



Current Reality and Solutions in Teaching Speaking Skills to Fourth-year English Language Majors at University of Phan Thiet

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Abstract: This study was conducted to survey the current situation of teaching speaking skills at University of Phan Thiet (UPT). To collect data for the study, a questionnaire was used to survey the opinions of fourth-year students majoring in English language and lecturers in the Faculty of Foreign Languages - UPT. The results show that both teachers and students had difficulties in teaching and learning speaking skills. The main difficulties of students include lack of background knowledge, lack of speaking ideas, lack of practical activities and not being given many opportunities to practice speaking. The main difficulties of lecturers include students' low motivation, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes. The lecturers and students made a number of suggestions to improve the current state of teaching speaking skills at UPT, including that lecturers should organize more interesting activities during the speaking class, and vary activities, select and organize simple communication activities and give students the opportunity to prepare and schedule time to prepare before speaking, organize speaking activities in pairs or groups for students to support for each other; students should improve their vocabulary and grammar, listen or watch programs by native speakers to learn how to express ideas and pronounce English properly. Finally, the research team also made some recommendations for students, teachers and schools to help teaching speaking skills more effectively.

Keywords: speaking skills, CLT, efficiency, difficulties, solutions

I. Introduction

Speaking skills play a much more important role in modern English today than ever before. The communicative language teaching method (CLT-Communicative Language Teaching) has since been applied to teach English to learners of all levels. The instructors hope that by this teaching method, they can help learners improve their English and use it effectively and fluently in communication.

However, there are still many difficulties that English teachers in Vietnam in general and English lecturers at University of Phan Thiet (UPT) are facing. Although both teachers and learners are trying their best to achieve the goal of teaching and learning English speaking skills effectively, the results have not been satisfactory so far. This has made the research team wish to conduct this study to investigate the teaching and learning of English speaking skills as well as to find methods and activities to improve the quality of teaching speaking skills at UPT. That's why we chose the topic: "The current reality and solutions for teaching speaking skills to fourth-year English language majors at University of Phan Thiet."

II. Literature review

2.1. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

CLT is an approach to teaching a foreign or second language. This method emphasizes communication competence. It also promotes interaction as a means of language teaching. According to Nunan (1989): "CLT views language as a system for expressing meaning." Activities include verbal communication, task performance, and language use for learners. CLTs reflect learners' needs; they include language skills as well as language learning goals."

It is aimed at making learners gain communicative competence so that learners can use the language correctly and appropriately. The main focus while using the CLT method is the learner. Instructors are just facilitators. The teacher is the person who manages the classroom and helps the learners to learn on their own. The curriculum stresses the use of language for practical purposes and is based on real-world resources. Learners are given tasks that have a purpose and significance.

The main focus of this method is to make it possible for learners to understand the intentions and expressions of writers and speakers. Learners need to learn the communicative function of structures. While using the CLT approach in language teaching, the target language is used in the classroom. Besides, the use of appropriate language is emphasized over accuracy. In CLT, linguistic should be learned through social interaction and should be taught by combining all language skills rather than by focusing on only one skill. CLT, on the other hand, promotes interactions between students and teachers. Teachers allow mistakes because it is more vital for pupils to be able to communicate in the target language. The CLT approach provides opportunities for learners not only about what to say but also about how to say it. Due to those principles, when applying CLT in the classrooms, teachers should offer activities such as role-playing to help learners learn the language in a social context. The functional aspects of the language should be taken seriously as well. Drama, role-playing, and games, as a result, are recommended to be employed in the classroom to foster real-life communication. Students should also be given the opportunity to hear the language as it is used in communication.

2.2. Strategy of developing speaking skills

Byrne (1991, pp. 22-31) pointed out that there are three stages to the development of learners' speaking ability, as follows:

Stage 1: Presentation Stage (when learners are introduced new knowledge)

In this stage, the teacher is the center. That is, they do the job of providing information, choosing materials to teach, and presenting the material so that the meaning of the new language is as easy to understand and remember as possible. Meanwhile, the learner's responsibility is to listen to and receive the information given by the teacher.

Stage 2: Practice Stage (when learners are allowed to work under direction)

Unlike the presentation phase, this stage the learner has to do most of the speaking. Instructors provide maximum practice time. Practice often takes the form of activities to improve speaking fluency. At this stage, pair work or group work is used.

