



Thu Dau Mot University  
Journal of Science

ISSN 2615 - 9635

journal homepage: [ejs.tdmu.edu.vn](http://ejs.tdmu.edu.vn)



## An investigation into difficulties in listening and speaking English as a foreign language

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**Article Info:** Received May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Accepted June 2nd, 2023, Available online June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023

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<https://doi.org/10.37550/tdmu.EJS/2023.02.412>

### ABSTRACT

*In this study, we examine students at Thu Dau Mot University specializing in Food Technology's speaking and listening skills in English. We conducted a survey on 59 students majoring in Food Technology using the questionnaire approach. Students struggle to develop macro-English abilities like speaking and listening, as seen by their responses. mastering English grammar, vocabulary, and other micro-skills might be challenging. The findings indicate that significant obstacles to learning listening and speaking skills include a lousy sound system, a lack of a communicative context, a limited vocabulary, a lack of cultural understanding, and a fear of making mistakes in communication. The findings also demonstrate that students' limited exposure to English and weak phonological skills are to blame for their difficulty acquiring pronunciation. Many words are long and complicated, making learning and recalling word parts like verbs, nouns, and adjectives challenging. Many words are also difficult to pronounce. Learning the grammar of verbs and articles is challenging for students. When the challenges are solved, this research aims to effective foreign language learning.*

**Keywords:** *English, learning difficulties, listening skill, speaking skill, Food Technology students*

### 1. Introduction

According to Bhutada (2021), English is the most often used language on the internet and is used as the primary language of instruction in educational institutions all over the world (Erlenawati, 2005). Speaking and listening are two of the four language acquisition skills

that are considered difficult for English learners, despite English being an international language. It is also commonly acknowledged as one of the hardest languages to master. Some students experience various speaking and listening difficulties, so they frequently remain quiet, reserved, and unable to speak English in class. Due to these restrictions, students' English proficiency suffers, negatively affecting their course grades (Misbah et al., 2017). The studies demonstrated the importance of micro-English skills (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) in making the communication process easier to understand (Matkasimova & Makhmudov, 2020; Polakova & Klimova, 2022; Walker et al., 2021; Saito, 2021), and macro-English skills (listening and speaking) will assist learners in developing confidence to make public speeches, attend interviews, participate in debates and group discussions, and give presentations (Rao, 2019; Kluger, & Itzchakov, 2022).

The following are the factors that contribute to learners' poor performance in English learning: students' limited vocabulary proficiency and lack of English foundation background; their lack of confidence when speaking or writing in the language; the curriculum's inappropriateness for assisting students in improving their English proficiency; their lack of exposure to English-speaking natives; the crowded classroom environment (Souriyavongsa, 2013; Normazidah et al. 2012; Hossain 2018; Nga H.T. Nguyen 2022; Phan T. Lam 2023). Besides, according to Abukhadrah (2015), social interaction is one of the biggest challenges faced by overseas students studying English.

According to a poll conducted in Vietnam, after more than ten years of formal English language instruction, nearly half of the 442 students who did not major in English did not know the most frequent 1000 words, and more than 90% did not know the most common 2000 phrases (Dang, 2017). Based on their performance on the university's placement English examinations, this student's overall level of proficiency was determined to be pre-intermediate, which corresponds to the A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU) has also underlined the value of learning English and the requirement that students succeed in the language while attending the institution. To accomplish this, TDMU has set an outcome target for English for Non-English Majors Learning English (2019), which mandates that students possess a TOEFL iBT (45 points), TOEIC (450 points), IELTS (4.5 points), or EPT-TDMU certificate (45 points - level 3). A few students are still unable to pass this English outcome target due to their students' poor performance in this subject. Students majoring in Food Technology at TDMU will also be impacted by the result's graduation implications.

In order to help students to get over their fear of learning English, this study was conducted to determine the challenges that students majoring in Food Technology face when trying to acquire macro-English skills (speaking and listening) as well as micro-English skills (vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar).

