# THE ATTITUDES TO ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL OF 1ST YEAR ENGINEERING STUDENTS AT THAINGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, VIETNAM

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## ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate the attitudes to English speaking skill of 1st year engineering students at ThaiNguyen University of Technology, Vietnam. Productivity English speaking skill Survey explored the reasons that students feel reluctant in speaking English and the reasons that students are not success in learning English. The results showed three main reasons are cultural factors, linguistic factors, and/ or psychological/ affective factors. The result of this research as an orientation to help English teachers in Vietnam find the best way to teach and to help their students gain English Language Acquisition.

**Keywords***: Learning; Cultural factors; Linguistic factors; Psychological factors.

## INTRODUCTION

Nobody can deny the important role of languages in life. All linguistic researchers claim that language is "core value". To catch up with the development of other countries on the world, many people are bilingual or multilingual. There are many ways to help you become bilingual such as compulsory subject at school, parents taught, television programs, etc. In Vietnam education system, English is a compulsory subject. With the role as an indispensable tool in communication of the world, studying English become a trend in Vietnam. It helps people gain scholarships, go abroad for further study, get good jobs, get high salary, go abroad to work.

According to M. Canale and M. Swain (1980), communication is the essential purpose of language (p. 23). In addition, Krashen (1982) said that people only acquire language when they can speak this language naturally, fluently. In Vietnam, English curriculum pays attention to rules, forms, and grammar or error correction; however, English acquisition means contributing meaningful interaction or communication as the way that children study their mother tongue – with no attention to form. Bueno, Madrid and McLaren (2006 : 321) confirmed that although speaking is one of the most difficult skills language learners have to face, teachers of English have spent all classroom time trying to teach students how to write, to read and sometimes even to listen in a second language because grammar has a long written tradition. Therefore, many Vietnamese learners have to face up with problems when they must focus their attention on meaningful interaction; whereas, in other countries, most of bilingual people are quite competent in speaking activities without ever knowing rules or grammar. Developing the learners' ability in speaking activities is actually a hard challenge of English teacher in Vietnam. Vietnamese learners often feel reluctant in speaking activities. Hence although they are very successful in

writing, reading, listening or doing grammar exercises, they cannot speak English fluently. They understand all the content of conversation but they cannot respond.

For example, in my institution – Thainguyen University of Technology – most of my students have problems in speaking activities. English is a compulsory subject at my university with 3 basic parts (45 periods for each part and 45 minutes for a period). All my students understand the important role of English for their career such as it help them expand their knowledge, study further, get high salary, get good status in companies, work for foreign companies. Communication is the main purpose of English subject in our curriculum. However, many English teachers complained about the English speaking ability of students. They said that they could not understand why. Similarly, my students complained that they could not understand themselves why they understood the situations, they knew many English words, they knew English rules but they could not respond. At that time, nothing in their head and they could not say anything. That means Vietnamese learners cannot gain the essential purpose of English language.

I agree with Finney, D. (2002) that language is communication and the teachers must develop their learners' communicative ability effectively in a wide range of professional and social contexts. Therefore, I decided to study about the attitudes to speaking English of 1st year engineering students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology, Vietnam. In this research, I would like to find the main reasons that make my students unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities. I hope that this research may give my colleagues some suggestions in finding the appropriate teaching method and curriculum to engage reluctant learners in speaking activities. Moreover, it may help my students gain success in studying English. They can develop their speaking skill and acquire English as a second language; hence, they can gain the essential purpose of English language.

## LITERATURE REVIEW
### The definition, characteristics and types of bilingual

Baker, C. (1993) said that "*it has been argued that deciding who is or is not bilingual is difficult*" (p. 7). Actually, there are many different definitions of bilingual. For example, Bloomfield (1933) gave maximalist definition that bilingualism such as "*the native-like control of two or more languages*". Whereas, Diebold's (1964) gave a minimalist definition, that is the concept of incipient bilingualism. The term "incipient bilingualism" allow people with minimal competence in a second language to squeeze into the bilingual category. In addition, Baker C. (1993) showed the third type of bilingual that are someone "*who approximately equally fluent in two languages across various contexts may be termed an equilingual or ambilingual or, more commonly, a balanced bilingual*" (p. 8). Lambert (1974) gave the fourth types of bilingual that is additive bilingual. Additive bilingual brings to the speaker a set of cognitive and social abilities which do not negatively affect those that have been acquired in the first language but where the two linguistic and cultural entities involved in being bilingual combine in a complementary and enriching fashion.

