

STRATEGIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS FOR THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT HANOI UNIVERSITY OF INDUSTRY

CÁC CHIẾN LƯỢC DẠY KỸ NĂNG NÓI TIẾNG ANH CHO SINH VIÊN NĂM NHẤT
TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC CÔNG NGHIỆP HÀ NỘI

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.57001/huih5804.2024.321>

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the difficulties and propose effective strategies for teaching English speaking skills to the first-year Students with Low English Proficiency (SLEP). Two questionnaires were designed to investigate the learning and teaching of English-speaking skills among 60 randomly selected students with weak English proficiency from different classes at Hanoi University of Industry (HaUI), along with 6 teachers who participated in the teaching. The findings reveal that a lack of confidence; difficulty organizing thoughts in English, limited vocabulary, challenges in understanding others' responses, pronunciation issues, and fear of making mistakes are key factors contributing to poor learning outcomes among these students. Based on the findings of the study, several pedagogical recommendations are proposed for English teachers. These include targeted vocabulary exercises, structured speaking frameworks, active listening exercises, pronunciation drills, confidence-building activities, and fostering interactive learning environments to optimize students' learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Speaking skills, difficulties, strategies, low English proficiency, vocabulary*

TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu những khó khăn và đề xuất các chiến lược hiệu quả để dạy kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh cho sinh viên năm nhất có trình độ tiếng Anh yếu (SLEP). Hai bảng câu hỏi đã được thiết kế để khảo sát quá trình học tập và giảng dạy kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của 60 sinh viên có trình độ tiếng Anh yếu, được chọn ngẫu nhiên từ các lớp khác nhau tại Trường Đại học Công nghiệp Hà Nội (HaUI), cùng với 6 giáo viên tham gia giảng dạy. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy rằng, thiếu tự tin, khó khăn trong việc tổ chức ý tưởng bằng tiếng Anh, vốn từ vựng hạn chế, khó khăn trong việc hiểu các câu trả lời, vấn đề phát âm và nỗi sợ mắc lỗi là những yếu tố chính dẫn đến kết quả học tập yếu kém của những sinh viên này. Dựa trên kết quả nghiên cứu, một số khuyến nghị về phương pháp giảng dạy đã được đề xuất cho giáo viên tiếng Anh. Những khuyến nghị này bao gồm tăng cường các bài tập từ vựng chuyên biệt, bài nói có cấu trúc mẫu, các bài tập nghe chủ động, luyện phát âm, hoạt động xây dựng sự tự tin, và tạo môi trường học tập tương tác để tối ưu hóa kết quả học tập của sinh viên.

Từ khóa: *Kỹ năng nói, khó khăn, giải pháp, trình độ Tiếng Anh yếu, từ vựng.*

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Received: 08/9/2024

Revised: 24/10/2024

Accepted: 28/10/2024

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of global integration and development, improving English skills, especially speaking, has become

a crucial need for Vietnamese students. However, many students with low English proficiency face significant challenges in learning and developing this skill.

In class, they are apparently less motivated to learn. As a result, their ability can never improve (Littlejohn, 2001) [1]. For this reason, they tend to abandon English as quickly as possible. Finding a balance in communicating with these groups during teaching sessions is not an easy task for teachers, and this is also true at HaUI.

However, while many researchers have investigated how to teach English speaking skills to students in general, few have introduced effective methods for teaching this skill to SLEP. This gap has motivated the researcher to conduct the study: Strategies in teaching English Speaking Skills for the First-Year Students with Low English Proficiency at HaUI which aims to explore the difficulties in teaching English speaking skills to SLEP and to propose some effective strategies to assist students at HaUI.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Overview of Speaking Skills in Language Learning

According to Burns, speaking skills are defined as a combination of language knowledge and social communication skills. Speakers need not only to pronounce words correctly but also to use intonation, rhythm, and body language to convey information effectively. This suggests that speaking English is not just about pronunciation or grammar but also involves other non-verbal factors [2]. Similarly, Goh and Burns emphasize that speaking is a complex communicative activity that requires coordination between multiple language elements, including vocabulary, grammar, phonetics, and intonation. They also point out that this skill involves a combination of social and cultural competencies to understand and respond appropriately in real-life communication situations [3].

