OVERCOMING BARRIERS IN ENGLISH COMMUNICATION: INSIGHTS FROM NON-ENGLISH MAJORS AT THU DAU MOT UNIVERSITY

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Article Info

Abstract

Effective English communication remains a significant challenge for non-English major students at many Vietnamese universities, often hindering their academic and professional development. This study explores the key difficulties faced by non-English majors at Thu Dau Mot University in English communication and their engagement in classroom speaking activities. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study collected data from 100 students through questionnaires and interviews.

The findings reveal four primary challenges: limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, overreliance on the native language, and lack of confidence. These issues not only affect students' ability to express themselves in English but also reduce their participation in classroom activities.

Despite these obstacles, the study found that active engagement in speaking activities positively impacts students' learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of supportive and interactive teaching methods. Engagement varied, with students demonstrating greater participation in structured activities than in spontaneous speaking tasks.

Based on the findings, the study provides recommendations for fostering a more engaging and effective learning environment.

1. Introduction

English is a global language and an essential tool for communication across nations. The need for Vietnamese students to learn English is rapidly growing, driven by advancements in science and technology and the increasing demand for English proficiency in the job market. Strong English skills can give students a competitive edge when seeking employment, particularly in international companies (Nguyen et al., 2023).

While many Vietnamese students excel in reading and writing, they struggle with verbal communication (Nguyen, 2018). Developing communication skills in English requires

considerable time, effort, and consistent practice. This limited exposure creates a significant barrier to language mastery and prevents students from gaining the full benefits of English proficiency in their personal and professional lives.

In this scenario, English communication among non-English majors at Thu Dau Mot University remains a challenge. As such, this study aims to explore the current state of English communication skills among non-English majors, identify existing challenges, and propose potential solutions.

This research aims to explore the challenges non-English majors face in English communication, and their engagement in classroom speaking activities. It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the common challenges that non-English majors encounter when communicating in English?

2. How do they engage in classroom speaking activities?

The study's findings shed light on the factors that hinder students' language development, and are expected to benefit lecturers by offering insights into challenges their students may encouter in classroom communication.

2. Literature review

2.1. Factors affecting students' English communication

Previous research highlights various factors affecting non-English majors' English communication skills. According to Rao (2020), speaking is a vital skill for students, but many struggle due to language barriers, lack of practice, and limited exposure to English. Psychological factors, such as fear and lack of motivation, further complicate the learning process. In studies conducted among non-English majors, these factors were often cited as primary obstacles (Seth & Joyce, 2021).

Effective communication skills include various components - listening, understanding, verbal, and non-verbal skills - that are essential for conveying messages. Communication in English is not only a fundamental need but also crucial for social interactions, academic success, and professional advancement. English, as a global language, has become a bridge across cultures, especially in education, where courses are increasingly being offered in English (Ahmad, 2016).

English communication skills go beyond classroom exams and require regular practice and motivation. Instructors play a vital role in teaching speaking strategies, which help students become more confident and effective in their language use. These strategies include practicing minimal responses, reducing reliance on scripts, and encouraging language use in authentic contexts (Bashir, 2011).

Identifying the obstacles non-English majors encounter in speaking English is essential to supporting their learning journey. Non-English majors often struggle with vocabulary, pronunciation, overreliance on their mother tongue, and confidence issues.

Vocabulary. Limited vocabulary is a common barrier for non-English majors. They often struggle to find appropriate words, resulting in incomplete or unclear sentences. This lack of vocabulary limits students' ability to express themselves, understand lectures, use tenses, remember English words or phrases, and hampers their confidence in speaking English (Bahrudin, 2018; Dafliza, 2024).

Pronunciation. Pronunciation issues also challenge non-English majors, as English has unique sounds, stress patterns, and intonation. Pronunciation errors can lead to misunderstandings and reduced confidence. Many students find it challenging to pronounce English words correctly, have native-like pronunciation and understand what they hear due to a lack of pronunciation knowledge. Students need focused practice on phonetic aspects of English, such as stress and intonation, to improve their communication skills (Fulcher, 2015; Suseno, 2023).

