Difficulties Experienced by First-Year Students Majoring in Tourism at Dai Nam University in Practicing English Speaking Skills

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the challenges faced by first-year students majoring in tourism at Dai Nam University in practicing and improving their English-speaking skills. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used to anonymously survey 180 students who was studying Tourism majored, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 students for detailed insights. Results of the analysis showed that psychological factors; linguistic factors; social knowledge factors are the top three major contributors which hinder the speaking ability, which suggests new approaches to improving learners' speaking skills.

KEYWORDS: speaking skills, difficulties, psychology, linguistics, social knowledge, Dai Nam University

I. INTRODUCTION

For many learners, mastering speaking skills is a critical aspect of language acquisition, and the success of this skill is measured by the ability to engage in conversational exchanges in the learned language (Nunam, 2009) [1]. There has been a significant shift in foreign language teaching methods: from approaches like grammar-translation and audiolingual methods of the 1980s to the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, which has become increasingly widespread and popular.

Despite this shift in methodology, speaking, inherently a human-to-human communication skill, remains intertwined with other skills such as listening, reading, and writing. It also consists of multiple components like vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Scott and Thornbury, 2007) [2]. This makes it a complex skill that presents significant challenges to learners. First-year students majoring in tourism at Dai Nam University, whose language proficiency upon entry is lower compared to those in public foreign language institutions, are no exception. A considerable number of students often do not know what to say or cannot articulate their ideas into sentences. Even with effort, they require a significant amount of time to express their thoughts without preparation.

With the aim of improving the English-speaking skills of students following tourism major at Dai Nam University, the author has conducted a study on the difficulties faced during the learning process. This research seeks to identify the current situation, analyze the causes, and propose solutions to these challenges.

2. Study Objectives

The study focuses on surveying and investigating the difficulties faced by 180 students during their practice of speaking skills. In-depth interviews were also conducted to identify the root causes of these challenges. The goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of speaking practice and propose appropriate solutions.

The research was conducted between October 2024 and February 2025.

The study aims to answer the following two questions:

1. What challenges do first-year students majoring in tourism at Dai Nam University face in practicing English speaking skills?
2. What measures can help students improve their English-speaking proficiency?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of speaking skills

There are many definitions of speaking skills. Fundamentally, speaking is an interactive activity and can be learned through interaction (Willis, 2015) [3]. It is a productive language skill (Siahaan, 2008), which means that speaking involves generating meaningful sounds that can be understood by listeners. According to Bailey (2000), speaking is an interactive process in which speakers aim to create meaning through generating, exchanging, and processing information orally. From these definitions, it can be concluded that speaking skills are inseparable from the process of communication. They represent the ability to use language effectively to express ideas, opinions, emotions, and information to others.

3.2. Difficulties in learning speaking skills.

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Difficulties in learning speaking skills can be categorized into five main groups: linguistic factors, psychological factors, environmental factors, teaching-method factors, and socialknowledge factors.

Linguistic factors include issues such as a lack of vocabulary to accurately express ideas, grammar problems that hinder sentence construction, and pronunciation difficulties caused by interference from the mother tongue (as studied with over 500 undergraduate students by Dina & Al-Jamal, 2013) [4]. Additionally, slow reflexes in recalling words and grammar lead to delays in forming sentences (Ozkan, Bada, and Genc, 2011).

Psychological factors include fear of making mistakes, fear of being judged by others, feelings of shame, anxiety about not understanding the interlocutor or being misunderstood, lack of confidence in one's abilities, lack of motivation to speak, and peer pressure to match the proficiency of classmates (Shen & Chiu's study with 148 Taiwanese students, 2019) [5]. Brown (2001) [6] added that these issues stem from fear, anxiety, and shame.

Environmental factors involve overcrowded classrooms, limited time for speaking practice, lack of supporting materials, insufficient opportunities to practice speaking outside of class, and minimal assistance from teachers and peers. According to Gradman and Ellis, opportunities for meaningful language exposure inside and outside the classroom significantly impact language development.

Teaching-method factors are another critical consideration. According to Hasan (2013), in weaker classes, teachers are more likely to shift from student-centered to teacher-centered approaches, which reduces students' opportunities to practice speaking and negatively impacts their skills. Moreover, a teacher's friendliness and the way they provide feedback can influence students' psychology and motivation.

