Using Information Gap Activities in Promoting Speaking Skills for Elementary Level Students at Dong Nai Technology University: Students' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: *In recent years, communicative approach is considered one of the primary methods to develop students' speaking competence. When applying communicative approach in the classroom, information gap activities are employed to promote students' oral skill. These activities have brought many benefits for students in the classroom and become good stimulations for students to boost their speaking skills. The study took place at Dong Nai Technology University with the objectives to investigate the students' perspectives of teachers using the information gap activities to help students improve their speaking competence. The data were collected via survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews in sequence. Sixty students took part in the survey questionnaire to answer 14 questions on their perception on speaking skills and information gap activities. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 6 volunteer students to explain more deeply about their answers in the survey questionnaires to evaluate the validity of the findings from the survey and give the answers to see whether these activities can affect students' speaking skills in the developed way. The findings from the study shows that information gaps activities are effectively utilized for the development of students' speaking skills.*

Keywords: information gap activities, students' speaking skills, elementary level students.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills play a significant role in English teaching and learning. They can enable learners to successfully accomplish the primary goal of learning English and also provide great supports for other skills. Through speaking, people are able to give their thinking and views on the problems easily (Torky, 2006) and can assess whether speakers have the ability to use a language sufficiently (Campbell-Larsen, 2012). In authentic situations, communication is likely to occur when listeners have no idea what the speakers want to convey (Liao, 1997), so it establishes a gap between the information and people need to establish mutual communication to narrow the gap. Therefore, when interacting with each other, students can fill the gaps with new information, which results in more natural and practical interaction. In recent years, English teachers in Vietnam have recognized the significance of communicative English, so they have extensively applied the communicative approach in English teaching to help students achieve communicative skills. In communicative approach lessons, there are many activities used to develop students' speaking competence and among those activities, information gap activities have been employed to encourage students to interact with each other. However, many students have been accustomed to learning for the tests, which mostly focuses on grammar and they had very few opportunities to study speaking and practice speaking skills at high schools. For those reasons, when studying at university, students can encounter difficulties in learning speaking skills.

The rationale of the study

Dong Nai Technology University (DNTU) is a university of applied science and technology, so its main focus is on practice to ensure that students can apply what they learn at university for their future jobs after graduation. In order to get students to be well-prepared for their future careers, English for communication is one of the top priorities at the university. For that reason, the lecturers at DNTU have utilized the communicative approach as an efficient method to familiarize students with the interactive environment to boost their speaking skills. During speaking lessons, many communicative activities have been designed for students to practice their speaking skills. Among them, information gap activities have left great influences on building interaction among students in English lessons. This

study is an investigation to find out about the perspectives of elementary-level students at DNTU towards the implement of information gap activities of their English teachers to promote their speaking capability and bring some recommendations about using information gap activities in teaching English for communication purpose.

Research questions:

The study aims at answering these two questions:

1.   What are the perceptions of students on the application of information gap activities in their speaking lessons?

2.   How can information gap activities enhance students' speaking ability?

Scope of the study

Information gap activities are various, so with different skills at different levels, we have different options. That is the reason why it is impossible for the researcher to cover all things relevant to the topic of the study. Only the most necessary knowledge about speaking skills and information gap activities are mentioned in the study.

With the above aims, this study is limited to the exploration of opportunities and constraints as perceived by students at Dong Nai Technology University. The study only focuses on 60 students who are familiar with the use of information gap activities in the classroom.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Communicative approach to increase students' oral skills.

According to Harmer (1998), teaching speaking skills by using the communicative approach involves oral activities that have the tendency to act in accordance with the common fundamental pattern: Engage-Study-Activate (ESA). Thanks to this, teachers engaged students in the topic introduced, students learn any language matters recognized as troubles and then teachers give students tasks relating to that topic to complete. With regard to engaging, teachers appeal to students and get them involved in the topic. Nazara (2011) states that speaking skills are so important that teachers should employ a variety of techniques like adapting instructional methods, authentic materials, designing communicative activities or using media to assist students to develop their skills. Harmer (1982) suggests a list of activities to develop students' communicative competence like drills, stimulations, conversation, communicative games, information gap tasks, and two-way discussions.

