

BRIDGING THE GAP FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS IN THE VSTEP SPEAKING TEST: KEY CHALLENGES AND PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 02/01/2025	This research explores the difficulties encountered by non-English major students while getting ready for the VSTEP speaking test at a university in Vietnam. A total of fifty-two intermediate-level students, comprising 12 juniors and 40 seniors, took part in a survey evaluating their views on the test, challenges in preparation, and obstacles to performance. The results indicate that students face difficulties due to inadequate speaking practice, a shortage of resources, anxiety, and insufficient engagement with real-life communication situations. These obstacles affect their fluency, vocabulary, and coherence while taking the test. Additionally, the research emphasizes the perceived insufficiency of class time dedicated to speaking practice and the lack of teacher support. According to these findings, the research recommends various approaches to enhance student performance, such as boosting speaking exercises in the classroom, supplying additional resources, and delivering focused preparatory workshops. Digital resources for independent practice and helpful feedback were recognized as crucial for improving students' speaking abilities. The study highlights the significance of thorough assistance in closing the disparity in language skills and achieving improved results in the VSTEP speaking test for students not majoring in English.
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THU HẸP KHOẢNG CÁCH CHO SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN ANH TRONG BÀI THI NÓI VSTEP: THÁCH THỨC CHÍNH VÀ GIẢI PHÁP THIẾT THỰC

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 02/01/2025	Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu những khó khăn mà sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh gặp phải khi chuẩn bị cho kỳ thi nói VSTEP tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Tổng cộng có 52 sinh viên trình độ trung cấp, bao gồm 12 sinh viên năm 3 và 40 sinh viên năm cuối, đã tham gia một cuộc khảo sát đánh giá quan điểm của họ về bài kiểm tra, những thách thức trong quá trình chuẩn bị và những trở ngại đối với việc thực hiện. Kết quả chỉ ra rằng sinh viên gặp khó khăn do luyện nói không đầy đủ, thiếu nguồn lực, lo lắng và không tham gia đầy đủ vào các tình huống giao tiếp thực tế. Những trở ngại này ảnh hưởng đến sự trôi chảy, từ vựng và sự mạch lạc của họ khi làm bài kiểm tra. Ngoài ra, nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh đến sự thiếu hụt thời gian trên lớp dành riêng cho việc luyện nói và thiếu sự hỗ trợ của giáo viên. Theo những kết quả này, nghiên cứu đề xuất nhiều cách tiếp cận khác nhau để nâng cao thành tích của học sinh, chẳng hạn như tăng cường các bài tập nói trong lớp, cung cấp thêm tài nguyên và tổ chức các buổi hội thảo chuẩn bị tập trung. Các nguồn tài nguyên kỹ thuật số để thực hành độc lập và phản hồi hữu ích được công nhận là rất quan trọng trong việc cải thiện khả năng nói của học sinh. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của việc hỗ trợ toàn diện trong việc thu hẹp sự chênh lệch về kỹ năng ngôn ngữ và cải thiện kết quả trong kỳ thi nói VSTEP cho sinh viên không học chuyên ngành tiếng Anh.
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1. Introduction

The VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency) has become an important standard for evaluating English language skills in Vietnam, especially for students who are not majoring in English. With universities progressively incorporating VSTEP into their language assessment frameworks, it is crucial to comprehend the unique challenges these students face to create effective teaching methods. The VSTEP speaking test specifically aims to assess students' communicative abilities, including fluency, coherence, and precision in spoken English. Nonetheless, students who are not majoring in English frequently feel unprepared for the requirements of the exam, resulting in increased anxiety and less than ideal performance.

Significance of the VSTEP speaking test

The VSTEP speaking test is in accordance with the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) standards, focusing on evaluating learners' real-world communication abilities at different proficiency levels. Studies show that this test format prioritizes natural and contextually suitable language use, representing a notable change from conventional assessment approaches that mainly concentrate on grammar and lexicon [1]. Students who are not majoring in English frequently miss out on immersive language experiences, essential for enhancing speaking skills. This lack results in issues like restricted vocabulary, grammar mistakes, and trouble with pronunciation, all of which adversely affect their speaking abilities [2].