Social-knowledge factors pertain to students' lack of knowledge about societal topics, which prevents them from contributing to discussions requiring advanced language proficiency. Observations suggest that students often remain silent because they don't know what to say, possibly due to insufficient resources to build their social knowledge.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

3.1. Reserch design

The research employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. It utilized a questionnaire summarizing difficulties based on the studies of Jack Richard (2009) combined with in-depth interviews.

3.2. Research participants

The study involved a total of 180 first-year students majoring in tourism at Dainam university. The sample size of 180 students out of 240 students in total provides a robust basis for analyzing the difficulties in learning and practicing speaking skills, allowing for comprehensive insights into the factors influencing speaking skills among these first-year undergraduates

3.2. Data analysis

Quantitative data were encoded using a Likert scale questionnaire ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and analyzed with SPSS software. Qualitative data from interviews were processed through audio recordings, keyword extraction, and frequency analysis.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Statistical analysis of survey and interview results

Regarding the difficulty correlation among factors for students, among the five major factors, those related to language, psychology, and social knowledge cause the most difficulties for students, with an average score of 3.5/5. A notable point is that the difficulty levels of these three groups of factors are quite even. Factors related to the learning environment and teaching style have a somewhat less significant impact (2.2 and 2.8/5 respectively).

Looking more closely at each major factor group, in terms of language-related factors, the Limited vocabulary and phrases to express ideas are the two biggest obstacles preventing students from speaking more, with scores of 4.0 and 3.9 respectively. Students cannot find vocabulary to express what they want to say and also struggle to describe it using simpler words. This means that they cannot express their ideas accurately and naturally.

Pronunciation uncertainty ranks third with a score of 3.7, indicating that students have not practiced pronunciation enough when encountering new words. This highlights the reality of whether students understand what learning vocabulary involves, and also shows they need more support with vocabulary learning strategies. In an in-depth interview, Phuong Anh, a student in class 1801, said that she still struggles because she always tries to translate word-by-word from Vietnamese to English and is not yet used to learning words in chunks, often having to pause and think for a long time to connect individual vocabulary into a phrase. Another student, Linh, shared that she finds the amount of new words to learn each week (about 40 words) a bit too much for her learning ability, and even after studying, she hasn't yet managed to apply them in exercises.

Grammar, specifically verb conjugation and interference from Vietnamese sentence structure, confuses students when translating (with scores of 3.6 and 3.5 respectively). Hoàng shared, "Sometimes I want to say a sentence, but I just say it without much

awareness of grammar. I know my speech is not accurate, but I'm not sure exactly where it's wrong." Another student, Xuan Tung, shared that there are many English elements that must be included but not in Vietnamese, such as verb tenses, singular/plural forms, or articles a/an/the, so he often forgets these. This indicates that students still have problems with accuracy when speaking a language and are influenced by grammatical differences between their mother tongue and the second language.
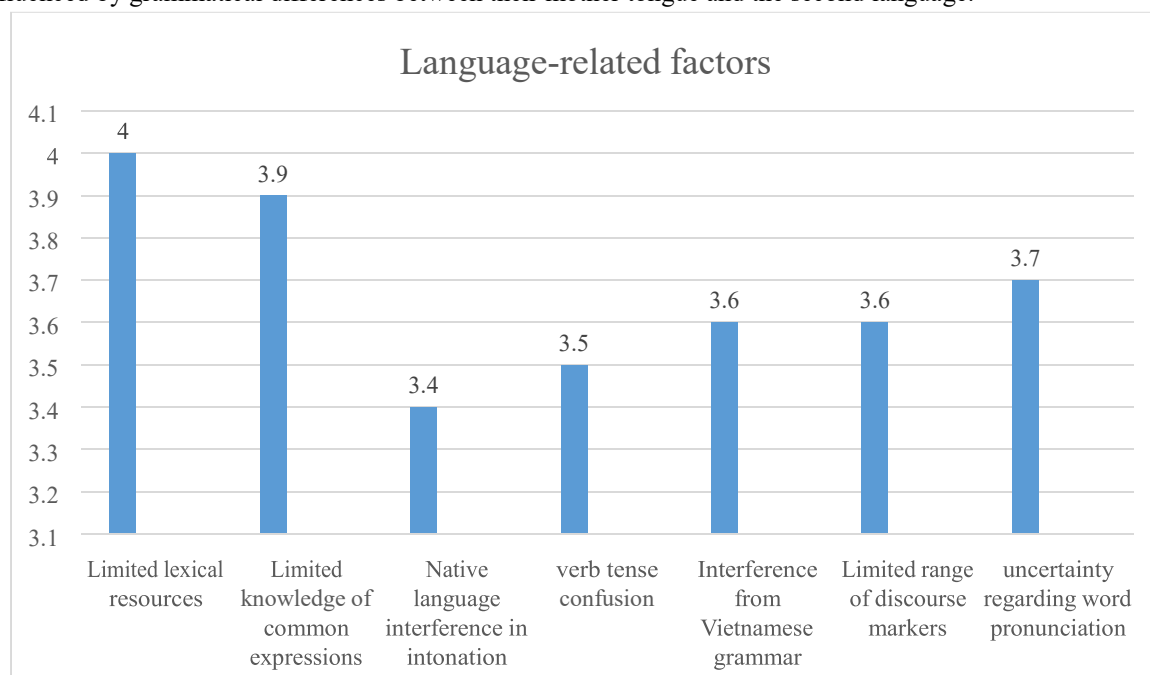

