A Study on the Speaking Problems of English-Majored Freshmen at HUIT

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Abstract: *This study investigates the difficulties encountered by English-majored freshmen at HUIT in developing their speaking skills and explores some strategies to improve their speaking performance. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative data from questionnaire and qualitative data from interviews and open-ended responses. 144 first-year students and 5 lecturers at Ho Chi Minh University of Industry and Trade were chosen as participants for this study. The findings reveal that there are several obstacles that students often face when speaking English, including psychological barriers, linguistic limitation, and lack of speaking opportunities. In addition, the result indicate that useful strategies should be suggested to help students become more fluent and confident in speaking English.*

Keywords: *speaking skills, English-majored students, speaking problems, communicative competence, speaking anxiety.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, the ability of communicating in English is considered to be the main objective of English language learning. In spite of this, for learners who study English as a second language, especially English-majored students, speaking skill is regarded as the most challenging skill among four main skills of English competence. A large number of English majors in Vietnamese universities do not acquire the requisite level of speaking. According to Woodrow and Chapman (2002), speaking skills pose a challenge for Asian students since they have few opportunities to interact with native speakers and the English language courses in most Asian countries are formally exam-oriented. Thus, in many Asian countries, including Vietnam, learners tend to struggle with English speaking ability. Numerous studies conducted in Vietnam context to have an insight in this problem. Research done by Quyen and Loi (2018) at Can Tho University showed that many English-majored students, particularly freshmen find speaking skill challenging to acquire. Nhan (2024) also investigated the difficulties in speaking English faced by English-majored students at Nam Can Tho University. He found out that their ability is affected by many factors including anxiety, self-confidence, motivation, and exposure to English outside the classroom.

In a different setting, Le (2019) carried out a study to examine factors that hinder students' speaking ability at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University. The results of this study show that the most significant factors influencing students' contribution to speaking are ones about teachers, students, and the classroom. It is clear that more research should be done to figure out first-year students' problems in speaking and appropriate strategies to improve their ability.

At Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade (HUIT), English-majored students are required to master their oral communication skills as a part of their academic and professional preparation. Nevertheless, many of them, particularly freshmen, encounter challenges when speaking in English, including anxiety, lack of vocabulary, or poor pronunciation. These challenges may come from inadequate exposure to real-life communication, the impact of exam-oriented learning in high school, lack of self-confidence and speaking opportunities in English language classes.

Understanding the particular difficulties that students face is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and learning English. By identifying these problems, teachers can adjust their methods, and

students can recognize their weaknesses and adopt better strategies for improve English speaking proficiency. Therefore, this study is aim to investigate the possible speaking problems encountered by English-majored freshmen at HUIT and suggests practical ways to improve their speaking performance.

1.1. Research question

This study is done to answer the two research questions below:

- What speaking problems do English-majored freshmen commonly encounter?

- What suggestions can be proposed to help students improve their speaking performance?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The importance of speaking skills

Speaking is defined as a verbal form of language that is used by human beings to communicate with each other (Lazaraton, 2014; Namaziandost et al., 2019). It is the most fundamental and essential skill that enables individuals to communicate and interact with each other in daily situations. According to Jesa (2010), speaking skills refer to "the ability to articulate sound using specific language in oral communication."

Brown (2008) asserted that speech is a fundamental means of communication that is vital for daily interaction, enabling individuals to exchange information, negotiate meaning, and build connections. It is obvious that insufficient speaking skills may hinder students' abilities to completely engage in discussions and articulate their opinions in social and professional contexts. Thornbury (2019) also emphasized that speaking is an essential skill that equips students to address real-life communication situations. Speaking proficiency is crucial for social interactions, career opportunities, and academic achievement as it enables people to express their opinions clearly and interact with others in a variety of contexts (Nhan, 2024).

