

## **Teaching English speaking skills: An investigation into Vietnamese EFL teachers' beliefs and practices**

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Rooted from the lack of studies exploring EFL teachers' beliefs around teaching English-speaking skills which might profoundly influence and drive their actual teaching practices in the context of EFL teaching in Vietnam, this paper reports the findings of research on the beliefs and practices of Vietnamese EFL teachers pertaining to English-speaking skills. The study involved 52 EFL teachers from 12 universities in different parts of Vietnam, with the primary aim of identifying teachers' beliefs about teaching EFL speaking skills in tertiary level English classes. The secondary aim was to explore the relationships between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices. The study used a mixed methods approach and collected data via online surveys and semi-structured interviews. The data analysis showed EFL teachers believed that increased time for teaching speaking skills, adapting communicative teaching methods, and student-centred learning could enhance students' English communication skills. However, further examination revealed that a deficit in teachers' efficacy and teacher disinterest in teaching this language skill imposed limits on their teaching practices. Teachers also identified other factors, such as university assessment policies, large class sizes, textbooks and student characteristics as barriers to quality teaching that are responsible for eroding student motivation.

### **Introduction**

English as a foreign language is taught at all school levels in Vietnam. Introduced to young learners in primary school, it is now a compulsory subject at secondary and tertiary education levels. Yet, despite learning English over an extended period, students still have difficulties mastering oral communication and struggle to achieve satisfactory English proficiency levels. A common complaint is "Many school leavers cannot read simple texts in English nor communicate with English speaking people in some most common cases" (Tiến, 2013, p. 66).

The teaching and learning of English in Vietnam has been under the spotlight since implementation of the National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFLP/2020 Project) by the Ministry of Education and Training in 2008 (MoET, 2008). The goals of the 2020 Project included confident and proficient use of a foreign language, especially English, by most Vietnamese students in their studies, daily communication and work by the year 2020. In order to achieve the goals of the National Project, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training sent hundreds of EFL teachers overseas for professional training (Tran, 2013). Their efforts to apply new teaching methods (Tran, 2013) and earlier introduction of English in primary schools were intended to improve the quality of EFL teaching and learning and enhance students' English communication skills. To this end, schools and universities employed native English TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) teachers to provide students with opportunities to communicate

with native English speakers and create authentic English-speaking contexts in the classroom. Nevertheless, Vietnamese EFL teachers, who act as key stakeholders and agents, make up the majority of English teachers. Although EFL teachers have attended training courses and adopted new teaching methodologies, the influence of their beliefs about teaching English-speaking skills on their actual teaching practices has not yet been studied. Therefore, this study investigated Vietnamese EFL teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching English speaking at tertiary level. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What do EFL teachers believe about teaching English-speaking skills?
2. How do EFL teachers actually teach English-speaking skills?
3. How are EFL teachers' beliefs and practices aligned with teaching English speaking?

## **Literature review**

### **English teaching at tertiary level in Vietnam**

The increasing role of English as a means of international communication has promoted the teaching and learning of English in non-English speaking countries, to boost their socio-economic development and globalisation. In this climate of internationalisation for economic development and cultural exchange, the demand for high-level English communication skills among younger generations is higher than ever (Rao, 2019). Vietnam is an active participant in this trend to enhance the teaching and learning of English. Although the position and status of English in the Vietnamese school curriculum has changed throughout history, English is currently the most important foreign language at all school levels and a compulsory subject in the education system (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2007).

At tertiary level, English is taught as either a major intensive subject or a basic subject in public universities in Vietnam (Hoang, 2013). At language universities or faculties of languages in any university where students are trained to become EFL teachers, translators or interpreters, English is taught as a major subject. In non-language-major universities, it is mainly taught as a general basic subject. In some private universities today, English is the core message of recruitment drives that fuel their reputations and feed their revenue streams, and teaching the language has attracted significant attention and investment. At these universities, students are required to master English because it is used as the medium of instruction for other subjects.

Within this context, improvements in English teaching and learning at tertiary level have become a principal aim of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training for preparing a generation of workers with adequate English to satisfy the demands of national and international employment markets (Tran, 2013). To achieve this goal, the Vietnamese government has made substantial investments to increase the number of qualified EFL teachers, introduce new teaching methods and approaches, redesign curriculums and equip classrooms with appropriate technologies. However, the quality of English teaching has not improved as anticipated and universities have been blamed for

the poor outcomes (Tran, 2013). Moreover, “the English proficiency of the majority of university students and graduates are quite disappointing - they do not appear to be confident with their English. Many of them cannot communicate in a simple English interaction” (Tran, 2013, p. 139).

Several problems have been shown to affect the quality of EFL teaching at universities. These include teachers' use of uninspiring teaching styles (Hoang, 2013; Tién, 2013; Nguyen, Warren, & Fehring, 2014; Tran, 2013); insufficient time for communicative activities (Nguyen et al., 2014; Tran, 2013); large class sizes (Hoang, 2013; Nguyen et al., 2014; Tran, 2013); varying competency levels (Nguyen et al., 2014; Tran, 2013); a mismatch between teaching and testing (Hoang, 2013; Tién, 2013); a lack of competent non-native teachers (Hoang, 2013; Tién, 2013; Vu & Burns, 2014); and teachers' limited abilities to organise classrooms and use technologies to support their language teaching (Nguyen et al., 2014). Other factors, such as student motivation to learn English and English curriculums, also affect the quality of English language teaching (Tién, 2013).

Le (2011) identified a new demand for communicative language teaching in Vietnam. However, a gap exists between teacher and student perceptions of the importance of interaction in English teaching and learning. While students prefer to interact in groups, teachers impose teacher-centred teaching methods in the classroom. This old teaching method, focused on the accuracy of written language, vocabulary, grammar and translation, has become inappropriate in the current milieu. Spoken language has become the focus of English pedagogy in Vietnam and the communicative language teaching (CLT) method is garnering more attention from teachers and educational authorities.

In summary, English is the most important foreign language taught and learnt in the education system in Vietnam today, because it has become “an indispensable language for intra-national communication and international communication” (Nguyen, 2012, p. 265). The Vietnamese government prioritised EFL teaching and learning by issuing favourable policies and investing extensively. However, on a macro level, the quality of EFL teaching and learning in Vietnam still needs further improvement, since English proficiency is limited, and solutions are needed to address the hindrances.