Regarding Psychological factors, the results show that students currently face significant fears in communication, including the fear of others not understanding what they are saying (4.0) and the fear of not understanding others (3.9). Students shared that when they don't understand, they don't know what to do or whether their understanding is correct. This indicates a lack of common communication skills. Ranking third among the major influencing factors is the lack of communication skills in order to extend the conversation. (3.8).

In-depth interview results reveal that the deeper reason for this fear is the embarrassment of being seen as inferior to peers and the fear of being ridiculed. Linh expressed a fear that making mistakes might lead others to misinterpret her as a person. Peer pressure and a weak sense of self-worth prevent students from using mistakes as a tool for improvement. Instead, they view mistakes as a detrimental addition to their perceived value. Students speculate about a bleak future when making mistakes that others do not. As a result, they tend to focus on delivering a few perfect sentences rather than practicing speaking more to convey their messages. This indicates a lack of skills in analyzing and processing emotions, directly related to learning motivation and their mindset toward trial and error as a learning process.
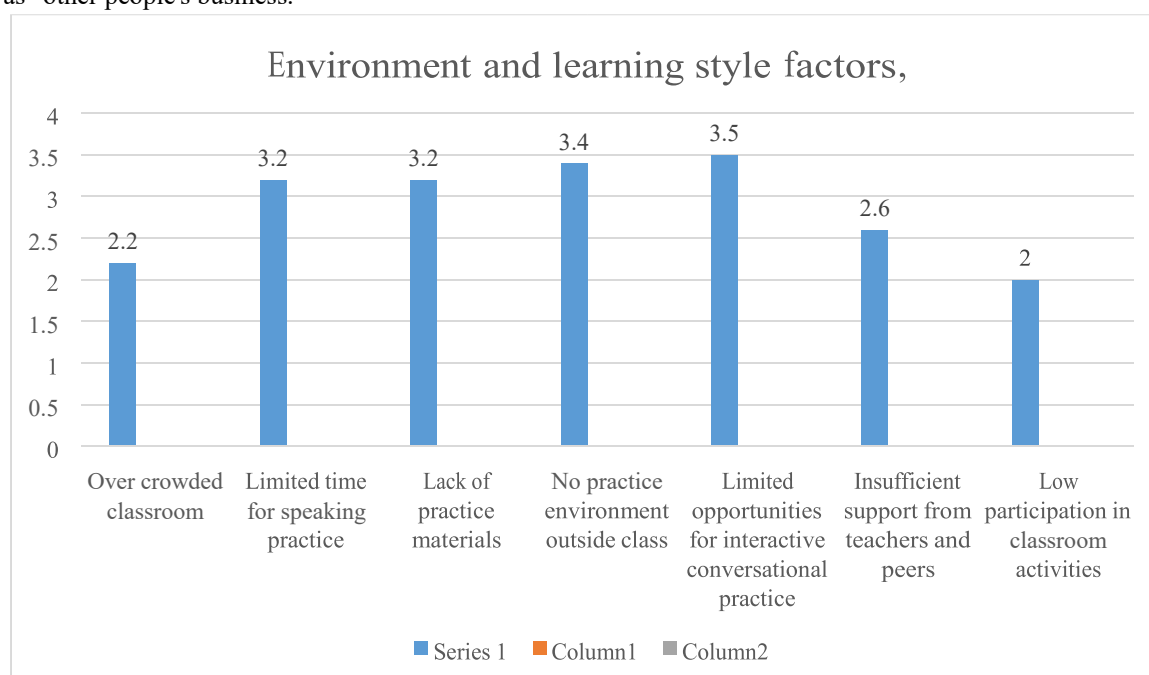
Moreover, the scores for other factors in the table are relatively high, showing that psychological factors significantly impact students' speaking performance. As a result, when students speak less, their fluency and naturalness in speaking skills are not practiced enough to become habitual skills.

