



Factors affecting students' english speaking performance at Thai Nguyen University of Technology

Thao Duong Thi

Department of Foreign Language, Faculty of International Training, Thai Nguyen University of Technology, Vietnam

Abstract

Spoken language production is widely acknowledged as one of the most challenging aspects of language acquisition (Brown & Yule, 1983) ^[5]. Indeed, many language learners encounter difficulty in effectively expressing themselves orally in their target language. Each student faces their own set of challenges.

The aim of this research was to examine the speaking difficulties experienced by students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology and the factors influencing their speaking abilities. The study involved 527 students from different faculties and fifteen English teachers as participants. Research tools utilized included questionnaires for students and teachers. Recommendations were formulated based on the research findings with the goal of assisting students in enhancing their performance in speaking classes.

Keywords: Thai Nguyen University of Technology, speaking proficiency, anxiety, factors, vocabulary

Introduction

Speaking is deemed one of the most crucial skills in English, as it facilitates clear oral communication (Richard, 2008) ^[12]. It is expected that students possess proficient speaking abilities, given their exposure to English over several years in school and various opportunities to engage in oral activities both within and outside the educational setting. However, many students struggle to communicate effectively and accurately due to gaps in their linguistic knowledge. According to Brown's theory (2004) ^[6], speaking proficiency can be assessed directly and empirically, considering it is a productive skill. A learner's speaking performance is typically deemed satisfactory when they demonstrate mastery of various components such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy. Not all language learners, despite years of English language study, are able to communicate smoothly and accurately. Many struggle with low performance when required to speak in front of others, presenting a significant challenge in language learning today. Effective communication skills are of utmost importance. However, a prevalent issue in language learning in Vietnam is that they can pass the exam, they find it difficult to communicate in English, despite their years of English language education (Nguyen Hoang Tuan, Tran Ngoc Mai, 2015). This can be attributed to various factors impacting students' speaking abilities, including performance conditions, affective factors, listening proficiency, topical knowledge, feedback during speaking activities, and specific speaking challenges. This study focuses specifically on the affective factors influencing students' speaking proficiency.

Many studies proved that affective factors have a considerable influence on students' speaking ability. Park and Lee (2005) ^[11] delved into the correlation between anxiety, self-confidence, and speaking proficiency among second language learners. Findings revealed a negative association between students' anxiety levels and their oral performance. In a separate investigation, Boonkit (2010) ^[4] explored factors contributing to the enhancement of speaking skills among learners. The study suggested that employing suitable speaking activities could effectively

mitigate learners' anxiety. Additionally, allowing freedom in topic selection encouraged participants to feel at ease, thus bolstering confidence in speaking English. Meanwhile, Tanveer (2007) ^[14] investigated factors contributing to learners' anxiety in acquiring speaking proficiency and its impact on communication in the target language. Findings suggested that feelings of stress and anxiety hindered language learning and performance, ultimately leading to decreased speaking proficiency.

Another crucial factor to consider is topical knowledge, as defined by Bachman and Palmer (1996) ^[3] as the stored knowledge structures in long-term memory. This encompasses the speakers' understanding of relevant information pertaining to a particular topic, allowing them to apply language within the context of their everyday lives. Bachman and Palmer emphasize the significant impact of topical knowledge on learners' speaking proficiency.

Feedback during speaking activities also plays a pivotal role, with many learners expecting constructive feedback from their instructors. Harmer (1991) ^[7] notes that instructors' feedback strategies depend on various factors such as lesson stages, tasks, and types of errors made by learners. Direct correction of students' errors during speaking tasks may disrupt the flow of dialogue and the overall objective. According to Mahripah (2014) ^[9], EFL learners' speaking proficiency is influenced by linguistic components such as phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and semantics, as well as psychological factors like motivation and personality.

In order to enhance students' speaking proficiency, educators must devise strategies to address the challenges they encounter. Moreover, teachers should also be cognizant of the affective factors as well as linguistic components impacting students' speaking abilities, enabling them to effectively manage these factors to facilitate improvement.

Although various studies have addressed this issue, the researcher contends that there is always potential for new insights. This research aims to identify the affective factors influencing students' speaking abilities and determine which factors exert the greatest influence. By examining the impact of these factors in specific settings and contexts at

Thai Nguyen University of Technology, the study hopes to find out how students at the school differ from learners from other places. The research will be really useful for teaching and learning speaking skills at this school.

Research method

The investigation was carried out at TNUT in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam, involving a cohort of 527 students and 15 English educators. Employing a methodological approach, the study used two questionnaires as data collection tools.