### **Teaching English speaking skills**

Hinkel (2017) defined teaching second language speaking skills as helping language learners master specific sets of interactional and communication skills. When learning a second language, learners are required to develop their speech-processing, discourse organisation and oral production skills, including correct grammar, rich vocabulary, accurate pronunciation, and information sequencing (Hinkel, 2017). As a productive skill, speaking is widely believed to be the most important of the four language skills, because it reveals any errors made by the learner (Khamkhien, 2010) and is the main way of communicating and forming relationships with people.

Defined as the use of language to give messages and express meaning (Al Hosni, 2014), speaking is a complex activity that combines the sound of speech, pronunciation, accent, speed, stress, intonation, and rhythm. Moreover, “speakers have to produce sentences on the spur of the moment” (Rao, 2019, p. 9). When a person speaks, information is revealed about region, native or non-native origins, personality, gender, and attitudes through the sound of speech (Luoma, 2004). Unlike writing, Luoma contended that speakers do not usually speak in sentences; instead, he viewed speech as idea units, characterised by connected phrases, clauses, and repetition. Besides grammar, the richness of the lexicon and having plenty of word choices to express oneself accurately and appropriately is also important. To achieve fluency, people are inclined to use typical expressions. Fillers and hesitation markers tend to be added to create more time to think and keep conversations going.

Al Hosni (2014) stated, “The focus of teaching speaking is to improve the oral production of students” (p. 22). Speaking is believed to be acquired through regular interaction and practice (Bashir, Azeem & Dogar, 2011) and reflection on teachers’ or listeners’ feedback through language-production activities (Swain, 2005). However, Tuan and Mai (2015) indicated that in some cases, teachers’ feedback during speaking tasks could affect students’ speaking performance. “If the students are corrected all the time, they can find this very demotivating and become afraid to speak” (Tuan & Mai, 2015, p. 10). Moreover, it is challenging for students in the EFL context to have enough opportunities to practise and use the target language for daily communication (Suban, 2021).

In the past, teaching English speaking did not receive much attention. English teachers spent most of their time teaching grammar and vocabulary using the grammar-translation teaching method. English speaking was taught as memorisation of dialogues, repetition or drills (Kayi, 2006). Today, English is a *lingua franca*, used globally for communication by the majority of non-native English speakers and people of different languages (Seidlhofer, 2013). Therefore, it is not essential for English teachers and students (Kirkpatrick, 2011) to acquire native-like fluency, accuracy and pronunciation.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been widely adapted to enhance English-speaking teaching in many countries, especially in the Asia-Pacific region (Butler, 2011). Teachers had favorable attitudes toward principles of CLT and believed that CLT can make their teaching effective and meaningful (Chang, 2011). Previous studies indicated that while CLT improves students’ English communication skills, CLT “has encountered various problems in the EFL and ESL contexts” (Ratnawati, Hossain & Tan, 2019, p.150). A lack of qualified EFL teachers and mismatch of English assessment strategies hamper proper implementation and limit success of this teaching approach (Al Hosni, 2014; Butler, 2011; Khamkhien, 2010; Khan, Shah, Farid & Shah, 2016; Ratnawati et al., 2019). Although EFL teachers claim they are using CLT to teach English, they find themselves struggling “due to their own lack of mastery, and this has caused a great amount of diffidence and discomfort with teaching communicatively” (Ratnawati et al., 2019, p.158). They do not offer students adequate communicative activities and fail to encourage students to speak English (Khan et al., 2016).

Problems affecting the quality of English speaking also stem from language learners. Ur (2012) identified four major factors affecting students' English communication competence as (a) inhibition, defined as a fear of being criticised and making mistakes; (b) being shy and having nothing to say; (c) low involvement due to large classes; and (d) mother-tongue interference. Conversely, students who are highly motivated and free from anxiety tend to speak more readily and attain higher achievement in speaking performance (Tuan & Mai, 2015; Wilang & Singhasiri, 2017).

### **Language teachers' beliefs**

The concept of teachers' beliefs is gaining more attention from educators and researchers. What is a belief? Borg (2001) defined it as "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (p. 186). Beliefs are understood to shape the way an individual understands the world, evaluates and makes judgements of an event or educational phenomenon. It is necessary to distinguish between individual beliefs and knowledge. Teachers' beliefs "refer to teachers' pedagogic beliefs or those beliefs of relevance to an individual's teaching" (Borg, 2001, p. 187). Basturkmen (2012) argued that teachers' knowledge, experiences and beliefs decide what and how they teach. Moreover, there is a "necessity of teachers examining and reflecting on their pedagogical beliefs and practices, and for the importance of theoretical knowledge as a kind of support for teachers to enable them to make changes" (Yang, 2018, p. 32). It is also important to understand teachers' beliefs in improving educational process (Xu, 2012). According to Xu (2012), language teachers' beliefs play a decisive role in using language teaching strategies and instruction, and shapes motivation and the teaching environment. Xu (2012) classified teachers' beliefs into three types: beliefs about learners; beliefs about learning; and beliefs about themselves.

Rosenfeld and Rosenfeld (2008) claimed effective teachers often have positive beliefs about students that lead to effective teaching practices and improvements in their students' learning competence. These teachers believe in their students' learning abilities and act on their beliefs by encouraging students to achieve good learning outcomes. It is also critical for teachers to understand the learners' goals, then support them to achieve their learning goals (Yang, 2018). "What teaching approaches a teacher uses in the language classroom reflects his/her beliefs about learning" (Xu, 2012, p. 1399). Language teachers with positive beliefs about learning therefore facilitate learning occurring.

Beliefs about teachers themselves include opinions and attitudes about their self-efficacy and emotions. Positive self-efficacy beliefs enhance teachers' accomplishments and helps build students' self-efficacy. "Teachers who fail to examine their beliefs may bring about unanticipated consequences in the classroom, set aside valuable curriculum, overlook or marginalize students who need them, misinterpret students' motives or behaviour, and limit their potential as professionals" (Xu, 2012, p. 1401).

## Method

### Survey instrument

Surveys are an effective means of collecting data about people's opinions on values, feelings, preferences and behaviours (Fink, 2012). Moreover, they offer flexibility as they can take the form of a self-administered questionnaire or interview, be paper-based or electronic, and administered via phone, in person or the Internet. De Vaus (2013) indicated that questionnaires provide a straightforward way to collect data. Based on methodologies in the literature, surveys are suitable for collecting data about people's attitudes and beliefs. This research made use of a survey questionnaire, designed on *Qualtrics* software, written in English, and was delivered online to teachers' email addresses.

