SPEAKING PROBLEMS FACING FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION – THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study investigated the problems that the first-year major students at University of Education – Thai Nguyen University encountered when speaking English and the causes of the problems. A mixed method design was adopted. Two data collection instruments were questionnaire and interview. The participants were 44 first-year English majors in their first term in the academic year 2021-2022 at the University of Education – Thai Nguyen University. The findings revealed that all of the students had problems though not all of them had the same problems. The problems that most of the students had were related to vocabulary and grammar. The biggest contributor to the problems was limited chances to be exposed to the target language and time spent practicing it. Personal factors like shyness, lack of confidence and fear of mistakes also accounted for the difficulties. Some possible solutions to solve the problems were proposed.

TRỞ NGẠI TRONG KỸ NĂNG NÓI CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH NĂM THỨ NHẤT TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM – ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
	Đề tài này nghiên cứu những khó khăn sinh viên chuyên ngành năm thứ nhất tại trường Đại học Sư phạm – Đại học Thái Nguyên gặp phải trong quá trình nói tiếng Anh và những nguyên nhân đằng sau. Phương pháp nghiên cứu kết hợp được sử dụng trong nghiên cứu này. Hai công cụ thu thập số liệu được dùng là bảng hỏi và phỏng vấn. Đối tượng nghiên cứu là 44 sinh viên chuyên ngành năm thứ nhất trong kì học đầu tiên của năm học 2021-2022 tại trường Đại học Sư phạm – Đại học Thái Nguyên. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy tất cả sinh viên đều gặp khó khăn với việc nói tiếng Anh mặc dù không phải tất cả các sinh viên đều có chung khó khăn. Vấn đề lớn nhất gặp phải nằm ở ngữ pháp và từ vựng. Nguyên nhân lớn nhất là sự hạn chế về tiếp xúc với ngôn ngữ đích và thiếu thời gian dành cho luyện tập. Các yếu tố cá nhân như sự rụt rè, thiếu tự tin và sợ sai cũng góp phần tạo nên khó khăn cho sinh viên. Một số biện pháp cũng được đưa ra để giải quyết vấn đề.

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1. Introduction

English has been regarded as the global language, which is being spoken as an official language in more than 50 countries and as a major foreign language in many others. People from different nations or continents use English as a medium to understand each other. Thanks to English, people can meet and make friends with those half the Earth away from their homeland. English has been used in all aspects of life such as diplomacy, business, education, politics and tourism. According to Crystal (1997) [1], English offers opportunities to higher education, employment, travelling and even a better life. A person with a high English competency level is likely to obtain a well-paid job. English also gives people access to unlimited sources of knowledge. It promotes education and training.

In Vietnam, English is being used as a foreign language. English is becoming more and more essential in the era of modernization and integration. In general education, English is among the three major subjects at all levels. Mastering English ensures good grades at school and a good future job. Various methods have been applied to improve the quality of English teaching and learning. The curriculum has been modified and teachers are provided with workshops to update their professional knowledge and teaching methodology. Students at all levels have been given access to innovations in education.

According to Ur (1996), speaking is regarded as the most important skill among four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) [2]. She also stated that those who know a language are often referred to as 'speakers' of that language, and many, if not most, language learners are interested in learning to speak. Speaking is a priority for many second language or foreign language learners [3].

However, learners of English encounter various problems when speaking. Difficulties in speaking that learners have to face have been investigated by many researchers. According to Sato (2003), learners of English are not competent in speaking because of their fear of making mistakes and their lack of vocabulary. Learners consider speaking English a stressful task [4].

Ur (1996) claimed that inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and mother tongue use are the main problems that speakers of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) face when they learn to speak. Firstly, learners are afraid of making mistakes, being criticized or just simply feeling shy. Secondly, they do not have enough vocabulary to talk or even motivation to speak at all. Thirdly, during conversations, some students dominate while others speak little or not at all. Finally, their mother tongue affects the way they speak. They feel that it is easier to speak in their mother tongue because it is familiar to them and they can avoid acting silly [2].

According to Rababah (2005) there are some factors affecting EFL learners when learning to speak. These factors come from learners themselves, teaching strategies, curriculum, and environment [5]. Many learners lack vocabulary to express their thoughts and feelings. A lack of strategic competence and communication competence is one of the factors that prevent the interactions from continuing. Motivation determines whether learners engage in an activity and how much time and effort they dedicate to it [6]. Motivation and chances to express ideas help to promote learners' communicative skills [7]. However, some learners lack motivation to speak English. A lack of a target language environment can lead to a lack of engagement in authentic situations. Children need to join discourse as well as to learn new knowledge and skills in order to learn discourse skills [8]. Therefore, a lack of opportunities to take part in discourse can be another factor to speaking difficulty. According to Littlewoods (1981), in the case where teachers and learners come from the same language background, the fact that some teachers prefer to use their mother tongue for class management also results in speaking problems [7]. When teachers use their first language, they take away the opportunities for their students to practice using the target language. Learners can see no point in using the target language while their mother tongue is used even more often.

