

# Obstacles of Mechanical Engineering Students in Learning English Speaking Skill at a University in Southern Viet Nam

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## ABSTRACT

Speaking is a crucial skill for learners in acquiring a new language, especially English. In fact, becoming proficient in spoken communication can be challenging for learners. This research aimed to identify the difficulties that students had to face in developing their English speaking skill. A descriptive survey was conducted using a quantitative research method to gather data from 50 second-year non-English major students (e.g. mechanical engineering students) at a university in Southern Vietnam. As well, questionnaires were employed to collect the data and IBM SPSS version 20 software was used for data analysis. The results revealed that the students coped with both linguistic and psychological obstacles when learning English speaking. The most significant challenges included vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and the ability to express ideas clearly, with emotional and social barriers for further complicating the learning process. Based on these findings, suggestions were made to help students somehow improve their speaking skill.

**Keywords:** speaking skill, obstacles, linguistic and psychological barriers, ability.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The unique status of English in the world has been acknowledged for a long time. Zoghbor (2018) noted that English has secured its status as the official language in many countries and serves as a lingua franca in various educational, technological, and business contexts globally (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 1997 & 2006). It has also become an international language or has been a second mother tongue in some countries. To understand one another, people often use speech,

text, media tools, and other means to make effectively exchange information.

Bailey (2003) pointed out that learning another language including four skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing while it remains challenging for non-native learners in Vietnam to achieve proficiency in all English language skills, particularly speaking, despite the numerous English courses offered by schools and universities and despite students studying English for seven to ten years in high school, many can only read a little and struggle with basic speaking skills. The Oxford Dictionary defines speaking as the act of conveying information or expressing ideas and emotions through speech, and as Ur (1996) points out, it is one of the crucial skills to master when learning English.

Speaking which “consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning” (Bailey, 2003). Speaking involves using words through oral pronunciation and selecting appropriate vocabulary to convey speaker’s intended message to listeners. Therefore, the primary goal for foreign language learners is to develop the abilities to speak the language fluently and to utilize it as a tool for communication, work, and study.

Currently, a university in the South of Vietnam has applied teaching English for students of all kinds of majors such as General English from one to four courses and a major English one for each program. Thus, students have chances to learn more English skills but they will also encounter many disadvantages in learning the language due to their studying situations and their knowledge. Students’ lack of qualified practice environment also significantly affects their speaking skill.

Regarding to mechanical engineering students at this university, they also study four modules of General English specified in the curriculum. In fact, it has appeared that the students have difficulties in speaking English basically. Therefore, it's important to examine the reasons they struggle with speaking English and identify effective solutions to help them improve their English speaking skills. Based on this analysis, we suggest some strategies to address the current challenges and enhance English speaking abilities for future learning.

## **II. A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Speaking skill**

A key indicator of language learners' proficiency is their speaking ability (Askhatova, 2020). Promoting speaking practice and enhancing speaking skills are crucial elements in the development of communicative competence and overall language proficiency, as noted by Mymrina, Abdrashitova, and Zakharova (2018). It is confirmed that speaking is one of four skills that students must master when graduating. According to Cameron (2001) & Brown (2004), speaking involves the use of the body's vocal organs to convey intended meaning. Communication is the process of creating language to facilitate interaction between the speaker and the listener.

### **2.2 Pronunciation**

Regarding to the aspects of speaking skill, Brown (2001) said that it proposed some aspects of speaking skills such as fluency, accuracy, pronunciation and vocabulary. In oral communication, pronunciation is essential for tasks like producing correct sounds, combining those sounds fluidly in speech, stressing words accurately, and using intonation appropriately (Boyer, 2001). In fact, speaking English fluently and correct pronunciation are very important because inaccuracies may cause native speakers to become confused or misunderstand the intended message (Chakma, 2014). Good pronunciation will help communication be easier to comprehend. That means, learners can communicate effectively with good pronunciation and intonation even though their vocabularies and grammar are not still professional. Therefore, it is proved that the listener's understanding reflects the speaker's ability to articulate the message effectively.

### **2.3 Vocabulary**

This issue is also one of the important aspects in learning a foreign language. The crucial role of vocabulary in second language learning lies in its reciprocal relationship with a learner's spoken language skills. Alqahtani (2015) highlighted that a rich vocabulary can boost learners' confidence in speaking. While Khan, Radzuan, Shahbaz, Ibrahim, and Mustafa (2018) emphasized the importance of focusing on vocabulary in L2 learning, viewing vocabulary development as foundational for enhancing all four communicative skills. Learners with limited vocabulary, they will also have a limited understanding of speaking, reading, listening and writing. Vocabulary is essential for successful use of a second language because without a rich vocabulary, we will not be able to use the structures and functions that we have learned to communicate intelligibly.

