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CHUYÊN SAN KHOA HỌC XÃ HỘI – NHÂN VĂN – KINH TẾ

Mục lục	Trang
Nghiêm Thị Hồ Thu - Cơ sở hình thành đặc điểm văn xuôi Ngọc Giao	3
Vũ Thị Hạnh - Từ ý thức về phái tính đến hình tượng người phụ nữ hiện đại trong tiểu thuyết Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ XXI	9
Phạm Thị Ngọc Anh - Ứng dụng hoa văn thủy ba trong điêu khắc tượng đài đương đại ở Việt Nam	15
Phùng Phương Nga, Đoàn Đức Hải - Biểu tượng trong tiểu thuyết Nguyễn Xuân Khánh (Khảo sát qua <i>Hồ Quý Ly, Mẫu thượng ngàn, Đội gạo lên chùa</i>)	21
Vũ Thúy Hằng, Đoàn Thị Hồng Nhung - Luận bản về cách phân loại tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu	25
Phạm Văn Hùng, Nguyễn Huy Hùng, Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương - Đại học Thái Nguyên với hoạt động đánh giá đầu ra của chương trình đào tạo qua mức độ đáp ứng chuẩn đầu ra của sinh viên chuẩn bị tốt nghiệp	31
Hoàng Duy Trường - Giải pháp nâng cao hiệu quả giáo dục thể chất cho sinh viên trường Đại học Y Dược - Đại học Thái Nguyên	37
Hoàng Thu Thủy, Lý Trung Thành - Nguyễn Ái Quốc - Hồ Chí Minh – người đặt nền móng cho quan hệ đặc biệt Việt Nam – Lào, Lào – Việt Nam	45
Trần Thị Lan - Vận dụng thuyết kiến tạo trong dạy học “Những nguyên lý cơ bản của chủ nghĩa Mác – Lênin” ở các trường đại học	49
Nguyễn Thanh Tú - Một số giải pháp nâng cao chất lượng dạy và học tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Giao thông Vận tải, cơ sở đào tạo Thái Nguyên	55
Nguyễn Thị Hoài Thu - Một số phương pháp dạy học tích cực nhằm phát triển kỹ năng nói tiếng Việt một cách hiệu quả cho học viên quốc tế tại Học viện Kỹ thuật Quân sự	61
Ngô Thị Lan Anh, Võ Văn Trí - Sự cần thiết của việc giáo dục ý thức bảo vệ môi trường sinh thái cho thanh niên ở thành phố Long Xuyên, tỉnh An Giang	67
Lê Văn Hiếu - Công tác tuyên truyền qua mô hình “ban tuyên vận” xã, phường, thị trấn và “tổ tuyên vận” thôn, bản, tổ dân phố ở huyện Bắc Hà (tỉnh Lào Cai)	73
Trần Hoàng Tinh, Trần Văn Khánh, Nguyễn Trung Kiên - Tăng cường công tác kiểm tra, đánh giá hoạt động giáo dục tính kỷ luật cho sinh viên tại trung tâm giáo dục quốc phòng và an ninh trong giai đoạn hiện nay	79
Nguyễn Mai Anh, Nguyễn Thị Hoàng Lan - Đổi mới nội dung giáo dục pháp luật trong chương trình đào tạo cử nhân giáo dục chính trị của trường Đại học Sư phạm - Đại học Thái Nguyên đáp ứng yêu cầu của chương trình giáo dục phổ thông mới	85
Đỗ Thị Ngọc Phương, Trần Thị Thảo - Phát huy thế mạnh đề án trong ngôn ngữ viết được sử dụng bởi sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm 2, trường Đại học Sư phạm - Đại học Thái Nguyên	91
Vũ Đình Bắc, Lý Mai Hương, Hoàng Thị Hồng Hạnh - Sử dụng hoạt động nhóm để nâng cao kỹ năng nói cho sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm nhất trường Đại học Sư phạm - Đại học Thái Nguyên	97
Nguyễn Thị Hằng, Lê Thị Quỳên, Nguyễn Lệ Mai, Vũ Thị Lệnh - Tổ chức học trải nghiệm chủ đề “sâu, bệnh hại cây trồng” (Công nghệ 10 - THPT)	103
Nguyễn Thị Khương - Vận dụng mô hình lớp học đảo ngược trong dạy học môn Giáo dục công dân ở trung học phổ thông	109
Lại Thu Uyên, Vũ Đình Bắc, Nguyễn Thành Long - Nâng cao ngữ pháp cho sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm 3 trường Đại học Sư phạm - Đại học Thái Nguyên thông qua kiểm tra chéo	115
Nguyễn Thị Hồng Chuyên, Hà Thị Như Quỳnh - Sử dụng kỹ thuật bắt chước trong việc nâng cao khả năng nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên năm 2 không chuyên trường Đại học Sư phạm - Đại học Thái Nguyên	121