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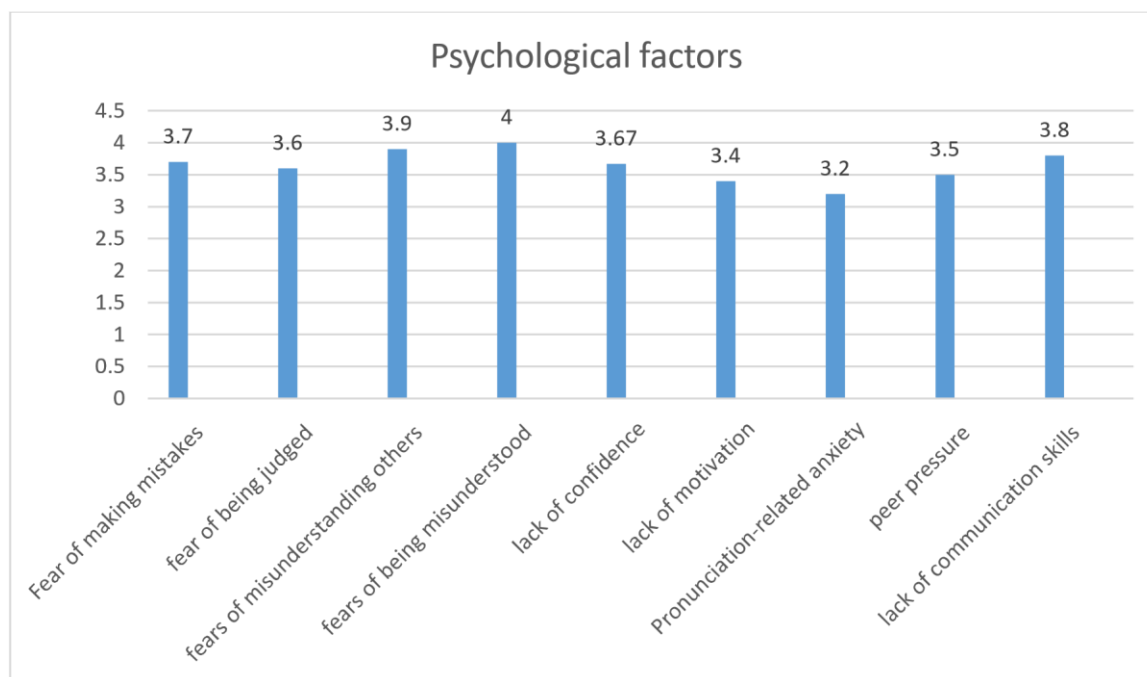
In addition to linguistic and psychological factors, the study reveals a noteworthy finding: social knowledge ranks among the top three factors influencing the speaking practice of first-year students at Dai Nam University. A majority of students admitted that they lacked sufficient social knowledge to discuss in-depth topics when the curriculum transitioned from basic communication to tasks requiring personal viewpoints on social issues (mean score: 3.6). In other words, students often lack ideas and personal perspectives on social topics—content typically associated with the intermediate level and above. Beyond the lack of background knowledge, students also reported having no access to resources for acquiring such knowledge and no habit of searching for unfamiliar information (mean score: 3.4). As a result, they often remain silent in class, waiting for peers to speak first.

