



FACTORS AFFECTING NON-MAJORED ENGLISH STUDENTS' LOW PARTICIPATION IN EFL SPEAKING CLASSROOM: A CASE IN VIETNAM

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Abstract:

EFL learners' low level of participation is reported as a problem commonly found in English speaking classrooms. This study aims to investigate students' perceptions of factors hindering their participation in English speaking classrooms. Questionnaires and interviews were conducted as data collection instruments of the study. 153 first-year non-majored English students from two Advanced programs and seven High-quality programs in a major university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam responded to the questionnaire and then 6 of them participated in the semi-structured interview sessions. The results strongly endorsed that students' lack of vocabulary, fear of being judged by peers and lecturers and feeling overwhelmed by interactive activities in Speaking classes were significant factors causing students' low level of participation. Recommendations are suggested to educators or lecturers in formulating future teaching strategies that promote students' participation in the context of higher learning.

Keywords: EFL speaking classrooms, high-quality programs, non-majored English students, students' low participation, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Communicative competence has become one of the greatest goals in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), Vietnamese university students' English proficiency levels remain limited (Nguyen, 2018; Ton & Pham, 2010; Trang & Baldauf Jr, 2007), and oral communicative competence of those students is still far from the expectation at the time students have completed university education (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2016). One of the

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main reasons that lead to this “far from the expectation” is students’ low participation in English speaking classrooms. In general, Vietnamese students are considered as obedient, shy and unwilling to participate in in-class activities, even at tertiary level. Therefore, understanding their silence and what factors hindering their participation in English speaking classrooms is a necessary step to find out appropriate solutions to encourage their participation in speaking classrooms and implement learner-centred approaches to language education. Due to the reasons, this study was conducted at a university in Vietnam.

1. Literature review

1.1 Class participation

The importance of students’ oral participation in the classroom has been emphasized by experts and researchers in the area of English language teaching. Lee (2005) defines that participation is students speaking in classrooms consisting of asking and answering questions, giving comment and joining in class discussions. Similarly, Simanjalam (2008) stated that classroom participation is considered as students’ paying attention, being on task, responding to questions, seeking help, making good use of class time and showing respect to teachers and classmates. Generally, class participation requires students’ interaction with teachers, classmates in classroom activities or tasks to show evidence that they are learning and paying attention to the classes.

According to Petress (2006), participation included three evaluative aspects which are quantity, dependability, and quality. Petress (2006) defined that quantity is the chance given to students to participate constructively. Dependability is to have students who can be relied upon to contribute “*relevantly, clearly and respectfully*” when they are called upon in class (p.3). Quality class participation is students presenting evidence of personal awareness of concepts discussed in class and this requires some interaction frequency. Hence, in this study, class participation is defined as the degree of attention, interaction, engagement, contribution in classroom activities that students prove evidences when they are learning in the English classroom.

1.2 The importance of students’ participation in speaking classrooms

Liu (2001) states four main class participation patterns are total integration, conditional participation, marginal interaction, and silent observation. These patterns describe a decreased level of oral participation from total integration to silent observation. However, Liu (2001) also claims that individual patterns are not always static which means that a student may participate actively in one occasion but keep silent in another.

Total integration refers to students’ active participation in class discussions. They follow the flow of the class, figure out exactly when to speak up and what to say. Their participation is often spontaneous, appropriate and natural.

In conditional participation, students may be highly motivated but their actual participation or interaction with the teacher or classmates is limited due to factors such

as socio-cultural, cognitive, affective, linguistic or environmental. However, students still know when to speak up and what to say in class discussions.

Marginal interaction means that students are attentive listeners but rarely speak up in class. They prefer listening, note-taking and group discussions after class to actively participating during class discussions. However, if they occasionally speak up in classes, they are poised and confident because each attempt is usually the result of careful thinking and internal rehearsal.

Silent observation is identified by students' withdrawal from oral class participation and their unconditional acceptance of what is discussed. In other words, they tend to avoid oral participation in the class and accept whatever topic of discussion in the class. To understand and verify what has been communicated in class, these students often use tape-recording, note-taking, or small group discussion after lectures. Furthermore, Lee (2005) states that student class participation is through two communication behaviors which are verbal and nonverbal. Verbal or oral participation refers to behaviors of speaking or giving opinions in the class, answering and asking questions or comments and taking part in the class discussions. In contrast, nonverbal participation is associated with behavioral responses during the class, including nodding their head, raising their hands, body movements and eye contact (Zainal Abidin, 2007). Students are usually considered passive or have a low level of participation when they do not take the initiative to actively involved.

Many researchers have defined the terms "*students' low participation*" in classes. Students' behavior is passive when they sit quietly, listen to teachers, take notes or do something else during lessons (Mohd Yusof, et al., 2011; Hussein, 2010; Bas, 2010). Petress (2001) stated that students' low participation in classes is detrimental to the progress of the students and impedes the teachers' ability to successfully assess students' progress.

From the explanations above, silent observation defined by Liu (2001) is considered as the most passive type of participation which refers to students' low participation in classes. Students have a low level of participation in classes when they show passive verbal and nonverbal behaviors, lack of interaction to teachers and other students, and do not get involved in classroom activities such as not volunteering to answer questions, not asking for help, not raising hands for answering questions, not speaking up in group discussions and the like.