2.2. Common speaking difficulties among EFL learners

According to Richard (2008), the priority for learning second or foreign language is mastering speaking skills. Although speaking is considered as the most important skill among the four skills, EFL learners still find it challenging to speak fluently a foreign language. A lot of research investigated the difficulties of EFL learners in speaking. Sawir (2005) conducted interviews of international students from different non-English speaking countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam ... who were studying in Australia for years. The study showed that even though they had studied in Australia for years, they still had problems when communicating in English. Another study by Lee (2009) revealed that respondents found it difficult to join class discussions regardless of how long they had studied in the US. It is clear that ELF learners encounter challenges in speaking regardless of their level of English proficiency (Al Hosni, 2014).

2.2.1. Psychological factors

A previous study by Rababah (2005) proposed that students' characteristics, pedagogical approaches, curriculum and environmental factors all contribute to challenges in speaking. It is obvious that mental problems can make EFL learners feel uncomfortable speaking. According to Harmer (2007), students tend to show reluctance to speak out due to shyness and a lack of inclination towards expressing themselves publicly, particularly when they are required to provide personal information or thoughts. Furthermore, Lin (2013) suggested that due to negative psychological factors such as fear, anxiety, being afraid of making mistakes, students might be concerned about misunderstanding and tend to avoid speaking. Self-confidence can also affect EFL learners' willingness to communicate in class (MacIntyre et al., 1998). On account of limited opportunities to practice speaking in class, learners are afraid of speaking. The fear of being embarrassed about making mistakes or being judged and laughed by peers prevents them from speaking English confidently.

2.2.2. Linguistic factors

In addition to psychological factors, linguistic difficulties are encountered by students. According to Sayuri (2016), students struggles with vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar usage when they attempted to speak. In particular, they are not sure about how to make complete statements and express their own opinions in English. Al Hosni (2014) also emphasized these problems in her study that EFL learners

felt hard to find the accurate vocabulary and assemble sentences to give their opinions. These findings are also found in other studies carried out by Lukitasari (2008), and MacIntyre et al. (1998).

However, having a range of vocabulary is obviously not enough for speaking fluently. According to Hetrkul (1995), grammar is also crucial in English speaking. However, since the grammar structures in English is different from structures in Vietnamese, using the two languages well at the same time is quite difficult. When speaking English, the grammar problems students mostly encounter are using different tenses, making clauses, and using accurate prepositions. They tend to misuse tenses since it is hard to remember the forms and when to use them. Moreover, Vietnamese students may excel at doing grammar exercises, but when required to apply grammar structures in speech, they struggle greatly.

To communicate appropriately and fluently in English, pronunciation is also considered as the most important thing that learners have to be proficient. Making mistakes in pronunciation is unavoidable in learning to speak any language, especially first-time learners. Dang et al. (2023) listed several causes of mispronunciation in English which are different sound system, ending sound pronunciation, and different intonation patterns.

2.2.3. Learning environment

Nhan (2024) indicated that the learning environment is crucial in determining learner's speaking abilities with a variety of instructional elements that influences their linguistic development. Difficulties in speaking primarily arises from the restricted character and insufficient frequency of speaking opportunities provided in the classroom, compared to the natural variations and genres of oral communication (Yusuf & Zuraini, 2016). Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) also claimed the value of practice opportunities and meaningful interaction. They noted that restricted access to authentic materials or resources might hinder learners' advancement. Nunan (1999) addressed that issues that arise from large class size and teacher-centered instruction, may impede individual practice and personal feedback. Indeed, since in Vietnam, the number of students in each class is usually over 40 students and can go up to over 50 students. With such a large class size like that, the opportunities for speaking practice are notably reduced. Golam (2012) emphasized that large class sizes can influence students' high-level achievement in English.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used to gather the reliable and accurate data for this mixed-method study. According to Johnson and Christensen (2008), the combination of these two approaches could maximize the values of the research. This study used a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire with 18 questions and 2 open-ended questions to collect the quantitative data. For qualitative data, interviews are conducted with lecturers who have had more than 6 years experiences of teaching.

