



**Tạp chí**

**NGHIÊN CỨU KHOA HỌC**

**ĐẠI HỌC SAO ĐỎ**

**SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL - SAO DO UNIVERSITY**

**ISSN 1859-4190**

Số 1 (72) 2021

TẠP CHÍ NGHIÊN CỨU KHOA HỌC

ISSN 1859-4190



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ISSN 1859-4190

**Số 1 (72)**  
**2021**



Địa chỉ: Sao Đỏ

Trường Đại học Sao Đỏ.

Số 24, Thái Học 2, phường Sao Đỏ, thành phố Chí Linh, tỉnh Hải Dương.

Điện thoại: (0220) 3587213, Fax: (0220) 3882 921, Hotline: 0912 107858/0936 847980.

Website: <http://tapchikicn.saodo.edu.vn/>Email: [tapchikicn@saodo.edu.vn](mailto:tapchikicn@saodo.edu.vn).

Giấy phép xuất bản số: 1003/GP-BTTTT, ngày 06/7/2011 và Giấy phép sửa đổi, bổ sung số: 293/GP-BTTTT

ngày 03/06/2016 của Bộ Thông tin và Truyền thông.

Mã chuẩn quốc tế số: 477/TTKHCN-ISSN, ngày 21/7/2011 của Cục Thông tin Khoa học và Công nghệ Quốc gia.

In 2.000 bản, khổ 21 x 29,7cm, tại Công ty TNHH In Trẻ Xanh, cấp ngày 17/02/2011.

**ISSN 1859-4190**

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**Tạp chí Nghiên cứu khoa học, Trường Đại học Sao Đỏ, ISSN 1859-4190, Số 1 (72) 2021**

**Đề cử Tòa soạn:**

Trường Đại học Sao Đỏ,  
 Số 24, Thái Học 2, phường Sao Đỏ, thành phố Chí Linh, tỉnh Hải Dương.  
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 In 2.000 bản, khổ 21 x 29,7cm, tại Công ty TNHH In Tre Xanh, cấp ngày 17/02/2011.

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# A study on the current situation of English speaking skills and some proposals to improve English speaking skills of non-English major students at Sao Do University

Nghiên cứu thực trạng kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh và đề xuất một số giải pháp nhằm nâng cao kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên không chuyên Trường Đại học Sao Đỏ

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Received date: 20/11/2020

Accepted date: 27/3/2021

Published date: 31/3/2021

## Abstract

English, the most important international language in the world, is currently used so intensively in many areas of life. Mastering the language is the matter of possessing its four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, among which, speaking skill is considered the most important and necessary for communication, especially when Vietnam is in the process of integrating into the world. Investigating the current situation of English speaking skills of Sao Do University students, the authors found that, although students have met certain requirements in English speaking skills several shortcomings still remain including students' lack of confidence, poor competence in communication etc. Within the limits of this paper, the authors, drawing on the main findings, would also like to propose some solutions to improve English speaking skills for non-English major students at Sao Do University to meet their current learning needs and future jobs.

**Keywords:** English speaking skill; students; international cooperation.

## Tóm tắt

Tiếng Anh hiện là ngôn ngữ quốc tế quan trọng nhất trên thế giới được sử dụng một cách rộng rãi trong nhiều lĩnh vực của đời sống. Làm chủ được nó, đồng nghĩa với việc sở hữu được bốn kỹ năng: Nghe, nói, đọc và viết, trong đó kỹ năng nói được coi là quan trọng và cần thiết nhất để giao tiếp, đặc biệt trong bối cảnh Việt Nam đang hội nhập quốc tế. Qua việc tìm hiểu và phân tích kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên Đại học Sao Đỏ, nhóm tác giả nhận thấy rằng mặc dù sinh viên đã đạt được những kết quả nhất định theo yêu cầu của môn học, nhìn một cách tổng thể, nhiều hạn chế như thiếu tự tin hay khả năng giao tiếp còn thấp. Trong giới hạn bài viết này, nhóm tác giả xin giới thiệu tóm tắt kết quả nghiên cứu và đề xuất một số giải pháp nhằm nâng cấp kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh cho sinh viên không chuyên đáp ứng nhu cầu học tập hiện tại và công việc trong tương lai.

