AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE CHALLENGES IN LEARNING B1 CAMBRIDGE SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG NON-ENGLISH MAJORED JUNIORS AT DONG A UNIVERSITY AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

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Abstract:

This study aims to investigate the difficulties in learning B1 Cambridge speaking among non-English majored juniors at Dong A University and to propose solutions to improve their practice effectiveness. Employing a quantitative research method, the study gathers data through both online and in-person student surveys, along with a separate questionnaire for teachers to suggest improvement strategies. The data, analyzed using statistical tools in Google Forms, highlights key obstacles and suggests remedial measures. The research findings indicate that the majority of students struggle with B1 Speaking skills due to limited vocabulary, weak grammar, poor listening skills, incorrect pronunciation, lack of confidence, and insufficient practice opportunities. Based on these findings, the study proposes several practical solutions, including practicing with sample test questions, applying the shadowing method, and utilizing learning tools such as VirtualSpeech to create an immersive speaking environment. It is hoped that the study will offer practical recommendations to support students in enhancing their Speaking skills for the Cambridge B1 exam, while also contributing to the foundation for future research on effective language teaching methods.

Keywords: *B1 Cambridge Speaking, Non-English majored juniors, Dong A University, challenges, solutions*

Introduction

As a global language, English plays a paramount role in communication worldwide (Crystal, 2008). Among the four essential English language skills, speaking is one of the most crucial skills that requires continuous development and refinement, serving as a cornerstone for effective communication.

Theoretically, speaking is the ability to convey meaning orally through both verbal and nonverbal symbols across various contexts, which can be enhanced through language learning. According to Chaney (1998), speaking involves constructing and sharing meaning through verbal and non-verbal symbols, making it a fundamental aspect of language learning and teaching. Learners must develop speaking competence to communicate effectively in diverse situations. In other words, speaking is an active,

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dynamic process, while speaking skills refer to one's ability to communicate proficiently, which can be cultivated through structured language education.

For Vietnamese students, proficiency in English is an essential prerequisite for global integration. However, mastering English, particularly speaking skills, presents significant challenges. Many learners state that despite years of studying English, they struggle to speak fluently and comprehensibly (Bueno, Madrid, & Mclaren, 2006). Currently, one of the most widely adopted frameworks for assessing English proficiency is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which categorizes language proficiency into six levels, from A1 to C2. At the university level, non-English majors are required to attain a proficiency level equivalent to B1 under the CEFR or Level 3 of the Vietnamese 6-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework (Ministry of Education and Training, 2014). The B1 Cambridge speaking component demands not only linguistic accuracy but also confidence and adaptability in real-life communication. This requirement poses a considerable challenge for non-English majors, particularly those with limited exposure to English in their daily interactions. Specifically, at Dong A University, non-English majored juniors appear to face multiple factors influencing their ability to develop B1 Cambridge speaking proficiency. Therefore, identifying the specific difficulties they encounter in learning B1 Cambridge speaking is crucial for improving their learning outcomes and communication competence.

Although the challenges associated with speaking proficiency among non-English majors have been widely examined, there remains a lack of in-depth research focusing specifically on the difficulties related to B1-level speaking competence. Thus, a more comprehensive investigation, specifically focusing on non-English majored juniors at Dong A University, is necessary to gain deeper insights into the obstacles they face in learning B1 Cambridge speaking and to develop effective solutions to address these challenges.

Given these considerations are the motivation for the researchers to conduct the study "*An Investigation into the Challenges in Learning B1 Cambridge Speaking Among Non-English Majored Juniors at Dong A University and Suggested Solutions*". Hopefully, this study will provide valuable empirical evidence and practical insights that contribute to the field of English language education, offering meaningful recommendations for improving students' English learning experiences.

Aims and objectives

The research aims to investigate the difficulties encountered by non-English majored juniors at Dong A University in learning B1 Cambridge speaking and propose some solutions to improve their B1 Cambridge speaking abilities. In order to accomplish the aims, the research pursues the following objectives (1) to investigate the challenges faced by third-year non-English majored students at Dong A University in learning B1

Cambridge speaking; (2) to propose recommendations for improving the B1 Cambridge speaking abilities of non-English majored juniors at Dong A University.

Significance of the study

This study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the difficulties in learning B1 Cambridge speaking encountered by non-English majored juniors at Dong A University. In order to support non-English majored juniors in better learning B1 Cambridge speaking skills, thereby facilitating their academic progress. Additionally, it offers teachers empirical data and practical insights to enhance their teaching strategies and inform further research.

