Article

An Investigation of Perceived Difficulties In Speaking Skills of English Major (Second Degree) Students

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ABSTRACT

According to Nunan (2015), speaking is the most important language skill to master and is often used to gauge language proficiency in general. The study aimed to identify causal factors affecting speaking as a basis for suggesting ways to help students improve their speaking performance. Using a mixed method approach involving a questionnaire and individual interviews, the study discovered what 60 second-degree students – working adults with limited learning time and exposure to English, considered the greatest barriers to improving their speaking skills. The questionnaire revealed that issues with grammar, vocabulary, and anxiety were what the students believed to be problem areas, while the interviews revealed further problems with cross-cultural communication and other factors. The results of this study are expected to be useful to other teachers and students of English while opening new directions for research in language teaching in the future.

Key words: Speaking Skills, Second Language Acquisition, Perceived Difficulties, Second-degree English Learners

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INTRODUCTION

According to Nunan (2015)[1], speaking is the most important language skill to master while Brown and Yule (1983)[2] stated that proficiency in a foreign language is often determined by how a learner can communicate in real-life situations. This idea is also supported by students, who have often regarded speaking as the most important skill out of the 4 commonly perceived skills (Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking) (Richards; 2002)[3]. Despite playing such a crucial role, speaking English and acquiring Speaking skills remained a challenging task for most EFL learners. However, there has not been much research specifically targeting older students, who might suffer severely in terms of language acquisition compared to their younger peers and need support (Brown, 2019; Koosha et al, 2011; Hartshorne, 2018). Baharudin (2013)[4–6] identified that anxiety was the greatest challenge that older learners faced. These fears can range from fear of not finishing work on time, fear of isolation among classmates to fear of being overshadowed by younger, brighter students. Other issues discovered in the same case studies included lack of free time, lack of finance, outside responsibilities, as well as the ability to simply digest what is being taught. While it is evident that the issues that older learners face are abundant and tangled in a complex web, without further investigation into what students themselves perceive to be roadblocks in their language learning, it would be exceedingly difficult to dispel their misconceptions about their own shortcomings and propose solutions for improvement.

As such, this study aims to investigate what the second-degree (an evening program for adults) students of the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature – HCMUSSH VNUHCM perceive to be problems in their acquisition of speaking skills to propose an appropriate course for improvement for their future studies. To achieve this aim, the study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What do second-degree English majors consider to be problems in learning speaking skills?

2. What do second-degree English majors consider to be problems in applying speaking skills?

On a practical level, this essay will provide insight into the difficulties and challenges that second-degree students face in their studies and directly help students recognize and come to terms with their shortcomings to chart the correct path forward. This awareness will not only help them improve their speaking skills but other areas of English which might also be held back by the same difficulties. For teachers and other researchers, this study will provide valuable knowledge to help further optimize teaching methods and open future venues for research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking

Speaking has often been defined as the act of communicating ideas using spoken language, though different scholars and experts have added their nuance to it. Harmer (2007)[7] stated that speaking is the ability to communicate using language features and the ability to process and respond to information in a given situation. Speaking is not just the spontaneous production and reception of spoken information; it has its system of rules and patterns that are distinct from those used in written language. Fulcher (2016)[8] wrote that speaking involves using language to communicate and interact with one another. This means that speaking is interactive by nature, and as such should be considered a back-and-forth process between involved parties rather than a simple production of knowledge. However, according to Hasni (2014), oral language use is often employed by only teachers rather than being an interactive activity.

In Vietnam, competence in speaking has often been linked to language competence in general, yet performance seems to have stagnated over the years. This point was proven by data on IELTS test-taker performance released by IDP in 2022 (can be freely accessed at https://ielts.org/researchers/our-research/test-statistics#Test_performance), in which Vietnamese test-takers only scored an average of 5.6 for their Speaking section – the lowest of 4 skills and joint 3rd lowest of all countries listed, on par with Nepalese and Filipino test-takers, and only slightly higher than Thai and Saudi Arabian test-takers. While it is true that the results of one international test do not portray the full picture of English language learning in Vietnam, it should at the very least ring some alarm bells as to how English language learning is perceived and executed.

Problems in learning speaking skills

Shen (2019)[9] divided problems in learning speaking skills into two main categories: linguistic factors and affective or psychological factors, built on the foundation of other literature in the past.

