

# Teaching speaking to ethnic minority students of english at hoa binh teachers' tr...

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Teaching speaking to ethnic minority students of English at Hoa Binh

Teachers' Training College: Problems and solutions Author: Ngo Thi Thuy

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research. Abstract This study aims to find out the problems in teaching

speaking skill to ethnic minority students of English at Hoa Binh Teachers'

Training College. Then, based on the characteristics and the real condition,

the author suggested some solutions to the problems. This study was a small

- scale research which studies the problems by interviewing 50 students and

10 teachers at Foreign Language Study Department (i) to find out the

problems that occur in teaching speaking skill to ethnic minority students of

English at Hoa Binh Teachers' Training College. For instance, students were

unmotivated, afraid of making mistakes, and they failed in using vocabulary,

grammar structures in speaking. (ii) to suggest some solutions such as using

different types of activities in speaking lessons, using games or giving

students tasks to prepare before the speaking lessons, using effectively

correcting techniques and observing the implementation of those solutions in solving the problems. Using different various activities and games in the speaking lessons could help to increase the motivation of students in speaking; Giving students tasks to prepare before the lesson helped students have ideas about what they are going to study in the next lesson. Using correcting techniques effectively could help students use vocabulary and grammar structures properly. Key words: teaching speaking, ethnic minority students, speaking activities

### 1. Introduction

Students of English at Hoa Binh teachers' Training College (HTTC) must get certain scores from the National Entrance Exam to gain admission to the Foreign Language Study Department. Though these students will attend to the English course at HTTC, the English scores the students get from the Entrance Exam do not make use any more. They just base on the total marks of three subjects: Maths, Literature and English to see whether the students are accepted to enroll in the course or not. This one of the cause that leads to the level of English proficiency is not the same among students. As Hoa Binh is a mountainous province with the living of eight ethnic minority groups; therefore, most of the students at HTTC are ethnic minority students. The main characters of the ethnic minority students are shy and reserved. Thus, this also leads them to the difficulty in studying a foreign language. One more thing we would like to mention here is the teaching speaking to students of English at HTTC. For the first four semesters, speaking skill is taught to integrate with other skills such as reading, listening, and writing, using Lifelines set textbooks (Hutchinson, 2001). The speaking skill is taught separately in the fifth semester, and this is the main concern of this study.

Though the students have studied speaking skill which is integrated with other skills: reading skill, listening skill and writing skill during the first four semesters and we teach them speaking skills separately in the fifth semester, we still meet many difficulties in helping and promoting students to speak. This is a very serious problem that we need to spend a lot of time to look for the causes of the problems and suggest some solutions to the problems. The result will be hopefully given the Department staff more understanding about the ethnic minority students' performance which is related with spoken English.

2. Learning difficulties and causes: It is very important to recognize that some of the learning difficulties are caused by language. Ballard (1996) claimed that language problems actually serve as one of the important reasons behind poor performance of the students. What Ballard (1996) said is true in the case of HTTC. The students of English at HTTC have studied English at the secondary school, and they also have two years studying English at the college, but they still get difficulties in expressing their ideas in the speaking section. From an informal interview to 50 students of the second year in April, 2010, the researcher found that the students had participated unsuccessfully in the speaking classes because they didn't know how to say out their ideas in English, though they had them in their mind, and they were so afraid of making mistakes when speaking. Furthermore, we must emphasize that speaking skill is better taught in the appropriate social contexts. In other words, our teaching methods must be pragmatic. Since the students are learning in a second language situation, we can not play down the role of the mother tongue in thinking and expressing their ideas. Whenever student are asked to give their opinions or

