

FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' SPEAKING PERFORMANCE AT LE THANH HIEN HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Spoken language production is often considered one of the most difficult aspects of language learning (Brown & Yule, 1983). In reality, many language learners find it difficult to express themselves in spoken language in the target language. Each student has their own problems. The purpose of this study was to investigate the speaking problems of the students at Le Thanh Hien High School and the factors affecting their speaking performance. The subjects of the study were two hundred and three grade 11 students and ten teachers of English. The research instruments used in this study were questionnaires and class observation. Based on the research findings some recommendations were made. The study was expected to help students improve their performance in speaking classes.

Keywords: Communicative competence, speaking performance, speaking problems.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking seems to be the most important skills of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) because people who know a language are usually referred to as speakers of that language (Ur, 1996). The major goal of all English language teaching should be to give learners the ability to use English effectively, accurately in communication (Davies & Pearse, 1998). However, not all language learners after many years studying English can communicate fluently and accurately because they lack necessary knowledge.

At Le Thanh Hien High School, the students are not good at English. They can pass exams easily but they find it difficult to use English to communicate. To help the students improve their speaking skills, it is necessary to find ways to help them overcome their problems. Moreover, the teachers need to know the factors that affect their students' speaking performance so that they can deal with these factors to help the students improve their speaking performance. However, until now, there is no research conducted at this school about these areas.

The current study addresses two issues:

1. *What are the problems that the students at Le Thanh Hien High School encounter when they learn to speak English?*
2. *What are the factors that affect their speaking performance?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative competence

We need linguistic competence, an adequate vocabulary and mastery of syntax to speak in another language (Nunan, 1999). However, linguistic competence is not sufficient for someone who wants to communicate competently in another language. According to Nunan

(1999), the speaker needs communicative competence which includes not only linguistic competence but also a range of other sociolinguistic and conversational skills which help him/ her know how to say what to whom and when. Johnson (1995) claims that the second language students need communicative competence to participate in and learn from their classroom experience.

At first, communicative competence was categorized into three components including grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence by Canale and Swain in 1980. Then, in 1983 Canale and Swain add the fourth component named discourse competence (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In the Common European Framework (2001), communicative competence is said to have only three components including linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. In this study, communicative competence is described with four components including linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence.

Factors affecting speaking performance

In order to help students overcome problems in learning speaking, it is necessary for the teachers to figure out factors that affect their speaking performance. Students' speaking performance can be affected by the factors that come from performance conditions (time pressure, planning, standard of performance and amount of support), affective factors (such as motivation, confidence and anxiety), listening ability and feedback during speaking activities.

Performance conditions

Students perform a speaking task under a variety of conditions. Nation & Newton (2009) believe that performance conditions can affect speaking performance. The four types of performance conditions that Nation & Newton (2009) suggest include time pressure, planning, the standard of performance and the amount of support.

Affective factors

One of the most important influences on language learning success or failure is probably the affective side of the learner (Oxford, 1990). Krashen (1982) states that a variety of affective variables has been confirmed to be related to success in second language acquisition in research over the last decade but most of those studies examined the three categories: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety.

Listening ability

Speaking skills cannot be developed unless we develop listening skills (Doff, 1998). Students must understand what is said to them to have a successful conversation. Shumin (1997) shares the ideas of Doff (1998) by stating that when one person speaks, the other responds through attending by means of the listening process. In fact, every speaker plays the role of both a listener and a speaker. Therefore, one is certainly unable to respond if he/ she cannot understand what is said. It means speaking is closely related to listening.

Topical knowledge

Topical knowledge is defined as knowledge structures in long-term memory (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). In other words, topical knowledge is the speakers' knowledge of relevant topical information. The information that topical knowledge provides enables learners to use language with reference to the world in which they live. Bachman & Palmer (1996) state

certain test tasks may be easier for those who possess the relevant topical knowledge and more difficult for those who do not. Bachman & Palmer (1996) believe that topical knowledge has effects on speaking performance.

