

Exploring Challenges of Major English Students Towards Learning English Speaking Skills Online During Covid 19 Pandemic and Some Suggested Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Due to Coronavirus outbreaks, almost all universities carried out teaching online by using a variety of learning platforms such as web-based learning, LMS combined with conducting video conferences through Zoom Meeting or Google Meet and the like. Although Ho Chi Minh City Open University (HCMCOU) made great efforts to invest state-of-the-art facilities and well-trained teaching team in the online educational process, students seemed not to be satisfied with this training system. Particularly, in English-speaking classes, students seemed to be in stock. Thus, this paper aims to explore the challenges encountered by major English learners towards learning English speaking skills online and then suggest some possible solutions for such problems that existed. To conduct this study, 35 major English freshmen joining in a speaking class of Schools of Advanced studies at HCMCOU were asked to respond questionnaire survey, and then five hard-working students were selected to participate in in-depth interviews relevant to barriers of online learning and their expectation during Covid 19 period. The findings illustrated that majority of students expressed their neglected attitude towards learning speaking skills online in the Covid 19 pandemic when they had to cope with various problems of technological advances, Wi-Fi connection, significant characteristics of speaking skills, and sociolinguistic competence. With such challenges exposed, more project-based learning and more video conferences were expected to apply.

Keywords: Online learning, Speaking skills, Challenges, Solutions,

1. INTRODUCTION

Since The World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed the serious worldwide influences of Covid -19 in January 2020 [1-6], numerous educational institutions have fallen into crisis, so they decided to switch from face-to-face learning at schools to online learning or distance learning [6]. With such an online learning form suggested, a diversity of applications and platforms are employed [7], including Google Classroom[8], WhatsApp [9], Zoom Meeting [10], and so on. Whatever applications or platforms used are not out of the range of concept “asynchronous” or “synchronous” learning mode. An asynchronous learning mode refers to the ways of online communication without the real-time participation between students and instructors, and

learning materials and learning resources are delivered via Learning Management System (LMS) platform with many supportive tools such as e-mails, discussion boards, blogs, wikis, or video/audio recordings [7]. Whereas, Synchronous mode involves delivering course contents in a specific period and requires the strong support of both the students and instructors in aspects of instructional designs, social communication, and learning environment [11]. Some effective tools of this learning mode allow students to orally communicate with the instructors or exchange messages, such as typing messages, presenting PowerPoint slides, transmitting videos or surfing websites, and organizing video conferences [12]. Both learning modes are widely applied in higher education institutions in Vietnam, Aisa, and other countries all over the world. At Ho Chi Minh

City Open University (HCMCOU), those learning modes have been applied since itself involved in distance training and e-learning (online learning) many years ago [13] for their missions and visions. This means that HCMCOU seems to have no difficulties in conducting online learning classes during Covid 19 period when itself has good preparation of advanced technology [14], learning platform [1, 7] teacher's technological awareness, modern teaching methods knowledge management, staff training available educational resources, accessibility, software and material design, technological investment [15]. However, it is hard to avoid the problems related to learners such as learning readiness, learning conditions, learning attitudes and perceptions, learning motivations, learners' academic, technological confidence, learning styles, learners' condition (age, gender, geography) [15] towards online learning. Especially with the English majors, these problems seemed to be more serious when those learners had to face a variety of speaking skills' characteristics such as communication, conservation ability, learning activities [16], listening skill, sociocultural skill, affective factors, and other linguistic and sociolinguistic competence [17], but also cope with the suddenness of transferring from traditional face to face on campus to eye to eye on the screen. This paper, therefore, examines English majors' responses to learning speaking skills online during the covid 19 pandemic through three following research questions:

- 1) What difficulties have students encountered during the online learning process?
- 2) What problems have students coped with when studying English speaking skills online?
- 3) What suggestions have students recommended when learning English speaking skills online?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The speedy spread of Coronavirus seriously impacts various aspects of people's lives in many parts of the world [18], [5], [7]. Especially in the educational field, all face-to-face teaching and learning activities are destroyed due to the closure of all schools and universities worldwide [6]. In addition, with the long-lasting Covid 19 pandemic (from 2020 until now), numerous governments and education ministers have made a decision of switching learning face to face on campus (with the physical presence of both teachers and learners) to distant online learning (eye to eye on

screen). This education shift brings diverse alternatives to teachers, learners, and authorities responsible for training activities. Despite many educators and researchers exploring different benefits and drawbacks of this shifting to online learning, numerous concerns need to be considered in our English education environment at HCMCOU.

