

Difficulties Encountered By Students at a University in Vietnam in Speaking English



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ABSTRACT: The research investigates into the speaking difficulties of fourth – year students at Thai Nguyen University. The goals of the research are to find out what linguistic difficulties and psychological difficulties do EFL learners at Thai Nguyen University face when speaking English. Quantitative method was used as the main method of this study. A total of 150 students were chosen as participants of the study. Due to the impact of Covid-19, data were collected through online survey in two weeks. The research discovered three linguistic difficulties (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary) and three psychological difficulties (attitude, anxiety and motivation). The findings of the study revealed that students tend to encounter linguistic difficulties than psychological difficulties. The most common problem is grammar incompetence, followed by vocabulary and anxiety. Furthermore, the outcome of the study indicated that EFL learners at Thai Nguyen University do not have pronunciation difficulty. The findings also show that students have positive attitudes, high levels of motivation toward speaking English. In addition, the researcher has proposed some recommendations for both teachers and students to reduce these speaking difficulties.

KEY WORDS: English speaking, linguistic difficulties, psychological difficulties.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

The use of English as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) in oral communication is one of the most common but highly complex activities (Hosni, 2014). Speaking is also considered one of the most important skills among the four skills (writing, reading, listening, and speaking) (Ur, 2000; p: 12). To achieve good speaking skill, students must master many aspects of speaking, namely pronunciation, fluency, grammar, comprehension, and vocabulary. However, achieving these targets of speaking is not an easy task as learners may encounter many difficulties when speaking English. These speaking problems can come from within learners themselves (linguistic ability, psychology) or come from the outside environment (classroom environment, learning materials). In this study, the researcher will focus on the problems that come from within learners which are linguistic difficulties and psychological difficulties.

There are three linguistic problems that many students face when speaking English, namely incorrect pronunciation, grammar incompetence and vocabulary shortage. First of all, many students have trouble pronouncing clear and correct words in English. As a result, teachers and other students will not understand them clearly. The second linguistic problem that EFL learners encounter is grammar incompetence. The grammar structures of the second language are different from the grammar structures of the first language. Therefore, learners sometimes mistake the grammatical patterns of two languages when they speak. Last but not least, most students lack an adequate number of vocabularies when speaking English. Consequently, students may have difficult to express their ideas and they may make a lot of pauses when they speak.

Moving to the other side of the argument, psychological difficulties such as attitude, anxiety, and motivation, also cause serious problems for EFL learners. Firstly, learners' attitude toward learning plays an important role in determining learners' level of proficiency. If students have a positive attitude toward learning, they are more likely to produce effective communication and receive higher grades. However, if students have negative attitude, they may not have enough effort in studying and may encounter several speaking problems such as lack of motivation. The second speaking problem that various learners encounter is anxiety. Students' anxiety is developed when they have negative perspective about themselves. Furthermore, some students feel anxious when they do not have enough time to prepare for their speech. Finally, students' motivation is a crucial factor in determining students' success or failure in completing tasks (Cherifa, 2016). If students have strong motivation to succeed, they will gain better scores than those who have weaker motivation.

Even though there are several studies investigated into the linguistic problems and psychological barriers that learners face during speaking tasks (Mufidah, 2017; Cherifa, 2016; Hosni, 2014 and Paakki, 2013), this problem still receives little attention in Vietnam.

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Therefore, this study intends to find out what linguistic difficulties and psychological difficulties EFL learners face when speaking English.

1.2. Statement of the research problem

As an English major, I find that speaking English poses many obstacles for EFL learners to overcome. The most prominent problem is linguistic problems. To be more specific, many learners struggle to express their ideas in English with appropriate vocabularies, correct grammar structures and correct pronunciation. Students can improve their language knowledge by participating in different speaking activities. The second problem is psychological difficulties, namely attitude, anxiety, and motivation. Many students do not know what to say during English speaking activities because they have no motivation, negative attitude, and high level of anxiety. Besides, therefore, this study hopes to help students overcome their speaking difficulties by investigating into the linguistic and psychological factors and contribute to fill in the gap of the field.

1.3. Significance of the study

The study is expected to find out what linguistic problems and psychological difficulties do EFL learners encounter when speaking English. It is also hoped that the research will benefit university students who are struggling with these difficulties.