Firstly, both students and educators were administered questionnaires designed to elicit quantitative insights. The student questionnaire comprised two segments: the initial part sought demographic particulars, while the subsequent segment contained 10 items aimed at probing the factors influencing students' speaking proficiency. This questionnaire was adapted from Abedini and Chalak (2017) [1] and Truong Tran Nhat Minh (2018) [15].

Conversely, the second questionnaire was tailored for the teacher cohort, a demographic predominantly aged over thirty and possessing significant English teaching experience. It probed teachers' perspectives on the factors impacting students' English-speaking prowess and their methodologies for English-speaking classes. Some data underwent statistical analysis using the SPSS software package. A thorough examination of the percentages derived from the responses to the closed-ended questionnaire items was conducted to ascertain the extent to which the English-speaking performance of the study participants was influenced by psychological and other determinants. The resulting data was meticulously presented in distinct tables corresponding to factors under investigation.

Findings

This study was undertaken to examine the impact of affective variables on the oral proficiency of students enrolled at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. The

research data encompassed two primary components: the first entailed findings from a survey questionnaire probing into the factors influencing students' English speaking ability and performance demonstration among students, while the second involved outcomes derived from a teacher opinion survey. Both sets of data delved into various facets such as linguistic competencies encompassing vocabulary, grammatical acumen, and pronunciation, alongside psychological variables including anxiety levels, nervous disposition, fear of errors, and self-assurance. The findings of this investigation will be discussed separately for students and educators.

Students' survey results

Survey results related to assessing the difficulty of speaking skills and assessing their English speaking ability show that: 67.8% of students agree that speaking is a difficult or very difficult skill to achieve. Most of the students surveyed rated their English speaking ability as low as average or below average. This shows that the English-speaking skills of students at Thai Nguyen Technical University are very weak. This fact can originate from several reasons discussed below:

Table 1: The frequency of participating in speaking activities

Never	33	6,3%
Seldom	36	6,8%
Sometimes	182	34,5%
Usually	183	34,7%
Always	93	17,6%

Table 1 presents the frequency of students' participation in speaking activities in the class. It is shown that more than half of the students never, seldom, or sometimes take part in the class speaking activities. This might be one of the reasons for their low proficiency in speaking skills.

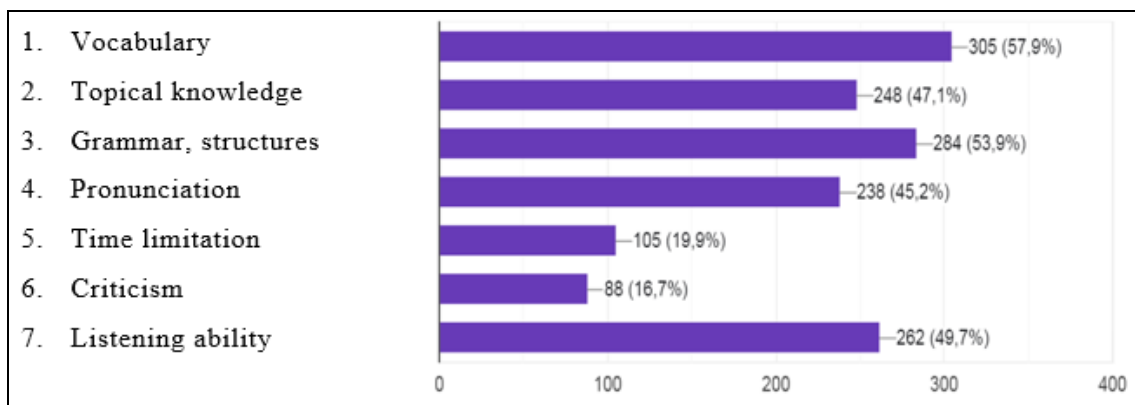


Chart 1: Linguistic factors

The findings regarding linguistic factors that affect students' speaking performance show that most of the students surveyed believed that their poor English speaking stemmed from a lack of vocabulary. (305/527 students, accounting for 57.9%); 53.9% of the students surveyed said that besides vocabulary, poor English grammar also hinders their English speaking. The third biggest hindering factor is listening comprehension. Nearly half of the students questioned (49.7%) agreed that: because of poor listening comprehension, they cannot communicate. Besides, there

are some other factors such as poor pronunciation, little preparation time for speaking or lack of social knowledge related to the topic are also other major obstacles in demonstrating one's English speaking ability. It can be argued that linguistic factors significantly impede students from showcasing their English-speaking proficiency. This aligns perfectly with the findings of Mahripah (2014) [9], who posited that the speaking abilities of EFL learners are influenced by various linguistic elements including phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and semantics.

