



Speaking skills in the context of learning English as a foreign language and teaching speaking skills to young students

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Abstract

Auditory comprehension and verbal expression in English are fundamental competencies for effective communication and global integration. Nevertheless, for the listener to grasp the substance of the dialogue, the capacity to articulate fluently and coherently is critically essential. Cultivating proficient speaking abilities continues to pose a considerable problem for students, particularly for younger individuals. This research examines the attributes of speaking proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) within Vietnam, identifies obstacles faced in speaking English, and, through a survey of real teaching and learning environments along with an evaluation of English speaking quality in a rural primary school class, suggests principles and strategies to improve the effectiveness of teaching speaking skills to young learners by analyzing classroom limitations in the context of primary-level EFL instruction.

Keywords: Speaking skills, teaching methods, children, English language, students

Introduction

Articulation is a key talent that warrants attention and enhancement, as it serves as a potent mode of communication. When studying grammar, vocabulary, or other linguistic concepts, the important aspect is to utilize that information in practical situations. Consequently, the objective of acquiring any foreign language is to excel in the four competencies of hearing, speaking, reading, and writing, with speaking being arguably the most difficult ability for learners, yet the one that most individuals aspire to perfect. Nonetheless, this ability is regarded as one of the most difficult facets of acquiring a new language. Numerous students struggle to articulate their ideas in English and often experience anxiety when attempting to converse in the language, even after years of constant study. Enhancing speaking abilities for learners to facilitate fluent communication is a crucial objective in contemporary foreign language education initiatives. Consequently, this article presents the challenges encountered by learners in developing speaking skills and the determinants affecting this ability, while also offering effective strategies for enhancing speaking proficiency and communication competence.

Theoretical Review

1. Related studies

Many research works both domestically and internationally have affirmed the role of methodological innovation in developing speaking skills. In Vietnam, Nguyen (2022) ^[21] argues that the application of interactive activities such as group discussions, peer feedback, and the use of technology significantly helps students improve their English speaking skills. Similarly, the study by Pham and Tran (2020) ^[25] at several colleges in the northern mountainous region also showed that students made significant progress when participating in situational communication activities. On an international level, Richards and Rodgers (2014) ^[30] assert that communicative teaching methods have fundamentally

changed the concept of teaching and learning English from “learning to know” to “learning to use”. In addition, Brown (2007) ^[3] also emphasizes the role of proactivity and continuous feedback in the speaking learning process — factors that help learners self-correct their pronunciation and expression to better align with international communication standards.

Learning English as a foreign language is often considered one of the most important skills in expression because it reflects the learner’s ability to use the language for real communication, rather than merely recognizing or recalling the language. Fulcher (2014) ^[12] defines speaking as the use of language orally for the purpose of communication between individuals. Burns and Joyce (1997) ^[6] describe it as a process of dynamic meaning-making, involving the production, reception, and interpretation of information within a context. In this sense, speaking not only involves forming grammatically correct sentences but also the ability to express ideas appropriately, coherently, and effectively during communication.

2. Speaking and communication skills

Speaking skills are considered one of the four core skills of foreign language learning, alongside listening, reading, and writing. According to Brown (2007) ^[3], speaking is “a complex process in which learners use language to express ideas, emotions, and attitudes in real-life communication contexts”. According to Rohmah (2013) ^[31], speaking skills are an important language skill, in which communication plays an essential role in the information age; speaking is the language taught in the context of globalization. Thanks to speaking skills, students can communicate with friends both domestically and internationally, and can also share ideas and perspectives. Some people assess students’ abilities based on their speaking skills more than other language skills. Students can effectively use speaking skills. At a basic level, Al Nakhalah (2016) ^[1] defines “Speaking as the transmission of language verbally. When speaking,

