English Majors' Perceptions of Difficulties in English Speaking at Nam Can Tho University

Dao Thi Thai[1*], Tran Thi Truc Hien[1]

[1]*Nam Can Tho University*

[*]*Corresponding author: Dao Thi Thai (email: dtthai@nctu.edu.vn)*

ABSTRACT

English is the most widely spoken language in the world, and its mastery is pursued by university students across various disciplines, including those majoring in English and others from different fields. Effective English speaking skills are essential for communication, yet achieving proficiency can be challenging. This study aimed to explore university students' perceptions of the difficulties they encountered while speaking English. With a mixed-method design, this research collected data through questionnaires administered to 290 university students and semi-structured interviews conducted with ten respondents. The results revealed linguistic aspect, particularly lacking vocabulary, was challenging for the participants when they wanted to express themselves with the mean score 3.34. In addition, the participants experienced psychological difficulties at a moderate level (M= 2.9). Particularly, EFL students were confronted with anxiety, fear of making mistakes, shyness, and lack of confidence in their speaking. If university students are aware of the difficulties they face in mastering English speaking skills, they can find solutions to overcome these impediments. This will help them improve their English speaking abilities.

TÓM TẮT

Tiếng Anh là ngôn ngữ được sử dụng rộng rãi nhất trên thế giới được học bởi sinh viên đại học, cả những người đang học chuyên ngành tiếng Anh và những người không học chuyên ngành tiếng Anh. Kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh là một kỹ năng quan trọng bởi vì nó cần thiết để có một cuộc trò chuyện để giao tiếp nhưng việc thành thạo kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh không phải là điều dễ dàng. Mục đích của nghiên

cứu này nhằm xác định nhận thức của sinh viên đại học về những khó khăn trong nói tiếng Anh, đặc biệt là sinh viên đại học chuyên ngành tiếng Anh năm nhất. Nghiên cứu này sử dụng phương pháp mô tả định tính với kỹ thuật phân tích dữ liệu dựa trên kết quả phỏng vấn người cung cấp thông tin và thông qua bảng câu hỏi được thực hiện với 290 sinh viên đại học. Các kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng có những yếu tố tâm lý - xã hội, giảng viên, và các yếu tố ngôn ngữ khiến sinh viên gặp khó khăn khi nói Tiếng Anh, trong đó sinh viên gặp khó khăn nhất về mặt ngôn ngữ và kiến thức hiểu biết chung. Nếu các sinh viên đại học có nhận thức về những gì những khó khăn họ gặp phải để có thể thành thạo kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh thì họ sẽ tìm được giải pháp để vượt qua những khó khăn này. Điều này sẽ giúp họ trong việc cải thiện khả năng nói tiếng Anh của mình.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

In the 21st century, education must adapt to the needs of global citizens, promoting the development of language skills to support effective cross-cultural communication. Language teaching plays an important role in acquiring the knowledge, energy and attitudes needed to interact harmoniously with diverse linguistic and cultural communities (Özdemir et al., 2021) [32]. In particular, the demand for proficient English communication skills is extremely high in the rapidly changing contemporary society. Scholars like Crystal (2012) and Rossner & Boliho (1990) [17],[34] stated that English is an important language worldwide which serves as an official language in different countries. Numerous research indicates that English is the most widely taught foreign language in schools in more than 100 countries (Lasanowski, 2010; Yano, 2001) [28],[39]. Recognizing its merits has motivated global citizens to strive for proficiency,

particularly in communication, underscoring its indispensable role in contemporary life.

English speaking skills pose a significant challenge compared to other skills such as writing, listening, and reading. Al-Sibai (2004) highlights that using English as a foreign language (EFL) in spoken communication is both common and complex, emphasizing its critical role in English language teaching [2]. Saunders & O'Brien (2006) assert that mastering linguistic structures is essential for proficiency in spoken communication, but fluency requires more than memorizing rules, idioms, and vocabulary [35]. Brown & Yule (1983) analyze speaking as the primary skill assessed in real-world situations, emphasizing the learner's ability to express their ideas clearly and effectively [8].

Although English is currently taught as a second language in secondary schools and universities in Vietnam, the lack of practice communities poses challenges, particularly in speaking. English learners often struggle with fluency due to linguistic barriers, including

factors related to knowledge of the language and topics.

With this in mind, this research aims to study first-year English-major students' perceptions of their speaking difficulties and identify which of these challenges most significantly impact their speaking skills. It is hoped that this study will contribute to facilitating English communication proficiency for English-major students, ensuring substantial improvement in their speaking abilities among English learners in Vietnam.