Communicative approach currently stimulates students to participate in interactive activities, purposeful communication and exchanging information between people while they are carrying out the tasks and activities in the communicative approach (Richards, 2006). Communicative approach has brought students to the central point of the lessons with the facilitating and instructing of teachers to conduct purposeful tasks in real-life situations (Richards & Rodger, 2001). The duties of the teachers in ESL/EFL classroom involve the activation for students, creating contexts for their creativities (Shakirova, Tarasova & Ilyasova, 2016). Teachers should extend the skylines of the rules, and consider the improvement of each individual, they should construct widespread educational skills, or they will not have the capacity to make progress at larger amounts of training.

2.2. The employment of information gap activities in communicative classrooms.

In authentic context, successful communication occurs when both speakers and listeners can clearly interpret each other (Dewi, 2017). They both must know what they are doing when conducting conversations so that they can understand each other and deliver related ideas and thoughts. Liao (1997) also points out that communication occurs in case the hearers have no idea what the speakers are intending to say and they need to listen to the speakers to find out the missing information. We call this "a gap" which requires the hearers to fill in to get the ideas or thoughts of the speakers. Tavil (2010) claims that in conversations, the duty of the hearers is not just listening to the speakers but also responding to the speakers and exchange information with the speakers. As a result, in oral communications, students need to work out the gap to naturally and successfully interact with each other.

Tavil (2010) states that in information gap activities, students have a shortage of information to finish the activities and they need to listen or speak to the others to fulfill the activities just like when they conduct communication in real situations. Besides that, information gap activities compel students to interact with their peers to deal with the problems or finish the activities (Teacher's corner, 2015). Each student will manipulate their speaking skills to work on the missing information by exchanging with others. These activities are good means of practice in which students are stimulated in pair work or group work (Rahimi, 2016). Teachers can give students forms, conversations, or photos that contain lacking components and request students to interchange the information to deal with the task. When sharing the information, students can communicate with others to practice their speaking skills as Ismaili and Bajrami (2016) state that these activities can effectively promote students' speaking ability.

Tran (2009) is of the view that information gap activities play a vital role in establishing students' communicative competence. First and foremost, when doing the activities, students have more opportunities to practice their speaking. They focus on the interaction among their peers to exchange the missing information. Moreover, thanks to these activities, they also help each other improve speak ability. Next, the activities help students build up their self-confidence. They can have the freedom to produce their own speech to convey their ideas without being afraid of making mistakes or being threatened by other factors. Then, the activities are highly motivating students when studying. They give students clear purposes of speaking and provide students with communicative tasks which allow students to have the same chance to express their ideas and opinions. Last but not least, these activities also enhance students' subskills like defining meaning, collecting information, dealing with the problems, deciding what to do with each task. Information gap activities stimulate relationship of students in the same groups in the classroom. They make students feel relaxed to speak, maximize the chances of practicing speaking activities. Information gap activities can develop learners' talking time with their peers when they exchanging information. These activities can also motivate students and enhance their self-study process. Besides that, these activities give students acknowledgment of teamwork and critical thinking. Moreover, they give room for teachers to be creative in designing and adapting materials in teaching (Teacher's corner, 2015). Despite the good aspects that information gaps bring to communicative classrooms, some teachers think that they can lose control of their classes when conducting information gap activities and make their students hard to speak (Tavil, 2010). Teachers ought to be as innovative as possible to manage the type of information gap activities. Teachers should focus on the requirements of the students that are suitable for the model of the activities organized in the classroom.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. The context of the study

The study is finite within the inspection of students' perspectives on information gap activities in English lessons at Dong Nai Technology University. This is a private university which is in the heart of many industrial zones invested by many foreign corporations. Students here have lower levels of English than other public universities. Therefore, the results can be true for the context of the university and may be applied to some certain extents in other universities. The study was conducted on 60 students who had finished at least two English courses at university, which meant that they had been used to joining in information gap activities in their English lesson.