Psychological factors such as fear of mistakes, anxiety or shyness, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation influence speaking performance [9], [10]. Fear of mistakes is one of the factors that cause problems to students in class. Aftat (2008) suggested that this fear comes from correction and negative evaluation [11]. Learners are usually afraid of being laughed at by their peers and they pay much attention to the way others feel about them [12], [13]. They also feel bad about being criticized by their teachers.

Shyness is another common mental state of many learners when they speak in the target language. This situation can cause negative effects on learners' speaking performance. For an acceptable level of shyness, learners may not sound natural though they can still get their messages across. However, for a higher level of shyness, learners can end up with having nothing to say [14]. Therefore, helping students to overcome their shyness will help them achieve the best result in speaking [15]. Bowen (2005) explained that some learners are shy by their nature [16]. They are quiet and do not enjoy talking or they may not be confident and afraid to speak English in front of their class.

Anxiety is a feeling of tension, and nervousness [17]. Sylvia & Tiono (2004) also agreed. They added that feeling anxious about speaking a language can negatively affect speaking performance [18]. The quality of oral production can be reduced and learners may seem less fluent than they actually are. Horwitz (1986) figured out three major causes of anxiety, which are communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation [19]. Communication apprehension refers to learners' ability to communicate in the target language. When learners find it difficult to convey their ideas or react orally to others' statements, they will normally feel anxious. Secondly, the fact that learners know that they are being tested will also cause anxiety. Moreover, being criticized or negatively evaluated by their peers also makes learners feel nervous and uncomfortable.

Lack of confidence is another factor leading to learners' difficulties. When the listeners do not understand learners as the speakers or when the learners do not understand other speakers, they usually feel unconfident. According to Nunan (1999), feeling unconfident about oneself leads to communication worries [10]. He & Chen (2010) revealed that the main cause of lack of confidence is a low speaking competence [20]. Learners normally feel bad about themselves if they cannot speak English fluent enough. Lack of teachers' encouragement also leads to lack of confidence in learners [21]. However, some teachers do not realize that their encouragement can make such difference.

Finally, motivation is essential to learners' speaking results. Nunan (1999) indicated that it can improve learners' reluctance to speak in English [10]. With motivation, learners are ready to join communication. Motivation is a kind of energy that is derived from inside learners. Motivation acts as the key factor to raise their interest in learning. A learner with a stronger motivation tends to achieve higher scores compared to those who have low or no motivation at all. According to Nunan (1999), lack of motivation is caused by uninspiring teaching styles, boredom, irrelevance of materials and lack of information about the objectives of the curriculum [10]. Lack of motivation in learning make learners reluctant to speak English in class. Good teaching results in motivation. Teachers should have passion, creativity and interest in order to motivate their learners. Some of the previous studies on problems that encounter students when they learn to speak English are presented below.

Aleksandrzak (2011) conducted a study on the problems of teaching and learning speaking English as a foreign language at advanced level. The study explored the difficulties when choosing a suitable method and the most common types of interaction among students in class, methods of management and evaluation by the teachers. It also recommended some suitable speaking activities for advanced learners of English [22].

Zhengdong (2012) investigated the problems with ESL speaking skills encountering students at a pedagogical institution in Hong Kong. The study used semi-structured interview as the major

method of data collection. It examined difficulties ESL students had when learning oral skills. The study found out that insufficient opportunities to speak English in class, lack of contents on language enhancement in the curriculum, and lack of target language environment for oral skills practice outside the class were some of the reasons of the problems with speaking. These problems were mainly concerned with the contexts of sociocultural and interpersonal competence. The author suggested combining an adequate intensive language training content in the curriculum [23].

Matějček (2013) explored difficulties in teaching speaking to adult learners. The learners' experiences and expectations were discussed when weighing the difficulties. The data were collected using questionnaires. The adult learners' attitudes towards learning and difficulties and their expectations contributed to the author's assumptions though they might differ in some points [24].

Al-Jamal D. A. & Al-Jamal G. A. (2014) studied difficulties EFL learners encountered. The participants were students of 6 Jordanian public universities. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection tools. The findings revealed the problems of EFL students in speaking and their reasons. They had a low speaking competency level. It was also pointed out that practice of speaking skills was not sufficient in class. Students also had difficulty with mother tongue interference, large size classes, and limited time [25].