In 1921s, bilingual education appeared in The Irish Free State of Ireland. Then, in 1939, bilingual education presented in Wales. After that, bilingual education was born in the US in

1960s. In St. Lambert, Montreal of Canada, bilingual education appeared with an experimental kindergarten class. In Vietnam, bilingual education was born from the domination of French. All schools taught in French, not in Vietnamese. All people in companies use French to communicate. However, in public places, people still use Vietnamese to communicate.

Mackey (1970) gave 90 different patterns of bilingual schooling considers: the languages of the home, the languages of the curriculum; the languages of the community in which the school is located and the international, the regional status of the languages. There are different opinions of linguistic experts about the definition of bilingual. Mackey (1957: 51) said that "*it seems obviously that if we are to study the phenomenon of bilingualism we are forced to consider it as something entirely relative. We must moreover include the use not only of two languages, but also of any number of languages. We shall therefore consider bilingualism as the alternate use of two or more languages by the same individual*". Aucamp, 1926 (in Bezier and Van Overbeke, 1968, p. 113) showed that bilingualism is the condition in which two living language exist side by side in a country, each spoken by one national group, representing a fairly large proportion of the people. According to Haugen (1953: 7), "*bilingualism is understood… to begin at the point where the speaker of one language can produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language*". Baetens Beardsmore, H. (1982) give simple definition of bilingual that must be able to account for the presence of at least two languages within one and the same speaker, and the ability in these two languages may or may not be equal.

In my opinion, I understand that the most powerful form of bilingualism is stable and balanced. Bilingualism is characterized by transfer, interference and code switching which lead to mixed third varieties. Bilingualism is individual and social, culture and psychological. Hence, bilingualism is also political or related to power in some ways good and bad. The people are bilingual when they can use two languages and the level of using two languages may be not equal.

**Some reasons that make learners unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities.**

As M. Canale and M. Swain (1980), Krashen (1982), Segalowitz (1976) concluded that the main purpose of a language is communication. However, there are many reasons that make learners unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities.

It is not an easy task to define exactly who are unsuccessful or less successful learners in speaking activities, however, it could be generally agreed that these learners are learners who do not have communicative competence. They cannot communicate or they are afraid of communicating in the foreign language.

According to Burns and Joyce (1997: 134), there are three main factors that make learners unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities. These are *cultural factors, linguistic factors, and/ or psychological/ affective factors.*

Firstly, *cultural factors* are a set of expectations, values and beliefs. They showed that cultural factors derive from prior learning experiences and the expectations created by these experiences. In addition, there is a big different in beliefs, thoughts, concepts, expectation between people in

different countries. For example, the difference in culture between Western and Eastern, Western people are easy-going whereas Eastern people are secret, shy and quiet.

The second factor is *linguistic factors*. Savignon (1972), Stern (1978, 1979) showed some linguistic difficulties in speaking activities such as how to address strangers when unsure of their social status, how to avoid grammatical errors, how to deal with false starts, how to cope with authentic communicative situations, how to keep the communicative channel open, hesitations, other performance factors. Burns and Joyce (1997) said that it is a challenge in transferring from first language to the sound, rhythms and stress pattern of other languages. It is evident that most of bilingual or learners feel reluctant in speaking activities when they face up with a language they do not know well. If they limit in linguistics, it is actually difficult for them to keep communicative channels open.

Third factor is *psychological/ affective factors*. These factors derived from the feeling or emotion of learners in learning activities. Psychological/ affective factors include previous negative social or political experiences, especially if their previous experiences were negative; lack of motivation; anxiety or shyness in class. According to a research of Cortazzi and Jin (1996), they concluded that Western learners are afraid of losing face in classrooms and singled out in public when they make mistakes in speaking activities. Similarly, in 1996, Ur showed that learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom; fearful of criticism; worried about making mistakes, losing face and shy to the attention that their speech attracts (p. 121).