**Từ khóa:** Kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh; sinh viên; hợp tác quốc tế.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the particularly important fields. It is one of the interests to the Party, the State and the whole society. Therefore, education for students in general and English education for students in particular is also invested considerably. The Government and the Ministry of Education and Training have implemented many solutions to improve the quality of foreign

language teaching and learning in the entire system of education in Vietnam, especially improving the quality of foreign language teaching and learning in higher education system in Vietnam. The foreign language teaching and learning has been a huge investment with the goal that students "graduated from colleges and universities have enough foreign language ability to use independently, to be confident in communication, to learn, to work in an integrated, multilingual, and multicultural environment; making foreign languages the strength of the Vietnamese people, serving the national industrialization and modernization" [1].

Reviewers: 1. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nguyen Van Do  
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Linguist Kham khien [2] said that speaking is one of the most important skills when learning a foreign language, including the English language. According to Bygate, speaking skill is one of the reflexive skills, helping learners to use a foreign language to express opinions, thoughts and feelings with others and listeners [3]. Thus, it can be affirmed that speaking skill helps the English language perform its own communication function. Moreover, speaking skill also contributes to reinforcing the listening skill of learners, helping to increase vocabulary and practice related skills. Therefore, many Vietnamese students, when learning English, want to learn and practice a lot to improve their speaking skill helping to study and work in the future. However, Vietnamese students in general, and Sao Do University students in particular, still face many difficulties in learning English, especially speaking skill when communicating in English. The article analyzes the current situation of English speaking skills and proposes some solutions to improve English speaking skill of non-English Major students at Sao Do University.

## 2. THE REALITY OF ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL OF NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT SAO DO UNIVERSITY

We have used the quantitative research method to

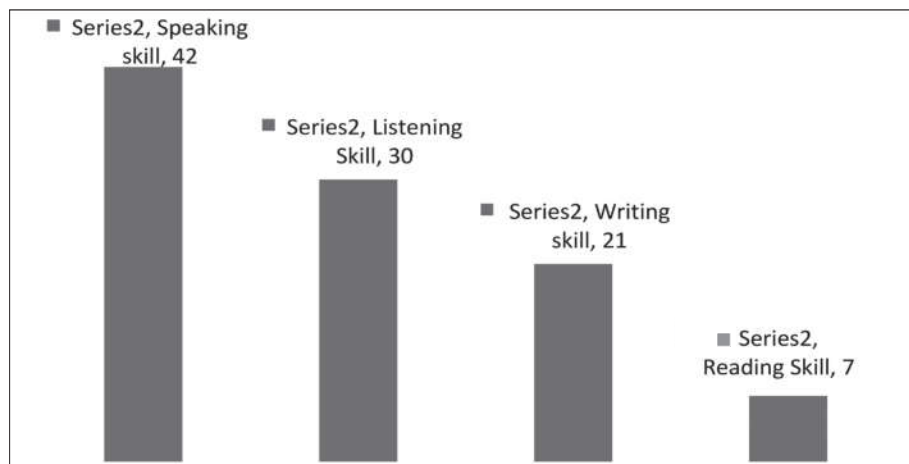


Chart 1. Difficulty scale Assessment of four English Languages skills: Speaking, Listening, Writing, Reading

According to chart 1, 42% of surveyed students said that speaking is the skill that students have the most difficulty in learning, followed by listening skill (30%), writing skill (21%) and reading skill (7%).

There are many reasons that make students evaluate speaking skills as the most difficult such as: poor vocabulary, the limited ability in flexibly applying grammar, the neglect of speaking practice in English classes, and also challenging English pronunciation, which has been found to challenge Vietnamese learners but has not yet been properly taught. Speaking skill is also a skill that students have difficulty in assessing

collect data through questionnaires to study the speaking skill of students at Sao Do University and randomly surveyed 360 students from different majors such as: Electricity, Electronics, Mechanical Engineering, Automotive Technology, Garment - Fashion... The content of survey questions helps to clearly and accurately learn about the situation of practicing speaking skill of Non-English Major students at Sao Do University. The questions are designed in an easy way for students to understand to help them give correct answers about: students' own assessment of their speaking skill, their practicing time in the classroom and outside the classroom, lecturers' teaching activities; The questions are aimed at finding out the causes and factors that affect the development of students' speaking skill. The questionnaire was sent to students November 2020. Most of the students were 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students. After questionnaires were collected, inappropriate or incomplete questionnaires were removed (10 questionnaires were rejected), statistics was finished, Excel software was used to calculate percentages to have relating output tables. Survey results show:

- The difficult level of English speaking skill for Non-English Major students at Sao Do University.

their own progress, because there is no exact answer like listening, reading, writing,... To realize their progress, students have to practice consistently and over a long time.

