

# FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL OF ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCES, VIETNAM

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## ABSTRACT

*Speaking skill is considered as the most important skill among four skills in learning English. In comparison with other skills, speaking is used the most often in our life. However, freshmen majoring in English at Thai Nguyen University of Sciences are facing a lot of difficulties in the process of improving their speaking skill. This descriptive study aims to find the current situation and factors affecting the competence of students' English speaking skill. The results revealed that limited vocabulary, poor grammar and pronunciation, lack of the language environment and inappropriate teaching methods were the main constraints for students in developing their speaking skill.*

**Keyword :** - *Speaking skill, challenges, solutions*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Facing the trend of integration and globalization, English is considered the most popular language in the world when there are nearly 60 countries using English as the main language, besides their mother tongue and nearly 100 countries use English as a second language [1].

In Vietnam since the Open Door Policy in 1986, the international involvement and ASEAN integration in the past several years have confirmed the dominant role of English in language teaching. The demand for English has taken off. English now is included in the curricula of all schools of all levels from primary to college with the focus on the development of four skills listening, speaking, reading and writing. Especially, when the National foreign language project 2020 was launched, English language education has become the main concern of the government, the Ministry of Education and the whole society. The project emerged in the fact that most Vietnamese students cannot communicate or use English in their study after 7 years at school and two or three more years at college. The project has been run with the goal that "by 2020 most Vietnamese students graduating from secondary, vocational schools, colleges and universities will be able to use a foreign language confidently in their daily communication, their study and work in an integrated, multi-cultural and multilingual environment, making foreign languages a comparative advantage of development for Vietnamese people in the cause of industrialization and modernization of the country" (National Foreign Language Project 2020).

At Thai Nguyen University of Sciences, English major students spend four years to study English so that they can get a job as translators, tour guides, interpreters, English teachers or work in the English language environment in international companies. The course follows the communicative orientation with the integration of the four skills listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, to master this language is not an easy task for the students who come from mountainous areas in Northern Vietnam with rather limited English competence. They face numerous difficulties in speaking using the language. The reason lies in the fact that many students are hesitant to

communicate with their teachers and classmates in English because they have few opportunities to do so. On the one hand, when students cannot understand the lesson, they are not motivated and become passive in the classroom. On the other hand, better students are sometimes hesitant to help the slow learners since they are not required to do so.

In classrooms, teachers aim at developing their students' abilities to speak, to listen, to read and to write. Speaking occupies the first and foremost place in this order. Brown (1994) also shares the opinions that speaking ability is integrated closely to writing, reading, and listening. So, in language teaching, it is of great importance to emphasize the interrelationship of skill. Also, of all the four macro English skills, speaking skill seems to be the most important skill required for communication (Zaremba, (2006)). Therefore, developing speaking skills for learners is one crucial purpose of language teaching. However, students have a lot of difficulties in this skill such as not knowing how to express their ideas because of the lack of vocabulary and grammar. With all these, students gradually lose their interest and self-confidence in speaking. For teachers, teaching speaking skill is not an easy task because speaking is considered as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information (Burns & Joyce (1997)). It demands much more than teachers' enthusiasm, which further requires that teachers must be flexible in using appropriate teaching methodology to get students involved and motivated in speaking.

It is in this context that the researcher conducted the study in the hope of identifying factors affecting students' speaking ability and then proposed some suggestions.

## **2. SUBJECT AND METHODOLOGY**

The descriptive method was used in the study to collect the data related to the current state of students' speaking skill and factors affecting it.

The study was conducted in the College of Sciences, Thai Nguyen University. The College offers 20 full-time bachelor programs majoring in natural and social sciences. It has 250 fulltime instructors and professors. Every year, the college admits more than one thousand students who mainly come from mountainous provinces in the north of Vietnam.

The subjects of this study were 33 freshmen majoring in English during the second semester of school year 2020-2021 at Thai Nguyen University of Sciences.

A survey questionnaire was distributed to 33 students to gather the data used in the study.

## **3. FINDINGS**

The following are the findings of the study:

### **3.1. Student background**

This part indicates the general background information of the respondents, including age, gender, numbers of years spending learning English before university, the purpose and students' current level of English.

#### **3.1.1 Gender distribution**

About the age of respondents, most of them (nearly 64%) are at the age of 19 and 22% are at the age of 18. Among 33 students, females account for 73% while males take up only 27%.