Feedback during speaking activities

Most students want and expect their teachers to give them feedback on their performance. However, all speaking production should not be dealt with in the same way. Harmer (1991) asserts that the decisions that the teachers make about how to react to students' performance will depend upon the stages of the lesson, the activities, the types of mistake made and the particular student who is making that mistake. If the teachers correct whenever there is a problem, the conversational flow as well as the purpose of the speaking activity will be destroyed (Harmer, 1991). If the students are corrected all the time, they can find this very demotivating and become afraid to speak. They suggest that the teachers should always correct the students' mistakes positively and with encouragement (Baker & Westrup, 2003).

Speaking problems

For Ur (1996), there are some speaking problems that teachers can come across in getting students to talk in the classroom. These are: inhibition, lack of topical knowledge, low or uneven participation and mother-tongue use.

The first problem that the students often encounter is inhibition. When students try to say things in a foreign language in the classroom they are often inhibited. They are worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face. They are shy of the attention that their speech attracts. Littlewood (2007) asserts that a foreign language classroom can create inhibitions and anxiety easily.

Secondly, learners often complain that they cannot think of anything to say and they have no motivation to express themselves. Rivers (1968) believes that the learners have nothing to express maybe because the teacher had chosen a topic which is not suitable for him or about which he knows very little. It is difficult for many students to respond when the teachers ask them to say something in a foreign language because they might have little ideas about what to say, which vocabulary to use, or how to use the grammar correctly (Baker & Westrup, 2003).

Another problem in speaking class is that participation is low or uneven. In a large group, each student will have very little talking time because only one participant can talk at a time so that the others can hear him/her. There is a tendency of some learners to dominate while others speak very little or not at all.

Finally, when all or a number of learners share the same mother-tongue, they tend to use it because it is easier for them. Harmer (1991) suggests some reasons why students use mother-tongue in class. Firstly, when the students are asked to have a discussion about a topic that they are incapable of, if they want to say anything about the topic, they will use their own language. Another reason is that the use of mother-tongue is a natural thing to do. In addition, using the first language to explain something to another if there is no encouragement from the teachers. Finally, if teachers frequently use the students' language, the students will feel comfortable to do it.

Previous studies

In this part of the study, some previous studies relating to this study will be reviewed. These studies were carried out to identify the factors affecting students' speaking performance and students' speaking problems.

Park & Lee (2005) examine the relationships between second language learners' anxiety, self-confidence and speaking performance. The participants of their study were one hundred and thirty two Korean college students who enrolled the English conversation classes. The results of their study indicated that learners' anxiety level was negatively related to their oral performance. Tanveer (2007) investigates the factors that cause language anxiety for twenty language learners in learning speaking skills and the influence of anxiety on communication in the target language and his result is similar to what Park & Lee (2005) figure out. The findings suggested that students' feeling of stress, anxiety or nervousness may impede their language learning and performance abilities. He cites that "the higher the anxiety, the lower the performance".

MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels (1998) studied the effects of self-confidence on oral performance. The results of their study showed that the learners' willingness to communicate was determined partly by their self-confidence. Park & Lee (2005) also examined the relationships between L2 learners' anxiety, self-confidence and oral performance. They reached a conclusion that self-confidence affected significantly on L2 learners' oral performance. They stated that if the learners were more confident, they would have better oral performance.

Feyten (1991) conducted a study to examine whether there is a relationship between listening ability and foreign language proficiency, between listening ability and foreign language listening comprehension skills, and between listening ability and foreign language oral proficiency skills. The results show that there is a significant relationship between listening ability and foreign language proficiency; between listening ability and foreign language listening comprehension skills; and between listening ability and foreign language oral proficiency skills. Bozorgian (2012) carried out a study to examine the relationship of listening skill with other language skills. The results of his study indicate a close correlation between listening comprehension and language proficiency. He states that the higher the listening score, the better the speaking score.

Lukitasari (2008) conducted a study focusing on the students' strategies in overcoming speaking problems in speaking class. The population of her study was the first semester students of Muhammadiyah University of Malang in Indonesia. The results of her study suggest that in speaking class, the students faced some speaking problems including inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation and mother tongue use. The findings of the study also reveal that the students' speaking performance was not good because they did not master the three elements of speaking namely vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

METHODOLOGY

Participants of the study

The participants of the study are the grade 11 students and 10 teachers of English at Le Thanh Hien High School. There were ten grade 11 classes at Le Thanh Hien High School, from 11B1 to 11B10. In order to get data for the study, two hundred and three students of five grade 11 classes were chosen to answer the questionnaires.