Excessive use of mother tongue. Students often rely on their native language when learning a foreign language, which can interfere with English learning. Translating thoughts from their native language into English often leads to errors and affects fluency. Many factors impact students' use of language in classroom, including differences between English and their mother tongue, teachers' use of first language, students' language preferences, code-switching, and teachers' explanation of English concepts. This overreliance on their mother tongue can also reduce students' motivation and engagement in English-speaking activities (Irene et al., 2023; Seth & Joyce, 2021).

Confidence. Many students feel anxious and lack confidence when speaking English. Fear of making mistakes affects their ability to engage fully in speaking activities. Teachers can help by fostering a supportive environment that encourages participation and gradually builds students' confidence (Bahrudin, 2018).

2.2. Engagement in Learning English-Speaking Activities

Active engagement in learning activities is essential for language acquisition (Nguyen, 2017; Robillos, 2023). Research suggests that students who participate actively in class (e.g, coming to class regularly, preparing lesson well, paying attention to lectures, answering questions, and contacting teachers to ask questions) retain information better and develop stronger critical thinking skills (Garside, 1996). However, factors such as grading subjectivity, attendance policies, and lack of confidence can impact students' willingness to participate (Rocca, 2010). Teachers can increase engagement by creating interactive activities and fostering a positive learning environment that encourages student involvement.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methods

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative methods involve collecting numerical data to quantify student attitudes, behaviors, and perceived challenges. In this study, we adopted a questionnaire from Yaman et al. (2011) study. A Likert-scale questionnaire was used to gather data on the specific difficulties students experience in English communication, including vocabulary, pronunciation, and use of native language. This method allows for objective measurement and comparison of responses across a larger sample.

Qualitative methods allow for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed insights into the challenges non-English majors face when speaking English. This approach enables researchers to explore factors such as students' confidence, language use, and engagement in speaking activities.

3.2. Sample

The sample consists of 100 non-English major students at Thu Dau Mot University. Ten students were invited from this cohort for interviews. This sampling approach allows for a diverse range of insights into the students' experiences.

Table 1 summarises the demographic information of participants.

TABLE 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Year of study	Freshmen	27%
	Sophomores	34%
	Juniors	25%
	Seniors	14%
Years of English learning	Les than 4 years	0%
	4 years	0%
	More than 4 years	100%

3.3. Research Instruments

A structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale was designed to assess the challenges that non-English majors face in English communication. The questionnaire was distributed online to ensure accessibility and coverage. It consisted of four main sections: demographic information, challenges in English communication, engagement in speaking activities, and open-ended questions for additional comments.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten randomly selected students to gain deeper insights into the factors influencing their English communication abilities. These interviews provided qualitative data on students' thoughts about their challenges, engagement in English classes, and suggestions for improvement. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure students could express themselves comfortably.

Data were collected over two months using a combination of online questionnaires, and in-depth interviews. The questionnaires were distributed through university email lists and social media groups, and interviews were scheduled with students who had completed the survey.

To analyse quantitative data from the questionnaires, the researchers calculated frequencies and percentages for each item. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Findings

