

# **An investigation into factors that hinder the participation of University students in English speaking lessons = khảo sát các yếu tố hạn chế sự tham gia của sinh viên trong giờ học nói tiếng Anh tại Trường đại học. M.A. Thesis Linguistics: 60 14 10 / Lê Thị Mai ; Supervisor : M.A. Lê Thế Nghiệp**

## **PART A: INTRODUCTION**

### **1. Rationale**

No one can deny the importance of English in life. English has become the vital device for communication in all fields. The final goal of study English is to master this language in communicating. The Communicative Approach teaching requires developing language learners' four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, speaking is seen as the center skill and the most demanding of the four skills (Bailey and Savage (1994:7)).

There is a fact that many Vietnamese students can write and read English well but they cannot speak fluently and correctly. Most of the students find speaking difficult, even uninteresting. After several years of teaching English, we have found that the university students are quite passive in speaking English. They do not actively participate in speaking activities. Certainly, students' participation can be affected by a variety of factors coming from teachers' side, students' side and others including classroom environment, types and contents of activities, etc. Unfortunately, this is not only the situation in my university but also the case for many other universities in Vietnam.

This has given me the desire to conduct a research to identify the factors that hinder students' participation as well as to find out the techniques and activities to increase students' participation in speaking activities at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University.

### **2. Objectives of the study**

The study is carried out to find out the factors hindering the university students' participation in speaking lessons, and why these factors have negative effect on university students' participation in classroom speaking activities. Based on the findings, the researcher will analyze activities and techniques often used by the teacher to increase students' participation. Furthermore, the researcher

will give some suggestions for teachers to stimulate students in speaking English and overcome the difficulties they have to face with in teaching speaking English for university students.

### **3. Research questions**

The study will answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors affecting university students' participation in speaking lessons?
2. What should teachers do to increase students' participation in class speaking activities?

### **4. Scope of the study**

First, the subjects of this study are second - major students of English at Ba Ria - Vung Tau University. Second, the study only covers the speaking skill. Third, the study focuses on finding out the factors including teachers' factors, students' factors and learning – teaching conditions hindering students' participation in classroom activities.

### **5. Methods of the Study**

In the study, both qualitative and quantitative methods are used. The data will be collected by means of questionnaire, interview and classroom observations. After the data is collected, analyzed and discussed, some conclusions will be drawn and some suggestions will be made in the thesis.

### **6. Design of the study**

The research consists of the following parts:

#### **Part A: Introduction**

This part deals with the rationale, objectives, significance, research questions, methods, scope and the design of the study.

#### **Part B: Development**

This part includes 3 chapters.

- ***Chapter 1: Literature Review***

The first chapter provides a theoretical background of speaking including definition of speaking, the importance of speaking, nature of speaking, characteristics of a successful speaking activity and learners' participation. In addition, this chapter also provides factors affecting students' participation in classroom speaking activities including teacher's factors such as teaching techniques, teachers' knowledge, teachers' characteristics, and teachers' roles in speaking activities, students' factors such as personality, learning style, attitude and motivation, different genders of students and students' anxiety, and learning and teaching conditions such as physical conditions and classroom climate. This is viewed as the theoretical framework for the investigation in the next chapter.

- ***Chapter 2: The study***

This chapter will present methodology adopted to collect data for the research, which consists of descriptions of setting, research questions, data collection, data procedures, data analysis and participants involved in the study.

- ***Chapter 3: Findings and Discussion.***

The data of this chapter will be collected from questionnaire, interview and observation, which reveals (1) how these factors hinder students' participation, (2) techniques used for speaking lessons, (3) some suggested solutions.

### **Part C: Conclusion**

## **PART B: DEVELOPMENT**

### **CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **1.1. Theoretical background of speaking**

##### **1.1.1. Definition of speaking**

Speaking is a skill which language teachers, quite rightly, believe is particularly important. By speaking, individuals can express needs, opinions and feelings, understand and ask questions.

