

# Factors Affecting English Speaking Proficiency among English-majored Students in a Vietnamese University

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**Abstract** - English proficiency is crucial for students majoring in English as it directly influences their academic performance and future career prospects. This study aims to investigate the factors affecting English speaking proficiency among English-majored students in a Vietnamese university. The study identified several factors influencing English speaking proficiency, including language anxiety, exposure to English outside the classroom, self-confidence, and motivation. Additionally, the study explored the role of teaching methods and classroom environment in enhancing speaking skills. The findings could point out some difficulties in speaking experienced by English-majored at Nam Can Tho University. Based on the results, recommendations are provided to educators and policymakers to optimize language teaching strategies and create a conducive learning environment to foster English speaking proficiency among students. This research contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of English language learning and provides insights for improving English education in Vietnamese universities.

**Keywords:** English Speaking proficiency, language anxiety, English majored-students, Universities

## I. INTRODUCTION

English competence, particularly speaking ability, is crucial for English majors since it has a considerable influence on academic progress and potential employment chances. In the context of globalization, the ability to communicate effectively in English is becoming increasingly crucial, making mastery of speaking skills a primary goal in English language education. Despite this, many English-majors in Vietnamese institutions fail to reach the requisite level of speaking skill. Moreover, speaking skills is the one that can fulfill the primary role of a language, which is to communicate; hence, a person who can speak English fluently would find it simple to master English in general. Unfortunately, for people studying English as a second language, speaking is regarded as the most difficult of the four primary English skills, which are speaking, writing, listening, and reading.

It is widely acknowledged that many university students from various nations whose first language is not English face difficulties speaking English. Woodow and Chapman (2002) state that “speaking skills are considered a problem for Asian students, because of the lack of exposure to native speakers, and the emphasis on formal exam driven language courses in Asian countries”. In the context of Japan, Araki and Raphael (2018) believe that speaking English can be a significant barrier for Japanese university students, in part because the Japanese high school curriculum does not give opportunities for students to express themselves. In another study done in Egypt, El-Sakka (2016) seeks a solution to the problem of EFL university students at Suez Faculty of Education who experience significant levels of speaking anxiety. Çağatay (2015) evaluated the foreign language anxiety of 147 Turkish students in an English preparation program at a Turkish university to identify potential causes and provide solutions.

Many Asian countries, like Vietnam, struggle with English language proficiency. There have been various research looking into this issue in Vietnamese contexts. Many English-majoring undergraduates, particularly freshmen, at Can Tho University (CTU) in Vietnam believe that speaking skills are difficult (Quyen,

Nga, and Nguyen, 2018). In another Vietnamese setting, Le (2019) conducts study to investigate the variables that restrict students' speaking abilities at Ba Ria - Vung Tau University. The study's findings show that teachers, students, and the classroom are the most important elements influencing students' contributions to speaking activities. Ngô's Master's thesis (2010) examines the problems that freshmen at Thai Nguyen University's Faculty of Information Technology have when learning to speak English. Following the identification of the issues faced by these first-year students, the above-mentioned writers and other experts offer a variety of remedies to assist Vietnamese students in dealing with the difficulties of speaking English.

Previous research has highlighted various elements that influence language learning, such as psychological factors, the quality of instruction, and the availability of opportunities for authentic language use. However, there is a need for more comprehensive studies that specifically address the unique challenges faced by English-majored students in the Vietnamese context. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a detailed analysis of the multifaceted factors affecting English speaking proficiency in this group. In order to achieve the objective of the study, the author endeavors to address the following question:

- What are the factors affecting English speaking proficiency among English-majored students in a Vietnamese university?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Definitions of Speaking skills

Speaking abilities are the capacity to successfully communicate verbally in a particular language. This comprises a variety of skills like pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and interactive communication abilities. Effective speaking abilities include not just the technical components of making sounds and words, but also the strategic use of language to express meaning, engage in discussion, and respond effectively in a variety of communication situations.

Burns (2019) defines speaking as "an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information." This concept highlights the dynamic and reciprocal aspect of spoken communication, in which both the speaker and the listener actively engage in the flow of ideas.

According to Goh and Burns (2012), speaking is a productive talent that consists of numerous components, including the right use of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as well as the capacity to organize thoughts logically and transmit them successfully in conversation. This viewpoint emphasizes the diversity and multifaceted character of speaking abilities.

Furthermore, Thornbury (2019) defines speaking as the capacity to utilize language correctly and fluently in real-time encounters. He underlines that speaking requires not just linguistic skill, but also pragmatic and sociolinguistic understanding, allowing speakers to tailor their language use to varied settings and audiences.