3.2. Participants

The research is carried out with the participation of 144 English-majored freshmen from Speaking 1 classes and 5 lecturers at Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade (HUIT). In general, the participants were from 18 to 20 years old. Most of them have studied English for 10 years and above. Since they come from both rural and urban areas with different backgrounds, their English proficiency levels are various. They are given questionnaires focusing on English speaking problems to collect the data for the study. In addition, 5 lecturers are chosen to take part in interviews. They are experienced lecturers who have more than 5 years of teaching English in university.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire was coded and analyzed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Descriptive statistics, including mean scores and standard deviations, were used to identify the general trend and students' perceptions in terms of speaking problems. Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs were above 0.7, confirming the reliability of the instrument. The results were presented in the form of tables to provide a clear overview of the data.

Interviews with lecturers were set up and recorded in two ways: face to face and through Microsoft Teams, each lasted for about 20 minutes. The information from the interviews is then converted into

text and analyzed to explore the lecturers' insights into the speaking challenges of students. Direct quotations are included to illustrate the key findings.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Findings

Research question 1. What speaking problems do English-majored freshmen commonly encounter?

Psychological factors

Table 1. *Psychological factors that students often encounter when speaking English*

No.	Statement	N Statistic	Mean		Std. Deviation Statistic
			Statistic	Std. Error	
1	I get nervous when I speak English with others.	144	3.56	.075	.899
2	I am afraid of being the center of attention when I speak English in front of class.	144	3.61	.076	.917
3	I am afraid of making mistakes when I am speaking	144	3.67	.081	.975
4	I feel less confident speaking in English than in Vietnamese.	144	3.82	.071	.850
5	I lose my confidence when I speak with friends who have higher English proficiency.	144	3.35	.087	1.047
6	I lack confidence in speaking English in front of teachers.	144	3.53	.076	.908

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistic related to possible psychological factors influencing students' English - speaking performance. The results indicate that most respondents experience a notable level of anxiety and low self-confidence when communicating in English, with mean scores ranging from 3.35 to 3.82 on a 5-point Likert scale.

Among the statements, the highest mean score is recorded in the statement "I feel less confident speaking in English than in Vietnamese.", with M = 3.82, SD = 0.850. This indicates that many students do not feel confident to speak English compared to their native language. The item "I am afraid of making mistakes when I am speaking" also shows a high mean score (M = 3.67, SD = 0.975). It can be seen that the fear of making mistakes is considered as a main cause of students' anxiety in speaking.

Moreover, students express their concern about attracting attention when speaking in front of classmates (item 2, table 1), as they are afraid to be laughed and judged by others. Similarly, students report being nervous when they speak English with other students (item 1, table 1) and with teachers (item 6, table 1). On the other hand, the lowest mean score belongs to the item "I lose my confidence when I speak with friends who have higher English proficiency" suggesting that peer comparison do influence students' confidence but it is less significant than other factors.

Regarding to the interview data, most participants indicated that many students are hesitant to speak due to their lack of confidence. One lecturer explained:

[...] "Some of my students speak with a shaking voice. They even cannot complete the whole talk. I have to calm them down a little bit and encourage them to continue. Actually, I understand them well since they are freshmen. They are not familiar with presenting a whole talk in English in front of others."

Furthermore, many participants pointed out that peer evaluation contributes to students' low confidence. One shared:

[...] "They are scared of losing face. They fear that just one single mistake in pronunciation or word use may lead to embarrassment. I know this feeling but sooner or later, they will have to overcome so that they can be better."

Linguistic factors

Table 2. *Linguistic factors students frequently face when communicating in English*

No.	Statement	N Statistic	Mean		Std. Deviation Statistic
			Statistic	Std. Error	
1	I am afraid of making grammatical mistakes.	144	3.66	.070	.846
2	It is difficult for me to speak in complete sentences with correct grammar.	144	3.59	.073	.872
3	I do not focus on grammar when I am speaking.	144	3.38	.088	1.057
4	I find it difficult to express my ideas because of my limited vocabulary mastery.	144	3.87	.076	.918
5	I lack vocabulary in certain fields.	144	3.99	.067	.806
6	Sometimes, I add Vietnamese words when speaking English.	144	2.83	.087	1.047
7	I find it difficult to pronounce English words correctly.	144	3.17	.081	.970
8	I usually forget to pronounce the final sound of each word.	144	3.44	.081	.974
9	I often pause too much or speak slowly when talking in English because I can't find suitable words to say.	144	3.61	.068	.820

According to Table 2, students' speaking performance can be affected by linguistic factors. The mean scores range from 2.83 to 3.66, indicating that most participants encountered common difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation when speaking English.

