

AN INVESTIGATION INTO ENGLISH SPEAKING LEARNING OF 2ND YEAR STUDENTS AT NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND SOME SUGGESTIONS

Lam Thi Thuan

National Academy of Public Administration

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Received:	25/4/2024	This article aims to find out the 2 nd year non-English major students' learning at National Academy of Public Administration towards the speaking skills in the textbook "Face2face, Pre-intermediate" with the focus on students' difficulties, preferences and demands in learning speaking skill. The study is conducted with 150 second year students during the first semester of school year 2023 - 2024. A questionnaire consisting of 8 open ended questions was distributed to the students. In addition, classroom observation was carried out in 5 lessons with these students. The data in the questionnaire were analyzed by calculating percentages and frequencies. Data collected from the questionnaire and the observations were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The results of the study reveal the students' bad performances with passive learning experiences and low level of proficiency, then they have negative attitudes towards the speaking skill whereas their preferences and demands.
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NGHIÊN CỨU VIỆC HỌC KỸ NĂNG NÓI TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TẠI HỌC VIỆN HÀNH CHÍNH QUỐC GIA VÀ MỘT SỐ ĐỀ XUẤT

Lâm Thị Thuân

Học viện Hành chính Quốc gia

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	25/4/2024	Bài viết này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu những khó khăn và nhu cầu trong việc học tập và thực hành kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên năm hai khối không chuyên ngữ tại Học viện Hành chính Quốc gia theo giáo trình học Face2face, Pre-intermediate. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện với 150 sinh viên không chuyên năm thứ hai trong học kỳ đầu tiên của năm học 2023 - 2024. Dữ liệu của nghiên cứu được thu thập thông qua việc phát bảng câu hỏi điều tra gồm 8 câu hỏi mở và việc quan sát lớp học trong 5 bài học với nhóm 150 sinh viên này. Bằng phương pháp tổng hợp các câu trả lời của sinh viên theo phương pháp định lượng và định tính, các kết quả thu thập được cho thấy thực trạng việc thực hành kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh nói riêng và học tập ngoại ngữ là tiếng Anh nói chung của sinh viên năm hai khối không chuyên tại Học viện Hành chính Quốc gia còn ở mức độ thấp. Trình độ sinh viên chưa cao, khả năng giao tiếp tiếng Anh kém và việc luyện kỹ năng khá thụ động dẫn đến thái độ của người học đối môn học chưa tích cực mặc dù họ ý thức được vai trò quan trọng và xác định được nhu cầu cần thiết của mình đối với môn học.
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Email: lamthuan83@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) focuses on functional language usage and learners' ability to express their own ideas, feelings, attitudes, desires and needs. Learners' success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course are mainly based on how well their spoken language proficiency has been improved. Therefore, teaching speaking skill plays an important role in the curriculum of most English courses. To develop learners' oral ability, teachers follow 3 phases: *presentation*, *practice* and *production*. However, whether the process works or not also depends on various factors like aptitude, opportunity, method and motivation as Carroll suggests [1]. In addition, Hutchinson and Torres [2] claims "...no teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook." Also, Burns and Joyce [3] concludes learning experiences were one of the factors making learners reluctant to speak up in class.

In Vietnam, learning English in general and English-speaking skill in particular are becoming more and more essential in the era of modernization and integration. Research on improving learners' English speaking is blossoming; however, the matter is still given much concern. During the foreign language learning process, Vietnamese learners are facing a number of difficulties such as inhibition, nothing to say, mother tongue [4], limitation of vocabulary and grammar, lack of English-speaking environment and weak teaching methods [5]. In fact, teaching and learning speaking skill in a foreign language is considered to be not a simple job, both teachers and learners need to be active through cooperative activities [6]. Besides the textbook, using other materials are also beneficial as taking advantages of supplementary sources will promote students' motivation and interest [7]. Furthermore, it is time to adapt teaching methods as grammar and vocabulary should be taught in real life situations in order to train the habit of using correct grammatical structures and the authentic use of target language [8]. Also, learning motivation seems to be very vital to learners of languages for it can be considered as both the cause and the result of language learning achievement. The more actively and voluntarily they join in the class activity, the more knowledgeable and confident they are to cope with the real-life situations [9].