The survey comprised five questions eliciting background information, and eight questions comprising 63 items investigating their beliefs and practices in teaching English-speaking skills. The questions were closed and open-ended; the latter encouraging teachers to share their beliefs, experiences, ideas and initiatives. Fifty-two EFL teachers from 12 different universities throughout Vietnam completed the survey. Teacher participants were invited to join the survey via email. The researcher also used the snowball technique to recruit teachers in different universities across the country. The survey was conducted at the end of 2019.

### Semi-structured interviews

Used together with semi-structured interviews, survey questionnaires are known to enhance the quality of research data (McLafferty, 2004). The semi-structured interviews took place in comfortable surroundings and created a friendly atmosphere for participants to share their opinions and beliefs, thereby adding more meaning, richness and depth to the research (Galletta, 2013). In this study, semi-structured interviews with five randomly selected EFL teachers extracted additional data to support the feedback obtained from the survey questionnaire. Interviews took the form of informal exchanges and lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes, after which the data were analysed to clarify and/or support the findings from the survey.

### Data analysis procedure

The survey questionnaire consisted of closed and open-ended questions, allowing for collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Numeric data, derived from the closed questions, were analysed quantitatively by means of descriptive statistics. An *Excel* database was used to analyse the survey items. Responses to the open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews were analysed qualitatively with thematic coding. Responses were categorised by grouping and counting coded numbers to identify themes, and subsequently compared and combined with the survey findings.

## Findings

### General information about teacher participants

Fifty-two EFL teachers from 12 universities in different parts of Vietnam participated in the research. Twenty-seven (51.9%) teachers worked in public universities and 18 (34.6%) taught in private English universities. Seven (13.5%) teachers worked for both public and private universities. The majority (86.5%) had over ten years of experience teaching English. Five (9.6%) had fewer than five years of experience. Twenty-eight (54%) teachers specialised in EFL speaking skills. Most (45 or 87%) taught general English, including the four language skills, grammar and vocabulary. The data indicated that one teacher taught different language skills, and few teachers specialised in teaching any one particular language skill. It can be seen from Figure 1 that the number of teachers who had experience in teaching different English skills was similar, i.e., reading (57%), speaking (54%), listening (52%), writing (52%), grammar and vocabulary (58%). There was also 37% of the participants revealing that they taught an English for specific purposes program.

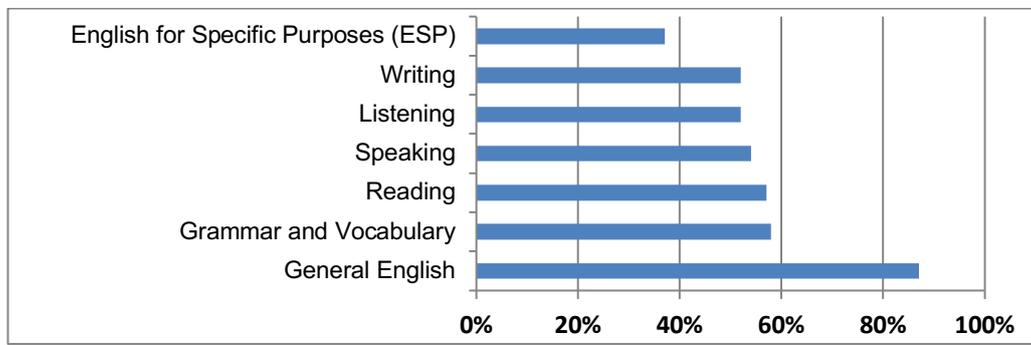


Figure 1: Distribution of EFL teachers' teaching areas

Although not all the teachers specialised in teaching English speaking, all of them believed it was important to teach speaking skills in university English classes, as verified by the data.

### Teacher beliefs about student motivation

Teachers perceived student motivation as the most important factor for improving EFL speaking skills in non-English speaking contexts. The majority (87%) believed that students would learn more if they were motivated to learn English speaking. The data analysis showed alignment with this finding and identified student motivation as the most important factor for improving English-speaking skills. A large number of the teachers surveyed (81%) also agreed that practising speaking without the fear of making mistakes improved students' English-speaking skills. More than half the teachers (58%) held the view that students would learn better if they had qualified English teachers, enjoyed communicating in English, and practised speaking with their classmates. Their spoken

English would also improve if they had the ability to communicate effectively in English (56%). Additionally, opportunities to talk to native speakers (58%) and learn in an English-speaking context (63%) would further enhance their ability to communicate.

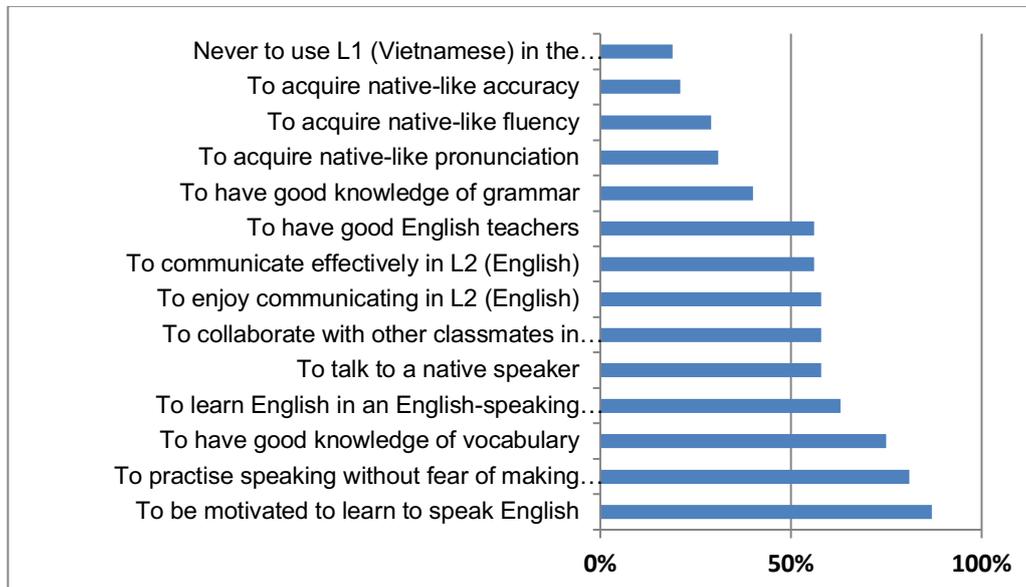


Figure 2: Percentage of contribution to improving students' English speaking skills

A small number of teachers (19%) believed that limited use or avoidance of the first language (Vietnamese) in classrooms when teaching English-speaking skills would promote students' English language learning. Few teachers believed that the acquisition of native-like accuracy (21%), fluency (29%) or pronunciation (31%) were important factors for improving English-speaking skills.