3.2. The research methodology

3.2.1. Participants

The study was conducted with 60 students (30 males and 30 females). They were studying different majors and at their elementary level of English. Most of them were freshmen and juniors who had studied two English courses at university and they were studying their third English course as required by the training curriculum. In order to pass the two previous English courses, they had to participate actively in the classroom activities and perform well on their final oral tests. They got used to learning English in communicative ways and experienced information gap activities in the classroom. After the survey, six students from the group were encouraged to participate in the semi-structured interview voluntarily.

3.2.2. Research instruments

With regard to the aims and objectives of this study, the data were collected through the survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews in sequence.

Questionnaires: The questionnaire consisted of three sections and distributed for 60 participants. Section one included three items on students' personal information about gender, age and major. In section two, students answered six questions on the brief information of speaking competence and information gap activities. The questions were closed-ended with options for students to choose from by putting ticks next to the answers that suit their situations. In section three, there were seven items adapted from the study of Ismaili and Bajramin (2016) whose results showed the perceptions of students towards information gap activities. They were applied the Likert scale with regards to students' awareness of the utility of information gap tasks or activities in the English classroom. Students selected one alternative from a five-point scale (strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree nor disagree; agree; strongly agree).

Semi-structured interviews: The interviews were actualized with 6 participants who volunteered to participate in the interview segment. The interview included five questions drawn from the options of students participating in the questionnaire survey. They were open-ended questions to encourage them to articulate their thoughts and opinions which they had experienced when studying English in their classroom. In order to confirm that students could fully interpret the interview questions to give the best answers, the questions were written in both English and Vietnamese. The answers from the participants were recorded and key ideas or notes were jotted down while the researcher was listening to the participants' answers. With the answers in Vietnamese, the researcher translated it into English for the transcription.

3.2.3. Data collection procedure

At the first stage, sixty students who were studying the third English course at DNTU were invited to take part in the survey questionnaire and gave their answers for each item in the questionnaire. They were not under the pressure of time-limited so they could have plenty of time to decide on their answers. After students finished the survey questionnaire, they were invited to take part in the interview voluntarily by filling in their contact information at the end of the survey so that the researcher could contact them.

After the quantitative data gathered from the survey were analyzed, the researcher contacted six students who volunteered to participate in the interview. The researcher let the students decide on the locations where they felt comfortable and at any time that was convenient to them.

In the second stage, the interviews were conducted and the researcher asked for permission to tape-record the answers of the participants to get the data and also made the participants feel natural when answering the questions.

3.2.4. Ethical consideration

Since the study was directed with 60 participants, it was critical to consider moral issues. All students participating in the questionnaire survey were requested their assent before the surveys were conveyed to them. Moreover, six students who took an interest in the follow-up semi-structured interview were invited by their readiness. They were allowed to express their own thoughts for the appropriate responses and they did not need to take after any configurations of replying. Individual data and personalities of the interviewees were kept secret and the information picked up from the survey and interviews were held namelessly. The ethical issues were highly appreciated within the conducting of the study so that the study did not violate any rules or regulations.

IV.   DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The questionnaire

As stated above, 60 copies of a survey questionnaire were delivered to 60 students who agreed to take part in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into three sections aiming at answering the two research questions.