In conclusion, speaking skills are an essential component of language mastery, requiring a mix of linguistic knowledge, cognitive processes, and interaction abilities. Developing these abilities is critical for effective communication in academic and daily situations.

### 2.2. The importance of Speaking

Speaking is an essential component of language competency and plays an important role in efficient communication. It allows people to convey their thoughts, ideas, and feelings effectively and convincingly. According to Brown (2001), speech is a major mode of communication that is essential for everyday interactions, allowing people to share information, negotiate meaning, and develop connections. Without

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excellent speaking abilities, students may struggle to fully participate in discussions and express themselves appropriately in social and professional settings.

Speaking activities increase cognitive processes required for language growth and learning. Swain (1985) proposes the Output Hypothesis, which holds that generating language (speaking) helps learners comprehend and internalize linguistic patterns. This active use of language is critical for cognitive development because it helps learners to practice and enhance their language abilities via real usage, reinforcing what they have learned while also promoting greater understanding and retention.

Regular speaking practice increases self-confidence and lowers language anxiety, both of which are necessary for efficient language acquisition. According to Krashen (1982), successful language learning requires a low emotional filter, which is defined as low fear and strong confidence. Speaking practice reduces nervousness and increases confidence, giving learners the certainty they need to participate more actively in discussions and speaking activities. This enhanced confidence leads to a higher readiness to interact and participate in language learning activities.

Speaking abilities are immediately useful in real-world circumstances, ranging from informal discussions to professional presentations and interviews. Thornbury (2019) contends that speaking is a useful skill that prepares students for real-world communication issues. Effective speaking abilities are critical for academic performance, employment possibilities, and social connections because they allow people to explain their ideas clearly and engage successfully with others in a range of situations.

Speaking encourages interactive and cooperative learning, which aids in language acquisition via social engagement. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the sociocultural hypothesis, which holds that social contact is essential for cognitive development. Speaking activities encourage collaborative learning and peer support, creating a setting in which students may practice language skills, get feedback, and learn from one another.

Furthermore, speaking provides instant feedback, which is essential for building language skills. Goh and Burns (2012) underline the significance of feedback in speaking exercises. Immediate correction and feedback assist students in identifying and correcting mistakes, resulting in more effective language skill development. This real-time engagement and modification enables the constant growth and refining of speaking talents.

In summary, speaking is a vital component of language learning that impacts communication skills, cognitive development, confidence building, real-world application, interactive learning, and the ability to receive immediate feedback. Understanding and emphasizing the importance of speaking can help educators design more effective teaching strategies that promote active use of the language and help learners achieve greater proficiency.

## 2.3.Common Difficulties in Speaking

### 2.3.1.Linguistic Factors

Pronunciation, syntax, and vocabulary intricacies stand as formidable linguistic barriers in the journey towards English speaking fluency. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010) underscore the significance of accurate pronunciation, highlighting learners' struggles with articulating certain English sounds. Moreover, Thornbury (2005) emphasizes the role of syntax and grammar in effective communication, noting how errors in word order or tense usage can impede comprehension. Vocabulary limitations further compound these challenges, impacting learners' ability to express themselves with nuance and precision (Schmitt, 2008).

### 2.3.2.Psychological Factors

The psychological dimension of language learning is equally paramount, with anxiety and self-consciousness emerging as pervasive hurdles. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) delve into the intricate web of

language anxiety, revealing its detrimental effects on learners' confidence and performance. Likewise, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) highlight the phenomenon of foreign language classroom anxiety, elucidating its role in inhibiting learners' willingness to engage in oral communication and take risks.

### 2.3.3. Background Knowledge

Cultural and experiential factors significantly shape learners' speaking proficiency, underscoring the importance of background knowledge. Ward and Kennedy (1999) explore the notion of sociocultural adaptation, underscoring how learners' exposure to English-speaking environments and interactions with native speakers profoundly influence their communicative competence. Moreover, Schmitt (2008) emphasizes the pivotal role of topic-specific vocabulary and discourse conventions in effective communication, pointing to the challenges posed by insufficient background knowledge.

### 2.3.4. Problems in Learning Environment

The learning environment plays a pivotal role in shaping learners' speaking abilities, with various institutional factors impacting their linguistic development. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) highlight the importance of meaningful interaction and practice opportunities, underscoring how limited access to authentic materials or resources can hamper learners' progress. Additionally, Nunan (1999) elucidates the challenges posed by large class sizes and teacher-centered instruction, which may hinder individual speaking practice and personalized feedback.