- English speaking skills of students at Sao Do University.

When answering questions about the ability of English speaking skill, up to 21% of students surveyed admitted that they cannot speak English, 51% of students self-assessed that their speaking skills weak, only 28% of students were confident with the average speaking ability or higher (according to Chart 2).



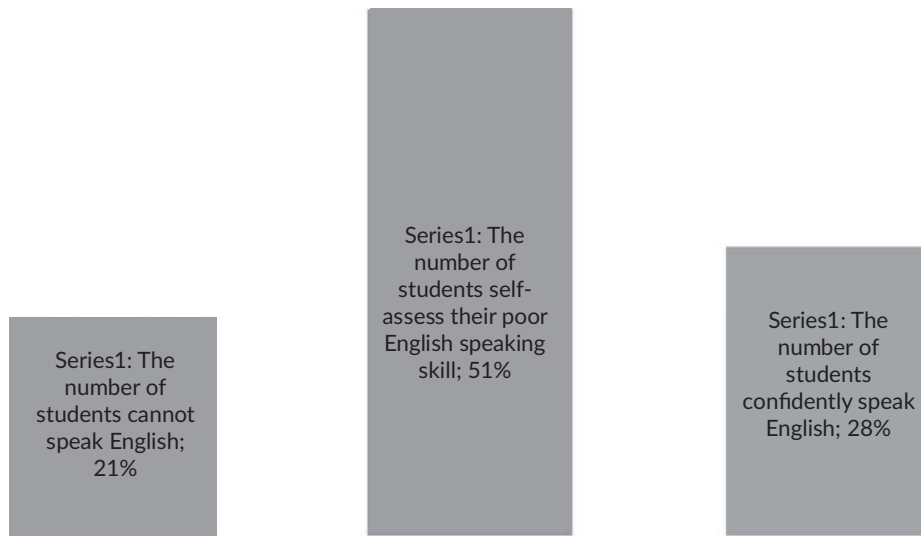


Chart 2. English speaking ability of students of Sao Do University

This is a concerning situation, because English speaking skill plays an important role in learning English language. Moreover, good English speaking skill will be very useful for students in daily communication and finding good jobs at large companies, multinational corporations that invest in Vietnam. English speaking skills considered a tool for effective work.

- A number of reasons cause weakness in speaking skill ability of students at Sao Do University.

The time for speaking skill in classrooms is also a factor to be considered. In fact, the survey shows that teachers have not focused on organizing active learning activities to practice speaking skill for students. Instead, many activities focus on grammar explanation and homework, reading skill (very often, accounting for 45% of class time); translation and learning vocabulary, listening skill (regular, accounting for 33% of class time), while speaking and writing skills are only focused occasionally (only 13% and 9% of class time) (Chart 3).

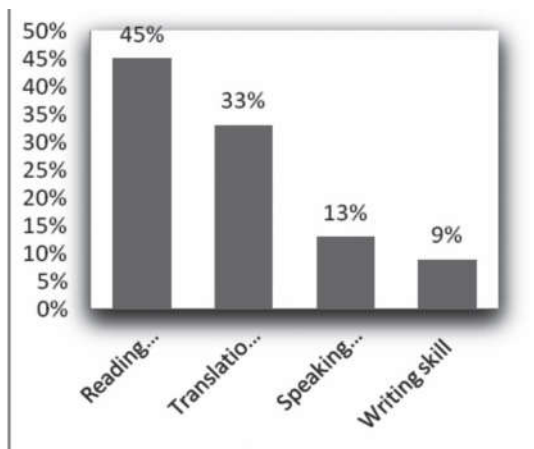


Chart 3. Time division for activities in some English classes at Sao Do University

This is a big difficulty for students who want to practice their speaking skill, because according to students, the time for speaking skill is too little, they want teachers to spend a lot of time helping students practice right in the main course. The lack of time for speaking skill is a big obstacle because teachers do not have enough time to organize too many activities in the class. The teachers cannot create many opportunities for many students to practice and perform in front of the classroom. In the limited time spent on speaking skill, most teachers also tried to organize many group activities, in-pair practice, presentations, games or individual speaking. However, the level is also not equal in the classes that students participate in the survey. There are 100 students (accounting for 66.7%) said that the teachers only organized the activities from 3 to 5 times during the course, only 30 students (accounting for 20%) said that the teachers organized the speaking activity more than 5 times during the course, especially 20 students (accounting for 13.3%) admitted that they are not allowed to participate in these activities in the classroom. The statistics show that the level of interest, investment in teaching speaking skill among teachers in classes at Sao Do University is not equal, which can be explained for the following main reasons:

- + Students' English proficiency and background are not equal. So, for weak classes, teachers have to spend a lot of time teaching grammar and vocabulary.
- + The number of students in the classroom is large, leading to difficulties in organizing activities to practice speaking skill.
- + The curriculum has not focused on speaking skill much.
- + The tests rarely include evaluation for speaking skill (usually final exams in the form of written tests of vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension).

