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Research Article



Exploring EFL English Major Students' Speaking Challenges and Their Strategies for Improvement

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In the face of global integration, the significance of mastering foreign languages for international communication has surged, especially for Vietnamese students majoring in English at Kien Giang University (KGU). Despite the importance, the challenges faced by these English-major students in honing their speaking skills and avenues to enhance their proficiency remain underexplored, especially within the KGU environment. The study primarily delved into the specific challenges that these students face in developing their speaking skills, and proposed strategies to overcome these challenges and bolster their speaking capabilities.

Methodology: This research employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a questionnaire and interviews as its primary data collection tools, and engaged 77 male and female English-major students from KGU.

Results: Analysis from the gathered data identified both intrinsic and extrinsic hurdles for the students, including limited vocabulary, apprehension about errors, and the lack of an immersive English-speaking milieu. Students shared common strategies for overcoming these challenges, which largely revolved around the use of technology, media, and interaction with proficient English speakers. The findings suggested that providing students with more opportunities to practice speaking, particularly with those proficient in the language, can be an effective way to improve their speaking challenges.

Conclusion: The study underscores the critical need for KGU students to master English amidst global integration. It highlights the intrinsic and extrinsic challenges KGU English majors face in speaking proficiency. Given the findings and recommendations, educators and students can collaboratively tackle these challenges, enabling KGU English students to excel in a globally integrated world.

1. Introduction

Globally, English holds a prominent position as a primary means of communication in various sectors, from education and research to business and tourism, as highlighted by Rao (2019). It is a conduit for scientific

discovery, international diplomacy, and technological advancements, underscoring that many of the world's universities use English as a medium of instruction. With the mounting significance of English, proficiency in this

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language equips individuals with enhanced opportunities in their professional pursuits.

In the Vietnamese educational landscape, English is a core subject, integrated into the curriculum from early stages. Notably, students majoring in English at Kien Giang University (KGU) have dedicated over a decade to studying the language, spanning their high school and university years. However, many still grapple with the intricacies of spoken English, which, if unresolved, might curtail their employment prospects.

Speaking, as a component of language learning, is often seen as the most challenging. Bueno et al. (2006) and Dakowska (2005) concur that while speaking is vital, its mastery in traditional classroom settings remains elusive. Ur (1996) and Bahadorfar and Omidvar (2014) further stress the quintessential nature of speaking in language learning, asserting that it is not only an art of communication but also a critical tool through which individuals are frequently evaluated in real-life scenarios.

With this heightened importance of spoken English, it becomes paramount for students, especially at institutions like KGU, to refine their speaking abilities, paving the way for brighter professional futures. Drawing from my three-year tenure at KGU, I've observed that students face myriad challenges when attempting to communicate in English. These range from classroom-related anxieties to hesitance in participating in English-centric activities. This research, therefore, aims to thoroughly probe these impediments, subsequently proposing viable solutions, and aspires to catalyze improvements in the speaking proficiencies of KGU students.

Numerous scholars have delved into the intricate definition of 'speaking.' Harmer (2007), Quianthy (1990), and Richard (2008) offer nuanced perspectives, highlighting aspects like fluency, on-the-spot information processing, and the significance of verbal and non-verbal cues. Delving deeper, Chaney and Burk (1998) and Cameron (2001) emphasize the interactive nature of speaking and the integral role of various speech organs in this process. Essentially, speaking is the articulation of thoughts through carefully coordinated vocal mechanisms, with an intent to convey clear and coherent meaning to listeners.

A gamut of factors, from anxiety (Bashir et al., 2011; Horwitz, 1991) to a lack of vocabulary (Hamad, 2013; Rababah, 2005; Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017) and apprehensions about making errors (Tsui, 1999; Woodrow, 2006), profoundly influence the speaking abilities of learners. Furthermore, issues related to pronunciation (Hassan, 2007; Morley, 1998) and a deficiency in topical knowledge, as elucidated by Bachman and Palmer (1996), further exacerbate these challenges.

Several studies have endeavored to dissect the challenges faced by English language learners globally. For instance, Tanveer (2007) shed light on how anxiety adversely impacts linguistic achievements. Hamad's (2013) exploration identified vocabulary deficiencies as a prime culprit for learner anxiety. Analogously, Sadighi and Dastpak (2017) in Iran, Gan (2012) in Hong Kong, and Abdel (2016) in Jordan, among others, have delved deep into the myriad factors that

hamper the speaking prowess of students.

