

ORAL PRESENTATION: AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO ENHANCE NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' SPEAKING PROFICIENCY

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Abstract – *This paper presents an integrated-skill approach of using oral presentations as an interactive teaching tool in non-English major classrooms. This paper has the following sections: (1) an introduction of the context of teaching and learning English and the factors affecting students' speaking ability in Vietnam and in several other countries; (2) a presentation of the benefits of integrating oral presentation in the classroom; and (3) suggestions to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to apply this approach effectively. The researcher applied this approach to two groups of medical students. The result shows that four main factors, which affect students' speaking ability are a lack of topical knowledge, low self-esteem, limited chances of practice and the overuse of mother tongue. By giving presentations, students have a higher level of confidence, speak correctly, use more vocabulary, and develop other language skills as well as soft-skills. However, teachers need to instruct students clearly, reduce pressure on student grades and give effective individual feedback. Furthermore, students need encouragement to create a dynamic learning environment. It is hoped that the pedagogical ideas presented in this paper can help teachers effectively employ oral presentations as a means of improving students' English-speaking ability.*

Keywords: *English as Foreign Language (EFL), non-English major students, oral presentation, speaking proficiency, Vietnam.*

I. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF INTEGRATING ORAL PRESENTATION INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN VIETNAM AND IN OTHER COUNTRIES

According to Hoang Van Van [1], the educational system in Vietnam has been changing since the country's Doi moi stage of economic reform. In this context of renovation, English has emerged as a mandatory subject to both undergraduates and graduates. With the purpose of attracting foreign investment, the government has developed English curricula activities into the national education system. As a result, English language education has become a top priority to foster the country's development. As Tran Thi Tuyet [2] points out, several universities in Vietnam are currently designing English programs as part of their curriculum to meet Vietnamese society's demand. Moreover, teaching English as a foreign language at higher education levels enhances students' language proficiency and enables them to use English fluently after graduation, a requirement of many positions in the current job market. In order to attain these goals, Al-Issa and his team [3] argue that students must master four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, over the past few years, several other researchers, for example, Marzuki et al. [4], Bajrami et al. [5] and Tsang [6] have pointed out that the prerequisite aim of learning a language is the ability to effectively use that language in oral communication. Moreover, Koşar et al. [7] say that teaching methods need to focus on the communicative purpose during and after studying. Furthermore, many researchers in

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the linguistics field have reached the same conclusion through their research [4]–[7]. These researchers agree that language teachers should apply varied teaching methods with a high level of oral communication into their lessons in order for students to be able to improve their speaking abilities. A study carried out by Al-Issa et al. [3] indicates that most of the teachers and learners have the same opinion that the final purpose of studying English is to describe the ideas in speaking fluently. At the same time, Boonkit [8] also expresses the idea that being able to speak fluently and transferring ideas successfully is considered the most important goal in teaching and learning a foreign language.

The above summary of studies shows that speaking skills play a particularly important role in generally improving students' foreign language competencies. There are many different perceptions about the role of teachers and students in teaching and learning English: some agree that both teachers and students have the same responsibility when students show weaknesses in speaking ability, while others have contradictory arguments that students are more responsible for improving their own foreign language ability and typically, speaking skills. Nevertheless, according to Khan et al. [9], teachers still carry more responsibilities because they are trained to be professional with specific knowledge and teaching skills. On the same point, Marzuki et al. [4] imply that although students play a role in determining their language ability, teachers are considered the most important factor in the process of improving the speaking ability for students. In other words, teachers need to create more interactive learning space in the classroom and directly instruct students to perform activities to improve their speaking ability. Similarly, studies [7]–[9] have pointed out that a teaching method in which teachers are likely to create a less interactive learning environment to practice is not effective for students. Specifically, the study results of Faulin et al., as cited from Marzuki et al. [4], indicating that Indonesian students have many difficul-