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 Definitions of speaking

According to language learning, several academics propose various definitions of speaking. Speaking is described by Chaney and Burk (1998) as a technique for creating and cascading meaning through verbal and nonverbal cues in varied contexts [15]. Likewise, Mackey (1965, cited in Bygate, 1987) [29],[13] oral expressions or speaking, involve not only the employment of appropriate sounds in the appropriate rhythmic and intonation patterns but also the selection of words and inflections in the right order to convey the intended meaning.

However, speaking is also characterized as a participatory activity that involves creating, sending, and receiving information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997) [9],[12].

Thornbury (2005) asserts that speaking simply refers to the oral output of a language that the learner has already been exposed to through explicit instruction, modeling, and drills [38]. The underlying premise was that speaking would take care of itself as long as the learner had amassed an adequate store of grammar and lexis and as long as attention had been paid to the

appropriate phonological articulation of this stored knowledge (p202).

1.2.2 The importance of speaking skills

In the present global world, communication is of paramount importance to get success in different fields. Language is a tool for communication and it is impossible to have perfect communication without using a language. Furthermore, people cannot achieve their goals without a language to communicate. Therefore, it is necessary to communicate with those who live worldwide with a proper language. As English is spoken all over the world and is considered the international language, it serves as the purpose of communication for people who live across the globe. Speaking skill is the most crucial to acquire a foreign or second language. Brown & Yule (1983) state that students will be judged upon most in daily life situations through speaking skill [8]. Although speaking is really vital, teaching speaking skills have been underestimated and most of time during speaking classes, students acquire this skill through memorization of dialogues or drill repetition. However, there is a great requirement for learners to improve their speaking capacity so as to communicate well in real-life situations. According to Brown (2000), the development of speaking skills is immensely significant for EFL students [10]. Proficient speaking abilities enable learners to effectively express their thoughts, ideas, and emotions in English, which engages in meaningful communication. Brown emphasizes that speaking is not only limited to producing words but it also involves utilizing appropriate grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation to convey accurate meaning, showcasing language mastery.

Furthermore, good speaking abilities enhance job prospects, as many professions require effective oral communication skills in the English language. In 4.0 era, candidates with great talents demonstrated through job interviews and they can be accepted based on the interview performance. Indeed, applicants normally have to participate and prove themselves in debates and groups' discussions where the candidates are evaluated based on their oral communications. Additionally, proficiency in speaking fosters social integration and cultural exchange, empowering learners to confidently interact with native English speakers and immerse themselves in English-speaking environments.

Moreover, Smith (2012) states that the acquisition of speaking skills positively influences the development of other language skills [37]. Active engagement in speaking tasks helps learners enhance their listening skills by becoming more attuned to native speakers' pronunciation, intonation, and natural conversational patterns. Furthermore, speaking activities reinforce reading skills by encouraging learners to verbalize and discuss written texts, analyze content, and share their interpretations with others. Similarly, according to Nunan (1991, cited in Bahrani & Soltani, 2012) [31],[5], when one has the ability to make a conversation in the acquired language, successful learning is attained. Therefore, if language learners are incapable of learning to speak or do not get any chance to speak in the language classroom, they may not have motivation and be interested in learning the language. This problem is common in EFL classrooms where language learners do not have enough opportunities to practice speaking skill.

In a broader view, Bygate (1987) stated that for many of their most fundamental actions, our learners frequently need to be able to communicate with confidence [13]. Speaking skill is the ability that is used to evaluate the learners most often. It is the ideal means of advancing business, social ranking, professional development, and social unity. This skill is also a medium that many people find particularly helpful for learning and through which a great deal of language is learned.

In conclusion, the importance of speaking skills for EFL students cannot be overstated. Effective speaking enables learners to express themselves, demonstrate language competence, navigate real-life situations, and integrate into English-speaking communities.

1.1.3 Factors affecting speaking performance
Linguistic and Topical knowledge factors

ESL/EFL learners frequently have difficulties in language development because of the gaps in their language collection. One of the most problems faced by learners is associated to their linguistic knowledge. They lack knowledge of grammar since they do not have adequate basic English consciousness or have not studied about it. According to Pratolo et al (2019, cited in Nadesan & Shah, 2020) [33],[30], the use of mother tongue in speaking class, where there are a difference in grammatical rules from one language to another also hinders the speaking competency in the second language. Besides, if students do not know how to use vocabulary accurately, they are unable to participate in a discussion. Moreover, according to Kelly (2006) [26], pronunciation is critical in spoken communication for producing correct information and meaningful communication.

