Improve English Speaking Skill for Students through cooperative activities at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration.

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ABSTRACT

Students at Thai Nguyen University of Economics & Business Administration are expected to get B1 level in English according to CEFR as the requirement for graduates. Recently, the percentage of students graduating on due date has been decreased as their English proficiency could not meet the standard. Seeking for appropriate teaching methods to improve the quality of students seems to be a challenging task for lecturers at TUEBA. Based on that condition, this study is aimed knowing how cooperative activities improve the students' speaking skill. The subject of this study was 45 sophomores in Financing and Banking at TUEBA. The research method used was an action research. This study conducted two meetings for the first cycle. The intruments used in this study were speaking tests, observation check list, and questionnaires.The result of the study showed that the students' speaking skill was improved as they enjoyed the activities in class by having a discussion, sharing, and cooperating well. Their improvement was proved by their speaking test results which increased from test to test. Some certain cooperatives activities were believed to be highly effective when applying to students at the medium and higher level of English.

Keyword: - *Cooperative activities, Speaking skill, English teaching and learning, Action research, TUEBA*

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1. INTRODUCTION

English has been considered a compulsory subject in the curriculum of most educational institutions in Vietnam with the goal of training professionals fluent in foreign languages to meet the increasing demand for the intellectual labors of the country. In addition to the graduating requirement for professional knowledge and skills, graduates of the university need to have sufficient foreign language competence to be able to use after graduation.

English speaking skill is considered one of the most difficult ones for learners of foreign languages. To most students at TUEBA, this issue is not the exception. Khamkhien (2010) [1] said that speaking is one of the most important skills when learning a foreign language, including English. According to Bygate (1987) [2], speaking skill is one of the reflexive skills, helping learners to use foreign languages to express opinions, thoughts and feelings to the opposite person and listener. Thus, it can be affirmed that it is speaking skill that helps the English language perform its own communication function. Moreover, speaking skill also contributes to strengthening learners'

listening skill, helping to increase vocabulary and practice related skills. Wongsuwana (2006) [3] argued that speaking skill can be improved through regular practice, "it doesn't depend on talent". Therefore, the process of students' training and practice methods will determine the level of progress of students, this progress takes time to accumulate gradually. Bygate (1987) defined speaking as an oral expression that includes the correct use of sounds in rhythmic and intonation patterns as well as word choice and proper ordering principles to convey appropriate meaning. According to the author, it is a means of building social relationships, ranking, a means of career and business advancement, and also a means through which many languages are learned. According to Chaney (1998) [4], speaking is the process of creating and sharing meaning using verbal and non-verbal signs in different contexts. Brown (1994) [5] and Burns and Joyce (1997) [6] defined speaking as an interactive process of creating meaning that includes the production, reception, and processing of information. Different authors defined the ability to speak in different ways, their definitions all shared the same feature: the ability to use language as a means to achieve some communication purposes.

Zaremba (2006) [7] also pointed out in his research that speaking or communication skill is often put first over work experience, motivation and academic credentials as criteria for recruiting new workers. Students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) often suffer from few opportunities to speak English outside the classroom (Zhang, 2009) [8] due to limited exposure to native English speakers. Therefore, the author suggested that teachers provide more situations and activities for students to strengthen their speaking ability.

English teachers and researchers on teaching methods of English as a foreign language have come up with many solutions to practice the language in and out of the classroom to improve students' speaking ability. Among them is the application of many interactive activities to create positive motivation and attract students to participate such as Role-play & Simulation activities, Presentation, Interview, Discussion, Question-Answer in the form of classroom management such as pairs, groups or individuals.

Author Thanyalak Oradee (2012) [9] in a study on the development of Speaking skill using three communication activities (discussion, problem solving and role-playing) affirmed: "Teaching English Speaking skill by using these three communication activities is a learner-centered approach. Students work in small groups, divided according to their language proficiency. Through these activities, students have the opportunity to work together and help each other to successfully complete assigned tasks. The atmosphere of working in groups can help students reduce their fear of making mistakes when speaking English. When working in groups, the students can show their abilities in a good way, which leads to a better self-control and more confidence in speaking English, thereby creating motivation and excitement to more learning activities."

Author Fasawang Pattanpichet (2011) [10] in a study on the effectiveness of using cooperative learning to develop students' English speaking skill, by empirical research method concluded "collaborative learning" helping to bring to the classroom an atmosphere that resembles real social and work life situations, in which students interact, negotiate and share ideas with each other."

