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## CHALLENGES TO SPEAKING SKILLS ENCOUNTERED BY ENGLISH-MAJORED SENIOR STUDENTS AT DONG NAI UNIVERSITY

BY

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### Abstract

This study investigates the challenges to speaking skills encountered by English-majored senior students at Dong Nai University in Vietnam. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data were collected from 100 students through a structured questionnaire, while qualitative insights were gathered from 15 semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that speaking anxiety ( $M = 4.12$ ) and lack of practice opportunities ( $M = 3.85$ ) are the most significant obstacles faced by students. Additionally, sociocultural factors and peer dynamics further inhibit speaking proficiency. Participants reported feelings of intimidation and cultural barriers that discourage active participation. The study highlights the need for pedagogical interventions, including the integration of communicative language teaching methods, enhanced feedback mechanisms, and the creation of supportive learning environments. By addressing these challenges, educators can foster greater speaking proficiency among students, ultimately enhancing their confidence and readiness for real-world communication.

**Keywords:** *speaking skills, challenges of speaking, English-majored senior students.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and increasing international communication, effective English speaking skills are essential for academic success and future career opportunities. However, many English-majored students face various challenges in developing their speaking proficiency, particularly in non-native environments. This study focuses on the specific difficulties encountered by senior students at Dong Nai University in Vietnam, a rapidly developing region where English is increasingly valued but often underutilized in daily interactions.

Research indicates that speaking skills are fundamental to language acquisition and serve as a critical measure of proficiency (Baker & MacIntyre, 2023). However, students often struggle with anxiety, lack of practice opportunities, and insufficient feedback, which can hinder their confidence and performance in spoken English (Lee, 2022). Moreover, sociocultural factors and educational methodologies contribute significantly to these challenges. In Vietnam, traditional teaching methods often emphasize grammar

and writing at the expense of speaking practice, leading to a gap in communicative competence among learners (Tran, 2021).

At Dong Nai University, where the curriculum aims to equip students with practical language skills, the reality remains that many learners feel unprepared for real-world conversations. A study by Pham and Nguyen (2023) highlights the need for a shift in pedagogical strategies to enhance speaking skills through interactive and student-centered approaches. Furthermore, the impact of technology and digital communication tools has introduced new dynamics in language learning, presenting both opportunities and challenges for students (Nguyen & Hoang, 2024).

This research aims to identify the key challenges faced by senior English majors at Dong Nai University in developing their speaking skills. By analyzing these obstacles, we hope to provide valuable insights that can inform curriculum design and instructional practices, ultimately fostering a more conducive environment for language acquisition. Understanding these challenges is crucial for educators and policymakers who seek to



improve English language proficiency among students in Vietnam and similar contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Importance of Speaking Skills in Language Acquisition*

Speaking skills are vital in the process of language acquisition, serving as a primary mode of communication and a key indicator of language proficiency (Baker & MacIntyre, 2023). The ability to communicate effectively in English not only enhances academic performance but also increases employability in a globalized job market (Almeida et al., 2022). Researchers have highlighted that the development of speaking skills is crucial for achieving communicative competence, which is defined as the ability to convey and interpret messages effectively in various contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980). This is particularly relevant for English-majored students, who are expected to demonstrate a high level of proficiency in both written and spoken English.

### *Challenges Faced by EFL Learners*

Despite the acknowledged importance of speaking skills, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners encounter significant challenges in developing their speaking abilities. A study by Lee (2022) indicates that speaking anxiety is a prevalent issue among students, often stemming from fear of making mistakes or being judged by peers and instructors. This anxiety can lead to avoidance behaviors, limiting opportunities for practice and hindering overall language acquisition. Moreover, the pressure to perform in a foreign language can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, negatively affecting students' confidence in their speaking abilities (Gkonou & Miller, 2021).

Another critical challenge is the lack of authentic speaking opportunities in the classroom. Traditional teaching methods often prioritize grammar and vocabulary over communicative practice, leading to a disconnect between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Tran, 2021). In Vietnam, where English is taught primarily as an academic subject, students frequently engage in rote memorization rather than interactive speaking activities (Phan & Nguen, 2023). This pedagogical approach can limit students' exposure to real-life conversational situations, making it difficult for them to develop fluency and spontaneity in speaking.