we produce sounds by using phonetic organs such as the lungs, vocal cords, vocal folds, tongue, teeth, and lips" (p. 99). At a more complex level, Burns and Joyce (1997, cited by Torky, 2006) ^[6, 35] define speaking as an interactive process that creates meaning, involving the production, reception, and processing of information. In this process, the structure and meaning of speech depend on the context, including the participants, their experiences, the environment, and the purpose of the conversation (Florez, 1999) ^[11]. Zaremba (2006) ^[39] also explains that speaking skills or communication skills are often prioritized over work experience, motivation, and academic qualifications when considering new hires. It should be noted that speaking skills help students achieve certain benefits, such as expressing thoughts, emotions, and feelings. Within the framework of communicative language teaching, speaking skills are often linked to the broader concept of communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980) ^[8] argue that communicative competence includes four components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. The combination of all these components is necessary for effective communication. Grammatical competence means having knowledge of sentence structure, pronunciation, and vocabulary; sociolinguistic competence is the ability to use language appropriately according to context, participants, and purpose. Strategic competence is the use of communication strategies to troubleshoot or maintain interaction, and discourse competence is the ability to connect utterances coherently and cohesively. Practicing speaking skills not only helps learners improve their communication abilities but also contributes to the development of other language skills through interaction, feedback, and language reflexes. Therefore, speaking skills are understood as the ability to speak in learning English as a foreign language, requiring learners to use language knowledge and interaction skills simultaneously. This definition is particularly suitable in primary education, where learners are still developing functional speaking skills and need structured opportunities to use English meaningfully. Speaking skills are one of the important skills that need to be developed and enhanced to facilitate effective communication. Nunan (1991) ^[23] explains this better when he posited that "for most people, mastering speaking skill is the single most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language, and its success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language". Speaking is the delivery of language through the mouth or the action of conveying information or expressing one's feelings in speech. Harmer (2001) ^[14] argues that teaching speaking skills plays an important role in developing communicative competence, helping learners use English as an effective communication tool, rather than just memorizing grammatical structures. For intermediate students, speaking skills are also the foundation for them to confidently participate in the learning and working environment in the context of international integration. Therefore, the goal of teaching speaking should not be the acquisition of individual vocabulary or grammar units, but rather the development of the ability to participate in simple, functional conversations.

3. Characteristics of Speaking Skills

Assessing oral proficiency frequently necessitates multiple subordinate skills. Mazouzi (2013) ^[20] asserts that learner activities must be structured around two equally significant

criteria: fluency and speech accuracy. These are two crucial elements in instructing foreign languages using a communicative methodology. Classroom exercises can assist students in enhancing their communicative abilities. Consequently, it is essential for them to comprehend the effective operation of the linguistic system. The primary attribute of speaking activity is fluency, which is the principal objective that educators aspire for their students to attain when instructing them in speaking abilities. Thornbury (2005) ^[34] argues that fluency in speaking is the ability to present issues in an understandable manner without interrupting the ongoing communication process, causing the listener to feel bored and unwilling to continue listening. Hedge (2000) ^[15] describes fluency as the ability to respond coherently and logically by combining words and phrases, pronouncing sounds clearly, and using stress and intonation when speaking. Fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation are particularly important for young learners of English as a Foreign Language. Fluency is the ability to speak smoothly at an appropriate speed, with few pauses and continuously. They have a limited vocabulary but are often related to the ability to maintain a conversation without long pauses or constant self-correction. Vocabulary is the second most important characteristic of speaking activity because students need sufficient vocabulary to express their thoughts clearly and accurately. In spoken communication, vocabulary is not only the number of words that the learner knows but also how to use them appropriately and effectively in context, in phrases or short expressions. Vocabulary is very important in speaking activities, where the speaker has to tell a story, because the speaker needs to identify characters, actions, locations, and events and piece them together to create a logical story. Pronunciation is equally important as comprehension because it depends on the learner's ability to produce clear sounds, stress, rhythm, and intonation for the listener. Pronunciation is considered a part of grammatical competence (Luoma, 2004) ^[18] and also a part of the communicative competence model. Pronunciation is also an interactive tool that affects comprehension. In research on English as a Foreign Language, speaking assessment criteria often include fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation as important criteria, so they are appropriate measures for pre- and post-test evaluations in studies using the storytelling method. Accuracy is also an important characteristic of speaking activities. If learners want to speak fluently, they need to pay attention to both the accuracy of grammatical structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation while speaking. Therefore, teachers should focus on both the accuracy and fluency of speech when teaching speaking skills to students. According to Thornbury (2005) ^[34], using correct grammatical structures while speaking requires learners to pay attention to the length, complexity of utterances, and the completeness of clause structures. To achieve lexical accuracy, learners must choose words that are appropriate for the context. The same word or phrase used in different contexts will have different meanings. Therefore, learners should know how to use words and phrases correctly to avoid causing misunderstandings for the listeners. He affirmed that pronunciation is also an aspect that learners need to pay attention to while speaking. To be able to speak English accurately, learners should grasp the rules of phonetics as well as the pronunciation of different words in English. In addition, it is necessary to understand