Stage 3: Production Stage (when learners are given the opportunity to work on their own)

At this stage, learners need the opportunity to speak English freely. The real opportunity to speak English is when learners can use English naturally. Teamwork plays an important part in getting learners to speak here. When working in groups, all learners have the opportunity to participate in the talks.

2.3. Problems with speaking activities

According to Ur (1996: 121), learners frequently face some problems in speaking activities. These problems include inhibitions, lack of ideas, low participation, and native language use. The problems can be explained as follows:

Inhibition: Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in class, such as anxiety about mistakes, fear of criticism, or fear of attention to speech.

Lack of ideas: Some learners have trouble thinking of anything to say, they have no motivation to express themselves other than guilt that they should.

Low participation: Only one participant can talk at a time if they want to be heard. In a large group, this means that each person will have very little time to talk. This problem is complicated by the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak little or not at all.

The use of mother tongue: In some classrooms, learners tend to use their mother tongue for a number of reasons. Firstly, it will be easier to communicate in their mother tongue. Second, it feels unnatural to talk to each other in a foreign language.

2.4. Solutions to problems in speaking

There are some possible solutions to common problems encountered during the speaking learning process, including:

Solution to solve the fear of being wrong

To overcome the fear of being wrong when speaking, there should be harmony between lecturers and students; lecturers should help students form the habit of concentrating in class; and teachers should also build a friendly and open atmosphere during class so that students feel comfortable speaking English.

The solution to dealing with shyness

Regarding the solution to overcome shyness, Pesce (2011) said that it is urgent for teachers to create a friendly and open classroom environment. As a result, shy students will be more comfortable making mistakes in their learning.

Solutions to deal with anxiety

According to Keramida (2009), motivating students and creating a comfortable environment in the classroom is important to get the attention of teachers because it can reduce students' anxiety, increase self-confidence and encourage them to be ready to communicate.

The solution to the lack of confidence

Ye Htwe (2007) stated that maximizing students' exposure to English is a good way to build students' confidence.

Solutions to solve students' lack of motivation to study

Aftat (2008) suggested that in order to encourage student motivation, instructors should provide ongoing encouragement and support, as well as asking questions to understand students' problems. This is important, as it encourages as well as gives students a sense of security and welcome during class.

2.5. Previous studies

Wu (2010) explored the relationship between students' CLT language learning strategies and their anxiety levels in an EFL classroom. The results showed that although implementing CLT in the classroom may be difficult to some extent, it is still considered a reasonable teaching method and should be adopted.

Al Asmari (2015) reviewed the difficulties and challenges that teachers face when implementing CLT in the classroom. The results demonstrated that lecturers had difficulties in accessing CLT materials and could not prepare CLT activities for their students due to limited class time and lack of CLT training.

Azadi et al. (2015) studied the impact of classroom interaction in improving students' speaking ability. Research results have proved that the communication of students in the classroom has developed their speaking ability. The researchers claimed that increased interaction in the classroom will improve the speaking proficiency of EFL students.

Ochoa et al. (2016) explored the relationship between CLT activities and their influence on students' motivation to learn English. Research results presented that EFL students consider CLT activities as motivation. The researchers recommended that teachers use each communication activity more than once to promote opportunities for students to practice English, encourage students to become independent learners, and create a friendly atmosphere in the classroom.

Wajid and Saleem (2017) investigated the opinions of EFL learners to estimate the influence of their attitudes on the performance of communicative activities in the classroom. The findings of this study showed a high level of student approval for implementing CLT in the classroom. Therefore, this study can be considered as evidence of the effectiveness of CLT on improving students' speaking ability.

III. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

The subjects of the study were 62 students of the English language major of the University of Phan Thiet. These students were selected from 3 classes K10NNA1, K10NNA2 and K10NNA3. These students were all in their fourth year and had completed the Speaking modules in the curriculum of English Language major, including the Speaking 1, Speaking 2, Speaking 3, and Speaking 4. In addition, 6 lecturers agreed to conduct a survey for lecturers around the issues of teaching speaking skills in UPT. These instructors all have extensive experience in teaching speaking skills, so consulting with these instructors was hoped to find out the teaching methods and techniques that they usually apply in teaching speaking skills to students at the University, while also accessing their desires to improve the teaching and learning of speaking skills. These students and lecturers were selected to participate in the survey because of their ease of access.