At National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), in General English (GE) for students of non-English specializations, speaking skill is being taught together with other skills based on the textbook "*Face2face, Pre-intermediate*" by Nicholas Tims with Chris Redston & Gillie Cunningham for three semesters with the total of 210 class hours. These courses aim at providing students with general knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary as well as developing students' four language skills. At the end of each semester, students are assessed based on a written test of listening, reading and writing skills for 90 minutes and an oral test from 10 to 12 minutes. In comparison with other skills, speaking skill has still been facing difficulties and the students' proficiency is rather weak. Many learners have been getting undesirable grades and feel dissatisfied with it. Therefore, the author expects to find out the students' attitudes, performances, levels of proficiency and their preferences or demands so that withdrawn recommendations can really support in this case.

2. Methods of the study

The study was conducted with 150 second year students from the NAPA during the first semester of school year 2023 – 2024 to find out the facts of teaching and learning this skill after the two first courses of 150 class hours. A questionnaire was distributed, consisting of 8 open ended questions, and collected data was analyzed by calculating percentages and frequencies can help find out the students' attitudes towards speaking skill, their preferences and their demands so as to make methodological recommendations for the case. In addition, classroom observation was carried out in 5 lessons during the first semester of school year 2023 – 2024, in which candidates practised their speaking skill, then the observation data based on the three criteria: teacher's presentation, teacher's methods and teacher- student interaction were analyzed by using qualitative techniques to supplement to the questionnaire's data about the students' attitudes, performances, levels of proficiency and their preferences or demands.

3. Findings and results

3.1. Learners' attitudes and participating degrees in speaking lessons

Like students at other universities, NAPA's students may come from all parts of the country with age ranges from 18 to over 20 and mixed levels of English language proficiency. As can be seen, speaking is an important skill in CLT to show how proficient learners are. However, the data collected from the questionnaire distributed to 150 students of 2nd year at NAPA reveals an uninteresting fact that only 28% of the respondents' state that they speak English willingly, while the percentage of the informants who feel reluctant to speak accounts for 72%. When they are asked how interested and satisfied they are in speaking lessons, nearly three fourth of the respondents (72%) reveal their low levels of interest, in which 27.3% (41 respondents) said they are not interested in learning this skill at all and 44.7% give little interest to it. The number of respondents who are eager (very and rather keen on the skill) accounts for less than a third (28%), with only 6.7% feel really like the skill. Figure 1 shows that the less interest learners have in speaking practice, the less satisfied they feel in learning the skill.

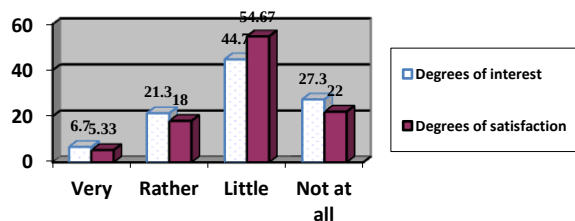


Figure 1. The learners' attitudes towards speaking skill (%)

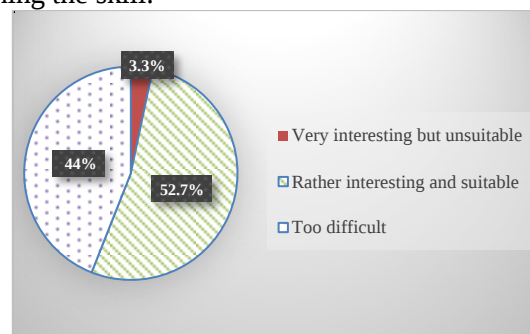


Figure 2. The learners' opinions towards speaking topics and activities in Face2face, Pre-intermediate (%)

In addition, a textbook that is relevant and meets learners' needs is also very important to reflect learners' attitudes to the skill learning. Learners' opinions about speaking topics and activities in the course-book "Face2face, Pre-intermediate" are shown in the following figure. None of the respondents say that the topics and activities are very interesting and suitable. Only 3.3% find these topics and activities very interesting but unsuitable. Whereas, more than a half (52.7%) claim these to be rather interesting and quite suitable. The rest of respondents (44%) answer that they are too difficult.

