

CHALLENGES FACED BY EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ONLINE ENGLISH SPEAKING CLASSES AT VINH UNIVERSITY DURING THE COVID-19 PERIOD

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, many universities switched rapidly to the online learning mode to maintain the continuity of the teaching and learning process. This explanatory mixed-methods study was an attempt to investigate the problems EFL students encountered in their online English speaking classes. The study involved 135 EFL students at Vinh University, a key national university in Vietnam. To collect data, a questionnaire and semi-structured interview were used. The results showed that there were six barriers that influenced EFL students' speaking skills in online classes, including facilities, computer skills, coordination, teaching method, learners' attitudes and assessment. From the findings, the study tried to suggest some pedagogical solutions in order to improve the quality of online English speaking learning for EFL university students.

Keywords: Challenges; online learning; English speaking; Covid-19.

1. Introduction

The importance of English as the language globally spoken and accepted has been comprehensively discussed (Rao & Parupalli, 2019). There are four main skills, including listening, speaking, writing and reading that allow its user to comprehend and produce spoken language for proper interpersonal communication, in which, in terms of oral communication, speaking must take pride of place when compared to the other aspects (Kirschner, 2012). However, the fact that the Covid-19 outbreaks all around the world has forced all the educational institutions to shift from face-to-face class to online learning and this seems to present their learners with both opportunities and drawbacks during the learning process. Due to the pandemic, most of the students had to switch to online learning with different platforms, including Zoom, Microsoft Team or Google Meet, etc. (Maheshwari, 2021). In fact, even in face-to-face classes, many students in Vietnam's educational system have difficulty in creating fully-developed verbal sentences even though they own a quite good foundation. One of the main reasons for this limitation is the lack of

vocabulary for expressing concepts in English, lack of English speaking strategies, as well as the limited opportunities to engage in speaking activities (Quyen *et al.*, 2018). There have been a few studies which tried to investigate the impacts of the online learning during Covid-19 era on EFL students' English learning in general (Maheshwari, 2021; Ngo Duc Huy, 2021; Bui *et al.*, 2021). However, no study was found to be conducted specifically to Vinh University EFL learners' English-speaking learning and the difficulties in various domains they faced. This study was carried out to fill in this gap as it is important to find out the challenging factors that influence EFL students' speaking skills and their attitude towards such online classes. The findings of the study might offer some pedagogical implications in order to improve the quality of teaching this important skill to Vinh University students and open a new insight for English teaching online. To come to this end, the study sought answers to the following question: What challenges do EFL students face when learning English speaking in online classes?

2. Literature review

According to Egbert (2005), online communication provides the learners with opportunities to orally communicate with other people in an environment that is conducive to learning. Learners claimed that online learning would be easier for those whose speaking skill is not qualified enough because they do not need to speak face-to-face to their interlocutors (Heng & Linda, 2003). Man-man (2006) supported this by stating that less confident learners might benefit from online communication since it minimized the anxiety caused by real-time interaction. Besides that, there was less teacher's control and more authentic objectives, thus online speaking allows hesitant pupils to express themselves more freely. On the other hand, the most significant impediment to online learning is a lack of social connection (Heng & Linda, 2003; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). The impacts of learning from home include fear of Covid-19 infection, frustration and boredom, inadequate information, lack of direct contact with classmates, friends, and teachers, and lack of private space (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Galea *et al.*, 2020; Hadel *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, challenges in implementing online teaching include pedagogical, technical and social aspects (Hansson, 2015, Hiai & Alnatour, 2021; Hillier & Fluck, 2017; White & Hammer, 2000). Learners in low- and middle-income nations may face challenges such as network outages, lack of electricity, and Internet access, as well as a lack of high-quality learning gadgets (Crichton & Onguko, 2013; Hansson & Jobe, 2014; Mahyoob, 2020; Ravindran & Bee, 2022). Other issues include the instructor's lack of control over the learning environment (Hijazi & AlNatour, 2021; Doghonadze *et al.*, 2020), and urgent requirements for disciplinary procedures and student organization. Other issues include students' lack of enthusiasm in the subjects they learn (Girik Allo, 2020; Hijazi, 2012) and challenges in obtaining instructional techniques for improving students' ability to solve problems independently (Doghonadze *et al.*, 2020; Muftah, 2022).