Instrument

The research instruments employed to collect data for this study were questionnaires and class observation. The questionnaires were delivered to both the ten teachers of English and the grade 11 students. The teachers' questionnaires consisted of 10 closed-questions designed in English (see appendix A). The students' questions consisted of 10 closed-questions designed in English (see appendix B).

Together with questionnaires, the researcher used class observation to see how the teachers carried out speaking lessons, how the students performed and what problems the students really encountered in speaking lessons. The researcher observed two classes, 2 periods for each class. Everything observed, heard, and experienced during class observation was recorded carefully in detail in the following observation sheet.

Time	Content	Teacher's activities	Students' activities
	1. Warm up		
	2. Pre-speaking		
	3. While-speaking		
	4. Post- speaking		
	5. Homework		

Procedure for conducting the questionnaire survey

The questionnaires were designed, and then the students' questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese. The researcher asked Doctor Nguyen Hoang Tuan for his comments on the questionnaire to validate it. Then the questionnaire was revised. On the first of August, two hundred and three sheets of questionnaire were delivered to the grade 11 students of five classes at Le Thanh Hien High School fifteen minutes before the classes began. The researcher explained clearly the purposes of administering the questionnaire which were to find the students' speaking problems, the factors affecting their performance and to find ways to improve the students' speaking skills. Then the teachers instructed the students to complete it. On the same day, ten sheets of teachers' questionnaire were distributed to ten teachers of English in their twenty- minute break at the staff room. Oral instructions and explanations were given in detail to the teachers by the researcher before they answered the questionnaire to avoid any misunderstandings. Then, completed questionnaires were collected.

Procedure for conducting the class observation

The researcher first designed the classroom observation sheet. Class observation took place three weeks after the questionnaire survey had been administered. The researcher observed two out of five classes which had been distributed the questionnaire by writing the names of these five classes into five small pieces of paper and chose randomly two pieces of paper from five. Then, the researcher observed these two classes. After asking for permission from the teachers who were in charge of these two classes, the researcher observed each class in two periods (90 minutes).

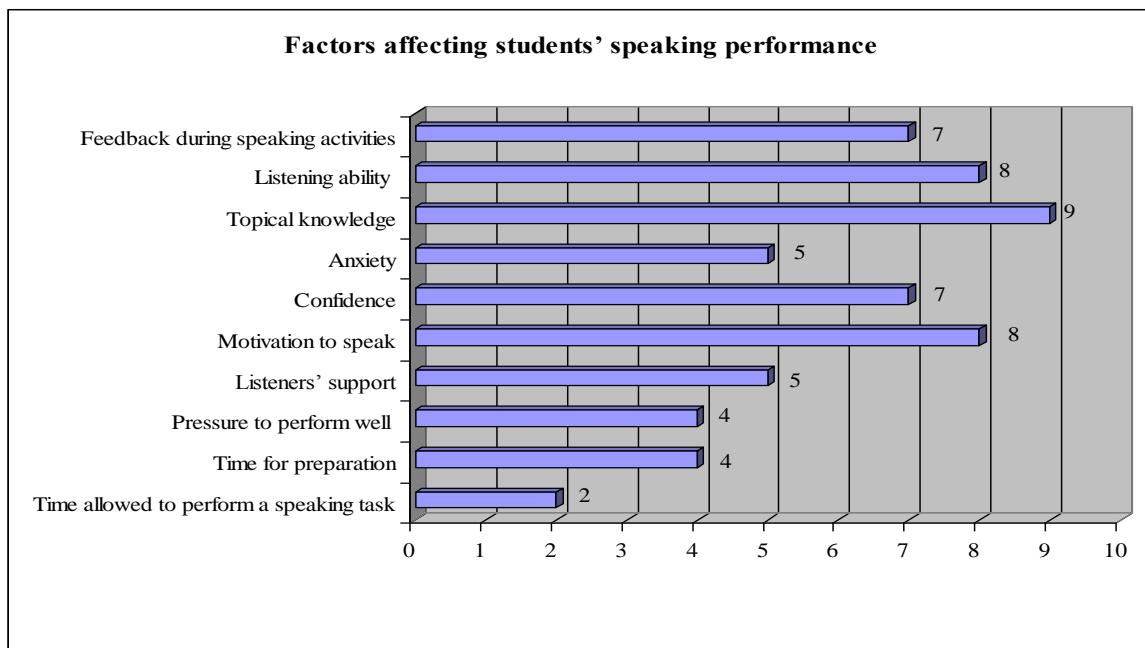
Data analysis procedure

The quantitative data derived from the questionnaires were analyzed using Excel program. In order to answer the two research questions, the descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages were used. The qualitative data were derived from the class observation. What happened in every class observed were described in detail. The researcher also discussed the strong and weak points of these classes.