Although over a half of respondents consider speaking topics and activities to be rather interesting and quite suitable, their participation in speaking lessons is a little quite surprising to the researcher. The result shows that nearly a half (48%) find that they need more time to practice the skill; whereas, only a third of the students are satisfied with the time given to speaking activities, even up to 18% think that they are given too little time to speak as shown in Figure 3.

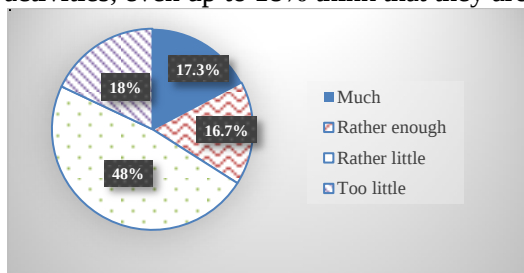


Figure 3. The learners' opinions in time given to speaking activities (%)

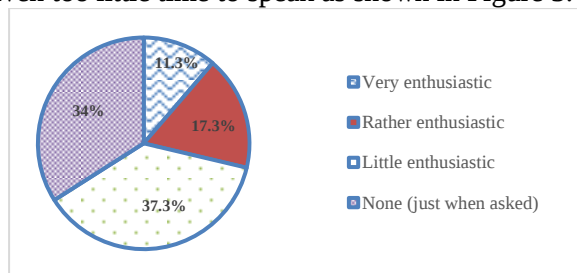


Figure 4. The learners' participating degree in speaking activities (%)

Moreover, learners' participation in speaking activities is also quite reluctant. As seen in Figure 4, there are only 11.3% of respondents enthusiastically involved and 17.4% of them are a little more positive. These two active groups account for less than a third of participants. However, the passive learning groups are nearly 2.5 times with about a half (34% of respondents) only speaking when the teachers ask them and the rest (37.3% of respondents) feel just little enthusiastic to take part in the activities.

Obviously, the topics and activities in the speaking lessons are not too demanding but quite suitable but there are many learners having difficulties in practising this skill. There are large numbers of students are not really concerned in learning the skill. As a result, they are not satisfied with what they have been gaining from the skill. Therefore, the questions raised here are what causes these and how the teachers can improve this situation.

3.2. Learners' difficulties in speaking lessons

Regarding learners' difficulties in the subject, many of them give more than one choice. As we can see from Table 1 below, lack of vocabulary and structures to express the ideas, poor listening and reading abilities resulting poor speaking, lack of confidence or shyness and lack of time due to crowded class are choices with highest percentages of respondents experiencing, approximate and more than 90%. Especially, among 93.3% of the students that are worried about lack of vocabulary and structures to express their ideas, the number of the students ranking this difficulty the first accounts for 31.3%. Among 97.3% of the respondents who often feel shy when speaking, the number of the students ranking it the first is up to 30.7%.

Samples to imitate or general knowledge in the discussed topics are not the main difficulties of respondents as only about a half choose these. In fact, only 2.7% of the students rank samples and 4% rank needed knowledge as their first difficulties. Besides, 3.3% of the respondents raise their voice of other difficulties they have, in which mixed ability among learners that is quite popular in NAPA's language classes is mentioned by 2% and lack of motivation in lessons is claimed by 1.3%. These other difficulties are also being ranked as the fourth and the fifth. It can be concluded that the respondents facing all difficulties raised by the researcher and the most common are the lack of vocabulary and structures, low proficiency in skills, lack of confidence and insufficient time.