Students mispronouncing a variety of phonemes might make it difficult for listeners to understand the content.

Topical knowledge also plays a vital role in English language learning particularly in speaking. Background knowledge or schemata guides the comprehension of events and scenes and activities for example going to a restaurant, attending a professional meeting or going to a doctor's office. Besides, it also guides the interpretation of the linguistic representations of these events, scenes, activities- i.e. of oral and written text. According to her, one fundamental assumption of the schema-theoretic approach to language comprehension is that the process of comprehending a text is interactive between the listener's or reader's prior knowledge of content and structure and the text itself. The text doesn't have any meaning on its own but a text just provides listeners or readers on how to generate the intended meanings from their prior acquired knowledge. It is concluded that comprehending words, sentences and discourse involves much more than just relying on one's linguistic competence. Indeed, one's linguistic competence is just one part of one's total background knowledge.

Psychological difficulties: Several psychological difficulties can prevent students from practicing their speaking skills in English class. They are detailed below.

Fear of mistakes: Many theorists argue that the fear of making mistakes is a primary reason students are reluctant to speak English in the classroom. Additionally, students often fear being laughed at by peers or criticized by teachers, leading them to withdraw from speaking activities (Hieu, 2011) [23]. Therefore,

it is crucial for teachers to reassure students that making mistakes is a valuable part of learning. The main cause of this fear is students' concern about appearing foolish in front of others and worrying about others' perceptions Hieu (2011) [23], as cited in Chen (2010) [16], explain that students fear making mistakes because they worry about being mocked by friends and receiving negative evaluations. This issue is especially prevalent in EFL contexts like Indonesia. Most EFL students are hesitant to speak a foreign language due to the fear of looking foolish. They also worry about how they will sound and fear sounding silly.

Shyness: Shyness is an emotional issue that many students face when required to speak in English class, which can hinder their learning activities, especially in speaking classes (Gebhard, 2000) [20]. Baldwin (2011) explains that speaking in front of people is a common phobia, causing students to go blank or forget their words [6]. Research shows that many students fail to perform at their best due to shyness, significantly impacting their speaking performance. Bowen (2005) argue that some students are naturally quiet and lack confidence, making them feel intimidated when speaking English in front of others [7]. Saurik (2011) adds that students fear making mistakes and being laughed at by their peers [36]. This study confirms that students' shyness is linked to their self-perception, with many fearing ridicule due to their low proficiency in speaking English.

Anxiety: Anxiety involves feelings of tension, apprehension, and nervousness associated with learning a foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986) [24]. These researchers identify three main causes of anxiety: communication apprehension,

test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension arises from students' low ability to communicate in the target language. Test anxiety involves fear of being tested, and negative evaluation stems from peers' and teachers' assessments. Understanding these factors is crucial for reducing students' anxiety (Harmer, 1991) [22].

Lack of confidence: Students often lack confidence when they feel their conversation partners do not understand them or when they struggle to understand others. This makes them remain silent. Building students' confidence is essential. Chen (2010) state that students' low speaking ability contributes to their lack of confidence, with many believing their English is poor [16]. Brown (2001) adds that a lack of teacher encouragement further demotivates students [11]. Teachers should encourage and assure students that they can communicate effectively in English, which is crucial for their learning success.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research design

A mixed method (quantitative-qualitative) was used for this study. Specifically, with the quantitative method, the researcher collected the opinions of English-major students through a questionnaire. For the qualitative method, the participants of the questionnaire were invited to participate in interviews and give detailed opinions.

2.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 290 English major freshmen from 6 classes at Nam Can Tho University. Ten of the 290 students taking part in the questionnaire survey were randomly selected to answer the questions in the interview section. The reason for choosing freshmen was that these students had just finished high school programmes and they may seldom or never take part in speaking activities in high schools and they just started taking speaking course 1. Additionally, the change in learning environment made them self-study a lot so they may not have appropriate learning methods for speaking skills.

2.3 Research instruments

For the quantitative method, the questionnaire was adapted from the questionnaire by Abadani (2017) in a way that could best fit the research context and assure the research aims. The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section 1 includes the participants' background information. Section 2 aimed at collecting data about linguistic and topical knowledge and psychological difficulties faced by the participants in English speaking. In this study, an interview was set up for ten students from six English major classes to gather more information about their perception, which was not evident in the questionnaire. The questions in the interview focus on the difficulties students face when speaking. The interview was conducted in both English and Vietnamese and the researchers prepared suggestions in case the participants could not give appropriate answers.