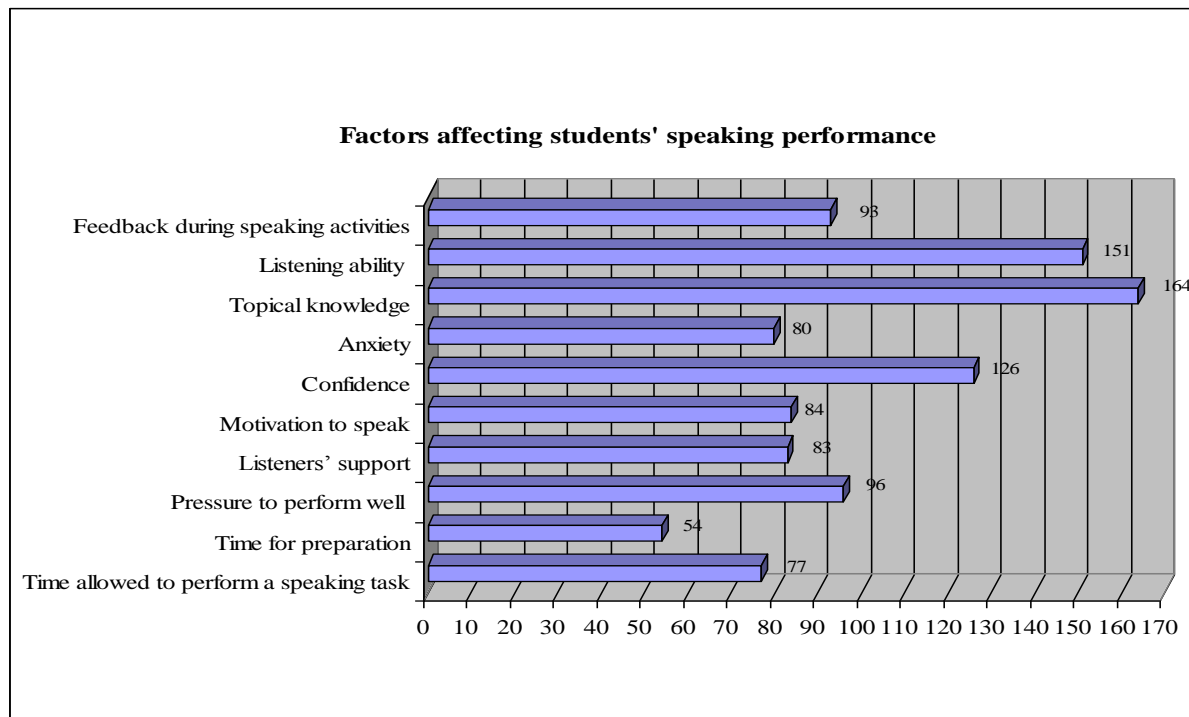
RESULTS

Questionnaire results

What are the factors that affect their speaking performance?



The majority of the teachers (90%) agreed that topical knowledge affected students' speaking performance. 80% of the teachers thought that listening ability had influences on students' speaking performance. The same number of teachers (eight out of ten) viewed motivation to speak as important factors that influenced students' speaking performance. 70% of the teachers referred feedback during speaking activities and confidence as factors that affected speaking performance. 40% of the teachers thought that time for preparation and pressure to perform well also affected their students' speaking performance. Only two teachers believed that their students' speaking performance was affected by time allowed to perform a speaking task.