express their ideas about something, most of them think it in their mother tongue then translate into English later., This is very difficult process because there are many differences between Vietnamese and English sentence structures. The result is that students cannot translate their ideas into English, they don't feel free to say loudly what they are thinking because of being afraid of making mistakes. The results coming from the interview to 10 teachers of English at HTTC about the difficulties that their students met in their speaking lessons were the same to the students' answers above. The teachers claimed that their students cannot actually use the language to communicate when they want, for many students, their " passive" knowledge is much larger than their " active" language. In speaking lessons, students may tend to be nervous about trying to say something, they partly may fair seeming foolish in front of others; they may worry about getting things wrong; they may want to avoid teachers' comments or corrections; and so on. All led students to lack motivation and confidence in speaking. Other difficulties that the students met during their college studying process are due to the learning strategies adopted. When the students come to study at the college, they need to adjust to a new way of thinking and processing information, and they need to change their learning strategies to meet the requirements of the new academic target (Ballard, 1996). For example, they need to develop skills such as summarizing, extracting the main ideas and making notes, asking questions, presenting in front of the class. Furneaux et al (1991) pointed out that many non- native speakers put too much emphasis on listening to the lecturers and note taking. Furneaux's idea is true to students of English at HTTC during every lesson, even in the speaking

lesson students preferred to listen to teachers and doing detailed note taking all what teachers said and they might feel worried if they could not write down all what teachers said. This was caused by their formed learning strategies at the secondary, where students just sat, listened and took notes, for most of the practice tasks were in form of written tasks, they didn't have chance to express their ideas in spoken language. The classroom management that teachers used to use at the secondary schools is also caused the difficulty for students in studying especially in speaking. At the secondary schools, even the students had chance to work in pairs or in small groups, but the monitoring and feedback of the group works were not good. Sometimes teachers just asked students to work in groups or in pairs but lacked attentions on how many students participated in the activities then no feedback or used only chorus feedback. This didn't teach students any experience in group work skills like participating skill or sharing skill. And group work fails its roles in motivating students learning. Furthermore, as we mentioned above, most of the students at HTTC are belong to ethnic minority groups: they are shy and very timid at communicating with other people. All these make students less motivated in learning. As mentioned in the Introduction section, the speaking skills in the text books by Hutchinson are facilitated by three main activities: pronunciation, situational conversation and argument. This is very useful to students and step by step help students to develop their speaking skills, if the teachers know how to deliver the lesson successfully, because when learning speaking students need to recognize that speaking involves three areas of knowledge: -

Mechanics (pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary): Using the words in the

right order with the correct pronunciation. - Functions ((transaction and interaction): Knowing when clarifying of message is essential (transaction/ information exchange) and when precise understanding is not required (interaction/ relationship building). - Social and cultural rules and norms (turn - taking, rate of speech, length of pauses between speakers, relative roles of participants): Understanding how to take into account who is speaking to whom, in what circumstances, about what, and for what reason. In fact, at HTTC, when dealing with pronunciation, teachers simply turn on the tape to let students listen and repeat. Few teachers stop to explain to students the mechanism of producing sounds. Consequently, students easily to forget the correct pronunciation of words (Bui, 2004, translated). Situational conversations are used to help students practice using the learned language in the provided situations and then help students know how to use those language items in the real situations, but these are practiced with little motivation from teachers, creating modest cooperation between students (Bui, 2004, translated). When the cooperation is not successful, teachers tend to ignore developing argumentation because they often fail when they try to do so. All these lead students to the difficulties in speaking such as using wrong words order, wrong pronunciation, and difficulty in using the learnt target language in the real life situations. In conclusion, the problems that students of English at HTTC have to cope with are: 1. Students don't know how to express their ideas in English. 2. Students are afraid of making mistakes when speaking. 3. Students' learning strategies. 4. Students are less motivated in speaking English. 3. Teaching speaking Speaking has always been a major focus of language teaching; however, both nature of

speaking skills as well as approaches to teaching them have undergone a major shift in thinking in the last 30 years. Speaking in the early seventies usually meant "repeating after the teacher, reciting a memorized dialogue, or responding to a mechanical drill" (Shrum and Glisan, 2000), reflecting the sentence - based view of proficiency prevailing in the methodologies of Audiolingualism and Situational Language Teaching. The emergence of the constructs of communicative competence of proficiency in the 1980s, lead to major shifts in conceptions of syllabuses and methodology, the effects of which continue to be seen today. The theory of communicative competence prompted attempts at teaching a foreign language in generally and teaching speaking skill in particularly. This make the language teachers need to consider teaching speaking skill to students seriously. Chaney (1998) states that: "Speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts". In second language learning and teaching, speaking plays a crucial part. We can say that speaking is one of the most important skill that students need to acquire during their learning a foreign language process and the goal of teaching speaking is to improve students' communicative skills, because, only in this way students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules appropriate in each communicative circumstance. Nunan (2003), pointed out that teaching speaking to ESL learners means to teach them to:

- Produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns
- Use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and the rhythm of the second language
- Select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter.
- Organize their

thoughts in a meaning and logical sequence. - Use language as a means of expressing values and judgments. - Use the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses, which is called as fluency. From Nunan's (2003) point of view we can see that the goal of teaching speaking skills is communicative efficiency. Students should be able to make themselves understood, using their current proficiency to the fullest. They should try to avoid confusion in the message due to faulty pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary, and to observe the social and cultural rules that apply in each communication situation. Another way to express what Nunan (2003) claims above is Thornbury's ideas. Thornbury (2000) states that the purpose of teaching speaking is to help students target the two objectives: precision and automatisisation, and we call these two objectives respectively accuracy and fluency. Accuracy in speaking English means students speak English without or with few errors in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Fluency in speaking means students are able to communicate one's ideas without having to stop and think too much about what one is saying. Both accuracy and fluency are important in teaching and learning speaking, but to help students develop communicative efficiency in speaking, teachers need to know how to conduct the speaking activities with the purposes of accuracy or fluency or both. Hayriye Kayi (2006) gives some suggestions for English language teachers while teaching speaking skills to students as follow: - Provide maximum opportunity to students to speak the target language by providing a rich environment that contains collaborative work, authentic materials, meaningful tasks and shared knowledge. - Try to avoid each student in every speaking activity, for this aim, practice different ways

of students' participation. - Reduce teacher's talking time in class while increasing students speaking time. Step back and observe students. - Indicate positive signs when commenting on a student's response. - Ask eliciting questions such as "What do you mean? How did you reach that conclusion?" in order to promote students to speak more. - Provide written feedback like "Your presentation was really great. It was a good job. I really appreciated your efforts in preparing the materials and efficient use of your voice..." - Do not correct the students' pronunciation mistakes very often while they are speaking. Correction could not distract students from her or his speech. - Involve speaking activities not only in the class but also out of class. - Circulate around classroom to ensure that students are on the right track and see whether they need your help while they are working in groups or pairs. - Provide the vocabulary beforehand that students need in speaking activities. - Diagnose problems faced by students who have difficulty in expressing themselves in the target language and provide more opportunities to practice the spoken language. In general, teaching speaking is a very important part of language learning. The ability to communicate in a second language clearly and efficiently contributes to the success of the students at school and success later in every phase of life. Therefore, it is very necessary that language teachers pay great attention to teaching speaking. It is better to provide a rich environment where meaningful communicative tasks for students. This can help students improve their speaking skills day by day and teaching a foreign language get its final goals.

4. Solutions to the problems

Now many linguistics and ESL teachers agree on that students learn to speak in the second language by "

interacting". Communicative language teaching and collaborative learning serve the best for this aim. Communicative language teaching is based on real-life situation that require communication. By using this method in ESL classes, students will have opportunity of communicating with each other in the target language. In brief, ESL teacher should create a classroom environment where students have real-life communication, authentic activities and meaningful tasks that promote oral language. This can be occurred when students collaborate in groups to achieve a goal or to complete a task. To solve the problems that occur in teaching speaking skills to students at HTTC, and to promote students' speaking skills, the researchers have tried to find out some solutions as follow: Firstly, teacher should think about the ways of teaching and delivering the speaking activities. To teach speaking effectively, the teacher should consider the following guidelines carefully: - Provide appropriate input: Input is the language to which students are exposed: teacher talk, listening activities, reading passages, and the language heard and reading outside of class. Input gives students the materials they need to develop their ability to use the language on their own. s - Use language in authentic ways: In order to learn a language, instead of merely learning about it, students need as much as possible to hear and read the language as native speakers use it. Teachers can make this happen in two ways: (1) Teacher talk: Always try to use the language as natural as possible when teacher talks to students. It means that teacher has to speak at a normal rate, use vocabulary and sentence structures with which students are familiar, and state the same ideas in different ways to aid comprehension. (2) Materials: Give students