+ The time in the curriculum for the English subject is limited, while the volume of lessons and knowledge is too much.

In addition, the number of students in each English class also has a big effect on the quality of learning and practicing speaking skill of students. Through the survey, 90% of students think that the class is too crowded (from 30-35 students), making students have few opportunities to practice during class time, and teachers are also difficult to observe, guide, listen and give detail comments for all students. Only 10% of surveyed students can study well, adapt to a crowded classroom environment at university level.

At Sao Do University, most of the non-English major students often pay little attention to practicing speaking skill. 87% of students surveyed admitted that they only focus on learning vocabulary and grammar to be able to do well in class and final exam. In addition, using the mother tongue (Vietnamese) too often in the classroom and having little opportunity to use English in everyday life makes students less confident and difficult to develop English speaking skill. 120 students (80%) in the survey showed that teachers and students often use Vietnamese in English lessons, especially when teachers explain grammar. Moreover, when leaving English class, in everyday life and in other situations, students rarely have the opportunity to use English to communicate. Therefore, It's necessary to create an effective English practice environment, where English is mainly used for communication, guidance and discussion, students will be forced to speak English so that the other people can understand their meaning.

### 3. FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL OF NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT SAO DO UNIVERSITY

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain [4] argue that, in many respects, speaking is considered the most difficult skill to comprehend and improve, because it requires learners to integrate many skills and language knowledge such as vocabulary, grammar, ability to choose suitable words, social knowledge related to the topic of practice and commitment of practicing... Therefore, it is possible to affirm that there are many factors deciding the quality of speaking skill. There have been many researchers, articles, research papers and books mentioning difficulties, influences in learning English speaking skill. These difficulties and influences can be divided into three basic groups as follows:

#### 3.1. Learning motivation

Aftat believes that learning motivation is an important factor leading to the success of teachers 'teaching and

students' learning processes. Students who realize the importance of speaking skill will make more effort in learning and practice, tend to overcome learning difficulties; There will be more excitement in learning, being active in activities organized by teachers and will be able to improve their language skills in general, English communication ability in particular. However, the majority of students have not focused on learning and practicing speaking, on the contrary, they often focus on learning grammar to easily pass the exams in the learning process. According to the above survey results, only 13% of students spend their time practicing English speaking skill. However, the majority of students of 13% of these students only participate in speaking activities in class, or practice with their friends with simple questions, conversations, short talks. They don't really invest in extra training after school. Thus, the majority of students at Sao Do University often focus on short-term goals, which are tests, exams rather than long-term goals in the future such as the ability to speak and use English at work, in study at higher levels. This is one of the major difficulties and challenges for the students. In addition, many students who do not have a rich vocabulary and do not have effective methods of practice also gradually lose their passion for learning speaking skill; Since then, often neglected in learning, passive when going to class and not motivated to practice speaking skill; They often have the feeling of "bored" to learn English, especially speaking and communication skills. This indifference and lack of consistency is caused by poor learning motivation and from there students tend to self-assess themselves to have "poor" foreign language skill, and do not want to communicate and use foreign languages in study and in everyday life. Therefore, the motivation to learn and practice speaking skill with students of Sao Do University is one of the important factors that need to be paid attention and promoted not only to each student, but also to the attention, create good motivation from teachers through organizing useful and exciting lessons to help student have high motivation in learning English speaking skill.

#### 3.2. Language knowledge

The process of training and communicating requires learners to have a rich vocabulary, good listening ability and the ability to apply appropriate grammar structures. If students do not have a good vocabulary foundation, appropriate listening ability and certain understanding of grammar structures, the learning process and practicing speaking skill will be much more difficult. English vocabulary helps speakers convey the right thoughts and content to other people, while grammar influences the process of word formation in

verbal communication in a concise, easy, and effective manner to understand. Moreover, grammar helps students understand meaning from special structures, without having to use words and long explanations. In addition, speakers can recognize whether their English speaking ability is good or not through accumulated linguistic knowledge (Thornbury, 2000: 11) [6]. This linguistic knowledge includes: knowledge of gender, knowledge of grammar, word semantics, pronunciation, sentence structure... All relevant knowledge of the language more or less affects the practice and progress of students, because learning a foreign language is not just about learning vocabulary and grammatical structures, but students must also know how to use language appropriately to the context and the purpose of communication. Students of Sao Do University with a characteristic of engineering students, they tend to be good at natural subjects such as Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry... so they have limited vocabulary, and their English language ability is also limited. They pay little attention to aspects of the language. They are not also confident to practice and practice regularly. This is one of the main reasons that make it difficult for students to conquer speaking skill.