1.3 Factors influencing students' low participation

The examination of the factors hindering students' participation helps to provide an insight on raising students' level of participation in English speaking classrooms. Lack of participation can be due to multiple factors that have been investigated by many researchers.

Gomez, Arai, & Lowe (1995) divides the factors into three major traits; class traits, student traits, and teacher traits. Class traits refer to interaction norms (pressure from peers not to speak, pressure to keep comments brief, peer discouragement of controversial opinions, peers' attention, peers' lack of respect); and emotional climate

(friendships, students' supportiveness of each other, students' cooperation). Student traits include fear of appearing unintelligent to peers or instructor, lack of organization skills, communication apprehension, fear of offending, and intimidation are all considered as confidence traits. Teacher traits, meanwhile, are linked to the approachability and supportiveness of the teacher as well as whether the teacher welcomes discussion.

Fawzia (2002) classified the factors affecting students' oral participation in three broad categories; student factors, social factors, and pedagogical/educational factors. Factors such as students' perception, attitudes, language factors, learning styles, the background of students and personal affective factors are examples of student factors whereas social factors include the gender of other students in class and nature community feelings in a group. The lecturer, the course in general, the topic and the nature of inquiry or point, on the other hand, are all related to pedagogical/educational factors.

In this study, the factors influencing students' low participation in English speaking classrooms are divided into five broad categories which are linguistic, cognitive, affective, pedagogical, and socio-cultural factors based on the theoretical framework established by Liu (2001). The framework is used since it is described in reliable sources of information. In addition, Zainal Abidin (2007) conducted a study to investigate the Malaysian students' participation. 146 first-year Engineering students participated in their study. The study found that on Malaysian students' oral classroom participation with the participants being 146 first year Engineering students, and finds out that students' participation in English speaking classrooms is influenced by those five influential factors mentioned by Liu (2001).

1.3.1 Linguistic factors

The linguistic category is related to the students' linguistic abilities and communicative competence Liu (2001). If any aspect from this knowledge is lacking or weakly performed, it can be difficult for students to develop their speaking skills. Therefore, the difficulties can come from limitations of vocabulary, pronunciation mistakes, and grammar mistakes. Tatar (2005) claims that students tend to keep quiet in classrooms due to their lack of language skills as well as inadequate content knowledge.

1.3.2 Cognitive factors

Cognitive factors refer to prior learning experiences, learning styles the students are familiar with, class preparation, knowledge of the subject matter and students' interest level in the discussion topics Liu (2001).

1.3.3 Affective factors

Affective factors are considered as students' personality traits, motivation, and attitude, anxiety, and risk-taking are all factors which fall under affective category (Liu, 2001). Affective refers to the emotional or psychological side of students' behavior which has

an important impact on their language learning process. Le (2019) also claims that students' personality, anxiety, attitude and motivation have been regarded as important factors affecting remarkably students' participation in speaking lessons.

1.3.4 Pedagogical factors

Pedagogical factors cope with whether oral participation is a part of the assessment, teacher traits, class size, classmate traits, and also the way teachers conduct the classes (Liu, 2001). Similarly, Fawzia (2002) also found that pedagogical factors like the course, topic, lecturer and teaching style could influence students' participation.

1.3.5 Socio-cultural factors

Socio-cultural factors refer to the participants' beliefs, values, and moral judgments that are heavily affected by their cultural backgrounds and educational experiences in their home countries. In Vietnam, Thompson (2009) states that Confucian ethics dominate the mindsets of both teachers and students, and thus students are taught to be obedient from a very young age. As a sequence, rote learning becomes a popular learning style of students from primary school to higher education. Nguyen (2002) also finds out that Vietnamese students often remain silent in class discussions and wait until called upon by the teacher, instead of volunteering to answer questions. Moreover, Nguyen (2002) also claims that Vietnamese students keep quiet in class in order to show respect to the teacher and create a productive learning environment since being talkative, interrupting, bragging, or challenging the teacher are not typical of Vietnamese culture.

However, Tani (2005) reports that the stereotypically quiet behavior of Asian students may only be restricted to the classroom itself, noting that students who are quiet in-class may well be boisterous in an 'English Cafe' setting where an informal student/teacher set-up is found. Therefore, it is also important to culturally know students' beliefs and backgrounds because most of the Vietnamese students are taught simply to value silence in the classroom.

2. Methodology

This study was guided by two research questions:

- 1) To what extent the students were affected by the factors?
- 2) What factors affecting the students' low participation most?

The research was designed as a descriptive quantitative study in which the data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interview. The questionnaire consisted of thirty-five items adapted from instruments used in previous study by Hamouda (2013). However, a number of the items have been rephrased and simplified for easier comprehension and to be suitable to the current research; at the same time, a few of new items based on the theoretical framework of Liu (2001) were also added to achieve the purposes of the study. Semi-structured interview includes two main questions aimed to find out participants' perceptions of factors hindering their

participation and what factors are the greatest reasons causing their low level of participation.

