

DIFFICULTIES FACED BY STUDENTS IN SPEAKING ENGLISH AT VINH LONG UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN SINH VIÊN GẶP PHẢI KHI THỰC HÀNH NÓI TIẾNG ANH TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM KỸ THUẬT VĨNH LONG

LE VAN DIEP ^{1*}; PHAM MINH TRUNG ²

^{1,2}Vinh Long University of Technology Education

Email*: dieplv@vlute.edu.vn

Nhận bài (received): 07/03/2022; Phản biện (revised): 06/04/2022; Chấp nhận (accepted): 08/4/2022

ABSTRACT

English is becoming an important or, in other words, indispensable tool in international communication today as this language is extensively used in various aspects of life ranging from education, health care, business, engineering and so on. In this context, English speaking skill is emphasized and prioritized in both teaching and learning at most universities, and Vinh Long University of Technology Education (VLUTE) is not an exception. As a matter of fact, university students in general and VLUTE students in particular have to deal with a certain number of obstacles in learning English speaking skill and many of them have started to fear speaking classes. This article identifies the difficulties faced by VLUTE students in learning English speaking skill and proposes suggestions to assist them in overcoming those difficulties. The findings were achieved with the use of an adapted questionnaire to collect VLUTE students' opinions on their difficulties in English speaking sessions and several suggestions were also made on the basis of these findings.

Keywords: Speaking skill, difficulties, obstacles, communication, questionnaire.

TÓM TẮT

Tiếng Anh đang trở thành một công cụ quan trọng hay nói cách khác là không thể thiếu trong môi trường giao tiếp quốc tế ngày nay, do ngôn ngữ này hiện đang được sử dụng rộng rãi trong nhiều lĩnh vực của cuộc sống như giáo dục, y tế, thương mại, kỹ thuật... Trong bối cảnh đó, kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh đang được chú trọng và ưu tiên trong cả việc dạy và học tại hầu hết các trường đại học, và Đại học Sư phạm Kỹ thuật Vĩnh Long (ĐHSPKT Vĩnh Long) cũng không phải là một ngoại lệ. Có một thực tế là sinh viên đại học nói chung và sinh viên ĐHSPKT Vĩnh Long nói riêng phải đối mặt với một số khó khăn nhất định khi học tập kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh và nhiều sinh viên đã bắt đầu hình thành sự lo sợ khi nói tiếng Anh trong lớp. Bài nghiên cứu này sẽ xác định những khó khăn mà sinh viên ĐHSPKT Vĩnh Long đang gặp phải khi học kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh. Để thực hiện công tác khảo sát, một bảng câu hỏi đã được điều chỉnh và áp dụng để thu thập và khảo

sát ý kiến của sinh viên ĐHSPKT Vĩnh Long về những khó khăn của các em trong những giờ thực hành nói, đồng thời các tác giả cũng đề xuất các giải pháp trên cơ sở những phát hiện thu được sau quá trình khảo sát.

Từ khoá: Kỹ năng nói, khó khăn, giao tiếp, bảng câu hỏi

1. Introduction

Language is an indispensable part in people's life. All the additional languages which people use in communication on a frequent basis can be called second language (Shastri, 2010). Today, English, known as the global language, is used in a wide variety of fields including education, business, technology, medicine and other important sectors and, in Vietnam, English also acts as an important foreign language to be taught and learned at all levels in the education system. In the process of modernization and industrialization along with the deeper integration in the international environment, the mission of teaching and learning English has been more prioritized and focused than ever. Gradually getting rid of the traditional teaching method where grammatical competence has been overemphasized, Vietnamese teachers and lecturers are switching to a more communicative approach in teaching English and speaking skill receives more attention.

1.1 Definition and functions of speaking

1.1.1 Definition

Speaking skill is developed through exposure and practice, in which there are stages of production beginning from the conceptual planning to the actual speaking (Garrett, 1982). Specifically, the speaker forms ideas in his mind, chooses the words and sentence structures and expresses them verbally. In other words, speaking is an interactive skill involving both listening and speaking. When a person speaks, he or

she starts the speech or responds to others' speech.

1.1.2 Functions of speaking skill

The importance of speaking skill is undeniable in human interaction. As noted by Brown and Yule (1983), speaking skill can help humans establish and maintain social relations as well as exchanging information in various contexts. Specifically, these functions are grouped into three primary types including *talk as interaction*, *talk as transaction* and *talk as performance* (Richards, 2008).

