

Learning English in Vietnam

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We both came from the same rural town in a province of Southern Vietnam. The learning conditions there were quite under-developed, with a huge number of students sitting in the same class, and there were no facilities to support our learning, unlike in the cities. In addition, most students were not interested in English, since they found no reason to use the language in daily life. However, we were different because we were especially interested in English. We used to ask ourselves what made us enjoy learning this language so much while other students seemed to study it as a requirement. The reason was simple: It was strange and new to us, and we dreamed of a day we could speak English like the actors and actresses that we saw in movies or the tour guides in our town. In our area, there were not many people who were able to speak English; hence, those with English language ability received admiration from others. We also heard that tour guides would earn exceptional sums of money. So, we were dreaming of being well-known, admired, rich, and armed with strong English skills. Our families would then be proud of us. Additionally, while we greatly enjoyed the series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, it was not dubbed in Vietnamese. Instead of relying on annoying subtitles, we wanted to understand what the characters said in English. Besides, we were interested in songs containing English lyrics at the time. We still remember the songs performed by Britney Spears, Westlife, or M2M. We loved the songs, we loved to sing, and we needed to know English to sing them. However, coming from a rural area was a disadvantage because the dream of improving English competency, especially listening and speaking skills, appeared impossible.

We started learning English as a required subject at Grade 6, and most of the time we were provided with grammar exercises or reading comprehension because these were the only two elements which appeared in English tests and exams at that time. Even for high school graduation or college entrance exams, good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary would ensure success. At that time, we believed that this was sufficient, since we were told by teachers



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that good grammar and vocabulary would lead to further development of English skills. We did not try speaking or listening exercises at this stage. However, soon after we entered our undergraduate programs, we realized that there was much more to work on than just grammar and vocabulary. We may have understood written sentences or texts, but we failed to engage in any conversations. For example, if we read a dialogue in a textbook, we could easily understand its meaning. However, if we were asked to orally perform similar dialogues, it would be problematic because we would not be able to put the words in the correct order or pronounce them correctly. We were shocked when our speaking instructor asked all of us to introduce ourselves on the first day of class, and we even had difficulties completing that task. We pessimistically thought that we would never pass the final speaking test for this semester. We were envious of students in the class who had learned English at language centers in the city and were annoyed when they were able to fluently engage in conversations with the teachers. Although we felt jealous, we admired the skills of these students, and we recognized that we needed to try harder if we were to be like them. One of our favorite strategies at that time was to write down whatever we would like to say and then read from our notes. Besides being inconvenient because of the time needed to write out notes, our strategy inhibited us from injecting emotions into our speech. However, it seemed as if we had no other options. The teachers commented that we were merely reading out loud rather than truly communicating. They were frustrated because we could neither make eye contact due to our absorption in our notes nor say a complete sentence without first preparing. We were then advised to make changes in the way that we conversed. Unfortunately, making changes in one's habits is not an easy task. To ensure that our communication skills would improve and that our interlocutors would be no longer angry or impatient while waiting for us to speak out, we agreed to change.

We do not completely adhere to the belief that practice makes perfect, but practice can at least make us better. Therefore, our aim was to keep practicing more and more whenever we could. It is striking that many English language learners place blame on not having anyone to practice speaking with or not having a topic to talk about. We also were at first obsessed by that thought, until our Speaking instructor made various suggestions. Firstly, we were mistaken in trying to stick with the topics presented in our textbooks rather than real-life situations. To avoid this, we thought of what was happening around us and made short speeches to express what we thought about those events in our free time in the dormitory. These simple topics included what we planned to do that day, what made us feel sad or happy just a moment ago, what came to our minds when we saw someone running a red light, or what made us annoyed when we went shopping for food the day before. None of these topics were in our books. Rather, they were drawn from our daily life. We believed that the purpose of learning a language was to help us deal with daily situations; therefore, we asked ourselves why we should concentrate on topics that were not really relevant to our own contexts, why we should open a book to find a topic when there were so many events occurring right in front of us. Instead, using real-life topics allowed us greater flexibility in expressing our ideas and interests.