Challenges faced by non-english majors

A significant challenge for students not majoring in English in the VSTEP speaking test is the discrepancy between their educational background and the test's communication demands. Numerous students encounter restricted opportunities for real speaking experiences, hindering their capacity to perform well under stress [3]. Studies show that anxiety during speaking evaluations frequently links to reduced performance levels [4]. Test anxiety greatly impacts the speaking abilities of students who have limited practice in oral communication [5].

The structure of the VSTEP speaking test poses extra difficulties for students who are not majoring in English, especially because it focuses on immediate interaction and the ability to generate spontaneous responses. Numerous students find it challenging to maintain coherence and fluency when under pressure, as they frequently are not used to the rigorous format of the test. The demand for quick thinking and efficient communication techniques adds to the complexity of their performance. Moreover, the absence of organized practice sessions and real-life communication experiences worsens these challenges, causing students to feel ill-equipped for the test's interactive format. Lacking adequate practice in impromptu speaking activities, students might feel increased anxiety, resulting in hesitation and interrupted fluency. These results underscore the importance of focused preparatory programs, such as organized speaking exercises, immediate response practice, and tailored feedback, to assist students in acquiring the essential skills for success in the VSTEP speaking test [6].

Proposed solutions and strategies

To tackle the challenges faced by non-English major students, researchers have proposed multiple methods to enhance speaking abilities. Involving speaking activities like role-plays and group discussions has been shown to improve fluency and decrease anxiety [7]. Applying these methods in the classroom creates a more encouraging atmosphere for students to enhance their speaking skills in a stress-free environment.

Moreover, technological progress offers creative possibilities for implementation. Utilizing digital platforms, such as language learning apps and online speaking activities, provides learners with adaptable, self-guided options to improve their speaking skills. These platforms generally offer features like practice speaking tests and instant feedback, aiding students in acclimating to the exam environment and enhancing their confidence [8].

In addition, specialized preparatory workshops designed for VSTEP-related activities can more effectively prepare non-English majors with the necessary skills to succeed in the speaking test. Workshops offering practice exams and personalized feedback greatly enhance students' readiness and self-esteem [9].

In conclusion, the VSTEP speaking test poses substantial difficulties for students who are not majoring in English, mainly because of their restricted exposure to engaging in language use. Nonetheless, by implementing efficient teaching methods, using digital resources, and participating in targeted preparatory tasks, teachers can close the language skills gap and help students excel in their assessments.

2. Methodology

2.1. Settings and participants

This study was conducted at a university in Vietnam, involving 52 non-English major students at the intermediate proficiency level. The participants comprised 12 junior students and 40 senior students, reflecting a diverse range of academic experiences. The VSTEP speaking test, a critical graduation requirement at the university, served as the focus of this research. Most of the participants had completed six compulsory general English courses as part of their academic curriculum, which provided them with foundational language skills but limited exposure to communicative English practice. All participants had either just taken or previously experienced the VSTEP speaking test, providing them with relevant insights into its structure and challenges. This context highlights the importance of understanding students' difficulties and experiences to develop more targeted strategies for improving their speaking performance.

2.2. Procedures and data analysis

The research employed a structured survey to explore the challenges faced by non-English major students in the VSTEP speaking test and their perceptions of the test. Data collection focused on participants' year of study and self-reported English proficiency level (Section 1), followed by an evaluation of the test's difficulty (Section 2), challenges encountered during preparation (Section 3), and difficulties faced during the test itself (Section 4).

Sections 5 and 6 examined the underlying causes of these challenges and gathered student suggestions for improving test preparation. Finally, open-ended questions in Section 7 allowed participants to provide detailed insights and recommendations for enhancing their readiness for the test.