The number of participants in the study included 153 first-year non-majored English students chosen randomly from two Advanced programs and seven High-quality programs at a university in Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Their specializations are Biotechnology (Advanced program), Aquaculture (Advanced program), International Business (High-quality program), Information Technology (High-quality program), Finance Banking (High-quality program), Food Technology (High-quality program), Chemical Engineering (High-quality program), Electrical Engineering (High-quality program) and Building Engineering (High-quality program). The participants include 95 females (62.1%) and 58 males (37.9%). There is an unequal distribution of gender among participants. Among 153 participants, 51 of them from International Business (33.3%), 28 participants from Information Technology (18.3%), 23 participants from Biotechnology (15%), 14 participants from Finance Banking (9.2%), 11 participants from Building Engineering (7.19%), 9 participants from Food Technology (5.9%), 7 participants from Chemical Engineering (4.6%), 5 participants from Electrical Engineering (3.3%), 4 participants from Aquaculture (2.6%), Table 3.1 below presented the summary of student participants' information based on gender and disciplines.

Table 3.1: The number of student participants based on gender and disciplines (N=153)

Variables		Number	Percent
Gender	Male	58	37.9%
	Female	95	62.1%
Disciplines	International Business	51	33.3%
	Information Technology	28	18.3%
	Biotechnology	23	15%
	Finance Banking	14	9.2%
	Building Engineering	11	7.19%
	Food Technology	9	5.9%
	Chemical Engineering	7	4.6%
	Electrical Engineering	5	3.3%
	Aquaculture	4	2.6%

The samples for the interview were chosen based on the mean scores of participants' perceptions of factor hindering non-majored English students' participation. Three students representing the "more reflective" group (D, E and F with high mean scores) and three students representing the "less reflective" group (A, B and C with low mean score) were invited to participate semi-structured interview sessions that explored their explanations to confirm and get more in-depth information from the questionnaire about their perceptions of factors hindering students' participation in English speaking classrooms. Table 3.2 below shows the information of these students.

Table 3.2 Information of students for interviews (N = 6)

	A	B	C	D	E	F
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male
Disciplines	International Business	Biotechnology	International Business	International Business	Aquaculture	Food Technology
Mean score of practice	1.11	1.14	1.57	4.23	4.29	4.77

After collecting the data, the questionnaires were translated into Vietnamese, the participants' mother tongue, to avoid ambiguity and misinterpretation of the language because the study was being conducted in a Vietnamese context. Moreover, the Vietnamese version questionnaires allows the respondents to fully understand the items' meanings and then provide reliable responses. To check the validity of the translation, the researcher first translated the questionnaire into Vietnamese. Then, the researcher had two TESOL friends translated Vietnamese questionnaires back into English to examine whether these English versions was equivalent with the original English ones.

Then, SPSS software version 25.0. was used to analyze the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire. Key to understanding the averages was adopted from Oxford (1990). Table 3.3 below shows the key.

Table 3.3: Key to understanding the averages

Very high	4.5 to 5.0
High	3.6 to 4.4
Medium	2.5 to 3.5
Low	1.0 to 2.4

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative results

To measure non-majored English students' perceptions of factors that hinder students' participation, the 35 items in the questionnaire were used. Participants chose their answers by marking a Likert-scale of each item ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Descriptive Statistics Test and One Sample t- Test were run to analyze students' overall perceptions. The descriptive statistics test was first conducted to find out the average level of students' perception. Table 4.1 displays the results of the Descriptive Statistics Test.

Table 4.1: Non-majored English students' perceptions
of factors hindering students' participation (N=153)

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Non- majored English students' perceptions	1.11	4.66	3.28	.49

As presented in Table 3, it can be seen that the total mean score of participants' perceptions of factors hindering students' participation (M = 3.28) fall in the medium scale in light of Oxford framework. Then, One-sample T Test was administrated to

evaluate whether there was a difference between the level of participants' perceptions (M= 3.28 as a medium level) and the test value of 3.6, the accepted mean score for high perceptions. The results showed that a significant difference between the sample mean (M= 3.28, SD=0.495) and the test value (M=3.6) was observed ($t = -5.42$, $df = 152$, $p = .00 < .05$). It can be inferred that students' perceptions of factors influencing students' low participation were medium. In other words, the students didn't think that these factors strongly affected their low participation.

Then, a Descriptive Statistics Test was run on the questionnaire to check the mean scores and percentages for each item related to linguistics factors. Table 4.2 below shows the results of this test.

Table 4.2: Students' perceptions of linguistic factors (N = 153)

	Statement	Mean score	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
1	Students find it difficult to construct sentences.	3.85	1.3	5.2	10.5	73.2	9.8
5	Students are not sure which verb tense to use when speaking.	3.45	3.9	14.4	26.1	43.8	11.8
9	Students lack vocabulary to express their ideas.	4.08	2.0	3.3	11.8	51.0	32.0
13	Students feel embarrassed when they have mispronounced.	3.37	4.6	17.0	26.8	39.9	11.8
17	Students think that their English proficiency is low.	3.78	3.3	7.2	19.6	47.7	22.2
20	Students lack grammatical background knowledge to express their ideas.	3.37	3.3	14.4	32.0	42.5	7.8
Total mean = 3.65							

The results presented in Table 4.2 reveals that the mean score of linguistics factors is 3.65 considered as the high level of participants' perception. This indicates that the non-majored English students highly perceived that linguistics factors hinder their participation in classrooms.