From all the factors above, we can see that not only Vietnamese learners but also all bilingual must face to problems of speaking skill. Therefore, finding the main reasons that make learners unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities is very necessary. After doing this research, we may find an appropriate way to solve this problem and students can gain the main purpose of English language.

**Context of the study**

Bilingual educational system appeared in Vietnam from the domination of French in 1858. At that time, all people, from young generation to old generation were bilingual. They can use two languages -both French and Vietnamese- fluently. All school used French in teaching. Then, Russian became a popular foreign language in Vietnam. Many people spoke in both Vietnamese and Russian. Studying Russian became a trend in Vietnam. Nowadays, with the development of society, most of Vietnamese people study English as a foreign language to serve their different purposes. Some people are multilingual; they can speak in Vietnamese, English, and Russian and even French. However, most of them are bilingual with two languages: English and Vietnamese.

Ellis (1996) observed and concluded that the English learning environment in Vietnam as a cultural island where the teacher is expected to be the sole provider of experience in the target language. Actually, teaching English in Vietnam is very traditional. The teacher, the syllabus, the curriculum and the textbooks determined the knowledge. In past, we used grammar-translation in teaching English. However, this method made learners not have ability in speaking activities. Thanks to the open-door policy of Vietnam in the early 1990s, the demand to be competence in

speaking activities to interact with the outside world and to access new knowledge and technology make speaking skill has been recognized. To catch up with other countries, take part in the world and get benefit from the globalization, Vietnam must acquire English, especially in speaking activities. Therefore, the attitude and purpose of learning and teaching English in Vietnam changed sharply. Developing learners' communicative competence is the demand and main purpose of all English teachers. However, most of Vietnamese learners face up with the difficult in speaking activities. Both English teachers and students said that they do not know exactly the main reasons that make them unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities.

According to the classification of Arberg, L. (1987), there are two kinds of bilingualism: "simultaneous" bilingualism – the languages are learned at the same time, usually from the birth and "successive" bilingualism – one language is learned after the other. From the distinction above, we can see that most of Vietnamese are "successive" bilingual. Most of them become bilingual because English is a compulsory at school and they study English after Vietnamese. However, they are limited in producing language. In classrooms, teachers must do most of talking in classrooms. Learners only listen and take note. It is dangerous that over half of the interactions that teachers have with students, students do not speak in English. If students can respond, they only produce simply and shortly, they do not have any creation in speaking activities. They are not ready to speak English and they often evade speaking English. Therefore they cannot communicate in English and they cannot acquire English.

From all reasons above, I decided to do a research about the reasons that make learners unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities. I hope the result of this research give suggestions in creating English curriculum for Vietnamese learners to develop communicative competence. The main research question in this study is "What are the reasons that make students at Thainguyen University of Technology unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities?"

**METHODOLOGY**
**Sample**
150 first year students of Thainguyen University of Technology will be chosen for this study. Thainguyen University of Technology is a famous university in the Northern mountainous area of Vietnam. At this university, we train students to become technological engineers. A course includes 5 years with 10 terms. In first year or second year, our students must learn general subjects such as Mathematics, Vietnamese, English, etc. Then, they have to study specific subjects in three years later. Though English is not the main subject in our university, with the experiences of former students, all of our students understand the importance and the necessary of English for their career in the future. They are students of three classes: K41 IA, K41 IB and K41 IC. I use a pre-test to divide these students into three main groups:
    Group 1: Successful learners in speaking activities
    Group 2: Less successful learners in speaking activities
    Group 3: Unsuccessful learners in speaking activities

Then, I study to find the reasons that make our students unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities.

**Instruments**

2.1 I use quantitative method to classify students for study. A pre-test helps me evaluate and classify the oral competence of students in three classes K41 IA, K41 IB, K41 IC. The pre-test must be appropriate with English curriculum and it can measure the English speaking level of learners in three classes. In other words, it must have ability in classifying subjects for the study accurately.