Informants and research methodology

Informants

The study focused on non-English majored juniors from Faculty of Tourism at Dong A University. Three Intermediate English 2 (IE2) classes were selected as the sample to ensure manageability and focused analysis. Furthermore, a survey with two teachers who have taught B1 Cambridge speaking to this group of students was also conducted to gather valuable pedagogical perspectives.

Research Methodology

In order to accomplish the aims, the researchers conducted the study based on a quantitative method. Specifically, data were collected through a student questionnaire to identify the difficulties encountered in learning B1 Cambridge Speaking. Additionally, a teacher questionnaire was conducted to gather insights and recommendations for improving B1 Cambridge speaking abilities among third-year non-English majored students at Dong A University. The process of analyzing data includes three key steps: (1) Analyzing the difficulties faced by non-English majored juniors in learning B1 Cambridge speaking; (2) Identifying effective methods for improving students' B1 Cambridge Speaking proficiency; (3) Drawing conclusions and providing recommendations.

Results and discussion

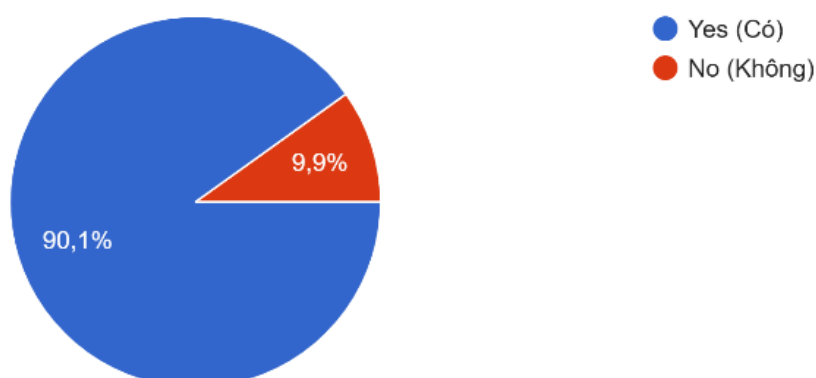*Students' Current Proficiency in Learning B1 Cambridge Speaking*

Figure 1. Students taking the B1 Cambridge speaking exam

The pie chart examines whether students have previously taken the B1 Cambridge Speaking test. A significant majority (90,1%) of students have taken the test at least once, indicating they have prior experience with the exam format, requirements, and assessment criteria. On the other hand, 9.9% of students have never taken the test, which may reflect either a lack of preparation or hesitation due to fear of failure.
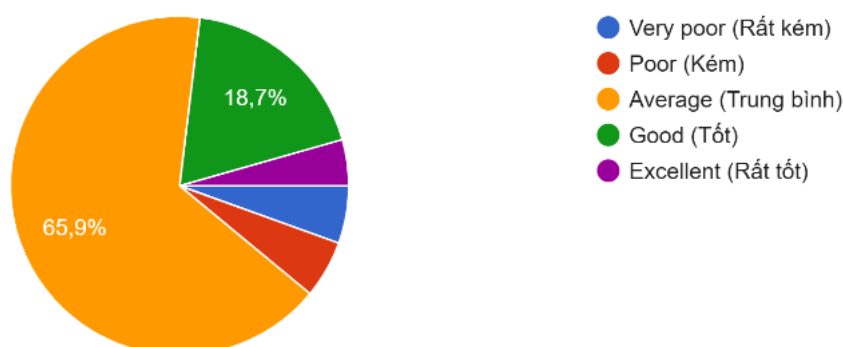

Figure 2. Students' current B1 Cambridge speaking ability

The second chart presents a general picture of students' self-assessment on B1 Cambridge Speaking ability. Examining the pie chart, a majority of student (65.9%) rate their speaking skills as average, indicating that they feel capable of basic communication but have not yet reached a proficient level. Conversely, 5.5% of students consider their speaking ability to be very poor, and another 5.5% rate it as poor, suggesting that approximately one in ten participants lack confidence in their skills. On the other hand, 18.7% of students consider their speaking ability to be good, while only 4.4% rate it as excellent, showing that only a small percentage of students feel fully confident in their B1 Cambridge Speaking proficiency.
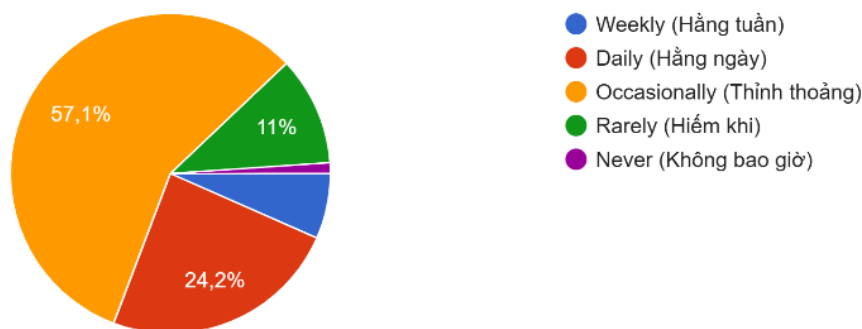
Figure 3. Students' speaking practice frequency