### 3.3. Teaching methods

In addition to learning motivation and language knowledge, teachers' teaching methods in English classes also significantly affect the skills development process of students. A teacher with knowledge, pedagogical skills and unprofessional teaching methods will adversely affect the teaching and learning process of speaking skill in English classes. There are many methods of teaching English in general and teaching methods of speaking English in particular such as Communicative language teaching, direct method, Task-based language teaching, Learner-centered Method,... All teaching methods have certain advantages, but which methods, at what times and which activities to achieve the highest efficiency are the teaching art of each teacher in the class. It is the effective teaching methods and activities organized in English classes that are a good opportunity for students to practice speaking skill. Teaching activities and learning tasks must be cleverly designed to give students the most opportunity to improve their speaking skill. Harmer (1998) [7] believes that effective speaking activities organized in the classroom not only help students practice speaking skills, but also create motivation and interest in learning for students.

## 4. SOME SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT SAO DO UNIVERSITY

Speaking skill is one of four important skills when learning a language, which learners cannot ignore

or consider lightly. Therefore, how to have teachers of English to focus on developing speaking skill for students at the same time to push students to invest time and effort in this skill is a huge challenge. Skinner argues that language teaching is a process that provides students with experience, creative ways to understand and use a language. This definition means that teaching not only helps students understand the language, but the most important thing is to give them opportunities to use the language in real life situations and in meaningful contexts. Therefore, the teachers of English not only explain the rules, but also provide students with a variety of topics to practice, such as introducing themselves, friends, family, home; how to talk on the phone, how to invite, how to thank, greet,... through classroom activities. The survey showed that some activities are regularly held in English classes at Sao Do University such as group work, in-pair practice, games, giving presentations, making conversations,... These activities will definitely create excitement in learning for students and create opportunities for students to practice their speaking skill.

However, students at Sao Do University still face many difficulties in practicing English speaking skill because of limited number of teaching periods in class (usually about 11 credits for four years of studying at the university) and the activities offered during school hours. Students must be active, self-study, self-practice depending on their individual abilities and appropriate time under the guidance of teachers.

Through the practical teaching process and observing students' progress, we propose some useful activities to help students improve speaking skill:

### 4.1. Raising students' awareness

Students' awareness about the importance of English speaking skill in the period of industrialization, modernization and international integration must be raised.

Each student needs to be properly aware of the importance of English speaking skill in the period of accelerating industrialization, modernization and international integration. In order to effectively implement the above solutions, it is necessary to strengthen propaganda activities on the mass media (university website, forums, clubs, etc.); organize workshops, gatherings, counseling, extracurricular activities, talk, exchange about the role and importance of training English speaking skill to increase awareness and need to practice English speaking skill of students. English is the international language, the language of integration and social development. Inability to speak English limits students to study, work, and integrate into the world.

#### 4.2. Organizing outside classroom activities

It is very essential to organize regular activities outside the classroom for students to improve English speaking skill.

- Establish and strengthen English club activities in departments of the University to help students have good environment to practice English speaking skill. Through the club, students have more opportunities to expand their relationship with people who passionate English. The students have more chances to contact, meet, exchange and learn from other club members. In the club environment they can exchange ideas on a theme designed with flexible and realistic content. The clubs also provide students with valuable experiences and share about how to use English well at work and in the community. English club is a very friendly and openly environment for students to come to exchange and discuss in English. The topics chosen are very close and suitable for all levels of students.

- Organize extracurricular activities for students to participate in order to improve their English speaking skill. These activities create opportunities for students to meet and interact with foreigners. Through this, students have not only the opportunity to show their own abilities, practice listening and speaking skills, but also gain more understanding of other cultures. They can learn how to behave and communicate quickly and effectively. At the same time, these activities also help students to train themselves the ability to speak in public, in front of strangers, and improve their confidence and energy.