2.2. Factors Affecting Success in Speaking Skills

2.2.1. The Role of Teachers

The role of a teacher in teaching speaking skills is multifaceted, as it involves guiding, motivating, and providing opportunities for students to improve their communication abilities. It has also been studied and emphasized by many researchers in the fields of education and linguistics.

According to Williams and Williams, the factors related to teachers put huge impact on students' language learning including subject knowledge, teacher's skills, test giving, scientific management and human relations, conscious of small details, knowing the students and build on their strengths, valuing and building

relationship and enthusiasm [4]. Jeremy Harmer discusses the teacher's role in encouraging interaction, cooperation between students, and providing learning resources [5]. David Nunan emphasizes the teacher's role in designing practical learning activities and offering individualized support for each student [6].

2.2.2. The Role of Learners

The role of learners in developing speaking skills is essential, as it involves active participation, self-motivation, and the use of effective learning strategies. Jeremy Harmer addresses factors such as persistence, effort, and learner confidence in language acquisition in his book *"The Practice of English Language Teaching"* [7]. Zimmerman's self-regulation model, widely referenced in education, outlines how learners manage various stages of their learning processes, such as setting goals, monitoring progress, and reflecting on outcomes [8]. Zoltán Dörnyei, an expert in language motivation studies learner persistence and motivation in language acquisition [9].

These studies provide deep insights into the key factors learners need to develop for success in learning English speaking skills.

3. STUDENTS WITH LOW PROFICIENCY

3.1. Definition

Students with low proficiency typically fall into two categories, as described by Shrum and Glisan. The first group includes students with learning disabilities, who face challenges across various academic areas such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, reasoning, and organizing information. These students often require sustained support from specialists to navigate their learning difficulties. The second group includes students with minimal language learning abilities, who are characterized as poor language learners. Although their progress may be slower, they have the potential to improve with tailored and appropriate instruction. However, such specialized classes are not always available [10].

The challenges faced by students in learning English speaking skills have been well-documented in educational research, highlighting both cognitive and emotional barriers that hinder effective communication. According to Horwitz, language anxiety is a significant barrier that impacts students' willingness to communicate in a second language, often leading to avoidance behavior [11]. Vocabulary limitations and pronunciation difficulties are

commonly cited linguistic challenges, which affect fluency and clarity in spoken English. According to Nation, expanding vocabulary through targeted exercises can help students communicate more effectively [12]. Peer collaboration and interactive learning are recognized as effective strategies for language development. A study by Alvarez et al. emphasized that peer interactions, like peer-to-peer speaking sessions, significantly boost students' confidence and facilitate learning by allowing them to scaffold each other's understanding [13].

3.2. Ways to Help Low-Proficiency Students

Many studies have been conducted to find ways to support poor language learners. However, one of the findings in the study by Gan, Humphreys and Hamp-Lyons indicated that unsuccessful language learners believed that teachers only paid attention to successful students and did not help them enough. They felt forgotten. These studies suggest that it is possible to help slower learners by training them to use more language learning strategies or by showing them that they are not forgotten through preparing lessons that are better suited to their learning styles [14].

In theory, Hadley proposed five hypotheses that could contribute to achieving language teaching goals, but only some of them seem applicable to slower learners [15]. The most important hypothesis that truly applies to low-proficiency learners is creating a lesson that addresses both the emotional and cognitive needs of students. Students should be placed in a classroom environment that reduces anxiety, boosts confidence, and encourages them to be willing to communicate (Chan, 2002) [16].

The role of the teacher is crucial in overcoming emotional barriers. Dörnyei emphasized the importance of supportive feedback, which aligns with the findings that students prefer immediate, constructive feedback to correct errors without discouragement [17]. Similarly, research by Brown highlights the importance of structured activities to reduce cognitive overload and build speaking skills incrementally, a strategy that resonates with this study's emphasis on small-group interactions and structured speaking frameworks [18].