2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

While the percentage of students who do not meet the foreign language standards on time and the number of graduates who do not pass the job interview in English successfully has been increasing, the enhancement of students' English speaking ability in developing language development in general is essential. In fact, the teaching and learning of foreign languages has not really broken out from the traditional method, leading to the lack of a highly effective and suitable teaching and learning method. Methods to improve speaking skill has not been fully invested because of time constrain. Therefore, it is necessary to search for the solutions to improve teaching and learning English speaking skill and the evaluation on the impacts of speaking activities is of great importance.

There are numerous studies on the issue of improving foreign language proficiency in general and speaking skill in particular, but so far not many studies on the effectiveness of the methods applied in teaching and learning English speaking skill were carried out at the authors' institution. In order to find some possible solutions and propose effective activities for students in learning English, the authors decided to conduct a research on the topic "Improving English speaking skill for university students at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration in term of cooperative activities". The authors focus on researching activities that are said to be highly effective for teaching speaking skill, thereby proposing appropriate methods for teachers at the institution in particular as well as those of English teaching. The findings and recommendations of this study can partly help foreign language teachers particularly at TUEBA to choose the most suitable teaching method.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research questions
The study attempted to answer the following key questions:
(1) How does the application of interactive activities in teaching have an impact on the development of English speaking skill of second-year students?
(2) What is the student's attitude towards that interactive activity?

3.2 Research methods
Research method has a positive impact on the quality of the final results of a research paper because it partly helps the authors conduct the research, collect and analyze the necessary information to achieve the goal research (Flick, 2011, p. 24) [11]. Methods are always designed based on the uniqueness and requirements of each study. As a result, it requires researchers to deeply understand the characteristics of their project and choose the best method to apply. In this study, the authors applied a 4-step process of an action research as follows:

Step 1: Make a plan
During the time working with students, the researchers found the class to be quite. Whenever being asked to speak in English, many of them hesitated; therefore, the authors began the research by defining and analyzing the problem. In order to prepare for the action plans, the research group designed a questionnaire, a pre-intervention questionnaire to collect information on students' English speaking ability, student assessment about their English speaking skill to have appropriate ways in the process of implementing the topic. The collected results of the students' questions and answers are very useful for the authors because those results could be used to evaluate the impact of classroom interventions on improving students' speaking skill.

The integration of English speaking activities in different class arrangement is carried out weekly for a period of 12 weeks (equivalent to the number of the time allocated for a semester after excluding 2 weeks for progress tests and assessment). Each activity is integrated into each Unit of the module. This activity is based on the learning materials and outline for the curriculum that the authors' division has used, and carefully selected to match the topics of interest among students. The popularity of the topics, suitable to the student's proficiency level, is also considered selected by the research group. Through interview questions at the pre-intervention stage, the research group found that difficult or unfamiliar topics to students could be the reasons for the decrease in their involvement in English speaking. Students are provided with learning diaries in the form of self-observations for them to self-assess their learning.

Due to the time constrain, the research has been carried out for one cycle; however, the authors intend to revise the plan to support the students and continue the second cycle in the following weeks if research results show that the activities are effective for their class.

Step 2: Take Action
After having the plans, the research group proceed to implement the plans prepared in their class. During the intervention, the information was recorded regarding students' weekly practice and observed the students' responses. The actions taken by the teacher, the necessary changes to the weekly plan made, and the behavior of the students were carefully recorded, too. At the end of the study period, questionnaires and interviews were used to collect more information about students' attitudes about English speaking activities.

Step 3: Observe
The authors systematically observed the changes of students when participating in activities in English class and recorded relevant information about the frequency of participation, the ability to interact. and students' attitudes in class. Collecting data from the observation phase could help the author to have a more detailed and accurate reflection of what has been done.

Step 4: Reflect
From the data collected through the observation period and intimate conversations with the students, the research group summarized and analyzed the data to get useful information about the activities used. Thanks to that, the research group (the teachers) were able to change their original plan before the new cycle started. By the end of the research period, the research group had accumulated a considerable amount of information on the impact of

diversifying speaking activities according to different class arrangement on the development of English speaking competence of students. Accordingly, the authors could rely on that to make decisions about which activities to use, in what ways to obtain high efficiency in teaching English speaking skill to their students.