Descriptive statistics and frequency analysis in SPSS were used to examine the data in order to identify important patterns in the responses of the students. Since the data was gathered using an ordinal scale, which allows for the measurement of central tendency and variability, the mean and standard deviation (SD) were computed for the perceived difficulty category. Since these variables provide categorical data, frequency distributions and percentages were employed for the remaining four categories (key challenges, emotional reactions, causes of difficulties, and suggested solutions). This method allows for meaningful comparisons while guaranteeing that the analysis truly reflects the experiences of the students. By highlighting the most frequently mentioned issues and suggested fixes, percentages give a clearer picture of the main problems that students encountered on the VSTEP speaking test.

To find recurrent themes in the students' open-ended responses, thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative data. Key issues that were the focus of the analysis were the perceived difficulties faced by the students, their experiences preparing, and suggestions for improvement. Meaningful topics including speaking practice, test anxiety, instructor assistance, vocabulary challenges, and preparation materials were used to group the responses. This method enhanced the quantitative results and offered more profound insights into the unique experiences of each student.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Results

Table 1. *Descriptive analysis of perceived difficulty in the VSTEP speaking test*

Category	Mean	SD
Perceived difficulty	10.4	8.32

The analysis of students' perceptions of the VSTEP speaking test difficulty (Table 1) reveals a mean score of 10.4 with a standard deviation of 8.32. This suggests that there was a significant range in results, even though many students found the test difficult. While some students thought the test was extremely challenging, others said it was easier to handle. The large SD indicates that individuals' degrees of readiness varied, potentially as a result of their past exposure to and practice with the English language. The comparatively large variance suggests that although some students have adjusted to the test format effectively, others have a difficult time, underscoring the need for more focused speaking practice and improved test-taking techniques.

Table 2. *Difficulties encountered during speaking practice and frequency of practice*

Category	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Challenges during independent practice		
Lack of resources	21	40.4
Difficulty in identifying and correcting errors	34	65.4
Limited vocabulary	42	80.8
Lack of an English-speaking environment	26	50.0
Distractions while studying	21	40.4
Other	6	11.5
Frequency of speaking practice		
Daily	13	25.0
Weekly	27	51.9
Monthly	4	7.7
Rarely	8	15.4
Never	0	0

Table 2 outlines the challenges participants faced while practicing independent speaking and the regularity of their speaking practice. Regarding challenges, the predominant issue was "Limited vocabulary," noted by 80.8% of participants, succeeded by "Difficulty in identifying and correcting errors" (65.4%) and "Lack of an English-speaking environment" (50%). These elements underline major obstacles in solo speaking practice, indicating a necessity for targeted vocabulary enhancement and methods for correcting mistakes. Resource scarcity and interruptions during study were noted by 40.4% of respondents, suggesting that outside influences also impede efficient practice. A less percentage (11.5%) mentioned other unnamed difficulties.

In terms of speaking practice frequency, 51.9% of participants engaged in speaking activities weekly, while 25.0% did so every day. 15.4% practiced infrequently, while 7.7% engaged in practice on a monthly basis. The reality that a large percentage engages in speaking less frequently than daily emphasizes a possible area for enhancement in their preparation practices.

These results highlight the importance of developing more accessible tools and encouraging settings to improve independent speaking practice. Additionally, raising the frequency of practice, particularly for individuals who engage in practice less often, may further enhance proficiency in the VSTEP speaking test.

Table 3 displays the emotional reactions and difficulties encountered by students during the VSTEP speaking test. Concerning emotions, 69.2% of participants indicated they felt "Nervous", establishing it as the primary emotional state throughout the test. 44.2% experienced "Anxiety," while a less percentage of students reported feeling "Calm" (23.1%) or "Confident" (11.5%). Just 5.8% mentioned different emotions, showing that nervousness and anxiety were the predominant reactions, implying the testing's high-stress character for numerous students. Regarding the

difficulties encountered during the examination, most students had trouble with selecting suitable words (59.6%) and applying proper grammar (59.6%).