In Vietnam, few studies were conducted to investigate related problems. Thach (2020) found that Vietnamese culture had some negative impacts on EFL students' interactions in online English course, including students' passivity and fear of raising questions to their teachers during the course. Meanwhile Pham (2020) found out different factors influencing students' interactions in these courses. More recently, Pham *et al.*, (2022) indicated that EFL students at Van Lang university encountered some difficulties

during their online learning courses, such as external noises, internet connection and negative impacts from long-time screening. In addition, Hung and Nguyen (2022) also suggested scaffolding as an effective strategy to be used in online classroom. However, these studies merely focused on the issues in online courses in general, not in speaking online classes. Moreover, the findings were limited to certain elements related to the learners, teachers and the learning environment. The current study tried to fill in the gap by seeking the results with a comprehensive scope, including facilities, computer skills, coordination, teaching methods, students' attitudes and assessment tools. The deeper findings will offer more insightful recommendations for a better teaching and learning process.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Mixed methods design was used for this study as data collected from a single questionnaire on the challenges faced by EFL students in online speaking classes during the Covid-19 period may not be sufficient to determine the dependability of the respondents' difficulties in their online speaking classes. The mixed method provided an opportunity for all participants of the study population to be represented within the sample search equally, without prejudice or direct intervention from the researchers. Accordingly, both qualitative and quantitative data were merged to expand the comprehension of this research conclusion, ensuring its accuracy and validity (Creswell, 2022). The quantitative data from the questionnaire were collected and analyzed before the interviews were administered as a follow-up stage in order to clarify and deepen the results from the questionnaire.

3.2. Participants

The study involved 135 EFL students, who were taking part in online speaking classes where English is used as medium of instruction. These participants were randomly chosen to ensure the objectivity of the results. These participants aged from 20 to 21 and they were all following the same training program at Foreign Languages Department at Vinh University. Also, a total of 20 participants were purposefully sampled based on their questionnaire scores for the follow-up interview with view to clarifying any ambiguity relating to the research problem emerged from the survey.

3.3. Study instruments

The study adapted the questionnaire from Hijazi and ALNatour (2021), which was designed to measure the same research problem for Jordanian EFL students. The Cronbach's alpha is 0.83, which is assumed to be highly reliable. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first one elicits personal information from the students, including their names, Gmail accounts and English learning experience; the second section was designed following a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), to identify EFL students' levels of agreement with the challenges faced in online speaking classes during the Covid-19 period. The questionnaire consisted of 28 items, divided into seven themes: facilities (5 questions), computer skills (3 questions), coordination (4 questions), teaching methods (4 questions), attitude (8 questions),

assessment (4 questions). The participants were required to tick the appropriate scale with their actual practice for each of the 28 statements in total.

The semi-structured interview was used among 20 interviewees. Once there was any ambiguity in the interviewees' answers, the questions were reworded and delivered back to the respondents. Furthermore, conversational language in Vietnamese was employed in the interviews to promote a natural and comfortable setting between interviewer-interviewee exchanges. To have clear and mutual understanding, Vietnamese was used to create rapport with the respondents. The length of the interview was about 10 to 15 minutes.

Before the quantitative results were statistically examined, the data had to be cleaned. During the data cleaning procedure, all missing data and extreme values were removed. For qualitative data analysis and table presentation, the computer software package Excel was employed. The researchers themselves transcribed, organized, and evaluated the qualitative data from the interviews.