According to Donough and Shaw (1993), speaking is a skill which enables people to produce utterances when communicating to achieve a particular end. This may involve expressing ideas, wishes or opinions, negotiating or solving problems, or establishing or maintaining social relationships.

Speaking is "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney, 1998:13).

Thus, speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving, and processing information. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment and the purpose of speaking

##### **1.1.2. The importance of speaking skill**

It is difficult to say which skill is the most important among four language skills. However, speaking seems the most important and the closest to the goal of language teaching: communicative competence. Pattison (1992) confirms that when people know or learn a language, they mean being able to speak the language. Besides that, Ur (1996:120) states, "of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important."

##### **1.1.3. Nature of speaking**

The nature of speaking has been discussed by many researchers. Byrne (1976:8) clarifies, "speaking is a two-way process between speakers and listeners involving the productive skills of understanding". Byrne (1995: 10) gives a diagram to show what happens in a speech situation.

Another author- Bygate (1987) shows that in order to be able to speak a foreign language, learners not only need to understand some grammar, vocabulary but also know how to use knowledge as well as language on deciding what to say and how to say.

One more thing concerning the ability to speak is that of fluency and accuracy.

### **1.1.4. Characteristics of a Successful Speaking Activity**

According to Ur (1996: 120), there are four characteristics for a successful speaking activity.

First, students talk a lot. Secondly, participation is even. Thirdly, motivation is high. Finally, language is of an acceptable level

### **1.1.5. Learners' participation**

## **1.2. Factors hinder students' participation in speaking activities**

### **1.2.1. Students' factors**

*1.2.1.1. Students' learning styles*

*1.2.1.2. Students' attitude and motivation*

*1.2.1.3. Students' second language level*

*1.2.1.4. Personality*

*1.2.1.5. Students' anxiety*

*1.2.1.6. Gender differences*

### **1.2.2. Teachers' factors**

*1.2.2.1. Teachers' teaching methods*

*1.2.2.2. Teachers' knowledge*

*1.2.2.3. Teachers' characteristics*

*1.2.2.4. Teachers' roles in speaking activities*

### **1.2.3. Teaching and learning conditions**

*1.2.3.1. Physical conditions*

Physical conditions in the classroom such as the classroom size, chairs, tables, lights and boards affect students' participation either positively or negatively.

Hammer (1992) emphasized that physical conditions had great impact on students' learning as well as their attitude towards the subject matter. Physical condition affects students' motivation. The large class, the poor facilities will decrease the relationship between teacher and students, and their motivation. Thus, arranging the physical conditions in classroom is a need if we want to increase students' participation in classroom activities.

*1.2.3.2. Classroom climate*

Classroom climate is referred to as the learning environment, or by a term such as atmosphere. The impact of classroom climate on students and staff can be beneficial for or a barrier to learning. Classroom climate is a perceived quality of the setting. It emerges from the complex transaction of many immediate environmental factors (e.g, physical, material, organizational, operational, and social variables), as a major determiner of classroom behavior and learning.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE STUDY**

### **2.1. An overview of the current situation of learning and teaching speaking at English department, Ba Ria – Vung Tau University.**

#### ***2.1.1. Introduction of English section, Ba Ria – Vung Tau University.***

#### ***2.1.2. The Syllabus and Materials for Speaking***

At Ba Ria – Vung Tau University, English majors have to study four skills in seven semesters. Each semester contains 15 weeks, the students have 3 speaking periods per week and each period lasts for forty-five minutes. Speaking syllabus is designed to help students develop English-speaking skill both accuracy and fluency. By the end of the course, the students must be able to communicate effectively in job-related situations as well as daily life, establish, and maintain relationships with members of the target community. They will be able to present their ideas about personal and social issues in English. The main topics include getting acquainted, communication, education, healthy, money and technology.

In term of methodology, teachers usually use the communicative method of teaching. Students often play the key role in the lesson, being the main speakers. Teacher only acts as an advisor during communication activities.