2.4 Data analysis

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaire was numerically coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 20.0. Initially, a Reliability Test was performed to verify the consistency of the questionnaire. Subsequently, a Descriptive Statistics Test was carried out to observe the mean scores,

maximum, minimum, and standard deviations for both the whole group and each cluster.

The qualitative data recorded from the interviews were first reviewed by the researcher to capture the overall ideas shared by the participants. Subsequently, based on the recordings and the notes taken during the interviews, the researcher transcribed the participants' responses in Vietnamese to deeply understand their perspectives. These transcriptions were then carefully re-read and critically analyzed by the researcher. In case of any ambiguity or misunderstandings, the researcher reached out to the participants to ask for clarifications. These Vietnamese transcriptions were subsequently translated into English by the researcher and were reviewed by the supervisor to ensure accuracy and appropriate interpretation. Finally, the translated data was further interpreted and analyzed to provide meaningful insights and findings for the research. This meticulous process ensured that the qualitative data were thoroughly explored, accurately represented, and clearly presented within the context of the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for EFL students' overall perceptions of linguistic and topical knowledge difficulties

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Students' linguistic and topical knowledge difficulties.	29	1.00	5.00	3.23	0.96
Valid N (listwise).	29				

Table 1 indicates that the overall mean score of the participants' perceptions of their linguistic and topical knowledge difficulties in English speaking is M = 3.23 (SD = 0.96). Therefore, it could be concluded that the participants had an high level of linguistic and topical knowledge difficulties in English speaking.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for students' perceptions of linguistic and topical knowledge difficulties

Items	N	Mean	SD %	D	N	A	SA
I can only answer questions rather being able to talk freely.	290	3.12	6.9	21.4	35.9	24.5	11.4
I lose concentration when I start talking because of too many things needed to be focused on.	290	3.07	9.7	16.9	27.2	31.7	14.5
English grammar rules make me overwhelmed.	290	3.19	10	18.6	29	27.2	15.2
I don't have enough vocabulary knowledge to express myself.	290	3.43	6.6	14.8	27.2	31.4	20

| I am not knowledgeable enough so that I could talk freely. | 290 | 3.34 | 8.3 | 16.6 | 27.6 | 28.3 | 19.3 |

As displayed in Table 2, the result indicates that the linguistic aspect, particularly lacking vocabulary, was the most challenging for the participants when they wanted to express themselves with the mean score 3.34. Item 4.4 shows that 51.4 % of the respondents struggling with vocabulary meanwhile 21.4 % had no vocabulary difficulties in their speaking. Item 3.5 related to topical knowledge ranked the second highest with the mean score 3.34, showing that the students had this difficulty at moderate level. It can also be seen that a significant portion of students, accounting for 47,6 %, felt they lack the necessary knowledge to speak freely whereas 24.9 % of the students did not encounter this difficulty. Likewise, a significant portion of students, 42,4 %, agreed or strongly agreed that grammar rules make them overwhelmed in speaking, indicating that they found English grammar challenging and overwhelming (M = 3.19). It can also be revealed from table 2.5 that

most students seem to be neutral or slightly agree with the statement "I can only answer questions rather than being able to talk freely", indicating that they might feel somewhat restricted in their ability to talk freely. In addition, 46.2 % of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they could not concentrate on their speaking when there were many things to focus on.

In summary, the analysis underscores the multifaceted challenges students encounter in language acquisition and proficiency, ranging from lexical limitations to grammar complexities and overall knowledge deficits. These findings provide valuable insights for educators and curriculum developers in tailoring interventions to address specific areas of difficulty and enhance students' language learning experiences. The Descriptive Statistics Test was also carried out to examine the mean scores of the respondents' overall perceptions of psychological factors that affect their speaking performance.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for EFL students' overall perceptions of psychological difficulties

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Students' psychological difficulties	290	1.00	5.00	2.94	0.96
Valid N (listwise)	290				

The results indicated that the overall mean score of the participants' perceptions of their psychological difficulties in English speaking was M = 2.9 (SD = 0.9). The one Sample T-test was conducted to compare the mean score and the test value of 2.6, the accepted threshold for a low

level of difficulties. The results showed a significant difference between them (t=4.2, p < 0.005). Therefore, it could be concluded that the participants had an average level of psychological difficulties in English speaking.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for students' perceptions of specific psychological difficulties