For linguistic factors, Harris (1969)[10] claimed that there were five aspects to pay attention to when teaching speaking skills: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and comprehension. For the latter, Ur (2018)[11] claimed that four factors could negatively affect the learning of speaking skills: inhibition, lack of motivation to participate, use of mother tongue, and lack of ideas.

Much research has been done in investigating problems that EFL and ESL learners face when learning speaking skills. Nazara (2011)[12] found that shyness and fear of criticism were the greatest roadblocks to the development of speaking skills. Huynh (2020)[13] discovered that students faced great difficulty in terms of pronunciation and anxiety. Rizki (2020)[14] arrived at a similar conclusion in their study at Universitas Riau, with students rating pronunciation and anxiety as the most destructive obstacles in their language learning in general, not just speaking. Even among more experienced learners, speaking English remained a challenge, as evident by Sawir's study of twelve international students learning in Australia in 2005[15].

However, all of these papers have been focused on young/very young learners or first-degree university students between the age of 18 – 22, while older learners have been largely neglected. Age has always been regarded as one of the major limiting factors in language learning (if not learning in general), with the critical period theory stating that there was a large advantage for younger learners and that our ability to learn only got worse with time. However, Hartshorne (2018)[6] discovered that while there was indeed a degradation of learning ability towards later stages in life, the critical period does not end after childhood and can be delayed with continuous practice. Even for individuals who missed developmental milestones, some recovery can still be made from a linguistic perspective, such as the stories of Viktor d'Aveyron and Genie – individuals who never had a chance to study languages until later in life. In contrast, Brown (2019) acknowledged that adults have a distinct advantage when it comes to attention span, life experience, vocational interest, and self-confidence.

All of the aforementioned factors mean that just because older students have to face more difficulty while having less time and resource for studying, educators should nonetheless strive to support them. By exploring the difficulties they are facing and acknowledging their strength, educators can create a better learning environment to help struggling students perform at their best.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Sixty students from 2 classes in the full-time second degree (or evening classes for adults) Bachelor of English Linguistics and Literature programme at a public university were chosen to participate in the current study. They have been made fully aware of the purpose of the study and that participation would not count towards their assessment, nor would any

of their private information be disclosed. These students were between the ages of 20-45 and were taking the course "Academic Writing C1" as part of the programme. In terms of general language proficiency, although there were some variations, most of them were at the B2-C1 level in the CEFR. The reason these students were specifically chosen was because they would have needed to finish their previous B1 and B2 courses and should therefore have had enough time to recognize their limitations and would be more open to discussing them.

Research design

The study employed a mixed approach, with the quantitative side being a questionnaire for descriptive statistics and the qualitative side being a semi-structured interview with some of the participants.

The questionnaire was modeled after the findings of Harris (1974), Ur (2018)[11] and the research designs of Rizki (2020), Riadil (2019), and Huynh (2011)[16], though a 4-point Likert scale was used instead of the original 5-point scale. The 4 options are: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree. This change was to prevent participants from defaulting to the middle option and force them to think about the answer. Multiple studies in the past have confirmed that Asian participants tended to avoid choosing either extreme and often chose the middle option (Chun, Campbell, & Yoo, 1974; Crask, Fox & Kim, 1987)[17,18]. By removing the middle option altogether, participants would be encouraged to reflect on their learning experiences while the researcher would be able to gather more conclusive data, thus giving the study more pedagogical and theoretical value. To compensate for this change, the time allowed for the questionnaire was lengthened and the researcher actively moved around the classroom to answer any question the participants could have about the questionnaire. In addition, the number of closed questions has been reduced to just fifteen to help participants maintain concentration and interest in the study, while participants were encouraged to think more about the open-ended question (16) and to further discuss their fears and challenges in the follow-up interview. The alignment of questions in the questionnaire and the areas specified in the aforementioned literature can be found in Table 1 below.