The testing-assessment includes assessment on two mid-term tests during the course of study, a final oral test, assessment on attendance and class participation. It can be specified as follows: class attendance and participation (10%), mid-terms test (30%) and final examination (60%). The final test is often designed with two parts and lasts about 10 – 12 minutes. In part 1, students are given a topic or issue and prepared it for 5-7 minutes. The second part is the presentation or discussion on the topic.

The chosen textbooks are Let Talk 3 by Leo Jones & Mosaic 1 - speaking by Brenda Wegmann & Miki Knezevic. The books are laid out with plenty of authentic models of spoken language, and communicative activities to help students practice using the language in the classroom. Most importantly, there are many pairwork and groupwork activities in the books. However, the activities are not well-structured enough and some topics are uninteresting, which cause problems during class activities such as not even participation, students are inhibited to speak, students have nothing to say or they use mother tongue, act.

### **2.2. Methodology**

#### ***2.2.1. The subjects***

The subjects of this study were students and teachers at Ba Ria-Vung Tau University. There were 50 students who took part in this study. They were second-year-English majors, studying for their Bachelor of Arts Degrees.

There were 9 teachers involved in this study.

### **2.2.2. Data collection instruments**

#### *2.2.2.1. Questionnaire for students*

#### *2.2.2.2. Questionnaire for teachers*

#### *2.2.2.3. Class observation*

The researcher observed 10 speaking periods.

#### *2.2.2.4. Interview*

The researcher interviewed 5 teachers and 10 students to get their ideas about the research issues beyond the questionnaires.

### **2.2.3. Data collection procedures**

The questionnaires were handed out to 9 English teachers and 50 learners at Ba Ria-Vung Tau University to collect information. The researcher observed ten speaking lessons lasting 135 minutes.

## **2.3. Results**

### **2.3.1. Teachers and students' perception on learning speaking English**

#### *2.3.1.1. The importance of speaking skill in English classes.*

The questionnaire's results showed that most students and teachers admitted the importance of speaking skill. Surprisingly enough, 94% of the students and 100% of the teachers gave speaking skill much importance in learning English.

#### *2.3.1.2. Students' interest in speaking English in class*

Most students did not like to speak English in class. 40% of the students answered that they had no interest in speaking English, 30% of the students had little interest in speaking English. In contrast, only 10% enjoyed speaking in class. In general, students' interest at Ba Ria-Vung Tau University in speaking English was low.

#### *2.3.1.3. The frequency of students' speaking English in class*

14%, 20%, 36% and 30% of the students always, usually, sometimes and rarely respectively spoke English in class.

#### *2.3.1.4. Students' evaluation on the topics of speaking activities in class*

Half of the respondents stated that topics of speaking in class were boring. 30% of the students thought that the speaking topics in class were difficult for them. Only 10% claimed that the topics were interesting.

### **2.3.2. Factors that hinder students' participation in speaking activities**

#### *2.3.2.1. Students' confidence when speaking English*

20 % of them felt unconfident and twenty students (50%) felt a little nervous when they have to speak English in front of the class.

#### *2.3.2.2. Factors hinder students' participation in speaking activities*

100% of the teachers and 52% of the students agreed that teachers' boring teaching was one of the most important factors hindering students' participation in speaking lessons. The second choice, accounting for 88.9% of the teachers and 34% of the students, was uninteresting lessons. The third choice (44% of the students and 88.9% of the teachers) was the fear of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation mistakes. The classroom atmosphere was one of the important factors that decided the degree of students' participation (for 20% of the students and 55.5% of the teachers). Surprisingly, 16% of the students and 77.8% of the teachers blamed students' reluctance of speaking for low proficiency in English.

### ***2.3.2.3. Students' attitudes when participating in speaking activities***

Most of the students did not like to participate in speaking activities. 10 students (20%) were eager and excited to speak. There were 15 students (30%) found speaking boring and 25 students (50%) were reluctant to speak.

### ***2.3.2.4. Degrees of the difficulties students feel when participating in speaking activities***

76% of the students stated that they often had difficulties when participating in speaking activities. 32 % of them found it "very difficult" and 44% of them found it "difficult" to participate in speaking lessons.

