

## **ELF Students' Speaking Skills: Difficulties and Solutions: A Case at Can Tho University, Vietnam**

**Cao Minh Ky<sup>1</sup>, Thai Cong Dan<sup>2\*</sup>, Chau Vinh Thanh<sup>3\*</sup> Thach Chanh Da<sup>4\*</sup> Le Minh Hieu<sup>5\*</sup> Phu Thi Hong Chau<sup>6\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Can Tho City, Vietnam

<sup>2,4</sup> School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Can Tho University, Can Tho City, Vietnam

<sup>3</sup> School of Foreign Languages, FPT University, Can Tho Campus, Vietnam

<sup>5</sup> Dong Ha Primary school, Ha Tien City, Kien Giang Province, Vietnam

<sup>6</sup> Chau Thanh High school, Kien Giang Province, Vietnam

**Authors' emails:** tcdan@ctu.edu.vn, tcda@ctu.edu.vn, leminhhieu09061991@gmail.com, chauvinhthanh87@gmail.com, chaupth.thptct@gmail.com

*\*Corresponding author:* tcdan@ctu.edu.vn

**Abstract.** *This paper aimed to investigate into the difficulties that many EFL students faced during their English speaking courses at university. It could also hope to provide possible solutions or directions to take into account or at the very least mitigate these problems for EFL students on their process of becoming future fluent English speakers. A survey was conducted on 43 EFL students ranging from freshmen to seniors at Can Tho University (CTU) in order to identify the cores of their problems with suitable solutions to speaking English better. The results showed that the primary cause leading to unfluent speeches in English was the lack of vocabulary needed to convey thoughts and ideas. Fortunately, the key to solving this problem was quite simple and could be applied to every EFL students at any level to have better speaking skills. Based on the findings, the solutions were to be an increase interaction with the language itself and also the improvement of other essential English skills. Also, these solutions could be practiced by EFL students themselves or with the help of English instructors and teachers from various educational institutions.*

**Keywords:** *speaking skills, difficulties, solutions, EFL students, Can Tho University*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background of this study**

The fluent speeches and communication related speaking skills is one of the important issues, if not the most important aspect when learning a language. The same idea applies to English, speaking is a tool to communicate ideas that are arranged and developed accordance with listener needs (Tarigan, 1987, cited in Musaddat, 2008). However, many EFL students are struggling with the skills that were the key reason they wanted to learn English for at the beginning. In recent years, the significance of speaking English has been dramatically raised by English becoming the international language as well as its use as the working language in 85% of international organizations (Crystal 1997). English communication is also a requirement for many high-paying professions and the opportunity to obtain a better position in a career, especially in multi-national corporations. Thus, the need for better English speaking skills is more prevalent now than ever. Nevertheless, the fluent speaking is not easily obtainable, "speaking the most complex and difficult skill to master" (Hinkel, 2005, p. 485), there are many obstacles that EFL students must

overcome to ensure the betterment of their future paths and careers.

To achieve this, we must first define what it means to speak English and then figure out the difficulties that plague many EFL students, which are preventing them from having fluent conversations and conveying their ideas into speeches. Only with this information can we then provide proper guides on how to improve their speaking. Little research has been carried out regarding the problems that EFL students face from their perspectives and how to deal with these issues. For this reason, this paper hopes to provide an actual view into the students' side, identify the causes carefully and give instructions on applying the solutions to their situation.

### **1.2 Aim of the study**

This study was conducted at Can Tho University with the focus on EFL students ranging from freshmen to senior students of the Department of English Language and Culture. The purposes of this study were as follows: (1) To study the difficulties of English speaking for EFL students at Can Tho university, and (2) To give out some suggested solutions to the difficulties of English speaking for EFL students at Can Tho University.