The questionnaire was piloted by other students in the same program. The final version of the questionnaire incorporated comments and criticisms of the original draft, which were that some questions were too lengthy, the division between sections was not clear,

Table 1: Alignment of questionnaire items with identified problems

Area	Questions
Grammar	1, 2
Vocabulary	3, 4
Comprehension	5, 6
Pronunciation	8, 9
Fluency	7, 10
Anxiety	11, 12, 13, 14, 15

and some of the questions were too difficult to understand. In addition, the questions were changed to have the same sentence structure "*I find it difficult to…*" to provide extra consistency and emphasize the issues being addressed. The final version of the questionnaire achieved a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.755 for consistency.

The finished questionnaire was administered in person to allow the researcher to answer any questions from participants. Indeed, some of the participants did pose questions such as whether they needed to provide personal information, as well as how long the response to the open-ended question should be. While this in-person proactive approach can be more time-consuming during the data analysis phase (compared to using online platforms that can analyze data automatically such as Qualtrics or Google Form), it was necessary to allow the researcher to be supportive and encouraging to the participants, which is the main spirit of the study.

The collected answers were manually transferred to SPSS to be calculated for descriptive statistics and will be further explained in the chapters below.

The follow-up interview was a simple, one-on-one interview with fifteen randomly chosen participants from those who took part in the questionnaire. These participants were asked to share their experience learning speaking skills and how the problems they had affected them. Due to the personal nature of the interview, the interview was only semi-structured, with emphasis given to exploring the individual problems of each participant. This also served the exploratory side of the study by focusing less on problems identified in other studies and exploring those not identified yet.

The following interview question served as the backbone of the interview, and follow-up questions were posed to get deeper answers, depending on the participants' responses:

What problems affected your acquisition and usage of speaking skills?

 Example of follow-up questions:

Can you explain that problem in further detail?

How severely does that issue affect your ability to learn and use what you learned?

The interview was conducted after the questionnaire and lasted 10-15 minutes for each person depending on the number of problems each participant had, with the researcher taking note of answers and asking for clarification when needed. The participants were made fully aware that the interview would not be recorded to encourage them to be more open and unabashed about their experience.

The data for each interview question was coded into general categories based on the common properties that emerged from the answers, especially noting unique answers that could offer a more unique perspective into existing or previously unknown issues.

RESULTS

Questionnaire results

 Due to the consistent structure between items, the table below will show a shortened version of the questions rather than the full sentence. Since the items are on a 4-point scale, the middle point will be between 2 and 3 (2.50), questions that score higher than that will lean towards agreement, and those below that will lean towards disagreement.

As can be seen from the table, grammar was the area that posed the most trouble for participants, with a score of 3.53 for grammar control and 3.50 for applying learned grammar, indicating very strong agreement. Vocabulary was also deemed a barrier to their ability to learn speaking skills, as indicated by a score of 3.42 for finding words to explain ideas and 2.98 for applying learned vocabulary. In addition, one of the responses to the open question (number 16) was that the participant did not know the right word to express their idea. Comprehension seemed to be another problem area, at a score of 3.18 for expressing ideas and 3.03 for forming ideas, indicating general agreement. Pronunciation, however, seemed to rank low among the areas covered in the questionnaire, with a score of 2.23 for pronouncing individual sounds and 2.17 for speech patterns, such as intonation and linking sounds. Fluency posed a mild problem for participants, at 3.30 for producing long stretches of language and 2.50 for maintaining conversation.

While the score for each question varied slightly, the general consensus seems to be that anxiety was a problem area for these participants. Participants agreed that they felt anxious about speaking (3.30), with one open-question response stating that they were anxious about both productive skills. Hesitation during speaking ranked the lowest among questions related to anxiety at 3.0 while time limit was the highest at 3.40. Surprisingly, the participants were less concerned about making mistakes (3.12) and language proficiency (3.17), though they still agreed that it was a problem.

Interview results

When asked about problems that affected them while learning speaking skills, a vast majority of students expressed concerns related to grammar (12/15). When asked to further explain their views, 5 participants stated that grammatical structures were too hard to remember and one participant specified that these structures were "too dry" - a Vietnamese expression for when something is difficult to digest due to being too boring or abstract, while another 3 said that the fact that they had to learn by heart gave them trouble, especially when recalling them in real conversations. Other notable complaints were about lacking a chance to practice (1), understanding when to use each structure (2), as well as not knowing how to apply what was taught (1).