Table 1. The students' difficulties in speaking lessons

Question: What difficulties are you facing in learning speaking with the textbook <i>Face2face, Pre-Intermediate?</i> (You can choose more than one and rank your options in order of importance, at least three).		Degrees of importance (1 = the most, 7= the least) - Number of respondents (%)						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Options:								
A. Lack of vocabulary and structures		47 (31.3)	42 (28)	26 (17.3)	12 (8)	13 (8.7)	0 (0)	0 (0)
B. Poor listening and reading abilities resulting poor speaking ability		19 (12.7)	13 (8.7)	28 (18.7)	32 (21.3)	24 (16)	9 (6)	8 (5.3)
C. Lack of samples to imitate		4 (2.7)	7 (4.7)	21 (14)	11 (7.3)	19 (12.7)	12 (8)	7 (4.7)
D. Lack of general knowledge in the discussed topics		6 (4)	3 (2)	22 (14.7)	13 (8.7)	11 (7.3)	15 (10)	21 (14)
E. Lack of confidence or shyness		46 (30.7)	39 (26)	34 (22.7)	12 (8)	7 (4.7)	3 (2)	5 (3.3)
F. Lack of time due to crowded class		28 (18.7)	46 (30.7)	19 (12.7)	23 (15.3)	12 (8)	8 (5.3)	5 (3.3)
G. Others:								
+ Mixed ability class		0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
+ Lack of motivation		0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (1.3)	0 (0)	0 (0)

3.3. Classroom observations in lessons with the respondents

The respondents of the research were 150 second-year learners from 3 different classes, each of which included from 48 to 53 students and class observations were done in 5 speaking lessons of each class during the first semester of the school year 2023-2024. While observing, the researcher noted key points of the teachers' presentation, the teachers' methods and the teacher - student interaction. These notes were the supplement to questionnaire data of students' weak performances with passive learning experiences and negative attitudes towards the speaking skill.

Teachers' presentation: The researcher finds that the teachers in the classes chosen are quite keen on teaching and enthusiastic with the students. However, their instructions are given in English and the majority of the students cannot understand clearly. Then, the teachers translate them immediately into Vietnamese and their students are able to do the tasks. Surprisingly, samples or suggestions are also translated so the students use their mother tongue a lot, they translate everything into Vietnamese and also find their answers in Vietnamese first. This wastes a lot of time and seems inappropriate in CLT. In addition, most of the lessons are just concerned only textbook activities for real-life situations are rarely applied or recommended.

Teacher's methods: In total 15 speaking lessons visited, the researcher finds that the teachers sometimes move around in the class during learners' practice taking place but not very often. Classes in the context of the study are mixed and quite crowded, so it is challenging for them to have enough time to support all students. When getting the students' answers, the teachers stop them immediately for error corrections. Examples, illustrations, and drills are quickly conducted through mainly pair or group work but these do not work effectively. The learners' talking time is limited and most of them do not actively join in conversations and discussions but imitate the samples, even some do nothing.

Teacher - student interaction: The teachers - students interaction is also a big concern in these speaking lessons. As focused in CLT, teachers play the role of facilitators whereas students are communicators but it seems to fail. The researcher sees that teachers' talking time is overwhelmed the students' and the teachers tend to have to do too much to raise their learners up but they are still too passive. The teachers try to control and direct the classes to complete the lesson plans according to the curriculum while the majority of the students sit quietly, pretend to concentrate on the book but they do nothing or reluctantly give the answers to finish their tasks. There are very few students that actively and effectively communicate as the majority say that they do not understand or do not know how to deal with the tasks. No students ask questions, disagree or express their own ideas. As a result, the teacher - student interaction in these classes seems to be just one way and teaching – learning process is not effective.

3.4. Expectations from the learners

The things that can improve students' ability in speaking are interesting and suitable topics, chances to practise speaking, teachers' methods of teaching, teachers' feedback and variety of activities or techniques such as songs or games to motivate students. Obviously, most of the students in the study were not very satisfied with their speaking learning. The topics and activities in the textbook are not too difficult for the majority but it is really a problem for the learners when practicing speaking with the textbook for various other reasons in term of methods, levels and motivation. It is very necessary to adapt the methods and textbook activities as well so that these can be more suitable to these students' levels and needs. When the respondents are asked for their opinions on important factors contributing to successful speaking lessons, the matter of methods and learners' performance are considered more than others as can be seen from Table 2.