### **2.4 Grammar**

In speaking, students must use the correct words and be grammatically correct, which is called accuracy (Brown, 2001). Whereas, Rossiter (2021) assumed that even without grammar, learners might still manage basic communication, but expressing more complex ideas would be challenging. Consequently, to advance beyond simple expression, language learners - whether learning their native tongue or a foreign language - must understand and apply fundamental grammatical rules and principles. That means accuracy is achieved by allowing the speaker to focus on grammatical and phonological elements. To express the correct context, grammar must be correct. Therefore, grammar and speaking skill are interrelated. Therefore, to have good speaking skill, grammar also plays an important part.

Besides grammar, there are also a few other aspects that are equally important such as: accuracy of vocabulary and pronunciation, fluency and ease of understanding. To teach speaking skills effectively, we need to combine grammar and other supporting aspects such as vocabulary and pronunciation. (Zam et al, 2021). Then, instructors' teaching materials and methods have a direct related to students' English speaking skill. In addition, the field of linguistics (vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation, grammar, English concepts) also contributes significantly to this skill. Furthermore, in the classroom, teachers need to create exciting and positive activities related to

students' interests or levels so that learners feel comfortable when entering the classroom. On the other hand, learners need to improve their English speaking skill to improve their own proficiency (Pham & Nguyen, 2021).

### **2.5 Obstacles in speaking English**

Numerous factors influence learners' ability to acquire speaking skills when learning a second language. Regarding to the factors of psychology, difficulties related to psychological factors will have a significant direct impact on the process of learning English speaking skill. Most learners feel afraid of making mistakes when speaking English and are hesitant in the process of practicing English speaking skills. Most learners feel pressure when they speak, communicate and present in English. On the other hand, students worry about misunderstanding the speaker's meaning, causing them to lose focus on how to answer or express their ideas. The less environment students have to practice speaking skill, the less significantly affective communication the student proficient in their own speaking skill (Pham et al, 2021).

Pham and Nguyen (2021) understood that English speaking skill was the most effective way to help students study and communicate. Thus, a research was conducted to find out the difficulties in English speaking skills of 103 non-English majored freshmen at a university in the Mekong Delta. The questionnaire, adapted from a version by Atallah (2016), comprised thirty-one items divided into three sections and the participants indicated their level of agreement with each item using a five-point Likert scale. The Social Science (SPSS) version 20 was also utilized to analyze the data. The findings indicated students' difficulties while learning speaking English were associated with linguistic and instructor domains. Implications for further practices are discussed.

Trinh and Pham (2021) conducted a study on "Challenges in Speaking Classrooms among Non-English Majors" to explore English speaking skill of student. This study aimed to understand some of the difficulties students encounter in the speaking classroom regarding speaking from a psychological and linguistic perspective. Language difficulties included lack of vocabulary and topical knowledge, the arrangement of ideas to be expressed in sentences, and inappropriate vocabulary. Interview's results also showed that learners had many language speaking difficulties.

Based on the above findings, some possible solutions were proposed to help students improve their speaking skill when learning English.

Maji, Samanhudi, & Mokoagouw (2022) launched a research about Students' difficulties in speaking English: (A Case Study in SMKNegeri 3 Sorong) aimed to explore the challenges and underlying causes faced by students at SMKN 3 Sorong Vocational School in speaking English. A case study research design was employed, utilizing two data collection methods: classroom observations and interviews. The findings indicate that the primary difficulties students face when speaking English stem from linguistic factors, such as limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and insufficient grammar knowledge. Additionally, students encounter issues due to nonlinguistic factors, including psychological elements like fear of making mistakes, low motivation, shyness, anxiety, and reliance on their mother tongue. However, these psychological factors are less significant than the linguistic ones. In conclusion, linguistic factors are the most dominant challenges faced by twelfth-year students at SMKN 3 Sorong in spoken English.