ties in expressing what they really want to say when learning English as a foreign language. Besides the lack of confidence in speaking, these students also admitted that they had difficulty expressing all ideas fluently when speaking in English due to several factors such as lack of vocabulary and incorrect pronunciation. Leong et al. [10] also stated that if students' speaking ability is weak, they tend to switch to speaking their mother tongue while communicating in English. At the higher education level in Vietnam, teaching English for EFL students is considered very important [2]. According to the EF EPI English proficiency index in 2018 [11], Vietnam reached 53.12 points, ranking 41st in the world out of 88 countries and ranking seventh in Asia out of 21 countries (after Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, India, Hong Kong and South Korea). Although ranked high in the region, Tran Thi Tuyet [2] and Tran Thi Hao et al. [12] write that the methods of learning and teaching English in some universities in Vietnam are currently ineffective and students cannot communicate fluently in English after graduation. From the interview results in the study of Tran Thi Tuyet [2], students expressed the reasons for not learning a lot of skills because teachers did not apply interesting teaching methods and there were limited changes in activities to help students interact with their classmates, the researcher claims this "teaching to test" [2, p.142]. However, for students who do not major in English, speaking skill is considered to be one of the most challenging skills students [8].

From the difficulties and demands of students when learning English to the needs for social development, teachers need to apply teaching methods which are appropriate to the actual abilities of students so that their speaking skills can progressively improve. In addition, the methods applied should ensure factors to improve students' language ability and generate enthusiasm for students during the practice [10]. In the last few years, several studies [3], [9], [10] have demonstrated that integrating soft skills in lessons has brought

positive effects as this not only improves the capacity of speech but also helps students foster their language skills in general as well as soft skills in particular. According to the research results of Daif-Allahet al. [13], students who study English in Pakistan improve their speaking ability when teachers apply activities to help students interact directly and speak more naturally. These results show that speaking skills are considered the most important skill because this skill demonstrates communication ability when learning a foreign language, and one of the methods that many researchers in the field of teaching foreign language have highly appreciated is integrating oral presentation into lessons. Teachers can actively create many situations that can help them to interact with classmates and teachers. Through personal (or group) presentations, students can exchange ideas, develop a friendly learning environment, support other students to improve their confidence using English thereby improving public speaking skills [9].

As mentioned by Cheung [14], in order to achieve the success of a language course, students need to be able to express their thoughts in the most accurate and fluent way. As a result, Cheung [14] proposed a presentation strategy that could help students achieve this important goal. Moreover, as discussed by Miles' [15], although there are many studies on the application of class presentation skills, most of them focus solely on the elements or factors that make a perfect presentation or the advantages and disadvantages when using presentation method in lectures. Meanwhile, there are few studies focusing on the importance of this skill in improving the speaking ability in teaching and learning a foreign language.

II. LEARNING SPEAKING SKILLS OF NON-ENGLISH MAJORS AT TRA VINH UNIVERSITY

A. *Characteristics and importance of speaking skill*

As De Jong et al. [16] explains, each individual has different levels of expression

and fluency when speaking, and whether using their first language or foreign language, individuals differ in the speed of their speech, vocabulary usage and self-confidence. Therefore, each person's speaking style is different. There are two main characteristics, which create proficiency in speaking that students need to focus on, namely fluency and accuracy [4]. Additionally, Soureshjani et al. [17] expressed the view that the ability to speak fluently in everyday life situations is considered the most important goal of a foreign language learner. Correspondingly, at many different angles, fluency is defined differently [16]. Lennon, cited by De Jong [16], introduces two ways to define fluency. In the broad term, fluency is proficiency in speaking generally. In terms of narrower definition, fluency is the ability to orally deliver ideas with smoothness and confidence. This definition is close to Freed's, cited by De Jong [16] who offers the requirement to respond to the ability to speak fluently that it is necessary to use the correct grammar and vocabulary in the right context.

