Teaching Speaking Skills at a Vietnamese University and Recommendations for Using CMC

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Abstract
The poor quality of teaching speaking skill at a university in Vietnam results in a large number of graduates who have difficulty with communicating English. Utilising technology into teaching method is a fundamental practice in teaching EFL, where it is available and accessible. Suggestions of using CMC (computer mediated communication) in teaching pronunciation and conversation are put forward to improve students’ oral skill.

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Introduction
First of all, let’s look at the way English is taught at HCS. Students start with the elementary level of English in the first semester and are supposed to obtain the intermediate level after graduation. The textbooks cover four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, at the end of each semester, students are assessed based on a written test of reading and writing skills only. As a result, many students and even teachers are ‘examination-oriented’. They spend time developing reading and writing skills while ‘ignoring’ listening and speaking skills. This is likely to happen not at a single university in Vietnam, but across the whole spectrum.

At Hanoi College of Science (HCS), students have to accumulate thirty credits of English out of 210 total credits for an undergraduate degree. Students study English in six out of eight semesters. The proportion of English compared to other subjects, then, is relatively large. The concern, however, as mentioned above, is the quality of teaching in language education. Because of the small scale of this study, this essay will briefly overview the situation of teaching oral skill at HCS and focus on initiating an application of technology in order to improve science students’ English speaking ability.

1. Situation of teaching oral skill at HCS
First of all, let’s look at the way English is taught at HCS. Students start with the elementary level of English in the first semester and are supposed to obtain the intermediate level after graduation. The textbooks they use are the Lifeline set (Hutchinson, 2001). The textbooks cover four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, at the end of each semester, students are assessed based on a written test of reading and writing skills only. As a result, many students and even teachers are ‘examination-oriented’. They spend time developing reading and writing skills while ‘ignoring’ listening and speaking skills. This is likely to happen not at a single university in Vietnam, but across the whole spectrum.

According to the findings from recent research at the university, over three quarters of graduate students can not communicate verbally in English because of shyness, inadequate vocabulary, or simply lacking the necessary knowledge. Most of them wish that they had been taught speaking skills more properly at university (Bui, 2004: 33-34, translated). Students listed a number of reasons for this. For example, during lectures, Vietnamese rather than English is mostly spoken, both by teachers and students. Students do not have opportunities to communicate in English and they may be shy because the others cannot understand what they wish to communicate.

Acknowledging the poor quality of teaching English in many developing countries, the following reasons have been cited:

- budgetary constraints causing
- classes with too many pupils, inadequate teaching materials and badly trained and badly paid teachers, which results in
- use of English diverging further and further from the proclaimed norm, while
- the demand for a knowledge of English is unabated because of its high prestige, job requirements within the country, and its usefulness abroad after emigration. (Gorlach, 1995, p. 35)

What Gorlach (1995) said is true in the case of HCS. Class size ranges from thirty to fifty students, which makes it difficult for teachers to arrange activities enabling students to practice speaking. Oversized English classes make speaking lessons stiff and unmoving (Bui, 2004, p.28, translated). Moreover, these English classes are often teacher-dominated, i.e. teachers speak whilst students listen and take notes – a format greatly lacking in interaction. Many studies have suggested that teacher-dominated classes instead of learner-centered classes prevent students from practicing oral skills effectively (e.g. Westgate, Batey, et al., 1985; Edwards, 1987; Pace, 1992).
Also in line with what Gorlach (1995) has noted, badly trained and badly paid teachers result in poor teaching methods, improper pronunciation and a lack in teacher motivation (Dang, 2004, pp. 68-71, translated). The role of teachers is significant. “Teachers are all in a position to speed up or slow down the language development of their students” (Collinson, 1977, p. 117). So, if they lack the knowledge of what communication is, and cannot communicate effectively, they will be very restricted in the sorts of learning that both they and their students engage in (Cartwright, 1977, p. 47). In fact, about three quarters of teachers of English at HCS were trained to teach language twenty to thirty years ago. In addition, the majority of these teachers were trained to teach Russian, but when Russian became unpopular, they shifted to teaching English after taking a two-year course of English. Most of them are used to a grammar-translation approach, which should have been eliminated in teaching language long ago. As a result, only a small number of teachers adopt a communicative teaching method, which is suitable for teaching English to develop learners’ communication ability. In addition, these facts reveal the weakness of leadership in retraining staff. The College must have a clear policy to retrain their teachers frequently to avoid such ‘out-of-date’ teachers (Dang, 2004, p. 76, translated).