Among the items, the statement "I lack vocabulary in certain fields." showed the highest mean scores (M = 3.99, SD = 0.806), implying that limited range of vocabulary in different fields is the most prominent problem students face when practice speaking English. Similarly, "I find it difficult to express my ideas because of my limited vocabulary mastery." obtained a high mean score (M = 3.87, SD = 0.918), suggested that insufficient vocabulary range can hinder students from expressing their opinions. The lowest mean score (M = 2.83, SD = 1.047) was observed in "Sometimes, I add Vietnamese words when speaking English." This item implies that code-switching between English and Vietnamese occurs occasionally but not frequently. In other words, due to lack of vocabulary, students tend to add some Vietnamese words to their statement if they do not know the words in English. In addition, the item "I often pause too much or speak slowly when talking in English because I can't find suitable words to say." recorded the relatively high mean score (M = 3.61, SD = 0.820). This finding refers to fluency problems that students struggle due to limited vocabulary and the need to translate ideas mentally from Vietnamese to English before speaking. It is clear that such frequent pauses can influence natural flow of speech to some extent.

In terms of grammar, the item "I am afraid of making grammatical mistakes." (M = 3.66, SD = 0.846) and "It is difficult for me to speak in complete sentences with correct grammar." (M = 3.59, SD= 0.872) show that students often encounter challenges in using grammar in oral communication. The problem does not lie in their lack of grammatical knowledge, but in their inability to apply grammatical structures appropriately in speech. Additionally, many students do not even pay much attention to grammar since they prioritize fluency over grammatical accuracy when speaking English. This is showed in item "I do not focus on grammar when I am speaking." with remarkable mean score (M = 3.38, SD = 1.057).

Meanwhile, pronunciation issues are demonstrated through items "I find it difficult to pronounce English words correctly." and "I usually forget to pronounce the final sound of each word." Between these two, the item "I usually forget to pronounce the final sound of each word." has higher mean score (M = 3.44, SD = 0.974), suggesting that students are likely to neglect the final sounds in their pronunciation when speaking English. This issue may stem from the impact of Vietnamese language, which does not emphasize final sounds. Consequently, some students may not be familiar with pronouncing these final sounds when speaking English. Furthermore, the item "I find it difficult to pronounce English words correctly." obtained moderate mean score (M = 3.17, SD = 0.970), indicating that some students still have difficulties in pronunciation even though they have learned English for years.

The data from the interview revealed that lack of vocabulary and grammar is the most common speaking problems among students. One participant remarked:

"I believe the most common problem is lack of vocabulary. Some students can't find the suitable words to say though they have ideas in their mind. About grammar, I'm sure they have learned a lot but using them to speak isn't easy as it seems."

Another lecturer gave her opinion about students' poor pronunciation:

"I have to say some students have problems in pronunciation. Sometimes I cannot hear what they are trying to say. I even misunderstand their ideas. Well, this is really an obstacle in speaking if they don't try to improve."

It is obvious that pronunciation plays an important role in expressing opinions. Mispronunciation can lead to unnecessary misunderstanding.

Environmental factors

Table 3. *Environmental factors that can influence students' speaking ability*

No.	Statement	N	Mean		Std. Deviation
		Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
1	I do not have opportunities to practice speaking English.	144	2.90	.094	1.130
2	Most speaking activities in class are not enough for me to improve.	144	3.23	.080	.959

The findings reveal that students have limited opportunities to practice speaking English (item 1, table 3). This lack of practice may come from the large number of students in speaking class, which makes it challenging for teachers to allocate sufficient speaking time to every student in class. As a result, students have fewer chances to express their ideas and receive feedback from teachers. In addition, students lack English-speaking environments or partners to communicate with outside the classroom. It is clear that there is a limitation in exposure and practice time, which contribute significantly to the improvement of speaking skill.