#### **3.1.2 The experience of learning English**

Figure 1 shows the amount of time spent studying English by first-year students majoring in English before entering university.

According to figure 1, most students (76%) have been studying English for 7-10 years before going to university. 18% students have studied English for more than 10 years but 6% participants have spent less than 7 years learning English.

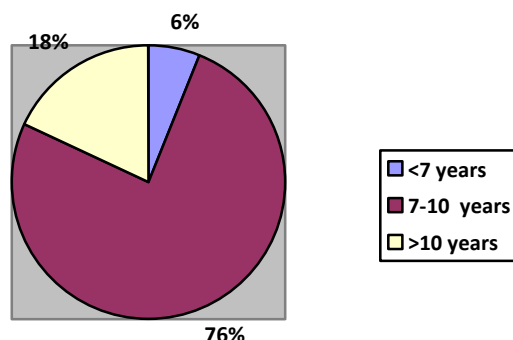


Figure 1. Experience of learning English

3.1.3 Students’ opinions about the importance of English

According to Table 1, most of the students with 96,97% stated that English was very important for them while there was a person (3%) who said that the importance of English was not very important.

Table 1. The importance of English

Answer	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Very important	32	97%
Not very important	1	3%

3.1.4 The purpose of learning English

According to Figure 2, 70% of students said that the reason for them to study English was to find a good job with a steady and attractive salary. The second biggest reason was that English was a very interesting subject for those who liked to learn another language as stated by 50% of participants. In addition, 48% of the students agreed that they wanted to learn English to broaden their knowledge and communicate with foreigners, followed by 45% wanted to learn English for entertainment. Other purposes for students to learn English are to look for a chance to study abroad and to serve the development of their hometown as admitted by 33% students. Finally, 15% of them agreed that they learnt English for other purposes.

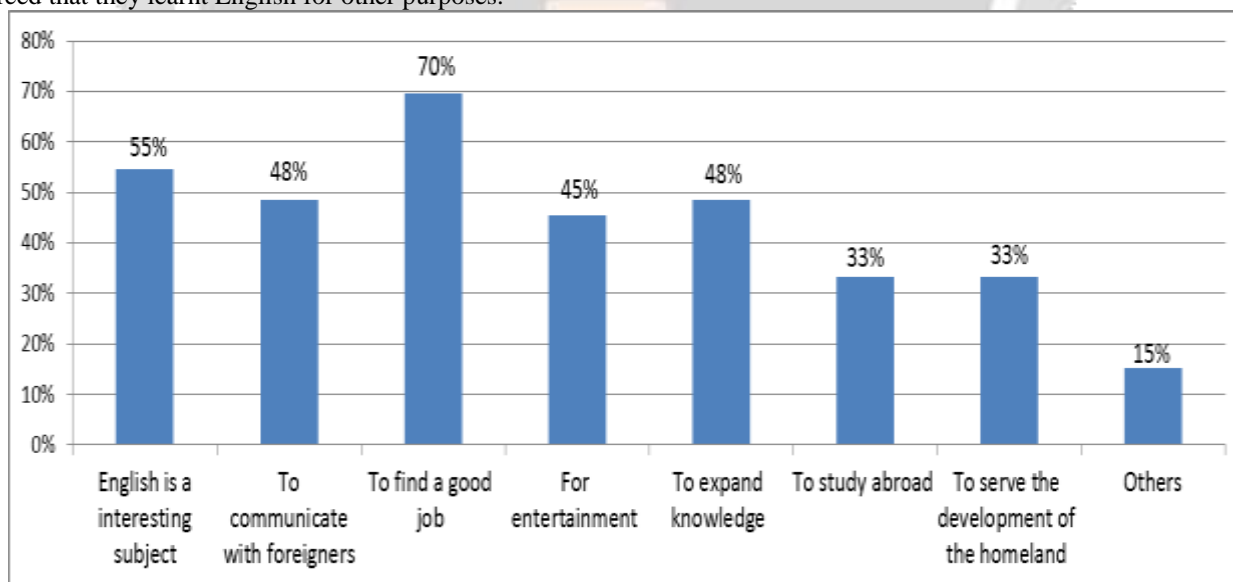


Figure 2. The purpose of learning English

3.1.5 Students' assessment about their own abilities in English

As can be seen in Table 2, when being asked about how students think of their English level, 3 students (9%) admitted that their English was very bad. 13 students (39%) agreed that their English was bad. Another 13 students

stated their English was OK while only 2 students (6%) thought that their level of English was good and another 2 said it was very good.