Another element that should be mentioned is mixed-ability student classes. Students in these classes have different backgrounds of English; some, who come from urban areas, have studied English for several years, but some, who come from rural areas, know nothing about English (Bui, 2004, p. 25, translated). Different levels of ability amongst students means more challenges to their teachers. They have to deal with some students who do not know anything about English, and some students who know quite a lot. Finding a balance in communication with these groups of students during lectures is not an easy job for teachers.

Above is an overall picture of the human factors involved in the teaching and learning process. How does the human factor deal with ‘labor instruments’ in the teaching-and-learning process? The only useful facilities employed in classrooms are text books and a tape recorder. Most teachers simply do not know and are not trained to use other equipment such as a computer as a teaching aid. The following relates to teaching oral skills at HCS.

Oral skills in the text books by Hutchinson are facilitated by three main activities: pronunciation, situational conversation and argument. 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 forget the correct pronunciation of words (Bui, 2004, op. 31, translated). Situational conversations are practiced with little motivation from teachers, creating modest cooperation between students (Bui, 2004, p. 35, translated). When the cooperation is poor, many teachers tend to ignore developing argumentation because they often fail when they try. Teachers, themselves, argue that they should spend time teaching writing and reading, as these skills help students get high marks in their exams (Bui, 2004, p. 19, translated).

The situation appears to constitute a vicious circle. The more they (both teachers and students) focus on reading and writing skills, the less they can communicate verbally in English. To be fair, it is not the teachers’ fault but the fault of syllabus designers. They are not aware of the significance of speaking skills, about which an English teacher states: “Speaking is extremely important: if it’s a voice into pupils’ writing, it helps them to develop and make sense of their reading, and it also does wonders for their self-esteem, building confidence for the outside world” (H owe, 2003, p. 12). If assessment is based on four skills equally, the situation may be different. However, it costs a lot of money and time to organize oral exams, which, according to many education managers, are not economical. Their point of view is being challenged by the current development of English within the country and in a world where technology develops rapidly, reducing global divides. With the development of technology as well as English as global language, humans across the world now can communicate easily with one another.

2. CMC application in teaching oral skill

People are living in a technological era, so privilege belongs to those who can make full use of it. In this essay, the author recommends using technological advances to improve students’ oral skills. Their English should be considered dead if they can not use it to communicate verbally. Moreover, as they are science students, they should be pioneers in applying technology in study.

There are two physical requirements that should be mentioned. First, class size should be no more than thirty students; twenty is ideal. Secondly, English lessons or at least speaking skills lessons should take place in language labs or computer labs which are available at HCS.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has developed rapidly, especially in language learning. CMC is no longer human-computer interaction, but human-to-human interaction via the computer (Rosell Aguilar, 2005, p. 418). Therefore, CMC can be defined as “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers” (Herring, 1996, p. 1).

CMC has been proved by many researchers to have a critical impact on higher education and positive changes in face-to-face classroom interactions (see: Harasim, 1990; Benge and Collins, 1995) and has become a relatively easy-to-adopt tool for educators around the world (Collinso, Elbaum et al., 2000). Besides, CMC plays a crucial role in the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), promising to enhance students’ communicative competency (McIntosh, Braul et al., 2003; Lam, 2004; Rossell Aguilar, 2005). Consequently, many academic journals have been born to meet the development of CMC and CALL in learning and teaching language in general, English in particular. These include System, ReCALL, and Computer Assisted Language Learning (or CALL) and others. In the case of HCS, CALL or CMC is strongly recommended to be used in improving students’ pronunciation and practicing discussion and argument. Because CMC and CALL overlap in this case, both terms will be used onwards interchangeably.