Nguyễn Nam Hà, Nguyễn Thị Thủy - Đánh giá thực trạng thể chất của sinh viên Đại học Thái Nguyên	127
Vũ Thị Thanh Thủy, Chu Văn Trung, Cao Thùy Linh - Nghiên cứu thực trạng và tiềm năng phát triển du lịch tỉnh Thái Nguyên	133
Trần Thị Ngọc Hà - Nghiên cứu mô hình kinh tế nông hộ nhằm quản lý và sử dụng đất dốc bền vững tại vùng trồng chè La Bằng, Đại Từ, Thái Nguyên	139
Nguyễn Văn Tâm, Hà Thị Hòa, Bùi Thị Minh Hà, Lê Thị Hoa Sen, Đặng Thị Hương - Ảnh hưởng của yếu tố nguồn lực đến đa dạng sinh kế nông hộ trồng chè trên địa bàn huyện Đại Từ, tỉnh Thái Nguyên	143
Hoàng Văn Hải, Hoàng Thị Thu Hằng - Ảnh hưởng của phân bón đến năng suất lúa tại Thái Nguyên	149
Đặng Thương Hoài Linh, Lý Thu Trang - Bảo hộ nhãn hiệu nổi tiếng theo pháp luật quốc tế và pháp luật Việt Nam	155
Đỗ Tuyết Ngân - Vai trò của phụ nữ trong phát triển du lịch cộng đồng ở thị xã Nghĩa Lộ, tỉnh Yên Bái	163
Vũ Thị Thu - Đánh giá sự thay đổi sử dụng đất nông nghiệp trong điều kiện biến đổi khí hậu tại huyện Giao Thủy, tỉnh Nam Định	169
Phạm Thị Thanh Mai, Trần Lệ Kim, Nguyễn Thị Lan - Tăng cường ứng dụng tiến bộ khoa học và công nghệ trong sản xuất chè tại thành phố Thái Nguyên	175
Nguyễn Thị Bích Hạnh, Nguyễn Thị Thu Thủy - Đánh giá hiệu quả của các loại hình sử dụng đất nông nghiệp xã Yên Phúc, huyện Văn Quan, tỉnh Lạng Sơn	181
Đặng Quỳnh Trinh, Trần Văn Hùng - Công tác kiểm tra thuế thu nhập doanh nghiệp đối với các doanh nghiệp ngoài quốc doanh trên địa bàn huyện Phổ Yên, tỉnh Thái Nguyên	187

USING GROUP-WORK ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL FOR THE FIRST YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION

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SUMMARY

Language is extremely vital in human life. Therefore, English plays an important role in the current integration of globalization from communication to opportunities in learning, working, expanding relationships to business cooperation, etc. Working in a group is considered as an excellent tool in enhancing their speaking ability in both pronunciation and brainstorming ideas. This study aims at investigating the difficulties in learning English speaking skill of the first year English majors of Thai Nguyen University of Education as well as the use of group-work activities and suggesting some effective techniques about group-work activities to develop their speaking skills. Interview and class observation were used to collect data in order to discover the answers to research questions. The participants are the students coming from class English k52 and a teacher teaching English speaking skill for this class. The result of the study is certainly meaningful and useful for both the students' learning process and the teachers' teaching speaking skill.