In conclusion, the journey towards English speaking proficiency is fraught with myriad challenges, spanning linguistic intricacies, psychological barriers, background knowledge constraints, and institutional shortcomings. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, educators and learners can cultivate a supportive learning environment conducive to linguistic growth and communicative competence. Through targeted interventions and pedagogical strategies informed by empirical research, the barriers to English speaking proficiency can be overcome, empowering learners to navigate the complexities of cross-cultural communication with confidence and proficiency.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Participants

The participants in this study consist of English-majored students from a Vietnamese university, encompassing diverse academic years, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds. Recruited through voluntary consent and various recruitment channels, directing communication with faculty members, participants contribute to the research through questionnaire. Their collective experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding English speaking proficiency offer valuable insights into the complexities of language learning in the Vietnamese university context.

### 3.2. Instrument and Data collection

The questionnaire used for data collection in this study was designed to completely analyze the factors impacting English speaking competency among English-majored students at a Vietnamese institution. This questionnaire includes Likert-scale items and elaboration prompts with the goal of collecting both quantitative data. The data collecting procedure follows ethical criteria, with participants receiving explicit information about the study's objective, rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. This research uses rigorous methodologies to reveal the intricate aspects of English speaking skill in the Vietnamese university environment.

## IV. FINDINGS

### 4.1. The influence of linguistic factors

The data collected from 62 English major students through a questionnaire was examined after gathering all the required information and concepts.

**Table 1.** Difficulties related to the Linguistic Factors

Items	N	Mean
Vocabulary size plays a crucial role in my English speaking proficiency.	62	3.98
The complexity of English grammar affects my confidence in speaking English.	62	3.93
Awareness of English collocations enhances my speaking fluency.	62	3.74
Understanding English word stress patterns improves my spoken English comprehension.	62	3.60

The findings indicate that vocabulary size is perceived as the most influential linguistic factor, with a mean score of 3.98. This suggests that a larger vocabulary significantly contributes to students' ability to express themselves effectively in English. The complexity of English grammar also plays a crucial role, with a mean score of 3.93, indicating that difficulties in mastering grammar can undermine students' confidence in speaking.

Awareness of English collocations, with a mean score of 3.74, is also important, highlighting that familiarity with common word pairings can enhance fluency. Finally, understanding English word stress patterns, with a mean score of 3.60, is seen as beneficial for improving spoken comprehension, though it appears to be slightly less influential than the other factors.

The findings highlight the strong influence of several linguistic parameters on English speaking competency among English-majored students at a Vietnamese institution. Vocabulary size and grammatical complexity are particularly important factors, implying that tailored treatments in these areas might significantly improve students' speaking ability. Furthermore, raising awareness of collocations and word stress patterns might help students improve their fluency and understanding in spoken English.

### 4.2. The influence of Psychological Factors

In the second part, students were questioned about challenges Psychological Factors in speaking. Table 2 shows the results of the students' challenges with the role of listener.

**Table 2.** Difficulties related to Psychological Factors

Items	N	Mean
I feel anxious when I have to speak English in front of others.	62	3.81
I often feel embarrassed when I make errors while speaking English.	62	3.77
I feel nervous during English speaking assessments or exams.	62	3.68
I lack confidence in my English speaking abilities.	62	3.44

The results show that anxiety is the most prevalent psychological element influencing students, with a mean score of 3.81 for feeling uncomfortable when speaking English in front of people. This high degree of anxiety indicates that fear of public speaking severely impairs students' capacity to communicate effectively in English. Embarrassment while making errors is also a significant concern, with a mean score of 3.77, showing that students' self-consciousness about mistakes has a detrimental influence on their speaking skill.

Nervousness during evaluations and exams is another important element, with a mean score of 3.68. This shows that the formal evaluation framework increases students' anxiety, which affects their performance. Finally, with a mean score of 3.44, the lack of confidence in speaking abilities reveals a systemic issue that underpins the other psychological aspects, adding to overall reluctance and decreased fluency.

The results underscore the significant impact of psychological factors on English speaking proficiency among English-majored students in a Vietnamese university. Anxiety, embarrassment, nervousness, and lack of confidence collectively contribute to students' difficulties in speaking English fluently and confidently.

### 4.3. The influence of Background Knowledge

**Table 3.** Difficulties related to Background Knowledge

Items	N	Mean
I find it difficult to speak English on topics I am not familiar with.	62	3.76
Lack of background knowledge on certain subjects hinders my ability to participate in conversations.	62	3.54
I often feel unprepared to engage in discussions on academic topics in English.	62	3.41
My limited knowledge of English-speaking countries' customs and traditions affects my communication.	62	3.32

The findings indicate that the greatest challenge for students is speaking English on unfamiliar topics, with a mean score of 3.76. This suggests that students' ability to engage in conversations is significantly hindered by their lack of familiarity with certain subjects. The lack of background knowledge on specific topics, with a mean score of 3.54, further underscores the difficulty students face in participating in conversations due to insufficient information.