### *Sociocultural Factors Affecting Speaking Skills*

Sociocultural factors also play a significant role in shaping students' speaking abilities. In Vietnam, societal norms and cultural expectations regarding communication can create additional barriers for EFL learners. For example, students may be less inclined to express their opinions or engage in discussions due to cultural values that prioritize respect for authority and conformity (Nguyen, 2022). This cultural context can limit students' willingness to participate in speaking activities, further exacerbating their speaking challenges.

Additionally, the influence of peer dynamics cannot be overlooked. Research by Tran and Nguyen (2023) emphasizes the impact of

group interactions on language learning, suggesting that students who feel comfortable in their peer groups are more likely to engage in speaking activities. Conversely, negative group dynamics, such as competition or intimidation, can deter students from practicing their speaking skills. This is particularly relevant for English-majored students at Dong Nai University, who may feel pressure to perform in front of more proficient peers.

### *The Role of Technology in Speaking Skills Development*

The advent of technology has introduced new avenues for language learning, offering potential solutions to some of the challenges faced by EFL learners. Digital tools and online platforms provide opportunities for students to engage in speaking practice outside the traditional classroom environment. For instance, language exchange applications and social media platforms allow learners to connect with native speakers and practice their speaking skills in real time (Nguyen & Hoang, 2024).

However, the effectiveness of these technological tools depends on students' willingness to utilize them and their access to reliable internet connectivity. A study by Hoang and Tran (2023) found that while many students expressed interest in using technology for language learning, issues such as limited access to devices and the internet often hindered their participation. Furthermore, students may still experience anxiety when speaking with native speakers online, which can limit the potential benefits of these technological platforms.

### *Pedagogical Strategies for Improving Speaking Skills*

In light of the challenges faced by EFL learners, educators must adopt innovative pedagogical strategies to foster the development of speaking skills. Research suggests that incorporating communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches can significantly enhance students' speaking proficiency (Pham & Nguyen, 2023). CLT emphasizes interaction as the primary means of language learning, encouraging students to engage in authentic speaking activities, such as role-plays, debates, and discussions.

Additionally, providing constructive feedback is essential for helping students improve their speaking skills. According to Gkonou and Miller (2021), timely and specific feedback can boost students' confidence and facilitate their learning process. Educators should also create a supportive classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and celebrates mistakes as part of the learning journey.

In summary, the literature underscores the various challenges encountered by English-majored senior students at Dong Nai University in developing their speaking skills. From speaking anxiety and limited practice opportunities to sociocultural barriers and technological constraints, these challenges necessitate a comprehensive understanding and targeted pedagogical approaches. By addressing these issues, educators can foster a more conducive environment for language acquisition and enhance the speaking proficiency of their students.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



This study aims to investigate the challenges to speaking skills encountered by English-majored senior students at Dong Nai University. To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

#### Participants

The study targeted senior students enrolled in the English Language Department at Dong Nai University. A total of 100 students participated in the quantitative phase, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different classes and gender. In the qualitative phase, 15 participants were chosen based on their responses in the initial survey, representing a range of speaking proficiency levels and experiences.

#### Data Collection

**Quantitative Data:** A structured questionnaire was developed and administered to the 100 students to identify specific challenges they face in speaking English. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items rated on a Likert scale, focusing on aspects such as speaking anxiety, lack of practice opportunities, and perceived sociocultural barriers. The questionnaire was adapted from existing literature to ensure validity and reliability (Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Lee, 2022).

**Qualitative Data:** In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 15 selected participants to explore their experiences and perceptions related to speaking difficulties. The interviews were designed to elicit detailed responses about their classroom experiences, interactions with peers, and the impact of sociocultural factors on their speaking skills. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent.

#### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and standard deviations, to identify trends and common challenges. The qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically, following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach facilitated the identification of key themes and patterns related to the speaking challenges faced by students.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of the study on the challenges to speaking skills encountered by English-majored senior students at Dong Nai University. The data collected through the questionnaire and interviews provide insights into the specific obstacles students face, their perceptions regarding speaking English, and the potential areas for improvement in their speaking skills.