Items		N	Mean	SD	D	N	A	SA
				%				
1	I am afraid of making mistakes and this keeps me away from speaking.	290	3.00	11	24.8	27.6	25.9	10.7
2	I don't have enough confidence to start a conversation.	290	3.24	9.7	16.9	27.2	31.7	14.5
3	I am always anxious while in the classroom.	290	2.75	11.7	32.8	32.8	14.1	8.6
4	Generally I am a nervous person and this effects of my participation in classroom too.	290	2.98	12.1	22.8	31	23.4	10.7
5	When I hear others speaking English well I lose my confidence.	290	3.02	12.1	21.7	31	22.1	13.1
6	I expect too much of myself which keeps me away from speaking.	290	2.81	12.1	29.3	32.8	17.2	8.6
7	I am a shy person and I usually talk little in Vietnamese or English.	290	2.78	15.2	28.3	29.7	17.6	9.3
8	I feel embarrassed about my pronunciation and accent.	290	3.02	13.4	21.4	28.3	23.8	13.1
9	I don't like to be laughed at when speaking in classroom.	290	3.16	11.4	18.3	30	23.4	16.9
10	I don't like to be negatively evaluated by the instructor and that is why I try to avoid speaking.	290	2.69	14.8	32.4	30.3	14.1	8.3

As shown in Table 4, participants expressed moderate agreement (M = 3.00, SD = 11.0) with the statement that fear of making mistakes hinder students' speaking. This implies that a considerable proportion of respondents experience apprehension about making errors, with 24.8% disagreeing, 27.6% agreeing, and 25.9% strongly agreeing that this fear hampers their speaking abilities. Respondents (M = 3.24, SD = 9.7) highlighted a comparable challenge: the issue of confidence. A substantial 16.9% of participants disagreed, while 27.2% agreed, and 31.7% strongly agreed that they lacked sufficient confidence to initiate conversations. This lack of confidence poses a significant barrier to effective communication and may inhibit learners' participation in speaking activities. Furthermore, participants expressed concern about anxiety in the classroom (M = 2.75, SD = 11.7), indicating that 32.8% of respondents disagreed, 32.8% agreed, and 14.1% strongly agreed that they experienced anxiety during class. This emotional state may hinder learners' ability to engage actively in speaking tasks. Additionally, the study found that high self-expectations impact speaking behavior (M = 2.81, SD = 12.1). A notable 29.3% of respondents disagreed, while 32.8% agreed, and 17.2% strongly agreed that high self-

expectations contribute to their avoidance of speaking activities. This suggests the importance of managing self-imposed pressures to foster a more supportive environment for language learning.

Moreover, participants acknowledged the influence of external factors, such as fear of negative evaluation and embarrassment, on their speaking behavior. With mean scores of 3.02 (SD = 13.4) and 3.16 (SD = 11.4), a significant portion of participants expressed discomfort with being negatively evaluated or laughed at while speaking in the classroom. These findings underscore the importance of cultivating a supportive and non-judgmental learning environment to encourage learners to overcome their inhibitions and actively participate in speaking activities.

In conclusion, the research highlights the complex interplay of psychological factors influencing learners' speaking behavior, including fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, anxiety, self-expectations, fear of negative evaluation, and embarrassment. Addressing these factors through targeted interventions and creating a supportive learning environment is crucial to fostering learners' confidence and proficiency in speaking skills.

2. Findings from the interview

The interviews provided valuable insights into the linguistic difficulties faced by participants, who expressed concerns about pronunciation mistakes, lack of vocabulary, and grammar proficiency. Eight out of ten students admitted that their primary challenge in speaking was a lack of vocabulary, which negatively affected their performance. They stated:

"Yes, my vocabulary and grammar are still weak, and my pronunciation is not accurate..." (Student E - Line 6).

"Yes, I have problems with vocabulary. The limited number of words I know sometimes causes interruptions when I speak due to a lack of words..." (Student G - Line 6).

In addition to vocabulary constraints, difficulties with grammar and pronunciation also hindered students from forming sentences and confidently pronouncing new words. As a result, effectively conveying ideas became a challenge for them. Some students expressed:

"Regarding the language aspect, I struggle with vocabulary and weak grammar, so when I try to utter a sentence, it often comes out incomplete." (Student A - Line 4).

"… Furthermore, grammar sometimes makes it difficult for me to find out the correct way to express myself." (Student B).

Conversely, two out of ten students reported facing minimal linguistic difficulties, as they had adequate vocabulary and grammar knowledge to support their speaking performance. They shared their perspectives:

"No, apart from some vocabulary challenges, my grammar and pronunciation are fine, teacher." (Student H)

"Yes, slightly, because at the start of Speaking 1, we hadn't learned pronunciation yet, so my speech was still a bit hesitant. However, my vocabulary is sufficient for expressing my ideas. If the speaking topic is easy, I can respond immediately." (Student K).