Table 2. *The students' opinions on important factors contributing to speaking lessons*

Questions: How important are these criteria in speaking learning? (You can choose more than one and rank your options in order of importance, at least three).	Degrees of importance (1 = the most, 8= the least) – Number of respondents (%)							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Options:								
A. Clear tasks and instructions	13 (8.7)	14 (9.3)	16 (10.7)	21 (14)	13 (8.7)	4 (2.7)	3 (2)	1 (0.7)
B. Interesting and suitable topics to learners	21 (14)	15 (10)	22 (14.7)	12 (8)	14 (9.3)	9 (6)	7 (4.7)	1 (0.7)
C. Variety of individual/ pair/ group work	15 (10)	21 (14)	19 (12.7)	11 (7.3)	12 (8)	16 (10.7)	5 (3.3)	0 (0)
D. Sufficient supply of vocabulary, structures and samples	15 (10)	21 (14)	16 (10.7)	13 (8.7)	23 (15.3)	15 (10)	21 (14)	1 (0.7)
E. Positive attitudes from learners	13 (8.7)	5 (3.3)	12 (8)	25 (16.7)	22 (14.7)	23 (15.3)	15 (10)	7 (4.7)
F. Learners' confidence in speaking	15 (10)	16 (10.7)	18 (12)	23 (15.3)	19 (12.7)	18 (12)	24 (16)	5 (3.3)
G. Learners' proficiency	35 (23.3)	32 (21.3)	32 (21.3)	13 (8.7)	11 (7.3)	11 (7.3)	9 (6)	3 (2)
H. Sufficient times for practice	23 (15.3)	26 (17.3)	15 (10)	11 (7.3)	15 (10)	17 (11.3)	13 (8.7)	18 (12)

As observed in the respondents' speaking lessons, tasks and instructions are given clearly in both English and Vietnamese. Therefore, it is not so surprised that only 56.7% of them choose this and the number of the respondents ranking it the most important accounts for only 8.7%. Together with this, variety of learning activities (individual/ pair/ group work) is also not a big matter of concern as only 66% mention and only 10% rank it the most crucial. Interesting and suitable topics come third with 67.3% choosing and 14% finding it the most vital. As observed, the textbook used is not the most up-to-date one but in the classes of the respondents, rarely authentic materials are added to make lessons more motivating and closer to life. The researcher thinks that topics and activities of the textbook are quite interesting and relevant, there are not too many difficult topics but they still need something much closer to the daily life and more useful for learners' aims, activities also need to be more various and motivating. More interesting communicative activities such as games, songs, telling stories, describing pictures, making conversations might be much more accessible and useful.

It can be assumed that the respondents are not used to speaking in front of the whole class and have not been taught how to speak, negotiate, persuade their peers or support their ideas as we can see the majority of them choose criteria such as sufficient supply of vocabulary, structures and samples or learners' proficiency with considerate percentages. Mixed levels of learners are the undeniable fact in credit classes at universities so nearly all of the respondents (97.3%) agree that in learning speaking skill, learners' level is very crucial, even up to 65.9% find it the most important when ranking it the three first degrees. In addition, learners cannot perform well so they really need supplying enough vocabulary, structures and samples to work. We can see that the number of the respondents choosing this accounts for 83.3%, in which more than a third (34.7%) ranking it the three first degrees of importance. When learners are not well-prepared, they cannot speak English willingly even they can be reluctant to speak, which can lead to passive learning and reduce learners' motivation.

Furthermore, class size in the context of the study as observed, about 48 to 53 students each class, is also one of challenges for learners to practise speaking willingly. Many of the respondents (92%) find time for speaking is not sufficient and learners' talking time is the most important to about a half as they rank this at the three first degrees of importance. From the observed speaking

lessons, the learners have chances to talk individually, in pairs or sometimes in groups of mixed ability students so English talking time is much less than Vietnamese, so just about a third of them are invited both willingly and reluctantly to speak in front of the whole class. It means that two third of the students do not speak much, even no English words during the lesson.