3.2. Research instruments

Student survey questionnaire

The design of the questionnaire is based on the Likert scale format. The Likert scale is a psychological scale commonly used in questionnaire survey-based research. On this scale, respondents indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement on a symmetrical scale for a range of opinions (Likert, 1932; Jamieson, 2004; Carifio and Rocco, 2007).

The student survey questions are based on research questions and related literature. In addition to the general information of the participants, the survey questionnaire consisted of three main parts. Part 1: Situation; part 2: Difficulties; Part 3: Proposing solutions. All the questions revolved around students' learning of speaking skills.

Lecturer survey questionnaire

For lecturers, with the purpose of finding out general information, the main sections include the survey items such as: commonly applied methods to teach speaking skills, common difficulties when teaching this skill, and suggestions as solutions.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Because the study was conducted in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the researchers conducted the survey via an online form using the *Google form* utility.

Before the participants began working on each questionnaire including the pilot survey and the official one, the researcher clearly explained the questionnaire items to avoid misunderstandings. Furthermore, the aims of the study were also explained to the participants. This is necessary for the participants to understand why they are encouraged to participate in this study. Participants were also reminded that they had to give their answers only once and could not re-edit them after submission. Besides, the researcher also reminded the participants to complete the questionnaire on their own and not to discuss it with other participants.

From the information collected through the student and lecturer survey questionnaires, the data is aggregated and sorted. The data were then analyzed according to different themes related to the different objectives of the study, including the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of speaking skills of the Faculty of Foreign Languages Department (FFL), the difficulties that students and lecturers are facing and the desire of these two subjects in improving the effectiveness of teaching speaking activity. After the process of classifying useful data into prominent topics, comparisons were made on the data collected from two different sources, the faculty survey and the student survey, from which it was possible to find out similarities and differences.

This process proceeded from theme to theme. Finally, the associations between those themes were brought together to uncover some striking findings. The final results were presented in the form of tables and graphs.

IV. Results and Discussions

4.1. The reality of teaching speaking skills to fourth-year English language students

With the desire to find out about the reality of teaching and learning speaking skills for students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages, this question was raised; and the data is shown in Figure 1. The number of students who said that teaching speaking skills was "effective" and "fairly effective" accounted for the highest number and were equivalent, at 32.3% and 35.5%, respectively. Another figure is 8.1%, for the percentage of students who chose "very effective". These three numbers show that a majority of students are satisfied or quite satisfied with the quality of training in speaking skills of the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Phan Thiet. However, it is worth noting that the rest accounted for nearly a quarter with the statement of "slightly effective" (22.6%) and "ineffective" (0.9%). This shows that out of four students, one student is not really satisfied with the quality of teaching this skill. Even though the number of "ineffective" accounts for only 1/10, it still poses a concern for the research team.

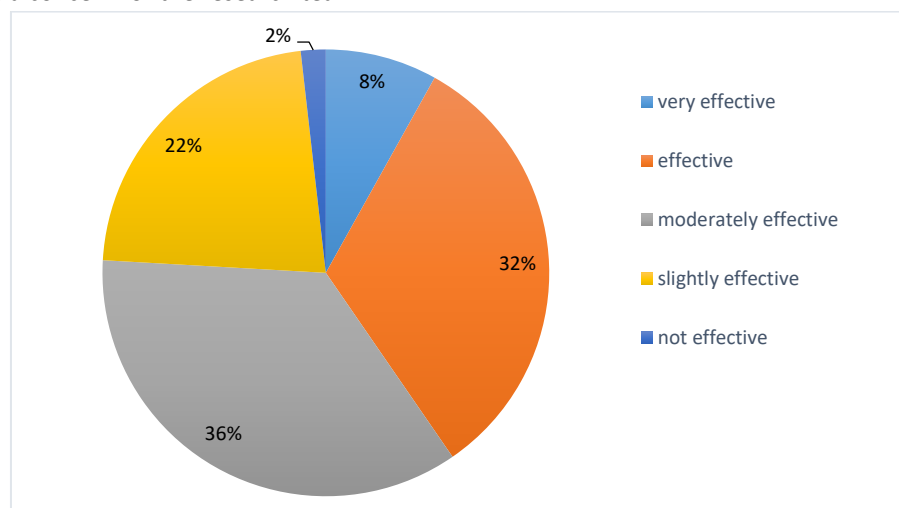


Figure 1: Students' opinions on the effectiveness of teaching and learning speaking skills at UPT