In linguistics factors, students believed that lack of vocabulary, the difficulty in constructing sentences and low level of English proficiency were the highest factors causing their low level of participation with the mean scores of 4.08, 3.85 and 3.78 respectively. Significantly, what stands out from Table 4.2 is that 83% of the students agreed that they do not participate or are reluctant to participate in English classrooms because they lack vocabulary to express their ideas (32% strongly agree and 51% agree). Also, 83% of the students agreed that they do not participate because they find it difficult to construct sentences (9.8% strongly agree and 73.2% agree). Moreover, low level of English proficiency, one of linguistics factors, highly influences their low participation;

69,9% of the participants agreed on that item (22.2% —strongly agree and 47.7% —agree). On the other hand, among the linguistics factors, feeling embarrassing when mispronouncing and lack of grammatical background shared the lowest mean score (M=3.37) and just 11.8% and 7.8% of the students strongly agree with this item.

After that, a Descriptive Statistics Test was run on the questionnaire to check the mean scores and percentages for each item related to cognitive factors. Table 4.3 below shows the results of this test.

Table 4.3: Students' perceptions of cognitive factors (N = 153)

Statement	Mean score	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
2 Students get used to waiting for their friends' responses before participating.	3.25	2.6	17.6	39.2	33.3	7.2
6 Students need to ask the friend sitting next to them what to say before participating.	3.23	5.9	13.1	41.2	32.0	7.8
10 Students find it uncomfortable to work in groups.	2.68	12.4	32.7	34.0	16.3	4.6
14 Students lack preparation for the classes.	3.12	4.6	17.0	44.4	29.4	4.6
18 Students lack knowledge in the discussed topics.	3.67	3.3	5.2	24.2	56.2	11.1
23 The topics of the lessons bore students.	3.18	3.3	16.3	45.8	28.8	5.9
Total mean = 3.19						

Results presented in Table 4.3 shows that the mean score of cognitive factors (M = 3.19) was at the medium level. It can be concluded that students thought that their low participation in English speaking classes were not strongly affected by these factors.

Additionally, that the majority of the students perceived lack of knowledge in the discussed topics as the key cognitive factors that prevent them from class participation. Over 67% of those supposed that their lack of knowledge in the discussed topics caused their low participation (56,2% agree and 11.1% strongly agree; Mean=3.67). Conversely, not many participants thought that they had a low level of class participation since they felt uncomfortable to work in groups (16.3% agree and 4.6% strongly agree; Mean= 2.68). Furthermore, a Descriptive Statistics Test was used to compute the mean scores and percentages for each item belonging to affective factors. Table 4.4 below shows the results of this test. Table 4.4 below shows the results of this test.

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Table 4.4: Students' perceptions of affective factors (N = 153)

	Statement	Mean score	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
3	Students get nervous when they are speaking in English in front of the whole class.	3.78	2.0	11.1	14.4	52.3	20.3
7	Students are shy people.	3.44	3.3	19.0	22.9	40.5	14.4
11	Students lack confidence in their spoken English.	3.75	3.9	7.8	15.7	54.9	17.6
15	Students are afraid to volunteer answers to the lecturer's questions.	3.21	5.2	17.0	35.3	36.6	5.9
19	Students prefer to process carefully ideas by thinking for themselves rather than by speaking to others.	3.18	5.2	20.3	33.3	33.3	7.8
21	Students lack motivation in learning English.	3.2	4.6	17.6	41.8	24.8	11.1
22	Students feel nervous to ask the lecturer a question during English class.	3.32	4.6	14.4	33.3	39.9	7.8
26	Students are afraid of lecturers' possibility of asking for an elaboration after sharing their view points.	3.37	3.9	14.4	32.7	39.2	9.8
28	Students worry about what opinions other students have of them.	3.48	3.3	11.1	32.0	41.8	11.8
Total mean = 3.41							

As observed in Table 4.4, the total means score reveals a medium range of participants' perceptions (M=3.41). This indicates that students did not highly perceived affective factors as factors causing their low participation in English speaking classrooms.

In this section, participants highly believed that feeling nervous when speaking in front of class (M=3.78) and lack of confidence (M=3.75) caused their low participation with 72.6% agree and 72.5% agree respectively. In contrast, students' preferring to process carefully ideas by thinking for themselves (M=3.18) was the lowest reason hindering their participation with just 7.8% strongly agree and 33.3 % agree. In addition, not many students believed that fear of volunteering to answer (M=3.2) and lack of

motivation in English (M=3.21) were highly influencing their low participation with 39.5% and 35.9% agree respectively.

Next, the mean scores and percentages for each item belonging to pedagogical factors was computed by a Descriptive Statistics Test. Table 4.5 below shows the results of this test.