## **2. Method**

The data reported in this research were derived from a study of the difficulties in learning English as a foreign language perceived by students majoring in Food Technology at TDMU. The study aimed to collect English language learners' opinions and feedback on the difficulties they encounter in learning English as a foreign language. We have selected the data collection online via students' questionnaires which were created using online survey software to send to students majoring in Food Technology at TDMU. In this survey, all the responses are anonymous, and respondents are allowed to take as much time as they want to complete the survey and be completely honest about their answers without the fear of prejudice. After that, we used computational, statistical, and mathematical tools to derive results from the collected quantitative data. Besides, quantitative information is much sorted for statistical and mathematical analysis, making it possible to illustrate it in the form of charts and graphs.

### ***Population and sampling***

The population of this study consists of 87 freshmen, 29 sophomores, 28 juniors, and 67 seniors majoring in Food Technology at TDMU. Then a specific group of 59 students majoring in Food Technology at TDMU was chosen randomly to participate in this survey, including 3 freshmen, 10 sophomores, 16 juniors, and 30 seniors. There are 24 males and 35 females between the ages of 19 and 25 with English learning experience below 1 year (5 students), 1-5 years (11 students), 5-10 years (26 students,) and over 10 years (17 students).

### ***Research instruments***

The questionnaire is a way to collect data from respondents because questionnaires are found to be a more efficient, cheaper, quick, flexible, and feasible method of conducting respondent research. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part was used to get students' demographic information including their English, their English use in daily life, and their English skills use most frequently.

The second and third parts of the questionnaire consisted of Likert scale questions which are used to get information about the difficulties students encountered when learning English macro skills and micro skills. In macro skills, we survey listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. In micro-skills, we focus on pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. There are five scales of measurement: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree.

### ***Data collection procedures***

This study is limited to students who are students majoring in Food Technology at TDMU. The questionnaire is designed to be delivered to students through Google Forms. After designing the survey questionnaire, the writer got feedback from her supervisor and revised it. The revised questionnaire was then delivered to the participants.

**Data analysis procedures**

After the writer got the data from the questionnaire, the writer analyzed the data following these steps:

The questionnaires were totaled up based on the scale in the table.

The data were analyzed in a descriptive percentage table with the percentage formula below:  $P = F \cdot 100 / N$

Which:

- P = percentage of the item
- F= frequency of the item
- N= the total number of the item (number of samples)
- 100: constant value

The writer calculated the mean of the results and displayed them in the form of tables.

**3. Result and discussion**

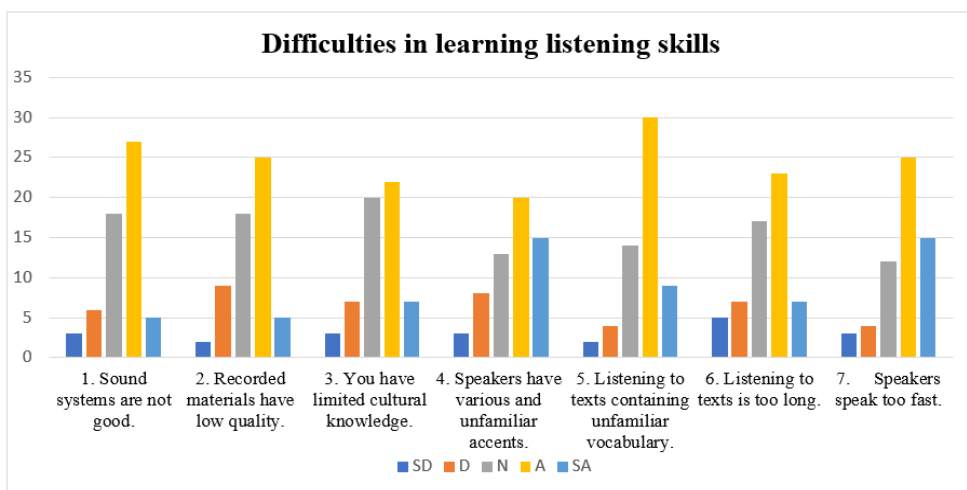
We conducted a survey on the difficulties of learning listening and speaking skills, difficulties in learning pronunciation, learning vocabulary, and learning grammar for 59 Food Technology students. The survey results are analyzed in detail in sections 3.1 and 3.2.