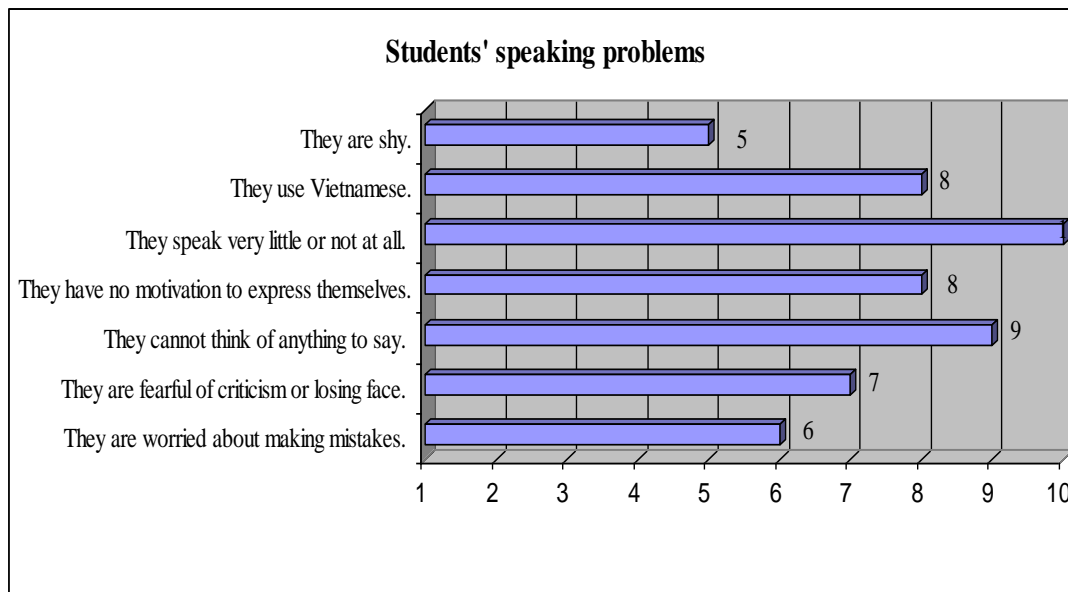


When the students were asked to choose the factors affecting their speaking performance among the factors listed, nearly half of them (47%) viewed the pressure to perform well as the most influential factor. 40% of the students thought that anxiety could affect their speaking performance. 38% of them agreed that time allowed to perform a speaking task could affect the results. Topical knowledge was thought to be an affecting factor by 81% of the students. 41% of them thought that motivation to speak could influence their speaking performance. 62% of the students said that confidence affected their speaking performance. Only a small number of the students (27%) thought that time for preparation could affect their performance.

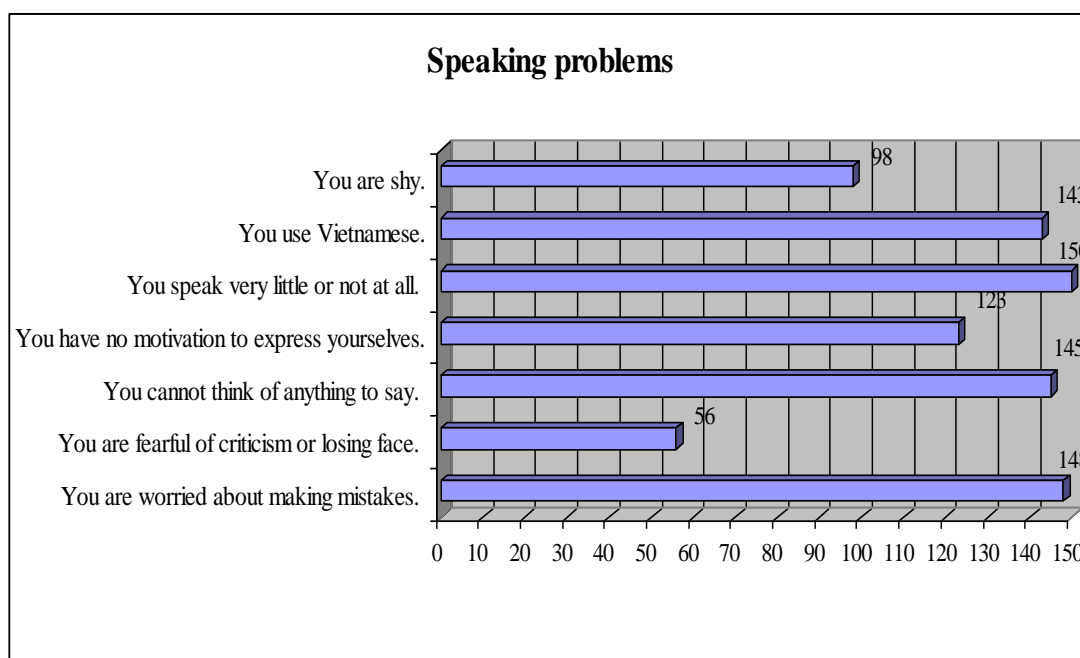
In summary, the results indicated that there were a variety of factors that affect the students' speaking performance. A majority of the teachers said that the students' speaking performance was affected by topical knowledge. The next two important factors mentioned were listening ability and motivation to speak. Besides, the teachers' feedback during speaking activities also was also reported to affect the students' speaking performance. Finally, confidence was considered to be a factor that had influence on students' performance.