2.1 CMC/ CALL in training pronunciation

Firstly, learning pronunciation should be based on two major principles:

1) ‘most learners will learn to produce most sound features of a foreign language with reasonable accuracy by mimicry alone, given the opportunity; this ability tends to decrease somewhat with age’;

2) ‘older learners can take more benefit than younger learners from formal, specialized, intellectualized teaching methods; the more sophisticated the learner, the more sophisticated the instruction that can be used upon him, the greater the standard of achievement per hour of instruction he will typically reach’ (Strevens, 1977, p. 84-85).

Strevens (1977, p. 83) argues that these principles will inform the rationale for teaching pronunciation.

Secondly, CALL can be used in teaching pronunciation. Employing visualization of prosodic features such as intonation patterns, stress and rhythm is easy for students to understand (Chun, 2002; Hardison, 2004), and can enhance their awareness and understanding of prosody (Hardison, 2004).

In the case of HCS, as well as other Vietnamese universities, teaching pronunciation is an urgent problem. The majority of teachers of English are trained domestically, i.e., they have never been abroad, let alone to English native-speaking countries. Some of them, as a product of Vietnamese history, were taught English in Russia. English has been taught ‘raw’ for many years as the country was engaged in wars. Education could not afford enough facilities for teaching English properly, lacking basic aids such as good textbooks and tape recorders. Consequently, English pronunciation has deviated from Standard English.

When the economy is developing, education can afford to use technology, it is better for students to access Standard English rather than learn English from their teachers. The teachers now should play the role of facilitators and guides in this process. They should let their students study the ‘right’ English from the beginning, which will help them have confidence to better communicate in verbal English at later stages. On the other hand, teachers’ pronunciation would be also be improved.

Hardison and Sonchaeng study voice training for language students and drama students, and suggest eight techniques for voice training (2005, p. 597). Their techniques are useful for reference. However, teachers would face a problem of time constraint if all these techniques are used at schools. Thus, three of these techniques can be chosen to apply to teaching pronunciation: breathing, flow of voice, and songs and lyrics.

2.1.1. Breathing

According to Hardison and Sonchaeng (2005, p. 598), practicing breathing helps increase the ‘ability to pause language appropriately in long sentences’ and ‘expand use of vowel space for greater intelligibility’. These are very important to Vietnamese because they often have difficulty in producing right stress syllables. Speaking also requires energy, especially in foreign language. Thus, breathing
We were away.
We were away a year ago.
You know we were away a year ago.

Figure 1: Visualizations of pitch contours with sustained phonation. In View Screen A, the stress was placed on the second syllable of away; on B, stress was on We and year.

CALL can be used here, for example the Real-Time Pitch program by Kay Elemetrics Computerized Speech Lab (Figure 1) to “display pitch contours in real time and offer the option of overlaying one contour on another in contrasting colors for comparison of learner’s utterance with that of a native speaker” (Hardison and Sonchaeng, 2005, p. 596). Such programs can be obtained easily in IT markets.

Students can work in pairs, listening to the tape of a (native-standard) person speaking while following along with the script; pay attention to pauses; and then practice with a partner. It is easy for students to adjust their pronunciation with the correct way of breathing. Students’ voices can be recorded for feedback by the software program.

2.1.2. Flow of the voice

To speak and communicate meaningfully, students should be able to control a variety of pitch levels. Pitch levels directly affect the intonation of sentences that they speak. In English, different intonations may mean different meanings, which can cause trouble for students when they communicate. For example, in Vietnamese language, there is only one type of intonation in question structures: rising tone at the end of sentence, while there are two in English with yes/no questions and WH-questions. As a result, when constructing questions in English, many students tend to raise voice at the end of sentence. That is why practicing a variety of pitch levels is so essential to students.

In this exercise, according to Hardison and Sonchaeng (2005), students practice various consonant-vowel consequences with variation in pitch to get used to different combinations of consonants and vowels and stress. Let us take an example of consonant /m/. /m/ is combined with other vowels to make sounds like ma, me, may, mow, moo. Students are asked to produce ma-me-may-mow-moo with different stress on different syllables (e.g., ma-me-may-mow-moo; ma-me-may-mow-moo, and so on). Another way to practice is to produce a long sentence with a rise or fall in pitch on each word, for instance:

Real-Time Pitch program can also be used here to create feedback for students and highlight the connection between stress, intonation, and pragmatics. View Screen A in Figure 1 may pragmatically illustrate a response to a question such as: What were you doing last year at this time? As pitch rise is on the stress syllable of the word a way. In contrast, in B pitch rise and stress are on different syllables which may indicate different meanings. This program is really beneficial for teaching pronunciation. It should allow for students to use extra time if they need practice.