This research is classified as explanatory mixed methods research. As a result, the researchers first analyzed statistically and numerically the data collected through the questionnaire after verifying and ensuring its reliability and validity to find the needed answers to the research question. The quantitative data findings were then used to guide the collection and interpretation of qualitative data from the interviews. The following phase involved theming, integrating, and comparing quantitative and qualitative results to gain a better understanding of the difficulties faced by EFL students in online speaking classes during the Covid-19 period.

4. Findings

To answer the research question, data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed and grouped into 6 domains, including assessment, teaching methods, coordination, attitudes, facilities and computer skills. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Results from the questionnaire for 6 domains

Domain	Mean	SD
Assessment	3.50	0.83
Teaching method	3.42	0.93
Coordination	3.32	0.78
Attitude	3.24	0.87
Facilities	3.22	0.95
Computer skills	3.15	0.84

Table 1 demonstrates the mean of six different domains, referring to the challenges when EFL students took part in online English speaking classes. Overall, most of the challenges showed a neutral level, only the assessment domain was regarded as the most difficult issue for English-major students participating in the virtual classes. With respect to other lower challenging domains, teaching method was the second most demanding factor at the mean of 3.42, followed by coordination and attitude area at 3.32 and 3.24

respectively. In comparison, Computer skills had the least impact, averaging at 3.15. More details related to these domains are analyzed in the following tables. The flowing section will analyze these six factors in more detail.

Table 2: Challenges related to Computer skills

Items	Mean	SD	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
It is difficult to apply computer skills	2.72	0.933	3%	16%	39%	34%	8%
I find it easy to use interactive applications (e.g: Zoom Inc., Microsoft Teams)	3.48	0.904	8%	48%	32%	8%	4%
I need training in computer skills and online usage	3.26	0.991	9%	34%	35%	18%	4%

Table 2 shows the proportions of the participants’ reflections on the Computer skills items. In general, most students did not encounter too many difficulties in utilizing computer or electronic devices and remain neutral about the need for the training of computer skills and online usage, accounting for 43%. However, 56% of EFL students showed an agreement that it is easy to utilize interactive applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, which were commonly used as online teaching platform in Vietnam. The qualitative data was in the same line as the above-quantitative data to the extent that all the interviewees admitted that they could have had the access to the computer since they were in lower schools.

Table 3: Challenges related to facilities

Items	Mean	SD	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I sometimes do not have easy access to the link on the Internet	3.46	1.077	6%	50%	18%	14%	6%
I find it hard to access the university platforms (e.g. E-Learning)	3.58	1.027	4%	43%	25%	11%	17%
The sessions are suddenly disconnected	3.57	0.913	13%	44%	33%	7%	3%

In Table 3, the problem of the lessons being suddenly disconnected was reported to be the biggest challenge for students, causing online learning to be interrupted, especially in rush hour with a large number of accessing people, as 57% of the students made an agreement on this view. Meanwhile, 56% of students had troubles in accessing the link on the Internet. From the interview, the number of students who lacked devices such as

computers, laptops or mobile phones was limited because most students said that they already own at least a smartphone or a laptop to support their online learning needs through platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and E-learning. In addition, about half of the students said that they had problems with the Internet connection causing online learning to be distracted such as not easy to access platforms (e.g. E-Learning); and the instructor's voice is not always clear, it is often difficult to comprehend what he or she is saying, which is illustrated by the number of people agreeing with 47% and 50% respectively.