2.1 Benefits of online learning

Online learning is named in different ways, such as "remote learning," "e-learning," "virtual learning," or "blended learning" [15, 19-24]. In this study, online learning closely connects to the computer-based training in pedagogical thinking or CALL (Computer-Aided Language Learning) and CALL software [25-27]. Many previous studies admitted that online learning brings a wide range of advantages for both instructors and learners as Octaberlina & Muslimin (2020) stated that teachers and learners at college were benefited from obtaining diverse abilities in separate fields such as developing their information technology skills which have been trained before for reasons of computerized innovation and reinforcing for teacher in the college [6]. Online learning was more convenient than traditional learning at schools because teachers and learners had flexible learning at home instead of going to schools or having fixed time on campus [28]. Additionally, with this online learning mode, learners could enrich their metacognitive development with reflexive and collaborative skills. Learners knew how to be self-directed and performed in an effective way [28]. Apparently, online learning is considered to be successful if only all factors of accessibility, flexibility, cost efficiency, interaction, and networking among teachers, instructors, administrators, and school managers have been solved in a satisfactory fashion [29]. In teaching the English language online, L. V. Nguyen (2008) acknowledged that technology helped to enhance the quality of syllabus design and material development [30], as well as improved learners' English language skills, computer skills, and collaboration experience [31]. The more technological advances applied, the more benefits learners obtained in terms of centeredness, autonomy, interaction, and collaboration [32]. Wiki application helped to promote collaborative learning or other work activities thanks to the flexible techniques of creating posters, newspapers, handbooks, etc. [33]. Google Classroom strongly supported teachers and students in both sides of overcoming the difficulties experienced and reducing paperwork or assignments [8]. WhatsApp is appropriate with students' and lecturers' needs in virtual classroom learning because it encourages learners' motivation and critical thinking in the era and post-pandemic Covid-19 [4, 34].

2.2 Drawbacks of online learning

The key challenges of online learning mainly focus on infrastructure, resources, information access, personal characteristics, support from institutions, technology and connectivity, instructors' design, and technology confidence [35-37]. In addition, some subset of barriers such as faceless teaching, faculty culture, insufficient time-frame to implement online courses, insufficient autonomous learning, high cost of materials, insufficient policy leadership, and time investment in online contacts or preparation for learning materials/activities greatly influence on the quality of online learning [37, 38]. Furthermore, other factors in technological advances, pedagogical methods, competent human resources, learners' factors lead to challenges of online English training (OET). These include Web commercialization, accuracy, complexity, and information quality [39], and other problems of learners, including self-motivation, self-driven learning capacity, effective communicative skill [36], e-learning attitudes, perceived behavior control, and learning attribute [40], and the limits and perspectives of transdisciplinary Methodology as well [41]. Besides, the perceptions of learners towards the online learning process may cause negative influences for qualities of online learning during the Covid-19 period. Indeed, a great number of EFL learners expressed their preference of conventional face-to-face communication to asynchronous discussions, and they prefer to study with BlackBoard learning to learning on screen because they believed BlackBoard learning is a useful and interesting learning environment and helped learners widen the scope of learning experience [7].

