

# Enhancing Speaking skills for ESL Learners

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**ABSTRACT:** The article presents the factors making influences on speaking skills among ESL learners. Based on these elements, it proposes several measures to enhance the speaking ability for this group of learners. Although many previous studies have addressed the same topic, in this paper the author provides more in-depth analysis. The conclusion is drawn from personal teaching experience with ESL classes of various age groups in Vietnam, where the demand for English communication in education, and business is steadily increasing. The suggested solutions are designed from a deep understanding about learners' advantages, difficulties, and aspirations, as well as the key aspects that directly affect the process of developing speaking skills.

**Keywords:** Factors, Influences, Measures, Enhance, Speaking skills

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Date of Submission: 06-11-2025

Date of acceptance: 19-11-2025

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Speaking has become one of the most essential learning skills due to the importance of communication in job-seeking (Anwar, 2021). Indeed, speaking ability is crucial in today's globalized world, where we need to communicate effectively with international colleagues, to expand career and business opportunities, and to strengthen professional relationships. Moreover, speaking English well either boosts academic and research competence, fosters a more profound connection with global cultures, and develops self-confidence as well as flexible thinking. In order to speak English well, learners are influenced by both internal and external factors. These may include learning motivation, psychological aspects, active listening ability, persistence in practice, communication environment, curriculum design, sociocultural factors, linguistic elements such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, expressive ability, and teaching methodology. Around the world, many studies have proposed various methods to improve speaking skills among ESL learners. Stephen Krashen (1998) conducted in-depth research on approaches to enhance the effectiveness of speaking skills development. He emphasized the importance of creating an enjoyable learning environment, which is similar to how they learn their mother tongue, through exposure to real-life contexts and everyday communication. He also pointed out that frequent exposure to various English materials such as reading books and newspapers, watching movies, or listening to radio programs can help learners develop their speaking skills more confidently and effectively.

Paul Nation (2012) stated that in order to speak fluently and confidently, learners need to build rich vocabulary, which enables them to express their ideas more clearly. In this article, the author analyzes the key factors affecting English-speaking skills based on years of experience in teaching ESL in Vietnam and proposes several groups of solutions, including curriculum design, teaching methodology, teaching and learning tools, effective learning strategies, and other supporting measures. The author hopes that the findings of this study will serve as a valuable reference for both ESL learners and teachers in Vietnam and worldwide.

## II. RELATED STUDIES

The strategies for learning speaking skills have attracted considerable attention from researchers worldwide. Sofyan and colleagues (2015), in their study on students' learning strategies for developing speaking ability, pointed out that students with good speaking skills tend to use a wide range of strategies and apply them more consciously and appropriately than low-achieving ones. They suggested that learners should be trained to become more aware of speaking strategies. Another study by Rizadly and colleagues (2016), conducted with learners who had poor English-speaking skills, revealed that those students did not know how to combine different learning strategies but relied mainly on compensation and social strategies. Moreover, because these were used ineffectively, they contributed only a small part to their learning process. For these reasons, the authors recommended that ESL teachers should help learners use more suitable techniques. However, both studies did not propose effective solutions to improve speaking skills. In Vietnam, Mai Lan Anh (2017), in her article *Some Strategies to Enhance Speaking skills for ESL students*, discussed the difficulties that students encounter when learning speaking skills and suggested several methods such as: using the simplest and shortest possible responses in communication situations; practicing and adapting language accumulated from

sample conversations; and becoming more confident in communicative contexts. Nevertheless, her article did not provide possible tactics to develop speaking skills. Truong Minh Hoa and Phan Thi Mien Thao (2020), in their study on the plan for the development of speaking skills for second-year students at the College of Foreign Economic Relations, indicated that the most frequently used strategies included planning ideas and language, using dictionaries to learn vocabulary, compensating for linguistic limitations by code-switching, expressing meaning through non-verbal forms or synonyms, taking deep breaths, and asking interlocutors for clarification. However, the actions such as activating background knowledge, self-preparing language, and self-evaluating speaking performance were not commonly employed by most of the students.