In Malaysia, English is considered a second language and is a mandatory subject in both primary and secondary education. Yahaya, Rose & Madzlan, Noor Alhusna & Muhammad, Mazura (2021) published a study of ESL Learners' Obstacles in Learning Speaking Skills. The participants were the six-year learning period in primary school and five-year period in secondary school. Students often do not achieve fluency in speaking. A significant number of students continue to encounter difficulties with English sentence structures and pronunciation. This paper aims to explore the challenges ESL learners face in developing their speaking skills, focusing on issues related to learning perception, anxiety, social interaction, and educational settings. To gather data, the study employed a quantitative approach using an online survey distributed through "Google Form" to 196 ESL students from a higher learning institution in Ipoh. The research utilized an adapted questionnaire formatted as a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26 to calculate the mean score for each item. Results revealed that the interference of the students' first language (L1) contributes to their speaking challenges. Students expressed a desire for teachers to correct every mistake and to utilize diverse and

contemporary teaching methods to enhance their interest in learning. The study suggests that ESL learners require increased motivation to build their confidence in using English. Additionally, teachers are encouraged to be more innovative in developing strategies that captivate students' interest in speaking English.

### **III. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this research is just to find out the obstacles in learning English speaking skill of 50 second-year non-English major students (i.e. mechanical students) at a university in the South of Vietnam. In fact, it is aimed to find out the reasons that prevent the students from acquiring the English speaking skill. Solutions will then be developed to provide guidance, with the intention that the study's findings will serve as a reference to enhance students' speaking skill in future semesters. Additionally, this effort aims to offer lecturers a comprehensive overview of current teaching practices, enabling them to refine their methods and improve their future lectures at the university.

### **IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study is a descriptive survey using quantitative research method to collect data through questionnaires in order to understand the obstacles of speaking skill of 50 second-year mechanical engineering students at a university in the South of Vietnam and at the same time finding solutions to help students improve English proficiency through the random surveys.

Initially, the researcher meticulously reviewed and selected several previous studies. Following this, the researcher established the research objectives, crafted the questionnaire, and submitted it to the supervisor for feedback to enhance the quality of the research instruments. The following step involved refining the questionnaire. Subsequently, the researcher met with the participants in person to ensure completion of the questionnaire. The final phase consisted of collecting and analyzing the data, culminating in the presentation of the findings. The software IBM SPSS version 20 was utilized to calculate the data collected from the questionnaires.

## V. FINDINGS

### 5.1 The reliability of the questionnaire

**Table 5.1:** Reliability Statistics of the questionnaire

| Cronbach's Alpha | N of items |
|------------------|------------|
| 0.646            | 13         |

A group of 50 students completed the questionnaire. The collected data of this research was computed to check the frequency and the internal reliability coefficient. The result in Table 5.1 showed that the questionnaire used in this study was reliable with significantly high Cronbach's Alpha of 0.646 for 13 items in total.

### 5.2 Common obstacles in English speaking skill of mechanical engineering students

**Table 5.2:** Descriptive Statistics of the difficulties of mechanical engineering students when learning English speaking skill at a university in the South of Vietnam

| No. | Statements                                                                                                 | Mean | SD   |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|
| 1   | I think I do not have enough vocabularies to carry out conversations or presentations on different topics. | 3.84 | 0.99 |
| 2   | I think I do not have enough grammatical structures to connect information and tenses are often confused.  | 3.86 | 0.90 |
| 3   | I think I have pronounced English words incorrectly.                                                       | 4.06 | 0.79 |
| 4   | I think I do not have enough ways to express ideas in English communication.                               | 3.94 | 0.99 |
| 5   | I think I have been influenced by Vietnamese speaking style.                                               | 3.3  | 1.26 |
| 6   | I think I do not have enough conjunctions and sentence connection devices.                                 | 3.7  | 0.89 |
| 7   | I think I have a pressure of performing well.                                                              | 3.38 | 1.21 |
| 8   | I think I have the fear of making mistakes in front of classmates.                                         | 3.46 | 1.37 |
| 9   | I think I have the fear of criticism or losing face.                                                       | 3.04 | 1.12 |
| 10  | I think I have been overpowered by better students.                                                        | 3.04 | 1.25 |
| 11  | I think I have unpleasant atmosphere.                                                                      | 2.86 | 1.07 |
| 12  | I think I do not have intrinsic motivation.                                                                | 3.26 | 1.16 |
| 13  | I think I have lack of listeners' support.                                                                 | 2.84 | 1.02 |

The descriptive statistics showing in Table 5.2 revealed that the average scores of thirteen difficulties of mechanical engineering students in learning English speaking skill range from (M = 2.84; SD = 1.02) to (M = 4.06; SD = 0.79).

The survey data illustrated various linguistic and psychological barriers that mechanical engineering students face when learning English speaking skill. The most pressing challenges reported by students' center around vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and the ability to communicate ideas with additional emotional and social barriers further complicating

the learning process. The results are displayed in each aspect as bellowed.