### Teacher beliefs about EFL teachers teaching speaking

Teacher participants considered communicative competence, oral English proficiency and appropriate teaching strategies important requirements for teaching English-speaking skills. In response to the question "What do you think is required for EFL teachers to teach EFL speaking skills?" forty-five teachers (87%) stated appropriate teaching strategies and communicative competence. Forty teachers (78%) agreed that EFL teachers also required good English oral proficiency. One teacher explained: "in order to teach well, the teacher must be confident about his competence first." Compared to the other requirements identified in Figure 3, participants highlighted the abovementioned factors, viz., communicative competence (87%), oral English proficiency (78%) and appropriate teaching strategies (87%) as the most important requirements for effective EFL teaching.

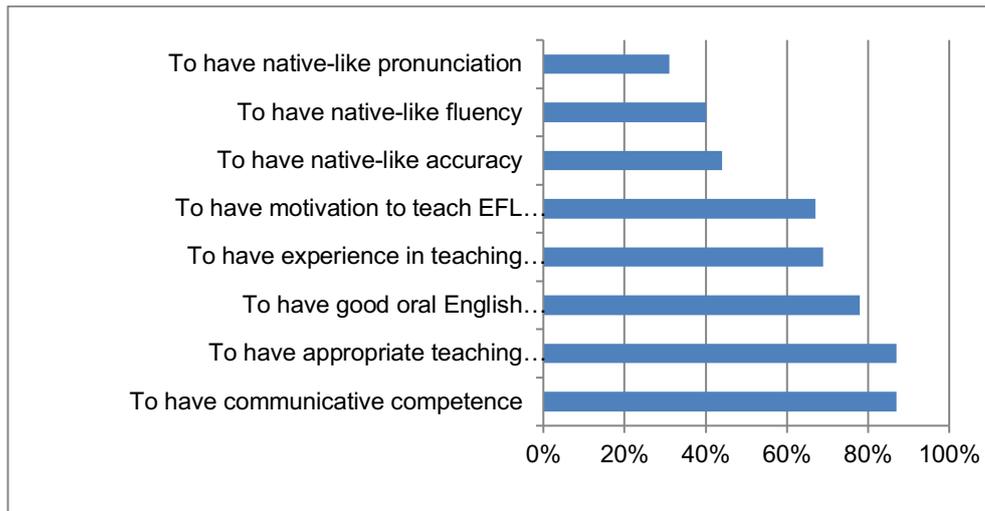


Figure 3: Requirements of EFL teachers to teach English-speaking skills

Almost 70% of the teacher participants believed that experience and motivation were important factors for enhancing their teaching of speaking skills. Fewer than 50% of the teachers surveyed did not consider native-like accuracy (44%), fluency (40%) and pronunciation (31%) foremost requirements for EFL teachers. Three out of five teachers suggested that EFL teachers should be “a good inspiring person” (T3, Teacher Interviews, 2019), motivating students to overcome their fear of making mistakes and encouraging them to participate fully in English-speaking practice within the classroom and other social contexts. They added that inspirational teachers helped students to persist with learning and master their English-speaking skills.

### Teacher beliefs about problems affecting their teaching practices

#### *Lack of oral English proficiency*

Teacher participants in this study reported that their lack of English oral proficiency was a hindrance to their confidence and hampered their teaching. The survey data showed 83% of teachers believed that shortcomings in pronunciation, fluency, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary and interactive communication eroded their confidence to teach English speaking. Thirty-four (65%) teachers deemed using appropriate pedagogical strategies helpful for teaching English communication skills effectively. Conversely, those who were unable to adopt these strategies were less confident to teach.

All teachers agreed that six factors: (a) teachers' lack of interest (56%); (b) experience (56%); (c) pedagogical strategies for teaching speaking (65%); (d) oral English proficiency (83%); (e) use of inappropriate teaching methodologies (60%); and (f) lack of knowledge of speaking topics (56%) reduced their confidence to teach speaking skills. Sixty percent of teachers believed the use of inappropriate teaching methodologies affected their teaching quality and confidence. Fifty-six percent agreed that lack of experience and interest hampered their teaching of speaking.