### **III. THE FACTORS AFFECTING SPEAKING SKILLS OF ESL LEARNERS**

#### **Subjective Factors**

##### **Motivation**

Crookes and Schimts (1991) stated that “Motivation has been identified as the learners’ orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second language.” In line with the idea of motivation, Norris, J. (2001) expressed that “It is taught that students who are most successful when learning a target language are those who like the people that speak the language, admire the culture and have a desire to become familiar with or even integrate into the society in which language is used. It means that students who are most successful when learning a target language at least will imitate not only the culture itself but also a desire and integrate into the society in which language is used, see Leave (2005).

Learners who clearly understand the importance and purpose of learning will develop the right attitude and strong determination to overcome challenges. Conversely, learners with a passive or avoidant mindset often fail to invest their effort, resulting in poor outcomes. For speaking skills, the motivation is clearer when people desire to communicate successfully with friends, colleagues, and business partners. Therefore, motivation is one of the key factors directly influencing learners’ concentration, effort, and attitude.

##### **Psychology**

In 1986, Horwitz and colleagues first introduced the concept of anxiety in learning a language. Anxiety is described as a combination of self-perception, belief, emotion, and behaviors related to language learning emerging due to the features of this process. Anxiety binds with specific activities and differs from any short-term nervousness or long-term personality features. In his research regarding anxiety and its effects, Balemir (2009) investigated the relationship between language proficiency and anxiety scale and causes such anxiety. Data for this study were gathered from 234 students attending the Departments of General English, Electrical and Electronics Engineering, International Relations, and English Language at Hacettepe University. In this study, it has been determined that students suffer from different levels of anxiety caused by problems about teaching methods, assessment, individual differences, and fear of evaluation. Horwitz’s (1986) also discusses the emotional aspect affecting the learning process. Consequently, in order to define the relationship between anxiety and speaking performance more clearly, oral tests and written tests were conducted and academic records have been examined. The results proved that anxiety affects not only the low achiever but also high proficiency students.

#### **Objective Factors**

##### **Learning environment**

It was considered a very important factor which will directly affect the quality of teaching and learning process, especially speaking. A comfortable, well-equipped classroom with enough facilities and a reasonable number of students provides an ideal classroom environment for speaking practice. The more chances learners have to speak, the more fluent and confident they will be (Snow, 2006). In addition, pair work tends to be better than group work because the more confident usually dominate in the group discussion while the shy learners keep silent. Beyond the classroom, learners can practice speaking with friends. Besides, parents also can give support by creating an encouraging environment for their children to practice speaking. According to Truong (2018), English-speaking clubs, online forums, language exchange platforms are all worthy resources for learners to improve their speaking skills.

##### **Sociocultural features**

Many linguists have insisted on the interdependence between language and culture. According to Brown (2007), language is part of the culture, and culture is part of the language. It is thus combined so complicatedly that the meaning of both would be destroyed if one tries to separate them. Kramsch (1998) considered language as the principle means through which people conduct their social life. In addition, while being used in a specific context, language is attached to culture in many different and complex ways. Tang

(1999) even treated language as culture: the two are, therefore, inseparable. According to Kuang (2007), language is the tool of culture, and culture is the content of language. Muir (2007) identified language as one of many cultural products. Despite various perspectives, culture cannot be separated from the existence and development of language.

### **Teaching methods**

Each methodology has its strengths and weaknesses. The art of teaching is to choose the right method at the right time with the right activities to achieve optimum results. Some of the commonly used methods in English classes are CLT, or Communicative Language Teaching; the Direct Method; TBLT, or Task-Based Language Teaching; and Learner-Centered Approaches. Speaking classes depend largely upon how appropriately teachers choose methods and design classroom activities. Well-structured and engaging activities will motivate learners to make speaking practice more enjoyable (Harmer, 1998).