To effectively combat English speaking challenges, several research-backed strategies have been proposed. These encompass the integration of audiovisual resources, consistent self-practice, the utilization of mobile social networking apps, and the adoption of specialized focusing methods. Notably, these tactics have proven fruitful in alleviating the anxiety tied to English speaking. Prioritizing a robust vocabulary and establishing a supportive classroom atmosphere are also crucial elements. Students frequently underscore the value of arranging ideas in their native language, adopting gestures, diving into English literary works, and fostering conversations with educators. Significantly, group discussions have been spotlighted as the premier technique to bolster English speaking skills (Basnet et al., 2022; Fauzan, 2019; Jasman et al., 2023; Suchona et al., 2019).

Notably, while extensive research has illuminated various facets of these challenges globally and even within Vietnam (Al-Roud, 2016; Alam & Ashrafuzzaman, 2018; Chand, 2021; Heriansyah, 2012; Nakhlah, 2016), a focused study examining the specific hurdles faced by English majors at KGU in their speaking endeavors remains scarce. It is this lacuna that this research seeks to address, with the hope of fostering a more conducive environment for speaking English at KGU and beyond.

This research aimed to delve deeply into the challenges faced by English majors at KGU when mastering speaking skills and to suggest actionable solutions to enhance their proficiency. The research was guided by two pivotal questions:

1. What specific obstacles do KGU students studying English majors encounter concerning spoken English?
2. What effective strategies can be implemented to strengthen their speaking abilities?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

The study employed a qualitative research design, including data collected through a questionnaire combined with data gathering via interviews with the participants. As stated by Lofland et al. (2006), qualitative data gained through interviews are useful within the research context since participants freely express their thoughts, perceptions and experiences in relation to the research topic in more detail. The two methods (i.e., questionnaire and interview), when combined together, allow researchers to assess the processes of the social phenomenon.

2.2. Participant

The study was anchored at KGU. Participants spanned second to fourth-year students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages. The participant pool comprised 77 students, 16 males (20.8%) and 61 females (79.2%), with age range of 18 to 22 years. Three students were later selected for in-depth interviews.

2.3. Instruments

As mentioned earlier, to find answers to the two research questions, the researcher combined two instruments, including a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire aimed to investigate English major students' difficulties in learning speaking skills. Moreover, some interviews were conducted to understand more about the difficulties in learning speaking and explore their methods for improving these difficulties. [Tables 1](#) shows the use of the instruments in the current study.

Table 1.
Instruments Used for Research Questions

Research questions	Research instruments
1) What difficulties do English major students at Kien Giang University face in learning the speaking skill?	Questionnaire + interview
2) What solutions can be effectively applied to assist English major students of KGU to improve their speaking skill?	Interview

2.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was applied as one of the main research instruments. As Bernard (2000) argues, a well-designed questionnaire can provide keen insights into how participants think and perceive the situation. Moreover, this is an effective and quick way to obtain a huge amount of information, especially from a great number of respondents, in a short time (Hinds, 2000).

To design the questionnaire, the researchers sketched out some main issues related to students' speaking challenges at KGU and then submitted the questionnaire to an expert familiar with the subject to see if the questionnaire fully covered the topic. In the next step, a Vietnamese version of the questionnaire in the form of online (Google form through emails) was delivered to the participants after it was piloted by 10 students. The questionnaire used in the current study comprised 24 items on a three-level Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*agree*) to 3 (*disagree*).

The questionnaire was composed of two parts as follows. The first part aimed to collect participants' demographic information consisting of four items related to their email address, age, gender, and undergraduate status. The second part entailed 24 items designed to investigate English major students' difficulties in learning speaking skills. The items were classified into five clusters namely difficulties related to internal factors (items: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), difficulties related to lecturers' teaching methods (items: 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12), difficulties related to teaching curriculum/ syllabus (items: 13, 14, 15, 16, 17), difficulties related to in-class English learning environment (items: 18, 19, 20, 21), and difficulties related to extracurricular activities (items: 22, 23, 24; [Appendix A](#)).

2.3.2. Interview

As for the second data collection instrument, semi-

structured interviews as online conversations via the platform Zalo were conducted to allow participants to freely share their thoughts about their speaking difficulties and strategies to overcome these difficulties. According to Gay et al. (2011), some interviews are structured, with a specified set of questions to be asked, while others are unstructured, with questions prompted by the flow of the interview. Semi-structured interviews combine both structured and unstructured approaches.

A semi-structured interview is flexible, allowing new questions to be generated during the interview; meanwhile, a researcher tailors a set of questions and a framework of themes to be explored (Lindlof & Tylor, 2002). This method allows the study to generate an understanding of the real world and interpret participants' perception of their own linguistic, social, and individual problems in L2 oral communication.