### **1.3 The significance of this study**

This study would aim to identify the difficulties that EFL students were facing in their learning process; thus, it could provide the solutions not only for EFL students but the also the English instructors, teachers and curriculum planners. The results could help the instructors to have better lessons and suitable teaching methods for EFL students based on their given problems.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Speaking**

At the most fundamental knowledge, speaking is the production of language through the mouth. However, we also utilize other part of the body to speak such as the lungs, vocal tract, vocal chords, tongue, teeth and lips. Speaking a language usually requires the attention of at least one listener. When more participants join the conversation and communicate with each other, the conversation is now called a "dialogue". Speech then flow effortlessly through each participants using dialogues, it can also be practiced or prepared ahead of time in order to be delivered in form of "presentations". Speaking is the considered by most learners of a new language to be the skill that they need to master as soon as possible.

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing *and* receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). The many forms of speaking depend on the contexts, situations and even the participants, which include their purposes for speaking and the surrounding environment in which the conversation is taking place. In order to speak the participants must achieve two goals: the first is linguistic competence, which is to produce specific points when speaking such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The second is sociolinguistic competence, which is the indication that they understand the when, where, why and how to produce such speeches and language.

### **2.2. English speaking**

According to Richard Nordquist (2018) the term *English* is derived from *Anglisc*, the speech of the Angles—one of the three Germanic tribes that invaded England during the fifth century. The English language is the primary language of several countries (including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and many of its former colonies, and the United States) and a second language in a number of

multilingual countries (including India, Singapore, and the Philippines). It's an official language in several African countries as well (such as Liberia, Nigeria, and South Africa) but is spoken worldwide. It is learned around the world by children in school as a foreign language and often becomes a common denominator between people of different nationalities when they meet while traveling, doing business, or in other contexts.

Hence, speaking is a tool to communicate ideas that are arranged and developed accordance with listener's need (Tarigan, 1987, cited in Musaddat, 2008). English speaking thus is the use of English to convey ideas and thoughts into words hearable to other listeners. English speaking in particular requires the speaker to utilize many other parts of their body to speak such as the teeth, lips and even nose in order to be truly proficient.

### **2.3 An EFL student**

According to the Department of Education, 2009, an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or ESL (English as a Second Language) student is a student whose primary language or languages of the home, is other than English and would require additional English language support to develop reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Also according to the Department of Education there are no typical ESL students. They come from many linguistic and cultural backgrounds and have had a wide variety of life experiences, attributes that can significantly enrich the life of the school and help enhance learning for all students.

### **2.4 English speaking skills**

A speaker's skills and speech habits have an impact on the success of any exchange (Van Duzer, 1997). A good speaker should anticipate the upcoming scenarios as well as provide appropriate responds to clearly convey ideas to the other listeners in a conversation. They must also manage discrete elements such as turn-taking, rephrasing, providing feedback, or redirecting (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Thus English speaking skills are the skills that can help the EFL students or new learner in general to improve their speeches. For example, an EFL student is given a situation in which he/she must converse with a salesperson, the learner needs to know the suitable vocabulary to describe the item in mind, rephrase or emphasize words to clarify the description if the clerk does not understand, and use appropriate facial expressions to indicate satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service.

Other skills and knowledge that instruction might address include the following: producing the sounds, stress patterns, rhythmic structures, and intonations of the language; using grammar structures accurately; assessing characteristics of the target audience, including shared knowledge or shared points of reference, status and power relations of participants, interest levels, or differences in perspectives; selecting vocabulary that is understandable and appropriate for the audience, the topic being discussed, and the setting in which the speech act occurs; applying strategies to enhance comprehensibility, such as emphasizing key words, rephrasing, or checking for listener comprehension; using gestures or body language; and paying attention to the success of the interaction and adjusting components of speech such as vocabulary, rate of speech, and complexity of grammar structures to maximize listener comprehension and involvement (Brown, 1994).

### **2.5 The difficulties in English speaking for EFL students**

The difficulties when speaking English can be divided into five categories: (1) Lack of English vocabulary, (2) English grammar, (3) Influence of mother tongue, (4) Confidence, (5) Lack of motivation.