4.2. Difficulties in learning and teaching speaking skills

4.2.1. Difficulties in learning speaking skills

Figure 2 shows the collected data related to the subjective problems that students encounter in the process of learning speaking skills. These problems are all very common problems faced by most second language learners, including: (1) lack of ideas when speaking; (2) poor expression ability; (3) lack of background knowledge; (4) poor pronunciation; (5) lack of confidence; (6) fear of making mistakes; (7) and lack of motivation. Except for factor (7) lack of motivation, the remaining contents received great agreement from students. Prominent in this group of difficulties is the lack of ideas to speak and the lack of background knowledge of the students. The two difficulties are very closely related, or it can be said that they have a cause-and-effect relationship. The lack of background knowledge could be due to a lack of reading or news watching habits. The next three issues that also need to be mentioned are students' lack of confidence, poor pronunciation, and students' fear of making mistakes when learning speaking skills. These issues are inextricably linked. Problems with English pronunciation can lead to a fear of making mistakes. In addition, not knowing how to express themselves becomes one of the most difficult things for students. This may come from the students' shortage of speaking strategies.

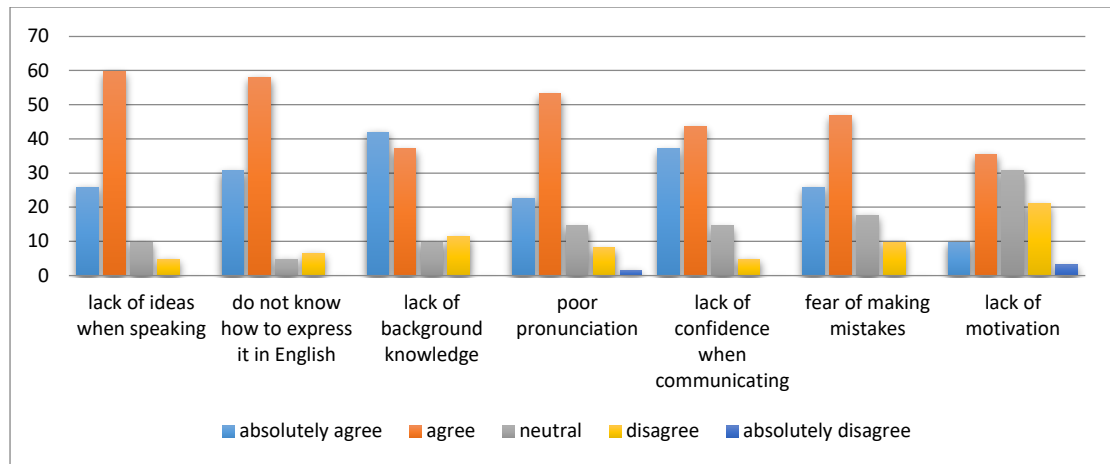


Figure 2: The difficulties that students face in the learning process come from subjective factors

(1) Not being given many opportunities to practice speaking, (2) unsatisfactory interaction of classmates, (3) uninteresting textbooks, (4) not varied activities, (5) lack of practical activities, (6) inappropriate requirements of speaking activities, (7) lecturers rarely use English in class are common problems that make it difficult for students to practice speaking skills at school.

According to the data obtained from the student survey, the two factors with the highest agreement are (1) students do not have a lot of opportunities to practice speaking and (5) lack of practical activities in class time, accounting for 59,7%. The fact that students have little opportunity to practice speaking in class may be due to the large number of students in a class, leading to very few opportunities to be invited by the lecturer. Too many students in a class becomes not only a problem for the students, it is also a problem for the lecturers.

Besides, the contents (2), (3), (4), (6) obtained similar results; specifically, the number of people agreeing and disagreeing on these contents is almost equal, accounting for about 40-50%, the rest disagreeing from 10-20%. The fact that students feel that the textbook is not interesting and that the requirements of speaking activities are high and not suitable can come from the unevenness of students' English proficiency. This leads to different situations among students such as: some students find the textbook and activities too difficult to lead or students feel the textbook and activities are too easy. Both of these trends might lead to a lack of interest and frustration among students when studying.

In addition, a few students also gave other opinions related to the reasons leading to difficulties in learning to speak, such as "no supportive equipment", "lack of communication environment", and "maybe the students have not yet determined what the purpose of learning is, which leads to a lack of determination; in addition, learning a language without an environment to use it also makes the learning more and more disorienting".