suprasegmental features such as stress, intonation, and rhythm. These features help learners speak English easily and effectively.

Research Methods

The current study applies the Action Research model, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. In addition to the theoretical study of speaking skills, especially English speaking skills in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam in particular and many countries around the world that consider English as a foreign language in general, the authors also conducted research on 30 fifth-grade students at a public elementary school in rural Vietnam. The main tool referenced for data collection was the questionnaire on English speaking strategies by the author Ardasheva & Tretter (2013) ^[2]. This questionnaire is adapted from the SILL 7.0 version by Oxford (1990) ^[24] - a toolkit on English speaking learning strategies for learners of English as a foreign or second language. The questionnaire includes questions belonging to six groups of speaking strategies: Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, Compensatory strategies, Metacognitive strategies, Affective strategies, and Social strategies. However, since the subjects of the study are elementary school students, the questionnaire has been flexibly adjusted to match their age-appropriate cognitive levels. The authors used several experimental methods in the classroom, such as enhancing practical activities, applying information technology, and fostering interaction between teachers and students as well as among students. Students perform individual speaking exercises and are graded based on three criteria: Fluency, Pronunciation, and Vocabulary.

The research was conducted experimentally at a public elementary school in the rural area of Vietnam. The class chosen to evaluate the research results is class 5 with a total of 30 students. They have been required to learn English at school since the 3rd grade. Therefore, they have become familiar with various methods of learning and practicing spoken English.

Findings And Discussion

1. The challenges of speaking English as a foreign language

It is argued that the process of speaking includes conceptualization, formulation, and articulation (Levelt, 1989) ^[17]. Thus, in the process of communication, the speaker must first select meaningful information to present. Next, one must think about how to use words appropriately and structure the grammar accurately. Then, the learner uses the articulatory organs to present. All three processes occur simultaneously, so learners may make mistakes while speaking, especially during direct interaction. Therefore, the speaking process can encounter some issues such as hesitation, topic deviation, grammatical errors, and limited vocabulary. However, learners cannot pay attention to all factors at the same time. If too much emphasis is placed on speaking accurately, it will hinder fluency in speech. On the contrary, if one focuses too much on fluency, it will lead to inaccuracies in vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation. Students learning English as a Foreign Language often find pronunciation to be one of the most challenging skills because it requires the ability to use the language immediately, while also controlling accuracy, fluency, and