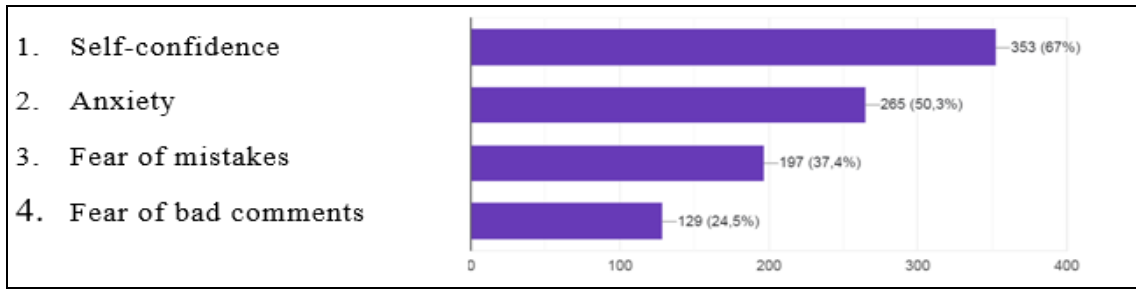


Chart 2: Psychological factors

Chart 2 presents whether the psychological factors affect students' English-speaking ability or not. Survey results show that all four psychological factors surveyed have an impact on student's English speaking ability, but the impact is at different levels. Specifically, in chart 6, 67% of the students surveyed said they were not confident in speaking

English; 50.3% of students said they were very worried and nervous when having to speak English; 37.4% of students are afraid of saying the wrong thing so they don't dare express themselves and 24.5% are afraid of negative comments from teacher and other learners.

Table 2: Effect of psychological factors

Model	Coefficients			t	Sig. (p)
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Sdt. Error	Beta		
1.(Constant) Psychological factors	- 0.051	0.014	0.018	0.336	0.043

Dependent Variable: students' English-speaking performance

In Table 2, when examining the correlation between students' English-speaking proficiency and psychological factors, we observe a coefficient (B) of -0.051. This indicates that psychological factors exert an inverse influence on students' speaking ability. Essentially, as a student's confidence diminishes, along with feelings of fear and nervousness, their English speaking proficiency tends to decrease. Moreover, the significance level (P = 0.043) underscores the substantial impact of psychological factors on students' speaking skills, signifying their pivotal role in shaping performance.

surmount their apprehensions and anxieties, effectively showcasing their speaking abilities becomes arduous. In other words, feelings of stress and anxiety acted as barriers to language learning and performance, ultimately resulting in a decline in speaking proficiency. (Tanveer, 2007)^[14]

Therefore, it can be deduced that psychological factors wield a significant influence on the manifestation of students' English-speaking prowess. Should learners fail to

1. Teachers' survey results

To gain deeper insights into how teachers assess the factors impacting students' English-speaking abilities, the researcher also gathered feedback from 15 teachers currently instructing at the university. Similar linguistic and psychological factors as those surveyed with the 527 students were also assessed. The findings are presented below.

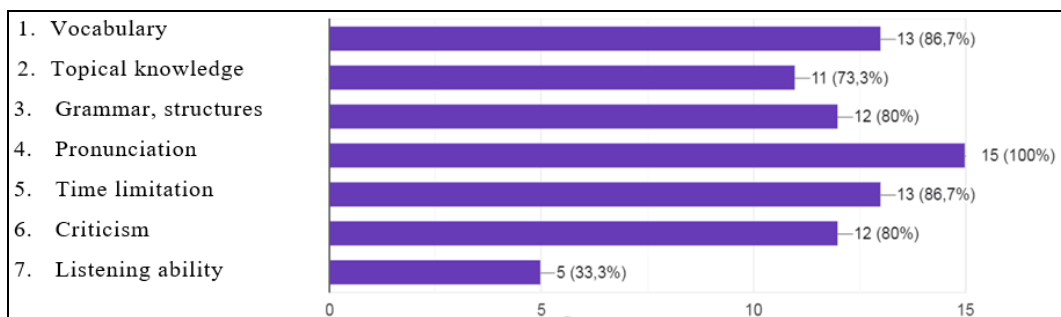


Chart 3: Linguistic Factors

In chart 3, teachers' assessments reveal a keen awareness of external influences on students' English speaking abilities. Without exception, 100% of teachers emphasized the indispensable role of vocabulary in students' speaking proficiency, underscoring its fundamental importance. A substantial majority of teachers, comprising 86.7%, recognized the necessity for students to possess strong grammar knowledge and mastery of sentence patterns to articulate ideas smoothly. Similarly, 86.7% of teachers acknowledged the significance of students' motivation to

learn English speaking, alongside their accumulation of relevant social knowledge (80%) pertinent to the subject matter. This underscores the critical impact of motivation and contextual understanding on students' ability to engage in English discourse effectively. Moreover, teachers highlighted the detrimental effects of limited speaking opportunities during class and students' inadequate listening skills, both of which contribute to diminished confidence in English speaking.