In Al-Nakhalah (2016) speaking difficulties facing English language students at Al Quds Open University were investigated. The study also examined the reasons for these problems. An interview was conducted on the sample to investigate speaking difficulties and their causes. Experimental method was adopted to see how effective the measure could be in solving the problems. The findings indicated that difficulties in speaking were caused mainly by fear of mistakes, shyness, anxiety and lack of confidence. The author suggested a favorable environment should be built to support and encourage the students to practice speaking English [26].

Candraloka and Rosdiana (2019) investigated students' speaking competency and their problems in speaking. The triangulation of mixed methods was used in the study. The participants were 7th graders in an Indonesian junior high school. Speaking test, questionnaire and interview were the main tools. The findings showed that all the students had problems with vocabulary and pronunciation, 83.9% of them had problems with grammar and 96.7% with fluency. Besides, the students had their personal reasons like shyness, anxiety, confusion, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes. The study recommended that the students' motivation should be stimulated and they should be taught with engaging speaking materials [27].

To sum up, speaking problems can be caused by many factors. ESL and EFL learners have difficulty in speaking although they might know much about the language. Many studies have revealed that oral skills have been given inadequate attention in class. Learners' personal issues like inhibition or lack of confidence can lead to problems and even failure in speaking English. A similar situation has been happening in the researcher's current institution. Therefore, the researcher would like to know the real problems that the students there have to deal with in speaking English and the causes of the problems. The researcher also proposes some possible solutions to address the problems. Further research will be conducted to examine the effectiveness of the proposed measures. The study seeks the answers for 2 research questions below:

1) What are the speaking problems facing first year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education?

2) What are the causes of these problems?

2. Methods

To conduct a research, it is possible to choose either qualitative or quantitative design or a combination of both. Each method orients towards either qualitative or quantitative approach but these two approaches do not exclude one another. Qualitative research design is used to make discoveries holistically. In this design, data from participants are collected, analysed and the

results are interpreted and a conclusion is made on the issue. This design is mainly based on reasoning so it is highly subjective in nature and needs a sufficient ability from the researcher to analyse and interpret the findings. Some methods which can be used in this design are case study, ethnography research, focus groups, interview, grounded theory and observation. In quantitative research design, researchers make a conclusion from measurable data. In this design, statistical instruments are used to analyse and interpret the results. It has objective nature and researchers' personal judgements do not have an impact on the results. Some methods which can be used in quantitative research approach are experimental, survey and causal comparative method. In mixed methods research design, both the qualitative and quantitative design are used in the same study. This mixed design may give more reliable results because it benefits from both approaches. It can also minimize limitations of both methods. Qualitative method gives textual explanations while quantitative method validates them with statistical data.

The author adopted a mixed methods design in order to examine the complex nature of the problem and give statistical data at the same time. The results from qualitative methods gave the researcher suggestion about what needed to be explored in more details. The findings from quantitative methods gave objective evidence and thus assured the study's reliability.

The participants in this study were 44 first-year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education in their first term. All of them are the same age. They come from different provinces in the North of Vietnam. As their entrance examination results revealed, they are different in their English performance. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they had to spend the whole first term online. Instructions were given on a web-based application and their assignments were handed in via a website.

Two data collection tools used in the study are questionnaire and interview. According to Bill (2000), a questionnaire consists of a set of questions in order to collect data to answer the research questions [28]. A questionnaire can have two types of questions, open-ended and close-ended questions. A closed-ended question gives participants choices to choose from, whereas an open-ended question requires a personal judgement or opinion from participants. The researcher can easily gather information from a large number of subjects, in a short period of time with questionnaires. With technological advances, the delivery of questionnaires can be done quickly via Google forms or emails. In this way, data can be partly processed, which helps save time and efforts. The researcher of the current study used a questionnaire to collect information about students' judgements of their problems in speaking English and where they thought their problems came from.