Table 4: Challenges related to attitudes

Items	Mean	SD	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Online learning makes me more independent as a learner	3.55	0.845	11%	44%	35%	9%	1%
Teaching courses online should continue even after the Covid-19 pandemic	3.08	1.152	11%	28%	28%	24%	9%
I enjoy online classes because different methods are used	3.23	0.897	5%	35%	42%	14%	4%
Online learning is more effective than face-to-face learning	2.64	0.959	2%	17%	35%	35%	11%
I'm comfortable communicating electronically	3.29	0.880	8%	30%	48%	11%	3%
It is easy to complete group projects/ assignments digitally	3.15	0.892	6%	26%	49%	15%	4%
It's easy to get distracted in online classes	3.56	0.868	12%	43%	36%	7%	2%
I find it difficult to motivate myself and maintain learning motivation in the course	3.39	0.840	6%	41%	42%	8%	3%

As illustrated in Table 4, the students expressed a neutral attitude towards online learning speaking. The highest challenge when it comes to virtual learning was getting distracted, as 55% of the students made an agreement on this view. In addition, the sample's responses on item 8 show that about 47% of students had difficulty in motivating

themselves and maintaining learning motivation during online classes. Moreover, a physical classroom, according to 46% of the participants, would provide a superior education. In addition, more than half of the students (55%) reported online learning was convenient for them in terms of time and location, allowing them to become more independent. This neutral attitude was explained by the interviewees that due to the various teaching methods used in online classes, the teachers created enjoyment in virtual classes with suitable methods in each lesson, with the support of many teaching applications such as Kahoot, Quizizz or Padlet that stimulated their interests. Also, about two-fifths said that they gained more confidence when communicating through computer screens because they could avoid direct eye contact with either teachers or classmates.

Regarding the coordination items, which are believed to be an indispensable part of learning and teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic period, EFL students' perceptions of the related five items are quantitatively illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5: *Challenges related to coordination*

Items	Mean	SD	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I sometimes feel distracted due to the lack of the teacher's control over the lecture	3.29	0.957	6%	41%	34%	14%	5%
The syllabus was clear	3.57	0.769	8%	50%	33%	9%	0%
I know the set of rules that should be followed during the online lecture	3.58	0.768	6%	54%	25%	3%	2%
I can easily deliver the difficulties I encountered during the semester to the instructor	3.29	0.782	4%	36%	46%	13%	1%

As shown in Table 5, one of the most significant issues is feeling distracted owing to a lack of instructor control, which accounts for 47 % of all challenges. As reported in the interviews, this is because during the lecture, the teachers are unable to fully watch the entire class, particularly when using online platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams and are also interrupted by other factors such as answering the phone or having an unstable connection or not utilizing the teaching apps competently. On the other hand, approximately 60% of learners indicated they have no trouble comprehending the syllabus since it is delivered or displayed clearly by the instructors at the start of the first meeting. Furthermore, exactly 60% of students claimed they are aware of the rules that must be followed throughout the online course. To deal with the delivering the difficulties, 40% of the participants found that they had easy access to their teachers to communicate with each other.

Table 6: Challenges related to teaching method

Items	Mean	SD	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Online learning does not enhance my critical thinking and problem-solving skills	3.35	0.917	4%	34%	36%	23%	3%
Online learning can customize learning for each student’s strengths, needs, skills and interests	3.35	0.869	7%	36%	46%	7%	4%
The lecturer uses different resources such as videos, music sessions, or others to deliver ideas	3.78	0.894	17%	55%	20%	5%	3%
English speaking teaching time is not enough	3.13	0.989	12%	33%	36%	16%	3%

Table 6 shows the percentages of the participants’ answers to the teaching method items in learning and teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic period. Overall, the students did not report to counter challenges related to their teachers’ teaching methods. The only challenge that students had was that online learning did not provide enough time for their speaking learning. This was clarified in the interview that this problem was similarly faced by the students in the face-to face class as the manner in which teachers organized, presented, and altered various themes at the same time, causing them to spend time looking for crucial knowledge and information and hence reducing their practice session. 72% of the students showed agreement that the lecturer used different resources such as videos, music sessions, or others to deliver ideas to make them feel interested and excited when engaging the online classroom. Besides, 43% of the students reported that online learning could customize learning for each student’s strengths, needs, skills and interests. Hence, it seems EFL students had a positive attitude towards online teaching methods in their speaking class.