Key words: *group work, using group-work activities to improve speaking skill, the first year English majors, students at TUE, speaking skill.*

INTRODUCTION

English is an international language which is extremely important in our life. It is considered a bridge connecting a country or a culture with others. In learning a language including English, the learners in general and Vietnamese ones, in particular, need to learn four main skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing skill. However, in order to communicate with people around the world, learners have to study how to speak English fluently as a foreign language or native people. This skill demands practice more in many contexts of our life both inside and outside the class. However, the English learning environment of our country is not really convenient and suitable enough for the students; which it is quite difficult for them to develop their speaking skills. Therefore, students are not confident and they do not what they have to talk when they communicate with foreigners.

To learn this skill effectively, it is important to require some activities as learning environment so that help the learners have

more opportunities to practice and feel more excited as well as motivated. Working in groups is one of such expected ones. Participating in group activities will help them to not only be more confident in communicating but also their speaking abilities will certainly improve significantly as members of the team will help others correct their mistakes and then all students will be able to progress together. Nevertheless, students join in the speaking lesson much more active because they have a lot of opportunities to practice speaking English, share ideas with their friends as well as re-correct for others' mistakes than listening and writing something given from their teachers.

There are many researchers both in our country and in the world studying about using group-work activities in order to improve speaking skill. However, the different activities or methods are suitable for different participants from other regions. It means that foreign students are different from Vietnamese students in general and the first year English majors at TUE in particular.

Working in groups in order to improve speaking skill is not really a new study in the

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world as well as Vietnam. However, the researcher wants to apply these activities for the first year English majors at TUE. Actually, group-work activities are extremely suitable with the students' characteristic. The researcher hopes that the teachers should organize more and more group-work activities for students so that they have more chance to enhance their English skills in general and speaking skill in particular.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The definitions of speaking

The concepts of speaking skill were defined by many famous authors in the world. According to Bygate (1987, p 1) [1] "Speaking skill is the ability in using oral language to explore ideas, intentions, thoughts and feelings to other people as a way to make the message clearly delivered and well understood by the hearer.". Besides, Hedge (2000, p 261) [4] argues "speaking is a skill by which they [people] are judged while first impressions are being formed.". In other words, speaking skill is an important skill which helps people express and share their ideas with others. This skill is often paid attention when people communicate because it reflects their thoughts and personalities. Speaking is the art of communication and is also the interaction between two or more people in expressing their ideas in the particular contexts.

Difficulties in learning to speak a foreign language

Nothing is easy and learning a foreign language in general and English, in particular, is no exception. During the learning language process, especially speaking skill, learners will deal with a number of difficulties which researcher will present some main difficulties below. They are inhibition, nothing to say and mother tongue.

Inhibition

Speaking skill is different from other skills in English such as reading, listening and writing. It requires a great real environment, which has foreign people, to practice communicating

effectively. Nevertheless, learners are often shy when they try to say something in the English classroom because they are afraid of making mistakes, worried about some teachers' negative comments or lacking self-confident in front of the crowd.

Nothing to say

Nothing to say is one of the learners' difficulties when they study English because they do not know what they will talk about a particular topic, especially when they communicate with foreigners. It may make learners feel bored and afraid of speaking because of lacking ideas to express themselves. In this case, students do not have opportunities to practice English speaking skill, in fact, this skill needs practicing more. Learners often lack self-confidence in their speaking ability and feel do not have enough language skills to express exactly what they want to say.

Mother tongue

Another problem is mother tongue which all most of students tend to speak a foreign language in when they explain some difficult things or discuss rough topics given by the teacher. If learners are asked reasons why they often use mother tongue during learning English process, they explained that they felt more natural and confident to express their ideas to the partners. In addition, some learners said that they did not want to make some stupid mistakes, be shy and especially have a deficient vocabulary.