The third chart focuses on students' habits in practicing B1 Cambridge speaking. A significant proportion (57.1%) of students report practicing speaking only occasionally, indicating that while they engage in speaking activities, their practice is inconsistent and may not be sufficient to bring about noticeable improvement. In contrast, 24.2% of students practice speaking daily, showing that a significant portion of students dedicate time to improving their speaking skills on a regular basis. However, 11% of students rarely practice, indicating that some students do not actively work on their speaking skills outside of class. Furthermore, 6.6% of students practice weekly, while 1.1% never practice at all, which is a serious concern as speaking is a skill that requires continuous effort. Without regular practice, these students are likely to struggle with pronunciation, coherence, and confidence when speaking in English.
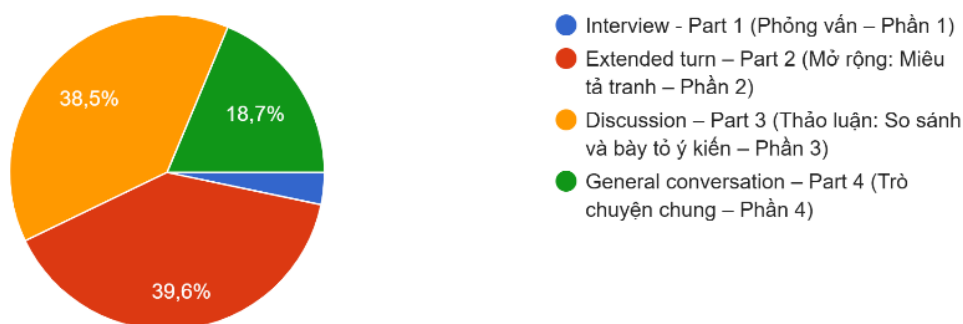

Figure 4. Students' opinions on the most difficult part of the B1 Speaking test

The final chart identifies that non-English majored juniors face challenges across various sections of the B1 Cambridge Speaking test. According to the data, 38,5% of students consider Part 3 (Discussion) the most difficult, likely because it requires not only language proficiency but also critical thinking and the ability to present well-structured arguments. Additionally, 39.6% of students find Part 2 (Extended Turn) the hardest, which suggests that speaking continuously for an extended period without interaction is a significant challenge. Furthermore, 18.7% of students struggle with Part 4 (General Conversation), which indicates that even informal discussions can be challenging for some learners, possibly due to a lack of vocabulary or confidence. Finally, 3,3% of students find Part 1 (Interview) difficult, showing that introductory personal questions are generally easier for students compared to more complex tasks.

Challenges Faced by Non-English Majored Juniors at Dong A University in B1

Cambridge English Speaking Skills

The following two charts illustrate the primary difficulties faced by non-English majored juniors at Dong A University while learning the B1 Cambridge speaking skills.
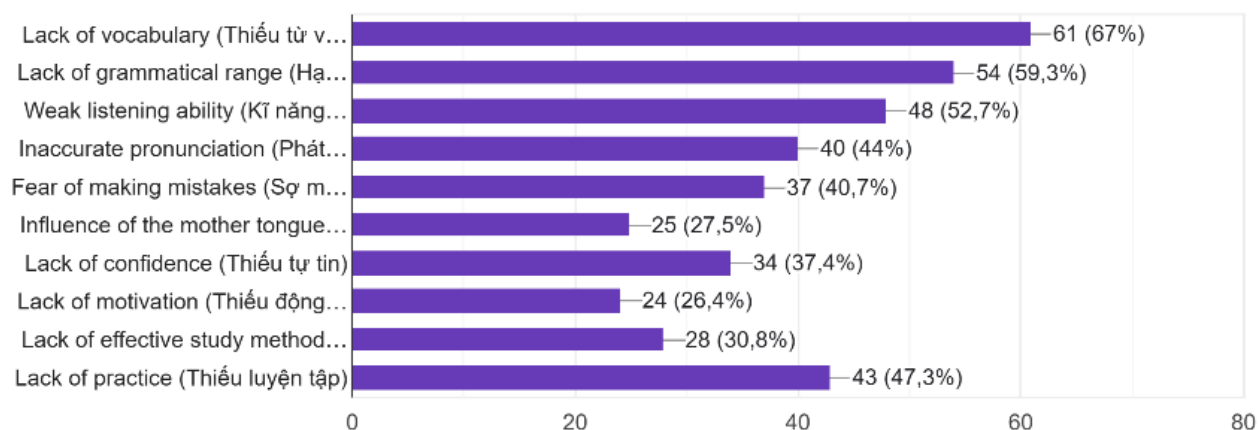