Table 7: Challenges related to assessment

Items	Mean	SD	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I obtain the necessary feedback	3.56	0.756	7%	49%	39%	3%	2%
The questions of the tests suit the different levels of students	3.56	0.770	7%	50%	37%	4%	2%

Items	Mean	SD	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Discussion time during assignments are limited	3.49	0.798	6%	50%	31%	13%	0%
Online learning increases the chances of cheating	3.38	0.951	10%	38%	35%	14%	3%

Table 7 illustrates the percentages of participants' responses to the assessment items when participating in an online speaking class. One of the highest challenges is that discussion time during assignments is limited, accounting for 56%. In fact, as reported in the interviews, the assessment of a speaking task was based on the teachers' observation and their feedback to the students, however the time used to discuss the exercise was too short, which lead to the students not showing their full potential. In addition, up to 47% of students agreed that online learning increased their chances of cheating. As a student reported in the interview: *"the internet has all the information people needed and helped the students connect with others quickly, consequently it was easy to find the answers for a test question over the internet or from our peers"*.

On the other hand, the participants had a positive evaluation towards their teachers' assessment on online speaking class. More specifically, more than half of the students (56%) stated that they received the necessary feedback during their online speaking class. In addition, about 57% of students felt the questions of the tests suit the different levels of students. These things can help students gain more knowledge and be more confident in their own abilities.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the online English speaking difficulties faced by EFL learners during the Covid-19 period. It centered on six factors that influenced EFL students' speaking skill in online classes, including facilities, computer skills, coordination, teaching method, learners' attitudes and assessment. Specifically, the coordination was found as a source of challenges, which is in the same line with the findings in Hijazi & AlNatour (2021); Doghonadze *et al.*, (2020), in which they indicated that difficulty was derived from the lack of control of the lecturer over the learning environment. In addition, the difficulties resulted from computer skills in online learning were consistent with White & Hammer (2000) and Hillier & Fluck (2017), who stated that any technical problems can have a negative impact during students' exams. A neutral attitude toward online classes has also been found in the study of Girik Allo (2020). Teaching methods were reported by the online learners in the study, which is consistent with the findings in Hijazi's study (2012). From the findings, it can be implied that EFL teachers, to some extent, were adequately adapted to the new teaching environment.

As noticed in the results section above, the challenge related to the assessment issues in online English speaking classes showed the highest score of all the statistical factors. The assessment was challenging since the students increased their chances of cheating when participating in digital classrooms with the support of many external sources from the Internet. This finding is similar to many previous studies (Kirschner,

2012; Hansson, 2015). It is recommended that EFL teachers and digital designers should take this lacune into account and apply different controlling methods to ensure the reliability of the online assessemnt.

EFL learners were found to be confronted with the problem of limited time of speaking praticce. This result is consistent with Hijazi & AlNatour' findings (2019), who found that teachers' knowledge about how to organize, present and adapt different topics and problems according to their learners' abilities and interests was not sufficient since the student teacher preparation at the university or college level focused more on the academic than on the practical aspect of teaching. Thus, the problems in the instructor's teaching methods already existed, even before the online learning methods for teaching were required. One suggestion might be that the teachers should assign the speaking tasks as a project or homework and provide students more time in class to present or discuss their results.

The coordination also had a negative effect on a student's learning process. Two notable difficulties included students feeling distracted owing to a lack of teacher supervision and insufficient time for English-speaking teaching as Muilenburg & Berge (2005) as well as Ali (2020) found from their research. This was mostly due to subjective and objective factors such as the inability to control the entire class, interruptions from teachers' incoming calls, incompetent use of teaching apps, and weak Internet connections from both learners and lecturers. Consequently, more considerations should be taken towards techniques of online classroom mangement.