Table 4.5: Students' perceptions of pedagogical factors (N = 153)

	Statement	Mean score	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
24	The class size is too big.	2.94	5.2	30.7	36.6	19.6	7.8
27	The allotted time for practicing English in class is not enough.	3.27	2.6	17.0	41.2	28.8	10.5
29	The lecturer usually corrects students in the bad way with harsh comments.	2.42	17	39.9	28.8	12.4	2.0
30	The lecturer does not give them time to process the questions.	2.58	11.8	37.3	34.0	15.0	2.0
31	Students get anxious if the lecturer gives marks for participation.	3.43	3.9	8.5	37.9	39.9	9.8
32	Classmates do not cooperate in group work.	3.12	5.9	20.9	35.3	31.4	6.5
33	The class is too noisy to concentrate on discussions.	2.77	8.5	33.3	35.3	18.3	4.6
34	The teaching methods used in class get students bored.	3.05	4.6	23.5	39.9	26.1	5.9
35	Classroom activities used in classrooms are not varied and interesting.	3.20	4.6	16.3	40.5	32.0	6.5
Total mean = 2.95							

The findings showed in Table 4.5 revealed that participants perceived pedagogical factors with a low level of hindering their participation in English speaking classes because the mean score (M=2.95) was slightly below the average mean score (M=3). In pedagogical factors, the lecturer' giving marks for student's participation (M= 3.43) was considered as the most frequent factor mentioned as influencing student' low participation with 39.9% agree and 9.8% strongly agree.

On the other hand, the big class size (M= 2.94), a noisy classroom (M=2.77), the lecturer's not giving enough time to process questions (M=2.58) and the lecturer's harsh

comments (M=2.42) were believed as the low reasons for students' low participation in the classroom discussions with the mean score lower than the average mean score (M=3). Specifically, just 27,4% students agreed that they do not participate in classed since the class size is too big. Less than one fourth participants believed that a noisy classroom highly influenced their low participation with only 22.9% agree. In addition, student did not feel that they do not participate in classes because of the lecturer's harsh comments and the lecturer's not giving enough time to process questions with 14.4% agree and 17% agree respectively.

Finally, a Descriptive Statistics Test was administrated to check the mean scores and percentages for each item related to social-cultural factors. Table 4.6 below shows the results of this test.

Table 4.6: Students' perceptions of pedagogical factors (N = 153)

	Statement	Mean score	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
4	It is rude to interrupt the lecturer when he/she is teaching.	3.64	5.2	11.8	20.3	39.2	23.5
8	Students prefer to remain silent to avoid any embarrassing situation.	3.37	5.2	15.7	27.5	39.9	11.8
12	Students are afraid of losing faces if they say the wrong things.	3.42	3.9	14.4	32.0	35.3	14.4
16	Students think that they should wait until called upon by the lecturer.	3.22	3.3	15.7	43.8	30.7	6.5
25	The lecturer gets a bad impression of them if they cannot speak English well in classroom discussions.	2.71	12.4	30.7	34.6	17.6	4.6
Total mean = 3.27							

In terms of social-cultural factors, participants do not participate in classes since they highly believed that it is rude to interrupt the lecturer when he/she is teaching (M= 3.64) with the highest percentage of agree 62.7%. In addition, students' remaining silent to avoid any embarrassing situation (M=3.37), fear of losing face also recorded high percentages in strongly (M=3.42) recorded high percentages in agree 51.7% and 49.7% respectively. In contrast, the lecturer's bad impression of students if they cannot speak English well in classroom discussions scored the lowest mean score (M= 2.71) with just 4.6 strongly agree and 17.6% agree.

In conclusion, students' belief of being rude to interrupt the lecturer was the main reason preventing students from participating in English speaking class. Students'

remaining silent to avoid any embarrassing situation, fear of losing face were also considerable barriers. Meanwhile, the lecturer's bad impression of students was the least influencing factor.

Finally, as presented in the table below, 13 out of 153 participants listed other factors that influenced their participation in English speaking class. Specifically, 6 of the students (3,9%) believed that different teaching methods between high school English speaking classes and university ones were the major obstacle for their participation in English speaking classes since students did not get use to with teaching styles in English speaking classes in university. 5 of them (3,3%) thought that mixed-level classes also prevented them from taking part in classroom activities. While, the others (92,8%) did not contribute any other factors.

Table 4.7: Students' perceptions of other factors (N = 153)

Other factors	Frequency	Percentages
Differences in teaching methods between high school English speaking classes and university ones	6	3.9%
Mixed- level classes	5	3.3%
No response	142	92.8%

In summary, the results revealed that non-majored students highly perceived linguistic factors (M=3.65) was the greatest barrier preventing them from participating in class activities, while they perceived the other factors such as affective factors (M=3.41), social-cultural factors (M=3.27), cognitive factors (M=3.19) and pedagogical factors (M=2.95) at medium level in light of Oxford framework. The analysis of the data led to conclude that the major of students highly perceived lack of vocabulary to express their ideas, lack of knowledge in the discussed topics, feeling nervous and lack of confidence, fear of lecturers' giving marks for their participation and being rude to interrupt the lecturers were the significant reasons leading to students' low participation. In these significant factors, lack of vocabulary was considered as the greatest reason for students' low participation in English speaking classrooms. Meanwhile, student's lack of grammatical knowledge and mispronouncing, students' feeling uncomfortable working in groups, students' preferring of thinking for themselves, lecturers' harsh comment, and lecturers' bad impression were not highly believed as the key reasons preventing them from participating.