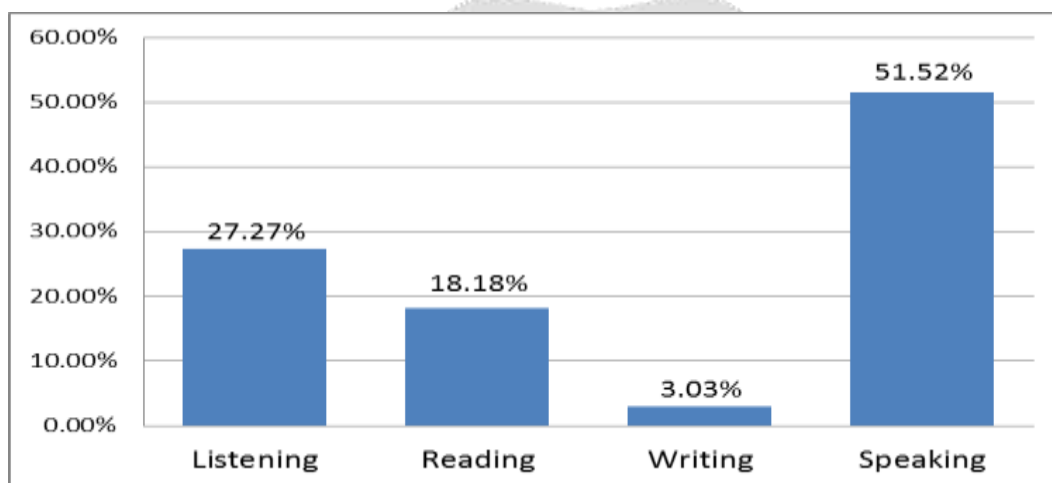
**Table 2. Students' assessment about their own abilities**

	Very bad	Bad	Normal	Good	Very good
Number of students	3	13	13	2	2
Percentage (%)	9%	39%	39%	6%	6%

**3.2 The reality of English speaking skill**

**3.2.1 Students' most challenging skill**

Figure 3 shows students' most difficult skill. Obviously, many students (51.52%) considered speaking as the most challenging skill, followed by listening with 27.27% students. 18.18% thought reading was the hardest skill while only 3.03% believed that they found writing the most difficult.



**Figure 3. The difficulty level of speaking skill**

**3.2.2 The importance of English speaking skill**

Table 3 expresses the students' ideas on the importance of the speaking skill. Interestingly, 31 students, accounting for 94%, said that English speaking skill was very important when learning this language. And the remaining 6% of students thought that this skill was normal.

**Table 3. The importance of English speaking skill**

	Very important	Normal
Number of students	31	2
Percentage (%)	94%	6%

**3.2.3 Perception of the difficulty of speaking skill**

Table 4 shows students' opinions about the difficulty of English speaking skills. Most freshmen majoring in English stated that English speaking skill was difficult for students, with 67% of students choosing to agree, and 9% of students choosing to strongly agree. However, some students didn't agree with this view, with 7 students choosing to disagree (21%) and 3% chose strongly disagree.

**Table 4. Perception of the difficulty of speaking skill**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Number of students	3	22	7	1
Percentage (%)	9%	67%	21%	3%

**3.2.4 The current state of students' English speaking skill**

Figure 4 illustrates students' self-assessment on their speaking skill. According to figure 4, 55% of the surveyed students acknowledged that their English speaking was bad and 15% stated that their speaking skill was very bad.

Besides, 24% of students assessed their speaking skill at a normal level and only 6% thought they had a good speaking skill.