**3.1. Difficulties students encountered when learning English macro skills (listening and speaking)**

The respondents had to tick the appropriate option from the five options for each statement in the student questionnaire. Five options that were given for each statement are as follows: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

*Difficulties in learning students' English listening*

The results of students' responses about difficulties in learning listening skills are presented below in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Difficulties in learning English listening

In response to the first statement, 3 students strongly disagreed, 6 students disagreed, 18 students were neutral, 27 students agreed, and 5 students strongly agreed. Therefore, it seems the majority of students agreed with the fact that sound systems are not good when listening to English. In response to the second statement, it seems the maximum average of students (25) agreed that recorded materials have low quality while listening to English. In response to the third statement, the majority of students (22) agreed that they have limited cultural knowledge while listening to English.

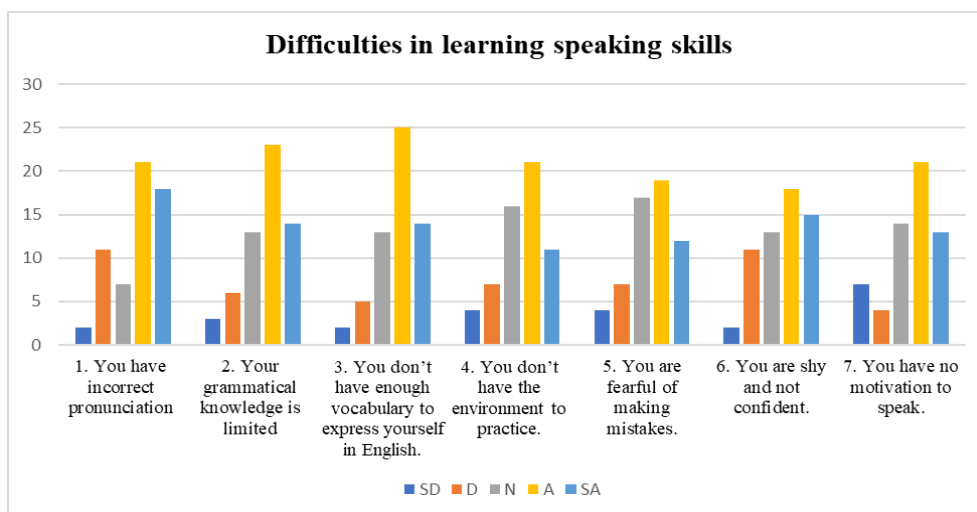
In response to the fourth statement, the maximum average of students (20) agreed that speakers have various and unfamiliar accents while listening to English. In response to the fifth statement, the majority of students (30) agreed that listen to texts containing unfamiliar vocabulary.

In response to the sixth statement, the maximum average of students (23) agreed that listening to texts is too long. In response to the seventh statement, the majority of students (25) agreed that speakers speak too fast.

In short, we found that the difficulties faced by students when learning listening skills were the poor sound system, low quality recordings, limited cultural knowledge, communicating with many different voices that are not familiar when listening, documents containing unfamiliar vocabulary, texts that sound too long, and the speed of the speaker is too fast.

### *Difficulties in learning students' English speaking*

The results of students' responses about difficulties in learning speaking skills are shown below in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Difficulties in learning English speaking

In response to the first statement, 2 students strongly disagreed, 11 students disagreed, 7 students were neutral, 21 students agreed, and 18 students strongly agreed. Therefore, it can be said that the majority of students agreed with the fact that they have incorrect

pronunciation while speaking English. In response to the second statement, it seems the maximum average of students (23) agreed that grammatical knowledge is limited while speaking English.