interaction in real-time (Quvanch, Qasemi, & Na, 2024) ^[29]. Pronunciation plays an important role in making it easy for the listener to understand the speaker's meaning. Mispronouncing any single sound or using incorrect stress and intonation will lead to misunderstandings of the speaker's intent. Additionally, using correct grammar is also important when speaking English because if the speaker uses the wrong word or form, it can lead to misunderstandings by the listener. Vocabulary is like the bricks used to build a house. If the learner's receptive vocabulary is limited, they will find it difficult to use it in communication and will not be able to express their thoughts completely. Therefore, language learners need to accumulate a large amount of vocabulary and retain it over a long period to be able to speak fluently. Many studies indicate that the development of speaking skills is influenced by various factors. First of all, psychological factors such as shyness, fear of making mistakes, or lack of confidence often cause learners to limit their communication in English (Horwitz, 2001) ^[16]. Such psychological factors can cause reluctance, avoidance of verbal communication, and less participation in class, even though the learners have basic grammatical competence. Learners often experience anxiety and language limitations such as poor vocabulary and pronunciation issues, which prevent them from expressing their ideas clearly and fluently. Norahmi *et al.* (2025) ^[22] found that students with high levels of speaking anxiety often face difficulties related to vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, confidence, and preparation. These factors directly impact their willingness to participate in class. Another study on speaking anxiety using a mixed-methods approach shows that learners' anxiety is also triggered by a lack of vocabulary, fear of mispronouncing words, and fear of being laughed at by friends, causing them to avoid speaking tasks or only provide minimal responses (Quvanch, Qasemi, & Na, 2024) ^[29]. Therefore, to become a proficient communicator, learners must learn to control their emotions. Negative emotional states will lead to communication failure, whereas positive emotions can lead to successful communication. Learning motivation plays a decisive role in maintaining enthusiasm and effort in practice. According to Gardner (1985) ^[13], learners with strong intrinsic motivation often achieve higher results in foreign language communication. In addition, the learning environment and teaching methods are also important factors. A friendly environment that encourages students to practice speaking regularly helps reduce psychological barriers, creating conditions for natural progress. If the teaching method still follows the traditional approach - focusing on grammar and translation - then students will lack opportunities for interaction, leading to weak speaking skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2014) ^[30]. The results of the current study indicate that the interaction between emotional and linguistic factors limits the speaking ability of English as a foreign language learner, especially in the classroom context where speaking skills are assessed. Such difficulties are more likely to occur in the context of learning English as a foreign language at the elementary and middle school levels, where young students are acquiring basic language skills and heavily rely on teacher support. Research on the use of storytelling in classrooms in Vietnam indicates that children struggle with verbal expression, especially when asked to retell a story in English. However, their abilities are enhanced through regular practice, visual support, and

retelling with assistance (Tran, 2021; Macalister & Thao, 2023) ^[19, 36]. In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in primary schools in Vietnam, Tran and Nguyen (2026) found that students initially struggled with speaking but could improve their abilities through increased exposure, visual support, and structured retelling exercises. These barriers require the use of structured and low-pressure speaking exercises, such as storytelling. Such exercises can provide structured input, practice, and supportive interaction to help young EFL learners gradually overcome speaking barriers.

2. Teaching Speaking Skills to Young Students

Teaching speaking skills requires methods that align with the cognitive development, emotional needs, and classroom behavior of young students. Young children are not “small adults”; they learn language best through concrete, meaningful, and emotionally engaging experiences rather than through abstract explanations of grammar rules (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2006) ^[7, 28]. Teaching speaking skills in English as a foreign language classes at the primary level should be interactive, structured, supportive, and motivating so that children can participate without feeling overwhelmed by language pressure (Ur, 1996; Wright, 1995) ^[37, 38].

3. Characteristics of Young Language Learners and the Current State of English Speaking Skills Among Primary School Students

For young language learners, visual stimuli, repetition, physical activity, and familiar environments are often more effective than lengthy explanations. This is especially true. Cameron (2001) ^[7] asserts that children learn language through specific experiences and activities that allow them to create connections between language and meaning, action, and social interaction. Similarly, Pinter (2006) ^[28] argues that young students are very sensitive to emotional factors such as the classroom environment, curiosity, and joy. Therefore, emotional support is a necessary condition for successful language learning. From a cognitive perspective, elementary school children are developing the ability to process, store, and retrieve language resources instantaneously. Therefore, they often need to be exposed to repetitive language, short task sequences, and teacher demonstrations before they can independently generate language (Cameron, 2001; Wright, 1995) ^[7, 38]. Rowntree (2000) ^[32] argues that joint activities provide social benefits for young students because they can practice language in a more supportive environment by working with classmates (Pinter, 2006) ^[28].