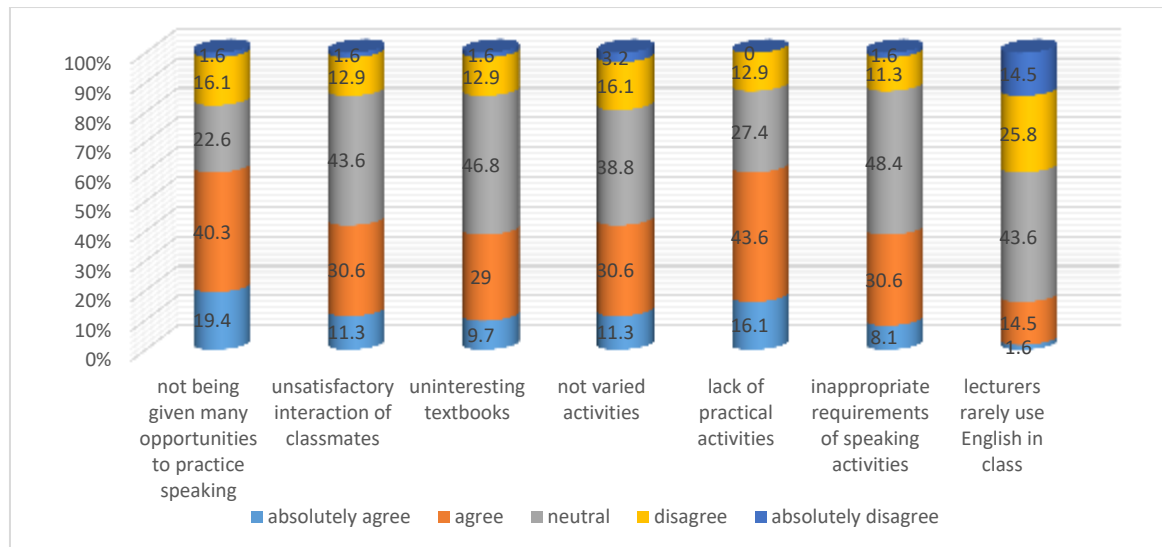


Figure 3: The difficulties that students face in the learning process come from objective factors

4.2.2. Difficulties in teaching speaking skills

The results of this survey indicate that there are two major problems that lecturers face in teaching speaking skills: students' deficient motivation, students' lacking confidence and their fear of making mistakes. In contrast, the inappropriate textbooks are not a problem for most lecturers. In addition, there are three other factors that most lecturers believe make teaching speaking difficult: overcrowded class sizes, uneven students' English proficiency, and students' low English proficiency. On the other hand, half of the lecturers said that students' lack of ideas to speak and students' lack of background knowledge also became obstacles to teaching speaking skills. Finally, only one third of the lecturers felt that they had difficulty in teaching speaking because of course time limitation and the students' lack of motivation and interaction. Through this survey question, it can be seen that lecturers are facing many problems when teaching speaking skills to students majoring in English.

All teachers who participated in the survey felt that the lack of student motivation created difficulties in teaching. Poor motivation not only affects the teaching of speaking skills, but also causes certain influences on the teaching of English skills or other subjects. Speaking activities, no matter how well prepared or can bring high efficiency to students' learning, but students do not participate enthusiastically, will not bring any good results. Students' lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes is the second most notable problem that causes difficulties for nearly all teachers participating in the survey. This problem from students makes classroom interaction between students and teachers or between students and students very difficult. Students will often be very timid and afraid to volunteer to speak or when called upon to speak; or when participating in speaking activities in front of the class. The consequence of this is that the lecturer cannot grasp all the problems in speaking English of the students so that they can give timely feedback to help students improve and improve their English speaking ability. The next two difficulties encountered by the majority of lecturers are related to the students' English proficiency, which is that the students' English proficiency is not good and the uneven students' English proficiency. Teachers will often have difficulty in implementing a variety of speaking activities in class when the students' English level is not good and uneven, which is evident when the activities are increased in difficulty. This fact is confirmed by the students participating in the survey, as there are students who think that the requirements of the activities are too high.