Group work

Working in a group is considered as an excellent tool or a good environment for learners to study English. Group-work activities have a variety of definitions which are mentioned below by researcher.

Eva Hammar Chiriatic (2004) [2] argues that "*group work is a very powerful learning approach, which can be hugely beneficial to students when used effectively.*"

According to Jennifer Morris (2016) [3], group work is a student-centered way of teaching that emphasizes collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork. When working in

a group, students can do some tasks by themselves without any teachers' help. The author means that the students certainly feel more confident and independent when they work with their friends. They can complete some both easy and difficult tasks without any teachers' help. In addition, their speaking abilities also develop significantly in the shortest time.

In addition, Rance-Roney (2010) [6] describes group work as a classroom practice where "*students work in teams to construct knowledge and accomplish tasks through collaborative interaction.*" Teachers sometimes use group work in an informal way to organize several short activities. However, group work in a formal way can bring many benefits for students as well. Learners can share their difficulties in learning together even suggest some useful ways to learn English as well as other subjects effectively.

To sum up, working in a group is one of the most useful methods for students to learn, especially in self-study process; and it provides a lot of benefits including knowledge and skills for learners.

Advantages of working in groups

Working in groups is one of the collaborative activities which students are center. It plays an important role in learning speaking skill; it also brings about many benefits to both the teacher and learners. There are some obvious advantages of using group work activities. *First of all*, the activities can help the students develop peer support. They often work together as a small class which has a teacher and students. It means that their support, encouragement as well as motivation are provided. *Secondly*, group-work activities give excellent chances for the students to practice speaking skill as well as expressing ideas in front of their friends. If they are bad at any aspect of English such as grammar or ideas, the classmates will certainly help you improve it. *In addition*, working in groups is really a good activity to get high production because "Many hands make light work."

Moreover, the students feel more confident and active when they join in group-work activities. To sum up, working in groups brings about a variety of advantages for both learners and teachers.

Disadvantages of working in groups

On the contrary, working in groups also has some minus drawbacks. *Firstly*, the whole activity could be time-consuming when working in groups because this activity needs all members of a group. It is very difficult to gather because of learners' different timetable; therefore, it is waste a lot of time. *Secondly*, some students feel that it is extremely a good way to avoid work. Especially in large groups, it is easy for them to leave duties to other or leader to complete. *Moreover*, it is very difficult to have general ideas, which may lead to conflict among group's members, since each person has different thoughts and opinions. A leader is a smart person who considers and chooses the most suitable ideas from a variety one. *In addition*, it is difficult for the teacher to determine what language they use when working in groups. They tend to explain some rough things in mother tongue, which cannot develop their English speaking skills. *Nevertheless*, the students make too much noise when they work in groups, which make other classes feel uncomfortable. Although working in groups has many disadvantages, it is a new activity hold in not only English lessons but also other ones.

A successful speaking lesson

Among the four skills, speaking seems intuitively the most important. People who know a language are referred to as, "speakers" of that language as if speaking included all other kinds of knowledge; and many if not most foreign languages learners are primarily interested in learning to speak (Ur 1998: 120) [5].

In order to have a successful speaking lesson, the teacher should pay attention to some following features such as the use of language, the content and learners' participation. In the book "*A course in*

Language Teaching”, Penny Ur (1998) [5] mentions four characteristics of a successful speaking activity, they are:

- *Learners practice a lot*. This means that students are the center and talk most of the time provided for speaking activities, and the teacher is only expected to introduce them what to talk about and encourage them to take part in the given activity.
- *Participation is equal*. Speaking activity is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants. Therefore, all of the learners should get a chance to speak and contribute to these activities fairly.
- *Motivation is high*. Learners are motivated and interested in talking about given topics which are chosen carefully by teachers. Learners are eager to do their tasks and have new things to say about them.