Table 3. *Emotional responses and challenges encountered during the VSTEP speaking test*

Category	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Emotions during the test		
Nervous	36	69.2
Confident	6	11.5
Anxious	23	44.2
Calm	12	23.1
Other	3	5.8
Struggles during the test		
Choosing appropriate words	31	59.6
Using correct grammar	31	59.6
Understanding the examiner's questions	22	42.3
Expressing ideas smoothly	32	61.5
Managing time effectively	20	38.5
Other	5	9.6

Both of these challenges were equally common, emphasizing the struggle students encounter in articulating themselves correctly and suitably when under stress. Moreover, 61.5% of those surveyed indicated they faced difficulties with expressing ideas smoothly, suggesting issues with fluency while taking the test. 42.3% faced difficulties with comprehending the examiner's inquiries, while 38.5% reported challenges with utilizing time efficiently. A limited percentage (9.6%) noted other vague difficulties. The results highlight the necessity for additional practice in choosing vocabulary, ensuring grammatical precision, and enhancing fluency, along with techniques to cope with test anxiety, comprehend questions better, and utilize time effectively during the speaking examination.

Table 4. *Causes of difficulties and perception of teacher's support*

Category	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Main causes of difficulties		
Lack of practice	32	61.5
Insufficient materials	28	53.8
Limited class time for speaking practice	22	42.3
Lack of teacher support	17	32.7
Other	8	15.4
Perception of teacher's role		
Very supportive	30	57.7
Somewhat supportive	19	36.5
Not supportive	2	3.8
Other	1	1.9

Table 4 examines the root causes of students' challenges and their views on teacher assistance in getting ready for the VSTEP speaking test. The primary reason cited for difficulty was a "Lack of practice," with 61.5% of participants recognizing it as an important factor. This implies that students are not participating in enough speaking activities beyond the classroom. Subsequently, 53.8% of participants noted "Insufficient materials," emphasizing the demand for additional resources designed for speaking practice. Restricted class duration for speaking practice was noted by 42.3% of students, suggesting that time limitations in lessons could hinder advancement. Insufficient teacher support was mentioned by 32.7%, whereas 15.4% referenced alternative reasons, including personal issues or outside difficulties.

Concerning the perception of teacher assistance, most respondents (57.7%) viewed their teachers as "very supportive," whereas 36.5% thought of them as "somewhat supportive." Just a minor percentage considered their teachers to be "not supportive" (3.8%) or held alternative

views (1.9%). These findings suggest that although many students consider their teachers a valuable asset, there is potential for enhancing focused assistance for speaking abilities.

This information underscores the necessity for strategies like more speaking practice opportunities, improved resources, longer class time for speaking, and greater teacher support to tackle these challenges successfully.

Table 5. *Suggestions for improvement and interest in extra sessions*

Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Actions for improvement		
More speaking practice in class	33	63.5
Access to additional materials	29	55.8
Clearer explanations of the test format	27	51.9
Feedback on speaking performance from teachers	28	53.8
Other	5	9.6
Interest in extra speaking practice sessions		
Yes	24	46.2
No	6	11.5
Maybe	25	48.1

Table 5 presents students' recommendations for enhancing their performance in the VSTEP speaking test and their interest in further speaking practice options. When inquired about measures that could enhance their performance, 63.5% of participants highlighted the necessity for increased speaking practice in class, which emerged as the most commonly recommended improvement. This suggests a strong wish for more chances to participate in speaking activities during regular classes. 55.8% of students indicated "access to additional materials", while 53.8% emphasized the significance of receiving "feedback on speaking performance from teachers". 51.9% proposed that "clearer explanations of the test format" would be advantageous, highlighting a necessity for improved comprehension of test criteria. A lesser proportion (9.6%) referred to various unspecified actions. Concerning their interest in additional speaking practice sessions or workshops, 46.2% of students showed a clear readiness to take part, whereas 48.1% were uncertain yet receptive to the notion "Maybe". Only 11.5% expressed no desire for more practice sessions. This indicates a widespread eagerness for additional activities that may improve their speaking abilities.