3.3 Data collection and instruments

Pre-test
During the first week of the semester, the research group conducted interviews with students in the classroom using a pre-prepared questionnaire that was appropriate to the students' current proficiency levels. Each teacher interviewed 15 students with an average duration of 5 minutes for each. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom meeting software. Each student was assessed based on the grading scale for speaking skill of the IELTS test (short for International English Language Testing System) which is the most popular international English language testing system in the world today in terms of the number of candidates.
The results of the interviews were aggregated as a basis for the research group to compare the progress in students' competence after the intervention.
The test structure consists of two parts: Part 1 (social interaction on topics of immediate needs and major concerns), and Part 2 (topics presentation).
The grading was based on IELTS criteria with the process in which 3 teachers in the research group discussed and agreed on the grading method to ensure the reliability of the test.

Post-test
After 12 weeks of applying the method, the research team carried out the same process as the Pre-test step. The time allocation for each test was up to 5 minutes per student and was carried out via Zoom meeting software. The assessment criteria for Speaking skills in this test were also based on the assessment criteria and questionnaires outlined in the pre-intervention test to ensure the consistency and reliability of the test results.

Questionnaire
The post-intervention questionnaire included only four survey items to determine whether students' attitudes towards communication in English and students' evaluations of the effectiveness to the interactive activities according to each form of classroom management (pair, group or individual). Students' proficiency was measured through their preference to use English to communicate after the intervention compared to the pre-intervention.
Students were surveyed in term of the level of participation in activities; level of interest in the activity; student progress with speaking skill; and the effectiveness of these activities in English lessons.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 compares differences in minimum and maximum scores at pre-test and post-test results. Generally, students performed quite better at the post-test stage although their minimum scores were quite similar. While the minimum and maximum scores of the pre-test were in turn 2.0 and 4.0, the figures for the post-test were 2.0 and 5.5. Students' proficiency level moved from A2 level to B1 in term of their maximum scores.

Table-1: Minimum and maximum scores of pre-test and post test

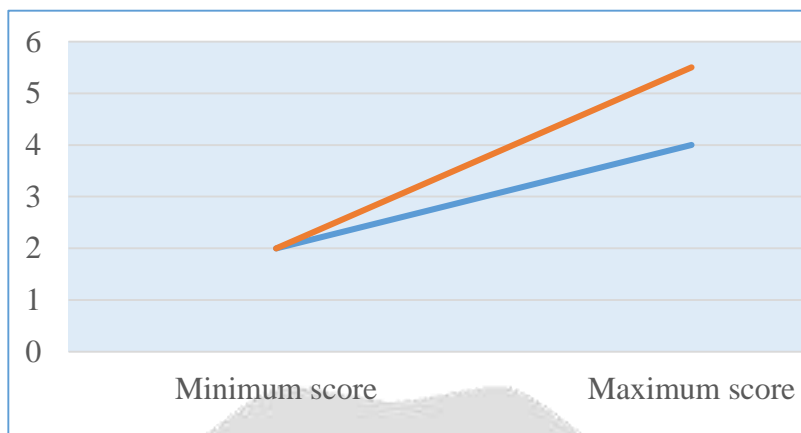| Types of test	Minimum score	Maximum score
Pre-test	2.0	4.0
Post-test	2.0	5.5

Chart-1: Pre-test and Post-test scores comparison

It can be seen from table 2, the average score for the tests was slightly different, which was 3.0 for pre-test and that 3.6 for the post-test. It is recognizable that in the post test, the students' average score was significantly higher than the pre-test. There was the average score gain of 0.6 between the two tests. This indicated that the intensive use of cooperative activities reflected positive impact on students' speaking skill development.

Table-2: Average scores of pre-test and post test

Types of test	Number of students	Average scores	Average score gains
Pre-test	45	3.0	0.6
Post-test	45	3.6	

