for Gifted Students. This study was conducted with a view to not only identifying the main challenges that students in Lao Cai High School for Gifted Students have encountered in communicating in English but also offering some suggestions that can be helpful for teachers in creating an English speaking environment for students. It also can be valuable for students who are searching for the techniques or strategies for their matters.*

Keywords: *Challenges, learning environment, motivation, interpretive.*

1. Introduction

At Lao Cai High School for Gifted Students, teaching English skills has been conducted at all classes for several years. Although some students understand English grammar very well, and even score high marks in examinations, their communication skills are very poor and they have to struggle to communicate in English. The lack of an English rich environment may discourage students from communicating in English and developing their communicative competence. Therefore, the school has been employing various methods to create an English speaking environment here. This paper will investigate the efficacy of some ways in creating an English speaking environment at Lao Cai High School for Gifted Students.

2. The Research

2.1. Identifying a problem

The researcher employs qualitative, interpretive approach. Data collection methods including Participant observation, Questionnaires, Interview, Document review were adopted to identify the real factors that cause students' problems in communicating in English.

2.1.1. Participant Observation

With the data collected, it can be explained that the many students found the speaking activities were quite challenge for them. Researchers realized that students often felt reluctant to communicate with others in English.

Therefore, the question of the research *"What problems that students may encounter while using English to communicate?"* was raised. However, the number of students who feel willing to use English in class or outside classroom to communicate with teachers and their peers is small. So *"what are the reasons for this situation?"* The answer can be found through an interview.

2.1.2. Interview

A. Students lack vocabulary to express their thoughts in English.

B. Students feel shy to speak English because they often mispronounce words

C. Students lack motivation in communicating in English.
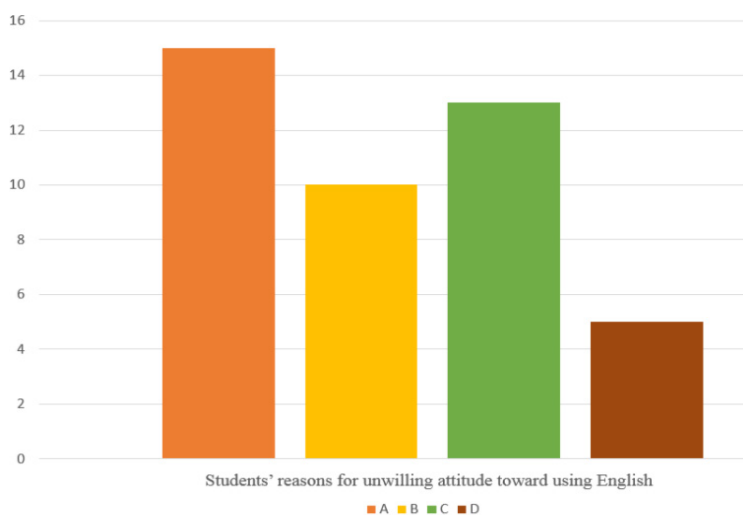
D. Others:..........................

Chart 2.1: Students' reasons for unwilling attitude toward using English

In summary, the findings in Questionnaire and Interview revealed many useful factors related to the students' motivation. The three main causes include the lack of lexico resource, lack of self-confidence and lack of motivation.

2.2. Discussion

Through the data collected, researchers found that there are three main problems that most students in the research group have encountered.

- *Lack of lexico resourc:* As the findings gained through information investigation stage, most of the students interviewed revealed that the difficulty in expressing their understanding in words discourages them from achieving successful speaking. Another common problem is that students sometimes think they have nothing to say on a particular topic.

- *Lack of self-confidence:* Speaking in front of other people needs courage, motivation from inside, and outside such as joyful atmosphere in the conversation and interesting topic.

- *Lack of motivation:* Another problem that discourages students to use English outside the lessons is that students have low motivation to learn English. Nunan (1991) wrote in Lawtie (1999), "Success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the (target) language".

2.3. Thinking of ways to tackle the problems

After three main issues were defined, researcher thinks of measures that could be taken to improve English environment at schools. Researcher then planned some strategies and techniques to change students' attitude towards learning English. The strategies planned to implement include expanding students' lexico resource, raising student's self-confidence and especially creating an English speaking environment to encourage students to communicating in English.

2.4. Practical application

- *Expanding student lexico resource:* To raise the use of English among students, teachers should combine different teaching methods and strategies even provide students different source for self-study.

- *The New Word a Day Game:* To reduce students' pressure on learning new words, teachers can provide a new word for a day by grabbing the word out of the dictionary or from all of any apps and websites.

- *Downloading vocabulary apps:* Teachers can ask students to download dictionary app or game apps such as Scrabble, PowerVocab, Magoosh Vocabulary Builder, A Word A Day Widget, 7 Little Words, Words with Friends,… on their phone and use it. Playing these word games will eventually broaden a person's vocabulary.