The results from student questionnaire were quite similar to those of the teachers, most of the students thought that their speaking performance was affected by topical knowledge. The next important factor was listening ability. In addition, the students thought that they needed to be confident to perform well. Last but not least, the students reported that their performance was also affected by feedback during speaking activities and the pressure to perform well.

What are the problems that the students at Le Thanh Hien High School encounter when they learn speaking?



The teachers were asked to choose the speaking problems that their students encountered. There were seven problems provided for the teachers to choose from. All the teachers agreed that their students spoke very little or not at all in speaking class. 90% of the teachers thought that their students could not think of anything to say. 80% of the teachers stated that their students often used Vietnamese instead of English in English lessons. The same number of teachers (eight out of ten) believed that the students had no motivation to express themselves in English. For seven teachers, the students were fearful of criticism or losing face. 60% of the teachers claimed that the students were worried about making mistakes. Half of the teachers said that in speaking class, the students were shy.



When being asked about which problems they encountered in speaking classes, a majority of the students (74%) highly agreed on the fact that they spoke very little or not at all. 73% of the students were worried about making mistakes when speaking English. 71% of them reported that they could not think of anything to say. 70 % of the students said that they often used Vietnamese in speaking classes. 61 % of the students claimed that they had no motivation to express themselves in speaking class. When taking part in speaking activities, 48% of the students were shy of the attention that their speech attracted. 28 % of them agreed that they were fearful of criticism or losing face.

In brief, the findings from the questionnaires delivered to both the teachers and the students showed that when the students learn speaking, they encountered many problems. According to the teachers, the most common speaking problem was that the students spoke very little or nothing in speaking classes. Most of the teachers said that the students could not think of anything to say. Moreover, they often used Vietnamese and they had no motivation to express themselves. The results from student questionnaire were nearly the same as from the teacher questionnaire. The students reported that they spoke very little or nothing in speaking class. Most of the time, they could not think of anything to say so they used Vietnamese. A significant number of students also claimed that they were fearful of criticism or losing face. They had no motivation to use English to express themselves.

Observation results

Class observations were carried out to see how students really performed and what problems they had in speaking classes. The following problems are the most common ones in the classes observed:

- (1) The students were not given enough time to prepare for a speaking task before the task was performed and to perform their task.
- (2) When the students were asked to work in groups, not all of them were eager to contribute their opinions in English. Some of them participated actively but the others spoke very little or not at all.
- (3) They tended to use Vietnamese when they discussed in groups.
- (4) While the students were making performances, the other students in class did not listen attentively. They even chatted with the people next to them when their classmates were speaking.
- (5) The students looked very nervous when they spoke in front of the class. Sometimes, they did not know what to say and kept silent.
- (6) They read what they had written on a piece of paper. They did not remember the structures and vocabulary to speak naturally.
- (7) Whenever the students made mistakes, the teacher stopped them and corrected the mistakes.
- (8) The students had to do a lot of things in a forty-five minute period. They were always in a hurry because they were given limited time for every task.

DISCUSSION

Generally speaking, there was a consistent among data from teachers' questionnaire, students' questionnaire and class observation.

The factors that affect students' speaking performance

With regard to the first research question, the results indicated that there were a variety of factors that affect the students' speaking performance. A majority of the teachers said that the students' speaking performance was affected by topical knowledge. The next two important factors mentioned were listening ability and motivation to speak. Besides, the teachers' feedback during speaking activities also was also reported to affect the students' speaking performance. Finally, confidence was considered to be a factor that had influence on students' performance.