Lack of vocabulary (Thiếu từ v… — 61 (67%)
Lack of grammatical range (Hạ… — 54 (59,3%)
Weak listening ability (Kĩ năng… — 48 (52,7%)
Inaccurate pronunciation (Phát… — 40 (44%)
Fear of making mistakes (Sợ m… — 37 (40,7%)
Influence of the mother tongue… — 25 (27,5%)
Lack of confidence (Thiếu tự tin) — 34 (37,4%)
Lack of motivation (Thiếu động… — 24 (26,4%)
Lack of effective study method… — 28 (30,8%)
Lack of practice (Thiếu luyện tập) — 43 (47,3%)

Figure 5. Difficulties faced by students in learning B1 Cambridge Speaking

The first chart presents the major challenges when learning B1 Cambridge speaking skills. The most significant difficulty is a lack of vocabulary, reported by 67% of students. Not having enough vocabulary prevents students from expressing themselves fluently, causing hesitation and delays when answering questions. Lack of grammatical range, with a percentage of 59.3%, is the second major issue, leading to incorrect sentence structures or an inability to diversify expressions, making their responses sound unnatural. In addition, weak listening ability, indicated by 52.7%, is another significant barrier. If students cannot fully understand the question or the examiner's point, they will be unable to respond accurately and effectively. Furthermore, 47.3% of students cited a lack of practice as another crucial reason why students do not progress quickly, as speaking skills require regular practice. Inaccurate pronunciation, mentioned by 44% of students, affects the clarity of communication. Fear of making mistakes (40,7%) is a common psychological factor, causing students to hesitate when speaking, leading to short responses, lack of idea development, or loss of natural flow. Additionally, 37.4% of students report a lack of confidence when speaking English. This causes them to be shy when answering questions or participating in conversations, reducing their ability to express themselves naturally and fluently. Moreover, 30,8% of students do not apply effective study methods, making it difficult for them to make rapid progress due to a lack of a clear study plan and an inability to systematically develop their skills. The influence of their mother tongue (27.5%) also contributes to improper translations or errors in pronunciation and grammar. Finally, 26.4% of students lack motivation, resulting in insufficient time and effort dedicated to improving their speaking skills, thus slowing their progress.
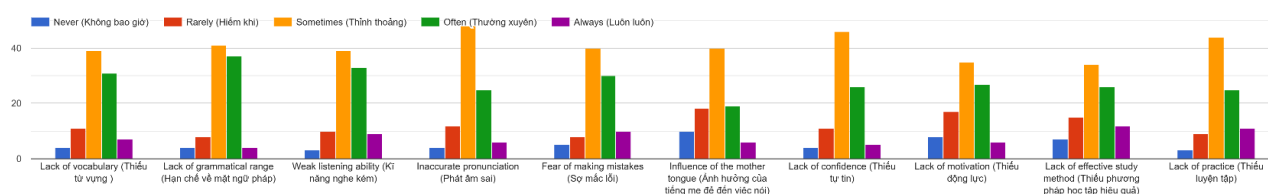
Figure 6. Frequency of various difficulties encountered by students

This second chart shows the frequency with which students encounter various difficulties when learning the B1 Cambridge Speaking skill. Notably, lack of practice and lack of effective study methods are the two factors most frequently marked as "always", indicating that many students lack sufficient opportunities to practice in real-life communication settings and lack a clear study strategy, which slows their progress in improving speaking skills. Lack of grammatical range is the most common issue faced by students, with 37 students choosing "often", revealing that grammar significantly affects their ability to form accurate and flexible sentences. Additionally, weak listening ability ranks second after lack of grammatical range, with 33 students selecting this factor as an "often" issue, which diminishes their ability to understand questions and respond accurately, thereby hindering their ability to communicate naturally. Pronunciation errors, lack of confidence, and lack of practice are the three factors selected by students with the highest "sometimes" frequency, with approximately half of the students selecting each of these factors. This suggests that many students still struggle with maintaining accurate pronunciation, lack confidence when speaking, and do not have enough practice opportunities to improve their speaking skills. Finally, lack of motivation and the influence of their native language are the two factors most commonly selected as "rarely" encountered. Although not a widespread issue, some students report feeling demotivation or influenced by their native language, which leads to difficulties in learning and communication.