4.1.1. The perceptions of students on the application of information gap activities in their speaking lessons

In section two, there were six questions with multiple alternatives to answer the first research question about their perception on the application of information gap activities in their speaking lessons. The results of these questions were respectively shown as the following data:
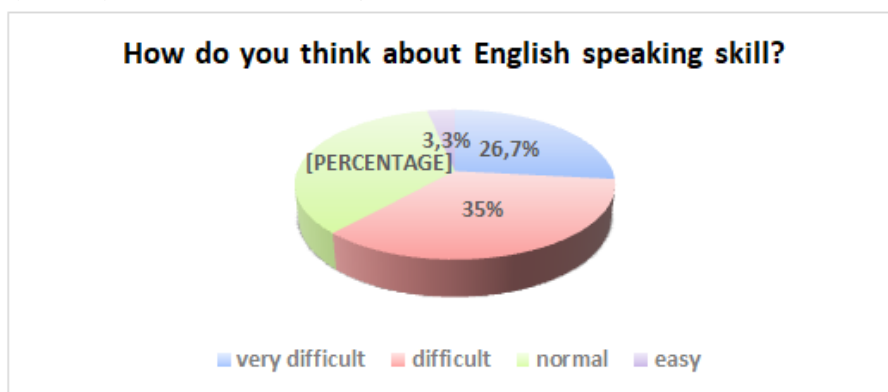

Figure 1. Students' perception on English speaking skill.

As easily seen from figure 1, there were 38.3% of students considering the difficulty of speaking skills as normal or rather easy. It was a good sign that many students seem to have good awareness of English speaking skills. However, more than half of the students doing the survey (61,7%) found speaking skills difficult or very difficult, which might lead to troubles for them when studying speaking skills.

Next, it is essential to know the types of information gap activities used by the teachers in the classroom, which is demonstrated in the table below:

Table 1
The activities applied in the speaking lessons
Which of these activities does your teacher usually apply in the classroom?

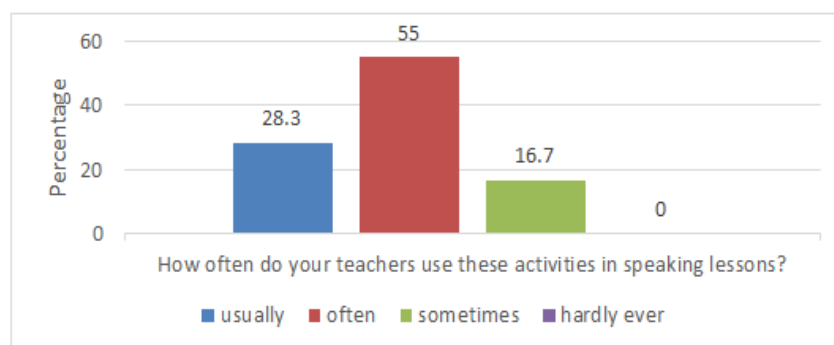|		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	find the differences in the photos	5	8.3	8.3	8.3
	exchange information	15	25.0	25.0	33.3
	exchange opinion	13	21.7	21.7	55.0
	play roles	15	25.0	25.0	80.0
	answer questions	12	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Figure 2. The use of information gap activities in speaking lessons.

Table 1 reveals that in the classroom, teachers tended to apply exchanging information (25%) and role-playing activities (25%) to speaking lessons. Besides that, about 20% and 21.7% of students respectively indicated that answering questions and exchanging opinions were also used in the classroom. It can be concluded that there was a variety of information gap activities applied in the lessons and students had full awareness of them.

When being asked about the frequent use of these activities in the classroom, over half of the students (about 55%) chose that their teachers often applied these activities in their speaking lesson. About 28,3 % of the students agreed that their teachers usually used these activities. It is a good point that from the students' answer we can see that there was no case that teachers did not apply these activities in their lesson (see figure 2).