In addition to the ability to speak fluently, students need to pay attention to the accuracy of the language when speaking, for example, the ability to use the correct grammar structure, vocabulary and pronounce correctly. Thornbury [18] emphasizes that when they are using the correct grammatical structure, students can convey information quickly and help listeners catch the ideas more easily. On the other hand, Thornbury also highlights the importance of using contextual vocabulary. By employing the proper terms, it enables students to limit misunderstandings while describing ideas, thereby, reducing conflicts that may occur when using English to communicate. For the Vietnamese education system, English is taught from grade 3, in some areas with difficult economic conditions, the students will start with this module at a high school level. Although there are opportunities to study English for anywhere between 3 to 7 years, students still have many difficulties when using English to communicate. When asked which skills are the most difficult to

improve, many students expressed the opinion that they can easily improve other skills such as reading and writing, but are difficult to improve their ability to speak English [19]. Another possible explanation by Ur, cited by Daif-Allah et al. [13] that speaking is the most important skill of four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). This view is supported by Hanifa [19] who argues that students with good speaking ability are evaluated higher than other students.

B. Factors affect students' speaking ability

In the classroom, speaking skills are mostly evaluated through tests. Therefore, it can be said that teaching and learning, in this case, focus mainly on grades [2]. In other words, speaking is encouraged for the purpose of evaluation. In the same vein, Al-Issa et al. [3] note that it is not surprising to see that some students learn foreign languages just to try to pass exams for the purpose of being able to graduate or because of the obligation of their work. It is likely, therefore, that English is taught for different purposes and such method becomes more common in countries, in which the demand for English is listed in the Expanding Circle and according to Denham's description [20], Vietnam is one of these countries. Thus, students' ability to speak English is also influenced by the purpose and motivation of each individual. At the same time, many other factors such as social needs, curriculum, methods and class activities also affect students' ability to use English.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on difficulties and factors affecting EFL students' speaking ability, thereby supporting teachers to flexibly apply many different methods in the classroom [7], [8], [18]. Specifically, Koşar et al. [7] agree that most students who learn English as a foreign language are having more under pressure with speaking skills than other skills. Overall, these researchers classified the difficulties into three main groups: knowledge, psychology, and presen-

tation. Knowledge group is the most popular group, which includes factors related to topical knowledge of students. This can be explained that when students speak, students often show their frustration to talk about unfamiliar topics. Moreover, this group also includes difficulties such as incorrect grammar, wrong word stress, and lack of ideas. The second group is called the psychological group, which includes elements that favor students' emotions and perceptions when learning speaking skill. In particular, the researchers stress that for students who have less motivation to learn English, they tend to have less talk than other students in the class. Furthermore, the lack of participation in long-term interactive activities causes fear when speaking English in front of many people. In addition, students rarely speak English when participating in discussions or presenting ideas due to being afraid of evaluated by teachers and classmates. The third group is called the presentation group, which includes external factors affecting students during practice such as time pressure or conflicts that occur during group work.

In another view, Ur, as cited by Al Hosni [21], draws out four main reasons that affect students' speaking ability. The first reason is called inferiority complex; this is explained as students have a feeling of anxiety and fear of being criticized when speaking incorrectly or simply being timid in learning a foreign language. The second reason is the lack of ideas, whereby students often express that they do not have many ideas to present when the teacher asks in English. The third reason is the lack of practice environment, students expressed that they rarely practice in the classroom due to the characteristics of the classrooms. The last reason is the overuse of mother tongue. This issue occurs when students tend to switch to using their mother tongue in English speaking practice in the classroom, which is explained by Leonget al. [10] that students can express better ideas if they discuss in their first language.

C. The problems of learning English of non-majors in Tra Vinh University

At Tra Vinh University, beside the program designed specifically for students who study English major, a large number of other students pursuing other programs are required to complete general English courses. After having taught several courses, the teacher found that most students in non-English major classes studying English at level 1 and 2 show excitement when studying this subject in class but when asked to discuss in groups or answer critical questions, students express timidity and a lack of confidence. Students said that they are not familiar with presenting ideas in English as most students have few opportunities to practice at the high school level. However, at level 3 and 4, the majority of students are more confident, proactively speaking but only in everyday topics such as living habits, food or favorite sports. When asked to criticize or give ideas in topics with more intensive levels, such as gender education, soft skills training or health, students show confusion and limited vocabulary. Another problem that limits the speaking ability of students at the school is due to the issue of the large classrooms (from 30 to 35 students per class), as a consequence, students have little opportunity to practice in the classroom. The oversized classrooms can also lead to the problem in some instances where only have a small number of students participate regularly while other students participate little or not at all, which creates to a relatively low and uneven participation rate in the class as a whole. It is further argued that one of the other difficulties that students in the non-English program at Tra Vinh University face is the lack of interactive environment and low level of vocabulary usage; students often switch to using Vietnamese while using English due to fear of being judged.