The results from student questionnaire were quite similar to those of the teachers, most of the students thought that their speaking performance was affected by topical knowledge. The next important factor was listening ability. In addition, the students thought that they needed to be confident to perform well. Last but not least, the students reported that their performance was also affected by feedback during speaking activities and the pressure to perform well.

The data from class observations revealed that the students' speaking performance is also affected by time for preparation. In all the four lessons observed, the students were given little time to prepare so their performance was not good

The problems that the students at Le Thanh Hien High School encounter when they learn speaking

In the current study, the findings from the questionnaires delivered to both the teachers and the students showed that when the students learn speaking, they encountered many problems. According to the teachers, the most common speaking problem was that the students spoke very little or nothing in speaking classes. Most of the teachers said that the students could not think of anything to say. Moreover, they often used Vietnamese and they had no motivation to express themselves. The results from student questionnaire were nearly the same as from the teachers' questionnaire. The students reported that they spoke very little or nothing in speaking class. Most of the time, they could not think of anything to say so they used Vietnamese. A significant number of students also claimed that they were fearful of criticism or losing face. They had no motivation to use English to express themselves.

Some more speaking problems that the students encountered in the classrooms observed were also recorded. The first problem was that the students often translated the information in the textbook into Vietnamese before they did the tasks. The second problem was that most of the students' speaking performance sounded unnatural because they did not remember the structures and vocabulary when they spoke. They just looked at their book and read. Furthermore, uneven participation in all the lessons observed was also considered to be another problem. Some students participated in the classroom activities actively while the others did it unwillingly.

In general, from the results of the investigation, it was evident that the students encountered many problems in the speaking class. Moreover, there were many factors that contributed to their success and failure in performing speaking tasks. On the whole, the current teaching and learning of speaking skills at Le Thanh Hien High School needed to be improved.

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CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned earlier, this study aimed to investigate the problems that the students at Le Thanh Hien High School experienced in speaking lessons and the factors affecting their speaking performance. The results of the study indicate that the students faced many problems such as (1) they spoke very little or not at all; (2) they could not think of anything to say; (3) they used Vietnamese instead of English when they discuss in groups or in pairs; (4) their participation was low or uneven; (5) they did not have motivation to express themselves; (6) they were fearful of criticism or losing face; (7) they had a habit of translate the information in the textbook into Vietnamese before they speak; (8) they looked at their textbook when they speak. The results also show that there were many factors affecting students speaking performance as follow: (1) topical knowledge; (2) listening ability; (3) motivation to speak; (4) teachers' feedback during speaking activities; (5) confidence; (6) pressure to perform well and (7) time for preparation.

Basing on the results of the study, some recommendations were made for both the teachers and the students at Le Thanh Hien High School. As for the teachers, they should first improve the performance conditions by giving their students time to prepare for a speaking task, teaching the students how to use mind map to generate ideas and giving students enough time to perform their tasks. Secondly, they should help their students overcome inhibition and shyness by having friendly, helpful and cooperative behaviors to make students feel comfortable when speaking in the class, reminding students not to worry about making mistakes and giving them clear instructions and sufficient guidance. Thirdly, the teacher should personalize and simplify the topics in the textbook to make them easier, more interesting and relevant to their lives. Moreover, speaking skills should be included in tests and exams because the students will be more motivated to learn speaking skills because they are tested. Another suggestion is that the teachers should give students more opportunities to speak English in class by using some speaking activities that require students to speak. Furthermore, the teachers should decide carefully when and how to correct the students' mistakes so that the students are not fearful of making mistakes and the flow of the students' conversation is not destroyed. In addition, the teacher should encourage students to participate in speaking activities. Finally, the teachers should create an English speaking environment by encouraging the students to use English in the classroom to make it a habit,

letting them watching films or videos in English and the teachers should also use English in the classroom frequently so that the students have more exposure to the language.

As for the students, they should first understand the importance of speaking skills. Their awareness of their studies may result in their motivation for learning. Secondly, they should practice speaking English outside the classroom more often by doing the speaking tasks in the textbook at home with their classmates, joining speaking club where they can use English to communicate and speaking on their own in front of a mirror. Finally, they should use English in the class instead of Vietnamese to make it a habit.