In response to the third statement, the majority of students (25) agreed that they don't have enough vocabulary to express themselves in English while speaking English. In response to the fourth statement, the maximum average of students (21) agreed that they don't have the environment to practice while speaking English.

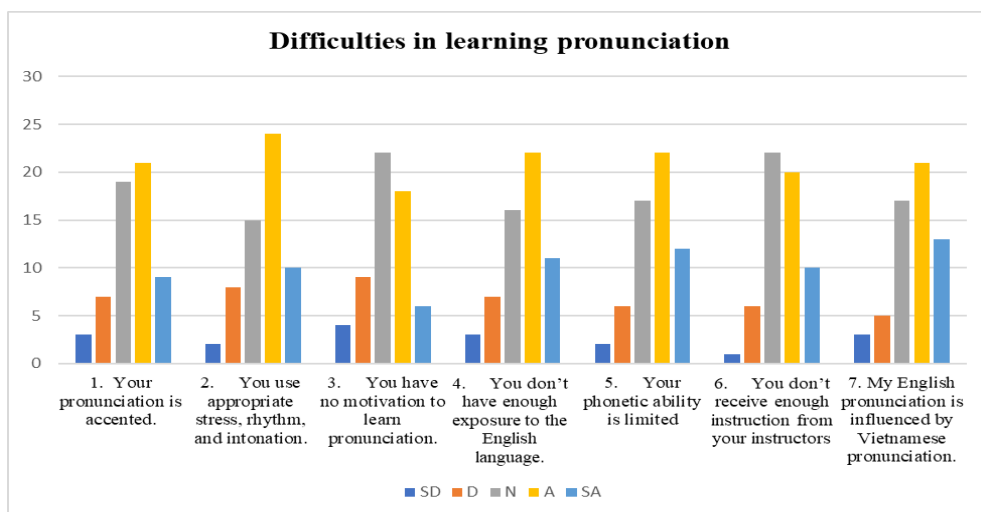
In response to the fifth statement, the majority of students (19) agreed that they are fearful of making mistakes. In response to the sixth statement, the maximum average of students (18) agreed that they are shy and not confident. In response to the seventh statement, the majority of students (21) agreed that they have no motivation to speak.

To summarize, most students struggle with pronunciation, have limited grammar knowledge, a limited vocabulary with which to express themselves, no environment in which to practice communication, and are afraid of making mistakes in their speech. They are shy and not confident in communication, leading to their not being motivated to speak.

### 3.2 Difficulties students encountered when learning English micro-skills

#### *Difficulties in learning pronunciation*

The results of students' responses about difficulties in learning speaking skills are presented in Figure 3. Figure 3 will show the average numbers after converting the responses into column charts.



**Figure 3.** Difficulties in learning pronunciation

In response to the first statement, 3 students strongly disagreed, 7 students disagreed, 19 students were neutral, 21 students agreed, and 9 students strongly agreed. So, here it seems the majority of students agreed that pronunciation is accented. In response to the second statement, it seems the maximum average of students (24) agreed that they use appropriate stress, rhythm, and intonation while pronouncing English.