- Set up English-speaking coffee shop: this is a friendly, youthful and dynamic space using English. There are many cafes managed by young people with the desire to create a fun place for young people to come to drink coffee, make friends, exchange and practice English. The language used is very common (daily language), not fussy and very few academic topics. Coming here, students must use English to make requests, talk, make friends, and communicate with young people who have the same passion to improve English communication skills.

- Boost practical communication in public places: more and more students of universities come to tourist destinations, city centers to meet and talk with tourists from many English speaking countries around the world. It can be said that this is a "class without tuition" but very effective. Students will practice talking with many tourists from different cultural styles and languages. However, students need to have good listening skill, rich vocabulary and appropriate usage of structures in order to communicate well. The topics and content of practice

are spontaneous without any preparation like in class. Moreover, students also need to equip with knowledge about the culture and history of Vietnam, famous tourist destinations, provinces and cities to introduce them to visitors. Through the practical teaching process, we have applied to our students to meet and communicate directly with many tourists in Hanoi, Quang Ninh, Hai Phong, Hai Duong, and received positive feedback. Students are more interested in learning, learning more practical vocabulary, using structures and words in a variety of practical ways, and becoming more confident in real English communication with foreigners.

- Organize competitions in English to give students the motivation to learn English and to practice English speaking skill. This activity encourages students to express their talents, passion, and interests in English. They will have more exposure to English, and will be more likely to gain motivation as they strive to achieve the prizes of the competitions.

- Discuss with friends on English-speaking forums, or make friends with students from universities around the world: by this way, students will overcome anxiety and lack of confidence. At the same time, students at the same university will share learning experiences, learning materials, learning methods with one another. Students can find English speaking forums easily through internet, websites, facebook. Some study forums of universities around the world are very useful for updating students' knowledge, skills and information.

- Use English speaking practice software or log into free websites to practice with friends, and on-site instructors: this is one of the most flexible and easy methods for students. Students can practice anytime and anywhere. The topics are often easy, fit and can be guided, providing appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure useful for speaking topics. Through these websites, students can learn any foreign language for free and make friends with native speakers to improve their listening and speaking skills. In addition, downloading free software and practicing at home will help students be proactive in time. Students can find suitable topics and levels for them to learn. Some of the favorite software such as: Side By Side, EF Englishtown, 101 Languages Of The World, WordSmart, EyeSpeak English,... Most of the software is provided for free, with moderate size and very easy to use with students. When learning on the software, students not only practice speaking skill, but also improve listening skill, enrich vocabulary and practice reading and writing.



### 4.3. Innovating teaching methods

It is necessary to have innovative teaching methods to improve English speaking skill for students who lack confidence in communication.

In order to help students overcome anxiety and lack of confidence, teachers must directly guide learners to participate in communication activities. In the English course, teachers need to regularly use English, pay attention and create conditions for learners, especially for those who are weak, lack of confidence. Teachers can use a variety of tips such as picture description, language games, questions and answers, and discussion to help students practice and develop their speaking skill. In the teaching process, teachers also need to integrate cultural and social factors of the native speakers in the lecturers to minimize the misunderstanding or cultural "shock".

Teachers need to take the advantage of time in the classroom to instruct students to self-study and self-practice:

- (a) Use classroom time to guide and interact with students;
- (b) Don't waste time on activities that students can learn by themselves and practice at home;
- (c) Reduce the role of the test and emphasize the importance of competencies that students achieve;
- (d) Encourage students to have strategies for learning and training outside the classroom;
- (e) Provide more learning and practice opportunities outside the classroom for students;
- (f) Establish clubs with regular and useful activities.

### 5. CONCLUSION

Practical teaching shows that all English skills in general and English speaking skill in particular need regular and long-term practice to bring good results for learners. No one learns a foreign language without making mistakes, so students need to confidently and patiently

communicate a lot in the classroom and especially outside the classroom, in real life to improve their foreign language skills. Through process of training and learning, students will improve their foreign language ability; reinforce their vocabulary, grammar, confidence... to correct basic mistakes gradually to improve their English speaking skill. This training process needs to be led and supported by teachers and must be conducted regularly and for a long period of time. Students need to practice English inside and outside the class because English speaking skill is very important and necessary not only in the learning process at university but also helps a lot in the job interview and work after university. While the practice time in the classroom is still limited, students at Sao Do University need to practice hard outside class a lot; therefore, participating in training outside the classroom through practical activities is very useful and necessary for students.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The findings in this article are from the University level research No 21.KHCN/20-21 supported by Sao Do University.

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