III. AN APPROACH TO ENHANCE ENGLISH SPEAKING PROFICIENCY FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS AT TRA VINH UNIVERSITY

A. Importance of oral presentation in foreign language teaching

While a variety of definitions of the term oral presentation exist in the EFL literature, according to Soureshjani et al. [17], oral presentation skills are the ability to present a certain topic clearly, convincingly and expressively. In the view of Ellis et al., cited by Hanifa et al. [22], the presentation can be defined as a pre-prepared talk with a clear structure. A more simple perspective has been adopted by Tkachenko, cited by Hanifa et al. [22] who holds the view that ideas or products are shown or explained to the audience through a talk called a presentation. In another major study, Hanifa [19] states that although the presentation should be rehearsed first, students should not present it in memory. Therefore, Hanifa also emphasizes that the presentation is not simply a talk during the presentation time but it also needs to create interaction with the audience.

Miles [15] suggests that oral presentation should be used as a useful teaching tool at a higher education level. King [23] points out that if guided and organized appropriately, the presentation method can bring life-long skills and experiences to students. Similarly, Nguyen Xuan Hung [24] asserts that presentation is considered one of the methods that can bring high interaction between students, and becoming a good speaker depends on many factors such as knowledge about the topic of presentation, tone and time management skills, but the most important factor is that the presenters must convey the message to the listeners in the most understandable way. For that reason, the presenter should understand the nature of the presentation method to achieve this goal.

B. Benefits of integrating oral presentation into English language teaching

Nguyen Xuan Hung [24] has identified one of the problems that teachers deal with is students' timidity. Therefore, oral presentations will enable students to practice as much as possible. Tran Thi Hao et al. have demonstrated the importance of oral presentation that this not only builds confidence for students and helps students be able to get better jobs after graduation [12], but also increases the communication abilities of students in many different fields such as education, science and business [3]. Another important practical benefit is that when students have more opportunities to present in the classroom, other soft skills are improved as well such as problem-solving and public speaking. The importance of oral presentation is further emphasized in foreign language classroom by Al-Issa et al. [3], the researchers point out that oral presentation strategy is one of the characteristics of progressive education and such a student-centered approach will create an active learning environment.

At the same time, oral presentation helps students achieve language skills preparing through presentation content, which can be described through PowerPoint slides, listening skills, and discussion questions related to the topic being presented. Speaking is the communicative approach that the presenters (students) use to convey content to listeners (classmates and teachers). Al-Mutawa et al., cited by Al-Issa et al. [3, p. 229], say that "learning to speak is a lengthy, complex process", hence it requires learners to practice regularly. This process is further explained by Daif-Allah et al. [13] as the result of daily practice, which leads to the ability to speak other languages naturally and for speaking to eventually become subconscious. Brooks et al. [25] also say that oral presentation is the most effective way to encourage students not only to present their own ideas in English orally but also to help other students in the class improve speaking skill in particular and other skills in general

Another major important study with this approach was carried out by Miles [15] who surveyed both teachers' and students' perceptions towards the use of oral presentation strategy in the classroom in Japan. Surprisingly, the findings show that both groups agreed on the three most important benefits of the strategy, which are firstly improving speaking skill, secondly improving English competencies and third being more confident when speaking English. Miles also stresses that students expressed more interest when teachers apply this method as they want to enhance their language proficiency rather than learning and practising to use software such as PowerPoint.

C. Integrating oral presentation strategy to foster speaking skills for non-English majors at Tra Vinh University

Whilst teaching English to non-English majors at Tra Vinh University, the author of this paper found that there were significant differences in the classes that used oral presentation strategy into the module compared with ones that did not use this strategy.