Vocabulary was also listed as a problem during the interview, though not to the same degree as grammar (9/15). Four participants stated that they did not have enough words to use in real life, while 1 confessed to having paralysis of choice from knowing too many words. Two participants said that they did not know the right word to express their ideas, while 1 confessed to wasting too much time looking for synonyms in Vietnamese. Another participant claimed that although they know how to express their ideas in Vietnamese, they cannot find the equivalent in English.

Problems with idea organization also plagued many participants. Out of ten responses related to ideas, 6 participants stated that they had issues with organizing their ideas both in class and in conversations. Three participants said that their idea organization was heavily affected by having to translate their thoughts from Vietnamese to English while 2 others believed that the difference between classroom and casual conversations made it harder for them to focus. Unfamiliar topics and lacking background knowledge appeared in seven out of the 10 interview

Table 2: Questionnaire results

Area of problem	Specific problems	Frequency of answers				Mean
		1 = strongly disagree	2 = disagree	3 = agree	4 = strongly agree	
Grammar	Controlling grammar usage		2	24	34	3.53
	Applying learned grammatical knowledge		1	28	31	3.50
Vocabulary	Finding words to express ideas		3	29	28	3.42
	Applying learned vocabulary	4	7	35	14	2.98
Comprehen	Expressing ideas	2	2	39	17	3.18
	Forming ideas	1	4	47	8	3.03
Pronunciat	Pronouncing individual sounds	11	27	19	3	2.23
	Controlling speech patterns	9	35	13	3	2.17
Fluency	Producing long stretches of language		1	40	19	3.30
	Maintaining conversations	1	29	29	1	2.50
Anxiety	Anxiety from speaking		6	34	20	3.23
	Fear of making mistakes		4	45	11	3.12
	Shame from low proficiency		4	42	14	3.17
	Hesitating during speaking		4	52	4	3.0
	Anxiety about time limits	1	3	27	29	3.40
Other problems:	- "….feel anxious when speaking, especially under time pressure" - "…. when I speak, I try to translate to Vietnamese" - "…I feel worried when speaking and writing" - "I don't know the (right) words for my ideas"					

responses, with one participant saying that the topics were "weird" (which might have meant "unfamiliar" since they are synonyms in Vietnamese).

One interesting category that surfaced from the interview response was the influence of Vietnamese culture (6/15). Four participants pointed out that the indirect style of communication in Vietnamese culture caused them issues since they had to explain for longer and could not get to the point. Another participant stated that Vietnamese people did not like confrontations, and another claimed that Vietnamese people tend to avoid questions, which made it harder to spark conversations. The most unique answer related to this problem was that Vietnamese children were not allowed to speak freely and that affected their communicative ability, leading to a snowball effect that debilitated their learning ability and self-confidence over the years.

Other issues discovered through this question were: problems with anxiety (4/15), fear of being wrong (2/15), not being able to catch up with partners (1/15), and not having enough chances to practice (3/15).

While these problems were similar to those mentioned in the questionnaire, the extra room for further exploration provided by the individual interviews revealed some other issues and further details on each problem area that might be useful.

DISCUSSION

From the results of the questionnaire, it can be seen that the participants of the study had problems with grammar, vocabulary, anxiety, and comprehension. Of these four areas, the former two posed the most challenge, which was in line with the findings of Syahfutra (2019)[19] and Rizki (2020)[14]. The interview revealed further information on these areas, with some participants having issues with having to remember too many grammatical structures by heart or grammar being too hard to digest, which is an ongoing problem in English classrooms in Vietnam in general, as shown in Huynh (2015)[16]. For vocabulary, it could be inferred that since participants had to translate their thoughts from Vietnamese to English, and their Vietnamese was better than their English, they would try to find an equivalent of the word they wanted to use rather than paraphrasing or simplifying their ideas. This influence by the mother tongue was identified in Ur (2018)[11].

However, when compared to results from Huynh (2020)[13], the participants did not have as much of a problem with pronunciation as previously thought. These differences could perhaps be attributed to the difference in research participants since this study took place in Ho Chi Minh City while Huynh's study was in Vung Tau province. Another surprising result from the questionnaire was that anxiety related to time pressure ranked rather high among the list of problems experienced. Due to a lack of practice time in the classroom and the format of the speaking test (in which students have 1 minute to prepare and must speak for 1-2 minutes), having a strict time limit combined with randomly chosen topics might have hampered their ability to use what they learned.