Although this qualitative study depended mainly on student interviewees as a main source of data, it maintained different reliable features of rigorous qualitative research, such as quality, credibility, trustworthiness, and neutrality as important factors of qualitative interviews (Davies & Dodd, 2002).

2.4. Procedure

The researchers at KGU initially identified key issues concerning English-speaking skills among English major students. Subsequently, they utilized Google Forms to distribute an online questionnaire to gather data. Following the data collection phase, three participants were interviewed. This step was undertaken to delve deeper into the major speaking challenges faced by the students. Since there could have been aspects not covered by the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the issues.

Each interview was approximately 10 minutes in length and focused on four questions ([Appendix B](#)). The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese so that the participants could easily express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings about the topic. Three participants were included in the interviews. All the interviews were recorded by smartphone for the purpose of analysis with the permission of the participants. A few follow-up questions were asked to dig for more specific information relevant to the answer given. The recordings were sent to two experts in the field to ensure their quality and reliability. After that, the researcher transcribed the interviews into Vietnamese and English for data analysis.

The obtained data from the questionnaire were reported as descriptive statistics using SPSS software (version 20.0). The interviews were initially transcribed, translated, and subsequently subjected to rigorous thematic analysis. The process of thematic analysis involves several steps, including familiarizing the researcher with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Findings from the questionnaire

3.1.1 Difficulties related to internal factors

Difficulties encountered by English major students in speaking skills in the current study were related to internal factors and external factors. The researchers uncovered several noteworthy concerns among the participants. First and foremost, a significant challenge identified was the struggle to acquire an adequate vocabulary for effective English communication, with a substantial 74% of respondents acknowledging this difficulty. Additionally, nearly 64% of participants expressed a lack of motivation when it came to engaging in English conversations with their classmates. Another notable issue was the limited opportunities available for participating in speaking activities, which was slightly lower but still impactful, with 61% of respondents highlighting this as a concern.

Remarkably, a substantial proportion of the participants, 51.9%, expressed a strong apprehension about making mistakes and facing criticism from their peers. This fear was identified as a significant barrier to their efforts to enhance their English-speaking skills (Table 2).

The students also pointed out that they faced obstacles in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar when they learned speaking skills. The findings are in line with those of the previous studies (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2014; Al-Lawati, 1995; Kabir, 2014; Ngo, 2011; Quyen et al., 2018; Rababah, 2005; Sayuri, 2016; Syamsurizal, 2015; Tanveer, 2007) regarding lack of confidence, motivation and vocabulary, grammatical competence, fear of making mistakes and pronunciation as inhibiting factors for EFL students in communicative competence.

3.1.2. External hurdles

Regarding external issues affecting students of English major in the current study, several external factors were investigated.

3.1.2.1 Lecturers' teaching methods

As indicated in Table 3, most students disagreed with

Table 2.
Difficulties Related to Internal Factors

When speaking English	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
I lack the vocabulary to express ideas	74	23.4	2.6
I do not know English-speaking strategies	50.6	32.5	16.9
I have limited opportunities to be involved in speaking activities	61%	28.6	10.4
I lack the motivation to speak English with classmates	63.6	19.5	16.9
I am afraid of making mistakes and being criticized by classmates	51.9	22.1	26
I am shy	49.4	22.1	28.6

Table 3.
Difficulties Related to Lecturers' Teaching Methods

When learning English speaking skills, I find that...	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Lecturers did not create interesting activities in class	33.8	32.5	33.8
Lecturers did not correct mistakes in speaking	11.7	27.3	61
Lecturers did not give English-speaking communicative and interactive activities	13	22.1	64.9
Lecturers did not give activities which require students to practice or use new vocabulary	19.5	27.3	53.2
Lecturers use their mother tongue in class	23.4	33.8	42.9
Lecturers focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary	15.6	36.4	48.1

the difficulties caused by their lecturers' teaching methods. In particular, 64.9% of the student respondents disagreed with the statement that lecturers did not provide English-speaking communicative and interactive activities. Likewise, 61% of the respondents disagreed with the notion that lecturers did not correct speaking mistakes.

Furthermore, 53.2% of participants expressed disagreement with difficulties arising from their lecturers' speaking activities. It is noteworthy that a significant proportion, ranging from 33% to 37%, of the respondents fell into the category of being unsure about issues related to their lecturers' use of their mother tongue or a focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary. The findings on difficulties related to teaching methods in the current study reveal some different results from the studies by Ho (2011), Hoa and Mai (2016), and Al-Sobhi and Preece (2018), indicating that lecturers' teaching methods affect students' speaking performance.