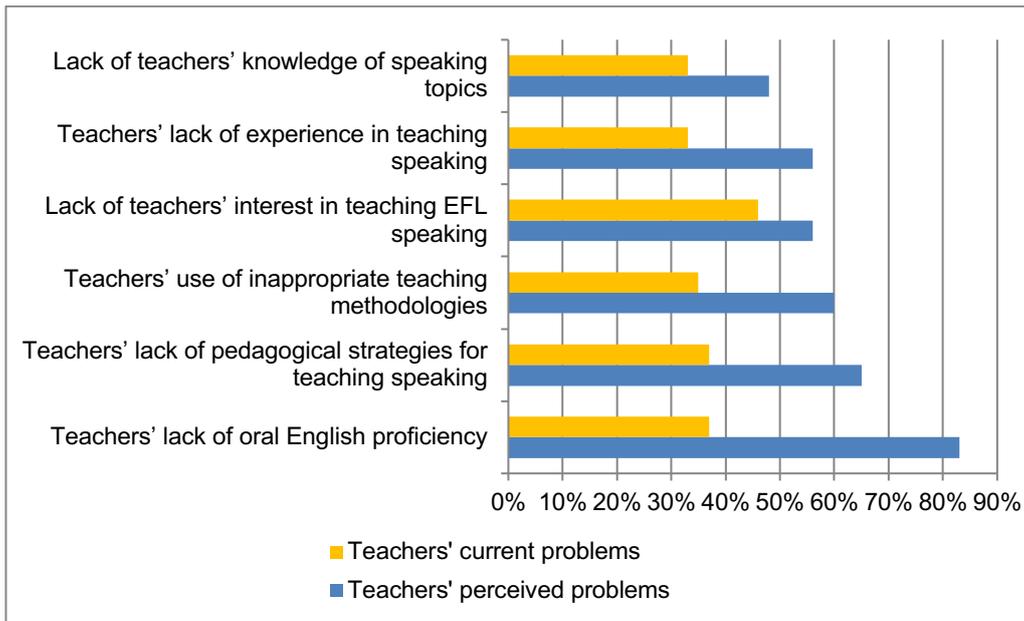


Figure 4: EFL teachers' current and perceived problems

*Teachers' lack of interest in teaching EFL speaking*

Lack of interest in teaching speaking, low levels of oral English proficiency and the absence of pedagogical strategies were identified as the biggest barriers for EFL teachers. According to the survey data, 46% of teachers lacked an interest to teach EFL speaking. In the interviews, two teachers blamed other factors for their diminished interest, including “big size classes” (T1 and T4, Teacher Interviews, 2019); “multi-level classes” (T4, Teacher Interviews, 2019); “low levels of English proficiency of students”; and “students are not active in practicing speaking skills” (T4, Teacher Interviews, 2019). Two out of five teachers indicated that students' lack of motivation to learn English and little access to English-speaking contexts prevented them from teaching English effectively and consequently dampened their enthusiasm.

Thirty-seven percent of participants admitted they encountered problems teaching English speaking due to their own lack of oral English proficiency and appropriate pedagogical strategies. One third of the teachers surveyed attributed difficulties to a lack of experience teaching speaking and inadequate knowledge of speaking topics. Approximately another third (35%) reported their teaching was troublesome due to inappropriate teaching methodologies.

The number of problems perceived by teachers to affect their teaching practice appeared to be more numerous than actual problems (Figure 4). The data suggests that teachers were aware of both the potential and their currently experienced problems causing difficulties in their teaching practices.

### Other factors

Large classes, student characteristics, examination and assessment policies, and insufficient teaching time were identified as major problems affecting the quality of teaching oral English (Figure 5). Almost three quarters of the teachers (73%) indicated that teaching large classes of students was a barrier to effective teaching, and elaborated on the difficulties of managing and organising speaking activities in classes of more than thirty students (T1, T4, and T5, Teacher Interviews, 2019). They recommended English classes with fewer than 30 students to facilitate speaking activities, enhance teacher-student interaction and increase opportunities for feedback and correction.

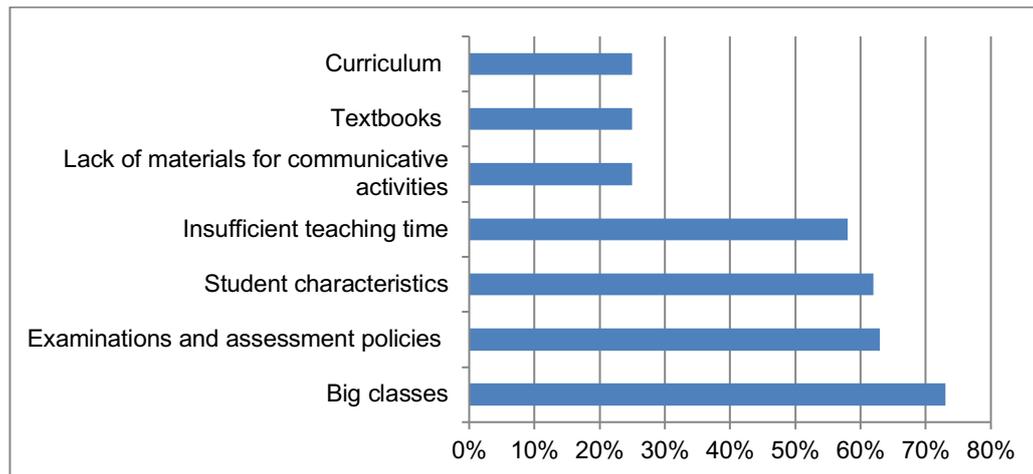


Figure 5: Factors affecting the quality of English speaking teaching

Thirty-three teachers (over 63%) believed that institutional examinations and assessments, which excluded English speaking in end-of-semester tests and entrance examinations, demotivated teachers and students from pursuing EFL speaking skills. Teacher 1 reported that students focused on learning grammar, vocabulary and reading skills in order to do well in tests and did not have time or “get an urge” (T1, Teacher Interviews, 2019) to learn and practice speaking skills.

Thirty-two (62%) teachers viewed the reluctance of students to engage in speaking activities, shyness and fear of making mistakes as affecting the quality of teaching. In the interviews, Teachers 1 and 3 claimed that students from rural areas tended to be shyer and less confident to communicate than those from urban areas. They added that students were passive learners, reluctant to practise speaking, and needed teachers’ persistent encouragement and instruction. Teacher 5 observed that students who confidently participated in speaking activities in the classroom were shy and hesitant to communicate with native English speakers. Most teachers interviewed (T1, T2, and T4) agreed that the majority of students shied away from communicating in English with teachers and friends because they were afraid of making mistakes and “losing face” (T4, Teacher Interviews, 2019).

Over 58% (30) of the teachers surveyed blamed the low quality of English speaking teaching on insufficient teaching time. Teachers 1 and 2, who taught at public and private universities, explained that English was taught as a general subject in public universities as four combined skills in one lesson. Therefore, they frequently taught other skills before teaching speaking skills and ran out of time, so students had to practise speaking for homework. Teachers 1 and 2 reported that English was taught as a basic subject at their private university, in preparation for major subjects that were delivered and tested in English. Despite being taught intensively and equally across all four language skills, English courses were short, and as a result students had insufficient time to master speaking skills.

A quarter of the teachers (25%) surveyed stated that the curriculum overlooked support for teaching speaking. There was a lack of materials for communicative activities or textbooks and a predominant focus on grammar, vocabulary and reading. Teachers 1 and 3 stated that their efforts to organise additional speaking activities were thwarted by uncertainties about their relevance to the textbooks and acceptance by students and other teachers.

### **Lack of results from teaching English speaking skills**

All the teachers surveyed reported that they attempted to improve their teaching and enhance students' English speaking competence. Thirty (58%) teachers cited examples that may be classified into six themes: (a) encouraging students to speak English; (b) creating opportunities for English speaking; (c) increasing the number of speaking activities; (d) integrating technologies for teaching speaking; (e) adapting the CLT teaching approach; and (f) allocating more time for teaching speaking.