### **Linguistic Factors**

This encompasses grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and background knowledge. For an enhanced speaking skills, learners must acquire enough vocabulary to communicate clearly. Good and rich vocabulary can give way to more flexible expressions and convey clearer and better messages, providing the speaker with fluency and confidence (Oya, Manalo & Greenwood, 2009). Alongside, good pronunciation that reflects a clear, meaningful message; good listening will help speakers catch others. Grammar is equally important. According to Thornbury (2000), grammatical competence will enable the learner to convey implicit meanings through grammatical structures without giving long explanations. Background knowledge, likewise, will support effective communication, particularly in presenting ideas or opinions. Textbooks, lessons, and exposure to real-life situations are good avenues to obtain such knowledge. Furthermore, newspapers, films, and the Internet will entail rich cultural and linguistic input. As it were, "learning a foreign language is not just about vocabulary and grammar, but also about knowing how to deploy the language appropriately within a particular context and for a communicative purpose" are the words of Truong in 2018.

## **IV. SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE SPEAKING SKILLS FOR ESL LEARNERS**

### **From learners**

Learners are the subject of teaching and learning activities in general. Therefore, they need to determine for themselves a serious and correct motivation and to develop suitable and effective strategies. First of all, learners need to clearly understand the role of English in their future work, which is necessary for most jobs today. For learners with good speaking skills, they will certainly have a successful future. A very important factor to improve English proficiency in general and speaking skills in particular is to change their learning methods to meet new requirements. Learners need to determine the goal that is having means to work in the future, not just achieving good scores or passing exams. Learners can boldly discuss with teachers about their learning methods so that teachers can help point out any limitations and suggest appropriate adjustments to help learners personalize their learning activities more effectively. For classroom activities, learners need to actively participate in and make the most of class time to practice communicating with classmates. Moreover, they are also required to limit writing during speaking activities. They should limit the conversion of ideas from Vietnamese to English. Listening to many conversations made by native speakers will help a lot in this case. With current conditions, learners can easily access open data sources from the Internet for self-studying and self-training through smart devices today which are very important to help learners practice correct pronunciation and speak fluently. This is one of the factors that determine the learner's confidence. In addition, learners can use the following strategies to improve their speaking skills.

### **Meta-cognitive Techniques**

Saed (2021) stated that students who employed meta-cognitive approaches could keep track of their progress, showing that they were hands-on learners. According to Kumar Basak (2018), learners may prepare, manage, and set learning objectives. When students adopt meta-cognitive strategies, they become more self-reliant. Learners are familiar with the learning methods used while in the middle of the learning procedure. They could organize and prepare their learning methods and self-evaluate their interpretation, see Namaziandost (2019). Good language learners are produced by independent learners. They may be able to help low achievers improve their results by identifying them.

### **Cognitive Techniques**

Learners that engage cognitive approaches as a learning strategy imitate other students. According to learners, this is also connected to language output restrictions, see Amiryousefi (2019). Introvert students are more likely to be impacted than extrovert students since they are less engaged. Amateurs also understand the

importance of communication abilities in applying what they've retained, said Alek (2020). Apart from that, students repeat sounds to enhance their accents while learning speaking talents, based on Djurayeva (2021). Students used cognitive ways to rehearse, acquire, and transmit messages and develop sentence structures through taking notes, see Fatsah (2020). While rehearsing, amateurs imitate, rehearse with sounds, and rehearse in a realistic way, according to Afri (2021). Through cognitive strategies, learners may also enhance their vocabulary, see Uztosun (2021).

#### **Compensatory Techniques**

Students might use compensation tactics to help them improve their speaking fluency. Compensation strategies are a different way to help students overcome language acquisition difficulties. When students are lost for words, they express their meaning using gestures, mime, or synonyms. The research demonstrated that students were familiar with their language restrictions when they employed compensatory techniques in speaking.

#### **Social Techniques**

Many investigations have recognized social methods as one of the least preferred ways language students' use, especially when students are asked to interact with others to fix their speech, see Namaziandost (2020). When practicing speaking skills, students pursue clarification from somebody they entrust when using social approaches cited by Hava (2019). Students who use social methods are more straightforward since they are looking for methods to enhance their English, also cited by Hava (2019). Roleplaying, for example, may be a fantastic way to rehearse language in the classroom.