4.1 Challenges in English Communication among Non-English Majors
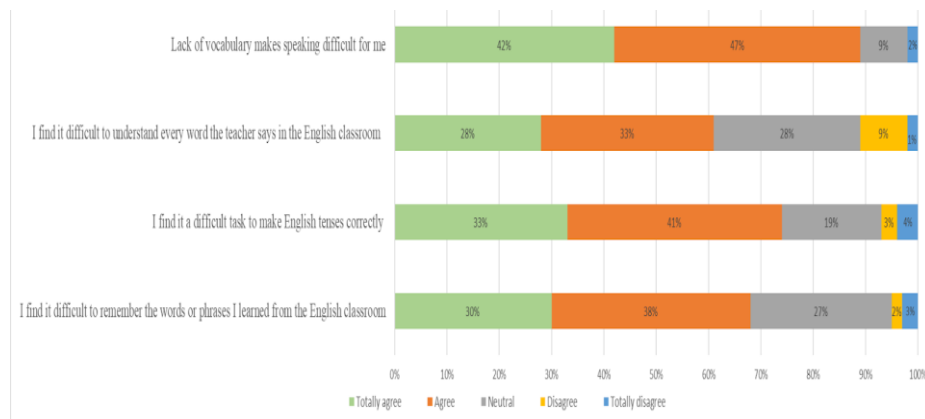

Figure 1. Difficulties in Using English Vocabulary

Out of 100 survey respondents, 89% identified limited vocabulary as a major barrier to effective communication (Figire 1). Additionally, 68% reported difficulty remembering previously learned words, and 61% noted that a lack of vocabulary hindered their ability to understand classroom lessons. Around 73% agreed that insufficient vocabulary impacted their use of grammar, specifically English tenses. Interviews confirmed that limited vocabulary led to difficulties forming complete sentences, as several participants expressed frustration over not having the words to express their ideas fully:

"My vocabulary is limited, so it's hard to speak."

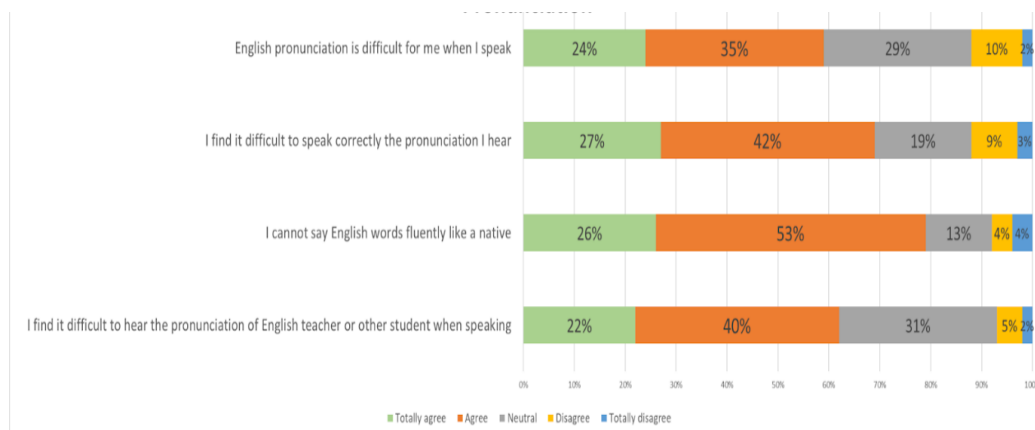*"Sometimes I have ideas I want to express, but I don't have the vocabulary."*

Figure 2. Student's Difficulties in Pronouncing English words

More than 60% of respondents agreed that pronunciation was a significant obstacle in speaking English (Figure 2). Nearly 70% of students reported struggling to understand others due to pronunciation difficulties, and 80% felt that sounding like a native speaker was out of reach. Interviews further highlighted that students felt pronunciation errors could lead to misunderstandings.

"If you pronounce it wrong, listeners may not understand you."

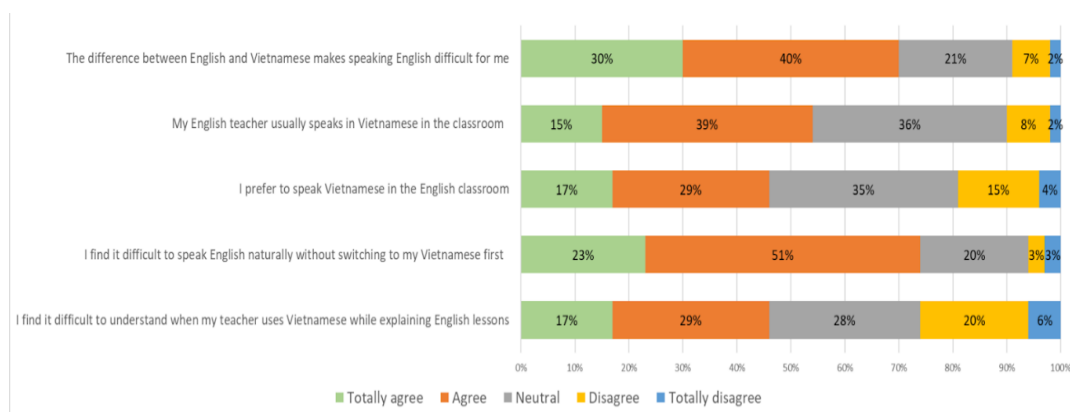*"I often mispronounce words, especially if I haven't seen the transcription."*

Figure 3. Students' Use of Native Language when Speaking English

The tendency to rely on Vietnamese when speaking English was a common issue among students (Figure 3). Over 70% of respondents agreed that the differences between Vietnamese and English created difficulties. Around 55% believed that using Vietnamese

during English lessons affected their ability to communicate effectively in English. In interviews, students admitted they often translated from Vietnamese before responding in English, which slowed down their speech and sometimes led to errors.