Teachers stated that they motivated students to “speak English all the time in class”; “speak as much English as possible in class” and “outside class”; “speak without interrupting them or correcting mistakes”; and “speak fearless of making mistakes” (Teacher survey, 2019). They also claimed to try and inspire students to speak English by “waking up students' interest in learning English” (Teacher survey, 2019). Additionally, teachers created opportunities for speaking English by “organising English speaking club” and asking students to “practise pronunciation every day, talk to native speakers, and improve topic knowledge”. They also added speaking activities, such as “group work and communicative activities” to involve more students in learning and practise their English speaking. Providing time for brainstorming ideas before speaking, grouping students with similar English levels, and including integrated materials for teaching speaking also offered additional opportunities for students to speak English (Teacher survey, 2019).

Teacher participants indicated that they adopted “a CLT approach in teaching speaking skills”; updated their knowledge “about teaching approaches, new teaching techniques and materials”; and designed their own lesson plans based on reliable textbooks appropriate to their students' English levels and interests (Teacher survey, 2019). The survey data showed that EFL teachers also integrated technologies into their teaching, and guided students to “learn and practise speaking by using online materials”, corrected “students'

mistakes through videos”, and asked them to record their English speaking practice at home.

Forty-two (almost 81%) teachers said that their efforts to teach English speaking achieved satisfactory results. They also tried to improve their own English competence (T1 and T5). In response to the open-ended survey question one teacher wrote, “My English speaking competence improved. Students feel motivated in learning and practising speaking in class. Students are more active in searching materials and practising English outside the classroom.” Another teacher said, “Students produce better sounds and fluency”, “Students seemed to be confident and interested in speaking English”. One teacher admitted, “Students are motivated with my efforts”. Another added, “More practice has been done” which helped “students overcome their shyness”.

However, 10 (over 19%) teachers revealed that their efforts to teach EFL speaking had not achieved expected results. They attributed this to student characteristics, such as, “Students are too shy to speak English. They are afraid of making mistakes” and “They are reluctant to join in speaking lessons”. Moreover, “students don’t keep practising speaking after class time and they don’t have a real goal for learning speaking skills”. Another reason they gave was students’ lack of motivation to learn, noting, “Students are not motivated to learn to speak because their EFL speaking skills are not tested in the end-of semester tests”. A further reason was crowded English classrooms and different levels of English competency. Unsuitable English textbooks was also cited as a cause for students’ poor English oral skills.

### **Recommended solutions**

Figure 6 indicates that the majority of teachers surveyed (73%) had problems with large class sizes. A similar number (75%) suggested that class sizes be reduced. Fifty-four percent suggested that students’ motivation and engagement could be enhanced by adopting a CLT approach (54%); using student-centred learning techniques (58%); communicative EFL textbooks (42%); and classroom activities for speaking practice (65%). More than 50% of teachers agreed that the time assigned for teaching speaking should be increased.

The survey data indicated that current EFL assessment and examination processes created difficulties for 63% of teachers, with 44% suggesting a change in policy to include assessment of English-speaking skills. Thirty-seven percent of teachers expressed a lack of confidence in their English oral proficiency and 48% viewed professional training courses as a necessary component for improving their efficacy and enhancing their confidence to teach speaking skills.

In summary, the research data showed that student motivation was believed to enhance their learning of English speaking and improve their communication skills. The teachers surveyed also acknowledged that Vietnamese EFL teachers needed to improve their communicative competence, oral English proficiency and teaching strategies, considered the most important requirements for teaching English-speaking skills. The majority of

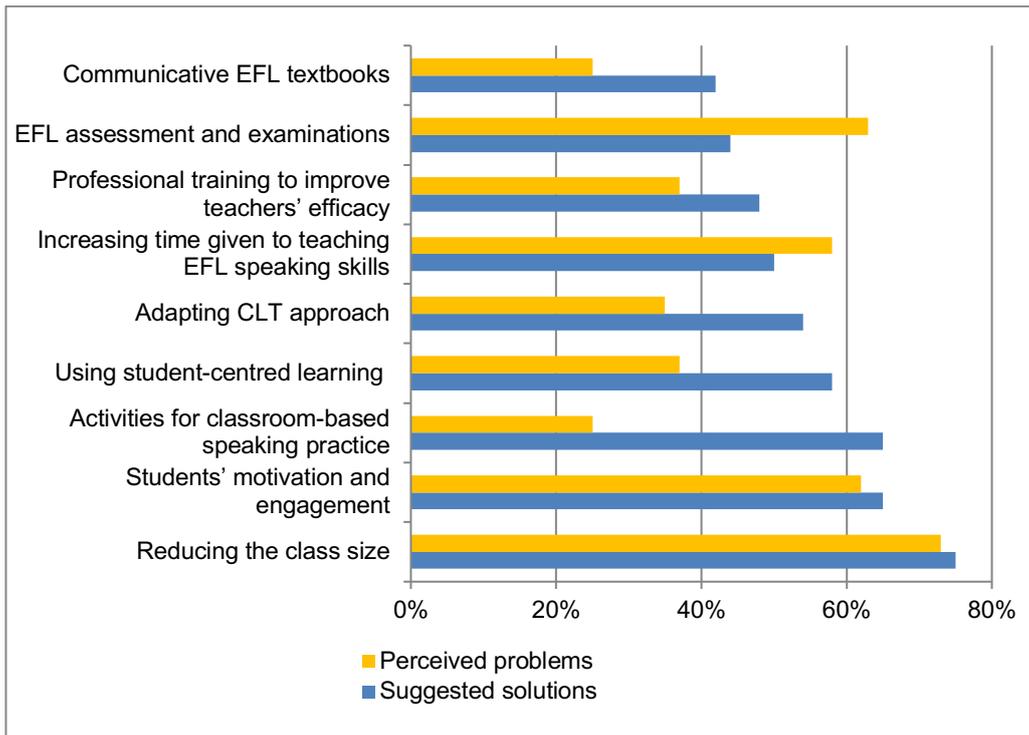


Figure 6: Suggested solutions to problems of EFL teaching speaking

teachers perceived their lack of oral proficiency diminished their confidence to teach English speaking, and not only affected the quality of their teaching, but also students' achievement. They reported a pervasive disinterest in teaching speaking, low levels of oral English proficiency, and a shortage of pedagogical strategies as some of their weaknesses. Teachers also believed that external factors, such as large classes, student characteristics, examination and assessment policies, and insufficient teaching time contributed to the problems affecting the quality of EFL teaching practices at universities. While all teacher participants appeared to be making efforts to teach students EFL speaking skills, their efforts were not always rewarded due to the abovementioned factors.