Hopefully, the study can contribute to the improvement of English teaching and learning at Le Thanh Hien High School.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey questionnaire is designed for an investigation into factors affecting students' speaking performance at Le Thanh Hien High School. Your assistance in completing the following questions is greatly appreciated.

Please put a tick (✓) in the box beside the option(s) you choose.

Part I: Demographic information

1. Gender

- Male
 Female

2. Age

- 20-25 years 26-30 years

- 31-35 years Other (please specify).....
 36- 40

3. Educational level

- Bachelor's degree
 Master's degree
 Other (please specify).....

4. How long have you been teaching English?

- 1-5 years
 6-10 years
 11- 15 years
 More than 16 years

Part II: Factors affecting students' speaking performance and speaking problems**5. How are the performance conditions in speaking class?**

Performance conditions	Yes	No
Are the students given plenty of time to perform a speaking task?		
Do the students prepare for a task before the task is performed?		
Do the students have the pressure to perform well?		
Are the listeners patient, understanding, sympathetic and supportive?		

6. How are your students in speaking class?

- Motivated
 Anxious
 Confident

7. Can you evaluate your students' listening skills?

- Very bad
 Bad
 Average
 Good
 Very good

8. What is your reaction when the students make mistakes during oral work?**(You can have more than one choice)**

- Keep quiet, smile and encourage them to go on their task.
 Stop them and correct their mistakes.
 Get annoyed when students keep making mistakes.
 If students cannot think of what to say, you may prompt them forwards.
 Watch, listen to students and write down points to give feedback afterwards.

9. In your opinion, which of the following factors affecting your students' speaking performance? (You can have more than one choice)

- Time for preparation Topical knowledge
 Pressure to perform well Listening ability
 Listeners' support Feedback during speaking activities
 Motivation to speak Time allowed to perform a speaking task
 Confidence
- Anxiety
 Other reason (please specify).....

10. Which speaking problems do your students encounter? (You can have more than one choice)

- They are worried about making mistakes.
 They are fearful of criticism or losing face.
 They cannot think of anything to say.

- They have no motive to express themselves.
- They speak very little or not at all.
- They use Vietnamese.
- They are shy.

Thank you very much for taking your valuable time to complete this survey. Your opinions are greatly appreciated.

APPENDIX B STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey questionnaire is designed for "An Investigation into Speaking Performance of the grade 11 students at Le Thanh Hien High School". Your assistance in completing the following questions is greatly appreciated. Please put a tick (✓) in the box beside the option(s) you choose.

Part I: Demographic information

1. Gender

- Male Female

2. Age

- Under 15 18-20
 15- 17

3. How long have you been learning English?

- Under 1 year 5- 7 years
 2-4 years More than 7 years

Part II: Factors affecting students' speaking performance and speaking problems

4. How much do you like speaking English in class?

- very much
 rather
 normal
 little
 not at all

5. How often do you practice speaking outside the classroom?

- Always
 Usually
 Sometimes
 Rarely
 Never

6. What do you think about the necessity of speaking skills to your future job?

- Very necessary
 Necessary
 Normal
 unnecessary
 Very unnecessary

7. How are the performance conditions in speaking class?

Performance conditions	Yes	No
Are you given plenty of time to perform a speaking task?		
Do you prepare for a task before the task is performed?		
Do you have the pressure to perform well?		
Are the listeners patient, understanding, sympathetic and supportive?		

8. How do you feel in speaking class?

- Motivated
 Anxious
 Confident

9. Can you evaluate your listening skills?

- Very bad
 Bad
 Average
 Good
 Very good

10. How often do the teachers correct your mistakes while you are performing your tasks?

- Always
 Often
 Sometimes
 Rarely
 Never

11. What factors affect your speaking performance? (You can have more than one choice)

- Time for preparation
 Pressure to perform well
 Listeners' support
 Motivation to speak
 Confidence
 Anxiety
 Topical knowledge
 Listening ability
 Time allowed to perform a speaking task

Other factors (please specify).....

12. Which problems do you encounter in learning speaking skill? (You can have more than one choice)

- You are worried about making mistakes.
 You are fearful of criticism or losing face.
 You cannot think of anything to say.
 You have no motivation to express yourselves.
 You speak very little or not at all.
 You use Vietnamese.
 You are shy.

Thank you very much for taking your valuable time to complete this survey. Your opinions are greatly appreciated.