In addition, some other subjective factors like the learners' positive attitudes or their confidence in speaking are also get much concern. No one is naturally born to speaking languages fluently and none of them is personally confident in front of others. The learners in the context of the study with low proficiency and mixed abilities tend to be shy and afraid of speaking as observed. However, most of them are aware of this matter as 92% claim that confidence is vital in speaking learning, in which about a third of the respondents give these high degrees of importance. Apart from being naturally confident, the change in attitude can also help. The researcher assumes that when students are weak at any skills but they have a positive attitude and make their effort to improve, they can make progress. Among the respondents, 81.3% pay attention to this factor but few appreciate it since only 8.7% of them ranking it as the most crucial in speaking learning or at the second and third degrees of importance there are only 3.3% and 8%.

Apart from criteria given in the survey questionnaire, participants of the study also raise their voices of others that they find can support a lot in teaching and learning English speaking skills. The students' suggestions to have effective English speaking classes with their textbook include adding more activities such as Role-play, games or outdoor activities to the lesson plans which is shared by 30.6% and using more visual aids like films, clips or samples from real life situations which is mentioned by 23.3%. These are specific activities, from which we can see that the learners really expect for interesting lessons that motivate them and are close to them. In short, collected data from both class observation and survey questionnaire reveals limited use of authentic materials, overuse of Vietnamese, ineffective drills due to lack of the teacher's support and control, the students' low proficiency, motivation and passive learning and insufficient time.

4. Suggestions for teaching and learning speaking skill at the National Academy of Public Administration

Firstly, the learners' attitudes towards English learning need to change with clear goals according to the current teaching methodology (CLT) as students' role is no longer passive recipients. They should take part in class activities enthusiastically and be free to express their own ideas or raise questions. The teachers only work as facilitators to support and lower their learners' shyness or passiveness. To get the learners involved and more active, besides fixed pairs or groups, the teachers can adapt rematching pairs, changing group leaders/ members frequently and more vital in crowded classes to take advantages of using learners as instructors or tutors so as to create smaller classes in a big one. Together with these, additional activities should be considered such as Presentation, Mini talk, Discussion, Role-play, Shows, Plans, Projects or Portfolio. All of these are really essential for the students to realize their responsibility and really communicate effectively.

Then, with the matter of methods, teachers' clear guidance is essential to learners but still to aim at communicative targets so the teachers should balance their overuse of Vietnamese. By the way instructions and explanations are given shortly and clearly enough in English or there are various authentic activities from easier to more challenging with sufficient illustrations, the learners can get used to using the target language. Even it is advisable for the teachers to make the rules of using Vietnamese in their class. Also, the way teachers encourage learners through visual teaching aids can improve the situation. Movies, video clips, television documentaries, pictures, objects, charts, maps or any eye-catching ones can increase the learners' attention. Learners' feeling of making a useful contributions is really useful to encourage their activeness so the teachers should be aware of how and what to feedback. The focus of speaking is fluency, not accuracy.

Last but not least, the students are not motivated to learn unless they regard their lessons as worth learning. The teachers need to find out what they want and adapt the lesson plans, in which combining different sources of materials is strongly recommended in this context as no textbook is desirable, valuable and relevant for mixed and crowded classes. Adaptation can include reducing, adding, omitting, modifying or supplementing to maximize the value of the book for their particular learners and keep pace with current teaching and learning approach. Besides, there should have necessary adaptations in other related features like legislative rules, cultural traditions or certain specializations.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate English speaking learning of the 2nd year students at National Academy of Public Administration with the textbook “*Face2face, Pre-intermediate*”. Through the research instruments of a questionnaire and classroom observation, the research’s significant findings include students’ weak performances, passive learning style, negative attitudes and low level of proficiency. Some recommendations have been offered so as to improve the situation. However, due to time limits and inadequate numbers of class observation and respondents the results might not be abundant enough to generalize all the English classes and students at NAPA. The researcher does not have chances to interview teachers after class observations so these cannot avoid the subjectivity. Basing on the finding of the study, the researcher may adapt her speaking syllabus for her students at NAPA or have new ideas for her further studies.

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