These statements collectively highlight how deficiencies in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar contribute to major linguistic barriers. The interview findings align with the

questionnaire results, which indicated that vocabulary shortage was the most significant obstacle in students' speaking abilities.

Regarding knowledge of various topics, most students emphasized that insufficient understanding of different subject areas significantly hindered their speaking skills. Participants acknowledged that they could express themselves more fluently when discussing familiar topics, whereas unfamiliar topics required substantial effort to generate ideas and find appropriate vocabulary, even when brainstorming in their native language. They commented:

"Yes, if I understand the topic, I will have more vocabulary. But for unfamiliar topics, I struggle to express myself, even in my native language." (Student A).

"My general knowledge is still quite limited, and I feel it's not enough. With familiar topics like family, friends, and relatives, I can speak comfortably. However, when it comes to unfamiliar subjects, I struggle to keep up and find it hard to speak." (Student E).

Overall, these interviews suggest that a lack of topical knowledge is a key factor that hinders students' speaking performance, making it difficult for them to engage in speaking tasks and utilize vocabulary effectively when discussing unfamiliar topics.

The interview excerpts also provide insights into various psychological difficulties that the participants faced when speaking English. Seven out of ten students experienced different psychological factors. Notably, anxiety was a difficulty that six students experienced during their speaking course. They felt anxious when performing speaking activities in front of many people or when studying with a foreign teacher. For instance, one student expressed his thoughts as follows: "I often feel anxious and nervous, which makes me forget what I need to say." Similarly, one student describes his situation: "I fear speaking when communicating with foreigners. I am afraid of losing face in front of friends if I make mistakes, especially since the class is quite large."

The second factor, fear of making mistakes, was also revealed in the interviews. Some students stated that when they made mistakes, other people, like their lecturers or classmates, would not understand them, which hindered them from speaking effectively. Below are noteworthy ideas from the respondents' reasoning about the problem: "I am afraid of making mistakes when speaking English, worried that the teacher won't understand and that I'll be embarrassed in front of my friends and the teacher." (Student 2) or "I feel psychologically unconfident when starting to speak, or am afraid of making mistakes. I'm worried that I'll make grammar mistakes or that my pronunciation isn't clear, so people won't understand me." (Student 3)

Another point noticed in the interview findings is that the participants experienced shyness and a lack of confidence because their language capacity was not sufficient for them to express themselves, stating, "I feel shy because I think my pronunciation is not correct." (Student 1), "I lack confidence, I am afraid of speaking because I fear the crowd. I get shaky and can't speak." (Student 7) or "I lack confidence because my knowledge is not sufficient. I am also afraid of speaking when communicating with foreigners." (Student 9).

On the other hand, two students did not face any psychological difficulties during their speaking performance. They stated that these factors did not cause them any problems and that they focused on conveying their messages. They said: "I don't feel anxious or embarrassed when speaking in front of a crowd; I'm not afraid of being laughed at because I make mistakes." (Student 4). Likewise, one student said, "I am mentally strong, so I am not worried about anything. I'm not afraid of making mistakes nor feeling embarrassed when speaking in front of a crowd, as long as I can speak." (Student 5).

Additionally, one student experienced a little difficulty related to anxiety due to insufficient vocabulary. However, this participant did not face shyness or anxiety when speaking in public, stating that "My weakness is a lack of vocabulary, so sometimes I get shaky and ask a friend to speak for me." or "No. I am confident; I don't feel anxious when speaking in front of a crowd, and I'm not embarrassed about mispronunciation." (Student 8).

In summary, the participants encountered some psychological challenges when speaking English, including fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence. Some students faced significant nervousness and fear of embarrassment, impacting their ability to speak confidently. Others showed strong confidence, not being hindered by fear or anxiety. These interview results differ from those of the questionnaire, which indicated that a lack of confidence was more challenging for the students than anxiety.

3.2 Discussion

The results indicate various challenges related to linguistic knowledge and topic familiarity that students face when speaking, with an average score of M = 3.23, SD = 0.97. These challenges include a lack of vocabulary, grammar, general knowledge, and poor pronunciation. One possible reason is that many students enter private universities with a low level of English proficiency, leaving them with insufficient vocabulary or only basic lexical knowledge. As a result, they often struggle to find the right words to express their ideas, which hinders effective communication with classmates and lecturers. Additionally, students frequently encounter difficulties with grammar knowledge, leading to incorrect sentence structures that can obscure the intended meaning and cause misunderstandings in communication. Furthermore, students struggle with pronunciation due to the inconsistent phonetic rules of English. Poor pronunciation can result in miscommunication and hesitation in speaking, as students fear being misunderstood or judged. These findings align with previous studies by Abedini & Chalak (2017) and Desnaranti & Putra (2022) [1],[19], which identified a lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and weak grammatical knowledge as key barriers to English as a foreign language (EFL) speaking practice.