The results emphasize important areas for enhancement, such as adding more speaking exercises to the curriculum, supplying focused resources, presenting clear descriptions of the test structure, and delivering constructive criticism. Holding workshops or additional sessions could also meet students' needs, considering the considerable interest shown.

For the qualitative results, when asked, "What particular adjustments would you suggest to enhance the preparation of students for the VSTEP speaking test?", answers differed. About a third of the students indicated that no changes were required. Nonetheless, among those who provided suggestions, recurring themes appeared. Numerous students highlighted the necessity for more speaking chances during class, indicating that additional real-time experience could enhance fluency and self-assurance. Others also favored practicing speaking in pairs or groups for engaging learning. Numerous students asked for example questions, practical situations, and organized activities to better understand test expectations, as well as more precise explanations of test subjects. Some emphasized the need to broaden vocabulary resources, especially via synonyms and scholarly phrases, since a restricted vocabulary affected their answers. Support from teachers emerged as another significant theme, with students indicating a desire for additional structured guidance and feedback to improve test strategies and fluency. Some students proposed lengthening preparation times and extending speaking sessions to alleviate last-minute pressure. Others expressed worries regarding the range of subjects included in the test, suggesting a more targeted method for preparation. These results indicate that although

certain students feel sufficiently prepared, others could gain from improved instructional assistance, organized practice, extra study materials, and clearer test instructions.

In answer to the inquiry, "Please share any extra remarks or experiences concerning the VSTEP speaking test," about fifty percent of the students did not offer further comments. Among those individuals, several important themes surfaced. Several students encountered difficulties with the test because of the need for impromptu speaking and a diverse range of subjects, with many having trouble selecting suitable vocabulary swiftly. Some students proposed that limiting the topics could make preparation easier. Test anxiety was a significant issue, as numerous students reported experiencing nervousness and fear both before and during the exam. Certain suggested relaxation methods, like deep breathing, to cope with stress, while others highlighted that regular speaking practice might enhance confidence. Many students observed that remaining calm and self-assured greatly enhanced their performance, and some rehearsed speaking before a mirror to alleviate anxiety. The influence of teachers was another theme, as some students valued those who communicated clearly and offered organized support, whereas others desired more vocabulary teaching and focused topic preparation. New test takers indicated challenges in adjusting to time limits and grading standards, hindering their ability to succeed. A student also expressed worries regarding the course's price, indicating that affordability might pose a problem for certain students. These insights emphasize the advantages and difficulties of the VSTEP speaking test, underscoring the necessity for improved preparation, teacher assistance, and techniques to alleviate test anxiety.

The qualitative results offer important perspectives on students' experiences with the VSTEP speaking test, emphasizing both advantages and aspects needing enhancement. Test anxiety became a significant issue, with numerous students finding it difficult to handle stress during exams, affecting their fluency and coherence. This is consistent with previous studies highlighting the importance of confidence-enhancing methods and stress reduction techniques to enhance speaking abilities.

Moreover, students' requests for increased speaking practice and teacher assistance emphasize the significance of organized classroom tasks and specific feedback. The demand for increased vocabulary materials and example questions indicates that learners encounter difficulties due to lexical constraints, reinforcing the necessity of integrating direct vocabulary teaching and test practice sessions in preparatory courses. Worries regarding time limits and diversity of subjects indicate that concentrated preparation on important themes might improve exam preparedness.

Although certain students showed contentment with the exam, others recommending enhancements pointed out pragmatic solutions like group practice, longer preparation periods, and enhanced teacher assistance. Adopting these suggestions may result in increased student confidence and enhanced performance in the VSTEP speaking test.