Insights from in-depth interviews indicate that this lack of attention to social issues is influenced by family attitudes. For example, a student named Huong (Class Tourism 1803) shared that her family believed: "The more you know, the more complicated life becomes. Focus on making money rather than worrying about social matters." This perspective is commonly found among students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who often need to work part-time to support themselves financially. Consequently, they tend to prioritize work and income over engaging in discussions about societal topics, which are sometimes perceived as "other people's business."

Looking at the less significant factor groups, the learning enviroment factors. The most significant obstacle within this group is the "insufficient number of English communication exchanges" (3.5). Students rarely participate in English-speaking activities in class but still recognize the need to speak more. Hoàng Anh, a student from class tourism 1804, shared that sometimes he finds classroom activities meaningless because he does not clearly understand how the activities contribute to improving his speaking skills. Students believe that speaking should be enjoyable to align with modern learning methods.

Additionally, the lack of opportunities to practice English speaking outside the classroom is another challenge for students (3.4). While students need to practice speaking frequently to achieve fluency, they often lack sufficient self-discipline and independent learning abilities to carry out this practice effectively. Interviews revealed that students are also not well-versed in time management skills (scoring 3.2 for "insufficient practice") and are overly dependent on teachers for finding study materials.

Finally, teaching methodology factors do not significantly affect students' speaking skills. According to the survey, the primary challenge in this category is the lack of variety in speaking tasks, which can cause students to feel bored and lose interest in speaking English. However, the score for this factor is relatively modest, at only 2.5/5. Other factors scored even lower, such as "teachers being unfriendly and not correcting students' mistakes" (1.9 points) and "teachers not modeling or providing materials for students" (2.1 points). This indicates that the majority of students perceive the instructors and the learning environment at Đại Nam University as supportive and professional.

6. SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS MAJORING IN TOURISM'
speaking skills

The research analysis suggests several approaches to improving the speaking skills of students at Đại Nam University as follows:

To address challenges related to language, workshops on effective vocabulary learning strategies could be included in extracurricular programs. Additionally, students need more opportunities to read, listen, and use the language they have learned. However, they require guidance and support from teachers to determine appropriate learning resources, proficiency levels, and suitable methods for studying.

Regarding psychological factors, organizing sharing sessions where students can discuss their difficulties could help them realize that they are not alone, as everyone has their own fears. This awareness can reduce feelings of inadequacy. Sessions focusing on self-worth and communication skills are also essential for students. Additionally, clearly demonstrating to students the differences in their abilities before and after completing a lesson or a series of lessons could help them recognize their progress and stay motivated.

Regarding environment and learning style factors, helping students understand the significance of the activities they participate in can boost their motivation to engage more actively in classroom activities. Moreover, creating English clubs with practical extracurricular activities that place students in situations where they must use English can provide additional support.

Fostering students' mindset to expand their social knowledge and interest in current events is also crucial, especially for those with difficult economic circumstances. Providing access to newspapers and broadcasts for daily reading from prestigious sources can play a vital role in helping students develop reading habits. Furthermore, implementing projects that promote the habit of reading could also be beneficial.

7. CONCLUSION

It can be said that improving English skills, particularly speaking skills, remains a challenging task requiring significant effort from learners, both the international ones who are living and working in English-speaking nations and the ones who study English as a second language.

This study, focusing on first-year students majoring in Tourism at Đại Nam University—a private institution where students often have low initial English proficiency and come from modest financial backgrounds—reaffirms two key factors that consistently hinder speaking skill development. The first is language-related challenges, mainly a lack of vocabulary, weak grammar, and poor pronunciation, stemming from inadequate learning strategies and a lack of self-directed learning skills. The second is psychological challenges, rooted in fears of being judged for mistakes, low self-esteem, and deficiencies in emotional management and personal communication skills.

Additionally, the research highlights the correlation between students' financial capabilities and their cognitive engagement with social issues. A lack of interest in abstract thinking and societal concerns hampers students' ability to form opinions and articulate them effectively in English.

Based on the identified challenges and their underlying causes, proposed solutions have been introduced to equip students with the necessary skills they lack, turning these into stepping stones to facilitate speaking practice and improve their speaking proficiency.

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