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Aims of the study

The study is aimed at the following points:

- to identify the difficulties that English teachers at HaUI face when teaching speaking skills to SLEP

- to identify the difficulties that SLEP at HaUI face when studying speaking skills

- to propose several effective strategies for English teachers with the aim of enhancing their ability to teach English speaking skills to SLEP.

4.2. Research Questions

Question 1. What are the difficulties that teachers of English may have in teaching speaking skills to SLEP at HaUI?

Question 2. What strategies may help these students improve their English-speaking skills?

4.3. Methods of the study

To achieve the stated objectives, the study employs a survey-based approach that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods. The instruments for data collection include two survey questionnaires delivered to learners and teachers. The two questionnaires were designed for the aim of the research and based on the knowledge studied in previous research which were mentioned briefly in the literature review.

4.4. Participants

To gather information to fulfill the aims of the study, two survey questionnaires were designed. The first questionnaire was distributed to 60 first-year students from different classes at Hanoi University of Industry, who had performed poorly in English written and spoken tests and were required to retake the English subject in their first semester. These students were selected for the survey for two reasons: First, they had completed the first-semester English course, making it easier to assess their knowledge and how they approached learning in English speaking lessons. Second, based on their poor exam results, it could be concluded that these students had very low English proficiency, making them suitable for the study.

The second questionnaire was given to six English teachers at HaUI. These teachers hold Master's degrees and they are between 26 and 34 years old.

4.5. Data collection tools

The data collection process took place during the second semester of the academic year 2023 - 2024. Two survey questionnaires were designed to collect data:

Questionnaire for students: To gather information about the difficulties of learning English speaking skills of students with low English proficiency (SLEP) and their expectations for improving this skill.

Questionnaire for teachers: To collect teachers' difficulties in teaching English speaking skills to SLEP and propose several strategies for overcoming these challenges.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1. Students' difficulties in learning English speaking skills

The questionnaire results provide valuable insights into the proportion of students who encounter difficulties in speaking English in various contexts, such as speaking in front of the class or expressing complex ideas. Additionally, the data highlight students' emotional responses when attempting to speak English, including feelings of nervousness, hesitation, and confidence, as shown in Figs. 1 and 2.

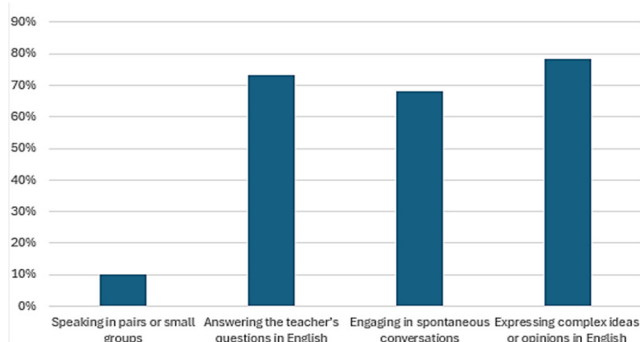


Figure 1. Situations students find it difficult when speaking English

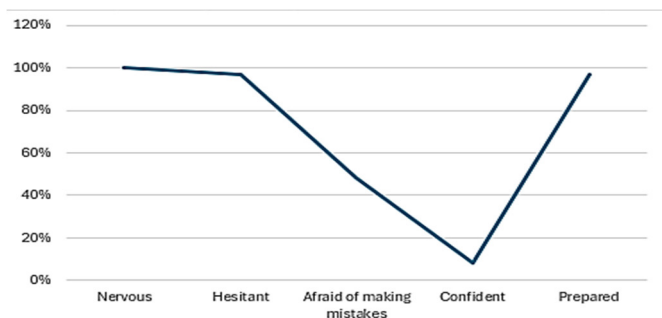


Figure 2. Students' feeling when trying to speak English

The survey results emphasize that students face both cognitive and emotional challenges when speaking English, particularly with complex ideas (78.3%) and responding to teachers' questions (73.3%). Spontaneous conversations also pose difficulties for 68.3% of students, underscoring their struggle with unplanned speech. However, the low percentage (10%) of students finding small group discussions difficult suggests that informal settings provide a comfortable environment for many.