1.4. Research questions

To understand the struggles in speaking English of English majors, the research aims to answer the following questions:

- *What linguistic problems do EFL learners at Thai Nguyen University face when speaking English?*
- *What psychological problems do EFL learners at Thai Nguyen University face when speaking English?*

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Linguistic difficulties

Language competence, according to Amoah and Yeboah (2021), is the ability to use the language and its parts or forms of the language learner. Saunders and O'Brien (2006) states that the correct use of language forms is critical for learners' oral proficiency. In terms of second language speaking, many learners might not be able to produce efficient oral communication due to their lack of vocabulary, grammatical incompetence, and poor pronunciation. According to Burkart (1998), language learners need to have knowledge of three areas involved within the speaking of which mechanics of language elements (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary).

2.1.1. Pronunciation

According to Derwing and Munro (2005), having a good pronunciation of the language can help in normal communication, particularly intelligibility. Thornbury (2005) stated that the lowest level of knowledge a speaker draws on is that of pronunciation. This means that words are stored with their pronunciation and do not need to be reconstituted every time they are used. Aspects of pronunciation include vowels, consonants, word stress, syllable, rhythm, connected speech and intonation pattern. Learners should be familiar with different sounds, their features and how to articulate them. They should also learn about word stress and intonation. Correct and clear pronunciations are important in language learning because good pronunciation makes the communication easier to understand (Dan, 2006 in Varasarin, 2007). Since English is not a phonetic language, non-native learners may struggle when they pronounce English words. Learners also confuse when they see words with similar spellings but have different pronunciation because of their surrounding contexts such as tenses and phonemes that come after them. If they fail to pronounce correctly, their speech will not be understood.

2.1.2. Grammar

According to Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2011), grammar is the basic unit of meaning, such as words and a set of rules to combine them into a new sentence. Crystal (1993) defined grammar as the study of the way words and their component parts combine to form sentences. The researcher classified grammar into two types: competence grammar and performance grammar. Competence grammar is the total set of rules possessed by a speaker; it is a grammar of the speaker's competence. It is a performance grammar if it is capable of accounting for just the sentences that a speaker has actually used (as discovered in a sample of output, or corpus). The variety and proper usage of the learners' grammatical structure, which includes the length and complexity of the utterances as well as the capacity to employ subordinating clauses, is referred to as grammatical accuracy (Cherifa, 2016). The number of grammatical errors is considered the main indicators of grammatical accuracy according to IELTS (2001 p.15) as cited in Hughes (2002 p.87).

In the process of learning second language, students need to understand grammar structures of target language (TL) so that they can express their ideas clearly. Heaton (1978) as cited in Rahayu (2020) points out that students' ability to manipulate structure and to distinguish appropriate grammatical form in appropriateness. In order to create effective oral communication, learners should have knowledge of words, sentences, and different grammar structures. The grammar structures of two languages are different, thus, it is important that learners do not mix them up.

2.1.3. Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the basic element in language that includes a single word, set phrase, variable phrases, phrasal verbs, and idioms (Mufidah, 2017). According to Cherifa (2016), achieving vocabulary accuracy relates to the appropriate selection of words when

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speaking. Learners have to be able to use different words and expressions for different situation accurately in order to achieve effective communication. In addition, students should acquire an adequate number of words and should also know how to use them accurately to communicate well in a foreign language like English (Huyen & Nga, 2003). Having adequate vocabulary knowledge can enable learners to speak properly. Without sufficient vocabulary, learners cannot convey their ideas which lead to inefficient communication. Gan (2012) found that insufficient vocabulary in English is a predominant problem among students.

2.2. Psychological difficulties

According to Oxford (1990) as cited in Cherifa (2016), the psychological factors are very important in determining success or failure for language learners. Similarly, other researchers such as Ur (1996), Hosni (2014), Cherifa (2016) and Amoah & Yeboah (2021) point out several psychological factors that hinder students' speaking difficulties, namely attitude, anxiety, and motivation.