66% of the students could not find words or structures to express their opinions. The next one, which affected 56 % of the respondents, was that they had poor pronunciation. Another difficulty of students in speaking lessons was that they could not find ideas to speak (40%). Others which related to teachers included teacher's unenthusiasm (18%), teacher's interruption or anger (4%) and little time (20%).

## **2.3.3. Activities increase students' participation in speaking lessons**

### ***2.3.3.1. Speaking activities used by teachers***

☞ *Question for students:* Group-work (48%) was an activity mostly used by teachers. Other activities such as interviewing and free discussion hold 22%, using games for speaking accounted for 20%, information gap and question and answer exchange took up 16%, and role-play was 14%. Besides, 12% of the students mentioned the use of visual aids such as pictures, actions, maps, etc.

☞ *Question for teachers:* 100% of the teachers appreciated pair-work or group-work (interaction patterns) to increase students' participation in classroom activities. Another speaking activity often used by the teachers (77.8%) was games; 33.3% of the teachers often conducted role - play, questioning and free discussion. The last activity (22.2% of the teachers) was interviewing; information gap activities accounted for 11.1% of the teachers.

### ***2.3.3.2. Activities motivate students to take part in speaking lessons***

☞ *Question for students:* 44% of the students agreed that story telling was the most effective activity. The second choice accounting for 36% and 34% of the students, was joke-telling, poetry and songs. 28% of the students gave a high appreciation to reporting news activity. 20% of them believed that problem-solving activity could help them participate in speaking lessons better. Interestingly, 16% of

the respondents agreed that oral presentation and interaction were important activities in motivating their participation. Besides, information gap activities played a role in their speaking for 14% of the students.

☞ *Question for teachers:* Most teachers (66.7%) chose providing students with vocabulary and structures to be used for the speaking tasks as the main teaching technique. 5 out of 9 teachers (55.6%) had a habit of increasing students' involvement in all activities by creating the comfortable and co-operative learning atmosphere and using communicative games and visual aids for students' speaking. 44.4% of the teachers encouraged students to speak by suggesting questions, giving students opportunities to express their own ideas, being enthusiastic, helpful and friendly. 33.3% of the teachers preferred to provide communicative activities and to be tolerant with students' mistakes.

#### **2.3.4. Some suggestions for teachers to motivate students to speak in English speaking lessons**

☞ *Question for students:* the majority of the students (54%) agreed that the teachers should conduct interesting games and activities when they wanted their students to involve in speaking activities. Another significant proportion of the students (48%) confirmed that the teachers should let students choose topics to discuss. 30% of the students thought that teachers should create interesting and appropriate topics to students' level. 44% of the students thought that teachers should give them more time to work in pairs or groups. 26% of the respondents thought that teachers had better let students choose their own partner; 16% the students were for pleasant atmosphere classroom. Last but not least, being enthusiastic, friendly and helpful was a great idea offered by 14% of the students.

☞ *Question for teachers:* In order to encourage students to speak effectively in the class, teachers should:

- Give simple, clear instructions so that students understand what they are supposed to do.
- Encourage students to speak by giving suitable and interesting topics.
- Be tolerant with students' mistakes to build and boost their self-confidence
- Carry out post-speaking activities so that students can assess their progress and learn from their mistakes.
- Plan the lessons carefully.
- Support students with vocabulary, structures and information.
- Give students opportunities to speak individually, in pairs or in groups.
- Ask students to prepare speaking tasks at home and in class.
- Give feedback on students' performance.
- Be patient when listening to students' speaking.
- Choose topics relevant to student levels.

Use teaching aids to draw students' attention

#### **2.3.5. Teachers' perception toward students' participation**

##### ***2.3.5.1. The difficulties teachers face in teaching speaking.***



88.9% of them said that large-class size was the most difficult. According to 77.8% of the teachers, students' proficiency level could cause some difficulties. In addition, 55.5% of the teachers often coped with the difficulties when their students did not participate in speaking activities. And the last difficulty was time problem.