4.2 Qualitative results

Firstly, the researcher asked the participants whether they had to deal with difficulties in participating in English speaking classes or not. Then, the participants were asked to share the factors hindering their participation. After that, the researcher tried to investigate the interviewees' perceptions of the greatest obstacles preventing them from getting engaged in classes.

First of all, for linguistics factors, all 6 participants highly perceived that as lack of vocabulary in several specific topics and being unable to express their ideas in English

were the greatest reasons leading to their low level of participation in English speaking classes. They shared,

"I think it's because of the topic of speaking, I don't have a lot of vocabulary on that topic. To make a completed sentence, I think, it takes me a very long time...I am afraid that I may use the wrong words, use wrong tenses or sentences or maybe wrong pronunciation... Maybe I know the vocabulary meaning but I have never used it or I forgot pronunciation of that word, so I'm afraid I pronoun the word wrongly. With my pronunciation now, I don't feel good, speaking the word is not good and I often forget to pronounce the final sounds of the word. There are some sounds that I find a bit difficult to pronounce in long words..." (Student A)

"I think my biggest reason is lack of vocabulary. For example, when I have to say a long sentence or make a long idea, I often stumble or be like uhmm..ahm too much because I don't know which words to match...And, sometimes when there are some topics that I have no vocabulary to talk about, such as academic or environment. Sometimes, like I have many ideas in Vietnamese, but I don't know how to express them in English." (Student B)

Sharing the same views, students D, and F found that lack of vocabulary in certain topics was the main reasons preventing them from expressing her ideas in class discussions. They reported,

"My greatest barrier is lack of vocabulary, and I have not yet prepared to choose words for ideas that I want to express. Besides, I often have difficulties with some grammar tenses. When speaking, I do not know how to use it properly. I know tenses when studying grammar, but when speaking, it is not easy to apply and speak fluently." (Student D)

"I think my current problem is that I lack vocabulary, like I want to talk about that topic but I do not have enough vocabulary to talk about it...Topics like citizen in other countries, culture or social topics. Like, I don't know what to say about those ones, like I was speechless. I have no interest in such topics....so I don't know how to say or I wouldn't say anything if the class was on that topic that day. I also got the kind of thing like I had to think about ideas Vietnamese and then translating it into English, I couldn't get rid of that thought." (Student E)

"My vocabulary is very limited. Sometimes I have a lot of ideas to share, but I don't know how to say it in English. Vocabulary is always a big problem not only for me but many of my classmates. Every time we have group discussion in class, we shared a lot of ideas in Vietnamese, but we cannot express in English." (Student F)

In terms of affective factors, feeling anxiety and fear of being judged or criticized by lecturers and classmates was perceived as the main reasons deterring students' participation by 4 of interviewees. Student A and C said,

"I am afraid that I may say something wrong. The lecturer will judge my English level, or she may not give a good score, so sometimes I am afraid to participate or express my ideas. I'm afraid of my friends' negative thought about me." (Student A)

"For me, I often hesitate to speak in front of class because at that time there are many people concentrating on me. I am afraid of saying wrongly, or accidentally saying incorrect words. I also feel a bit petty and ashamed..." (Student C)

Additionally, student A and F reported that it was uncomfortable for her when working in groups with higher-achieved students since she was not confident to express her ideas in groups discussions. She revealed,

"When discussing in groups, because there are many people, then I lack confidence to contribute my ideas. Many times, I just listen to my friends...I also feel afraid to give my opinion..." (Student A)

"... group work activities are also sometimes very boring. Many of my classmates are so good that sometimes I feel like teamwork doesn't make any sense like that person does the activities alone. I do not have chance to contribute." (Student F)

While, the other two revealed that they were not afraid of being criticized by the others when studying English speaking with higher-achieve students in class since they viewed that making mistakes was the way to help them improve their English, and it was a chance for them to learn good points from their friends. They shared,

"I think I don't mind of being wrong, afraid of being wrong or being judged. I think it helps me to be better. A lot of times when I spoke too fast, I could not pronounce words properly, many of my classmates laughed, but I thought it was normal. There was no problem." (Student B)

"I am not afraid of criticism or fear of making mistakes because I think I am a Vietnamese who learns English, so of course I cannot speak correctly...I do not feel shy when working in groups or in pairs if there is someone better than me. I think that I can learn from them..." (Student D)

Moreover, 4 out of 6 students affirmed that lack of motivation was also reduced their level of participation in English speaking class. They reported that they only get

engaged in a certain activity to get scores for passing the course, and they did not have many opportunities to apply what they study from the classes. They presented,

"For presentation activities, I am required to participate because of the score. If not, I would not have much motivation to participate enthusiastically like some active and good classmates." (Student C)

"I have got the motivation which encourage me to try my best, to develop my speaking ability. Like, I see that I go to class just because of grades. Like if I live in a foreign country speaking English, I also have the motivation to learn Speaking to communicate and talk. I do not have many opportunities to practice speaking English here, so sometimes I am also lazy to learn. For me, it is not relevant or very linked to my specialized courses..." (Student D)