Regarding to the vocabulary limitations in Question #1: Students rated their lack of vocabulary as a significant obstacle (Mean = 3.84, SD = 0.99). This indicated that they felt unable to fully engage in conversations or presentations. In fact, they might face to the difficulties in expressing ideas, unclear communication, low self-confidence, the lack of reflexes, the limited expressive ability, etc. This deficit may prevent students from expressing ideas on a wide range of topics, particularly those outside technical



terminology, which is essential for real-world communication.

Grammar and Tense Confusion in question #2: A shortage of grammatical structures and frequent confusion over tenses (Mean = 3.86, SD = 0.90) which indicated that students struggled to connect information coherently in English. This suggests a need for foundational grammar support, as students' difficulties with sentence structure likely impede their ability to produce clear and connected speech, affecting fluency and cohesion.

For the pronunciation challenges in the #3: Pronunciation is reported as the most severe linguistic barrier (Mean = 4.06, SD = 0.79). This high mean score highlights the importance of clear pronunciation for effective communication. The difficulties of pronunciation may lead to misunderstandings, decrease students' confidence, and create reluctance to participate in spoken English activities.

Regarding to expressing ideas as mentioned in #4: Students also face challenges in expressing ideas fluently (Mean = 3.94, SD = 0.99). This suggested that even when they have a general understanding of vocabulary or grammar, they might lack the needed flexibility, which was an essential skill for academic and professional interactions, to articulate complex thoughts.

The influence of native language in question #5: The impact of Vietnamese language structures on English speech (Mean = 3.3, SD = 1.26) reflected the effect of language transfer, where students apply familiar linguistic rules from their native language to English. This interference often results in grammatical errors and unnatural phrasing, making it harder to adapt to the conventions of English.

For the conjunctions and sentence flow shown in question #6: Students reported that their limited use of conjunctions and linking devices (Mean = 3.7, SD = 0.89) which contributed to reduce the fluency of their speech. Without effective connectors, students might produce fragmented speech and reduce the flow and clarity of their communication.

Regarding the performance pressure (e.g. question #7): Numbers of students got significant pressure to perform well (Mean = 3.38, SD = 1.21). This created stress and hindered their ability to speak naturally. Then, performance pressure might lead students to avoid speaking in many kinds of situations or to overthink their responses. Thus, they compromised the fluency in speaking English.

The idea in question #8 and #9 are about the fear of making mistakes and peer comparison: The fear of making mistakes (Mean = 3.46, SD = 1.37) and the anxiety of being overshadowed by more proficient peers (Mean = 3.04, SD = 1.25) reflected a strong influence of social evaluation on students' willingness to engage in English speaking tasks. Then, the "fear of criticism" might inhibit students from practicing and refining their speaking skill.

Learning environment and support (e.g. questions #10, #11, #12, and #13): A perceived lack of listener support (Mean = 2.84, SD = 1.02) and an unsupportive classroom atmosphere (Mean = 2.86, SD = 1.07) indicated that students seemed to be discouraged from speaking openly. Moreover, low intrinsic motivation (Mean = 3.26, SD = 1.16) also suggested that students did not see the immediate relevance of English speaking in their field, which could reduce their commitment to improvement.

## VI. DISCUSSION

The data analysis revealed that the obstacles in learning English speaking skill of mechanical students in this university are multi-layered that involve both language proficiency and affective factors. There were three main difficulties for this issue as followings.

**Linguistic Challenges:** The most prominent linguistic barriers are vocabulary limitations, grammar difficulties, and pronunciation capacity. In fact, limited vocabulary confines students' ability to discuss topics outside of their immediate knowledge base, which may restrict engagement in broader discussions. This result was similar from the one of the research implemented by Pham and Nguyen (2021); Trinh and Pham (2021). In addition, grammar and tense confusion seem to disrupt their capacity to connect information logically making their speech disjointed. Besides that, the data showed the high scores on pronunciation challenges that underscore the need of speaking more clearly, more confidently to avoid misunderstandings. It was a key factor in boosting students' self-assurance. This result was similar from the one of the research implemented by Fakhruddin Zam Zam et. at (2021). Finally, the influence of Vietnamese language structure suggests a tendency toward negative language transfer, where students apply Vietnamese syntactic and stylistic rules into

English speaking. This often leads to word-for-word translations and unnatural phrasing, which may be difficult for listeners to understand. Addressing this would involve explicit instruction on key differences between Vietnamese and English, highlighting the nuances that contribute to more native-like fluency in English.