The second problem was having no peers to work with. We were quite concerned about this. However, we later realized this was a mere excuse for not practicing. We tried to create a small speaking group consisting of English majors living in the dorm for out-of-class practice, but

we failed, since people were afraid that if we used English out of the classroom, we would be thought to be showing off. Our solution was to speak to ourselves. We had our own rooms, which was convenient because we could lock the door whenever we needed to practice. Based on topics drawn from our daily life, we could easily make a speech or presentation while pretending to speak in public to invisible audiences. We tried to practice every day, but it honestly depended on our mood at the time. Practicing at least three times a week was fine for us. We even created questions and answered them ourselves. Usually, we used our phones to record the speeches so that we could listen to them later and evaluate them. We felt comfortable doing this because there was no one to judge us; we simply listened to ourselves and fixed what we thought necessary. However, many times, the recorded speeches were so terrible that we were disappointed with our own work. We had bad pronunciation, hesitated, had an unclear voice, and had poor intonation. Although we were not confident enough to ask someone to listen and comment on our work, we now knew what our weaknesses were. If we were not happy with our first try, we simply tried again. We shared this with our peers, who responded negatively. In their minds, only insane people talk to themselves. They thought we were overzealous. They never understood our passion and thirst for good communication skills in English. In our minds, shyness was a barrier which would only hinder us. Although we were afraid of making mistakes, we needed to overcome our fear and shyness.

After practicing alone for a long period of time, we still struggled with conversations, since we were not used to speaking with someone else in English, which required spontaneous reactions. Again, solutions were necessary. Our fear of public speaking was quite severe, so we decided to cope with it step-by-step. We were fortunate enough to have computers and an internet connection, which allowed us to converse online with friends and teachers via Skype. We had our trepidation about having face-to-face conversations in English, but talking online was less stressful. So, we gathered a group of students and teachers for scheduled group calls on Skype, which was free of charge. Though we invited friends from other English classes to join, they refused, so most of the participants were either our classmates or the course instructors. It was clear that most of us only wanted to practice with people that we knew well. Even though it was not easy to encourage our classmates, we succeeded by explaining that this was a good way to get to know each other more and to have good relationships with our teachers. The topics for the conversations could either be planned in advance or arise spontaneously. We preferred not having any topics planned, and members of the group were encouraged to break the ice by raising an issue of their interest or concern so that other members could join the conversation. The topics often changed frequently. From this online activity, we felt much more confident in our ability to react immediately to the speech of others. It was also extremely convenient, since some members lived far away from others.

After several online conversations, we agreed to have face-to-face conversations either on campus or in coffee shops, where we felt the most comfortable. We set up a time that fit everyone's schedule and informed other members, usually our classmates and teachers who participated in the Skype conversations. We sometimes invited our American teachers, since we now felt more confident interacting with foreigners. The topics were varied—either a review of what we had discussed via Skype or a melange of new issues. By this stage, we had interacted

with each other for a long time, which allowed us to feel less shy or nervous. This led to further conversations with not only our group members but also others for whom there were opportunities for conversation. One point that we would like to note here is that the classroom atmosphere frequently creates attitudes of formality and discomfort. To combat this trend, we often went to places where we felt much more comfortable. From this, we realized that friendly learning environments play important roles in the learning process.

Making progress is not easy; it requires time and effort. However, we know that if we had not been brave enough to take action, we would never have made improvements in our language competency. After a long period of practicing, our communication skill greatly improved. We felt comfortable and confident in making conversations with foreign teachers and visitors. On top of that, we were able to work part-time as tour guides and successfully passed the speaking tests.

We are now working as English instructors, and we keep hearing about our learners' fears and worries about their speaking skills. This is not a surprise, since we went through this stage before successfully improving. This compels us to share our past problems with learners, provide them with the strategies that we applied, and assist them whenever necessary. We are honest with learners about our past shyness and embarrassment. As teachers, we consider ourselves to be guides and facilitators rather than shining models who need to hide their weaknesses. We believe that people who have experienced similar situations are more likely to sympathize and offer help to each other. Hence, it is vital to indicate what problems we used to have in speaking English and what strategies we used to improve ourselves. We hope our advice is inspiring to our students. Students typically respond that they never imagined that their teachers also experienced the same problems that they are facing. When we tell them about our experiences, they are surprised and quickly become more confident and calm. They realize that having problems in speaking at first is not an unusual matter, yet most people can come through this with improved skills. We are so happy when our learners gain confidence, inspiration, and motivation in learning English through our stories.

The advice we usually share with other teachers is try not to be frustrated with our learners' poor speaking performance since we were no better than them in the beginning stages. In fact, we never stop encouraging them to keep practicing. Though we were poor at speaking, we have made progress by trying our best. We believe that the same progress will develop in our learners as well. Additionally, we would like to create a friendly environment to motivate our learners to participate. Few people work well under great pressure. Positive attitudes from teachers mean so much to their learners and in many cases have an impact on their learning.

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