These characteristics suggest that teaching young students should not rely solely on lengthy teacher lectures or explanations of grammar theory. Children can learn to make connections between language and meaning, as well as how to participate confidently through lessons that include organized language exercises, storytelling, songs, gestures, and images (Cameron, 2001; Wright, 1995) ^[7, 38].

To assess the current state of English speaking skills among elementary school students, the researchers conducted a survey of 30 students at a public elementary school in rural Vietnam during the 2025–2026 school year. The survey was designed based on a 5-point Likert scale, focusing on criteria such as communication confidence, vocabulary, reflex ability, and interest level during speaking lessons.

The results show that 68% of students feel shy or anxious when communicating in English, especially when speaking in front of the class or with foreigners. The main cause stems from the fear of making pronunciation or grammar mistakes or lacking confidence in vocabulary, which aligns with Horwitz’s (2001) ^[16] assertion that language anxiety is one of the biggest barriers affecting the speaking skills of foreign language learners. And 74% of the surveyed students believe that they lack vocabulary and have slow speaking reflexes, making it difficult to express ideas naturally. Notably, up to 62% of students reported that current English speaking classes are still formal, mainly revolving around sample dialogues in textbooks, with little creative activity or real interaction. Some lessons still lean toward pronunciation tests, dictation, or answering fixed questions instead of creating opportunities for students to practice communication in real contexts.

4. Principles of Teaching Speaking Skills to Young Learners

One of the fundamental principles in teaching young students how to speak is to promote the development of meaningful communication. Ur (1996) ^[37] argues that learners are more successful in using language when it is linked to communicative purposes rather than merely being a form of isolated practice. Therefore, speaking activities need to provide learners with a real reason to express themselves. In elementary classes, this means that teachers should plan activities that require students to use language that is meaningful to them, such as asking, answering, describing, narrating, or collaborating. Support, modeling, and repetition are also very important. Modeling provides learners with a clear language template to imitate, and repetition allows them to absorb vocabulary, sentence structures, and pronunciation through repeated exposure (Cameron, 2001; Wright, 1995) ^[7, 38]. Children especially need support because they often require assistance before they can speak independently. Recent studies on support in English-speaking classrooms show that effective support can include modeling, repeating exercises, checking understanding, providing feedback during and after task completion, and offering explanations (Pinela Bajaña *et al.*, 2025) ^[27]. Another important principle is to balance accuracy and fluency. Ur (1996) ^[37] and Pinter (2006) ^[28] argue that speaking exercises at the elementary level should focus on communication and learner confidence rather than strict error correction, as excessive correction can lead to reduced participation and increased anxiety. Error correction should be selective, supportive, and appropriate to the learner’s development, rather than neglecting accuracy. In practice, teachers can choose not to correct errors in communication exercises and provide positive feedback after students complete the activity.

5. Limitations in the Classroom in the Context of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the Primary Level

Although these principles are pedagogically sound, EFL classes at the primary level often encounter practical limitations that hinder their application. Teachers in Vietnam and similar contexts often have large classes, short lesson durations, and assessment systems that prioritize textbook memorization and tests over speaking skills (Bui & Newton, 2021; Phan & Nguyen, 2024) ^[4, 26]. It is difficult to

organize thorough speaking practice for each student under these conditions. In addition, there are other difficulties in the rural context. Research on English education in rural Vietnam conducted by Do *et al.* (2022) and Cuong (2021) ^[9] shows that teachers often face a lack of teaching materials, limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom, and disparities in the curriculum between rural and urban areas. Teachers also pointed out that students in underdeveloped areas may lack motivation, confidence, and opportunities to use English for communication, which further complicates maintaining speaking participation (Bui *et al.*, 2025; Phan & Nguyen, 2024) ^[5, 26]. These limitations are significant for lesson design. Therefore, speaking activities for young students need to be flexible, cost-effective, and engaging. These activities should use materials such as pictures, flashcards, puppets, and simple story prompts, instead of expensive technology or complex equipment. The flexibility in using limited resources, opportunities for meaningful verbal interaction, and the use of repetitive language make story-based and collaborative activities particularly suitable (Bui & Newton, 2021; Pinela Bajiña *et al.*, 2025) ^[4, 5, 27]. In this sense, storytelling and other related speaking tasks provide an effective and practical solution for the reality of English as a foreign language classes at the primary level, especially in rural areas of Vietnam, where teachers need effective and practical pedagogical methods.