According to Creswell (2012), interview is a method of data collection, in which interviewers and interviewees will ask and answer questions related to certain topics [29]. They can either meet face-to-face or via an electronic device or Internet application. Interview is a form of consultation where researchers try to find out more about an issue. Three common kinds of interviews are structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews [30]. Structured interviews involve a complete controll by the interviewer. The questions in this kind of interview are usually short and require a straightforward answer. Semi-structured interviews contain topics and questions prepared by the researcher but the interviewee has more freedom of what to speak [31]. Unstructured interviews are conversations between interviewer and interviewee with questions that support the aims of the research. In fact, no interview is totally unstructured. Interviews offer researchers chances to obtain a full and clear explanation from participants. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews give the interviewer chances to make sure that the interviewee understand the questions, while the interviewee is still speaking. Interview gives researchers opportunities to exploit the answers from the interviewees in more details. This is particularly true for face-to-face interviews, where the interviewer can express the questions in the clearest way. The researcher in this study used a semi-structured interview, which helped to collect the desirable data, but still gave chances to interviewees to relax and feel comfortable.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Answers to research question one

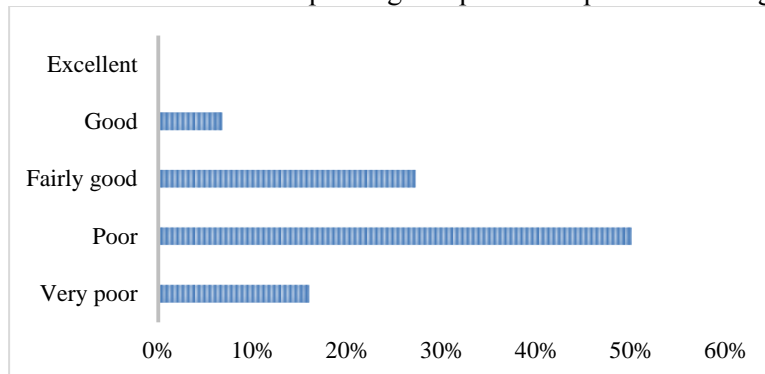The current situation of the students' speaking competence is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. *Students' speaking competence*

As can be seen from Figure 1, no student claimed that their speaking ability was excellent while more than 60% of them admitted to have poor and very poor speaking performance. The percentage of students with good and fairly good speaking ability accounts for about one third. These results can partially prove that the students had difficulty in speaking English.

To find out whether they truly struggled with speaking, the researcher interviewed each of them for 2 or 3 minutes. The interview was done in English. From the interviews with them, the research figured out that half of them could not give a proper answer for all the questions. Their answers were mostly incorrect in terms of grammatical structures and verb tenses. Many of them made mistakes with word choice. Their pronunciation was mostly quite poor when it came to unfamiliar words and phrases. However, some of the students seemed to have problems with even common words, especially auxiliary verbs in their short forms. Most of the answers went straight to the point being asked but most of them were short answers without extra information. Most of the students lacked communicative strategies to deal with unfamiliar topics and words; therefore, they hardly had a fluent conversation as they had to pause to think about word meanings or look for ideas for unfamiliar topics. As can be seen from the interview results, most of the students were still struggling with speaking. They had problems with their pronunciation, word use, grammar and communicative strategies. These findings gave an evidence to their poor performance in speaking English.
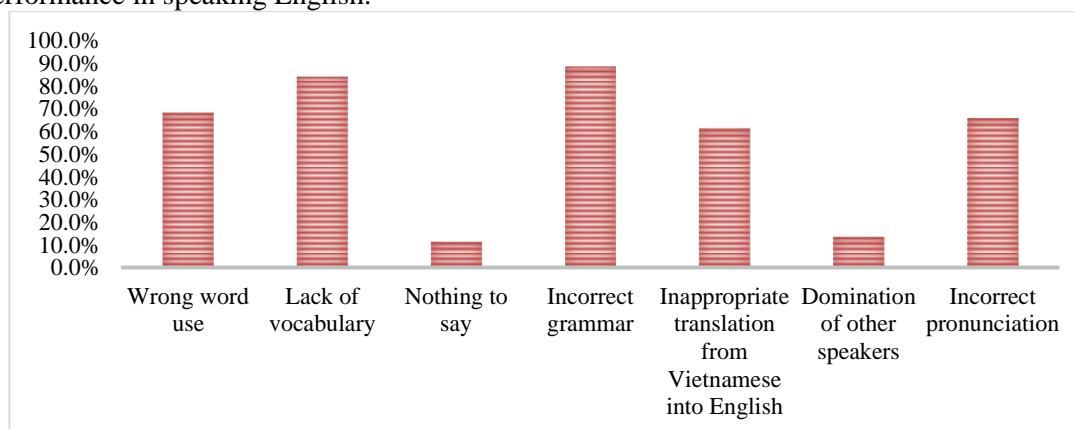

Figure 2. *Students' problems in speaking English*

To be more specific, the students were asked to indicate the problems they were having when they spoke English. As can be seen in Figure 2, incorrect grammar and lack of vocabulary were two problems that the majority of the students had; 88.6% of them had problem with grammar and 84.1% of them had difficulty with lack of vocabulary. Most students also struggled with word use, pronunciation and mother tongue interference with the percentage of 68.2%, 65.9% and 61.4% respectively. A few students had problem with nothing to say and uneven participation in conversations. Most of the students had problem with speaking. They did not only struggle with one or two of them but with most of the given options.