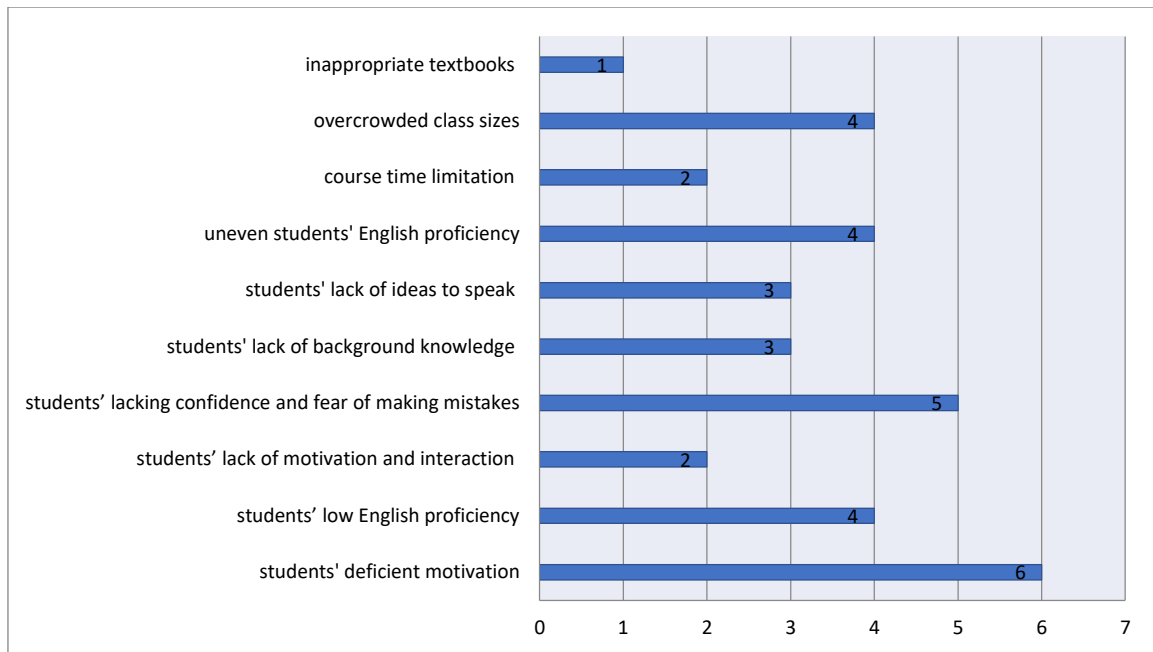


Figure 4: Difficulties that English language teachers often face in the process of teaching speaking skills

4.3. Suggestions for improving the quality of teaching and learning speaking skills

4.3.1. Suggestions from students

As for the solutions for students, the contents received high agreement from the survey participants. In which, the opinion (3) "Students need to improve their own vocabulary and grammar" reached the highest rate, up to 93.5%. The rest of the opinions accounted for a fairly high proportion, ranging from 77.4% to 82.3%. A special feature is that in all content related to student solutions, there is no opinion showing disagreement. The above shows that most students are aware that in order to learn speaking skills more effectively, they themselves need to make a lot of effort to limit their problems in the learning process such as: lack of vocabulary, grammar, ideas, or lack of confidence.

Among the solutions for teachers-specifically, lecturers of the Faculty of Foreign Languages, it is suggested that "Teachers should assist students in finding speaking ideas" and "Teachers should organize practical and interesting activities in speaking lessons" achieved a very high and similar agreement rate, 95.2% and 95.1%, respectively. "Teachers should provide more background knowledge (vocabulary, grammar, phonetics) for students before speaking" was also agreed by many students, accounting for 88.7%. The above figures show that students also have high expectations for teachers during speaking class. They need the support of teachers in providing knowledge about grammar, vocabulary and ideas, so that speaking activities can be carried out more effectively. In addition, students also expect speaking activities to be organized closer to reality and create more excitement. However, the suggestion "Teachers should encourage the use of English as the main language in other subjects' lessons" was less agreed than other opinions (69.3%). This is completely consistent with the survey item above. Many students disagree with the assertion that teachers rarely use English to teach in class, so they also do not think that teachers need to promote the use of this language in class.