Regarding topical knowledge, a lack of familiarity with various topics can hinder students' ability to engage in discussions. When students are unfamiliar with a topic, they struggle to generate ideas and appropriate vocabulary, even when brainstorming in their native language. This finding is somewhat similar to Abedini & Chalak's (2017) [1] study, which suggested that topic knowledge contributes to speaking inhibition.

In addition, the findings of the current study showed that psychological factors caused a moderate level of difficulty for students in speaking English, accounting for M = 2.94 (SD = 0.96). Some students stated that they did not feel confident, felt shy or anxious, and were afraid of making mistakes when they performed speaking activities because they lacked language knowledge or general knowledge. Many of them also experienced anxiety when speaking in public. As a result, it is likely that many students are reluctant to speak with their peers or lecturers. It partly agrees with the research findings of Andas (2020), who posits that when speaking, students tend to be worried about making mistakes and shyness, which are factors that cause speaking difficulties [4]. These findings are also similar to those of other research regarding psychological factors that hinder students from speaking, namely fear of making mistakes, shyness, lack of confidence, and anxiety Hamad (2020); Amoah & Yeboah (2021); Huon & Em (2022); Desnaranti & Putra (2022) [21],[3],[25],[19].

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The study utilized descriptive statistical analysis through SPSS software to explore the difficulties of English major freshmen at Nam Can Tho university in English speaking. The results showed that linguistic knowledge and topical knowledge were more challenging factors that hindered the participants from speaking than psychological difficulties. Specifically, data from the study indicate that among the surveyed difficulties, linguistic knowledge and topical knowledge were difficult with an average score of 3.23 whereas psychological difficulties with average scores of 2.94. Based on the results of the study, it is better for English-major students to seek out or create more chances to practice speaking English more often as practice makes perfect. Specifically, they should learn vocabulary, improve their grammar repertoire to easily express themselves in speaking skills and read more to gain background knowledge so as to get ideas for their speaking. Furthermore, students should have self-motivation to look for opportunities to speak English wherever and whenever possible, for example taking part in classroom activities such as pair-work, group work, class discussions, joining English clubs, making friends with better learners and native speakers, traveling to the country where English is spoken natively, and so on. Besides, students should take risks wisely to present a difficult topic in front of the class or bravely choose a difficult task. It is important for students to know that making mistakes in speaking English is a natural phenomenon. When students overcome their fear of making mistakes to start speaking English once, they will feel more confident and use English more frequently. As a result of that, they may improve their speaking English competence remarkably. One more thing is that the computer is not strange to students and many of them can own a PC or laptop nowadays, so they should use sound recorder software to record their voice and evaluate it with the native speaker's voice. Students should put more effort into practicing English sounds. Consequently, some mistakes can be recognized, corrected and their pronunciation will be improved significantly. Regarding recommendations to teachers, they should allow students to talk about their English speaking difficulties, ask questions, and share good-experience or effective ways of

learning English that they have tried. For teachers, they should make clear about their sympathetic behavior to weak students so that they dare to confide in teachers about their problems. Teachers should move around the class, talk to students to find out some weak students and help them overcome their inferior complex. Thanks to the teacher's encouragement, weak students can feel more confident in communicating with their peers in English. The more English-majored students speak English, the more confident they feel. Besides, the teachers should create more diverse speaking activities for students so that they have more chances to speak in class to develop their speaking skills.

REFERENCES

[1] Abedini, F., & Chalak, A. (2017). Investigating the inhibitive factors in the speaking of Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, 4(6), 82-97.

[2] Al-Sibai, D. (2004). *Promoting Oral fluency of Second Language Learners: Educational Linguistics.* Department of English. King Saud University.

[3] Amoah, S., & Yeboah, J. (2021). The speaking difficulties of Chinese EFL learners and their motivation towards speaking the English language. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(1), 56-69.

[4] Andas, N. H. (2020). Students' Speaking Problem at the Fourth Semester of English Study Program in Sembilanbelas November Kolaka. *ELT Worldwide*, 7(1), 1-9.