#### **2.5.1 Lack of English vocabulary**

Vocabulary learning is an essential part in foreign language learning as the meanings of new words are very often emphasized, whether in books or in classrooms. It is also central to language teaching and is of paramount importance to a

language learner. Recent research indicate that teaching vocabulary may be problematic because many teachers are not confident about best practice in vocabulary teaching and at times don't know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). Vocabulary learning is the most comprehensive and most difficult aspect of English for foreign learners to master thoroughly. However, it is also the most fundamental in our process of learning a new language. We need to know what the definition of everything we see in order to describe them or to express our feelings and emotion toward them. The lack of a proper set of vocabulary creates a barrier for EFL students because they are unable to convey their thoughts and ideas clearly. This can be especially discouraging for speakers and is the main problems that many EFL students face when it come to speaking.

Words with multiple meaning or words that have similar meanings (synonyms) present a challenge for EFL students because they are confused and unable to choose which forms to use in certain contexts. Other EFL students reported that they have difficulties remembering the words that they have learned for prolong periods of times. Other difficulties related to vocabulary are fixed word collocations, phrasal verbs, idioms, proverbs and regional differences in vocabulary usage. British English and American English or other English-speaking countries can have different usages, pronunciation and spelling for the same words. Finally, English usage can also be formal and informal. Formal English is the language of the mass media, education, business, economy, commerce, technology, science, etc. Informal English includes colloquial, slang and dialect usage. It is harder for foreign learners to master informal than formal English vocabulary.

### **2.5.2 English grammar**

Finally, we cannot ignore the grammatical aspect of English if our goal is to achieve fluent English speaking. Grammar, in a general sense, defined as the area of knowledge that includes the body of the rules and regulations that governs the use of a language, constitutes a significant knowledge area in writing as it is directly related to fluent and accurate writing in EFL. It is through grammar that EFL students can express their complexity in English, separating the advanced user of English from the beginner.

Grammatical problem can range from the inability to use proper categories of words such as noun, verb adjective, etc., to the confusion for tenses especially in Vietnamese EFL students since Vietnamese language does not have tenses. Furthermore, proficiency in grammar usage will help students understand and produce more complex sentences in high-class environments. However, such a crucial aspect yet easily overshadowed by the importance of other (nonetheless important) English skills is listening or reading.

### **2.5.3 Influence of mother-tongue.**

"Mother tongue" is the term used to refer the native language of a speaker. It is the primary language used most frequently around the speaker from their birth to their current level of education. "To use two languages familiarly and without contaminating one by the other is very difficult," said Samuel Johnson in 1761." (Cited in Cook, 2002; Abi Samara, 2003).

Another problem for EFL students is the always constant presence of the mother-tongue in the classroom environment. The reason for this is because it is easy for them to switch back to their native language when they encounter a topic that they do not accustom to. Secondly, the use of mother tongue in English classes feels very natural to them. If left without the supervision of the instructor, the students will try to explain the topics provided to them to other students using their native tongue.

The use of mother-tongue presented numerous other problems related to a specific language, namely Vietnamese. Since the structures of Vietnamese and

English are vastly different, using Vietnamese causes students to use the wrong forms of words and sentence structures when speaking English thus preventing the EFL students at CTU from being used to English application.

#### **2.5.4 Confidence**

Grubber (2010) state that self-confidence is an attitude that you hold about yourself that allows you to move forward and achieve your goals. A lot of EFL students feel a sense of inhibition when they are trying to speak resulted from their lack of confidence. When speaking, they are worried about making mistakes and fearful of criticism. Taiqin (1995) advocate that as the students are afraid of making mistakes and losing their self-respect. This problem is particularly severe because it has gotten so bad for some students that they refused to partake in even reading exercises for fear that they can sound ridiculous in front of other students.

The lack of confidence can also lead to a fear of assistance. This can be seen in the case of many students afraid of asking others for help and guidance with their speaking skills. The students sometimes feel that others may make fun of them if they make mistakes when speaking especially when handling situations involving foreigners.