The item "Most speaking activities in class are not enough for me to improve." (M = 3.23, SD = 0.959) implies that although speaking activities are included in class, large class size and limited time may prevent students from engaging actively and effectively to the activities.

Along with the statistics, responses from the interview show that lack of practice time is one of the causes of poor speaking performance of students. For instance, one lecturer expressed their thoughts as follow:

[...] "I think one of the reasons students struggle with speaking English is because they do not practice much. I mean when they come to class, they have chances to practice with their classmates but outside the classroom I'm not sure. I think they do not practice much as they do not have partners to speak with."

Another lecturer also agreed that insufficient exposure to real-life communication may hinder students' improvement in fluency and confidence:

[...] "I usually say that if they don't have partners to practice, they can just practice alone. However, it seems difficult because they don't have enough motivation to do that. The best way is always to have someone to talk to."

Research question 2. What suggestions can be proposed to help students improve their speaking performance?

Based on the data gathered from the open-ended questions and interviews, several suggestions are proposed to help students develop greater confidence and improve their speaking skills. From the interviews, teachers suggested strategies that encourage students to speak more in class. For instance, one teacher shared:

[...] "More activities should be done such as pair work, group work, role play, and so on. All students can have more chances to talk. Giving presentations is also a good idea for them to practice public speaking and improve their confidence."

For some teachers, more activities in class should be done to give students more chances to practice speaking. Due to the great number of students in class, teachers cannot ask each student to give their

talk. Therefore, it is necessary to have pair work, group work or role-play activities that students can discuss and communicate with each other. Since most students usually show their anxiety when they have to speak in front of others, giving presentations would be a good strategy for them to overcome their shyness and be more confident to speak.

Another teacher also suggested that finding appropriate teaching materials and applying technology can be an effective way to enhance students' speaking performance. She indicated that:

"Find more teaching materials beside the textbook for reference would be good. We need to find things that fit our students' level. Technology should be applied, too. I see that there are some AI tools can help them with speaking."

When asked about giving advice to students, all respondents agreed that regular practice is the best way to build confidence and fluency. One participant emphasized:

"Practice, practice, practice! Regular practice is the best way. They should try to speak immediately without preparing or looking at notes, speak whenever they have a chance."

Similarly, the open-ended responses from students highlighted that practice plays a vital role in enhancing their speaking skills. One student stated:

"I think the best way to improve my speaking skills is to practice speaking English every day. Talking with friends, classmates, or even with myself helps me become more confident. I also believe that listening to native speakers through movies, podcasts, or songs is useful because it helps me learn correct pronunciation and natural expressions. Another way is to record myself speaking and then listen to find mistakes. Finally, learning new vocabulary and using it in conversations can make my speech more fluent and interesting."

Another student shared a similar view:

"I believe the best way to improve my speaking skills is through consistent practice and exposure. Speaking regularly with fluent English speakers, recording myself to check my pronunciation, and learning natural expressions from movies or podcasts can all make a big difference. Confidence and constant practice are key."

From these responses, it can be inferred that speaking skill can become less challenging once students adopt methods that are appropriate for them. Consistent practice and increased exposure to English are crucial for gradually enhancing their communicative competence.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the two research questions were revealed through the questionnaire and the interview. The findings of the first research question implies that the most prominent speaking problems students encounter result from psychological, linguistic, and environment factors. Among these factors, mentality is considered as one of the most common barriers. Students tend to feel less confident in speaking English than in their mother tongue (M = 3.82). One of the reasons is that they are afraid of making mistakes while talking (M = 3.67). Some students are anxious about being laughed and judged by their peers, according to a response from one teacher participant: "They are scared of losing face. They fear that just one single mistake in pronunciation or word use may lead to embarrassment..." This finding supports the statement of Horwitz et al. (1986) that anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluation are the main components that can hinder communicative competence in foreign language learning. These results were also indicated in the previous research conducted by Tuan and Mai (2015), who found that anxiety and lack of confidence often obstruct students' willingness to speak English in class. Another study by Khan et al. (2017) also emphasized that the fear of making mistakes is one of the main causes of speaking anxiety of students. When students are concerned too much about making mistakes and being judged by others, they tend to avoid speaking, which can gradually limit their development.