The researcher could see from the interviews that the students struggled quite often while they were speaking. The most clearly observed problems were lack of vocabulary and incorrect grammar. Because they did not have enough vocabulary, they pause for long and very often to search for words to say. A few students could say nothing at some questions though they were repeated several times. This means that they could not speak not due to low voice or rapid speed of the interviewer, but maybe because the topics were unfamiliar to them. Many students did not pay attention to grammatical structures and most of the verbs in their sentences were in the infinitive form. Because they did not know the words well, they mispronounced them. However, even for common words which they know, some students still did not articulate them correctly. This phenomenon made it difficult for the researcher as the listener to understand them.

3.2. Answer to research question two

The researcher listed the factors that might contributed to speaking problems and the students were asked to give a judgement on the extent to which they thought each of the factors influenced their speaking performance. The results are presented in Figure 3 below.
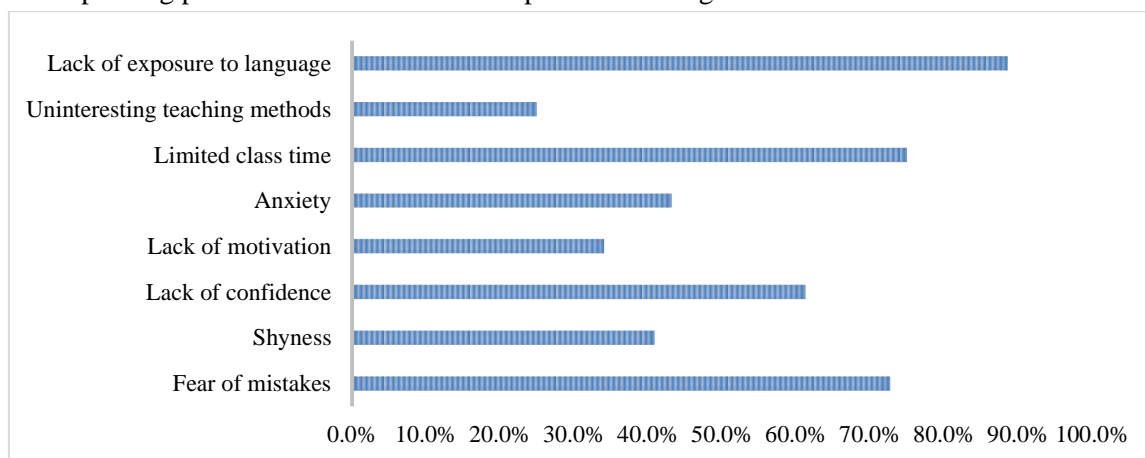

Figure 3. *Reasons for students' speaking problems*

As can be seen from Figure 3, lack of exposure to the target language contributed the most to the students' difficulty, at 88.6%. Limited class time and fear of mistakes were other two major factors after lack of exposure to the language, at more than 70% of the students. About 60% of the students stated that lack of confidence when speaking caused difficulty to them. Around 40% admitted that shyness and anxiety caused them difficulty in speaking. Teaching method was not the main reason for the students' speaking problem; in fact, only 25% of the students did not satisfy with the teaching methods they were taught with.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, all of the students had problems in speaking English though not all of them had the same problems. The problems that most of the students had were related to vocabulary and

grammar. When they spoke English, they paused for long time and often to search for words to say. Many students had an issue with pronunciation whether they knew the words or not. The mistakes in pronunciation did not seem to follow a pattern. Most of the students did not show that they were aware of grammatical structures as they did not often put the verbs into their correct forms and tenses. This did not cause misunderstanding but obviously made their speaking performance poor.

The students' problems in speaking were caused by many factors. The biggest contributor was the chances to be exposed to the target language and the time spent praticing it. This might be understandable as English plays a role of a foreign language in Vietnam. Most of the factors were derived from the students themselves as they felt unconfident, nervous or shy and afraid of making mistakes.

The researcher suggests that the students should be taught grammar and vocabulary in real life situations so that they can train a habit of using correct grammatical structures and the authentic use of target language. Moreover, extensive listening and extensive reading should be provided to the students so that they can have a favourable environment to use the language. Along with that, teachers should have a suitable method to manage the students' self-study. Finally, more engaging extra-curricular activities should be organized to promote the students' confidence in speaking English.

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