After answering about the types of information gap activities used in the speaking lessons, students were stimulated to show their perceptions on how much they liked the activities and whether they were effectively applied in the speaking lessons. The findings for these questions were shown in the charts below:
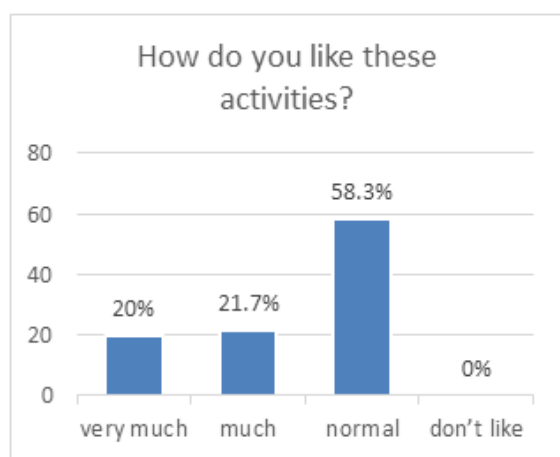

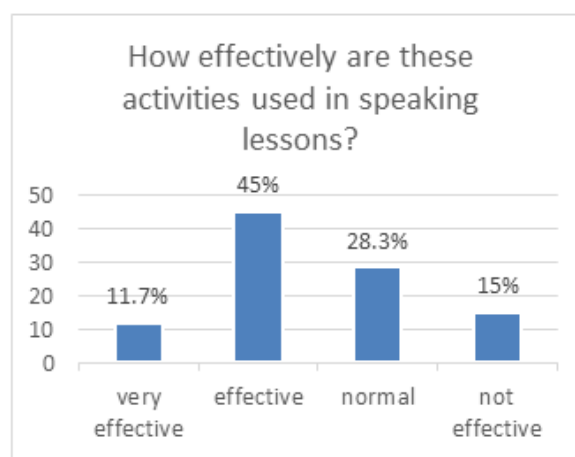Figure 3. Students' interest in the activities

Figure 4. The effectiveness of the activities

As we can draw from figure 3, a lot of students liked these activities, about 41.7%, and no students did not enjoy these activities. However, a large number of students (about 58.3%) seemed not interested enough in these activities since they only felt normal. Despite this matter, most students agreed that these activities were effectively employed in the speaking lessons (shown in figure 4). Although most students had positive attitudes on the use of information gap activities, there were still 15% of them felt that these activities were not effectively used in speaking lessons. This can be the reason which led to the normal feeling of a large number of students shown in figure 3.

The data from figure 3 and 4 bring about the consideration of what cause students troubles when taking part in these activities, some of which they encountered are clearly showed in figure 5.
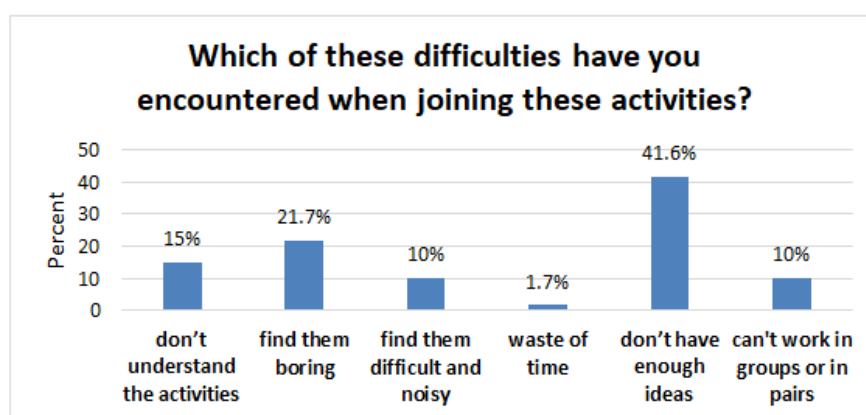

Figure 5. The difficulties students encountered when joining these activities

It is easily seen from figure 5, the majority of students (about 41.6%) said that they did not have enough ideas to take part in these activities. Besides that, 21.7% of the respondents found the activities boring. Other common difficulties students faced including not understanding or finding the activities difficult to follow, which accounted for 15% and 10% respectively. Moreover, some students had troubles working in groups or in pair as 10% of them answer that they could not work in groups or in pairs. Fortunately, very few students (1.7%) felt that information gap activities were a waste of time.