## Discussion

### Teacher beliefs about teaching English speaking

With regard to the first research question, "What do EFL teachers believe about teaching English-speaking skills?", all the EFL teachers (100%) surveyed believed it was important to teach English speaking, supporting the findings of Tran (2013) and Le (2011). The majority (87%) perceived student motivation as the most important factor for improving EFL speaking skills, in alignment with Xu (2012) and Wilang and Singhasiri (2017), who proposed that students' abilities to learn increased exponentially when they were motivated. Sixty-two percent of the teachers agreed that Vietnamese students were shy,

reluctant and lacked confidence to speak English. Similarly, Le (2013) and Tran (2013) indicated that certain characteristics of Vietnamese students limited their participation in English communication. This study confirmed that shyness and a fear of making mistakes prevented Vietnamese students from acquiring English-speaking skills.

The study also indicated that EFL teachers believed that oral English proficiency and communicative and pedagogical competence are important requirements for boosting their confidence and efficacy. Low efficacy and a lack of pedagogical strategies for teaching speaking were amongst the most significant factors perceived to affect teachers' confidence, concurring with the findings by Hoang (2013), Le (2013), and Vu and Burns (2014). Importantly, this study is the first to identify a contradiction between teachers' perceptions of the importance of teaching English speaking and their disinterest in teaching this language skill, and implies that the goal of improving students' English communication skills will be difficult to achieve without the commitment and engagement of EFL teachers.

The majority of teacher participants perceived large class sizes, examination and assessment policies, and insufficient teaching time as major problems affecting the quality of EFL teaching. Hoang (2013), Nguyen et al. (2014), Vu (2021) and Tran (2013) also identified large class sizes as a factor affecting the quality of English teaching and learning. In this study, the teachers found large class sizes particularly demotivating. The exclusion of English speaking from institutional examinations and assessments also deterred teachers and students from teaching and learning English communication skills.

### **Teachers' Actual practices of teaching English speaking**

With regard to the second research question, "How do EFL teachers actually teach English-speaking skills?" all the teachers surveyed claimed they made efforts to teach English speaking in their English lessons. Thirty (58%) provided detailed examples of their attempts to improve the quality of their teaching. Firstly, they introduced additional communicative activities, provided students with relevant grammar and vocabulary for speaking topics, and guided students in brainstorming ideas for topics to discuss. Secondly, they encouraged students to engage with other classmates in practising speaking English by grouping students of similar aptitudes together to facilitate interaction. Thirdly, many of the teachers surveyed used integrated technologies and adapted a CLT teaching approach to teach speaking. The teachers' practices aligned with the current wave of using technologies to boost student's speaking skills in the world, such as using video blogs (Lestari, 2019), *YouTube* (Albahlal, 2019), English movies (Parmawati & Inayah, 2019), and *Instagram* (Qisthi & Arifani, 2020). Finally, teachers designed lesson plans appropriate for students' needs and "observed students speaking in order to have some adjustment in methods" (Teacher Survey, 2019). The findings of the current study are similar to the recommendations provided by Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020) who suggested that the speaking curriculum should be well prepared; technology and media should be integrated into English-speaking teaching and learning to broaden student's culture, knowledge and experience; and opportunities for English practice both inside and outside the classroom should be well facilitated.

### **Alignment of teacher beliefs and practices**

With regard to the third research question, “How are EFL teachers’ beliefs and practices aligned with teaching English speaking?” some alignment was evident between teachers’ beliefs about teaching English speaking and their teaching practices. All the teachers surveyed recognised the importance of teaching English speaking and made an effort to teach this language skill. However, not all their efforts were rewarded, due to factors related to students, teachers and others regarding assessment policies and institutional facilities.

Most teachers (87%) believed that motivated students learn better and are more likely to achieve expected learning outcomes. This belief aligned with their actual practice in that they encouraged students to learn spoken English, and tried to inspire and awaken their interest in EFL learning. In order not to demotivate students from communicating or interrupting their conversations, teachers reported allowing students to talk without correcting mistakes. They understood that “treating students as knowledgeable individuals with valuable skills in other languages, rather than merely as failed English speakers, could bolster student confidence in a context where fear of making errors can make students excessively risk-averse and therefore reluctant to express themselves in English” (Eleftheriou, 2019, p. 75). In these ways, teachers’ practices were found to align with their beliefs and supported the findings of Rosenfeld and Rosenfeld (2008), and Tuan and Mai (2015).

Teacher participants were aware that their lack of efficacy and knowledge of teaching methodologies might create difficulties for teaching spoken English. This finding accords with what Pakula (2019) concluded in his study, that teachers’ lack of knowledge of how to teach speaking skills limited them from their own professional practice and it is necessary to improve teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs of their own competency of teaching oral skills. More than a third of teachers (37%) admitted not having sufficient oral English proficiency to teach English-speaking skills. In recognition of this weakness, EFL teachers endeavoured to improve their English competency by integrating materials and technologies into their teaching and applying new teaching techniques and strategies, such as group work and other communicative tasks. Thus, teachers’ beliefs about themselves aligned with their practice and the conclusions of Xu (2012).

### **Conclusion**

This study attempted to investigate Vietnamese EFL teachers’ beliefs and practices in teaching English speaking at tertiary level and the influence of their beliefs about teaching English-speaking skills on their actual teaching practices. The findings indicated that EFL teachers perceived the importance of teaching English speaking and they made an effort to teach this language skill. The alignment between teachers’ beliefs and practices was identified. However, there was a mismatch between teachers’ perceptions of the importance of teaching English speaking and their interest and engagement in teaching this skill. The study indicated that the mismatch was rooted from teachers’ low efficacy

and confidence in teaching English speaking skills and other factors, including class sizes, assessment policies and students' personalities.