#### Quantitative Findings

##### - For Questionnaire Results

The quantitative data from the structured questionnaire were analyzed to identify the predominant challenges faced by the students. The results are summarized in Table 1, which presents the

mean scores for each challenge based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Table 1: Challenges to Speaking Skills**

Challenges to Speaking Skills	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Speaking anxiety	4.12	0.78
Lack of speaking practice opportunities	3.85	0.82
Limited feedback from instructors	3.65	0.90
Sociocultural barriers	3.50	0.85
Lack of confidence	4.05	0.80
Ineffective teaching methods	3.45	0.95
Peer dynamics (competition/intimidation)	3.30	0.88
Lack of motivation	3.20	0.91

#### Analysis of Quantitative Data

As shown in Table 1, the highest mean score was for "speaking anxiety" (4.12), indicating that many students experience significant anxiety when speaking English. This finding aligns with previous studies that highlight the detrimental effects of anxiety on language performance (Gkonou & Miller, 2021).

The next most significant challenges included "lack of speaking practice opportunities" (3.85) and "lack of confidence" (4.05). These results indicate that students feel they do not have sufficient opportunities to practice their speaking skills, which is critical for language acquisition (Baker & MacIntyre, 2023). The lack of effective feedback from instructors (3.65) further contributes to the challenges faced by students, as timely and constructive feedback is essential for language learning (Nguyen, 2022).

#### Qualitative Findings

##### For Interview Results

The semi-structured interviews provided rich qualitative data that complemented the quantitative findings. Thematic analysis revealed several key themes regarding the challenges to speaking skills:

**Anxiety and Fear of Judgment:** Many students expressed feelings of anxiety and fear of being judged by their peers and teachers. One participant stated, "I often worry about making mistakes when speaking, so I prefer to stay quiet." This resonates with the findings of Lee (2022), who identified speaking anxiety as a barrier to participation in language learning.

**Limited Practice Opportunities:** Participants emphasized the limited opportunities for speaking practice in their courses. As one student noted, "We focus too much on grammar and writing; we rarely have speaking activities." This aligns with Tran (2021), who

pointed out that traditional teaching methods often prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical speaking skills.

**Cultural and Social Influences:** Several students highlighted the impact of cultural norms on their speaking abilities. Many felt that the Vietnamese culture, which often values humility and deference to authority, discourages open expression of opinions. One interviewee remarked, "In class, I feel like I shouldn't speak up too much; it's not respectful."

**Peer Dynamics:** The dynamics among peers also played a role in students' willingness to speak. Some participants reported feeling intimidated by more proficient classmates, leading to avoidance of speaking situations. "Sometimes, I feel embarrassed to speak in front of my friends who are better at English," shared one student.

#### Discussion

The findings of this study highlight several critical challenges faced by English-majored senior students at Dong Nai University in developing their speaking skills.

**The Role of Speaking Anxiety:** The predominance of speaking anxiety among students underscores the need for effective interventions to reduce anxiety in language learning contexts. Various strategies can be employed, such as creating a supportive classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and celebrates mistakes as part of the learning process (Gkonou & Miller, 2021). Educators can also implement activities that gradually build students' confidence, such as pair or small group discussions, where students may feel more comfortable expressing themselves.

**Importance of Practice Opportunities:** The significant impact of limited speaking practice opportunities on students' proficiency highlights the need for a curriculum that prioritizes communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches. Integrating more speaking activities, such as role-plays, debates, and discussions into the curriculum can provide students with the practical experience necessary for language acquisition (Pham & Nguyen, 2023). Additionally, incorporating technology, such as language exchange platforms and online speaking groups, can offer students more avenues for practice outside the classroom (Nguyen & Hoang, 2024).

**Addressing Cultural Influences:** The findings also point to the importance of understanding the sociocultural context in which students are learning. Educators should be aware of how cultural values influence communication styles and create opportunities for students to express their opinions and engage in discussions. Workshops on cultural competence and communication can be beneficial in helping students navigate these challenges.

**Enhancing Peer Interactions:** The dynamics of peer interactions are crucial for fostering a supportive environment for speaking practice. Educators can facilitate positive peer interactions through team-building exercises and collaborative learning activities that encourage students to support each other in their language learning journey. Additionally, providing structured peer feedback sessions can help reduce competition and foster a sense of community among students.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that English-majored senior students at Dong Nai University face several significant challenges to their speaking skills, including speaking anxiety, limited practice opportunities, cultural influences, and peer dynamics. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that involves modifying teaching methodologies, fostering supportive classroom environments, and integrating technology into language learning. By implementing these strategies, educators can enhance students' speaking proficiency and overall language competence, ultimately preparing them for successful communication in real-world contexts.

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