The qualitative findings highlight actionable recommendations to improve VSTEP speaking test preparation. Many students emphasized the need for increased speaking practice in class, structured feedback, and additional learning resources such as sample questions and vocabulary support. Test anxiety was a recurring challenge, with students suggesting relaxation techniques and confidence-building strategies to improve performance. Some also recommended clearer test format explanations and more structured preparation activities, including workshops and extra practice sessions. These insights suggest a comprehensive approach that integrates classroom engagement, enhanced teacher support, targeted anxiety management, and well-structured preparation resources to address students' needs effectively.

3.2. Discussion

The results of this research indicate that students who are not majoring in English encounter considerable obstacles in getting ready for the VSTEP speaking test, with primary challenges being restricted vocabulary, struggles in recognizing and rectifying mistakes, and insufficient

chances for practical speaking experience. The findings are consistent with earlier studies showing that non-English majors frequently face challenges with fluency and coherence because of limited exposure to spoken English and a lack of self-assurance in their speaking skills [3].

An important discovery in this research is the significant number of students who reported feeling nervous (69.2%) and anxious (44.2%) while taking the test, aligning with earlier studies on anxiety related to foreign languages [4]. This study provides new perspectives by emphasizing how anxiety tied to specific tests, especially concerning unfamiliar subjects and spontaneous speaking, greatly affects performance. In contrast to Duong and Duong's [7] investigation into speaking challenges, which largely linked students' difficulties to overall communication obstacles, this study highlights the importance of organized test preparation in reducing performance anxiety. The results indicate that anxiety management methods like practice speaking activities and specific stress-relief techniques ought to be included in exam preparation.

Furthermore, this research reveals that 80.8% of participants recognized a restricted vocabulary as a significant obstacle, surpassing the rates noted in earlier studies concerning non-English majors' speaking abilities [6]. This indicates that even with current vocabulary training initiatives, students continue to have difficulty retrieving suitable words during spontaneous speaking scenarios, highlighting the necessity for improved vocabulary development approaches. Unlike the research by Thao and An [8], which concentrated on self-efficacy in language acquisition, this study highlights the direct effect of vocabulary limitations on test performance, emphasizing the need for vocabulary enhancement strategies designed for high-pressure speaking evaluations.

The research also emphasizes that although a majority of students view their teachers as helpful (57.7%), there remains a considerable demand for more teacher support and organized speaking exercises. The significance of instructor feedback in preparing for speaking tests has been thoroughly recorded [5], yet this study indicates that learners gain the most from tailored feedback sessions and organized speaking exercises, highlighting the need for more instructional assistance in the classroom.

In summary, this research adds to the current literature by validating established challenges and presenting new insights regarding test-related anxiety and immediate vocabulary retrieval issues. Tackling these problems necessitates a comprehensive strategy that encompasses organized test readiness, focused vocabulary education, and enhanced instructional assistance. Future studies ought to investigate the efficacy of particular anxiety-reducing methods and vocabulary intervention strategies designed for the VSTEP speaking test.

3.3. Implications for Vietnamese students' VSTEP preparation

The findings of this research have significant implications for improving Vietnamese students' preparation for the VSTEP speaking test. Addressing the identified challenges, such as limited vocabulary, nervousness, and insufficient speaking practice, requires a more communicative-focused approach in English instruction. Incorporating regular in-class speaking activities, providing detailed performance feedback, and offering workshops or extra practice sessions can help students build confidence and fluency. Furthermore, enhancing access to diverse materials, such as sample test questions and real-life scenarios, can better equip students for the test's demands. By aligning classroom practices with the specific requirements of the VSTEP speaking test, educators can bridge the gap between students' current skills and the test expectations, ultimately improving their performance and readiness for graduation requirements.

4. Conclusion

This research identified key challenges faced by non-English major students in preparing for the VSTEP speaking test, including limited speaking practice, insufficient resources, and anxiety. Students also reported feeling unprepared due to the lack of exposure to real-life communicative situations and limited support from the curriculum. To address these challenges, the study

recommends increasing speaking practice in class, providing additional resources, and offering preparatory workshops. Incorporating digital tools and giving detailed feedback can also enhance students' confidence and performance, ultimately improving their readiness for the test.

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