Two classes of medical students were chosen to have presentations for their General English 2 module. After dividing students into groups (each group had 2-3 students), the groups randomly chose topics. These topics were proposed by teachers based on the current syllabi of non-English majors at Tra Vinh University: Objective Ket (general English level 1) and Objective Pet (general English level 2, 3, 4). Each group has at least two weeks to prepare the content and to ensure that courses finish on time. There were at least 2 group presentations each week. Before asking students to make presentations, teachers introduced the requirements clearly, the prerequisite purposes of the presentation, as well as the objectives to be achieved after each presentation. During the teaching process and through lectures, discussions, the author experienced positive results and that this method benefits to students in speaking skills. Two main results are presented as follows:

1) *Speaking more fluently with a higher level of confidence and communicative style:* In some classes using the presentation strategy, most students showed more excitement when they were free to share ideas from given topics. Students are free to create (for example, presentation styles such as using PowerPoint, Prezi or other applications). This is an opportunity for students to experience their ability to communicate ideas to others and is also considered an important step while learning speaking skills. Brooks et al. [25] and Daif-Allah et al. [13] have pointed out that students' language competencies can only be improved when they have the inspiration and motivation to perform a specific activity. Although students present in a group, each individual presents different content, so each of them must practice making their own presentation fluent. In fact, some students still expressed anxiety or nervousness before giving presentations, but surprisingly, they conveyed excellent ideas during presentations. When asked the reason for being nervous, students said that due to time pressure as most of them had many ideas to share. However, students agreed that since each group presented different topics, they were interested in discussion, and therefore, they put more efforts to make good presentations. This helps students become more confident when using English and feel motivated when learning English.

2) *Speaking more accurately with better pronunciation and a wide range of vocabulary:* Another benefit of using the presentation strategy is that students can pronounce words more accurately. In addition to preparing presentation content, students need to practice before making a class presentation. Most students said that for good presentations, all members of the group spent a lot of time fixing each other's pronunciation mistakes. Some students have the same view that although their voice and phonetics cannot be completely as good as native speakers, they will still try their best to pronounce correctly. After that, students confidently speak without fear of mispronouncing, thereby helping stu-

dents transfer information more accurately, in a way that is easier to understand. Moreover, in the process of searching documents for the presentation, students also learn varied vocabulary related to the topic presented. Since then, students also flexibly apply the vocabulary learned when participating in group discussion.

Besides significantly improved speaking skills, students also appreciate this strategy as other language skills are improved as well. Specifically, students can improve their listening skills while listening to other students and during discussion time. In this way, students can create a habit of using English more frequently, meeting the communication needs after graduation. In addition, students can also improve the ability to write paragraphs, especially writing on topics that have been presented or discussed in class.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Although the integration of soft skills into teaching has many positive impacts on students' language ability, it also brings some certain challenges. This is especially true of oral presentation as it requires much time and instructional plan in accordance with the schedule of the module. From the difficulties encountered in using this strategy, the author of this paper has some suggestions to both teachers and students. In terms of teachers, for the presentation to be successful, it is important for teachers to introduce and instruct the macro and micro-skills related to the presentation. At the same time, teachers should create a comfortable environment, reducing the stress with regards to grades for students. Teachers also need to give specific assessment and feedback to individual students. For students, it is necessary to be proactive in learning and practising presentation skills so that the presentation can be effective, thereby creating more motivation for other students.

In summary, the use of a presentation to improve speaking skills not only creates a positive, student-centered teaching approach

but also a meaningful activity to build interest for students when learning a foreign language. Through oral presentation, students can become more active learners and know how to enjoy creating their own content to introduce to classmates. Students think that presenting in front of the class is a challenge, but a rewarding task. Although the ideas given in this article on how to use the presentation method in the classroom is not an uncomplicated choice, it is hoped that this paper will provide teachers with a basic solution that can be applied in the classroom, allow teachers to use oral presentation as a means to improve students' English language skills as well as the ability to think critically, and be a skill that, when implemented properly, can help students find good jobs in the future.

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