#### **2.5.5 Lack of motivation**

One other factor worth consideration is the lack of motivation to speak in some EFL students. Motivation is one of the main factors affecting the success or failure of students in foreign language learning (VNU Journal of Science, Foreign Languages 27 (2011) ) Although a minor problem, this can affect new EFL students and learners and discourage them from pursuing further into English education because we can only learn what we need to learn. The development of communicative skills can only take place if learners have motivation and opportunity to express their own identity and to relate with the people around them (Littlewood, 1981:93,). Without a proper guideline and clear purposes for learning, it is very difficult for someone to find interest in learning anything especially a new language. This can stem from the fact that teachers and instructors may pick topics that are not appealing to the learners and thus cannot generate interests for them to study.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODS/METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research question**

The survey conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What are EFL students' difficulties in English speaking at Can Tho University?
2. What are some suggested solutions towards the difficulties for EFL students' at Can Tho University?

#### **3.2 Participants**

43 EFL students in the Department of English Language and Culture at Can Tho University participated in this study, ranging from freshmen to senior students from the age of 18 to 25.

#### **3.3 Research design**

The current study was designed to collect descriptive quantitative data using a questionnaire to first identify which of the five main problems faced by EFL students and then to further identify the exact and more detailed issue in each categories.

#### **3.4. Research Instruments**

A questionnaire was used in this study. The questionnaire was divided into 2 sections: the first section was designed to identify the main cause that prevented EFL students from speaking English. The second section consisted of 42 questions to examine the more detailed problems for students ranging from behavioral actions to knowledge-based problems such as learning material and method.

#### **3.5 Procedure**

The questionnaires were handed to the students randomly. The survey took place between 25<sup>th</sup> February and 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2020. The whole procedure was supervised by the conductor. Before the distribution of the questionnaires, instructions and guidelines were presented to the students to ensure that they understood the questionnaire fully.

The students were asked to choose what category they felt like they belonged in regarding the difficulties when speaking English. They were then asked to rate the affects that these problems had on them in section 2 of the of the questionnaire with number “1” to “5”. Number “1” indicates total disagreement and “5” means complete agreement.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data collected, the following would be the results

**Table 4.1 Group A: Vocabulary**

Questionnaire Items	Level of Agreement (%)
• I cannot express what I want to say because I do not know the words to describe it.	98
• I find it difficult to remember vocabulary in English.	80
• I learn vocabulary ONLY through textbooks.	58
• I rarely watch or pay attention to the English in the media (movies, songs, videos, etc...).	68
• I learn new vocabularies using dictionaries or learning them in a list.	91
• I spend the majority of my time NOT using English (listening, speaking, or reading English, etc...).	83
• I do not decide what kind of word I need to learn for the situation and just study them because I am forced to do so.	82
• When I talk, I do not use English words that I have heard in songs or movies in class.	77

From Table 4.1, it was seen that the main problem for EFL students of CTU was the lack of necessary vocabulary to properly and fluently speak English with 98% the total number of students fell into category A.

**Table 4.2 Group B: Confidence**

Questionnaire Items	Level of Agreement (%)
• I feel that my English is bad and feel that they cannot speak English well.	18
• I am afraid that others will make fun of me when I speak English.	18
• I do not want to take part in speaking activities.	8
• I am extremely worried about my pronunciation when speaking to	24

others and even more when I speak to foreigners.	
• I am not used to speaking English and prefer using other English skills such as writing.	<b>20</b>
• In my class there are many students that are better than me in English judging from their scores and abilities to speak.	<b>15</b>
• I do not practice speaking English often.	<b>17</b>
• I do not like to ask anyone to help me with my English speaking.	<b>12</b>
• I find it embarrassing to even read in front of other people and thus afraid to try.	<b>20</b>

As seen in Table 4.2, EFL students at CTU that fell into Group B tend to exhibit shyness and nervousness when speaking (24%) and even more when speaking to a foreigner. Other noticeable harmful effects of having confidence problems consist of the fear of speaking English in general (20%), the refusal to even read English in front of other students (20%). These students also have the low standard when judging their own performance in English (18%) and afraid of other people making fun of them for making mistakes (18%).