2.2 I use qualitative method to find the reasons that make learners unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities. Observation, questionnaire and interview will be used to find the reasons. I take part in five English periods each class and observe the attitude of students to speaking activities. The questionnaires and interview questions are used to find the reasons that make students fail in speaking activities. Obviously, all the questionnaires and interview questions will be translated into Vietnamese in order to avoid misunderstanding.

**RESULTS**

After using a pre-test, 150 students were classified into three main groups in speaking activities. Data for this study comes from students in three classes K41 IA, K 41 IB, and K41 IC. These students must do an oral test to measure the English communicative competence. Time for each person in this pre-test is from 5 – 7 minutes. The topic of oral test is about general things in life such as studying, hobbies, memory, etc. The presentation of students in the oral test is evaluated by participant observers (English teachers). There are three main groups in speaking activities.

   Group 1: Successful learners with score from 7 – 10
   Group 2: Less successful learners with score from 5 – 6
   Group 3: Unsuccessful learners with score from 0 – 4
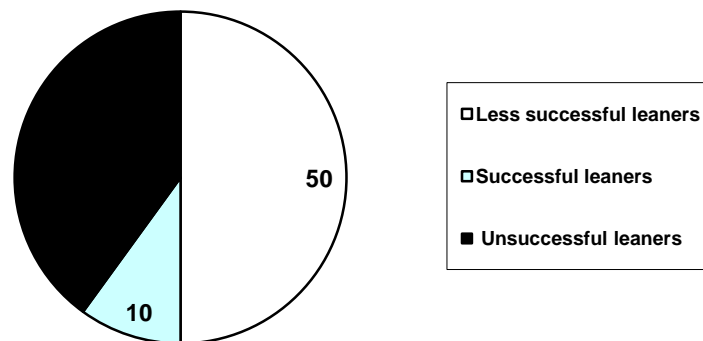   (Band score is from 0 – 10)
   After pre-test, I got this result:
   10% students got score from 7 – 10
   50% students got score from 5 – 6
   40% students got score from 0 – 4.
   The result of this pre-test can be presented in the pie-chat.



After pre-test, qualitative method helps to find the reasons that make learners unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities.

Observing five English periods each class, I realized that students in group 2 and 3 always feel reluctant in speaking activities. In class, students only listen and take note. In English periods,

teacher is center. Teachers uses traditional method in teaching, therefore, the students are not active, unwilling to speak, teachers use most of class time to transfer knowledge. The feedbacks of teachers do not encourage students in speaking activities, unsuccessful and less successful learners seem very shy when they receive these feedbacks. In addition, most English teachers require their students to keep silent in class. Moreover, there are too many students in a class. Therefore, the students do not have much chance to speak English and the learners' communicative competence is limited. I realized that most of students in group 2, 3 shy and worry when they must use English in speaking activities. About 30% students in group 2 and 3 cannot say anything when teachers required.

Secondly, interview questions were used to find the reasons that make students do not success in speaking activities. In the first question, I found that most of students in group 2 and 3 study English because it is compulsory subject. Therefore they do not have motivation in studying English. According to the answers of students for second question, I can conclude that about 90% students study English late. Hence, their ability in speaking English is not good. In the third question, I realised that many students know that speaking activities is very important in studying English; however, they do not know how to improve their speaking skill. When I ask them about their problems in speaking activities, they give a lot of problems which belong to three main groups: cultural factors, linguistic factors, and psychological/ affective factors. In the last question, I know that teaching method has many bad affect to students. Many students complain that they do not have many chances in speaking activities, they only listen and take note important information. Therefore, they do not active in speaking activities.

Lastly, the questionnaires were used to collect the opinions of students in group 2 and 3. I divided the questionnaires into five main parts. Part A includes three statements about gender, background of students. Students must choose only an appropriate answer. Part B includes six statements about cultural factors, part C includes seven questions about psychological / affective factors and part E includes 7 questions about the motivation of students.