Teachers' Suggestions for Improving B1 Cambridge Speaking Skills

The following two charts illustrate teachers' recommendations regarding the most effective classroom activities and resources for improving non-English majored juniors' B1 Cambridge speaking skills.
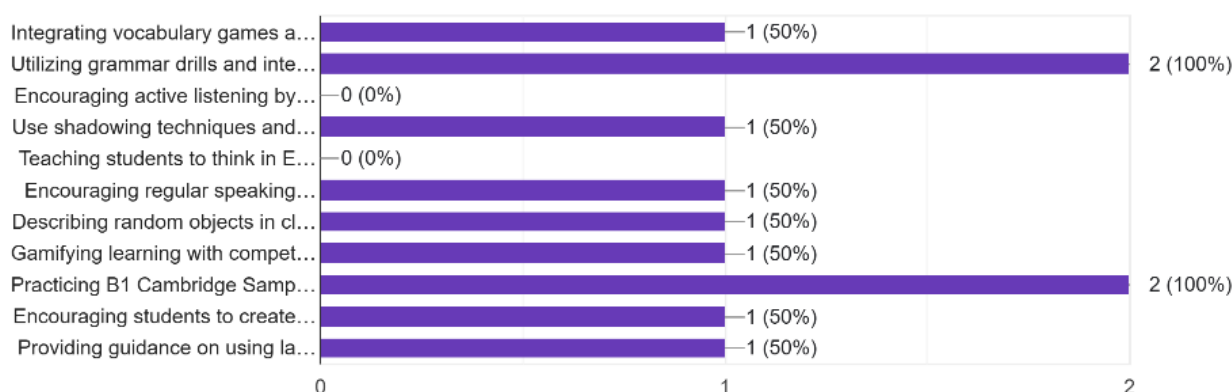

Figure 7. Teachers' perceptions of the most effective teaching methods

The first chart highlights the teaching methods that educators consider most effective in helping students overcome challenges in the B1 Cambridge Speaking test. The results show that 'Utilizing grammar drills and interactive exercises' and 'Practicing B1 Cambridge sample speaking tests' are the two most highly rated strategies, chosen by 100% of respondents. Additionally, 50% of participants identified other useful techniques, including integrating vocabulary games and quizzes, shadowing techniques, encouraging regular speaking, describing random objects, gamified learning, and providing guidance on using language apps.
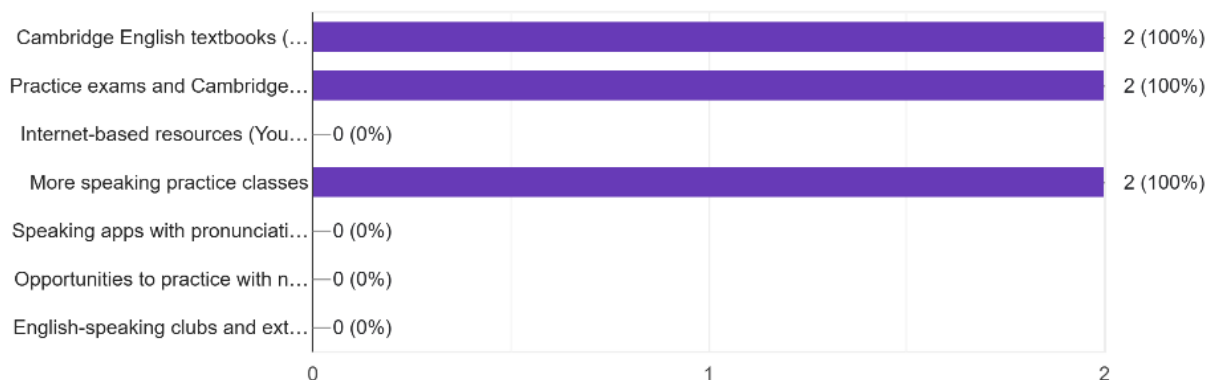

Figure 8. Teachers' perceptions of the most helpful resources

The second chart presents the resources and support systems that teachers believe are most beneficial for improving students' B1 Cambridge speaking skills. According to the data, 'Cambridge English textbooks, practice exams, and Cambridge sample tests, and more speaking practice classes are the most highly recommended, receiving 100% agreement from all respondents. In contrast, other resources such as online tools, pronunciation apps, opportunities to practice with native speakers and English-speaking clubs were not selected.

These findings first emphasize the importance of structured grammar exercises and exam-oriented practice, complemented by engaging, communicative activities that foster fluency and confidence, then suggest that educators prioritize official Cambridge materials and structured practice environments over technology-based or immersive language learning approaches.

