Factors Affecting English Majored Freshmen's Speaking Performance in a University in the Mekong Delta – Viet Nam

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ABSTRACT	Published Online: April 22, 2023

Speaking is one of the most crucial and challenging skills to master in learning English. As a consequence, learners regularly encounter difficulties that restrict their ability to speak English. For this reason, this study was carried out to find out factors that affected the English-speaking performance of English majored freshmen at a university in Can Tho City. The participants were recruited from 80 English majored freshmen at a university in the Mekong Delta, Viet Nam. Three instruments including the questionnaire, the paper-based interview, and the observation were used to collect the data. The found factors accounted for vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, background knowledge, psychological issues (lack of motivation, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence), learning environment, and lack of practice time. Based on these results, further recommendations were made for both EFL students and teachers.

Keywords: English speaking skills, English speaking performance, factors, EFL students, freshmen students

1. INTRODUCTION
1.1 Rationale
Among many skills in learning English, speaking plays a vital role in English major and needs to be developed. In daily communication, we speak twice as much as we read and write (Rivers, 1981). Moreover, according to Brown (1994), "Speaking was one of the main parts in communication". It is common that if a person learns a language that means he or she should be a competent speaker of that language. In most cases, the users of that language need to involve in various types of discussion or conversations, therefore they need to be proficient in speaking. Richards and Renandya (2002) have mentioned that "A large number of the world's language learners study English to develop proficiency in speaking".

However, it is not easy for learners to master English speaking skills. Tatham and Morton (2006) have shared that "Many people reported that they might understand a language but they could not speak it". Besides, a large number of students in the university cannot speak English fluently.

For those reasons, it is necessary to conduct a study to find out factors that influence EFL, especially freshmen students' speaking performance so that both EFL teachers and students can work out remedies to overcome their speaking difficulties.

1.2 Significance of the research
This study mainly focuses on finding out the factors related to difficulties in speaking skills of English majored freshmen. This is to help teachers and students, especially first-year English majored students have a better understanding of the students' speaking difficulties. Consequently, they can find out useful solutions to improve students' speaking skills.

II. LITTERATURE REVIEW
2.1 Definitions of speaking skills
In the modern days, English has become a useful tool for communicating and interacting with one another. Among four main language skills, speaking skills play a vital role in getting success in all fields. Different researchers have given the nature of speaking a lot of consideration and concern. The following are some notable researchers' definitions.

First of all, speaking is the action of imparting information or expressing one's sentiments through speech, as well as the delivery of language through the mouth. According to Florez (1999), "speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning in that both its form and meaning depend on the context, the participants, their experiences, the environment,

and the purpose for speaking" (p.1). Therefore, it is the ultimate communication tool that enables students to share their ideas, thoughts, sentiments, and emotions with others.

Next, Quianthy (1990) claims that "speaking as the process of transmitting ideas and information orally in a variety of situations". In other words, speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non - verbal symbols, in a variety of context (Chaney, 1998). It indicates that words can aid the listener in correctly understanding the speaker's thoughts and viewpoints in specific situations.

In addition, Bums & Joyce (1997) state that "speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information." According to the Oxford Pocket dictionary (2009), "speaking is the action of conveying information or expressing one's thoughts and feelings in spoken language." Tarigan (1985, p.15) also shows that "speaking is a skill conveying words or sounds of articulation to express or to deliver ideas, opinion, and feeling."

However, speaking skills are not only simply speaking. They include many different skills such as turn-taking skills, conversational skills, etc. Firstly, in the interaction, the mechanism of the talk in which turn-taking organization is inside, can be the conceptual landmark (Mey, 2001). It asserts that turn-taking is concerned with where and how the speaking turn happens, as well as how speakers pick others or themselves as the next speakers. Next, conversational skills refer to the ability of the individual to start and maintain a conversation with other people (Kelly, 1982). They consist of conversation questions, emphasizing and acknowledging comments, lengthy and delayed exchanges, eye contact, emotion and the content of the conversation. Besides, there are some other skills like getting attention, starting and ending communication, and so on. All of these skills contribute to making a good speaker.