Converserly, student E viewed that although she had to deal with several factors hindering her participation, she still wanted to improve her English speaking skill. She shared,

"I always want to improve my speaking skills although I am facing some difficulty to participate in class..." (Student E)

Regarding cognitive and pedagogical factors, all interviewees affirmed that different in teaching English speaking methods between high school and university was a considerable reason for students' low participation in English speaking classes. They revealed that at high-school English classes, they mainly focused on grammar and did not have many activities or opportunities for practicing Speaking, while at university English speaking classes, they were required to do lots of interactive activities in groups and do presentations almost every period which they had not got used to yet. This was the reason why they felt overwhelmed and less active in classes activities. They reported,

"...when I studied English speaking at high school, I mainly did the homework and then spoke in pairs of Sample Speaking lessons, and mainly did grammar homework. While in university English speaking classes, there were too many speaking activities in groups, in front of class, or giving presentations on topics and sometimes I had no ideas for what to speak. I had to prepare the speaking without samples at all. For me, university classes required me to be more active comparing with studying English at high school." (Student A)

"In the past, high school teachers often assigned homework and detailed instructions and reminded us frequently. As for college, I found although lecturers gave instructions, but most of the time, I had to do research on my own. For example, at high school, I did not have many chances to give presentations, while in university classes, I had to give

presentations all the time....at first, I was overwhelmed with that, and I did not get used to making continuous English presentations like this, so sometimes I was a little tired and did not want to participate in many activities anymore.” (Student B)

“...when I first studied in Speaking skill class, I found that it was different from when I was in high school, so I didn't get used to it. At high school, I mainly studied English from books, theories, or doing homework. At university, I had to make a lot of presentations, then I had to work in group, so I was not confident when participating in activities that had to discuss, or had to speak English a lot.” (Student C)

Secondly, 5 of 6 participants strongly agreed that lecturers' giving feedback in a negative way was the greatest factor influencing their low participation in English speaking classes. They shared,

“... Sometimes when I finish my presentation, lecturers gave some harsh feedback and pointed out my mistakes, and I felt sometimes criticized, sad and afraid. Next time I did not dare to express opinions or get out of my comfort zone. I was afraid to use new sentence structures or use new words.” (Student B)

“.... the atmosphere sometimes was too stressful, and that made us hesitate to give opinions. If the lecturer was too strict, then if I said something wrong, the lecturers would point out my mistake right after my speaking. Then the next time, I did not dare to speak nor would I want to participate.” (Student C)

“Many times, I also wanted to give my point of views, but the lecturers sometimes give some harsh comments, then pointed out my mistakes in front of the class, using words that are not yet gentle to comment on me. Then, I felt ashamed, stressed and I did not want to participate in speaking anymore.” (Student F)

On the contrary, student A viewed that there was no problem with the way lecturers giving feedback. The quote of student C below shows her idea.

“I think the lecturers are quite friendly. Teachers also support and help us a lot. For example, when we work in groups, the teachers also give comments and suggestions on our presentations, and help me improve my Speaking.” (Student A)

Additionally, students reported that their lack of knowledge or interests in the discussed topics and fear of lecturers' giving marks for their participation were also hindering their participation. Student F shared,

"If there are topics like sports or topics that I have a lot of knowledge about, I would like to participate... Most of the topics in class are pretty boring for me. I don't even know how to speak Vietnamese. I'm bored so I'm too lazy to join." (Student F)

"I'm afraid of saying somethings wrong, then the teacher may minus my points." (Student D)

In terms of social-cultural factors, student C, D and F revealed that there was a distance between them and lecturers. They were afraid of expressing themselves, being disrespectful when raising questions to their lecturers. The quote of them below shows their ideas.

"Actually, I know the teachers would not do anything to harm me, but I'm still kind of scared, seeing the distance. I followed to what the lecturers say, did not dare to ask him or dare not speak out my opinions about the things I did not understand in a certain activity, if I did not understand, I asked my friend." (Student C)

"I found an invisible barrier that I felt distance from the teacher, so sometimes when the lecturer was to strict, I was also afraid that she would have a bad impression on me, I sometimes feel uncomfortable in order to raise my opinions when discussing in class. I also dared not ask the lecturers questions. I will answer when the lecturer calls my name, otherwise I will better be quiet." (Student D)

"I am also afraid to ask questions for teachers when I do not understand well or raise my point of view in front of teachers. I am afraid that they would say I am disrespectful." (Student F)

Altogether, it can be concluded that lack of vocabulary, fear of being judged or criticized by lecturers or classmates and lecturers' harsh comments were perceived as the key factors causing students' low level of participation in English speaking classrooms. Additionally, it was highly believed that first-year non-majored English students did not participate since they did not get used to with teaching methods in university English speaking classes. Furthermore, while most of participants explained that the reasons leading to students' lack of confident and motivation in learning English were caused by mixed-classes in which lower-achieved students were not comfortable when working in groups with higher-achieved students, 2 of participants positively thought that they could learn good points from good students, and be supported by them.