Practical Approaches to Improve B1 Cambridge Speaking Skills for Non-English

Majored Juniors

Practicing B1 Cambridge Sample Speaking Tests

According to the data presented in the findings, both participating teachers selected practicing with Cambridge B1 sample speaking tests as the most effective method to enhance students' speaking performance. This consistency in teacher responses indicates the importance of familiarizing students with the test format and typical question types. Therefore, this solution was proposed based on strong support from the teachers' feedback.

Becoming familiar with B1 sample tests is a crucial step in the preparation process for the exam. Mohammed (2021) points out that apart from preparation in class, test takers should create a systematic plan for revising. Furthermore, it is vital to be familiar with the test format (Rozakis 2003) because knowing what to expect in the exam makes test takers feel more confident and relaxed. Engaging with sample tests enables students to develop a comprehensive understanding of the test structure and common question types, allowing learners to handle specific requirements and respond more confidently and strategically during the actual test.

To adequately prepare for the B1 Cambridge Speaking test, students should rely on quality and accurate study resources. One of the most popular and effective materials is "Cambridge English: B1 Preliminary for Schools", which provides sample tests as well as practical exercises based on frequently encountered topics in the exam.
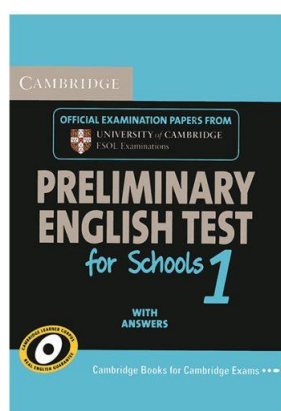

Picture 1. Cambridge English: B1 Preliminary for Schools

Another valuable resource is "Practice Tests for Cambridge English: B1 Preliminary", also published by Cambridge. This book includes numerous practice exercises that simulate the actual exam, helping students get acquainted with the test's structure, timing, and demands of the exam.
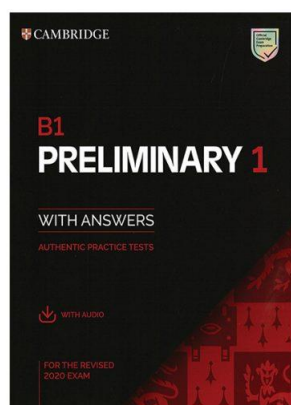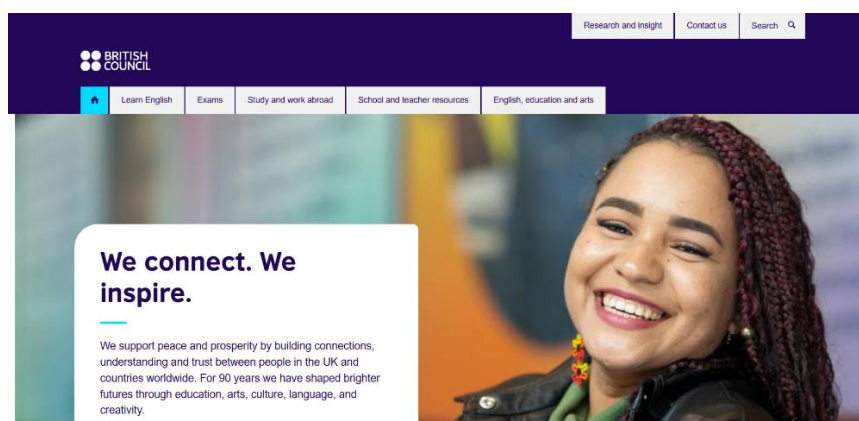

Picture 2. Practice Tests for Cambridge English: B1 Preliminary

In addition to these printed materials, students can also refer to reliable websites such as Cambridge English and British Council. These sites offer a wealth of free resources, including sample tests, video tutorials, and useful articles.
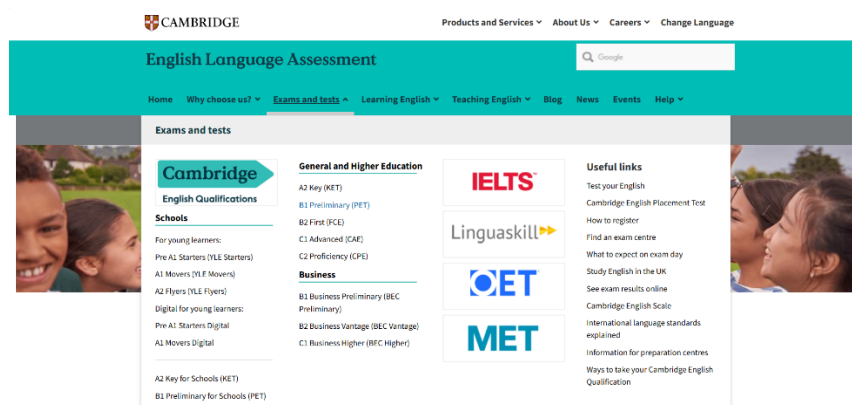
Picture 3. Website of Cambridge English