2.2 The importance of English speaking and speaking skills

Nowadays, English is regarded as a valuable tool for individuals to connect to the world. It can be found in all elements of education, business, commerce, communication, culture, health care, and all facets of daily life. And being able to communicate in English is viewed as the key to unlock a magnificent world. Gillis (2013) claims that "speaking skills are important for career success, but certainly not limited to one's professional aspirations. Speaking skills can enhance one's personal life, thereby bring about the well-rounded growth we should all seek". Another author explains that speaking skills or communication skills are usually placed ahead of work experience, motivation, and academic credentials as criteria for new recruitment for employment (Zaremba, 2006).

Likewise, Sesnan (1997) says that "people always learn to speak first when they learn their mother tongue". This means speaking is regarded as a medium for people to convey their sentiments, obtain information, and establish social relationships in regular communication. Similarly, Celce-Murcia (2001, p.103) confirms that "the ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language since speech is the most basic means of human communication". In the same way, Pattison (1992) argues that "when individuals learn a language, they aim to be able to speak that language". Furthermore, speaking is the most frequently used language skill in almost every context. Most experts feel that speaking is the most crucial of four language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing). According to Gass and Varionis (1994), "speaking can support other language skills and plays a major role in the shaping of the learner's developing language".

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research questions
This research is done in order to answer the following research questions:

1. Do English majored freshmen at Tay Do University have difficulty in speaking English?
2. What are the factors that affect English majored freshmen's speaking skills at Tay Do University?

3.2 Instruments
Observations, questionnaires and paper interviews for both teachers and students were used as the instruments in this study. The questionnaire was useful because it allowed researchers to collect significant amount of data from a large number of people in a reasonably inexpensive, quick, and efficient manner. As a result, the questionnaire was utilized to determine the problems encountered by freshmen in learning English and to speed up the data collection process. Furthermore, the interview questions for students and teachers would provide additional information and confirm the data in the questionnaire. Furthermore, observations were done in order to obtain extra data that the questionnaires and interviews did not capture.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Results of the questionnaire

4.1.1 The influence of linguistic factors

Table 1 Students' problems in vocabulary

Statement	Frequency (%)					M	SD
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
One of the issues with your speaking skills is a lack of vocabulary	0	1.3	17.5	53.8	27.5	4.07	0.71
You are unable to completely explain your thoughts or your ideas due to a limited vocabulary	0	3.8	11.3	48.8	36.3	4.17	0.78
When it comes to selecting the suitable words for the context in which you are speaking, you feel perplexed	0	1.3	16.3	60	22.5	4.04	0.66
Limited vocabulary makes you repeat a word many times when speaking	0	2.5	18.8	50	28.7	4.05	0.76
You may forget the meaning of some words because you do not use them to speak frequently	1.3	1.3	18.8	56.3	22.5	3.98	0.76

Vocabulary

Grammar

Table 1 Participants' problems in grammar

Statement	Frequency (%)					M	SD
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
You cannot remember all of the grammatical rules when speaking	0	6.3	17.5	53.8	22.5	3.92	0.81
You do not know how to apply your grammar knowledge in your speaking skills	0	2.5	27.55	51.2	18.8	3.86	0.74
When speaking, you often make grammatical mistakes such as incorrect tenses or parts of speech	0	2.5	15	53.8	28.7	4.08	0.73
You are unable to convey exactly what you want to say due to a lack of grammatical knowledge	0	6.3	21.3	43.8	28.7	3.5	0.87
You frequently use a statement constructed by word-for-word translation from Vietnamese	2.5	10	23.8	51.2	12.5	3.61	0.92

Pronunciation

Table 1 Students' problems caused by pronunciation

Statement	Frequency (%)					M	SD
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
When you have a speaking performance and your pronunciation is inaccurate, you will be confused	2.5	3.8	23.8	43.8	26.3	3.88	0.93
Your intonation and pronunciation are unnatural	1.3	12.5	25	43.8	17.5	3.64	0.96
You often get puzzled between words that have similar pronunciation when speaking	1.3	7.5	25	50	16.3	3.73	0.87
You often forget pronouncing final sounds when you speak	2.5	13.8	28.7	42.5	12.5	3.49	0.97
You often become confused when stressing words with multi-syllables	1.3	5	18.8	62.5	12.5	3.71	0.93

According to these tables, students admitted that their linguistic competence accounting for their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation was a factor that affected their English speaking. Among the three components of linguistic factors, vocabulary was the one that caused the most frequent trouble to students.