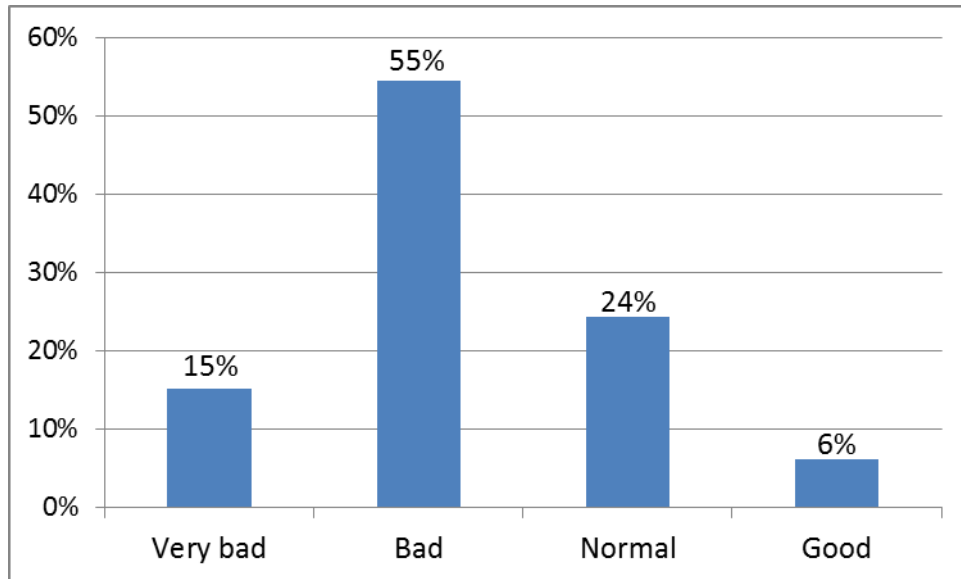


Figure 4. The current state of students' speaking skill

**3.2.5 The level of interest in speaking English in class**

Overall, the majority of students said that they liked to speak English in the classroom with 64% as can be seen in Figure 5. Especially, 18% of students answered that they loved to speak English in the classroom. However, a similar proportion (18%) with 6 people did not like this.

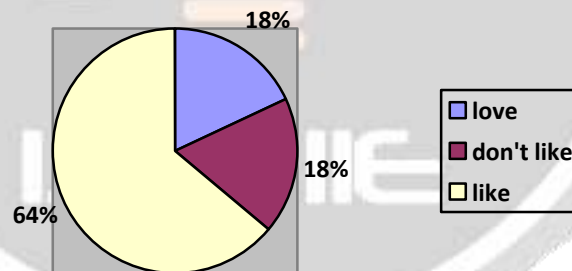


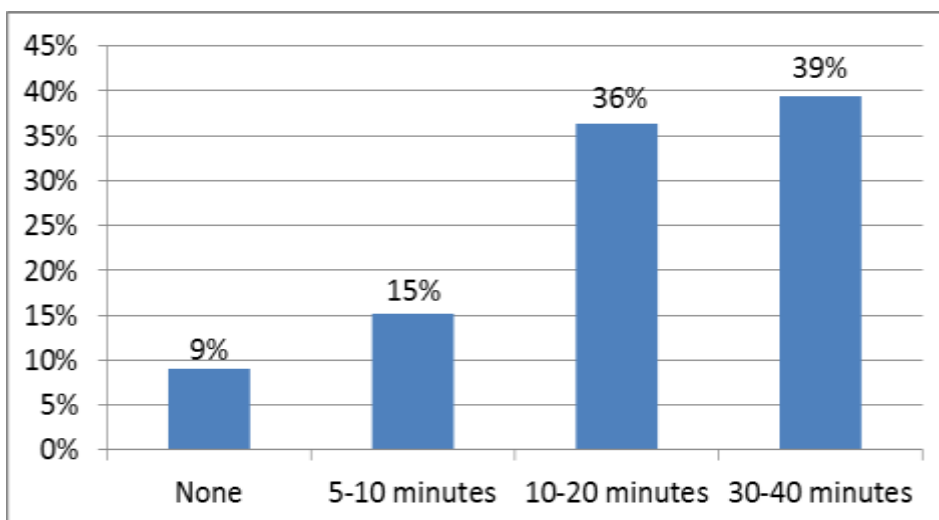
Figure 5: The level of interest in speaking English in class

**3.3 Students' investment in speaking skill and learning strategies**

**3.3.1 Time investment**

Figure 6 illustrated the amount of time that students spend practising their speaking skill in a day. Interestingly, 39% of respondents said that they spent about 30-40 minutes a day speaking English. 36% of students agreed that they spent 10-20 minutes, followed by 15% admitting that they invested 5-10 minutes in speaking English. However, 3 students stated that they didn't spend any time speaking English in a day.