Reducing the number of students in English classes is essential for easing class management and enhancing interaction and communicative activities. At a minimum, assessment policies require reform to include English speaking in end-of-semester tests at all universities, in order to promote student and teacher motivation and gradually shift English-speaking assessments to compulsory status. Conferences, training and refresher courses should be made available to increase the number of qualified English teachers, update the knowledge and teaching methodologies of existing teachers, and offer opportunities for exchanging ideas and experiences.

This can be considered a grass-roots study since it identifies the origins of problems related to teaching English-speaking skills as perceived by primary stakeholders, namely, EFL teachers in tertiary education, and recommends appropriate solutions for the Vietnamese context. The findings and recommendations in this study can also be applied globally to other contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. These contexts could be Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, China and many other countries that share similar cultural contexts.

As the scope of the study was limited to the investigation of EFL teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching English speaking skills in Vietnam, further research should be done on using technologies to teach speaking, teaching speaking to high school students and adults, and students' perceptions and actual practices of learning English speaking skills both inside and outside the classroom.

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## Appendix A: Survey questionnaire

In this research, I would like you to share your own beliefs and practices of teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language) speaking skills. Your participation and sharing would be valuable for this research.

- Q1 What is your gender? A. Male B. Female
- Q2 What types of school are you teaching?  
A. Public  
B. Private  
C. Both of the above
- Q3 How long have you been teaching English?  
A. 1 - 5 years  
B. 6 - 10 years  
C. Over 10 years
- Q4 What areas of English are you teaching? (You can choose more than one answer)  
A. Reading  
B. Writing  
C. Speaking  
D. Listening  
E. Grammar and vocabulary  
F. English for specific purposes (ESP)  
G. General English
- Q5 Do you think it is important to teach English speaking skills?  
A. Yes  
B. No
- Q6 What following factors do you think are important to improve students' EFL speaking skills? (You can choose more than one answer)  
A. To have good knowledge of grammar  
B. To have good knowledge of vocabulary  
C. To learn English in an English-speaking context  
D. To talk to a native speaker  
E. To acquire native-like pronunciation  
F. To acquire native-like fluency  
G. To acquire native-like accuracy  
H. To communicate effectively in L2 (English)  
I. Never to use L1 (Vietnamese) in the classroom  
J. To practise speaking without fear of making mistakes  
K. To be motivated to learn to speak English  
L. To collaborate with other classmates in practise EFL speaking  
M. To enjoy communicating in L2 (English)  
N. To have good English teachers  
O. Could you please suggest other factors?
- Q7 What do you think is required for EFL teachers to teach EFL speaking skills? (You can choose more than one answer)  
A. To have native-like pronunciation  
B. To have native-like fluency  
C. To have native-like accuracy

- D. To have communicative competence
- E. To have good oral English proficiency
- F. To have appropriate teaching strategies for teaching EFL speaking
- G. To have motivation to teach EFL speaking skills
- H. To have experience in teaching EFL speaking
- I. Could you please suggest other factors?

- 
- Q8 What factors do you think make teachers feel less confident in teaching EFL speaking? (You can choose more than one answer)
- A. Teachers' lack of oral English proficiency, including pronunciation, fluency, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary and interactive communication
  - B. Lack of teachers' interest in teaching EFL speaking
  - C. Lack of teachers' knowledge of speaking topics
  - D. Teachers' use of inappropriate teaching methodologies
  - E. Teachers' lack of pedagogical strategies for teaching speaking
  - F. Teachers' lack of experience in teaching speaking
  - G. Could you please suggest other factors?
- 
- Q9 Which of the following problems do you think you currently have in teaching EFL speaking? (You can choose more than one answer)
- A. Teachers' lack of oral English proficiency, including pronunciation, fluency, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary and interactive communication
  - B. Lack of teachers' interest in teaching EFL speaking
  - C. Lack of teachers' knowledge of speaking topics
  - D. Teachers' use of inappropriate teaching methodologies
  - E. Teachers' lack of pedagogical strategies for teaching speaking
  - F. Teachers' lack of experience in teaching speaking
  - G. Could you please suggest other problems?
- 
- Q10 Which of the followings do you think are the biggest problems that affect quality teaching of EFL speaking skills? (You can choose more than one answer)
- A. Lack of materials for communicative activities (1)
  - B. Textbooks (that focus much on Grammar, Vocabulary and Reading and do not support Speaking teaching)
  - C. Curriculum (that do not cover speaking skills)
  - D. Big classes
  - E. Insufficient teaching time
  - F. Examinations and assessment policies of the institutions
  - G. Student characteristics, including students' reluctance to engage in speaking activities, students' shyness, students' fear of making mistakes
  - H. Lack of teachers' oral English proficiency
  - I. Could you please suggest other factors?
- 
- Q11 Do you make efforts to teach EFL speaking skills to improve students' English communication skills?
- A. Yes. Could you please give examples of what you are trying to do to improve your EFL speaking teaching to enhance students' English speaking skills?
- 
- B. No. Could you please explain why?
-

- Q12 Do you think your efforts in teaching EFL speaking achieve your expected results?  
 A. Yes. Could you please explain why?  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 B. No. Could you please explain why?  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- Q13 What factors do you think could improve your EFL speaking teaching?  
 A. Activities for classroom-based speaking practice  
 B. Real-life tasks  
 C. Communicative EFL textbooks  
 D. Professional training to improve teachers' efficacy  
 E. Reducing the class size  
 F. EFL assessment and examinations that include Speaking skills  
 G. Increasing time given to teaching EFL speaking skills  
 H. Adapting CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) approach  
 I. Using student-centred learning instead of traditional teacher-centred teaching technique  
 J. Students' motivation and engagement in learning EFL speaking skills  
 K. Could you please suggest other factors?  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you very much for your participation.

## Appendix B: Semi-structured interview questions

1. Do you think teaching English speaking skills is important?
2. What factors do you think are important to improve students' EFL speaking skills?
3. What do you think is required for EFL teachers to teach EFL speaking skills?
4. What factors do you think make teachers feel less confident in teaching EFL speaking?
5. What problems do you think you currently have in teaching EFL speaking?
6. What do you think are the biggest problems that affect quality teaching of EFL speaking skills?
7. Do you make efforts to teach EFL speaking skills to improve students' English communication skills? Could you please give example of what you are actually and currently doing to improve students' speaking skills?
8. What solutions do you recommend to improve your EFL speaking teaching?

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