A newly found problem in this study was the negative influence of Vietnamese culture on acquiring speaking skills. The traits stated by the participants matched with those identified by Tran (2021)[20], in which he claimed that due to the country's roots in village culture and an emphasis on maintaining a wide network of relationships, Vietnamese people tended to avoid conflicts and questions and preferred an indirect style of communication that would not damage relationships. This problem is not exclusive to Vietnamese students – students from other Eastern cultures might have the same problem. Aspland (1999)[21]

as quoted in Paltridge (2002)[22] found that Chinese students were unlikely to pose questions and challenge their instructors due to their native culture and that their lack of communication led to a lack of confidence in their abilities. From a purely linguistic perspective, Kaori (2006)[23] discovered that the influence of L1 culture in an L2 classroom can be seen through how ideas are organized and developed as well as what kind of logic is applied. This idea was indeed found in some of the participants' responses, especially those related to translating ideas from L1 to L2 and finding direct equivalents for words between L1 and L2. This was also in line with Bradley (2000)[24], which stated that students might have difficulty expressing themselves when they lack the appropriate resource in English that does not have an equivalent in their L1 or might feel uncomfortable discussing these problems in an environment with a different cultural setting.

CONCLUSION

The current study investigated problems in acquiring and using speaking skills among second-degree English majors in a public university in Vietnam. To this aim, two research questions were formulated:
1. What do second-degree English majors consider to be problems in learning speaking skills?
2. What do second-degree English majors consider to be problems in applying speaking skills?
To answer these questions, the study employed two instruments: a questionnaire synthesized from the findings of Harris (1969) and Ur (2018)[11] as well as the research models of Rizki (2020)[14], Riadil (2019)[25], and Huynh (2015)[16] alongside a semi-structured interview to give more depth to each problem area. While some results were in line with prior studies such as problems with grammar, vocabulary, anxiety, and comprehension, pronunciation was not as much of a problem as previously thought. These problems could be alleviated with a shift from the traditional approach to grammar teaching, which placed heavy emphasis on learning by heart, to a more modernized version that focuses more on the practical side of grammar.

An interesting finding which did not appear in other studies of the same kind was the impact of native culture on acquiring speaking skills. This cross-cultural issue has been identified by various literature in the past, though often limited exclusively to the use of mother tongue or L1 transfer. In the context of Vietnam, although there was a study comparing the communicative style of Vietnamese native and English native speakers by Nguyen (2015)[26], it was severely limited in that the study only compared how these demographics expressed satisfaction, which was an area

that Vietnamese speakers have long been direct in. Understanding these cultural differences and helping students acclimatize themselves to the foreign language classroom can greatly enhance the efficiency of language learning, not just in speaking but in other skills as well. Without properly identifying and solving deeply rooted problems like those stemming from L1 culture, it is possible that current and future generations of students will not only not improve but regress compared to the rest of the region and the world.

On a pedagogical level, the findings of this study are expected to provide learners and teachers with insight into what potential problems are and how to fix them. For learners, understanding the problems that other students have can encourage them to reflect on their learning journey and identify their own weaknesses. For teachers, they can use the findings of this study to form teaching and learning strategies to solve these issues in their own classroom, such as changing their approach to teaching grammar and vocabulary. These strategies, with further research, can lead to greater, sweeping changes on the curriculum level, undoing some of the shortcomings of current teaching methods.

The current study was not without its limitations. Firstly, the small sample size meant that while the results were significant for that specific group of students, it is not yet applicable to the rest of Vietnam. As such, a larger, more intricate study might be needed to truly grasp the problem and provide impactful solutions. Secondly, the study only managed to get to the surface of some of its findings, especially that of problems related to culture. Because culture is a massive subject to explore, future studies can each tackle one aspect of culture and its effect on language learning, such as the effect of cross-cultural features or contrastive rhetoric. Finally, the methodology of the study and its focus on perceived problems from the perspective of the participants, while successful in uncovering deeper problems, might prove to be rather subjective. Other educators and researchers can improve the research design by including the perspective of other stakeholders as well or compare between perceived problems and actual problems using a pre-established rubric.

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ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Not applicable.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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