The chart below illustrates the changes in the number of students achieving A1, A2, B1, and B2 level ò proficiency between the two tests. It can be seen that before using the activities, the percentage of students at A1 and A2 is relatively high, accounting for 40% for A1 level and 47% for A2 level. Meanwhile, the number of students who are at the low B1 level is very small, accounting for 13% and especially there are no students at B2 level. However, the results after applying the method represent the changes in the number of students according to their proficiency level. Specifically, the number of students reaching A1 level decreased by nearly half compared to the pre-test, accounting for 24%. The number of students at A2 level in pre-test decreased to 20%. The increase in the number of students with B1 level in the post-test was 4 times as big as that in the pre-test. 4% of students with B2 level can be seen in the post-test which had not been obtained by students in the pre-test. Also, there was a marked shift between the number of students with A2 and B1.
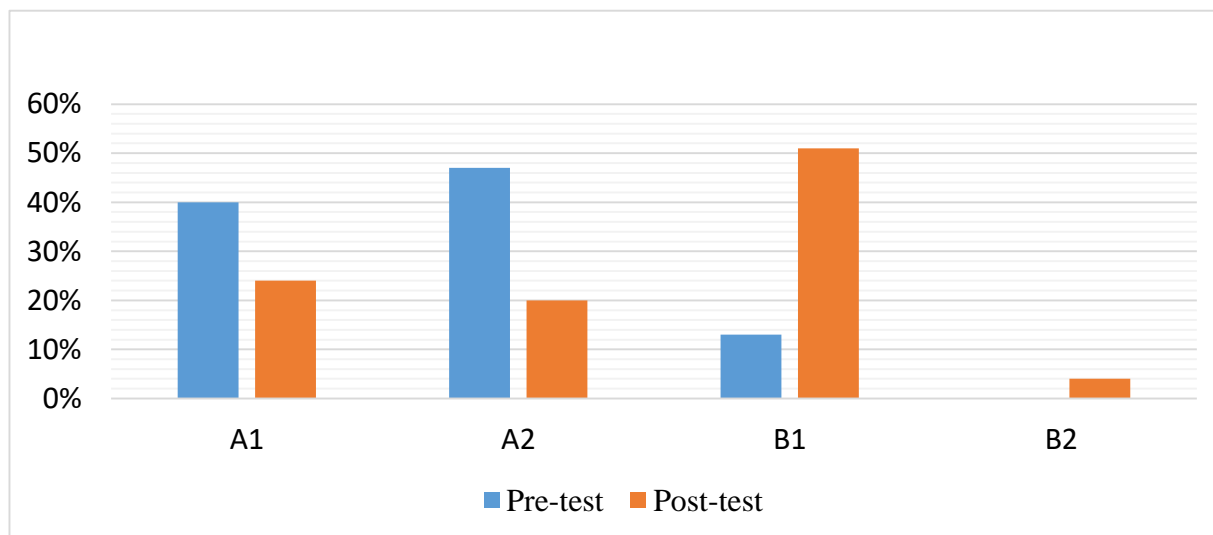
Chart - 2: Proficiency changes between Pre-test and Post-test

The results of the test before and after applying the teaching method was classified according to the proficiency level as shown in the table below. The number of students at A1 in the Pre-test had an average score of 2.3 points, while the average score of this level in the post-test was 2.6. Thus, the average score gain was 0.3 which implied little improvement was made for this level. For the group at A2 level, the average scores gain of the tests was 0.7 which was 2 times as high as that of group A1.

Table - 3: Pre-test and Post-test average scores of students with A1 level

A1 level	Types of test	Average score	Average score gain
(2.0 – 2.5)	Pre-test	2.3	0.3
	Post-test	2.6	

Table - 4: Pre-test and Post-test average scores of students with A2 level

A2 level	Types of test	Average score	Average score gain
(3.0 –3.5)	Pre-test	3.3	0.7
	Post-test	4.0	

The average score gain of students at B1 between the two tests in the following table shows that the number of students at level B1 increased significantly, from 4.1 to 4.7. In general, the average score gains of the groups A2 and B1 were much higher in comparison to the others.

Table – 5: Pre-test and Post-test average scores of students with B1 level

B1 level	Types of test	Average score	Average score gain
(4.0 – 5.0)	Pre-test	4.1	0.6
	Post-test	4.7	

Table 6 shows the fluctuation among the student at different levels. It can be seen that interactive activities were most effective with students at higher levels of proficiency. Specifically, the number of students at A1, A2 all decreased, to 7 and 11 students respectively. The number of students at B1 was nearly 4 times as many as in the post-intervention test compared to the pre-intervention. It is particularly noteworthy here that none of the students reached B2 level in the pre-intervention test, but there were two students at B2 level in the post- test.

Table – 6: Pre-test and Post-test average scores of students with B1 level

Level	No. of students at Pre-test	No. of students at Post-test	Increase	Decrease
A1	18	11		+
A2	21	09		+
B1	06	23	+	
B2	0	02	+	

The results obtained from the questionnaire, the students' interest in each activity, the level of participation, and the effectiveness of the activities applied in the English class are described in the tables below.