2.3 Challenges of Learning English Speaking Skills Online

Owing to Covid break, learners are more under pressure when participating in learning English speaking skills online. In fact, learners not only face the typical challenges of English-speaking skills but also cope with numerous barriers of the online learning environment. These were discussed by many researchers. As A. P. Lian & Mestre (1985b) ever said that speaking a language as English was an important part of language training due to three essential factors taken into account such as communication (focusing on communicative language teaching), conversation ability (conversation class-common form for practicing the language at school), and activities which include some role-plays and short-term stimulations [16]. Moreover, learners need to equip themselves with listening skills, sociocultural skills, affective factors, and other linguistic and sociolinguistic competence such as grammatical, discourse,

sociolinguistic, and strategic competence [17, 42, 43]. Referring to challenges of online learning, Anderson (2008) listed eight challenging categories of learning online, including learners, teacher, institution, support, course, technology, costs, and society [15]. These cover numerous aspects of learning motivations, learners' academic, technological confidence, learning styles, learners' condition, teacher's technological awareness, modern teaching methods, qualification and competence, knowledge management, staff training, learners' faculty support and social support, syllabus design, pedagogical model, learning materials and activities, flexibility, localization, available educational resources, accessibility, software and material design, technological investment, accessing rates, tuitions, course fees, books, institutional financial background and funding and so forth [15, 44].

2.4 Learners' perceptions in online learning during Covid-19 period

Online learners had positive perceptions [5] in their learning process when the Covid pandemic happened. The good points expressed were not excluded: (1) learners enable to continuously maintain their learning courses and promptly graduate from the university if they have no problems with internet access, financial issue, and online learning implementation; (2) learners enable to complete their tasks well without physical learning on campus and require more small group tasks in order to they could support their friends who did not have an internet pulse and access [1]; (3) learners enable to improve their English ability and their characteristics thanks to the application of ICT in the online learning process, [45]. Overall, both learners and teachers expressed their positive attitudes toward applying technological advances and ICT development in English training in remote settings [1, 5, 26, 30, 33].

Conversely, many Arabian learners expressed that virtual education does not attract them, compared to learning with the BlackBoard on campus [7]. Also, learners lack opportunities to interact with their teachers and peers and even get less feedback when all lectures and learning activities are delivered through an online learning system. This greatly influences their social interaction in real life [5]. Some students revealed that online learning made them lose interest and commitment in the learning process, and learners feel lazier when having insufficient control and guidance from the teacher, so they are easily distracted in self-learning and doing assignments. Especially with English speaking skills, learners were more disadvantageous if more online learning was conducted. Lecturers could not maximize their

beautiful voice when many unnecessary echoes surrounded or unstable Wi-Fi connection and learners had to make more effort to listen to lecturers or apply a variety of computers and other similar devices. Consequently, learners have physical problems such as eye fatigue, poor postures, and so on. Eventually, learning commitment was the weekend [5]. Besides, learners also had the problems of less engaging in online courses due to limited access to technology resources or internet connection and low-quality sound [46]

Off all advantages and disadvantages of online learning, and positive and negative perceptions of learners toward learning English speaking skills online mentioned above, learners seemed to prefer face to face on campus to learning in remote setting (online learning)[14]. These are explained as follow: (1) learners have more opportunities to make conversations in the language classroom; (2) learners can use dialogues that encourage more meaningful negotiation and apply more accessed language knowledge when face to face in the classroom [47]; (3) learners enable to harness their oral communicative skills when leaving schools/ university [47]. Whereas, participating online English speaking courses, learners are under stress of speaking skill barriers like language mechanics, language functions, social and cultural rules and norms [48], and online learning limitations with the problems relevant to learners, teachers, institutions, support, course, technology, costs, and society[15]. Nevertheless, in the context of long-lasting Covid-19 impact and universities closure, learners have no choices, so joining online classes is unavoidable. To assure studying online effectively, some possible solutions are advised as following:

2.5 Applying more Project-based learning in the online learning process

Project-based learning (PBL) is derived from the idea of “project-based education” of John Dewey (1938, 1997). It is a comprehensive approach that helps learners engage in discovering their authentic problems [49]. PBL may help learners to autonomously explore their abilities to identify as exactly as possible their encountered problems, and it may create an environment to help learners make their needs visible. Once the learning environment is created, learners will be provided a wide range of relevant resources covering such areas as listening, rhythm, intonation, grammar, vocabulary, and so on. Apparently, the more resources are set up; the more benefits learners will have. Project-based learning is considered an effective tool that greatly supports online learning. As Thomas Markham (2011)

described on page 23, *“PBL integrates knowing and doing. Students learn knowledge and elements of the core curriculum but also apply what they know to solve authentic problems and produce results that matter. PBL students take advantage of digital tools to produce high-quality, collaborative products. PBL refocuses education on the student, not the curriculum—a shift mandated by the global world, which rewards intangible assets such as drive, passion, creativity, empathy, and resiliency. These cannot be taught out of a textbook but must be activated through experience.”*[50]. Thus, PBL is an integral part of online learning.