#### ***2.3.5.2. Teachers' responses towards unwilling speakers***

88.9% of the teachers often encouraged unwilling students to speak by using different teaching techniques such as role – play, games or suggested questions, etc. Two teachers in this survey still let students speak although students seemed to be unwilling to speak.

#### ***2.3.5.3. Students' participation in English classes***

44.4% of the teachers claimed that their students often spoke Vietnamese in speaking activities. 33.3% of the teachers said that their students worked with great interest when they took part in speaking activities. Only 22.2 % of them said that their students did not co-operate, remained silent all the time, and some students even did other things when they were asked to participate in some activities.

## **CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1. Major findings and discussion**

#### ***3.1.1. Factors hinder students' participation in speaking activities.***

The findings showed that there were three main factors hindering students' participation coming from teachers, students and classroom.

Firstly, some factors came from learners such as learners' language level, their interest, personalities, learning style, attitude and anxiety. In the speaking lessons, the students with lower proficiency might feel unconfident. They were afraid of making mistakes and losing face in front of their teacher and other students. As a result, they did not dare to join in any speaking activities in class. Besides, another finding is students' attitude in speaking involvement. The more positive attitude students had, the more actively students participated in speaking lessons.

The next was students' personalities. This factor was rather important for each student. Most of students felt worried, hesitant and not self-confident enough in front of the classmates and teachers. The findings showed that 42% of the students did not want to take part in speaking activities because of shyness and low English proficiency. Students' shyness and lack of English knowledge made them passive in the speaking activities. Furthermore, a larger number of the students (50%) suffering from anxiety which caused negative effects to their learning process in general and to their participation in speaking activities in particular. 26% of the students from the results of questionnaires felt nervous and tense when being asked to speak English in the class. 44% of them were afraid of making

grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary mistakes. Thus, students' anxiety is actually a typical factor. The final factor from learners was learning style. In speaking lessons, learning style influenced students much. The impulsive learners often talked much while the reflective ones preferred to think more. For the limited time lesson, the reflective learners often had fewer chances to speak out than the impulsive ones. The findings from researcher's observation pointed out that the speaking class with reflective learners seemed to be quieter and more boring than the one with impulsive ones.

Secondly, the findings referred to the teachers' factors. They are teachers' characteristics, teaching methods, and teachers' roles. The first factor which affected students' participation most was teachers' teaching methods. The results from the questionnaires showed that more than a half of the students (52%) and 100% of the teachers claimed that teachers' boring teaching methods were the main factor preventing students' involvement in speaking activities. In speaking lessons, the teachers with learner- centered teaching method would know how to keep students' speaking and how to give each student chances to participate in speaking tasks.

In addition, teachers' characteristics were also very important. Through the results from questionnaire and interviews, 20% of the students thought that if their teachers were enthusiastic, friendly and helpful, they would feel more comfortable. So, they could better participate in speaking activities.

One more thing relating to teachers' factors was teachers' roles. The results from the questionnaires and interviews showed that in a speaking lesson, teachers had to be a facilitator, assessor and resource if they wanted students to speak much more. Teachers had to give feedback and comments for students after each speaking task. Up to 66% and 40% of the students said that they could not find words, structures as well as ideas to speak. So, they really needed teachers' encouragement by giving them vocabulary, structures beforehand. It means teachers' roles were very important in order to increase students' participation.

Finally, teaching and learning condition also plays an important role in increasing students' participation. Most teachers (88.9%) complained that a large-class size caused the difficulties in teaching speaking. It was very difficult for them to control the crowded class and to organize speaking activities. A pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere would create students' motivation and encourage their participation in speaking activities.

In short, the participation of the second-year majors of English at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University was strongly affected by different factors as previously mentioned above. The factors were internal and external ones. The internal came from students themselves and the external factors were from teachers and size-class as well as classroom climate.