The emotional barriers revealed-100% of students feeling nervous and 96.7% hesitant - illustrate that confidence is a major issue. While nearly all students feel

prepared (96.7%), none reported feeling confident, indicating that emotional factors, such as fear of judgment, impact their performance. To foster effective communication skills, teachers should focus on reducing students' anxiety through supportive, low-stakes interactions, like small-group tasks and step-by-step challenges, which can gradually build confidence in formal settings.

Students' difficulties in speaking English

The results in Fig. 3 demonstrate that emotional barriers, especially a lack of confidence (96.7%), are significant challenges in speaking English. Organizational issues, like structuring thoughts before speaking (86.7%), and vocabulary limitations (70%) are also notable difficulties. Students also face challenges in understanding responses (68.3%) and pronunciation (63.3%). These findings indicate that both emotional and linguistic factors hinder communication. Addressing these challenges through confidence-building activities and structured vocabulary support could boost students' speaking skills, making them more comfortable and effective communicators in English.

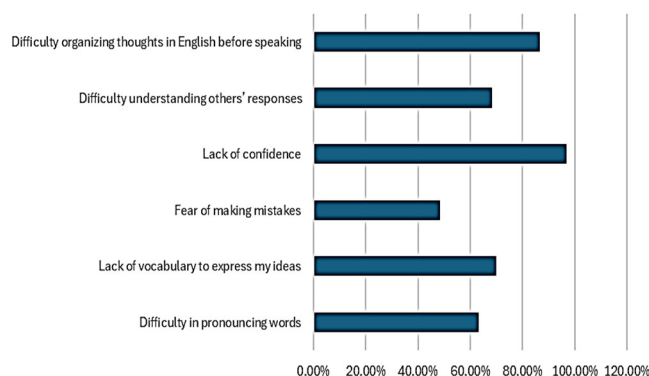


Figure 3. Students' difficulties in speaking English

Students' expectations of teacher support in overcoming speaking challenges

Table 1. Expected speaking exercises for building students' confidence

Questionnaire items	Percentage
Provide more speaking practice opportunities in class	61.7%
Offer targeted advice on how to improve speaking skills	60%
Organize peer-to-peer speaking sessions	70%
Create a supportive and non-judgmental environment for speaking	63.3%
Allow more time to think and organize thoughts before speaking	66.7%
Offer additional speaking resources (videos, podcasts, articles)	58.3%

The data reveals that 70% of respondents support peer-to-peer speaking sessions, suggesting the importance of collaborative practice. Additionally, 66.7% value more time to organize their thoughts before speaking, while 63.3% want a supportive and non-judgmental environment. Providing more practice opportunities (61.7%) and targeted advice (60%) are also highly favored. This indicates that learners seek structured, collaborative, and supportive spaces with ample time and feedback to enhance their speaking skills.

Students’ expected types of feedback from the teacher to improve speaking skills

The results indicate that most students (86.7%) prefer immediate feedback after speaking to help improve their English skills. Additionally, 73.3% value written feedback, while 38.3% seek regular progress reports to monitor their improvement. Only 10% want constructive criticism on specific areas like pronunciation or grammar, and 30% appreciate encouragement and positive reinforcement.

These findings suggest that students favor real-time and detailed feedback, as it allows them to make adjustments promptly. However, the desire for positive reinforcement indicates that motivational feedback is also key to boosting confidence.