3.1.2.2 Teaching curriculum and syllabus

Compared to the internal factors, challenges caused by this part saw mostly higher negative responses than positive ones. In other words, the agreed respondents accounted for between 37% and 46%, compared to the disagreed responses of between 22% and 28% (Table 4).

Reviewing the responses related to the teaching curriculum and syllabus, the findings from the

Table 4.
Difficulties Related to Teaching Curriculum/Syllabus

I find that...	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Teaching curriculum limits learners' English speaking practice	37.7	37.7	24.7
The assessment of speaking practice was not regularly applied	44.2	33.8	22.1
The content of teaching syllabus did not focus on communicative achievement	44.2	31.2	24.7
The textbook lacks English speaking activities	37.7	35.1	27.3
Speaking skill is separately taught from other language skills	45.5	28.6	26

Table 5.
Difficulties Related to In-class English Learning Environment

I find that...	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %
The number of native teachers in language skill classes is limited	72.7	18.2	9.1
Some of the better students dominate speaking English in class	63.6	19.5	16.9
Speaking classes are crowded	33.8	48.1	18.2
The arrangement of tables and chairs in class prevents students from joining interactive activities	19.5	23.4	57.1

questionnaire revealed that the curriculum of the English language program generally and the syllabus of speaking skills, particularly in the current context, prevented EFL students from gaining valuable speaking practice. The results are in line with the studies of (1995), Ambu and Saidi (1997), and Al-Abri (2008 Al-Lawati), who also mentioned difficult factors related to teaching curriculum.

3.1.2.3 In-class English learning environment

As shown in Table 5, the significant factor related to the in-class English learning environment, which was agreed to by nearly 73% of the participants, was the limitation of native lecturers teaching classes of language skills in the current context. Other issues with fewer agreed responses included the domination of the better students (63.6%), and crowded classes (33.8%), but this response is dominated by a higher-than-usual neutral response. Additionally, more than half of the participants disagreed that immovable tables and chairs were an issue (57.1%).

These findings support the previous studies of Maruyama (1996), Ambu and Saidi (1997), Woodrow (2006), and Quyen (2018) in terms of hindering factors for English learners’ speaking practice.

3.1.2.4 Extracurricular activities

The majority of respondents agreed with the regular use of their mother tongue in English-speaking class (79.2%) as the main factor limiting their speaking abilities since all of them shared the same nationality, and it seemed easier to express their own views in Vietnamese when they dealt with unfamiliar speaking topics. Moreover, 61% of the participants agreed that they had limited opportunities to be involved in programs for English practice after class. Despite the lower rate of responses, the result depicted a noticeable concern of the students for limited opportunities for English speaking practice after class, constituting around 53.2% of respondents (Table 6).

These findings are not different from the results of studies by Jdetawy (2011), Al Hosni (2014), and Quyen et al. (2018), indicating that using mother tongue in English-speaking classes and limited places for English-speaking practice after class constraining EFL learners’ speaking proficiency.

3.2. Findings from the interviews

A predominant concern among all students interviewed

Table 6.
Difficulties Related to Extracurricular Activities

I find that...	Agreed (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
My classmates and I often use Vietnamese to communicate after class because it is easier to understand and express ideas	79.2	18.2	2.6
There are limited places for English speaking practice after class, like English clubs, English communities	53.2	37.7	9.1
There are limited English use programs for students	61	31.2	7.8

revolved around pronunciation. For instance, Student A pointed out that occasionally, listeners could not comprehend them due to pronunciation errors, stating, “The first difficulty I encounter is pronunciation. Sometimes they do not understand what I say due to my bad pronunciation.” This sentiment was echoed by Student B, who confessed their hesitation to communicate, remarking, “My pronunciation is not good enough, so I am scared to communicate with everyone.” Similarly, Student C highlighted a lack of corrective feedback, noting, “First, there is no one correcting my pronunciation, so I am not sure whether I pronounce every word right.” Beyond pronunciation, issues with grammar were also evident. Student A admitted to challenges with correct grammar usage, while Student C felt confined to using basic tenses. Moreover, vocabulary emerged as another significant hurdle. Specifically, Student B expressed that their limited vocabulary hampered effective communication, saying, “I also lack the vocabulary to express my ideas.”

To overcome the challenges they encounter in speaking English, students have employed a range of strategies. Many, like Student A, actively seek feedback from those who are more proficient, saying, “I ask them to correct my mistakes after practicing English with them. I have noticed that I am getting better.” This approach is similarly reflected in Student C’s interaction with their brother-in-law to rectify pronunciation issues. Concurrently, the rise of technology has paved the way for self-directed learning. Student A leverages apps for practicing English with foreigners, Student B uses learning apps and dictionaries with phonetic transcriptions, while Student C memorizes dialogues for real-world application. Another pivotal strategy revolves around immersing oneself in English through diverse media. For instance, Student B enhances their skills by watching movies and listening to music, whereas Student C frequently watches English videos on Facebook. In essence, even as pronunciation remains a shared obstacle, these students are leveraging a combination of technology, media, and direct interactions to surmount their speaking challenges.