4.1.2 The influence of background knowledge

Table 1 Participants' problems in background knowledge

Statement	Frequency (%)					M	SD
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
Limited information about the topic makes you not understand what the speaker is saying	1.3	5	18.8	62.5	12.5	3.8	0.77
You are unable to expound clearly your ideas or messages due to a lack of information	1.3	5	13.8	60	20	3.93	0.81
Because your background knowledge is insufficient, it is improper to arrange sentences when speaking	0	6.3	20	56.3	17.5	3.85	0.78
You lack the necessary ideas and knowledge to clearly convey a topic	2.5	2.5	31.3	50	13.8	3.7	0.83
With the limited knowledge, you cannot make a conversation logical	1.3	1.3	18.8	65	13.8	3.89	0.69

According to the results, most of the learners admitted that they were unable to expound clearly their ideas or messages due to a lack of information (mean=3.93, SD=.81). Besides, participants agreed that with the limited knowledge, they could not make a conversation logical (mean=3.89, SD=.69). It could be easily seen that because students' background knowledge was insufficient, it was improper to arrange ideas when speaking (mean=3.85, SD=.78). Additionally, respondents accepted that limited information about the topic made them not understand what the speaker was saying (mean=3.8, SD=.77). Finally, English learners lacked the necessary ideas and knowledge to clearly convey a topic (mean=3.7, SD=.83).

4.1.3 The influence of psychological problems

Table 1 Students' psychological problems

Statement	Frequency (%)					M	SD
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
You often feel shy or afraid when speaking English in front of other people	2.5	6.3	26.3	42.5	22.5	3.76	0.96
You think you are not really good at English speaking so you feel bored and discouraged	7.5	13.8	30	33.8	15	3.35	1.13
You are scared of getting laughed at if you make mistakes when speaking English	3.8	13.8	32.5	33.8	16.3	3.45	1.04
You become nervous when a foreigner interacts with you	1.3	7.5	21.3	56.3	13.8	3.74	0.84
You are unable to speak English smoothly and naturally due to a lack of confidence	0	11.3	25	46.3	17.5	3.70	0.89

As the table shows, most respondents agreed that they often felt shy or afraid when speaking English in front of other people (mean=3.76, SD=.96). Actually, respondents accepted that they become nervous when a foreigner interacted with them (mean=3.74, SD=.84). Next, students were unable to speak English smoothly and naturally due to a lack of confidence (mean=3.70, SD=.89). Specifically, students admitted that they were scared of getting laughed at if they made mistakes when speaking English (mean=3.45, SD=1.04). Besides, students had a neutral attitude towards the statement that stated they were not really good at English speaking so they feel bored and discouraged (mean=3.35, SD=1.13).

4.1.4 Problems in learning environment and time to practice

Table 1 Students' problems in learning environment and time to practice

Statement	Frequency (%)					M	SD
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
It is difficult to participate in clubs where people practice speaking English	2.5	10	35	45	7.5	3.45	0.87
It is very hard for you to find opportunities to speak English outside the class	1.3	10	37.5	37.5	13.8	3.53	0.90
The number of native teachers in language skill classes is limited	5	18.8	31.3	35	10	3.26	1.04
You do not have much time to practice your English speaking skills outside the class	2.5	18.8	28.7	41.3	8.8	3.35	0.97
Speaking hours in class is too short for you to practice English	1.3	16.3	35	33.8	13.8	3.43	0.96

From the results, participants agreed that it was very hard for them to find opportunities to speak English outside the class (mean=3.53, SD=.90). Most of learners admitted that it was difficult to participate in clubs where everyone practiced speaking English (mean=3.45, SD=.87). Moreover, they agreed that the speaking hours in class which was too short for them to practice English (mean=3.43, SD=.96). Additionally, participants had no ideas with the statement stated that they did not have much time to practice their English speaking skills outside the class (mean=3.35, SD=1.13). Lastly, they had a neutral opinion with the last statement indicated that the number of native teachers in language skill classes was limited (mean=3.26, SD=1.04).