It can be drawn from section two of the survey questionnaire that many students had fully been aware of the application of information gap activities and most of them had shown their interests in these activities. However, there are several problems they still encountered when they took part in these activities.

The enhancement of students' speaking ability by applying information gap activities

In section three, there were seven items designed for the students to response on a five-point Likert scale which helped to get the students' opinions and improvements after they had been aware of the use of information gap activities in the speaking lessons. The data collected from the questionnaire were demonstrated in the table below:

Table 2
Students' perceptions on the enhancement of their speaking skills by the application of information gap activities in the lessons

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
1. Information gap activities offered the opportunity for "natural" learning.	15%	33.3%	13.3%	31.7%	6.7%
2. Information gap activity learning provides a relaxing atmosphere.	5%	25%	26.7%	25%	18.3%
3. I improved my vocabulary.	3.3%	28.3%	10%	30%	28.3%
4. I had more chances to practice English in the classroom.	6.7%	13.3%	25%	38.3%	16.7%
5. It was easier for me to express myself when I use information gap activities.	10%	15%	15%	38.3%	21.7%
6. I felt motivated in learning English.	11.7%	11.7%	25%	33.3%	18.3%
7. I felt confident to speak in English.	15%	16.7%	10%	38.3%	20%

Note: Strongly disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Neither agree nor disagree = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly agree = 5

From table 2, we can see that 38.4% of the students agreed and strongly agreed that information gap activities make their learning more naturally. Besides, 43.3% strongly agreed and agreed that information gap activities gave them a relaxing atmosphere while studying English speaking skills. From the results, we can see that many students have positive attitudes towards information gap activities.

With the application of information gap activities, 58.3% of the students said that their vocabulary could be improved and 55% of them agreed and strongly agreed that they were giving more opportunities to apply their English into practice within the classroom context. Amazingly, over half of the students (51%) claimed that they could express themselves when participating in these activities. Moreover, these activities made students feel motivated and confident in speaking English, in which more than half of the students agreed and strongly agreed. In short, information gap activities give a positive contribution to the improvement of students' speaking ability in terms of vocabulary, opportunities to practice and express their ideas, confidence, and motivation in learning English speaking skills.

4.2. The interview

Six students were voluntarily invited to the interview after the data from the questionnaire had been analyzed. The aim of the interview was to have a deeper understanding of the answers from the students to gain more reliable results for the study. The interview consisted of five questions asking about the reason for the difficulties of speaking skills, the effectiveness of information gap activities, the problems they faced, the assistance in the improvement of vocabulary, and the chances of natural learning these activities brought to the students. In light of the level of the students, the interview questions were designed in both English and Vietnamese version.

From the interview, the researcher figured out the following results:

For the first question, the researcher discovered the reasons why the students found speaking skills difficult were that they lacked vocabulary and had not got many opportunities to study speaking skills at previous levels. However, the researcher was glad to hear that most of the interviewees were then interested in learning speaking skills at university since they were able to take part in a wide range of activities during the speaking lessons. The first participant said that he had not studied speaking skills in high school, but then he got used to studying speaking skills. Amazingly, participant four told me that although she found speaking skills difficult, she stills would like to improve her speaking ability since it could help her a lot in her future job. Next, when it came to the difficulties students encountered when taking part in the information gap activities, most students agreed that due to lacking vocabulary, they found it hard to gather ideas to speak in information gap activities. However, four out of six interviewees agreed that teachers provided great assistance in helping to develop their vocabulary through information gap activities. Most of them felt that they could improve their skills better with a lot of practice in the classroom. However, two participants could not catch up with the activities after the teachers gave the instructions and they needed their friends' assistance in explaining the instructions in Vietnamese, yet they could learn some ideas from their friends and with the help of the teachers.