2.6 Conducting more Video Conferences in the online learning process

Video conferencing is an effective tool that cannot be lacking in distance education when it is the unique way to communicate between teachers and learners in remote learning settings [51]. Conducting video conferences is quite complex when it requires to assure the quality of video and audio, fixed time between instructors and learners, clear teaching strategies, and chances for a face-to-face meeting on screen [52], but it is believed to be essential for online interactive activities owing to following reasons: (1) providing a structured space to faculty if learners are present or absent in face-to-face meeting fashion; (2) providing necessary checks whether learners are impersonation schemes or not in their online coursework; (3) assisting learners to keep up on the course material and avoiding cheating in online learning or testing process [53]. In general, learners expressed their appreciation, satisfaction, and engagement in more video conferences conducted [54] because video-conferencing activities help to increase learners’ learning attitudes, instructors' presence, and other sense of caring or giving guidance and the like.

3. METHODOLOGY

A mixed research method was applied in this study, and 35 freshmen English majors of a speaking class of Schools of Advanced studies at HCMCOU were employed to respond to the questionnaire survey, and then five hard-working students in out of 35 learners in this speaking class, who completed all assignments on LMS and other projects, and fully attended video conferences as demanded, were asked to answer the open-ended questions of a semi interview. These research participants had just graduated from highschools and got into the first semester of the university learning environment. They have never experienced any online learning condition before, but unfortunately, Covid-19 occurred, they were obligated to study online. It means that these learners were not

ready for learning in a remote setting. For that reason, this study aimed to explore the challenges that the students actually encountered in their online learning systems and the barriers in their learning English speaking skills online as well. This study also aimed to seek more possible solutions suggested by the learners for such problems that existed.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 - ONLINE LEARNING CONDITION	PERCENT (%)
Q1: Accessing an online English-Speaking Class	Answers (%)
Online learning through LMS designed by HCMC	100% (optional)
LMS of Q-skills-online (learning source of English-speaking skill –Level 1 at HCMCOU)	100% (obligated)
Participated in Video Conferences through Google Meet or Zoom meeting	100% (optional)
Q2: Reasons for taking part in online English -speaking class	Answer (%)
Obligated (had no choice-covid 19 – cannot conduct face to face class)	93%
Not miss the classes, punctual graduation	94%

As can be seen in Table 1, all of the participants accessed the online English-speaking class. 100 % of them participated in the online learning process through LMS designed by HCMCOU, although this learning system is optional. It means that learners depend on their abilities and learning condition can maximize their assignment completion. If they can complete all, more extra marks would be given to them. In contrast, learners were obligated to complete all exercises in LMS of Q-skills-online created by educating a team of the book Q-skills for Success - Listening 3, which is selected as a main learning source of English- speaking skill –Level 1 at HCMCOU and 100% of participants finished punctually as required. However, when asking for reasons for joining online English -speaking classes, 93% of participants revealed that they were obligated to participate because they had no other options when Covid -19 getting spread and more serious, and 94% of them expressed their maintaining learning online for not missing classes and enabling promptly

graduate from university. The rest of the participants were neutral in this question.