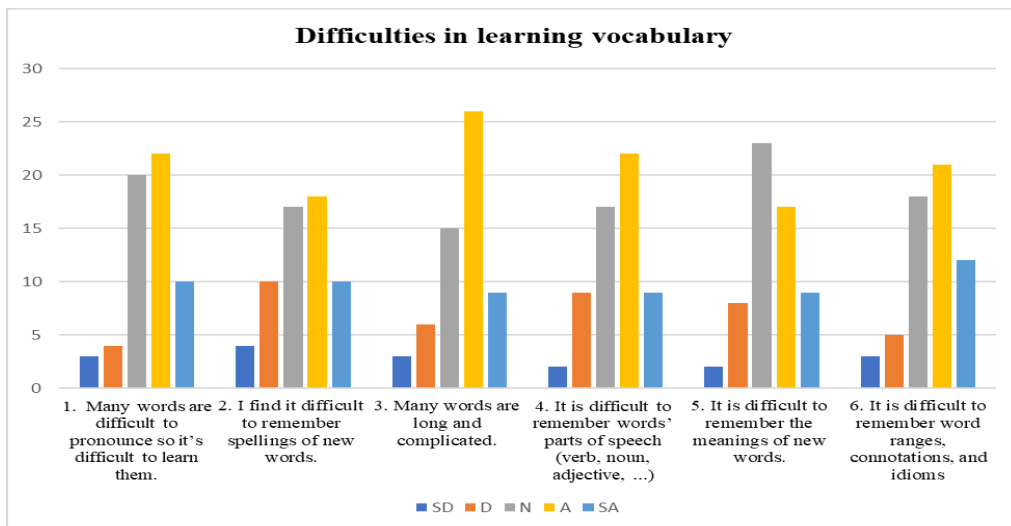
In response to the third statement, the majority of students (22) were neutral that they have no motivation to learn pronunciation. In response to the fourth statement, the maximum average of students (22) agreed that they don't have enough exposure to the English language while pronouncing English.

In response to the fifth statement, the majority of students (22) agreed that their phonetic ability is limited while pronouncing English. In response to the sixth statement, the maximum average of students (22) was neutral that they don't receive enough instruction from their instructors while pronouncing English. In response to the seventh statement, the majority of students (21) agreed that their English pronunciation is influenced by Vietnamese pronunciation.

In short, most students believe that pronunciation is stressed and that they need to use appropriate stress, rhythm, and intonation when pronouncing. The special thing is that they realize that their phonetic ability is limited when pronouncing, and they are not guided meticulously in pronunciation. The last difficulty is that they are affected by Vietnamese pronunciation.

*Difficulties in learning vocabulary*

The results of students' responses about difficulties in learning speaking skills are presented in Figure 4. The figure 4 will show the average numbers after converting the responses into column charts.



**Figure 4.** Difficulties in learning vocabulary

In response to the first statement, 3 students strongly disagreed, 4 students disagreed, 20 students were neutral, 22 students agreed, and 10 students strongly agreed. Therefore, here it seems the majority of students agreed that many words are difficult to pronounce so it's difficult to learn vocabulary. In response to the second statement, it seems the maximum average of students (18) agreed that they find it difficult to remember the spellings of new words while learning vocabulary.

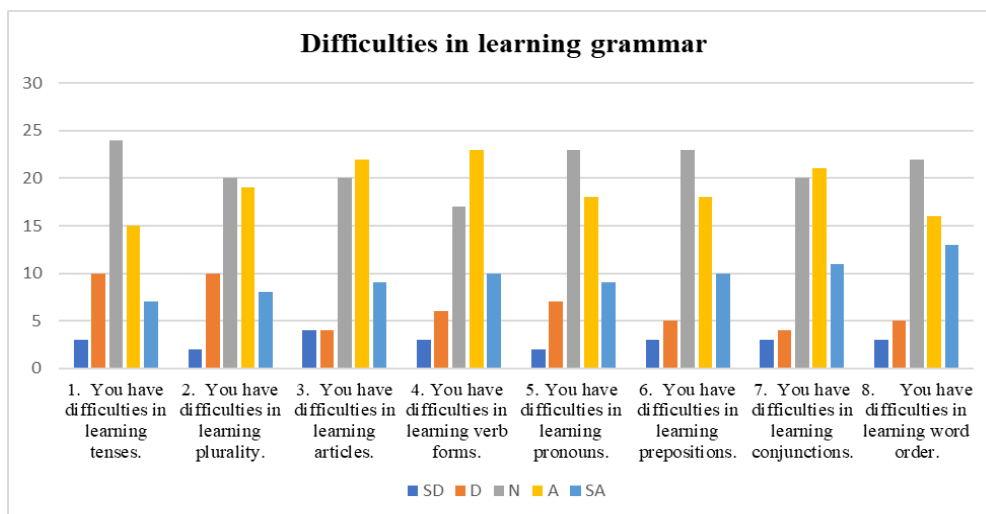
In response to the third statement, the majority of students (26) agreed that many words are long and complicated while learning vocabulary. In response to the fourth statement, the maximum average of students (22) agreed that it is difficult to remember words' parts of speech (verbs, nouns, adjectives, ...) while learning vocabulary.