Regarding to affective and social factor, psychological obstacles (i.e. performance anxiety, fear of errors, and social comparison) greatly influence students' willingness to engage in English speaking activities. Actually, the fear of making mistakes, particularly in front of classmates, is one of the highest-rated concerns which indicate that students get highly self-conscious about their English speaking skill. This anxiety may stem from a lack of confidence in their speaking abilities, compounded by performance pressure, and a competitive classroom environment. Addressing these affective factors is critical to foster a more supportive but less judgmental learning environment. This result was similar from the one of the research implemented by Pham Minh Thu et. al (2021); Trinh and Pham (2021). Moreover, the data also reflects a lack of intrinsic motivation, which suggests that students may not fully recognize the value of English speaking for their career development. This gap of motivation combining with the absence of a supportive atmosphere that seemed to hinder students from taking the necessary risks to improve their speaking abilities. Thereby, creating opportunities where students can practice English without the fear of judgment, such as low-stakes speaking activities and supportive peer feedback, can encourage more active participation.

As for the cultural and environmental factors: The classroom environment plays a vital role in students' perception of support and their willingness to speak. When students feel that their contributions are not valued or that the atmosphere is not conducive to open communication, their inclination of engaging diminishes. An effective strategy might be to create a classroom culture where students feel empowered to express themselves without the fear of criticism and were supported by activities that promote teamwork and constructive feedback.

In conclusion, the data highlights both linguistic and psychological factors that need to be addressed to improve English speaking skill of mechanical engineering students. A comprehensive approach which balances the targeted linguistic

support, reduces the performance anxiety, and increases their motivation with supportive learning environment. Then, they could significantly enhance the students' English speaking confidence and proficiency.

## **VII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

First, the author only focuses on studying about the general obstacles of mechanical students in English speaking skill. In addition, the research has not found out the reasons of the students' difficulties. Thus, the results cannot generally illustrate for the whole EFL learners in the research context. Then, the data are just the participants' obvious thinking and choices at the moment that they read the questionnaire and sometimes do not base on any theories. Ultimately, these methods appear ineffective in enhancing learners' abilities, as their success largely hinges on the learners' own motivation to learn.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the multifaceted challenges mechanical engineering students face in developing English speaking skills, encompassing both linguistic and psychological factors. Key linguistic obstacles include limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and pronunciation issues, which collectively restrict students' ability to engage in fluent and accurate communication. Additionally, the influence of Vietnamese language structure further complicates their adaptation to English syntax, often leading to unnatural phrasing. Psychological barriers, such as performance pressure, fear of making mistakes, and social comparison, significantly inhibit students' willingness to speak in English, reflecting a need for a more supportive learning environment. Furthermore, the data suggests that low intrinsic motivation and an unsupportive classroom atmosphere hinder students' engagement in language learning, reinforcing the need for a comprehensive approach to improve their speaking skills.

## **IX. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Educators play a significant role in helping learners to overcome both linguistic and affective barriers, create a pathway to be more confident and effective English communication skills. These improvements are essential not only for academic success but also for students' future

professional development in a globalized engineering field. Firstly, enhanced vocabulary and grammar training help to implement targeted vocabulary-building exercises, especially on topics beyond technical terms. This will broaden students' abilities to express themselves while grammar lessons should focus on connecting ideas and maintaining consistent tense use, which are essential for cohesive and fluent communication. Then, pronunciation practice and support via establishing language labs or online pronunciation tools can help students improve their clarity. Pronunciation exercises should be integrated into regular coursework to build students' confidence in speaking, especially in peer-to-peer conversations. Moreover, addressing the differences between English and Vietnamese structures through focused exercises can reduce language transfer issues. Educators can highlight common errors and demonstrate native-like sentence construction to help students communicate more naturally. In addition, building a positive and inclusive classroom atmosphere is crucial for reducing anxiety. Activities like low-stakes group presentations and peer feedback sessions can help students practice speaking in a supportive setting, decreasing the fear of criticism and performance pressure. The educators should emphasize the relevance of English speaking skills in mechanical engineering careers, incorporating real-world scenarios and industry-related projects to make language learning more meaningful. Activities that link English skills with students' career goals can increase their engagement and motivation. Last but not least, encouraging teamwork and active listening can foster a sense of community and mutual support among students. Group discussions and collaborative exercises can help students build their confidence, feel heard, and lessen the fear of being overpowered by more proficient peers.

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