5. Discussion

With regard to linguistic difficulties, lack of vocabulary was perceived as the most significant factors for students' low participation in English speaking classes. This finding

confirms the results of a study done by many previous researchers (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Hamouda, 2013; Murad and Jalambo, 2019). They found that students' poor vocabulary was one of the main reasons why students were passive listeners rather than active participants in the oral English classroom. However, the results of this current study revealed that students did not highly believe grammatical difficulties as the main reason for their silent in class. This finding is different from a study done by Tanveer (2007) who reported that in his study, the students experienced grammatical difficulties which could lead to the impression that anxious students are not capable communication in English.

In terms of affective factors, studies carried out by many researchers (Gomez, Arai & Lowe, 1995; Liu, 2001; Morita, 2004) found similar findings; lack of confidence, fears of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated, and feeling intimidated made students be less active to participate. Moreover, participants strongly believed that there was a great difference in English ability between them and their classmates. They felt nervous, uncomfortable and unconfident because of these perceived differences. There was a comparison with peers in mixed-level classes. This finding was the study reinforced the findings of the earlier studies by Hamouda (2013). He reported that the students constantly compared themselves with their peers, feeling inferior to others, and such negative cognitions put serious impediments in their language development.

Regarding to cognitive factors and pedagogical factors, the present study found that students' lack of knowledge in the discussed topics and students' fear of lecturers' giving marks for their participation was mains reasons leading to their low level of participations. This result is in agreement with Savaşçı (2013) who stated that an important point about the reluctance problem among EFL students is students' limited knowledge of the topics. The participants in his study stated if they did not have enough knowledge on a subject, they could not get deep into it and they were not able say much. Moreover, from the qualitative analysis, the findings showed that lecturers' giving feedback in a negative way was a source leading to students' silent in Speaking classes. Similarly, many researchers concluded that the authoritative, embarrassing and humiliating attitude of the lecturers towards students, particularly when they made mistakes, could have severe consequences on learners' cognition and their willingness to communicate in the class (Price, 1991; Tanveer, 2007; Hamouda, 2013). Furthermore, differently from factors listed in the questionnaires, the current study figured out that differences in teaching methods in university English speaking classes and high school English speaking class was another main source leading to student's low level of participation. In the context of university non-majored English-speaking classes, students did not actively participate in English speaking classes since students felt stressed and overwhelmed of interactive activities such as Role-plays and giving presentations in English almost every period which they had never experienced in high school English classes. Thus, the study reinforced the findings of the earlier studies by Koch and Terrell (1991) who found that a large number of their subjects considered oral presentation as the most anxiety-provoking activity in the class.

For social- cultural factors, students' fear of being rude to interrupt the lecturers was considered as the main reason for students' silent in Speaking classes. Students reported that they should wait called upon by lecturers, dare not to speaking up, and they were afraid that if they raised questions for lecturers, that would be considered as being rude. This is in the same direction with Zainal Abidin (2007) who reported that the belief that it was rude for a student to interrupt while the lecturer was teaching. For students, they should not speak unless they were asked to, and speaking too much was also considered as rude as it was a sign of disrespect to the lecturer as well as other students. Moreover, Li and Liu (2011) concluded that one of the causes of reticence and reluctance in the EFL classroom was related to Asian culture in teaching and learning which discourage individuals from speaking up in classroom settings.

6. Conclusions and implications

Students' low participation is considered as an annoying problem for not only English language lecturers, but also students. For Vietnamese students at the university, in Mekong Delta, there were three fundamental factors found in this research. First, students witness a lack in sufficient vocabularies as the greatest barrier preventing them from participating actively in English speaking classes. Second, students' nervous, lack of confident and fear of being judged is other causes of their low participation. Third, lack of knowledge in the discussed topics, student's fear of being rude to interrupt the lecturers and students' waiting until called upon by the lecturer were also highly perceived as factors hindering students' level of participation.

Based on the findings of the study, thus a few suggestions are forwarded. Firstly, the findings revealed that the majority of students were still having problems with the language. Lack of vocabulary was the problematic area identified. Therefore, it is suggested that activities to improve the students' vocabulary be planned. Secondly, the study also showed that students were reluctant to take part in discussions for fear of making mistakes and being judged. Students should be informed that making mistakes is a part of learning process. It will help the student to be more confident to express themselves in English, learn from mistakes and thus, language development is enhanced. Finally, the findings indicated that students thought it was rude for a student to interrupt while the lecturer was teaching, and they should only speak when they were asked to. To demystify these beliefs students should be informed on the benefits of taking part in class discussions. Thanks to sharing the ideas with the class, a student can check whether his understanding is correct through the feedbacks given by the lecturer and other students.

6.1 Limitations and suggestions for further research

Although the results of the questionnaires, interviews and other literature incorporated some of the conclusions reached in this analysis, it is important to concede that there are two limitations in this study. Firstly, the sample of the study was not sufficiently diverse.

The diverse sample would have consisted of multiple universities so that the findings would have effects to greater magnitude. Secondly, the authenticity of the study depends on their honesty and interest of the student participants. Sometimes, participants are not willing to share about their lecturers and often give inadequate accounts of classroom participations.

A suggestion for future research is to investigate the sources of factors influencing students' low participation in other skills classes such as reading, writing and listening. Research in this field will shed valuable light on the sources leading to students' low level of participation.

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