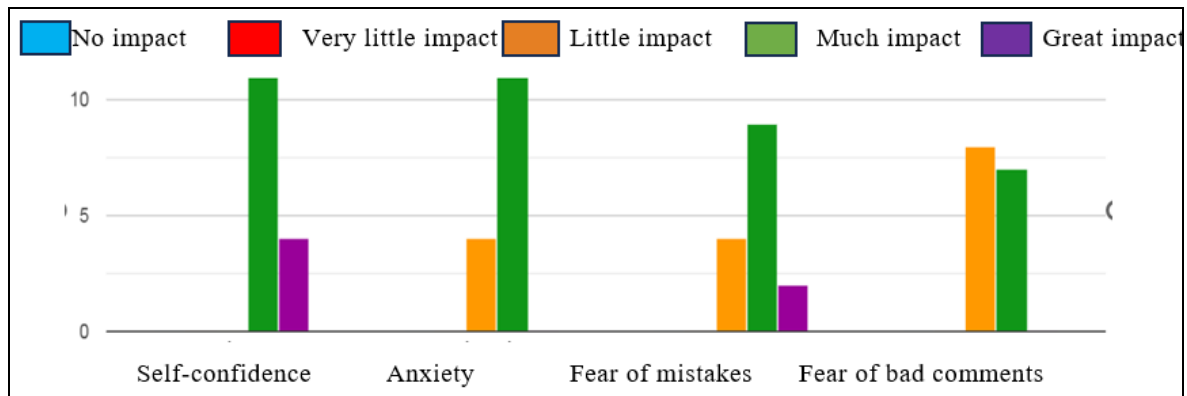


Chart 4: Effect of psychological factors

The results for the notion of the psychological factors show that all teachers interviewed affirmed that certain factors directly influence students' proficiency in spoken English. Among these influential factors, lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes stand out prominently. Notably, all four of these factors are considered to significantly impact students' English speaking skills. Lack of confidence emerges as the most impactful, with 93.3% of teachers in agreement. Following closely is the fear of saying the wrong thing, with 86.7% agreement. Anxiety ranks third at 73.3%, and fear of negative feedback from teachers and classmates is rated fourth at 53.3%. This underscores the crucial role of psychology in impeding students' English-speaking abilities. In conclusion, to excel in spoken English, students also require substantial psychological training.

Discussion

As indicated by numerous studies, various linguistic and internal psychological factors can impact ESL/EFL students' speaking abilities. However, the results of these studies vary depending on factors such as the study population, context, and time period. This study's findings reveal a direct correlation between students' speaking proficiency and both linguistic and psychological factors. Key linguistic factors include limited vocabulary, weak grammar skills, difficulties in listening comprehension, and pronunciation challenges, all of which hinder speaking ability. Moreover, internal psychological factors such as lack of confidence, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and fear of negative feedback also play significant roles.

Sato (2003)^[13] conducted a similar study, emphasizing the impact of psychological factors on speaking skills. His findings underscored that learners' internal states, particularly during speaking activities, are heavily influenced by psychological factors, with lack of confidence and anxiety being the most prevalent hindrances. Additionally, Sato noted that while students often approach language learning with enthusiasm, these psychological barriers impede their progress.

In this study, respondents widely agreed that the fear of making mistakes is the most pervasive fear, closely linked to anxiety and lack of confidence. The fear of making mistakes stems from concerns about being ridiculed, negatively evaluated by teachers, or criticized by peers. Similar conclusions were drawn by Ayub and Lodhi (2016)^[2], who associated anxiety with shyness or fear of errors. Juhana (2012)^[8] also echoed these findings, highlighting ESL students' apprehension of making mistakes due to low proficiency levels or fear of ridicule from peers.

In addition to psychological factors, studies reveal a significant correlation between English learners' speaking proficiency and their language knowledge. When a student lacks vocabulary, struggle with grammar, and exhibit poor pronunciation, their speaking ability suffers greatly. Consequently, their confidence dwindles as they struggle to effectively communicate.

Conclusions

The study's objective was to investigate how psychological and linguistic factors influence the English-speaking skills of students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. It concluded that psychological factors like fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and self-confidence, along with linguistic factors such as vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension, and social knowledge, are the primary causes affecting students' speaking abilities. The findings suggest that students who possess strong psychological resilience and solid language skills tend to excel as language learners. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on expanding vocabulary, enhancing language proficiency, and practicing self-confidence to mitigate the impact of psychological factors. Only through such efforts can learners aspire to attain success in developing their speaking skills.

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