In response to the fifth statement, the majority of students (23) were neutral that it is difficult to remember the meanings of new words while learning vocabulary. In response to the sixth statement, the maximum average of students (21) agreed that it is difficult to remember word ranges, connotations, and idioms while learning vocabulary.

In conclusion, the difficulties that students face are many: difficult vocabulary words that are difficult to learn; difficulty to remember the spelling of new words; many long and complex words; difficulty remembering type words and distinguishing words from categories; difficulty to memorize word meanings, word usage, and idioms.

### *Difficulties in learning grammar*

The results of students' responses about difficulties in learning to speak are presented in Figure 5. The figure 5 will show the average numbers after converting the responses into column charts.



**Figure 5.** Difficulties in learning grammar

In response to the first statement, 3 students strongly disagreed, 10 students disagreed, 24 students were neutral, 15 students agreed, and 7 students strongly agreed. Therefore, here it seems the majority of students were neutral that they have difficulties in learning tenses while learning grammar. In response to the second statement, it seems the maximum average of students (20) were neutral that they have difficulties in learning plurality while learning grammar.

In response to the third statement, the majority of students (22) agreed that they have difficulties learning articles while learning grammar. In response to the fourth statement, the maximum average of students (23) agreed that they have difficulties learning verb forms while learning grammar.



In response to the fifth statement, the majority of students (23) were neutral that they have difficulties in learning pronouns while learning grammar. In response to the sixth statement, the maximum average of students (23) was neutral that they have difficulties in learning prepositions while learning grammar.

In response to the seventh statement, the maximum average of students (21) agreed that they have difficulties in learning conjunctions while learning grammar. In response to the eighth statement, the majority of students (22) were neutral that they have difficulties in learning word order while learning grammar.

In conclusion, speaking and listening skills are crucial for language learning and everyday interactions. According to this research, most students find it challenging to understand grammatical rules relating to tenses, articles, plurals, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and word order, etc. Besides, other issues are pertinent to the listeners, the listening content, and the facilities. These results will guide students at Thu Dau Mot University who specialize in food technology to learn English more effectively and develop their speaking and listening skills. In the same direction, Nga H.T. Nguyen (2022) and Phan T. Lam (2023) also researched these issues for English-majoring freshmen at Tay Do University and Dong Nai Technology University, with comparable findings.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study collected data from the Faculty of Food Technology by surveying 59 students, and from their responses, it was found that students had a lot of difficulties learning macro-English skills (listening and speaking) and micro-English skills (pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar).

Difficulties faced by students of Food Technology when acquiring macro-English skills in the first set of research questions. The results show that the difficulties in learning listening skills are due to poor sound systems, listening to texts containing unfamiliar vocabulary and speaking too quickly, limited cultural knowledge, and communication with many different voices. Difficulties in learning speaking skills are that students do not have enough vocabulary to express themselves in English, their knowledge of grammar is limited, there is no communication environment, and they are afraid of making pronunciation mistakes in communication.

In addition, the second set of research questions shows that students have difficulty acquiring micro-English skills, such as pronunciation, because they have not had much exposure to English and their ability to learn English is difficult. Their phonics skills are still limited. The difficulty in learning vocabulary is that many words are long and complex; Many words are difficult to pronounce, so it is difficult to learn and remember parts of words (verbs, nouns, adjectives, ...). The difficulty in learning grammar is that students have difficulty learning verb and article forms.

From this study, several important truths can come to light, and they can be used as underpinning data to come up with an improved solution. Findings have shown that the sound system is not good, so school authorities can improve this problem. On the other hand, students do not have much exposure to English, and their phonetic ability is limited to pronunciation, so the school and teachers can organize some seminars for students to give their answers and effective advice on this matter.

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