**Table 4.3 Group C: Motivation**

<b>Questionnaire Items</b>	<b>Level of Agreement (%)</b>
✓ I just study English because It is mandatory for my scores.	<b>4</b>
✓ My institution doesn't have speaking or listening sections in my exams.	<b>3</b>
✓ I do not need English for my job.	<b>1</b>
✓ When I am studying in class there are not a lot of speaking activities to take part in.	<b>4</b>
✓ I do not often take interest in English entertainment or media in general.	<b>4</b>
✓ I feel that the teaching methods in class are not very fascinating to me.	<b>3</b>
✓ My English instructors and I rarely speak to each other using English.	<b>2</b>
✓ I am interested in another language and do not find enjoyment in learning English.	<b>5</b>
✓ I only study English when I am near an exam or a test.	<b>3</b>
✓ I do not have much relevant topical knowledge about English subjects so I do not like to speak.	<b>5</b>

Group C (Table 4.3) is the least common problem encountered by EFL students at CTU. However, it is worth noticing that the main issues when it comes to motivation for EFL students is that they lack the insight into certain topics (5%) which then leads them to a deprivation of interest in further learning. The lack of interest in English media and entertainment can also be another factor (4%). Finally, some learners just want English in order for them to bypass certain curriculum when studying which is why they do not feel compelled to learn more.

**Table 4.4 Group D: English grammar**

Questionnaire Items	Level of Agreement (%)
✓ I cannot use the correct prepositions (to, from, at, about, etc...).	12
✓ I am confused about word forms (verb, noun, adjective, etc...).	18
✓ I made mistakes when using <b>ED</b> and <b>ING</b> adjective (confused vs confusing).	17
✓ I am confused about the tenses.	29
✓ I cannot use relative clauses (which, who, when, etc...).	19
✓ I am not proficient in using the plural and singular forms of words	22
✓ The order of words in a sentence is problem to me.	21

In Table 4.4, Grammar related problems are the second most common issue for EFL students at CTU. The main results of these problems are the confusion when dealing with tenses (29%) making sentences difficult to understand. Using incorrect singulars and plural forms is also another prevalent result (22%). Students in this group can also have problems arranging words in a sentence correctly to speak (21%). Finally, word forms (19%), relative clauses (18%) and descriptive adjectives (17%) are all important factors in speaking yet were all negatively affected by the problems stemming from limited English grammar.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Discussion

After identifying the main problems and the results from these problems from the perspective of the students, we can see that the EFL students at CTU have a lot to overcome in order to be proficient in English speaking.

Researchers such as Laufer and Nation (1999), Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), Marion (2008) and Nation (2011) and others have realised that the acquisition of vocabulary is essential for successful second language use and plays an important role in the formation of complete spoken and written texts. In English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learning vocabulary items plays a vital role in all language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2011). The main issue preventing them from fluent speaking at CTU is vocabulary related problems. This creates a barrier between speakers since they cannot convey their ideas and emotions properly. Another side factor is the limited usage in English grammar which cripples their ability to make cohesive sentences and make their speeches sound unnatural. Parallel need for considerable refinement in the analysis of functions of particular patterns and structures in speaking English go as well if we want to improve our abilities to speak fluently. Furthermore, the third most common problems is the confidence that EFL students have for themselves. Krashen (2002) finds that learners with high motivation, self-confidence and a good self-image, and with a low level of anxiety are well equipped for success in second language acquisition. Thus, we can deduce that confidence has a major impact upon the performance of EFL students at CTU.

With the information gathered through survey, we can now make suggestion and give clear solution on how to combat these problems or minimize their effects on EFL students at CTU. The solutions will not only benefit the students but also the instructors and teachers by giving them what to focus on when tackling these problems.



## 5.2 Implication and solutions

There are a number of resources and activities available to get round these common speaking problems. Ur (1991:130) also gives the solution, the several activities that can help reducing speaking problems: (1) Group work, (2) Easy language, (3) Interesting topic, (4) Clear guidelines, (5) English monitors.