Table 2 – BENEFITS OF LEARNING ONLINE THROUGH LMS & ZOOM MEETING OR GOOGLE MEET

Q3: Benefits of learning online through LMS

Nearly 83% admitted all the following ideas:

- *Practice sub-skills of English-speaking skills such as lexical resources, listening skills, pronunciation, intonation, grammar structures*
- *Discuss, upload sharing, comment on peers' work*
- *Exchange knowledge and ideas among learners and get the assessment of the instructor*
- *Flexible accessing and learning (anytime, anywhere with an internet connection)*

Q4: Benefits of learning through Zoom Meeting or Google Meet (Video conferences)

51% of participants naturally express their ideas and overcome shyness or embarrassment (*without face to face, just hear voices, eye to eye contact on screen*)

49% of participants felt it hard to speak naturally (*just see the face of the partner in small image on the screen, without body language –not easy to understand, unclear voice due to unstable Wi-Fi, unexpected noise*)

Table 2 illustrates that learners are forced to study online, but 83% of them recognized some advantages when doing exercises on LMS, and this helped to improve many aspects of speaking skills such as vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation, grammatical structures, and listening skills. They also had opportunities to discuss, upload sharing, give comments on peers' work, exchange knowledge and ideas among learners, get assessments from the instructor, and have flexible access to the learning system. Nevertheless, when asking them about learning through Zoom Meeting or Google Meet, just 51% of them enabled to speak English speaking skills so well. They could overcome shyness and embarrassment because of eye-eye on-screen with small images of faces, so they were easier to talk naturally. Whereas, 49% of them express their ideas in the opposite way - not naturally speaking English owing to just seeing a small partner's face, without

body language, and unclear voice due to unstable internet connection and unexpected noise.

Table 3 - LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS

Q5: Thinking and feeling of learners

88.5% of participants believed face-to-face learning (on-campus) outweigh than eye on-screen (online) (*Online learning: without interaction between teachers and learners or learners together, individual work on LMS → boring, learning motivation decreased. Eye to eye contact between learners and instructors through video conferences causes limitations in observing non-verbal language signs and performance as the meeting parties only see small images of each other's face, unstable internet connection, many technological techniques and applications concerned → more stressed, tired, and fed up with learning*)

94,2% of participants agree that learning English speaking skills has many problems: *insufficient communication activities, limited class conversations, shortage of role plays and short-term stimulations, instructor's presence, time control, slow feedback, and reflection*

97.1% of participants expressed their neglected attitudes to online learning during Covid 19

Looking at Table 3, we can see that learners had various perceptions of the online learning process. 88.5 % of them said that face-to-face learning was better than online learning because when online learning, learners could not face to face interaction with their friends and instructors. They had to do individual work on LMS, and this made them bored, and their learning motivation was decreased. Just eye-to-eye contact through video conferences, learners were limited in observing non-verbal language signs and performance of their partners, so they were hard to memorize their lessons, vocabulary, or grammar and limited their speaking skills. Additionally, an unstable internet connection made it hard for learners to understand their partners' expressions and many technological techniques and applications, so learners were more tired and fed up with their learning. Due to the diverse challenges of online learning as mentioned, 94,2% of participants admitted that learning English speaking skills online cause many problems such as insufficient communication activities, limited class conversations, shortage of role plays and short-term stimulations, instructor's presence, time control, slow feedback, and reflection. Eventually, 97.1% of participants claim that they were really neglected to accept this online learning model; after Covid 19 finished, they hope they can study face to face on campus as ever.

Table 4 - LIMITATIONS OF LEARNING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS ONLINE

Q6: Limitations of learning English speaking skills online:

85.7% of participants revealed that they had coped with many challenges of language competence, sociolinguistic, sociocultural background, insufficient communicative environments (*because learning online causes difficulties in building teamwork, developing collaboration, or holding group meetings whenever learners work on a project*)

Table 4 shows the barriers that learners encountered when learning English speaking skills online. 85.7% of participants admitted that the challenges they face were not excluded of language competence, sociolinguistic, sociocultural background, insufficient communicative environments because learning eye to eye on the screen, learners lack interaction between learners and teachers, and among learners together. They also have insufficient teamwork building, collaboration, group meetings and this made it learners hard to improve their English-speaking skills

Table 5 – POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Q7: Learners' necessities for online English learning

68.5% of participants agree that they need to:

- *have great abilities of autonomous learning*
- *self-engage and involved in their learning process*
- *participate in all Video conferences*
- *upload their work on discussion boards,*
- *give comments and feedback on their peers' performance*
- *complete all exercises or assignments as required on LMS*

Q8: Learners' suggestions

60% participants recommended that:

- *more interactive environments should be created (to offer learners more opportunities for practicing speaking English, transferring, and accessing knowledge, exchanging information, and clarifying messages)*

- Diverse communication activities need to be improved (*such as linguistics elements, rhythm, intonation, gestures, body language, proxemics relationships, and rules for interaction (A. P. Lian & Mestre, 1985a; Srikaew et al., 2015)*)
- More eye- to- eye conversation through video conferences should be organized (*to help remote learners have more opportunities to practice speaking, giving responses, or speedy reflection. The more class conversation learners have, the more speaking skills improve (A. P. Lian & Mestre, 1985a; M. K. R. Singh et al., 2015a)*).
- More self-practice environments (such as recording personal voice or individual video clips) are also suggested (*to advocate learners have more habits of speaking, listening, reviewing, and self-correcting encountered mistakes in their speaking time*).

62.8% of participants suggested more Project-based learning (PBL) should be applied because:

- *PBL is an effective way of identifying learners' real needs*
- *PBL will enable learners to autonomously explore their abilities to identify as exactly as possible their encountered problems*
- *PBL is helpful for students in an online learning environment which has an instructor's presence and care*
- *Project-based learning will create an environment that will help to make the needs visible both to themselves and perhaps others*

68.5% of participants suggested having more Video Conferences (*because the more eye to eye contact on screen, the more interaction happens, and this helps to increase learners' learning attitudes, instructors' presence, and getting more caring or giving guidance or feedback from the instructors*).

In Table 5, participants were asked if they continue to study online, what necessities that learners need to equip themselves. 68.5% of participants had the same ideas of improving their autonomy, having more self-engagement and involvement in their learning process, fully participating in all Video conferences. They also need to complete all requirements of the course, like uploading their work on discussion boards and giving comments and feedback on their peers' performance. Likewise, learners were asked for suggestions for better online learning; 60% of participants recommended that more

interactive environments be created, diverse communication activities need to be improved, more eye-to-eye conversation through video conferences should be organized. 62.8% of participants suggested more Project-based learning (PBL) should be applied 68.5% of them agreed more Video Conferences should be conducted with all reasons presented in this table.

For the interview part, 5 of 35 participants were invited to answer the questions related to the challenges of the online learning system (LMS and Video Conferences) and the barriers of learning speaking online. Most of them confirmed that they had problems of unstable internet access and some unfamiliar software or technological techniques applied, so it took them much time to get acquainted with. They had to cope with memorizing some subskills of speaking skills such as lexical resources, grammar points, pronunciation, and intonation when learning speaking skills online. They also emphasized that they lacked interactive, collaborative, social skills when online classes just mainly focus on individual work more than teamwork. Finally, they expressed their expectation that if our school cannot conduct face-to-face classes on campus due to the long-lasting of Covid 19, they hoped that more Video conferences and more PBL should be carried out. These participants also added if they had the priority of selecting between online learning and face-to-face on campus. They decided to select the face-to-face learning mode for its numerous advantages.

5. CONCLUSION

Like other universities in the world, HCMCOU has conducted online learning classes during Coronavirus outbreaks. Although state-of-the-art facilities were invested and the teaching team was trained well, learners were not very satisfied with the online training system and had various difficulties in English speaking classes when conducting online learning. Thus, this research paper was carried out to explore the challenges of learners encountered in online learning systems and in learning speaking skills online, and then suggest more solutions for the existing problems. With the interview and questionnaire survey, the barriers of learners were explored. These were not out of the range of technological techniques, internet connection, special characteristics of speaking skills, and sociolinguistic competence. Therefore, the possible solutions suggested were not excluded from conducting more PBL and Video conferences to improve learners' English speaking skills.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The conducting of this paper may help learners, teachers, Faculty of Foreign Languages have chances to look back at the existing problems of online English learning and teaching in order to have more appropriate improvements or more investment when necessary. It also contributes to conducting more research papers later such as "Exploring the effectiveness of applying Project-based learning in learning a language online", or "how Video Conference impacts on learners' learning outcomes in remote setting" and more other studies of this online field.

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