In addition, no challenges related to facilities were reported in the study. The findings are inconsistent to Aboagye *et al.* (2020) and Hijazi & AlNatour (2021), who claimed that "facilities" is one of the challenges that make it difficult for educators to successfully deliver online learning. In terms of computer skills, the data indicated that the student's past experiences with utilizing technology and web applications in an educational environment helped them to control their online learning at good level. However, it is obvious that online education requires much more time and technology than traditional education (White & Hammer, 2000). Besides, there was a high degree of computer skill challenge because those students were not prepared or trained to use such skills. Notably, a large proportion of the participants come from rural areas, where the use of technological tools for learning is not widely adopted. As a result, it is recommended that EFL students should be provided with the necessary knowledge/ skills related to online usage to have a more effective learning.

Another purpose of the study was to examine EFL students' attitude toward the online English speaking class during the Covid-19 crisis. Both positive and negative feelings were expressed. The learners found it difficult to focus on online classes and easy to be distracted. The external factors such as noise, family member interference, smartphone notifications, or Internet connection are mentioned as the sources of such difficulty. These can be used to partly explain why most students express a negative attitude in motivating and maintaining motivation during online speaking classes. Consequently, the effectiveness of online learning is rated to be worse compared to physical classes. This finding is in line with Mardiah (2020) and Tri *et al.*, (2022), Pham *et al.*, (2022), in which they realized that E-learning was not as effective as in face-to-face classes. From this finding, more student controlling tools should be taken in account when it comes to online class to ensure the effectiveness of such classes.

6. Conclusion

The study was carried out to examine the challenges EFL students encountered during their online speaking class in Covid-19 period. It was discovered that EFL Vinh University students faced six notable difficulties, including facility, computer skills, coordination, teaching method, learners' attitudes and assessment to a moderate level. While increasing the chances of cheating during assessment and restricting discussion time are major drawbacks, EFL students in this study did not show the difficulty in coping with the online English speaking learning. A number of pedagogical implications were figured out previously in order to improve the effectiveness of the online English speaking learning and teaching. The finding is significant as this study contributes considerably to the body of related field since it was one of the most recent attempts to identify the problems as well as the attitudes of EFL students in a Vietnamese context. Moreover, it provides to the educators and policy makers a more understanding on the substantial obstacles and problems that EFL learners face as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic's rapid shift to online learning, and the steps that must be taken to make online education more accessible and to address the concerns that have been reported. Plus, it increases instructors' knowledge of their students' viewpoints and performance in their Speaking learning on the digital platform, which is seen to be a good indicator of learning and teaching success. This study is limited to the views of undergraduate students studying at Vinh University. Since it was conducted based on views of 100 undergraduate students, obtained results are limited and cautious for a generalization.

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TÓM TẮT

NHỮNG THÁCH THỨC MÀ SINH VIÊN NGOẠI NGỮ GẶP PHẢI TRONG LỚP HỌC NÓI TIẾNG ANH TRỰC TUYẾN TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC VINH TRONG THỜI KỲ COVID-19

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Nhiều trường Đại học ở Việt Nam đã nhanh chóng chuyển sang dạy-học trên các nền tảng trực tuyến trong giai đoạn dịch bệnh Covid-19. Nghiên cứu tổng hợp này cố gắng tìm hiểu những vấn đề mà sinh viên chuyên ngữ tiếng Anh gặp phải khi học kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh trong các lớp học trực tuyến. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện với 135 sinh viên ở Trường Đại học Vinh, trường đại học trọng điểm quốc gia của Việt Nam. Số liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập bằng câu hỏi và phỏng vấn chuyên sâu. Kết quả nghiên cứu đã chỉ ra rằng có 6 yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc học kỹ năng nói: cơ sở vật chất, kỹ năng công nghệ, sự hợp tác, phương pháp giảng dạy, thái độ của học viên và kiểm tra đánh giá. Từ kết quả nghiên cứu, bài báo đã đưa ra những đề xuất nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả cho việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh trên các nền tảng trực tuyến.

Từ khóa: Khó khăn; kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh; dạy-học trực tuyến; Covid-19.