Talk as interaction

Talk as interaction is reflected through conversations on a daily basis and acts as a primarily social function. People normally have a need to communicate with each other, e.g. exchanging greetings, joining small talks, sharing experiences and so on with an aim of building and maintaining a friendly communicative environment. The conversations may be either casual or formal, depending on specific circumstances. Examples of this kind are chatting with friends, or talking to teachers, family members and colleagues. The speaker needs to know how to open and close the conversation, choose the topic, make some jokes or react to others.

Talk as transaction

Talk as transaction is reflected in contexts in which what is said or done is focused. The main purpose of speaking in these contexts is to make listeners understand the speaker clearly and accurately. In these transactions, the talks are

linked with specific activities; for example, group discussions in class, teachers' guidance or instructions in class or phone calls made to get flight information. The main characteristics of talk as transaction primarily focus on the information or the message, not the participants. During these talks, the speaker might make use of communication strategies to get himself understood or frequently make questions, repeat the information and have certain comprehension checks.

Talk as performance

Talk as performance is public talk to deliver information to audience, such as classroom presentations, public announcements and speeches. This type of speaking is normally in the form of monolog rather than conversations or group discussions and tends to be in a formal way. The main feature of this type is to focus on both message and audience and it also requires a strict compliance in terms of form and accuracy. Therefore, this type requires the speaker to adopt an appropriate format in speaking to deliver information or messages in an appropriate sequence and with correct pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The audience engagement is also encouraged to increase the effectiveness of speaking.

2. Difficulties faced by students at Vinh Long University of Technology Education

According to Shastri (2010), the objective of teaching the speaking skill is to develop a person's ability to express the ideas intelligibly, reasonably, accurately and fluently. Therefore, learners should be taught grammatical patterns and lexical items to present ideas in different contexts. Phonology is not necessarily introduced but correct pronunciation and stress

need to be taught. The inability to speak English fluently and accurately also leads to common problems faced by students during their speaking class. In reality, due to their lack of command over grammar and vocabulary and poor pronunciation, students are likely to face psychological barrier because they have to deal with the fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed in the classroom. According to the study conducted by Shen in 2019, it was also found that the problems in speaking classes were divided into linguistic and psychological aspects, in which difficulties relevant to language factors and psychological obstacles were highlighted.

Under such a circumstance, the case of students at Vinh Long University of Technology Education (VLUTE) is not an exception as they also face a variety of problems in speaking sessions in the classroom. As part of the training programs, VLUTE students can enroll in three classes of English including English 1 (45 periods), English 2 (45 periods) and English 3 (60 periods) while students majoring in Tourism take an additional class of English 4 (60 periods). In all these classes, speaking is an important skill and it is also considered a challenge for most students as they previously had few opportunities to practice in high schools. Most students are not confident enough to practice speaking in class due to various reasons. They frequently lack vocabulary to verbally express their ideas and they also find it hard to say a complete and correct sentence because of their poor grammar. Seriously, a majority of students hesitate to practice speaking with their partners or present their ideas in front of the class as they cannot overcome their fear of making mistakes and become afraid of being ridiculed by classmates

or being corrected by lecturers. Their speaking incompetence was also revealed in the English competence exams as a large number of students gained unsatisfactory results in the exams. To investigate and gain an insight into the situation, a questionnaire was adapted to conduct the survey on difficulties faced by VLUTE students (Rizki, Atni Prawati & Masyhur, 2020). In the questionnaire, the problems faced by them are classified into two major categories including linguistic aspect and psychological aspect and are reflected in 20 questions. While the linguistic aspect involves difficulties related to vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation that students meet in their speaking sessions, the psychological aspect covers the fear of making mistakes shyness and anxiety and lack of confidence and motivation. All of the mentioned difficulties are considered major obstacles contributing to VLUTE students' loss of motivation and fear of class speaking, resulting in their poor learning performance as well as their inability to speak English in classes, exams and future jobs.