METHODOLOGY

In terms of methodology, interview and class observation were used to collect data in order to discover the answers to research questions. The participants are the students coming from class English k52 and a teacher teaching English speaking skill for this class. Thirty students was chosen to observe; ten students and a teacher were chosen to interview.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results analyzed from the interview and observation, it is clear that teachers and students are well aware of the importance of speaking skill. Moreover, they all have positive attitudes towards the role and benefits of group-work activities in both teaching and learning speaking skill. The effectiveness of working in groups in learning speaking skill was clearly described in the class observation and interview. Students showed that they liked working in groups than individually. The teacher also often divided the whole class into some small groups, and then he/she gave tasks to the students. They worked, discussed, and helped others solve some difficult exercises in pleasant atmosphere together. The researcher saw that they were very happy and confident when working in

groups. In addition, they were more active than work individually because when they studied with their friends, they felt confident and gained more knowledge as well as experiences from their classmates.

Moreover, the teacher also organized many group-work activities during the speaking lessons because he saw that students prefer working in groups than working individually. As my observation, the teacher often divided the class into two or four groups depending on the tables in each classroom. Nevertheless, the teacher also gave homework required the students to work in groups for them. Therefore, they worked in groups not only in the class but also at home when they did their homework. They may complete the duties at the library, canteen or some convenient places.

However, most of the students found they faced many difficulties in speaking lessons, though teachers gave them chances to practice speaking through group activities. Most of them (about 80%) still did not have ideas to share with their friends during group-work activities. Lieu, an interviewee, said: *"I have a lot of difficulties in learning speaking skill... Moreover, I do not know what I have to say."* Also, appropriate 78% students felt not confident enough to present in front of their friends as group members because they were scared to make mistakes in their speeches. Lieu also said: *"Sometimes I feel unconfident when I stand in front of other people and speak English"*. Moreover, other interviewee said: *"Oh my difficulties in learning speaking skill are: 'I feel lack of confident; Sometimes I don't know what I have to say'"*. About 80% students say that they lacked ideas to share with their partners when the teacher gave a topic. They might have some difficulties at the time because five or ten minutes is not really enough for them to brainstorm outline of the given topic. To sum up, the first year students face many difficulties including lack of confident, inhibition and nothing to say.

After the process of the study using group-work activities, most students' speaking skill reached acceptable and good level. In the first

observation lesson, a pair could talk 50 words in a minute; however, in the third lesson, they could speak more than 80 words per minute compared with the first one. It means that their speaking ability was enhanced by using group-work activities both inside and outside the class. They also know more about their friends because they have many opportunities to talk and share something together. They cannot deny that using group work not only helps them to solve a number of hard exercises or tasks but also is a chance for them to understand more about their classmates. They are the first year majors, so they do not know others very well. Group-work activities are extremely a good chance for them to understand more about their new friends.

The researcher would like to give some suggestions on ways to improve the use of group-work activities successfully in English speaking lessons. *Firstly*, the teacher should organize group-work activities for the students to participate in order to enhance their skills in general and speaking skill in particular. In addition, the teacher should give clear instructions before asking the students to work in groups, which helps them understand what they have to do or in other words, what they have to concentrate on to get a high result. *Secondly*, the students should self-study to improve their grammar, pronunciation as well as vocabulary. They can learn everywhere and every time. Moreover, they should spend at least two hours per day practicing speaking as well as other skills. They should make a smart schedule and follow it strictly; self-hanging awards for themselves is also a good way for learners to complete the timetable effectively. *In addition*, they can learn English from many sources such as via the Internet. Uyen said: “*We can watch audio, video and movie and repeat them*”. Repeating is a traditional method but I think it is still effective. On the Internet, there are many channels, pages or groups helping students study not only English but also other subjects. Youtube is one of the best websites that the researcher would like to recommend to the learners. In

conclusion, they can learn from many sources not only in the books but also via the Internet which is a wonderful source with huge sources of data and information for the learners’ study.