2.1.3. Song: melody and lyrics

According to Harrison and Sonchaeng (2005, p. 603) “music is highly motivating, and helps blending and linking, the flow of speech and the rise/fall of the voice – all of which maximize pitch range”. There is also an interesting phenomena related to music and language observed by the writer: many people, who cannot understand a single word in English, are able to sing English songs with excellent proper pronunciation of their lyrics. That may be the reason why the idea of using songs in teaching and learning language is introduced by many educators.

In this exercise the set of five audio CDs and text books Let’s Chant, Let’s Sing (Graham, 2001) seems to be most favourable. The book is composed of children’s songs and folk songs whose ‘lyrics are generally more comprehensible’ for students of a lower proficiency level (Hardison and Sonchaeng, 2005). The CDs can be installed on computers. The textbooks should be required for teachers and are not necessary for students for the above reason. The material can be used in the following process. First, students listen to the melody without lyrics, which is similar to the prosody of the language, to get used to the rhythm. After that they chant along with the music. Then, they listen to the music with lyrics, singing the song together. When students sing together, teachers can easily find out how many students still have problems with pronunciation without taking time checking one by one.

Dealing with songs and rhythm appears to be a good chance for teachers to correct the pronunciation of two consonants /l/ and /n/ at the beginning of words by some students from a certain regions of Vietnam can be eliminated through studying English. In Vietnamese language, it is still understandable if they make such a mistake, but in English, it is unacceptable, especially while singing. Thus, learning pronunciation in English may also help students to correct the mistake they may make in Vietnamese language. Language, in general, can easily integrate with music, creating positive effect on language learners, particularly pronouncing properly.

2.2. Oral conversation online

The second solution for practicing discussion and argument with CALL is to use synchronous environment: oral conversation online. Many scientists and scholars agree that in the information technology era of 21st century, web-based learning has become the major trend of future teaching and learning models (Kinshuk and Yang, 2003, p. 5). While at the beginning CMC was restricted to text, audio conferencing has been commonly available since the mid 1990s, thus allowing remote users to communicate orally and synchronously with one another. “With the increasing availability of synchronous voice-based groupware and the additional facilities offered by audio graphic tools, language learners have opportunities for collaborating on oral tasks, supported by visual and textual stimuli via computer-conferencing” (Lamy, 2004, p. 520). Voice-based synchronous CMC is regarded as “a specific mode supporting conversations that are both different from face-to-face ones, and influenced in significant ways by the interactions of learners with each other, i.e. human-machine-human interaction” (Lamy, 2004, p. 251).

Rosell-Aguilar (2005, p. 418) adds that audiographic conferencing systems have developed into ‘multimodal tools’ including visual, verbal and written elements, which can improve communication and interaction. A list of updated CMC research on audiographic online conferencing for language learning has been introduced (see Lamy, 2004, p. 522; Rosell-Aguilar, 2005, p. 418).

Because of the availability of synchronous voice-based groupware, the idea suggested here is the use of Skype audiographic online conferencing for students to practice discussion and argument in English online. The Skype program can be downloaded for free from www.skype.com. Reasons for selecting Skype for training oral skill includes: 1) the program is free; 2) the quality of Skype’s sound and image is excellent, much better than those of similar programs, such as Yahoo Messenger: the current most popular program for synchronous communication; 3) it allows participants to send files (handouts) synchronously while discussing, without having to open emails; 4) most importantly, it is easy to find native speakers or international students to invite them into the discussions via the search tool; and 5) students of HCS are science students so it is not difficult for them to deal with computers. Besides, some other audiographic online programs, such as Wengo or Yahoo Messenger can be employed as a substitute.