After acknowledging the reasons why students found difficulty with speaking skills and why students encountered problems when participating in these activities, the interviewer moved to determine the reasons why students found the information gap activities were effective or not effective in developing their speaking ability. Firstly, the interviewer based on students' answers from the questionnaire to confirm students' answers. Then, the interviewer listened and took notes of the students' opinions. Fortunately, all students who took part in the interview agreed that the information gap activities were effectively used in the lesson. a student showed that they could know the topics and gathered vocabulary before practicing the activities. Another answer was that the student could get good examples and instructions from the teachers to complete the activities. Moreover, six participants agreed that information gap activities encouraged pair work and group work, In regard with the improvement in vocabulary through information gap activities, all interviewees confided that they were given good chances to brainstorm the vocabulary in prior to each activity and then applied them into practice within the authentic context. However, two of them needed time to correct their pronunciations of the vocabulary and sometimes they were afraid of making mistakes.

For the last question related to the "natural" learning environment created by the information gap activities, 100% of the participants agreed that they had good access to the real-life context when completing the activities. At first, some of them felt a bit hard with the activities, but when they were accustomed to the situations, they could perform their skills quite well.

In conclusion, as the result of the above positive data, it can come to an end that information gap activities should be frequently developed in my teaching context and I felt confident to continue to apply these activities in the speaking lesson.

4.3. Discussion

The results from the data analysis have proved the consistency with the finding from Ismaili and Bajrami's (2016) study in the field. The results have confirmed the significance and successful application of information gap activities in my teaching context. Besides that, the findings also listed the difficulties from students' perspectives so that teachers can work on finding the solutions to deal with the problems.

The findings from the study contribute to some practical utilizations. Firstly, the questionnaire survey results have drawn a clear picture of how these activities conducted in the classroom and the difficulties as well as the enhancement in the speaking skills of the students. The results confirm the findings of Rahimi (2016) that students are encouraged to pair work and group work to develop their speaking competence when taking part in these activities. Moreover, the results also clarify the improvement in students' speaking skills as discovered in Ismaili and Bajrami (2016). Secondly, the interview results play a good supporting role to have the researcher have a deeper understanding of students' problems and give clearer answers for the second research question on how these activities can enhance students' speaking ability.

In addition, the study also reveals that information gap activities are good to develop students' vocabulary as well and provide students with a good chance to practice with real-life situations. For that advantage, students' skills will not be limited within the classroom context but develop more and more to make sure students can apply their skills in communication.

Lastly, the results from questionnaires also reveal the negative attitudes from the students which include boredom, difficulties, and noise from these activities. Besides that, there were parts of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed that information gap activities could enhance their speaking skills and give them a relaxing atmosphere or "natural" learning. For these reasons, teachers need to be more flexible in applying these activities and find out ways to stimulate students' learning process.

To sum up, information gap activities can bring many benefits for students in developing their speaking ability. It is a good idea for teachers to update their teaching methods frequently to successfully apply these activities in their teaching.

V.   CONCLUSION

The present study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of information gap activities on improving students' speaking ability. The study has drawn some valuable findings which can assist to solve the problems that I have noticed within my teaching context. The data illustrated that nearly half of the students enjoyed the information gap activities, but 56.7% of them agreed and strongly agreed that these activities were effectively used in speaking lessons. Moreover, with the help of teachers and the encouragement in taking part in pair work and group work, students' skills can be improved clearly. Last but not least, the use of information gap activities contributes fully to the development of students' speaking skills since they encouraged students to practice in authentic contexts and interact with each other more frequently. However, these activities alone cannot always motivate students in learning. Therefore, teachers should wisely apply them and combine with other teaching techniques to get better results.

For better research on teaching speaking skills, further studies may investigate the effects of information gap activities on a larger sample size of English learners at different universities. Hopefully, information gap activities will be widely and flexibly utilized in many places in Vietnam in the future.

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