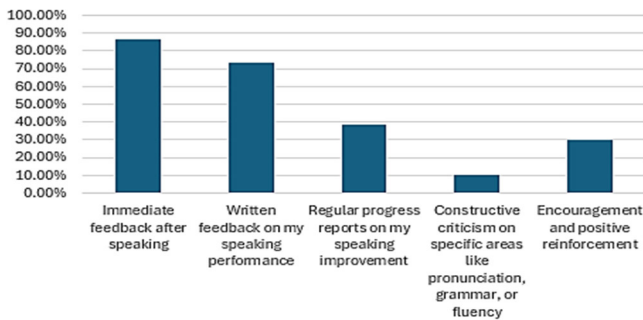


Figure 4. Students’ expected types of feedback from the teacher

Students’ expectations of teacher’s feedback on speaking skills

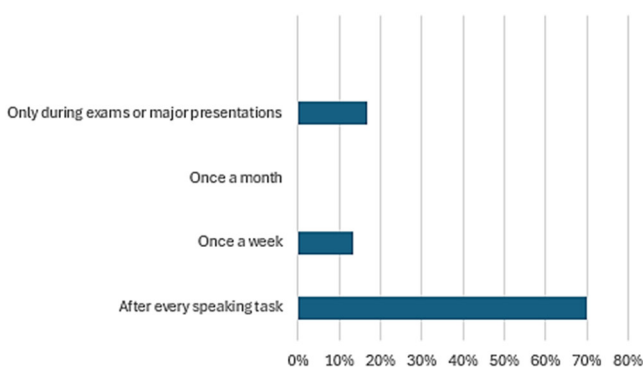


Figure 5. Students’ expectations of teacher’s feedback on speaking skills

The results show that 70% of students prefer to receive feedback after every speaking task, indicating a strong desire for continuous, immediate feedback. Only 13.3% of students would like feedback once a week, while 16.7% prefer receiving it only during exams or major presentations. No students opted for feedback once a month or other alternatives.

These findings suggest that most students value frequent feedback to track their progress and make immediate improvements. Offering feedback after every task could foster better speaking outcomes and support ongoing development.

5.2. Questionnaire for teachers

Teacher’s perception of the suitability of speaking materials for SLEP

Table 2. Teacher’s perception of the suitability of speaking materials for SLEP

Questionnaire items	Percentage
Yes, they are appropriate.	66.7%
No, they are too difficult.	33.3%
No, they are too easy.	0%

The results in Table 2 indicate that 66.7% of respondents find the current teaching materials for speaking skills appropriate for slow learners, while 33.3% believe they are too difficult. No respondents felt the materials were too easy.

This suggests that while most students feel the materials are suitable, there is still a need to adjust content difficulty for some learners to ensure it meets diverse student needs.

Teacher’s methods of assessing speaking skills for SLEP

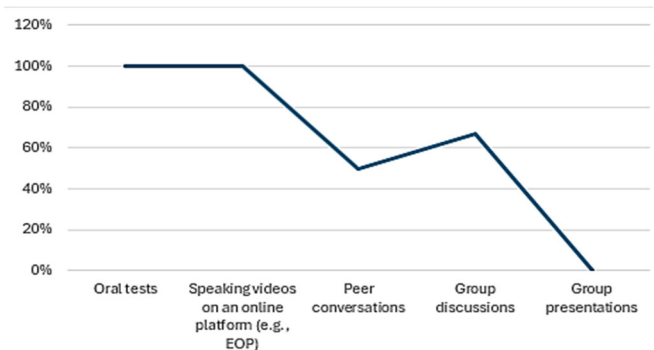


Figure 6. Teacher’s methods of assessing speaking skills for SLEP

The results show that all respondents (100%) assess speaking skills for slow learners through oral tests and speaking videos on an online platform like EOP.

Additionally, 66.7% use group discussions, while 50% rely on peer conversations. Group presentations are not used (as shown in Fig. 6).

This indicates a strong preference for individualized and video-based assessment methods, while group activities, such as discussions and peer conversations, are also considered effective. However, group presentations are seen as less suitable for assessing slow learners' speaking skills.

Teacher' challenges in teaching speaking skills for SLEP



Figure 7. Teacher' challenges in teaching speaking skills for SLEP

The results in Fig. 7 show that the main challenge in teaching speaking skills to slow learners is their lack of confidence (100%). Other significant challenges include pronunciation difficulties (83.3%), anxiety or fear of making mistakes (66.7%), and limited vocabulary (50%). Additionally, 66.7% of teachers report difficulty in class participation, understanding spoken English, and lack of motivation.

These findings suggest that emotional barriers like low confidence and anxiety, along with linguistic difficulties, are the key obstacles to developing speaking skills in slow learners.