Feeling unprepared for academic discussions in English, with a mean score of 3.41, highlights a common issue among students, indicating that gaps in academic knowledge can affect their confidence and fluency. Lastly, the limited understanding of English-speaking countries' customs and traditions, with a mean score of 3.32, points to a cultural knowledge gap that impacts students' communicative competence.

The results highlight the significant impact of knowledge-related factors on English speaking proficiency among English-majored students in a Vietnamese university. Difficulties in speaking on unfamiliar



topics, lack of background knowledge, unpreparedness for academic discussions, and limited cultural knowledge collectively contribute to students' challenges in speaking English fluently and confidently.

#### 4.4. The influence of Learning Environment

**Table 4.** Difficulties related to Learning Environment

Items	N	Mean
The lack of opportunities to practice speaking English in class hinders my proficiency.	62	3.76
Limited access to language learning resources (e.g., books, audio materials) affects my ability to improve my speaking.	62	3.53
The teaching methods used in my English classes do not adequately focus on speaking practice.	62	3.45
The classroom atmosphere does not encourage active participation in speaking activities.	62	3.26

The findings indicate that the most significant challenge for students is the lack of opportunities to practice speaking English in class, with a mean score of 3.76. This suggests that insufficient practice time in the classroom significantly hinders students' ability to develop their speaking skills. Limited access to language learning resources, with a mean score of 3.53, further highlights the difficulties students face in improving their proficiency due to a lack of adequate materials.

The teaching methods used in English classes also pose a considerable challenge, with a mean score of 3.45, indicating that current pedagogical approaches do not sufficiently emphasize speaking practice. Lastly, the classroom atmosphere, with a mean score of 3.26, suggests that the environment may not be conducive to encouraging active participation and engagement in speaking activities.

The results of this study underscore the significant impact of the learning environment on English speaking proficiency among English-majored students in a Vietnamese university. The lack of opportunities for speaking practice, limited access to learning resources, inadequate teaching methods, and a non-conducive classroom atmosphere collectively contribute to the challenges students face in speaking English fluently and confidently.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

English proficiency is a crucial skill for students majoring in English at Vietnamese universities. However, achieving fluency in speaking English can be challenging due to various factors. This discussion explores the linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors that influence English speaking proficiency among English-majored students in Vietnamese universities.

One of the most important linguistic factors determining English speaking skill is students' understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. A strong foundation in these areas is required for effective communication. Furthermore, exposure to legitimate English items, such as literature and media, can increase language skills and speaking ability. Furthermore, the complexities of English grammar and the contrasts between English and Vietnamese language systems might provide difficulties for students.

Psychological variables have an important impact in English language competence. Confidence and drive are important predictors of students' willingness to participate in spoken English practice. Fear of making errors or being evaluated by peers might impair students' speaking ability. Thus, building a supportive and encouraging learning atmosphere is critical for increasing students' confidence and enthusiasm to speak English.

Students' past knowledge and experiences have an impact on their ability to speak English. Exposure to English-speaking surroundings, availability to resources such as language classes or private tutors, and individuals' specific learning methods can all have an influence on their ability to speak English fluently. Furthermore, students' socioeconomic backgrounds and educational possibilities outside of university may have an impact on their language abilities and confidence in speaking English.

The learning atmosphere in Vietnamese institutions might be challenging for English speakers. Large class numbers, restricted possibilities for interactive learning, and a reliance on traditional teaching techniques may impede students' capacity to practise speaking English in a supportive environment. Furthermore, a lack of access to actual English-speaking settings and resources inside the academic environment might stymie students' language growth.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To summarize, the variables impacting English speaking proficiency among English-major students at Vietnamese colleges are varied and interconnected. Linguistic variables like as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as well as psychological characteristics like confidence and motivation, have a substantial influence on students' ability to communicate smoothly in English. Furthermore, students' past knowledge and the learning environment inside institutions are important factors in molding their language abilities.

Addressing these issues necessitates a holistic strategy that involves offering chances for interactive learning, creating a friendly and encouraging environment, and customizing instructional approaches to individual learning requirements. Furthermore, including actual English resources and experiences into the curriculum can help students improve their language skills and prepare for global communication.

By recognizing and addressing these variables, Vietnamese colleges may help English majors gain the abilities and confidence needed to flourish in spoken English, improving their academic and career chances in an increasingly linked world.

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**Lam Ky Nhan** holds an M.A. in English Education from Can Tho University (2021) and serves as a dedicated English Department Lecturer at Nam Can Tho University, Vietnam. Currently pursuing a Ph.D. with an expected completion in 2026, his teaching passions include grammar, academic writing, teacher and learner motivation, and testing and assessment. He is committed to advancing English education and contributing to effective language teaching practices.

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