2.2.1. Attitude

In second language acquisition (SLA), attitude is one of the most important personality factors, which directly affects the level of proficiency of each learner. According to Montero (2014), the way a learner develops his/her linguistic abilities is mostly influenced by the attitude that he/she processes, either to a target language or a target culture. A number of studies have been conducted to prove the theoretical assertions about the relationship between attitude and second language learning, and it has been discovered that attitude and other affective variables are as important as aptitude for language achievement, and that positive and negative attitudes have different reasons for arising (Bachman, 1990; Gardner, 1985; Malallah, 2000 & Coleman et al., 2003, as cited in Hosseini & Pourmandnia, 2013). Hosseini and Pourmandnia (2013) defined attitude "as a disposition or tendency to respond positively or negatively towards a certain thing such as an idea, object, person or situation". Furthermore, Ellis (1992) asserts that the term 'attitude' refers to the set of beliefs that a learner holds towards members of the target language (TL) group or second language (L2) community and also towards his/her own culture. Hence, a learner's attitude includes not only the learner's attitude toward native speakers of the TL, but also the learner's attitude toward the language as a whole: the language learning process, the language teachers, the country where the language is entirely spoken, and even the learner's classmates who are studying the same language.

Many researchers have concentrated on the three components of attitude which are cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. These three components are believed to have a reciprocal influence (Wenden, 1991).

- Cognitive refers to any information, fact, or knowledge relevant to an attitudinal subject includes the thoughts, beliefs, and values of a language.
- Emotional or "feelings" is comments (positive or negative) about the language (Baker, 1992; Rajecski, 1982).
- Behavior or a behavioral intention or the action can be done (possible acts) for the language (Rajecski, 1982).

2.2.2. Anxiety

According to Horwitz as cited in Nascente (2001), anxiety is a feeling of tension, apprehension and nervousness associated with the situation of learning a foreign language. Sanders and Wills (2003) said that anxiety is "a complex, multifaceted experience, a feeling which comes flooding into our whole selves, affecting many different aspects of our being". In the process of learning foreign language, anxiety is a feeling of the worry aroused the negative emotional reaction when learning or utilizing a second language (Young, 1999). According to Ying (2008), language anxiety is caused by learners personal and interpersonal, learner beliefs about language learning, teacher belief about language anxiety, teacher-learner interactions, classroom procedures and language testing. Similarly, language anxiety is "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Furthermore, anxiety about speaking a certain language can influence the quality of oral language production and make individuals appear less fluent than they really are (Horwitz, 1991).

There are three types of anxiety which are proved by different researchers:

- **State anxiety:** It is defined as an unpleasant emotional arousal in face of threatening demands or dangers. A cognitive appraisal of threat is a prerequisite for the experience of this emotion (Lazarus, 1991). According to Ormrod (2011), state anxiety is temporary feeling of anxiety elicited by a threatening situation. It means this type of anxiety happen on subject based on situation that will be faced or ongoing situation.
- **Trait anxiety:** It reflects the existence of stable individual differences in the tendency to respond with state anxiety in the anticipation of threatening situations. Trait anxiety is pattern of responding with anxiety even nonthreatening situations goes away (Ormrod, 2011). The trait anxiety happened for long time, and it keeps coming out in subject. The person who got trait anxiety always feeling fear or worry about something.
- **Situation-specific anxiety:** It refers to the persistent and multifaceted nature of some anxieties (MacIntyre & Gardner 1991). It is aroused by a specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examinations, or class participation (Ellis, 1994; p: 480).

2.2.3. Motivation

It is clear that motivation plays an important role in determining success and failure of ESL learners. Motivation is defined as "some kind of drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something" (Harmer, 2001). It is a connection of

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efforts and will to reach a goal in the language, plus favorable attitudes towards learning the language (Gardner, 1985). Since language learning is a long process, if learners can develop a sustainable level of motivation for long-term achievement, they will find pleasure in learning. Thus, motivation to learn is the force that drives learners to seek out intellectual and new experience. Motivation has different categories depend on different researchers.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

The research project selected quantitative as the research design method. Quantitative research focuses on collecting numerical data and generalizing it across groups of people or to explain a particular phenomenon (Babbie, 2010; Muijs, 2010).

3.2. Data collection instruments

A questionnaire is a tool for gathering information in the form of question lists that are provided to participants to collect information about them. According to Brown (2001), "Questionnaires are any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers."

The survey questionnaire of the research attempts to answer the two research questions through different data collection instruments, namely: EFL learners' linguistic difficulties scale, Students' attitude toward speaking English scale, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety scale, and English learning motivation scale.