If EFL students want to enrich their vocabulary, Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) propose strategies to learn vocabulary as follows: (1) guessing from context, (2) using word parts and mnemonic techniques to remember words, and (3) using vocabulary cards to remember foreign language-first language word pairs. They must also divine a learning strategy that is suitable for them and not just follow every curriculum blindly without question. Choose the set of words that they want to learn according to their needs and situation instead of a big word list that will soon be forgotten. Learn vocabulary from sources other than textbooks and dictionaries to prevent the loss of interest in learning. According to Stahl (2005) in <http://www.readingrockets.org>, students probably have to see a word more than once to place it firmly in their long-term memories. For example, just paying attention to the lyrics of an English song that you really like or in TV show that you enjoy is more effective than just reading and trying to memorize them.

As for the confidence aspects, according to Jonas (2010) there are several ways of enhancing self- confidence to overcome speaking problem: (1) Relax-do not stress yourself too much and just go with the flow of your speeches, (2) Prepare- Focus on building up a set of key phrases and vocabulary, so you can enter into the conversation more prepared, (3) Practice- Your confidence will grow as the English you know becomes second nature, (4) Get English-speaking conversation partner and regularly meet up and (5) Get an English monitor. Teachers and lectures should be more aware of their students' reluctance to speak and should give their learners enough time for speaking skills, help them overcome their timidity through friendly behaviors to make them feel comfortable when speaking, remind their learners that there is nothing to fear about making mistakes, and give them clear instructions and enough guidance. Teachers should give their learners more opportunities to speak English through using some speaking tasks that help them to speak and encourage them to take part in speaking activities. In addition, teachers should know when and how to correct their learners' mistakes so that they can avoid them in the future and worry less about making them.

Finally, grammar should never be ignored in favor of other skills as a good EFL student will always try to be better at every skill. Achieving effectiveness in communication requires communicative competence which is the mastery of the knowledge of language and the ability to use the knowledge in actual communication (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). Asking others for assistance with grammar is a guaranteed way to improve. Writing exercises and practicing writing are also effective when trying to improve grammar skills. But most important of all, EFL students must know and admit their mistakes when they are made. Only once they figure out their mistake by themselves can they truly better themselves. Teachers can also help be reinstate the importance of grammatical skills to EFL students and new learner in general.

The influence of the mother tongue (Vietnamese) also plays a noticeable role in the difficulties of EFL students at CTU. It is undeniable that the interference of the students' mother tongue creates many problems on the road to speak English fluently and effortlessly. Thankfully, this difficulty can also be resolved with the help of dedicated monitors and instructors that are proficient in both languages. Although understanding the forms of error and guiding the students towards appropriate way is a challenge, experienced instructors can find solutions around this since mother tongue influence is always not negative. According to M. M. Abdul Rahuman, 2017,

once the learner is at the satisfactory state in the second language learning process, it will make the learner's language admirable. Furthermore, teaching English for college-level EFL students is easier since most of them can understand the differences in both languages in term of forms, formations and rules. Providing learning opportunities and leading them towards meaningful goals will bring satisfactory results in teaching English as a second language.

At last, we know that how successful a task is depends on how much the people in it are motivated. The same goes with English speaking for EFL students at CTU. With the right motivation we can help alleviate some of the difficulties that plague EFL students for so long. There should be some sort of enjoyment while learning in order to be motivated to continue studying (Wu, 2003). As fellow EFL students, we should strive to give each other encouragement and promote inspiration. Moreover, teachers should help students find inspiration in topics that they least expect to as well as guide them to do more learning based on their own interests to make full use of their motivation.

### **5.3 Limitation**

Despite the effort put into the research there are still limitations in this study. The first is that the number of participant in this research is quite limited. The number of participants was initially 60 but was reduced to 43 as some of the results were faulty due to unclear instruction. Another factor is that the questionnaire was based on a large number of sources which took a long time and was difficult to summarize and select the suitable questions to be placed into the questionnaire.

### **5.4 Conclusion**

With the rise of demands for higher education as well as occupational opportunities, English speaking is now more essential than ever. However in order to be the leading example and even future educators for others to follow, EFL students at CTU must overcome the challenges and obstacles presented before them. This study will hopefully shine light upon some of the obstacles that can befall EFL students and direct them on a brighter path on the journey to becoming more proficient

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