Apart from the psychological factors, linguistic factors also play an important role in identifying students' difficulties in speaking. A lot of students reported that their lack of vocabulary in certain fields (M = 3.99) and grammar use (M = 3.66) prevent them from speaking fluently. Moreover, they tend to struggle to speak in complete statement with correct grammar structure (M = 3.59). This leads to their fluency problems when they cannot find suitable words and appropriate structures to say (M= 3.61). One teacher also emphasized these problems in the interview: "I believe the common problem is lack

of vocabulary... About grammar, I'm sure they have learned a lot but using them to speak isn't easy as it seems." These results are also found in a prior study by Gan (2012) and Al Hosni (2014). It is obvious that lack of vocabulary and grammar accuracy leads to hesitation, frequent pauses, difficulties in conveying ideas. These limitations not only reduce students' fluency but also their confidence when expressing their opinions in English.

In terms of environmental factors, the findings indicate that limited opportunities to practice is considered as a significant challenge to English-majored freshmen. Due to the large number of students in a class, teachers are restricted from providing sufficient speaking time and feedbacks for each student. Therefore, many students become passive participants in class which can negatively affect their communicative competence. Moreover, lack of English-speaking environment outside the classroom is another barrier to students since they rarely have a chance to communicate in English in real-life contexts with native speakers. Some teachers said that even though students are encouraged to practice more and more, it is hard for them sustain the motivation without interaction. Limited exposure can lead to reduced opportunities to apply knowledge to real communication. Thus, students' speaking skill cannot be improved. This aligns with a previous study by Tuan and Mai (2015), which indicates that frequent and meaningful practice is crucial for enhancing oral communication skills. Another point is that some students perceived speaking activities in class are "not enough" and ineffective to improve their skills (M = 3.23). This may stem from factors such as limited time, large classroom size, repetitive activities, or unequal participation among students. As Ur (1996) emphasizes that due to large classroom size and poorly structured speaking tasks, only a few students dominate while the others remain silent.

To help students overcome the problems discussed, the findings provide valuable insights intro strategies that can enhance students' speaking abilities. Both teachers and students agreed that regular practice is the key to the improvement. The word "practice" repeated from both interviews and open-ended questions emphasizes the belief that continual use of language in communication is extremely essential. Students recognized that frequent practice, exposure to English contents, and self-monitoring techniques like recording can help them speak more fluently and confidently. Furthermore, teachers suggested that interactive activities like pair work, group work, role play, and presentations give students more opportunities to speak and build their confidence, especially in large classes. This supports Ur's (1996) view that communicative activities should be done to increase students' speaking time and reduce teachers' dominance in class. Some teachers also recommended use of supplementary materials and technology including AI tools to offer students the best ways to enhance their speaking skills. This aligns with Reinders and White's (1996) perspective that technology can extend learning beyond the classroom.

6. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that English-major students face several challenges in developing their speaking skills, primarily due to psychological, linguistic, and environmental problems. To help students improve their speaking performance, eliminating psychological barriers and improving linguistic limitation are extremely significant in the process of mastering English speaking. Moreover, useful strategies need to be done, such as consistent practice, interactive classroom activities, and the integration of technology to help students enhance their speaking ability. It can be evident that teachers play an important role in creating communicative and supportive learning environments where students can express themselves freely and receive feedback. At the same time, students should take initiative by practicing regularly and seeking more exposure to authentic English use. Overall, this study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical significance for teachers and English-majored freshmen at HUIT, offering insights into challenges students encounter in speaking English and effective ways to develop their communicative competence.

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