Conclusion And Some Proposed Solutions

Articulation is a key objective in the pedagogy of the English language, as students are consistently preoccupied with their proficiency in utilizing the language with efficacy and fluency. Nevertheless, throughout the acquisition of speaking skills, individuals face some challenges that impede their capacity to communicate effectively and precisely. Consequently, this article delineates the challenges faced by learners in acquiring speaking skills and the variables influencing this ability, while also offering effective strategies for enhancing speaking proficiency and communication. To enhance their verbal abilities, students predominantly emphasize compensatory and social methods over alternatives including memory, cognitive techniques, emotional regulation, and metacognitive approaches. Such a bias undoubtedly hinders learners from enhancing their speaking abilities. Consequently, educators must assist students in understanding and employing speaking techniques suitable for their proficiency and capabilities. Assisting students in selecting suitable speaking styles is a crucial measure to facilitate their advancement in foreign language skills.

It is essential to improve authentic communication endeavors within the classroom. To tackle the problem of pupils having insufficient opportunities to utilize English in the educational setting, educators must revamp lesson plans by improving authentic communication activities. It will assist pupils in honing their speaking abilities while also cultivating their reflexes and self-assurance in communication. For optimal efficiency, educators should be proficient in communicative teaching techniques, adept at facilitating group activities, and capable of fostering a welcoming and amiable classroom environment. Furthermore, it is essential to guarantee the availability of facilities and auxiliary equipment to facilitate educational activities.

As for the utilization of information technology in the practice of spoken English, it is crystal clear that the incorporation of information technology into English language instruction is an unavoidable tendency in today's age of digital technological proliferation, intended to improve the quality and efficacy of education. Educators may utilize software and digital platforms that facilitate speaking exercises to assist learners in enhancing their pronunciation, documenting their presentations, and evaluating their skills. Promoting online education and exchange initiatives is essential. Nevertheless, in regions characterized by challenging economic circumstances and insufficient resources for students, this approach will prove ineffective.

In terms of peer enhancement and self-evaluation, such assessments are highly engaging, enabling students to actively identify their speaking strengths and limitations through peer evaluation activities guided by teacher-defined criteria.

Establishing an English-speaking atmosphere at educational institutions is also essential, as the learning context significantly influences the efficacy of students' English speaking ability development. This entails establishing clubs or coordinating events, competitive endeavors, and intellectual challenges, either autonomously or incorporated into the standard curriculum of the school and classroom, to foster engagement among students, thus augmenting their verbal abilities. For this method to be optimally effective, it takes substantial backing from the school, diverse groups, financial resources for activities, and the passion and ingenuity of the educators.

Last but not least, schools should improve instructional abilities and technology proficiency for English educators. The institution formulates a regular training agenda for the English teaching staff, emphasizing the integration of theory and practice, maintaining contemporary content and significant applicability, arranging training sessions, specialized workshops, and mutual experience sharing, while promoting self-directed study and research via online educational platforms.

Vietnam considers education and training to be of paramount importance, viewing it as the foremost national policy that shapes the nation's destiny. The advancement of education and training is regarded as a collective obligation of the Party, the State, and the populace. The educational system in Vietnam seeks to achieve equilibrium between universal accessibility and high standards, breadth and specialization, national identity and global integration. Education is built upon the bedrock of traditional Vietnamese cultural values, while simultaneously integrating the essence of global knowledge and international benchmarks, with the objective of cultivating Vietnamese individuals into global citizens. The advancement of technical competencies, artificial intelligence expertise, and English language ability, particularly in speaking, for learners across all educational tiers is strongly prioritized and has made preliminary strides.

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