4.2 Results of the interview
4.2.1 Results of teachers' interview
The teachers' interview questions were conducted by four lecturers who had a lot of experience in teaching English speaking.

In the first question, "Do you think your students encounter any problems when speaking English? If yes, what are their problems?", all of teachers showed that their students usually had problems when speaking English. The evidence was showed as the following answers:

Teacher 1: "Yes, they do. They lack confidence and perhaps also they do not know how to use the vocabulary. Thus, they feel shy to speak. They are also scared to make a mistake in front of other students."

Teacher 2: "It is obvious that almost all EFL students have difficulty when trying to speak in English. The first thing has to deal with psychological factors such as anxiety or lack of confidence. Besides, they do not have any ideas to share at all which may result from their lack of vocabulary. The two last factors account for pronunciation and grammar."

Teacher 3: "Yes. In pronunciation, they usually forget saying the last or final sounds. Besides, psychological factors directly influence their speaking process. they can be listed as shyness, fear of making mistakes, anxiety, etc."

Teacher 4: "Of course, my students usually have problems when speaking English. Their common problems come from lack of vocabulary leading to not express their ideas fully; sometimes, their word choice is not suitable. In addition, they lack of grammar knowledge, making them apply the wrong tense. Besides, their poor pronunciation causes misunderstanding to their partners and then they cannot respond. Finally, lack of background knowledge affect their ideas. This is to say they do not have enough ideas to express themselves."

Through these responses, it can be seen that when their students spoke, one of the most difficult factors was psychology. They were frequently anxious and they were also afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates. As a result, they were hesitant to speak. Besides, students did not have any ideas to share at all which may result from their limited vocabulary and lack of background knowledge. Moreover, pronunciation was also a factor directly affecting their speaking skills. They commonly mispronounced words and omitted to pronounce last sounds, causing them to be misunderstood and unable to answer.

In the last question, "What are your suggestions for your students to help them improve their speaking skills?", they demonstrated a lot of methods to improve their students' speaking skill.

Teacher 1: "Practice, practice and practice! Because practice makes perfect. They can talk to their friends and classmates or talk in front of the mirrors. They may also record themselves to check if they have improved and what they still need to improve."

Teacher 2: "At first, they need to develop strong motivation for learning. Next, they should invest more time and effort on practice. It is also necessary to specify appropriate learning methods. They also have to get involved in class activities and find a peer who they can study and practice with."

Teacher 3: "Practice, practice and practice! Besides, they need to enhance their motivation and clear goals of improving a language."

Teacher 4: "They should learn vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation first through films or English channels, then read more books and watch videos in English."

Based on their responses, one of the most mentioned measures is practicing. Students should practice every time and everywhere if possible. The best way to practice was to find a partner who can practice with them regularly. Additionally, it was necessary to develop strong motivation for learning. Lastly, their students needed to master the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

4.2.2 Results of students' interview
Ten students were chosen at random to conduct the interviews. In the first question, "Do you like speaking English? Why or why not?", 100% respondents showed that they really liked speaking because of their interests. Besides, they enhanced their communication abilities and could increase their confidence through speaking English. Specifically, there were some proofs of students' responses:

PVK: "Yes, of course. Because I think English is an international language and I believe English will be more popular in the future".

TTTH: "Yes, I do. Because it helps me have a lot of experience in communicating in English and also help improving my speaking skills."

PTMN: "Yes, I do. I really love learning and speaking English since I'm interested in America's culture."