3. Results and discussion

With regard to the linguistic aspect, the survey results show that 48.6% and 42.6% of students agreed and strongly agreed (respectively) that their speaking skill was affected by their limited vocabulary and 48.7% of students got confused to combine and use proper vocabulary in speaking. Due to their low level of speaking, most students admitted that they tended to include their mother tongue (Vietnamese) in speaking. Furthermore, grammar was also their weakness when 42.7% of students faced troubles in arranging English words into sentences during their speaking and they also spent a considerable amount of time thinking about grammar when they spoke. This factor

also led to their hesitation to speak English in the classroom and 76% of surveyed students only spoke English in class when they were sure that their grammar was correct. In terms of fluency and pronunciation, 34% agreed and 22.7% strongly agreed that they rarely responded to their partners when speaking because their partners spoke faster than them. This result also indicates that students were demotivated, had to speak under pressure, and failed to interact with their partners in classes.

From a psychological view, anxiety, shyness and fear of being corrected and laughed at are obvious difficulties faced by VLUTE students. 19.3% (strongly agree) and 30.7% (agree) showed their fear of getting correction from teachers in speaking sessions while those who willingly accepted teachers' correction occupied 26%. Most students felt shy and ashamed when they made mistakes or could not speak fluently and a total rate of 74.7% ended up saying nothing or chose to keep silent. A number of students were discouraged from speaking as they were afraid that their speaking partners could not understand what they said. Public speaking, or speaking in front of audience, still remained a daunting obstacle for students when 80.7% felt nervous in speaking in front of the class. 52% of survey students also preferred to work individually rather than work in groups to avoid speaking English or, in other words, escape from speaking opportunities. 56% of students admitted that they just tried to speak English when they were told or encouraged by their lecturers and this was totally not a voluntary action.

4. Conclusions and suggestions

4.1 Conclusions

It is undeniable that most Vietnamese

students in general and VLUTE students in particular are weak at speaking English and the situation needs to be carefully and timely identified and addressed. From the survey result, a significant rate of students are facing difficulties concerning vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, which deters them from learning English speaking effectively, have poor classroom performance and achieve unsatisfactory exam results. In addition, psychological problems are also regarded as a common hindrance of students in most English classes. Fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence and motivation are identified as major obstacles making students unable and unwilling to practice and communicate in English. In order to help students overcome the investigated difficulties, several suggestions with regard to both teaching and learning English speaking at Vinh Long University of Technology Education are provided as follows.

4.2 Applying MINUS principles in teaching beginners

As most students of VLUTE are at preliminary level and they also lack the English foundation; therefore, MINUS principles should be applied to improve the teaching effectiveness (I.S.P. Nation & Newton, 2008). The acronyms “MINUS” stand for Meaning (Focus on meaningful and relevant language), Interest (Maintain interest through a variety of activities), New language (Avoid overloading learners with too much new language), Understanding (Provide plenty of comprehensible input) and Stress-free (Create a friendly, safe and cooperative classroom environment).

Principle 1. Focus on meaningful and relevant content

In this principle, the purpose of

learning, not the grammar or vocabulary explanations, should be mainly focused. For example, simple sentences and structures should be taught very early in each class to ensure students’ immediate use. Lecturers could present these sentences and structures verbally with gestures and lots of repetition and encourage students’ engagement. Sentences and structures could be written on the board and students could write them down to use as basis for pair work. This way can make students memorize the useful sentences and structure and understand partners when they use them as well as linking the written and spoken forms.

Principle 2. Maintain interest through a variety of activities

To maintain students’ interest, activities should be designed to be short and diversified and stimulate the students’ involvement. Simple ways to make students interested in learning speaking include doing activities that involve movement, using real objects and pictures, organizing activities outside the classroom (speaking clubs with foreigners are a good example), and introducing and practicing new content through games and activities (e.g. simulation of a game show).

Principle 3. Avoid overloading learners with too much new language

The lecturer should not need to focus too much on grammar or vocabulary in the early stage of each class as it would be a mistake when a lecturer introduces too many grammatical rules or new words. This could result in students’ losing control over the language, thus the simple rule “learn a little, use a lot” should be prioritized. To make good use of this principle, the words, sentences or structures need to be practiced in various but simple ways (games and activities).