2.5. Increasing Students' Reading Time

Literary contents are often full with cultural information and evoke unforgettable reactions for readers. Newspapers and magazines are also a good source of vocabulary: local papers will provide elements of everyday life in society such as interviews, advertisement and other social affairs.

2.6. Vocabulary Quizzes

To help extend students' lexico resource, the researcher planned to help students to develop the habit of using new words in daily conversation by having a vocabulary quiz every week based on words that the class comes across.

- *Organizing Contests:* A contest among groups of students which requires students to find the meaning of an idiom/slang word and use it in their English conversation may encourage students to do self-study. Students can film the video of their conversation and post it on school's websites.

- *Using authentic materials:* Sources can include films, news broadcasts, and television shows; Web sites; and photographs, magazines, newspapers, restaurant menus, travel brochures, and other printed materials. Listen to a video retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6CL2Y4yS0I and jot down interesting facts about dreams.

- Reviewing Films: Films and television offer students a chance to observe behaviours which are hidden in texts; slang words or idioms which are used in native speakers' daily conversations.

2.7. Raising students' confidence

- *Teaching pronunciation:* There are some apps which can be useful to improve students' pronunciation ability such as Sound Pronunciation App, Learn English Sounds Right, Say it: English Pronunciation, Elsa speak, Forvo Pronunciation, English Pronunciation app, … In this way, students can practice speaking at any time.

- *Organizing group activities:* It is aslo said "Pair work and group work can be used to increase the amount of time that learners get to speak in the target language during lesson."

- *Role-play:* Role-play is any speaking activity when you either put yourself into somebody else's shoes, or when you stay in your own shoes but put yourself into an imaginary situation!

2.8. Creating a positive learning environment

- *Encouraging Peer Support in the Classroom:* allowing students to check their answers with their peers before offering them to the whole class also encourages students to speak up. Similarly, they can be allowed to have a discussion with their peers before talking to the whole class so that they will feel more confident in speaking English.

- *Being Sensitive When Assigning Students into Groups:* Many students tend to talk more with their close friends. Therefore, when organizing group work, the teachers should take account of and accommodate these personal traits. It is a good idea to let students choose who they are going to work with.

- *Providing Opportunities for Students to Speak English outside the Class:* opportunities such as English clubs inside and outside the school should be introduced to students. For instance, students can be put into groups to do some projects and if possible, their group work should be recorded or filmed. They may also be asked to carry out and record interviews with foreigners who are visiting or living around or encourage to join English contest held by teachers.

- *Interviews:* An effective way for students to learn about the target language and culture is to send them into their own community to find information via interviewing native speakers in the community, which they can record in notebooks or on audiotapes or video tapes.

- *Making videos:* After the lesson, students were divided into groups of three or four. Students had to give compliments to students from other classes and recorded or videotaped and presented in front of the whole class.

- *Holding a fashion show:* talking about your hot trend

- *Annual event -12 hour challenge:* working and sharing in different groups

- *Studying abroad or exchange programs:* providing the students with a chance to learn about the culture of many other countries.

- *Use both English and Vietnamese in school daily activities:* English should be used along with Vietnamese from classroom sign to school's timetable or any school's documents.

- *Teaching integrated lessons:* Teachers act as guides for students. Furthermore, teaching integrated lessons encourages the teachers of different subjects to work together. The integration of the contents of other subjects in ELT helps reduce the pressure of learning for students.

2.9. Evaluate the action

2.9.1. How would rate your satisfaction with an English environment on these parameters?

Table 2.1. Students' attitude towards communication skills

	Very dissatisfied	Not satisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Lessons offered	0	0	20%	54%	26%
Quality of teaching methods	0	0	10%	65%	25%
Extracurricular activities offered	0	0	10%	70%	15%

2.9.2. How helpful is changing learning environment to your Engl16h study?

An evaluation sheet collected after the time of using different strategies and techniques showed a progress of altering students' attitude toward learning English communication skills compared to the prior ones. Although there were some limitations in the process of implementing strategies and organizing activities due to limited time, class size, restricted finance,… students developed their habits in using English both in and outside class.

3. Conclusion

Creating an English speaking environment plays a crucial role in learning English language in high school level. This finding was carried out in order to exemplify both the main challenges that students have to face up and some suggestions that are beneficial to students as well as teachers in a English working environment.

References

[1]. Littlewood W. (1981). Communicative Language Teaching. Cambridge:Cambridge University Press

[2]. Byram, Michael (2000), Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning. Taylor & Francis Routledge; New Yok.

[3]. Harmer, Jeremy. 2001. The Practice of English Language Teaching, 3rd Edition- Longman Press.

[4]. Harmer, Jeremy (2001), The Practice of English Language Teaching, 3rd Edition- Longman Press.