Speaking is one of the most important skills in learning a foreign language, especially English. It can help people communicate with others in many different regions of the world. There are some studies research about group work to improve speaking skill; however, students at TUE differs from students in other countries. Moreover, there are few researches related to this topic have been done in Thai Nguyen city, especially at TUE.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, teaching speaking skill in foreign language is not easy and it puts strong demands on both the teacher and students. Group-work activities are excellent tools and effective in increasing motivation for learning, positive feeling for the friendship, and problem-solving. In working in groups, students are centered and trained to be a cooperative, independent, and active learner. Moreover, they knew how to work in groups as well as how to divide duties equally to each member of the group, which helps them more and more mature. There are a variety of factors that make a successful speaking lesson. The researcher would like to give some suggestions on ways to improve the use of group-work activities successfully in English speaking lesson. *Firstly*, the teacher should organize group-work activities for the students to participate in order to enhance their skills in general and speaking skill in particular. In addition, the teacher should give clear instructions before asking the students working in groups, which helps them understand what they have to do. It means that the students know what they have to concentrate on to get a high result. *Secondly*, the students should self-study to improve their grammar, pronunciation as well as vocabulary. They can learn everywhere and every time. Moreover, they should spend at

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This study was on small scale; it was only researched in the first year English majors of FLE at TUE. It is a new young department which covers about 250 students of the university. Therefore, it cannot cover and investigate deeply all aspects of the matter

because this study was only conducted at one university because of lack of time and human power. Moreover, the students’ features differ from other English majors students of different universities. Hence, further studies should be expanded to more universities and investigate more facts surrounding the current state of learning and teaching English speaking skill through group-work activities.

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TÓM TẮT

SỬ DỤNG HOẠT ĐỘNG NHÓM ĐỂ NÂNG CAO KỸ NĂNG NÓI CHO SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ NĂM NHẤT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM – ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

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Ngày nay, tiếng Anh được xem là ngôn ngữ quốc tế. Hoạt động nhóm được xem là một công cụ hữu ích trong việc nâng cao kỹ năng của người học về cả phát âm và nghĩ ý tưởng. Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích tìm ra những khó khăn cơ bản trong quá trình rèn luyện kỹ năng nói của sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm nhất trường Đại học Sư phạm – Đại học Thái Nguyên cũng như thực trạng sử dụng hoạt động nhóm trong giờ học nói và đưa ra một vài gợi ý về cách sử dụng hoạt động nhóm để phát triển kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh cho sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm nhất. Hai công cụ nghiên cứu được dùng là phỏng vấn và quan sát lớp học. Đối tượng của nghiên cứu là sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm nhất và một giảng viên dạy kỹ năng nói. Kết quả của nghiên cứu sẽ đóng góp hữu ích cho cả quá trình học nói của sinh viên và cho cả hoạt động dạy kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của các giảng viên.

Từ khóa: làm việc theo nhóm, sử dụng các hoạt động nhóm để trau dồi kỹ năng nói, sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm nhất, sinh viên của trường Đại học Sư phạm – Đại học Thái Nguyên, kỹ năng nói.

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SOCIAL SCIENCE – HUMANITIES – ECONOMICS