Picture 4. Website of British Council

Practicing Using the Shadowing Method

In addition, the Shadowing technique was also recommended by teachers as a helpful approach, especially for improving pronunciation and speaking fluency. This is reflected in the teacher questionnaire results, where this method received positive responses. As such, incorporating the Shadowing technique as an additional solution is justified and aligns well with the insights gathered from the survey.

According to IDP IELTS (2023), to implement the shadowing method effectively, students should follow the steps outlined below:

Step 1: Choose a Video/Audio

• Start by selecting a video or audio clip featuring native speakers, preferably on a topic that aligns with the learner's personal interests to maintain motivation. Listen to the entire recording once to grasp the main idea and overall context.

• Select clips that do not exceed five minutes in duration to reduce cognitive load and prevent demotivation.

• It is advisable to use materials with subtitles or transcripts, as these support comprehension and pronunciation awareness.

Step 2: Practice Listening

• Listen to the chosen material 4–5 times to develop familiarity with the content and structure.

• During the listening process, focus on phonological features such as stressed syllables, vowel and consonant sounds, and final sounds.

• Read along using subtitles or transcripts to support vocabulary recognition and pronunciation accuracy. Unfamiliar words or expressions should be identified and looked up to ensure thorough understanding.

Step 3: Practice Shadowing

• Play the video or audio and repeat each sentence immediately after the speaker, ensuring accurate imitation of pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation. The recommended repetition speed is aligned with the speaker's natural pace.

• Playback speed may be reduced initially (e.g., to 0,75x or 0,5x) to support beginner learners, then gradually increased as fluency improves.

Step 4: Record and Revise Your Shadowing

• Continue practicing until the learner is able to speak in synchrony with the recording.

• Record the learner's voice and compare it with the original audio to identify deviations in pronunciation, stress, or intonation.

• Take notes on mispronounced words or unnatural speech patterns and revise accordingly. Consistent practice across various topics is encouraged to enhance overall speaking fluency and accuracy

*Using VirtualSpeech to Improve B1 Cambridge Speaking Skills*

Students can enhance their English-speaking abilities and effectively prepare for the B1 Cambridge Speaking test by using VirtualSpeech, an AI-powered Virtual Reality (VR) application.

Picture 5. VirtualSpeech platform

Key Features of VirtualSpeech for B1 Cambridge Speaking Practice (VirtualSpeech, 2025):

Virtual Exam Environment: To help students get familiar with the atmosphere of the exam, VirtualSpeech provides a virtual exam environment.
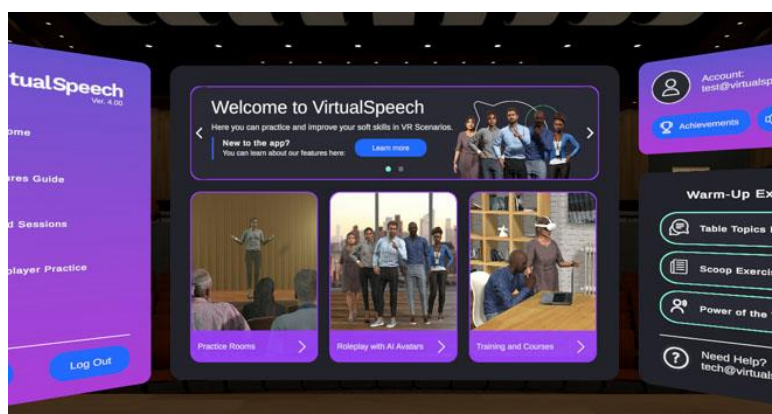
Picture 6. Virtual Exam Environment

AI-Powered Roleplays: The app offers real-life communication scenarios to help students practice reacting flexibly in everyday communication situations.


Picture 7. Practice Booking

AI Examiner Interaction: The AI examiner interaction feature helps students prepare better for the B1 speaking exam.