STT	Suggestions to improve learning and teaching speaking skills	Absolutely agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Absolutely disagree
1	Students should enhance their knowledge on their own to have more ideas when speaking (by reading books, watching programs, ..)	32,3	46,8	21	0	0
2	Students should listen or watch programs by native speakers to learn how to express ideas and pronounce English.	37,1	45,2	17,7	0	0
3	Students need to improve their own vocabulary and grammar.	40,3	53,2	6,5	0	0
4	Students should find friends (Vietnamese or English-speaking foreigners) to practice speaking outside of class time	32,3	48,4	19,4	0	0
5	Students should join English clubs (in or out of school).	25,8	51,6	22,6	0	0
6	Lecturers should provide more background knowledge (vocabulary, grammar, phonetics) for students before speaking.	35,5	53,2	9,7	1,6	0
7	Teachers should support students in finding speaking ideas.	32,3	62,9	4,8	0	0
8	Teachers should organize activities that are more practical and interesting in speaking class.	40,3	54,8	4,8	0	0
9	Teachers should encourage the use of English as the primary language in other subjects' lessons.	27,4	41,9	29	1,6	0
10	Textbooks of Speaking modules should be updated.	30,6	46,8	22,6	0	0
11	The number of students in a class should be reduced to increase interactivity.	21	35,5	35,5	4,8	3,2
12	FFL should organize an entrance exam to classify first-year students in accordance with language ability.	29	35,5	32,3	3,2	0
13	FFL should organize more English speaking contests, promote activities of English clubs.	22,6	40,3	33,9	3,2	0

Table 1: Students' suggestions to improve learning and teaching speaking skills

4.3.2. Suggestions from lecturers

The figure 5 illustrates solutions that the lecturers employed to solve the problems in learning and teaching speaking skills. Firstly, when students are practicing speaking, most of the lecturers will not show any expression, just silently note the mistakes and correct them after the students complete the speaking part. Secondly, to deal with the lack of motivation when learning speaking skills, lecturers used a variety of solutions to overcome this problem. Two outstanding solutions are organizing a variety of pair/group/class interaction activities and changing various activities. More than 80% of lecturers have used these two solutions. Thirdly, similarly, when dealing with students' lack of motivation, lecturers used a variety of methods to deal with a class with many weak English-speaking students including giving students the opportunity to prepare and specify a time to prepare, selecting and organizing simple communication activities, and pairing students with good speaking ability to support students with less ability. Finally, with large classes, most instructors organize speaking activities in pairs or groups for students to support each other.

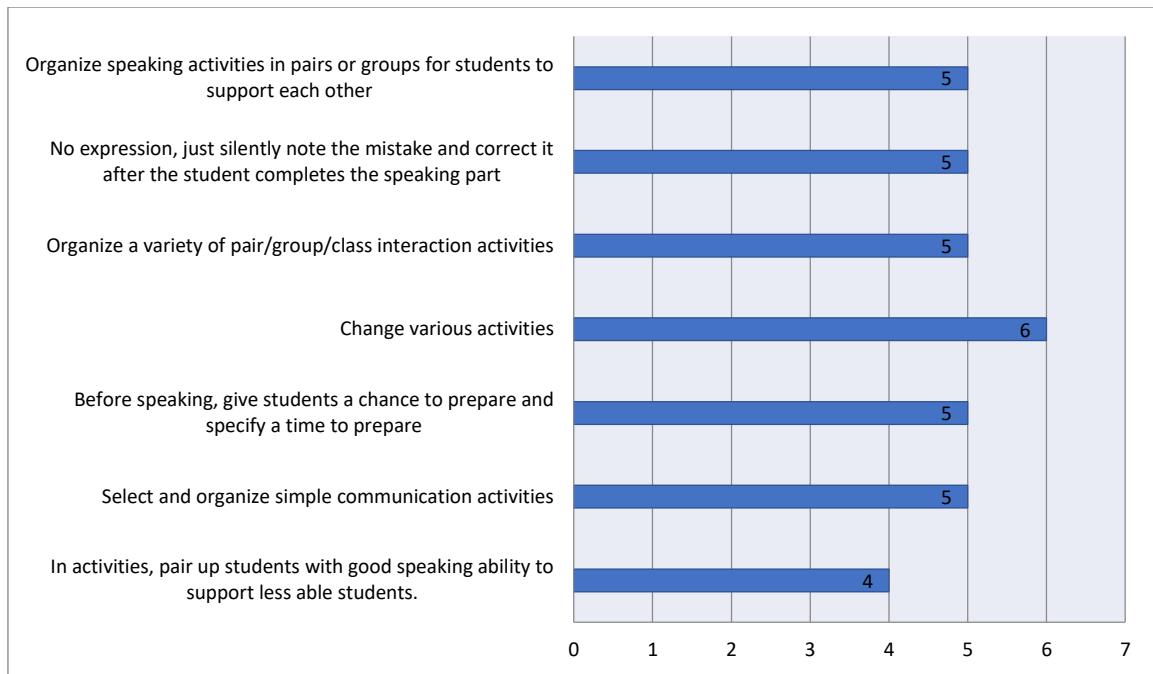


Figure 5: Teachers' suggestions to improve learning and teaching speaking skills

In addition to the solutions that have been given to deal with the difficulties in teaching speaking skills in the survey questions, the surveyed lecturers have suggested a number of other useful solutions such as:

There should be a placement test for first-year students to categorize them into classes. Teaching a class with the same level will save time explaining to weak students, while good students will not feel bored because the knowledge is already known.

Interweave activity demonstrations for lessons with short clips and English learning tips (under 60 seconds)

Provide free English learning platforms in the media, then encourage students to participate. For example, Tiktok is the channel most students spend the most time to follow today. Teachers can introduce and encourage students to follow these channels and use CapCut software for students to make similar short clips for activities or homework to submit to the lecturer. The teacher shows these clips to the whole class the next day (each clip is 30 seconds maximum).

Encourage learners to self-study and have clear goals for learning.

Encourage good students to practice with weaker students. Divide the study group so that students can practice speaking with each other.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

From the results of this study, it can be seen that the teaching and learning of English speaking skills of the Faculty of Foreign Languages – University of Phan Thiet is effective. However, students' English speaking ability is still not satisfactory. On the other hand, in teaching and learning speaking skills, there are still many objective and subjective difficulties. On the part of students, outstanding difficulties can be mentioned such as lack of background knowledge, lack of speaking ideas, lack of practical activities and not being given many opportunities to practice speaking. On the part of lecturers, most lecturers face difficulties such as students' motivation is not high or students are not confident and afraid to make mistakes. To overcome these difficulties both lecturers and students have taken remedial measures. Students think that students themselves need to improve their vocabulary and grammar, should listen or watch programs of native speakers to learn how to express ideas and pronounce English, and students also suggest that teachers should organize more interesting activities during speaking class. Besides, to overcome the difficulties in teaching, the

lecturer proposed to change activities in a variety of ways; select and organize simple communication activities and give students the opportunity to prepare and schedule time to prepare before speaking; organize speaking activities in pairs or groups for students to support each other.

5.2. Recommendations

To the students

First of all, in addition to the time spent in class, students need to learn and improve their language skills by different sources such as reading magazines, books, and documents; or watch TV programs, youtube channels, social networking sites with content related to English. From there, you can learn how native speakers express sentences, use vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation.

Besides, students also need to learn general knowledge and increase their personal experience on common speaking topics, in order to make it easier and more effective to find speaking ideas.

To speak more confidently and fluently, students should also spend more time on this skill and find for themselves environments where they can use English to communicate and converse; such as joining English associations, groups and clubs inside and outside the school; make use of applications and software that speak English with native speakers; or find themselves some friends so they can practice speaking English together often.

To the lecturer

Firstly, teachers should focus on changing the method of teaching speaking in the direction of communication (CLT), creating conditions and opportunities for students to develop as much as possible their speaking skills, not only in speaking sections but also in other subjects of the program.

Second, lecturers should also pay more attention to investing in their lectures. A lecture with diverse activities, interesting topics, diversified class organization, reasonable and realistic requirements, and various teaching aids will create good motivation for students, making the teaching process easier, from which the students will be able to learn this skill more effectively.

Third, when teaching speaking skills, teachers should pay attention to groups/classes with poor language skills so that they can be more flexible in how they communicate, how to organize activities, how to divide groups, and how to correct mistakes, how to assign exercises.

Finally, teachers should be the ones who inspire students and motivate them in their learning path; remind students to be self-directed in cultivating and practicing their own skills.

To the university

The training department of University of Phan Thiet in general and the Faculty of Foreign Languages in particular should consider organizing an entrance exam for newly admitted students majoring in English language. Due to the nature of the major, teaching and learning can be more effective if groups of students with similar language abilities are placed in the same class. In addition, the syllabus of the Faculty's speaking modules should also be evaluated and updated each year.

In addition, the school and faculty should also organize more activities for students to have the environment to practice English, for example, eloquence contests, MC contests; or create opportunities for English-speaking foreigners to have culture exchanges with students in the school.

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