Content	Page
Nghiêm Thi Ho Thu - Formation basis of Ngọc Giao's prose characteristics	3
Vu Thi Hanh - From new consciousness of gender characteristics to new women in Vietnamese novels at the beginning of 21 st century	9
Phạm Thi Ngọc Anh - Applications of water-wave icons on contemporary sculpture of monuments in Viet Nam	15
Phung Phuong Nga, Doan Duc Hai - Symbols in Nguyen Xuan Khanh's novels (the cases of novels <i>Hồ Quý Ly</i> , <i>Mẫu thượng ngàn</i> , and <i>Đội gạo lên chùa</i>)	21
Vu Thuy Hang, Doan Thi Hong Nhung - Discussion on classification of the motherworship religion	25
Phạm Văn Hưng, Nguyễn Huy Hưng, Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương - Thai Nguyen University's assessment of program learning outcomes through the assessment of senior students near their completion of their undergraduate degree	31
Hoàng Duy Tuong - Solutions to enhance physical education efficiency for students at Thai Nguyen University of Medicine and Pharmacy – Thai Nguyen University	37
Hoàng Thu Thuy, Ly Trung Thanh - Nguyen Ai Quoc – Ho Chi Minh – who set the foundation for the special relationship between Vietnam and Laos	45
Trần Thị Lan - Applying the tectonic theory to teaching "the basic principles of the Marxism - Leninism" in universities	49
Nguyễn Thanh Tú - Some solutions to enhance the quality of teaching and learning English at University of Transport Technology, Thai Nguyen Campus	55
Nguyễn Thị Hoài Thu - Methods of active teaching for efficient development of Vietnamese speaking skill for foreign students at Military Technical Academy	61
Ngo Thi Lan Anh, Vo Van Tri - Necessity of educating the consciousness of ecological environment protection for youth in Long Xuyen city, An Giang province	67
Le Van Hieu - Communications projected by the model "propaganda department" in communes, wards, township and "commander" in villages, cities in Bac Ha district (Lao Cai province)	73
Trần Hoàng Tinh, Trần Văn Khanh, Nguyễn Trung Kiên - Strengthen examination and evaluation of disciplinary education activities for students at national defense and security education centers in the current phase	79
Nguyễn Mai Anh, Nguyễn Thị Hoàng Lan - Renovation of legal education content in the bachelor's degree program in political education of Thai Nguyen University of Education to meet the requirements of the new general education curriculum	85
Đo Thị Ngọc Phương, Trần Thị Thảo - Project power in the study of the English written language used by the second-year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education	91
Vu Đình Bắc, Ly Mai Hương, Hoàng Thị Hồng Hạnh - Using group-work activities to improve English speaking skill for the first year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education	97
Nguyễn Thị Hằng, Lê Thị Quyên, Nguyễn Lê Mai, Vu Thị Lenh - Organizing the experiential learning in teaching the theme "pests and disease of plants" (Technology 10 in high school)	103
Nguyễn Thị Khuong - Applying the flipped classroom model in teaching citizen education subject in high school	109
Lai Thu Uyên, Vu Đình Bắc, Nguyễn Thanh Long - Enhance grammar of third-year students of English major through peer check at Thai Nguyen University of Education	115
Nguyễn Thị Hồng Chuyền, Hà Thị Nhu Quỳnh - Imitation technique in improving 2 nd year non-English major students' oral competence discourse at Thai Nguyen University of Education	121

Nguyen Nam Ha, Nguyen Thi Thuy - Assessment on physical condition of students at Thai Nguyen University	127
Vu Thi Thanh Thuy, Chu Van Trung, Cao Thuy Linh - Research on the current and potential developments of Thai Nguyen tourism industry	133
Tran Thi Ngoc Ha - Researching household economy model for sustainable management and use on sloping land in tea growing areas in La Bang commune, Dai Tu district, Thai Nguyen province	139
Nguyen Van Tam, Ha Thi Hoa, Bui Thi Minh Ha, Le Thi Hoa Sen, Dang Thi Huong - Impact of resource factors on livelihood diversification of tea growing households in Dai Tu district, Thai Nguyen province	143
Hoang Van Hai, Hoang Thi Thu Hang - The effects of fertilizers on rice yield in Thai Nguyen	149
Dang Thuong Hoai Linh, Ly Thu Trang - The international and Vietnamese laws on protection of well-known trademarks	155
Do Tuyen Ngan - The role of women with community based tourism development in Nghia Lo town, Yen Bai province	163
Vu Thi Thu - Assessing the agricultural land use change under the climate change context in Giao Thuy district, Nam Dinh province	169
Pham Thi Thanh Mai, Tran Le Kim, Nguyen Thi Lan - Enhancing the application of science and technology advances into tea production in Thai Nguyen city	175
Nguyen Thi Bich Hanh, Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy - Assessment of efficiency of agricultural land use in Yen Phuc commune, Van Quan district, Lang Son province	181
Dang Quynh Trinh, Tran Van Hung - Business income tax inspection for non-state enterprises in Pho Yen district, Thai Nguyen province	187