According to data, 80% of students in this study are male. In many studies report, women use the newer, advanced forms more frequently than men. Newly introduced forms used mostly by women are sometimes prestigious (Trudgill, 1972) and sometimes not (Fasold, 1968). Therefore, the gender is one of reasons that create the high number of unsuccessful and less successful learners. Secondly, nobody has studied English since they were 1 -6 years old, only 5% students have studied English when they were 7 – 12 years old, 30% students have studied since they were 13 – 16 years old and 65% students have studied English when they were more than 17 years old. Actually, most of students in this investigation study English late. Therefore, their ability in speaking activities is not good. Many linguistic researchers affirmed that the younger learners study foreign languages, the better they are in speaking activities. 60% students in this study are minority students. In fact, minority students must face up with more challenges in speaking activities than other students. All of minority students study English late. Moreover, they lived in remote areas; therefore, they do not have many chances in approaching foreign language. They do not have useful technology in study English and they do not have chances to practice speaking English.

In part B, C, D, E of the questionnaires, students must choose the appropriate answer – A, B, C, D or E.

- A. Never or almost never true of student
- B. Usually not true of student
- C. Somewhat true of student
- D. Usually true of student
- E. Always or almost true of student

After collected the data, I have the result of part B, C, D, and E that:

| Answer / Question | A | B | C | D | E |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Part B** | | | | | |
| **4** | 0% | 0% | 5% | 15% | 80% |
| **5** | 0% | 0% | 10% | 25% | 65% |
| **6** | 5% | 10% | 25% | 50% | 10% |
| **7** | 10% | 40% | 30% | 10% | 10% |
| **8** | 10% | 30% | 46% | 9% | 5% |
| **9** | 1% | 3% | 16% | 40% | 40% |
| **Part C** | | | | | |
| **10** | 0% | 2% | 18% | 50% | 30% |
| **11** | 5% | 25% | 45% | 15% | 10% |
| **12** | 10% | 15% | 40% | 20% | 15% |
| **13** | 10% | 25% | 40% | 15% | 10% |
| **14** | 14% | 26% | 30% | 20% | 10% |
| **15** | 2% | 5% | 20% | 33% | 40% |
| **16** | 10% | 15% | 50% | 16% | 9% |
| **Part D** | | | | | |
| **17** | 2% | 3% | 50% | 25% | 20% |
| **18** | 2% | 4% | 24% | 30% | 40% |
| **19** | 5% | 10% | 40% | 30% | 15% |
| **20** | 5% | 5% | 20% | 40% | 30% |
| **21** | 5% | 5% | 50% | 25% | 15% |
| **22** | 3% | 7% | 20% | 40% | 30% |
| **23** | 0% | 5% | 15% | 30% | 50% |
| **Part E** | | | | | |
| **24** | 10% | 15% | 50% | 16% | 9% |
| **25** | 2% | 25% | 40% | 25% | 8% |
| **26** | 5% | 15% | 35% | 25% | 20% |
| **27** | 15% | 20% | 40% | 21% | 14% |
| **28** | 35% | 30% | 20% | 10% | 5% |
| **29** | 5% | 10% | 20% | 31% | 34% |
| **30** | 2% | 10% | 40% | 35% | 13% |

## DISCUSSION

From all the data above, I can concluded that there are 3 main reasons that make 1ˢᵗ year Engineering Students in ThaiNguyen University of Technology unsuccessful or less successful in speaking activities: These are cultural factors, linguistic factors, and/ or psychological/ affective factors. In fact, to these students, linguistic factors do not have much effect to the ability of students in speaking activities. Many students study English well but they still unsuccessful in speaking activities. The result showed that the psychological / affective factors have the worst affect to students. Moreover, teaching method has much affect to students. These results also indicated that some English teachers use inappropriate teaching method which does not encourage students in speaking activities. In addition, some English teachers give unsuitable feedbacks which make students feel shy. Many students in this study know the important role of speaking activities in studying English and they study English because it is a compulsory subject, however, many students do not like study English, therefore, and they do not have motivation in speaking activities.

## CONCLUSIONS

Cultural factors, linguistic factors, and/ or psychological/ affective factors are main reasons that make learners not success in learning language in general and feel reluctant in speaking activity in specific. However, from these reasons we should find the best way to solve these problems. Helping learners acquire language gradually through improving speaking skill is the main mission of every English teacher.

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