#### **Memory Techniques**

Memory techniques were among the least used methods since they are tied to a learner's level of proficiency, see Leong & Ahmadi (2017). Also according to Leong & Ahmadi (2017), these strategies are more frequently adopted by third-semester learners at a more elevated education institution. Visual connections and pictures were reported to be used by students to boost their speaking abilities, based on Heron (2021). Students who employ these techniques keep essential information they hear and read while learning an untried language. The least successful approaches for developing speaking ability, in general, were memory methods, see Ashida & Otaki (2021). In memory approaches, students create mental processes, utilize imagery and music, review, and employ action stated by Alek (2020). Students combine sounds and pictures in their brains to generate a graphical representation of the latest word when using these techniques. Consequently, memory techniques for speaking skills were mentioned as the most often used approaches in just a few publications.

#### **Affective Techniques**

Affective techniques were also underappreciated as the most typical language learning method, see Sreena & Ilankumaran (2018). Because they are connected to learners' ability levels, affective strategies were the least preferred cited by Uztosun (2021). Affective methods were less emphasized since emotional factors were addressed less when learning English. Learners learn more effectively when they have the support of other successful students in a positive learning environment. On the other hand, adults were less interested in emotional methods, said Ozdemir, E., & Papi (2021). Apart from that, it was revealed that students in their current learning surroundings used the song as one of their stress-relieving approaches, according to Leong & Ahmadi (2017). Stress might also be eased by conversing with other learners about their feelings, said Saputri (2021).

#### **From teachers**

The experience from real life and the teaching process shows that good learners are those who have good motivation, proper attitude and suitable learning strategies. These three factors are closely related to each other and have a great impact on the learning process. Teachers need to help learners raise their awareness of the role of English, especially the English proficiency requirements for employers. Not only through the usual appeals, teachers can take real examples to motivate learners. When they have better awareness, learners will have motivation, attitude and effective learning strategies. Moreover, most learners do not spend much passion on speaking skills, so it is necessary to guide them to find more love and interest in this skill. In work or study, finding joy and excitement in the process of performing tasks is extremely important. Teachers need to give specific instructions to learners on how to prepare lessons, how to learn vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Learners need to imply vocabulary and grammar to word and idea order in a sentence. In addition, diversifying learning activities in the teaching process focusing on developing communication skills, plays a very important role. Activities must start at a low level and move up gradually. Furthermore, changing a passive learning habit from many years ago to a new one requires a lot of effort and dedication from teachers.

Teachers also need to create a good feeling for learners. Rewards and punishments are considered as one of the best ways to both put pressure and generate motivation. How to eliminate the fear of making mistakes while speaking English is also a necessary step because only when learners are willing to speak can we help them develop and improve their speaking skills.

### **Methodology and tools**

Accumulating linguistic and social knowledge

Students can actively accumulate and improve their linguistic knowledge and reflex with support of tools beside in class lessons. This may be reached through websites that provide useful vocabulary and structures for speaking by topic as follows:

EnglishClub-englishclub.com: Lists of Conversation Topics, Useful Phrases, and Speaking Tips; Building Confidence in Speaking and Conversational Phrases.

ESL Conversation Topics - eslconversationtopics.com: Hundreds of topics with vocabulary and sample questions to practice speaking; supporting pairs or self-practice by answering aloud.

FluentU - fluentu.com: Teaching vocabulary and grammar through real English videos-movies, news, and so on; learning vocabulary in context.

UsingEnglish.com - usingenglish.com: provide lists of idioms, phrasal verbs and speaking phrases according to category; expand topic-based vocabulary.

EnglishClub "Phrases for Conversation" - englishclub.com/ref/phrases/: Providing ready-made structures for greetings, agreeing, disagreeing etc; Offering quick reference to practical speaking.

Perfect English Grammar - perfect-english-grammar.com: This site gives clear grammar explanations with sentence-building exercises; it is important to master structures before using them in speech.

EnglishPage.com - englishpage.com: With detailed explanations of grammar and sentence patterns; Understanding how to form natural English sentences.