**Figure 6. Distribution of time to speak English**

### 3.3.2 The ways to practice speaking English

**Table 5. The ways to improve English speaking skill**

Ways of practising speaking	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Using some apps on your phone	30	91%
Learning from books	15	45%
Communicating with foreigners	10	30%
Talking to friends in English	14	42%
Joining the English clubs	9	27%

Improving English speaking skill for students is not a simple task. In order to speak English well requires students to have appropriate practice methods and form a habit in daily life. Therefore, it will help learners react quickly in all situations.

As shown in table 5, the participants used a variety of ways to practise speaking English speaking. overall, most of the students (91%) chose to use the applications on their phones to practice speaking, followed by learning from books with 45%. Talking to friends in English was also one of the ways that 42% of students used. In addition, there were some other ways such as communicating with foreigners used by 30% of the participants, and joining English clubs used by 27% of them.

### 3.4 Factors affecting speaking skill

Table 6 below lists the factors affecting the English speaking skill of 33 first-year English major students. According to table 6, 85% of students strongly agreed that limited vocabulary negatively affected their speaking, and 15% of them agreed with this. Most of the students (67%) agreed that lack of grammar knowledge was one of the reasons for their poor speaking skill, and 27% of students strongly agreed with this, but 6% of students did not want to give their ideas. In terms of pronunciation, 82% of participants strongly agreed that their poor English pronunciation affected their speaking skill and 9% of them also agree with that. However, the remaining 9% did not comment on this point. especially, the result of the questionnaire shows that 70% of the students strongly agree that lacking word stress when speaking English was one of causes of being bad at speaking and 30% agreed with this statement.

Besides, 58% agreed that they were unable to express their ideas clearly in English. However, 12% of students disagreed with this and 3% strongly disagreed with the statement. Related to the confidence of speaking English, 12% of students strongly agreed and 30% agreed that lack of confidence was a factor negatively influencing their speaking while 30% did not give their ideas and especially 21% disagreed and 6% strongly agreed with that. Related to the language environment, 51% of students strongly agreed or agreed it was the reason for their poor performance of speaking while only 24% disagreed with that. Interestingly, 51% participants considered unsuitable teaching method as one of the causes of their weak speaking skill; whereas 33% gave opposite ideas about it. Regarding the time spent on speaking at class, 45% of the students agreed that it was not enough while 33% of the participants did not think so.

**Table 6. Factors affecting speaking skills**

	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Limited vocabulary	85%	15%			
Poor grammar	27%	67%	6%		
Poor pronunciation	82%	9%	9%		
Lack of word stress when speaking English	70%	30%			
Being unable to clearly express ideas in English	15%	58%	12%	12%	3%
Inconfidence	12%	30%	30%	21%	6%
Lack of the language environment	6%	45%	25%	24%	
Inappropriate teaching method	3%	48%	15%	21%	12%
Inadequate time for speaking skill at class compared with the other 3 skills	12%	33%	21%	24%	9%

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Speaking skill was assessed very crucial among the four skills but the most challenging to the students. David Nunan (1995) also believed that speaking was the single most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language, and then the level of success was measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language.

According to the findings, the majority of the participants agreed that they needed to learn English to be able to find a good job, so the ability of speaking English well is really crucial to them.

Although most students believed that they were not good at oral skill, they are interested in speaking English at class. This indicates that the teachers should create a lot of activities to involve students in practising English speaking.

The findings revealed that the participants considered limited vocabulary, poor vocabulary and pronunciation, lack of the language environment and inappropriate teaching methods as the main constraints in developing their speaking skill. Therefore, teachers should provide students with a lot of vocabulary and guide them how to learn vocabulary effectively so that they can use the words in context. The students also need to be equipped with basic knowledge of grammar and pronunciation in order to produce sentences and sounds correctly. Obviously, teaching methods should be flexible so that the students are interested in the speaking tasks and the time for speaking activities should be maximized. Last but not least, the language environment is pivotal to improving speaking and listening skills. Unal and Ilhan (2017) illustrated in their research that little contact with foreign language speakers and lack of support outside class were constraints in English learning in Turkey. Thus, the teachers should create as many opportunities as they can to help students use the language in real contexts. Outdoor activities such as English clubs or exchange activities with foreigners could be useful for them to improve their oral competence.

#### 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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