3.2.1. EFL learners' linguistic difficulties scale

The EFL learners' linguistic difficulties scale is a 5-point likert scale based on the notion of Krashen (2003) on affective factors which includes poor pronunciation, grammar incompetence, and vocabulary shortage. Questionnaire items were adapted from Amoah and Yeboah (2021). The scale ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree with 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = normal, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree.

3.2.2. Students' Attitude toward English speaking activities scale

The students' attitude toward English speaking activities scale is a 5-point scale adapted from the original 7-point scale format of Gardner's Attitude Test Battery (1985). The scale ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree with 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = normal, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree. Aspects of the questionnaire items were modified from Gardner's (1985) so that it will be suitable for Vietnamese students.

3.2.3. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety scale

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety scale (FLCAs) is a 5-point likert scale that is adapted from Horwitz (1986). The scale ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Aspects of the questionnaire items were selected and modified.

3.2.4. English learning motivational scale

Motivation items were selected and adjusted from Gardner's 7-point scale Motivation Test Battery format (1985) so that it will be suitable for Vietnamese students. Participants were asked to rate each statement by their level of agreement in a close ended 5-level Likert scale with 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = normal, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree.

3.3. Data analysis procedures

Due to the impact of COVID-19, data were collected through online survey questionnaires in two weeks. The survey was sent out through online platforms. A total of 150 answers were returned and used for analysis. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The survey consists of two main parts, each part deals with one research question:

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the study will be presented descriptively according to the research questions; (1) *What linguistic problems do EFL learners at Thai Nguyen University face when speaking English?* (2) *What psychological problems do EFL learners at Thai Nguyen University face when speaking English?* The findings are summarized in the table below

	Speaking difficulties	Mean	Std. dev
Linguistic difficulties	Pronunciation	2.9	1.3066
	Grammar	3.674	0.985
	Vocabulary	3.428	0.8552
Psychological difficulties	Attitude	3.736	0.9639
	Anxiety	3.234	1.238
	Motivation	3.522	1.004

From the information presented in the table, we can see that students' pronunciation does not cause them speaking problems. Furthermore, all participants of this research have a positive attitude toward speaking English and a relatively high level of motivation. Therefore, students' attitude and motivation have no significant impact on students' speaking difficulties. On the other hand, grammar, vocabulary, and anxiety somewhat affect learners' speaking problems. Among three factors, grammar has the

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strongest impact, followed by vocabulary and anxiety. All in all, we can conclude that students often face linguistic difficulties than psychological difficulties when speaking English.

The results of the survey revealed that EFL learners at Thang Long University often face linguistic difficulties than psychological difficulties when speaking English. In an attempt to answer the first research question “*What linguistic problems do EFL learners at Thai Nguyen University face when speaking English?*”, the results shown that students often encounter three linguistic difficulties namely pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary which agree with the findings of Rianingsih (2015). Furthermore, the findings revealed that grammar incompetence and vocabulary shortage are the most common linguistic problems. Based on the answers received from participants, it seems that their linguistic difficulties are caused by the use of first language, lack of practice and lack of adequate linguistic knowledge. For instance, many students reported that they often forget to pronounce the ending sound or mistake the pronunciation of English words for Vietnamese words. This problems are mainly caused by their overuse of Vietnamese in English class. Moreover, many students said that some words and grammar structures in English are too complicated to remember, which are caused by lack of linguistic knowledge and lack of practice.

In an attempt to answer the second research question “*What psychological problems do EFL learners at Thai Nguyen University face when speaking English?*”, the outcomes revealed three psychological problems, which are attitude, anxiety, and motivation. The results shown that learners have a positive attitude toward speaking English, and a high motivational level. However, data from the research shown that participants have a relative high level of anxiety. Based on the responses received from participants, the causes of their anxiety are the learners’ self-perception, classroom environment and the teachers. The findings of this study agreed with the study of Januariza and Hendriani (2016) who believes that students’ anxiety is caused by themselves and the teachers who teach the speaking subject.

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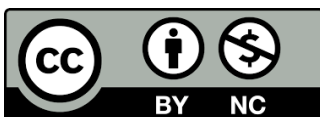
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