Effective activities for improving SLEP's speaking skills (from teachers' view)

The results in Fig. 8 demonstrate that all teachers (100%) believe easy-to-follow dialogues are the most effective for improving speaking skills in slow learners. Additionally, 83.3% find structured speaking prompts helpful. Half of the teachers (50%) support free-flowing conversations and guided discussions, while only 33.3% view interactive games that encourage spontaneous speaking as effective.

This suggests that teachers prefer structured activities for slow learners, emphasizing the need for guided exercises, though there is some interest in more interactive methods to encourage spontaneous communication.

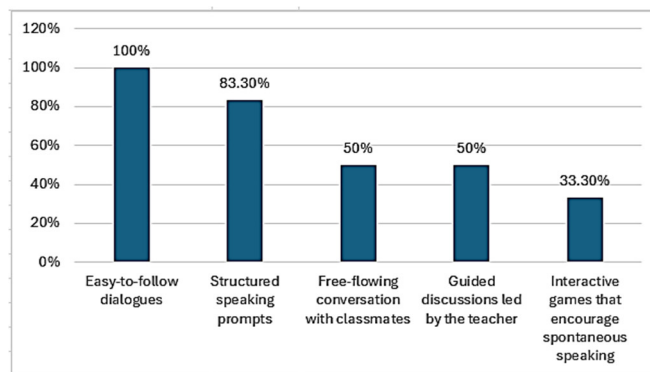


Figure 8. Effective activities for improving SLEP's speaking skills (from teachers' view)

Suggestions for Improvement

In response to the question, "What additional support or resources would you recommend improving teaching speaking skills to low-proficiency students?" participating teachers provided several insights. All teachers unanimously agreed that reducing class sizes and increasing in-class practice time are essential measures to facilitate students' speaking development through personalized attention and extended practice. Furthermore, over half of the teachers advocated for upgrading technological tools, emphasizing the role of advanced digital platforms and resources to make lessons more interactive. A smaller proportion highlighted the need for more interactive materials to engage students and enhance participation. In summary, addressing these priorities-smaller class sizes, extended practice time, and enhanced technology-can substantially improve the effectiveness of speaking instruction for low-proficiency learners.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges highlighted in this study, several targeted strategies are recommended. First, incorporating confidence-building activities like role-playing, pair work, and small group discussions can gradually reduce students' anxiety, particularly in formal speaking settings. Additionally, structured speaking practice using frameworks such as mind maps and outlines can aid students in organizing their thoughts, reducing cognitive load, and minimizing anxiety. Enhanced vocabulary support through targeted exercises, including interactive games and flashcards, is also crucial for expanding students' word banks, enabling better everyday communication. Listening exercises and shadowing techniques are suggested to improve comprehension and response skills. Furthermore, pronunciation drills focusing on common challenges can

aid in clearer articulation. It is also essential to provide frequent and supportive feedback that is immediate and constructive, focusing on encouragement and guidance to help students learn from mistakes positively. Incorporating technology, such as language-learning apps and multimedia tools, can create engaging lessons that support both classroom and self-study. Finally, reducing class sizes is recommended to allow for more personalized attention, enhancing speaking practice opportunities and overall learning outcomes. These strategies are intended to create a supportive environment, addressing both emotional and linguistic challenges for low-proficiency English learners.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the multifaceted challenges students encounter when learning English speaking skills, with emotional and cognitive difficulties being the primary obstacles. Key issues include a lack of confidence, problems organizing thoughts, restricted vocabulary, and anxiety about mistakes, which significantly affect communication. These emotional barriers, like nervousness and hesitation, obstruct speaking performance even if students feel technically prepared. Teachers have a crucial role in overcoming these barriers by applying specific strategies. Recommended methods include confidence-boosting exercises, structured speaking tasks, targeted vocabulary development, and listening comprehension activities. The study emphasizes the importance of immediate feedback, effective use of technology, and smaller class sizes to create a more tailored and supportive educational setting. By addressing both emotional and linguistic challenges holistically, educators can better support low-proficiency English learners, enabling them to communicate more confidently and effectively. This comprehensive approach can lead to improved speaking outcomes, ultimately enhancing students' overall language abilities.

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