"I often translate my thoughts into Vietnamese before saying them in English."

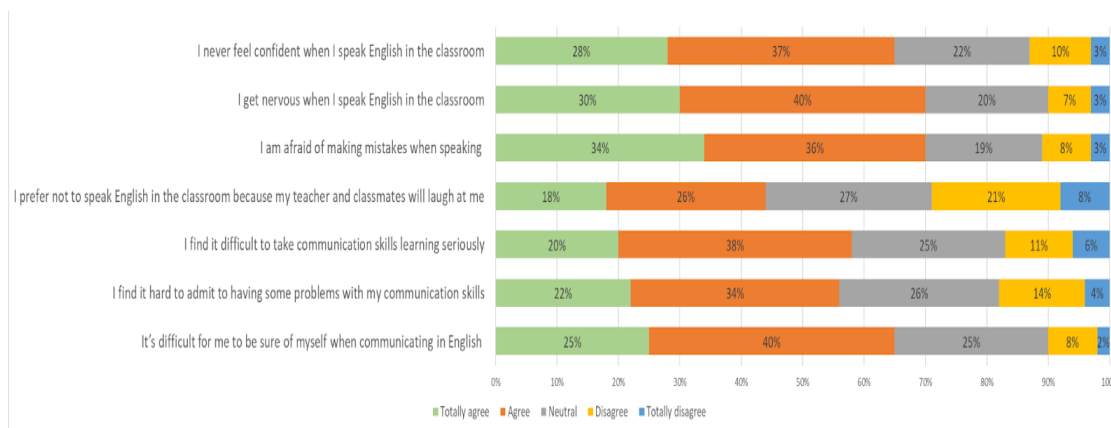*"I feel more confident speaking in Vietnamese than in English."*

Figure 4. Students' Perceptions of Their Confidence in Speaking English

Confidence emerged as a key factor affecting English communication (Figure 4). Approximately 65% of respondents reported never feeling confident speaking English in class, and 70% felt stressed when required to speak. Additionally, fear of making mistakes was common among students, further hindering their willingness to participate actively in speaking activities.

"I often get nervous when I have to speak English with others."

"I understand questions but sometimes don't know how to answer in English."

4.2. Students' Engagement in Speaking Classrooms

Survey results showed that 62% of students believed attending class improved their speaking skills (Table 2). However, a significant portion of students remained neutral about their level of preparation and participation in class activities. While 76% of respondents paid attention to their speaking during class, only 50% voluntarily engaged in answering questions or seeking feedback from teachers.

TABLE 2. Students' Engagement in Speaking Activities

Statements	Totally Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Totally Disagree (%)
I come to class every day to practice speaking effectively.	27	35	28	8	2
I come to class prepared.	19	36	37	7	1
I pay attention to what I speak.	29	47	21	2	1
I listen carefully to lessons or my teacher's advice.	24	42	28	5	1
I raise my hand to answer questions in class.	20	39	37	3	1
I contact my English teacher to review my speaking skills or ask questions.	21	31	35	10	3

5. Discussion

5.1. Challenges Faced by Non-English Majors in English Communication

Linguistic difficulties. The study revealed that vocabulary limitations and pronunciation issues are major linguistic challenges for non-English majors. This finding aligns with Phung (2012), who observed that many students are unable to use English effectively, even after extended study, due to gaps in vocabulary and grammar. Similarly, Vu (2020) found that students who do not develop vocabulary and sentence patterns at an early stage struggle to communicate effectively later on. These findings highlight the importance of targeted vocabulary and pronunciation training to help students build a strong foundation in English.