In the second question, "What do you think about the role of speaking English in daily life?", most students said that speaking English played a vital role in daily life. They thought if they became a person who could speak English fluently, the would get more chances for a high quality job or even work

at a foreign company. From that, the standard of their life was also improved. Furthermore, they believed that the could make more foreign friends when knowing how to speak English. The following were some proofs:

NLCT: "I think speaking English is very important for everyone in general and for me in personal. I want to have a lot of foreign friends in order that I can learn more about the other cultures."

PVK: "I think it will help us have a chance to work with foreigners."

TTHT: "It is very vital, so I always try to improve my speaking skills so that I can get a great job in the future."

In the third question, "People say that learning to speak English is difficult. Do you agree or disagree? Explain why or why not?", some of students agreed with this statement but others do not. Some with agreement thought that they faced many issues during learning English speaking time. Besides, they thought that English was not their mother tongue language so they might encounter some difficulties when speaking. The following answers were considered as the proofs:

TTHT: "I agree. Because English is not our mother tongue language so it is normal when we encounter some issues when learning and speaking English."

NTQ: "Yes, I agree. I think speaking is the most difficult skill when learning a foreign language because we need to combine a lot of elements such as vocabulary, grammar, tones and etc. in order to make a perfect speech."

However, others without agreement showed that it was easy for them to learn and speak English. There were some proofs:

TTTH: "I do not think so. Because it is easier when we study hard and spend more time to practice it."

PVK: "I think it is not difficult because of my passion and patience."

Besides, there was a different opinion, in which she just agreed partially:

PTMN: "I partly agree. It will be easy for people who love English and will be difficult for ones who do not love it."

In the fourth question, "What are some of the problems that you often encounter when speaking English?", the majority of respondents mentioned that grammar was their biggest problem when speaking. They showed that applying the correct grammatical structures to the conversation was extremely hard. Within the short time of conversing, they were unable to choose the correct structure immediately, making them confused. Additionally, they lacked stress, intonation and incorrect pronunciation when speaking. Besides, psychology was also a barrier for them when speaking English. The following responses provided specific evidence:

TTTH: "I am afraid of communication and I have a bad grammar too. I usually confused when speaking in front of many people."

DDK: "It is grammar for sure!"

NLCT: "I often speak without intonation and make mistakes about incorrect pronunciation."

Finally, in the question "What do you often do to improve your speaking English skills?". The majority of the participants agreed that improving vocabulary, grammar and background knowledge was critical to solving problems when speaking English. Furthermore, spending more time practicing speaking with friends or teachers might help students improve their pronunciation. The following sharings were considered as the evidence:

TTHT: "Practicing speaking regularly is the best way. Additionally, we also can complete our English knowledge by listening to English songs and watching films with English subtitles."

PNM: "Practice speaking and listening more, and acquire grammar knowledge!"

PTMN: "I watch films and Ted Talks' video clips and talk with my teachers and friends."

4.3 Results of the observation

The findings of the observation show that firstly, most of the students forgot to pronounce the final sounds (24.6%). Next, mispronouncing the word was the second common problem - accounting for 20.4%. Moreover, choosing the unsuitable words for the context was no less important issue appearing during speaking English (18.3%). Additionally, students also encountered problems in not understanding or misunderstanding teachers' questions (11.3%). Besides, some problems that students accounted for being not fluent when speaking in front of a lot of people (7%), applying wrong tenses (5.6%), repeating a word many times and being unable to expound clearly students' ideas (5%). Finally, the mistake appeared at least in using incorrect grammatical structures accounting 2.8%.

In summary, the results of the observation were perfectly aligned with the questionnaire responses. Students had issues with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, background knowledge and psychological factors.

V. DISCUSSION

The triangulation of the results from three instruments namely the questionnaire, the paper-based interviews and the observations reveals that they quite matched each other. In other words, it can be said that the majority of the problems affecting students' English speaking were related to vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, background knowledge, psychological factors (including motivation, fear of mistakes, and confidence), learning environment, and practicing time.

To begin with, students said that vocabulary was the most difficult aspect of speaking. Concretely, students were unable to interact with others, communicate effectively, or express their thoughts because of their limited vocabulary. Furthermore, they lacked the ability to select appropriate

terms for each context when speaking. This confirms the findings in previous studies which stated that "limiting vocabulary is a barrier that prevents students from leaning a language" (Schmitt, 2000).