It is ideal to cooperate with English native speakers and English learners around the world to invite them into the online discussions. This is not very challenging to teachers because nowadays they can join English Teaching Associations in Asia to seek cooperation and exchange ideas with other teachers in the region. Then they can encourage their students to use Skype to communicate with one another person in the global language: English. In addition, the role of teachers has been changing dramatically compared to the traditional one:

Teacher’s language expertise involves competence, knowledge, tolerance, understanding and technology to understand and appreciate students’ use of language; to contribute to the development of their language competence; to choose appropriate methods of teaching, distinguishing between essential matters and surface considerations; to evaluate language texts, schemes, programmes and equipment; to justify what they are doing in the classroom before colleagues, parents, administrators and the interested public (Collins, 1977, pp. 110-111).

Teachers are not simply competent in language, but also in task design and application of technology into teaching and learning. As mentioned above, they should play the role of facilitator of the students’ learning process, rather than teaching students. Task design for audiographic conferencing is another matter that is not discussed in this essay (see Rosell-Aguilar, 2005 for reference). Task design for
The discussion in Skype now is named as a conference. The number of conference participants varies, depending on teachers' targets. Groups of three to four are often organized for discussion. Sometimes the whole class may be required to join if necessary. Figure 2 illustrates an online audiographic conference.

**Figure 2: Model of an online audiographic conference.**

The above model depicts a conference among two Vietnamese (one teacher and one student) and one foreign invited guest. The teacher plays the role of the host of the conference, motivating the student to discuss, express his/her ideas to the foreign student and helping the conversation along. It is not necessary for the teacher to be host all the time. This role sometimes transfers to students or invited guests. Peer teaching sometimes creates unexpected excellent results (Wagner, 1982).

The process of an online audiographic conference is simple. It creates chances for non-native students to meet and discuss with foreigners in a real world. They can encounter different variations of English in the world, which make them aware of ‘world Englishes’ (Jenkins, 2003). Joining such conferences, students have chances to meet and discuss with students in the world. Hence, they can improve not only their English communication, but also open their minds to the world.

**Conclusion**

Educators should be aware that the 21st century is a century of technology. Thus, advantages belong to those who can make use of technology. Teachers of English at HCS should turn their disadvantage of not having a Standard English into the advantage of using CMC/ CALL to teach standard spoken English to their students. Teaching oral skills should be given attention to right at the beginning to create proper pronunciation for students. It is proper pronunciation which helps learners develop confidence in communication. CALL appears to be the best choice for training in pronunciation. When students can start to communicate verbally in English, internet conferences like Skype can be the place where they can meet and talk with foreigners to improve their communication ability in English as well as open their knowledge horizons. As mentioned above, teachers should be aware of the fast development of technology and discover the latest application of CALL in their teaching contexts.

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It ends with some recommendations for change in the educational policy of Bangladesh. English language teaching in Bangladesh. Some studies outline strategies that can be used by teachers in EFL contexts to help adult learners develop their speaking skills. Developing speaking skills of adult learners in private universities in Bangladesh 99. To be selected for the sample, they had to be an English language teacher in a private university and had to have experience of teaching for some years. One participant noted that the university authority emphasises speaking skills to such an extent that students are supposed to come to the teacher and talk for some time in English if they receive a poor grade in their speaking test.

Through this research, we aim at investigating whether teaching the speaking skill by using communicative language teaching approach is effective to overcome the students’ problems in speaking skill. Moreover; to describe what teachers should do in applying the CLT in the classroom in teaching activity and to analyse the benefits of using CLT in teaching learning process for the teacher and students. Communicative language teaching (CLT); communicative competence; speaking skill. 7) Methodology. In this study we are going to follow the descriptive research as it fits the outlined objectives; it aims to describe tow variables, communicative language teaching as the independent variable, and its role in improving the students’ speaking skill as the dependent variable. Teaching speaking skill has been given to the students by the teacher based on curriculum since SMP up to the MA, but still there are many students in High School such as the students at first grade of MA Pembangunan UIN Jakarta who have problems in speaking skill. Today, there are many English teachers who have been teaching speaking skill by using conventional method, which is one way or passive teaching method and not the interactive method in class. Furthermore, many teachers just inquire their students to do some exercises and spend their time at the class in mastering other skill such as writing and reading because they have to make their students achieve a good result in the last examination.

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