In general, the vast majority of students showed their interest and even much interest in the activities conducted during class. Among the given activities, interview, role play & simulation were most interesting to the students, accounting for 78%, followed by debate, accounting for 56%. Interview & survey and discussions were equal in the level of interest, accounting for 51%. Information gap was said to attract students less, accounting for 42%, and the lowest level of interest is for Q&A activities, accounting for 35%. Besides, there were still a small number of students who showed no interest in Q&A and debate activities, accounting for 11% and 7% respectively.

Table-7: Students' evaluation on cooperative activities

Activities	Completely uninterested	Uninterested	Interested	Fairly interested	Highly interested
	0	1	2	3	4
Information gap	0%	0%	19%	46%	42%
Interview & survey	0%	0%	16%	33%	51%
Role play & Simulation	0%	0%	0%	22%	78%
Discussion	0%	0%	9%	40%	51%
Question- answer	0%				
Debate	0%	7%	16%	22%	56%

In terms of the frequency of participation, the table illustrated that the vast majority of students always take part in cooperative activities held in the classroom, accounting for 66.7%. However, there was still a small number of students who rarely participated in these activities, accounting for 11.1%.

Table -8: Students' evaluation on frequency of involvement

Question	Never	Sometimes	Usually	Always
	0	1	2	3
How often do you involve in the cooperative activities in the class?	0%	11.1%	22.2%	66.7%

Chart 3 represents the percentage of the effectiveness of the applied activities. More than half of the students agreed that conducted cooperative activities were really effective for their speaking skill. However, 14% of students doubted about their improvement in speaking English**.**
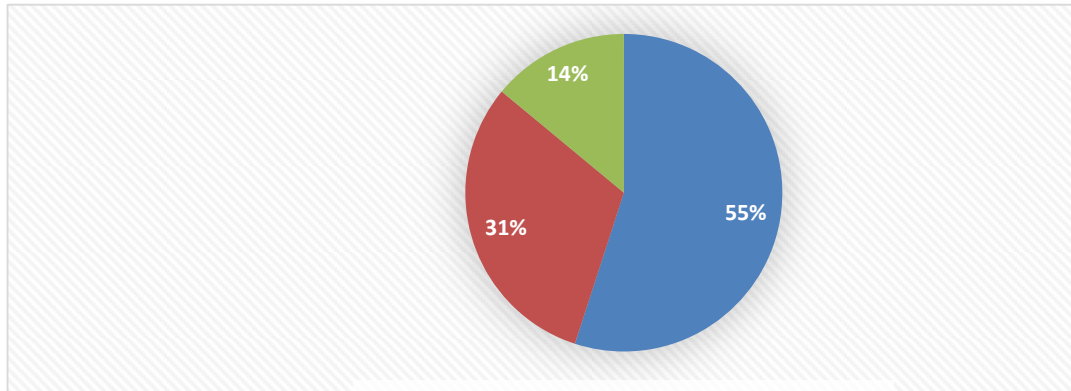
Chart-3: Evaluation of the effectiveness

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on data interpretation, some conclusions could be drawn:

The application of cooperative activities could be effective in improving students' speaking skill. These activities are easy to be applied in teaching speaking to students with lower English proficiency at some educational institutions. Moreover, the use of those activities in teaching speaking improves students' motivation and interest in speaking English. The students got into the habit of speaking in English that they rarely did before. Thus, the students' language proficiency can be improved.

Through the cooperative activities, the students' speaking skill can be improved. It is proved by the result of the improvement from pre-test to post-test. The collected data showed that applying cooperative activities can be an alternative strategy to improve students' speaking skill.

From the questionnaires, students were interested in participating in the activities as a strategy to improve their English. Most of them agreed that the high frequency of participation on these activities has positive effect on their speaking competence.

There are some suggestions which are presented in order to improve the students' speaking skill.

(1) For the English teachers, they should design and adapt the topics in the course book to make it interesting and enjoyable for the students. Cooperative activities can be applied frequently and flexibly to teach students at multi-level classes. In addition, the use of the each activity should be appropriate with the language proficiency of the students and the facilities of the classroom.

(2) For the students, they need to participate in the activities quite often regardless their exposure to those activities. Although some of the activities seem to be more interesting and easy to join than others, equal amount of time and effort should be put on various types of cooperative activities. The improvement of their speaking skill much depends on the learners' self-motivation rather than teachers' supports. In short, the students had better to make themselves enjoy the process of self-study. Then, always practicing speaking in English every day could make their English speaking improved day by day.

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