Principle 4. Provide plenty of comprehensible input

It is a matter of fact that students are likely to use their mother tongue with local accents and concentrate on mechanical difficulties if speaking is introduced too early. Before teaching speaking, the use of visual aids and contextual support for English learning such as pictures, gestures, mime, objects and personal experiences are required to ensure the understanding of inputs. Lecturers should also pay proper attention to their language used in class to make sure that what they teach is simple, but not simplistic or ungrammatical. The suggestion is that one form for one meaning should be adopted. For instance, “My name is.....” or “I am” could be taught to students but lecturers need to choose only one of them but not both; or lecturers should also choose either “Where are you from?” or “Where do you come from?”

Principle 5. Create a friendly, safe and cooperative classroom environment

It is strongly proved that anxiety has a significant influence on non-native students' willingness to speak English in class (Yashima, 2002). It is important that low-level students or beginners should have successful and low-stress learning experiences. A positive learning environment should consist of contributing factors such as variety, movement, physical comfort, frequent interaction, successful language experiences, and opportunities for students to engage in the lessons and make mistakes without penalties.

4.3. Placing an emphasis on pronunciation

Students can make their speaking more intelligible thanks to their good pronunciation (Derwing & Munro,

2005). As learners of a foreign language, students' learning speaking is certainly affected by their knowledge of patterns of pronunciation and grammar in that language. It is important that lecturers need to pay more attention to students' pronunciation during the course to ensure their stable pronunciation and become familiar with English speaking patterns and pronunciation rules. Specifically, lecturers need to articulate individual sounds because most students are able to mimic particular sounds without much effort. When a student makes a pronunciation mistake, the lecturer can correct it by repeating the word correctly several times with ordinary stress and intonation until the student self-corrects the mistake. Besides, stress and intonation should also be focused in teaching speaking. Lecturers need to carefully teach word stress, sentence stress and intonation to students and design various activities to help students learn and practice pronunciation in a natural and positive way. As a result, students can avoid making the common mistakes of saying words with the stress in the wrong place, or making every word, stressed or unstressed, the same length (I.S.P. Nation & Newton, 2008).

4.4 Teaching vocabulary for beginners

For beginners, direct vocabulary teaching acts as an effective method with the use of vocabulary cards. The cards can have the English word with illustration (if possible) on one side and Vietnamese meaning on the other side. Besides learning vocabulary in a physical class, students can use these cards in their own time, look at them on a frequent basis and create a mental picture of each word and its usage. Some other techniques can include the use of first language definitions, synonyms, pictures or demonstration.

4.5 Correcting grammatical errors

Lecturers need to identify the cause of errors to best correct them and, in some cases, many errors have more than one cause. Students should also be comforted that making mistakes is unavoidable and it is even beneficial when they can learn from their mistakes. However, correcting a student's mistake should follow a proper procedure. When a student makes a mistake in speaking English, the lecturer interrupts and provides the immediate correction. The lecturer can also repeat the correct

form several times or the lecturer might make a written note of common mistakes and give to students after class as this type of correction does not interrupt students' speaking. It is also necessary for lecturers to spend some lesson time pointing out common mistakes, explaining how to correct them and encouraging students to self-correct these mistakes in their future speaking. Another effective way for students to monitor and self-correct their speaking mistakes is to record their speaking and listen again in their free time or they can have peer correction.

REFERENCES

- [1] Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Teaching the Spoken Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Derwing, T. and Munro, M. (2005). Second language accent and pronunciation teaching: A research-based approach. *TESOL Quarterly* 39, 379–398.
- [3] Garrett, M.F. (1982). *Production of speech: Observation from normal and pathological language use*. Academic Press.
- [4] I.S.P. Nation & Newton (2008). *Teaching ESL/ELF: Listening and Speaking*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.
- [5] Richards, J. C. (2008). *Teaching listening and speaking from theory to practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Rizki, B. A., Prawati A. & Masyhur (2020). *Survey on speaking problems faced by the second year students of English Department of Universitas Riau*. University of Riau.
- [7] Shastri, P. D. (2010). *Communicative approach to the teaching of English as a second language*. Himalaya Publishing House.
- [8] Shen, M. Y. (2019). *EFL learners' English speaking difficulties and strategy use*. *Education and Linguistics Research* Vol. 5 No 2.
- [9] Yashima, T. (2002). *Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context*. *The Modern Language Journal* 86, 54–66.

Thông tin phản biện: ThS. Hồ Anh Bằng; ThS. Nguyễn Anh Thư