In conclusion, the pathway to achieving English speaking proficiency is riddled with multifaceted challenges. Overcoming these necessitates a collaborative effort from students, educators, and curriculum planners.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study revealed that English majors at

KGU face speaking skill challenges due to personal and institutional factors. These challenges include limited vocabulary, low motivation, fear of errors, a shortage of native instructors, and few speaking opportunities. The study has several limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, the participant pool primarily consisted of students from one university and did not encompass all four academic years or include teachers. This limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of English majors and educators.

Additionally, due to resource and scope constraints, the study did not incorporate English majors from other universities. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent the diversity of experiences encountered by English majors across different institutions.

Further research is needed to delve deeper into the challenges faced by English majors across all four years of university study, including freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of both internal and external factors affecting their speaking skills. Moreover, future studies should explore the effectiveness of specific English-speaking strategies aimed at boosting students' confidence and promoting active communication. Lastly, follow-up research could propose and evaluate models designed to enhance students' speaking performance, such as creating English communities on campus, organizing extracurricular English activities like speaking clubs, arranging field trips to English-speaking countries, and hosting English-speaking contests. These models could potentially address the identified challenges and further improve English-speaking skills among students.

Declarations

Competing interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Authors' contribution

The authors contributed equally to this study, including the design, data collection, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data generated and analyzed during this study are available and held by the researchers.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire (English version)

My name is Nguyen Van Thong and Le Hoai Thuong – from Kien Giang university. I am conducting a study on the topic “An Investigation on Difficulties Faced by English Majored Students in Learning Speaking Skill at Kien Giang University and Possible Solutions to Better English Speaking Learning”. I would be grateful if you could spare your time to fill in the following questionnaire as part of my data collection for the study. Your cooperation will be greatly appreciated and I can say for sure that all of your personal information will be kept confidential and the information from your answers will only serve the research purpose as stated. Thank you for your time and willingness to participate. As a whole, the questionnaire aims to investigate English majored students’ difficulties in learning speaking skills. It includes two parts as follows.

Part 1: Demographic information

Please check (X) the box with the appropriate information.

- 1. Email address:
- 2. Age: _____
- 3. Gender: Male Female
- 4. Undergraduates: 1 2 3 4

Part 2: Questions

For each of the following statements, please put a check (X) in a box which best corresponds to your case (Agree; Neutral; Disagree).

I. Difficulties related to internal factors

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1. I lack vocabulary to express ideas			
2. I do not know English speaking strategies			
3. I have limited opportunities to be involved in speaking activities			
4. I lack motivation in speaking English with classmates			
5. I am afraid of making mistakes and being criticised by classmates			
6. I am shy			

II. Difficulties related to lecturers’ teaching methods

<i>When learning English speaking skills, I find that...</i>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
7. Lecturers do not create interesting activities in class			
8. Lecturers do not correct mistakes of speaking			
9. Lecturers do not give English speaking communicative and interactive activities			
10. Lecturers do not give activities which require students to practise or use new vocabulary			
11. Lecturers use mother tongue in class			
12. Lecturers focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary			

III. Difficulties related to teaching curriculum/ syllabus

<i>I find that...</i>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
13. Teaching curriculum limits learners’ English speaking practice			
14. The assessment of speaking practice was not regularly applied			
15. The content of teaching syllabus did not focus on communicative achievement			
16. The textbook lacks English speaking activities			
17. Speaking skills is separately taught from other language skills			

IV. Difficulties related to in-class English learning environment

<i>I find that...</i>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
18. The number of native teachers in language skill classes is limited			
19. Some of the better students dominate speaking English in class			
20. Speaking classes are crowded			
21. The arrangement of tables and chairs in class prevents students to join interactive activities			

V. Difficulties related to extracurricular activities

<i>I find that...</i>	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
22. My classmates and I often use Vietnamese to communicate after class because it is easier to understand and express ideas			
23. There are limited places for English speaking practice after class like English clubs, English communities			
24. There are limited English use programs for students			

Appendix B

Semi-structured interview questions (English version)

1. How do you use English at university? Do you like speaking skills? Why?/ Why not?
2. Can you tell me some of the methods you use to study speaking skills?
3. What difficulties do you encounter when learning speaking skills?
4. What solutions do you use to overcome these difficulties?