### ***3.1.2. Teachers' ways of increasing students' participation in speaking lessons and students' attitudes***

The findings from the survey revealed that one of the activities mostly used by teachers was pairs work and group work. 100% of the teachers often conducted them in teaching speaking. Others

activities such as questioning, interviewing, role-play, etc, were also very important. A large number of teachers and students liked using games and visual aids during the process of teaching and learning speaking as a mean to motivate students to take part in speaking activities. Games and visual aids made students comfortable and helped them reduce stress, increased their motivation and involvement in all activities in class.

The findings also showed that teachers and students preferred the activities such as storytelling, joketelling, etc, that required them to think deeply and to make use of knowledge and vocabulary.

Another fact is that most of the investigated teachers (66.7%) considered that providing vocabulary, structures to be used for speaking tasks; creating a comfortable, cooperation learning environment were the most effective ways to draw learners' attention in speaking lessons. Furthermore, some activities such as encouraging students to speak by suggested questions, giving them chances to practice speaking, ignoring students' mistakes were also brought to teachers' attention to motivate students to take part in speaking activities. And from the results of students' interviews, most of them liked those activities.

### **3.2. Recommendations for increasing students' participation in speaking activities**

#### ***3.2.1. Varying speaking activities***

#### ***3.2.2. Helping students to improve their knowledge of grammar and enrich their vocabulary***

#### ***3.2.3. Managing speaking turns suitably***

#### ***3.2.4. Building a cooperative atmosphere in class***

#### ***3.2.5. Helping students to be confident***

#### ***3.2.6. Being enthusiastic, friendly, helpful and tolerant***

#### ***3.2.7. Creating interesting and appropriate topics***

#### ***3.2.8. Forming a habit of speaking English in the class***

## **PART C: CONCLUSION**

### **1. Conclusion**

Firstly, one of the most important points is the teachers' and the students' awareness of students' participation. According to the teachers, students' participation plays a significant role in creating great success for speaking lessons.

Indeed, one of the main conclusions from the findings and discussion is that there are various factors which hinder students' participation in speaking activities coming from students themselves such as students' learning styles, anxiety, language level, coming from teachers such as teachers' characteristics, teachers' roles and coming from learning and teaching conditions like classroom atmosphere. The research affirms the powerful impact of these factors on both their teaching and students' feelings and learning speaking in class

The students' comments on the ways the teachers use to motivate students to speak in English lessons are really a valuable source of information for the teachers to find out the best solutions to increase their participation.

Another general conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that most of the students have more motivation to speak English when the teachers know how to create an interesting effective and lesson with their teaching techniques in the classroom.

What is more, the researcher also gives some recommendations for increasing students' involvement in speaking lessons.

In conclusion, students' participation plays an important role in speaking activities. If we want to have a successful speaking lesson, we should pay more attention to the factors that hinder students' participation such as students' personality, students' anxiety or students' language level and try to improve our teaching methods, our characteristics as well as our roles. The researcher hopes that this study will make an especial significant contribution to better the current teaching and learning to speak English at university today.

### **2. Limitations and suggestions for further research**

Although the researcher has made great effort towards conducting this thesis, there undoubtedly exist some limitations.

First, due to small group of teachers observed at their teaching speaking periods, the drawn conclusions were trial. A study with a larger number of teachers being observed to investigate their ways to apply communicative language teaching and run lessons would certainly have more valid and reliable data. Therefore, further study should include this feature in their analysis in order to get more valid and reliable explanation on the issue.

Second, subjects of the study were only second-major students of English, not all the students in the school. So, further studies should also investigate into the other subjects.

Third, in this study, such factors that affect students' participation in speaking activities such as students' age, religion, aptitude, students' belief, teachers' expectations, materials, etc, were not focused. It is clear that these factors to some extent have decisive effects on students' participation and the quality of a speaking lesson.

Finally, the researcher carries the study with the hope to find out if those factors affect learners' participation in speaking activities only. Their effects on other skills should be considered in further studies. Besides, further studies should also study specific techniques to overcome the negative effect of those factors.