[5] Bahrani, T., & Soltani, R. (2012). How to teach speaking skill. *Journal of education and Practice*, 3(2), 25-29.

[6] Baldwin, C. (2011). *How to overcome shyness during an oral presentation*. Online: http://www. ehow. com/how-overcome-shyness-during-oral-presentation. html.

[7] Bowen (2005). *Methodology: Shy Students.* An Article Offering Suggestions And Advice On Teaching Shy Students

[8] Brown, G., & Yule, G. (1983). *Teaching the spoken language (Vol. 2).* Cambridge university press.

[9] Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* Prentice Hall. Inc. New York.

[10] Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching (Vol. 4).* New York: Longman.

[11] Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by Principles. An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

[12] Burns, A., & Joyce, H. (1997). *Focus on Speaking. National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research,* Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia 2109.

[13] Bygate, M. (1987). *Speaking.* Oxford University press.

[14] Celce-murcia (2001). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language.* United State of America: Heinle & Heinle.

[15] Chaney, A. L., & Burk, T. L. (1998). Teaching Oral Communication in Grades K-8. *Allyn and Bacon, Order Processing*, PO Box 11071, Des Moines, IA 50336-1071.

[16] Chen (2010). *The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and the Oral Production of a Second Language.* University of Michigan.

[17] Crystal, D. (2012). *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

[18] Derakhshan, A., Khalili, A. N., & Beheshti, F. (2016). Developing EFL learner's speaking ability, accuracy and fluency. *English Language and Literature Studies*, *6*(2), 177-186.

[19] Desnaranti, L., & Putra, F. P. (2022). Undergraduate Students Perceptions' Analysis about Difficulties in English Speaking. *Research and Development Journal of Education,* 8(2), 469-479.

[20] Gebhard, G. J. (2000). *Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Language*. USA: The University of Michigan Press.

[21] Hamad, K. Q., & Seyyedi, K. (2020). Communication challenges facing Soran University students in speaking English as a Foreign Language. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation,* 3(8), 40-53.

[22] Harmer, J. (1991). *The practice of English language teaching*, *Third Edition*. Longman: London and New York.

[23] Hieu T. (2011). *Students lack confidence to use English. Viet Nam News*. https://vietnamnews.vn/talk-around-town/212262/studentslack-confidence-to-use-english.html

[24] Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. A. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal, 70*(2), 125-132.

[25] Huon, T., & Em, S. (2022). Jurnal As-Salam, Vol. 6 No. 1 Januari-Juni 2022. *Jurnal As-Salam*, *6*(1).

[26] Kelly, G. (2006). *How to teach pronunciation.* India: Pearson Education.

[27] Khan. 2005. Language in India. available at: www.languageinindia.com. *Viewed on: 15th*

[28] Lasanowski, V. (2010). Can speak, will travel: The influence of language on global students' mobility. In R. Bhandari & P. Blumenthal (Eds.). *International students and global mobility in higher education: National trends and new directions* (pp. 192–209). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

[29] Mackey, W. F (1965). *Language Teaching Analysis.* London: Longman

[30] Nadesan, N. K., & Shah, P. Md. (2020). Non-Linguistic Challenges Faced by Malaysian Students in Enhancing Speaking Skills. *Creative Education*, 11, 1988-2001. https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2020.1110145

[31] Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology.* UK: Pretice Hall International.

[32] Özdemir, A., & Pehlivan Şişman, E., & Büyükkarcı, K. (2021). Pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures: a scale development study. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(Special Issue 2), 848-865.

[33] Pratolo, B. W., Habibie, A. F., & Setiawan, A. (2019). Speaking Skills Challenges Encountered by Indonesian EFL Learners. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research,* Vol. 370, 160-164

[34] Rossner, R., & Boliho, R. (1990). *Currents of change in English language teaching (2nd Ed).* NY: Oxford University Press

[35] Saunders, W. M., & O'Brien. (2006). Oral language. In F. Genesee, K. Lindholm-Leary, W. M. Saunders, & D. Christian (Eds.),

Educating the English Language Learners: A Synthesis of Research Evidence (pp. 14-45). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[36] Saurik. (2011). *Learning English The Easy way!.* Available: http://guides.wikinut.com/Learning-English-The-Easy-Way!/2wuchx26/ (March 15, 2011).

[37] Smith, F. (2012). *Understanding reading: A psycholinguistic analysis of reading and learning to read.* Routledge.

[38] Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to teach speaking*. Longman.

[39] Yano, Y. (2001). World Englishes in 2000 and beyond. *World Englishes*, 20(2), 119–11