TalkEnglish.com - talkenglish.com: Teaching sentence patterns and vocabulary grouped by situation; e.g., job interview, travel; Practicing real-life speaking structures.

LearnEnglishFeelGood - learnenglishfeelgood.com: Grammar and conversation worksheets include dialogues and structured speaking drills.

Speak & Improve by Cambridge - speakandimprove.com: AI listens to your speaking and gives ratings about fluency, vocabulary, and grammar; Speaking fluency with feedback.

SmallTalk2Me - smalltalk2.me: Practice everyday English with an AI conversation partner; topic-based speaking and pronunciation feedback.

ELSA Speak-elsaspeak.com: An AI identifies pronunciation and grammar mistakes; this is for improving accent and sentence rhythm.

Free4Talk-free4talk.com: voice chat rooms with real people worldwide. Practice speaking spontaneously in real time.

Moreover, one of the reasons why learners have slow reflexes is the lack of social knowledge. The learners can improve this by reading the articles and news on official websites such as: BBC Learning English, EnglishClub, Activities for ESL Students - Internet TESL Journal, ESL Desk, English for Academic Purposes - various sites, Dave's ESL Café, Grammar / Vocabulary-Focused Sites - News & Current Events for ESL. These websites and English programs develop lots of information and social knowledge for learners.

Enhance speaking practicing in and out of class

In order to increase reflex, pronunciation and confidence when communicating in English as well as to make class time more lively and active, teachers can use many measurements in the classroom or in extracurricular hours such as: Organizing communication activities in pairs/groups, Using the "Communicative Approach" method, Encouraging short presentations, Teaching by topic, Applying technology in the classroom (using videos, applications, listening and conversation exercises, speaking chatbots), Establishing English clubs, Connecting students with native speakers or international friends, Assigning learning tasks out of class (recording short speeches, interviews, simulating situations and submitting them to teachers), Encouraging students to speak English in daily activities with teachers, friends, relatives, etc.

Create a favorable environment

Teachers can provide direct support or apply a peer learning model to encourage good learners to help poor learners; Assign tasks to pairs and groups based on level and similarity in aspirations, interests, residence, psychological characteristics, culture, etc. Teachers should create a democratic environment inside and outside the classroom. Accepting wrong answers helps learners not to be afraid of making mistakes and be motivated to continue speaking. Teachers can also encourage learners to brainstorm in English, to avoid translating from Vietnamese to English when speaking. Reflex may be enhanced by practicing giving feedback as quickly as possible. Learners need to actively participate in pair and group activities when requested, avoid relying on their

partners. In this case, teachers or pair/group leaders should clearly assign tasks to each member, ensuring the level of participation in activities and the role of each member is the same.

## V. CONCLUSION

Improving speaking skills for ESL learners is a real challenge. It requires a lot of time and effort to adjust and change the old habits. To have good speaking skills, there must be enough practicing time, close coordination and great effort from both teachers and learners. What is more important is the motivation, attitude and learning strategies of learners to develop themselves. The author finds that metacognitive and cognitive strategies need to be used more often than memorization strategies to improve communication skill. By learning through friends, acquaintances, TV, books, etc., learners will receive knowledge more naturally and progress faster. In addition, social strategies, self-motivation and compensation can also be used to reduce learners' pressure when speaking English, and to enhance communication among learners with different levels and purposes. Furthermore, a comfortable learning environment that encourages personal development will give learners greater autonomy. Also, learners with an optimistic mindset will be more successful and use more learning methods. They are also motivated and have specific language development ideals for themselves. In the current context, information technology and artificial intelligence applications are increasingly applied in many fields, including English speaking practice. These applications also provide necessary support for teachers and learners. Learners should focus on self-study and self-development based on the guidance of teachers and the support of technology. This will help increase practicing time outside the class, bring excitement to learners, improve the quality and diversity of feedback. Learners can take advantage of AI scoring tools instead of relying entirely on teachers. Not only that, the rich and easily accessible resources today are also a superior solution for learners in their self-study and practicing process. Learners need to have a specific plan to effectively exploit these resources.

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