Secondly, another barrier that affected students' communication was lacking background knowledge. Many participants believed that they did not have enough background information, making it difficult for them to explain themselves. They also lacked the necessary knowledge and information to present a topic. This was in line with Rivers (1968) who stated that "students had nothing to express because teachers chose a topic which was not suitable for their students or about which the students knew very little".

Moreover, students struggled with grammar since they found it difficult to describe or convey exactly what they intended to say when they lacked grammatical expertise. Furthermore, participants did not know how to connect their grammar knowledge to speaking skills, making it difficult for them to communicate with others. This supports Anderson (2005) findings that "learners need to experience grammatical convention in various context in order to control and use them correctly".

Fourthly, another issue with students' speaking abilities was improper pronunciation, which resulted in listeners not understanding what they said. Furthermore, students frequently forgot to articulate the last sounds or mispronounce the words when speaking. Additionally, several students had trouble controlling their intonation or even spoke without it. This supports the findings of Nation (2009), who found that "when some teachers and students complain about difficulties in speaking, they are often talk about pronunciation".

In addition, psychological factors were also one of the problems in speaking. Because of their lack of confidence, many students were unable to communicate clearly and naturally in front of others. This is consistent with Chen (2010) who said that "the main cause of students' confidence is their low ability in speaking English". Furthermore, when they made a mistake, they felt embarrassed and did not want to continue speaking. It was a significant barrier for pupils who believed they were not excellent at speaking and were discouraged or lacked enthusiasm to learn English. This also matched with Ur (1996) who shared that one of the most important factors causing speaking difficulties is their psychology.

Finally, students' problems with English speaking included the learning environment and practicing time. The majority of students agreed that they did not have a conducive environment to practice speaking on a daily basis (both at school and outside). They were also used to communicating in Vietnamese in English class. It was also difficult to find time to practice speaking English with their friends and professors. These results share with the findings of Lave and Wenger (1991, p.98) who showed that "a community of practice is a set of relations among person, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice".

VI. CONCLUSION

Thanks to precious information from the questionnaires, the interviews and the observations, it can be concluded that the factors that most inflenced students' english speaking was vocabulary. Because of their limited vocabulary, they were unable to express themselves. Moreover, they did not know how to put appropriate words in particular contexts.

Next, another obstacle to students' communication was the lack of background knowledge. Students did have enough relevant information about a new topic, which made it difficult for them to explain themselves or present their ideas. Additionally, students struggled with grammar on a regular basis since it was difficult for them to define or convey exactly what they wanted to say when they lacked grammatical knowledge. They also didn't know how to link their grammar knowledge to their speaking abilities, making it difficult for them to converse with others. When speaking English, they frequently use incorrect tenses or parts of speech.

Continuously, the pronunciation was also a major stumbling block when it came to speaking English. Students were scared that if they pronounced their words incorrectly, their listeners would not understand what they were saying. Furthermore, learners were perplexed by related speech, linking words, and ending sounds, and their pronunciation was neither natural or fluent. Likewise, a number of students struggled with intonation and even spoke without it.

Besides that, one of the difficulties in speaking was related to psychological reasons. Due to a lack of confidence, English speakers were unable to converse fluently. They were particularly uneasy when speaking in front of others. They were also shy and embarrassed when they made mistakes, which made them hesitant to talk. Many students were unable to present clearly and naturally in front of others because of lacking confidence. It was a big barrier for students who believed they were not good speakers and were discouraged or uninterested in learning English.

Last but not least, the learning environment and practice time were issues for learners when speaking English. A large percentage of students lacked access to a comfortable environment in which to practice speaking on a daily basis. Moreover, finding time to practice speaking English with their friends and partners was also difficult. They were also accustomed to conversing in Vietnamese in English class.

In general, focusing on English speaking problems was a useful strategy to assist EFL freshmen recognize their difficulties and then enhance their English speaking abilities. Depending on the data presented, they might be able to provide acceptable solutions to these problems.

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