Influence of the mother tongue. The study also showed that non-English majors frequently rely on their native language when speaking English. Many students translate sentences from Vietnamese before responding in English, which can lead to errors and reduced fluency. This finding is consistent with Seth and Joyce (2021), who found that students often revert to their native language to communicate complex ideas, and Grettel (2015), who noted that students use their native language to clarify instructions or collaborate with peers. These findings suggest that excessive use of the mother tongue may hinder English fluency and confidence, emphasizing the need for immersive English practice in the classroom.

Lack of confidence. Confidence was identified as a significant factor affecting students' ability to communicate in English. Many students reported feeling anxious and self-conscious when speaking English, especially in front of peers or teachers. This result aligns with the findings of Seth and Joyce (2021), who found that psychological factors like fear of making mistakes impact students' performance in English. Building confidence through supportive classroom activities and gradual skill-building exercises can help students overcome this barrier, as suggested by Bahrudin (2018).

5.2. Engagement in English-Speaking Activities

The study found that engagement in classroom speaking activities positively impacts students' language development. Most of the participants actively participated in English-speaking exercises, indicating a strong interest in improving their communication skills. This aligns with Seth and Joyce (2021), who suggest that active participation in language activities fosters confidence and fluency. Similarly, Queenie et al. (2017) found that collaborative learning and interactive exercises increase students' motivation and engagement in English classes. These results highlight the value of participatory activities that encourage students to practice speaking in a supportive environment.

In contrast, the study's findings differ from Grettel (2015), who observed that traditional, teacher-centered methods with a focus on grammar correction can discourage engagement. Instead, this study suggests that creating opportunities for meaningful interaction can better support students' progress in spoken English.

6. Recommendations and Conclusion

6.1. Recommendations

Drawing on the study's findings, teachers can adapt their teaching methods, focusing on engaging activities and confidence-building techniques that promote better language learning outcomes.

Incorporating fun learning activities can make language learning more enjoyable and effective. By utilizing music, movies, and other media, teachers can create a more engaging and motivating learning environment. Additionally, regular exposure to English in various contexts can help students develop listening and speaking skills more naturally.

Encouraging independent practice is also crucial for developing speaking skills. By promoting practice with a wide range of topics, teachers can help students build vocabulary and confidence. Furthermore, encouraging students to practice independently outside of class can reinforce language skills and help them become more comfortable expressing themselves in English.

Finally, increasing teacher support and motivation is essential for helping students develop their speaking skills. By using group discussions, interactive exercises, and frequent feedback, teachers can create a more supportive and encouraging learning environment. Sharing personal language-learning experiences or highlighting successful English learners can inspire students and motivate them to continue practicing and improving their skills.

By implementing these strategies, teachers can address the barriers identified in the study and significantly improve the speaking proficiency of ESL learners.

6.2. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the challenges non-English major students face in developing effective English communication skills. These obstacles not only hinder students' ability to communicate fluently but also affect their active participation in classroom speaking activities. Despite these challenges, the findings emphasize the importance of classroom engagement as a key factor in improving language learning outcomes.

The study highlights the need for targeted strategies to address these issues, including enriching students' vocabulary, improving pronunciation through focused practice, and reducing reliance on the native language by promoting immersive English use. Additionally, building confidence through interactive activities, supportive feedback, and gradual skill-building exercises can encourage students to participate more actively and develop their speaking abilities.

Educators play a pivotal role in creating an environment that fosters student engagement and addresses individual learning needs. By incorporating interactive, student-centered teaching methods and providing consistent encouragement, teachers can help non-English majors overcome barriers to effective communication. Furthermore, educational institutions could consider implementing curricula and extracurricular activities that enhance English communication skills for non-English majors, aligning with their academic and professional aspirations.

This research offers valuable insights for improving English language education for non-English majors and serves as a reference for future studies. However, it is subject to several limitations that may affect the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. The study's small sample size limits the statistical power and breadth of perspectives captured. It was conducted within a compressed timeframe, which limited the opportunity to explore issues of interest in greater detail. An over-reliance on convenience sampling is a potential limitation. The participant pool, based on accessibility, may not represent the broader diversity of university students.

Considering the above limitations, expanding the scope of similar research to larger and more diverse student populations could provide a broader understanding of the challenges and solutions in this area, ultimately contributing to better learning outcomes for students in non-English-speaking contexts.

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