authentic reading materials from newspapers, magazines, and other print sources. The readings need reviewing carefully to ensure that they are at appropriate level to students. The materials should introduce relevant vocabulary and grammatical structures in advance and provide the context by describing the content and typical formats for the type of speaking activity.

- Provide context: the context includes knowledge of the topic or content; the vocabulary and language structures in which the content is usually presented and the social and cultural expectations associated with the content. To help students have an authentic experience of understanding and using language, teacher had prepared them by raising their awareness of the context in which it occurs. Teacher did it by asking students what they know about the topic, eliciting the vocabulary and language structures related to the context that students had already known.
- Design activities with purpose: Ordinarily, communication has a purpose: to convey information. Therefore, when conducting the activities in classroom, we had tried to design the activities that simulate communication outside the classroom. In these activities, students had chance to use the language to fill an information gap by getting answers or expending a partial understanding. These types of activities were very useful to students, because all students had responsibility to speak to complete their tasks.
- Encourage collaboration: Whenever deliver the activities, teachers always gave students clear form of task and outcome of the tasks. This would help students to collaborate as they develop a work plan, discuss the substance of the task, and report the outcome, this also helped students know how to use the language in a variety of ways and learn from each other. The effective

collaborative activities should have communication gap, task orientation and time limit. - Address appropriate grammar structures that related to the delivered speaking activities to students, this can help students use the target language consciously and help to promote accuracy in speaking activities. - Give appropriate feedback to speaking activities; this can help to encourage the confidence of the students. Make sure that teachers are listening what students are speaking and take notes all the recurring errors you hear so that you can address them with the whole group in the feedback section later. - Include awareness of culture aspects of language use: Languages are cognitive systems, but they also express ideas and transmit cultural values. When delivering speaking activities to students, it is very important for teachers to include information on the social, cultural and historical context that certain language form carry for native speakers. The teachers got this from variety resources such as from magazines, newspapers, radio and television programs, movies or internet. Using these types of authentic materials in the classroom can help students to expand their perspectives and generate interesting discussion about the relationships between language and culture. Secondly, the teachers have to deal with is the classroom organization: To help students feel confident in their learning, and students have the chance to share their ideas, the research normally organized the class in form of pair works or group works. As we had mentioned above, the students at HTTC are most ethnic minority students, they are not very active in public, and they are not very familiar with the new learning strategies at the college, so group works or pair works are good way to help students to deal with those problems. Through these

classroom organizations can also let students have more chances to interact with each other, this help to release the anxiety that students usually meet in their class participation. Thirdly, the teachers deal with the activities that can help to promote students speaking skills. The activities that the researchers had applied are: discussions, role play, information gap, story telling, story completion, reporting and doing class presentation.

Discussions: Nunan (2003) states that discussion can be held for various reasons: The students may aim to arrive at a conclusion, share ideas about an event, or find solutions in their discussion groups. It is very essential that the purpose of the discussion activity is clearly set by teacher before the discussion to help students to go on the right trace and save time on chatting about irrelevant things. For example, students can become involved in for against discussions. In this type of discussions, the teacher can form groups of students preferably 4 or 5 in each group, and provide controversial sentences like " World governments should conduct serious campaigns against smoking." Then each group works on their topic for a given time period, and present their opinions to the class. It is essential that the speaking should be equally divided among group members. At the end, the class decides on the winning group who defended the idea in the best way, this can help to encourage students participating well in the activity. This activity foster critical thinking and quick decision making, and students learn how to express and justify themselves in polite ways while disagreeing with the others. For efficient group discussions, it is always better not to form large groups, because quiet students may avoid contributing in large groups. The group members can be either assigned by the teacher or the students

may determine it by themselves, but groups should be rearranged in every discussion activity so that students can work with various people and learn to open to different ideas. This can help students to reduce their shyness and hesitation. Lastly, in discussion activities, what the aim is, the students should always be encouraged to ask questions, paraphrase ideas, express support, check for clarification and so on. These help students to improve their sub skills that they haven't learnt much at the secondary school, and this is also one important aim of teaching language to students. To deliver this activity successfully, teacher should choose the topics for students to discuss from the easy ones to the more difficult ones. This can help students are getting familiar with the form of activity and can improve their sub skills step by step.

**Role play:** Role play is one way of getting students to speak. In this activity, students pretend they are in various social contexts and have variety of social roles (Harmer, 1984). In other words, in role play activities, students are assigned roles and put into situations that they may eventually encounter outside the classroom. Because the role play imitates life, the range of language functions that may be used expands considerably. Also, the role relationships among the students as they play their parts call for them to practice and develop their sociolinguistic competence. They have to use language that is appropriate to the situation and the characters. The role play usually makes students feel enjoyable, and this type of activity help lack self - confidence or have lower proficiency levels step by step improve their speaking skills. Paul (2000) states role play is one of the useful activities that help students to improve their fluency in speaking.

**Information gap activities:** This type of activities require students to complete a task/ tasks by

obtaining missing information, a feature the activities have in common with real communication. In this activity, teachers arranged the class with pair works: One student will have the information that other partner does not have and the partner will share their information. Information gap activities serve many purposes such as solving problem or collecting information, so it is very useful for helping students to improve their speaking skill, it also helps students to cooperate well in speaking activities, and it encourages all students even the shy ones to participate in the activities, because in this activity, each partner plays an important role because the task cannot be completed if the partners do not provide the information the other need. These activities are effective in speaking because every student has the opportunity to talk extensively in the target language. Story telling: In this type of activity students can briefly summarize a tale or story they heard from somebody beforehand or read somewhere or they may create their own stories to tell their classmates. This type of activity fosters creative thinking. It also helps students express ideas in the format of beginning, development, and ending, including the characters and setting a story has to have. Student also can tell riddles or jokes. This activity can be delivered at the very beginning of the lesson; the teachers may call some students to tell short riddles or jokes as an opening. This is very simple and natural way for teachers to address students' speaking ability, and also get the attention of the class. Story completion: This type of activity is very enjoyable, whole class, free- speaking activity for which students sit in circle. In this activity, teachers start to tell a story, but after a few sentences the teachers stop narrating, then each students starts to tell the story from the point where the

previous one stopped. Each student is supposed to add from four to ten sentences. Students can add new characters, events, descriptions and so on. This activity encourages students to work on their own way, using their own language target that they have, and can express their ideas freely. Students feel confident in participating in speaking activity. On the other hand, this activity is rather difficult for students, especially the students whose level of proficiency is low; they are afraid of making mistakes in speaking and worry about what they are saying out. To help students participate in this type of activity successfully, teachers should help students by give some cues that related to the topic they are dealing with. Reporting: In this activity, students are asked to read a newspaper or magazine before going to the class, and in class, they report to their friends what they found as the most interesting news. Students can also talk about whether they are experienced anything worth telling their friends in their daily lives before class. This type of activity can help students to get the input by themselves, and students also can learn the way to express their ideas from the articles they have read in the newspapers, magazines or books. Doing class presentation: Another effective activity is to assign small groups of students to prepare a class presentation during which time they take over the class and direct their peers in discussion based on some topics that they prepared. They prepare their peers several days before the day of the presentation by finding reading materials related to their topic. They design a study sheet and vocabulary list to accompany the reading. The study sheet should contain various questions related to the topic in the reading material. The group directs the other students to think about these questions and be ready to

discuss them the day of the presentation. On the day of the presentation, the group is graded on how well they are able to get their peers to discuss the topic and how well they are able to keep their peers talking in English. In general, they would be graded on how well they are able to fulfill their teaching role. This activity is especially effective in ensuring the class discussion in English if the students are aware that a group's evaluation is based on how well they are able to get their peers to participate. The key to this is to choose the group at random, not let them choose their own groups. If this is done, the teacher can be ensured that friends of some members of each group will try to participate in activity so that their friends will not receive low grade. To deliver all the above types of activities successfully, the teachers should:

- Prepare the activities very carefully, make sure that students understand what they are going to do and the outcome that they need to acquire after the activities.
- Prepare students with the providing the input (both topical information and language forms) so that they will have something to say and the language with which to say it.
- Keep groups small so that all students can participate in the activities, especially, the less confident students will feel more able to participate if they do not have to compete with many voices, and they can have chance to express their own ideas.

Thus type of class arrangement also helps students have responsibility to their group tasks; try to complete the tasks in time. It is also easy for teachers to monitor the small group works.

- Keep short: Give students a defined period of time, not too much time, this is challenging to students but it can help to avoid the boring and foster students to work hard, and improve their creative skills, develop some of their sub skills such as choosing the

main ideas, organizing the ideas, etc. - Allow students to participate in their own way with their own level. s As we can see, in fact not every student will feel comfortable talking about every topic because each student has individual language skills, and individual approach to working in groups or in pairs. Do not expect all students to contribute equally to the speaking activities or to use every grammar point the teacher has taught them. - Do topical follow-up: It is very necessary to have students report to the class on the results/ outcomes of their activities, this will help students to see how much they have done, give students the chance to share the ideas with the whole class, and during their reporting, others can ask the presenters questions about what they did not understand. This also can help students to develop other sub skills such as: asking questions, clarifying their ideas, and supporting their ideas. - Do linguistic follow - up: After each activity, teachers should spend some time to give feedback on repeat grammar or pronunciation problems that we heard during the speaking activity that occurred. This helps students know how to use the language target correctly and also not hurt the students while they are speaking. Through well prepared speaking output activities, teachers can encourage students to experiment and innovate with the language, and create a supportive atmosphere that allows students to make mistakes without fear of embarrassment. This will also contribute their self - confidence as speakers and to their motivation to learn more. 5. Conclusion Having looked at the teaching real situation and the students' characteristic and learning strategies, we had pointed out some difficulties that the ethnic minority students of English at Hoa Binh Teachers' Training College such as students

don't know how to express their ideas in English; students are afraid of making mistakes when speaking;. students' difficulties in adapting learning strategies; and students are less motivated in speaking English, the researchers had suggested some solutions to those problems: using discussion activities, role play, information gap, story telling , etc. These solutions are not new to common teaching situation in any university, but at HTTC, with the real condition. As mentioned in the introduction section, it is very difficult to carry out these activities in the classroom. To succeed in teaching, both teachers and students have to work hard and seriously consider learning speaking skills is very essential in language learning and teaching. The authors of this article don't want to give anything new to the readers, we just wanted to share some of our difficulties in teaching speaking skills to ethnic minority students a new type of teaching subjects with some solutions to the difficulties. With lack of experiences in writing articles and doing research, it cannot avoid any mistakes in expressing ideas and using the language, and we are willing to hear any comments on our article. Thank you for your attention. Reference Ballard, B. 1996. Through language to learning: Prepare Overseas Students for Study in Western Universities (A)// Coleman, H., ED. Society and Language Classroom . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Bui, H (2004). Situation of learning English at HUS. Improving English Teaching, Hanoi: Vietnam National University. Chaney, A. L., and T. L. Burk. 1998. Teaching Oral Communication in Grades K-8. Boston: Allyn & Bacon. Furneaux, C., Robinson, P. and Tonkyn, A. 1991. Talking heads and Shifting Bottoms: The Ethnography of Academic Seminars (A)// Adams, P., Heaton, B, and P. Howarth, Eds. Social - Cultural

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