Picture 8. Practice Sample Test

Body Language Review: VirtualSpeech also offers modules to help students enhance their non-verbal cues, such as posture, gestures, and eye contact, and replay their body language after a speech, presentation, or communication to identify areas they need to improve.
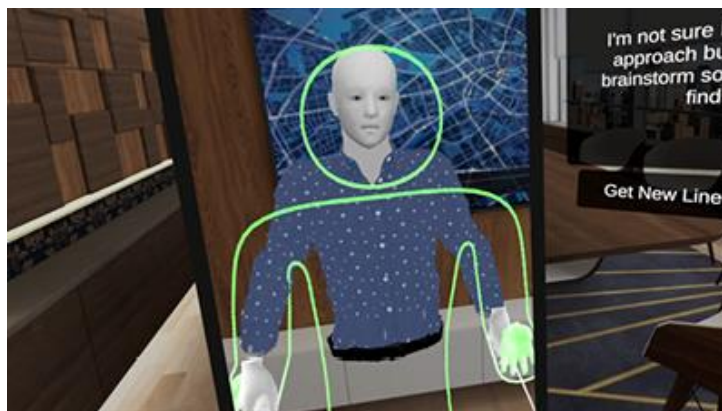
Picture 9. Body Language Practice

Speech Analysis & Feedback: The instant AI feedback feature helps students identify mistakes and improve their speaking skills effectively.
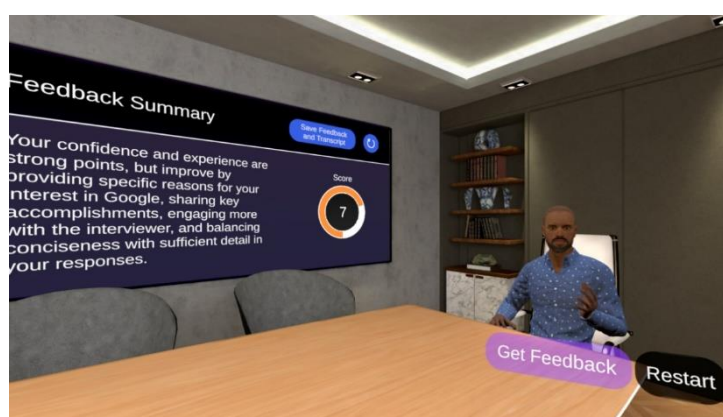
Picture 10, AI Feedback System

Progress Tracking & Analytics: VirtualSpeech also provides progress tracking and analysis features to monitor students' development. AI tracks and analyzes students' progress over time, helping them identify weaknesses and improve the effectiveness of their practice.
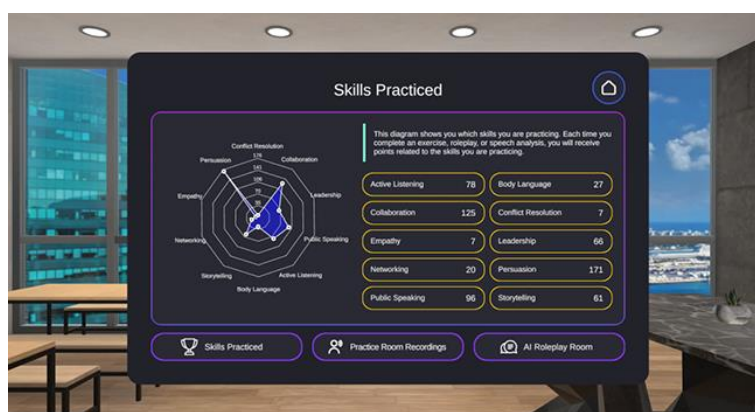
Picture 11. Progress Tracking & Analytics

Conclusion and Recommendation

In general, although most third-year non-English major students at Dong A University have participated in a B1 Cambridge Speaking test, the survey results show that the majority still encounter many difficulties in the Speaking section. Furthermore, a significant proportion of students report engaging in speaking practice only occasionally, indicating that their efforts are inconsistent and may be insufficient to yield noticeable improvement. This lack of regularity can hinder their ability to develop fluency and spontaneity. During their preparation and practice for speaking skills, students often struggle with a range of obstacles, including (1) lack of vocabulary; (2) lack of grammatical range; (3) weak listening ability; (4) lack of practice; (5) inaccurate pronunciation; (6) fear of making mistakes; (7) lack of confidence; (8) lack of effective study methods; (9) the influence of their mother tongue; (10) lack of motivation.

Based on the teachers' survey data analysis, the study has proposed three solutions to improve B1 Cambridge speaking skills for non-English major students. First, regular practice with B1 Cambridge sample tests helps students familiarize themselves with the exam format, time allocation, and question types. Through this, students can gain experience, reinforce their knowledge, and become accustomed to the time pressure in the exam room. Second, the shadowing method is recommended to improve pronunciation, intonation, and fluency in speaking. This method involves listening to and repeating dialogues from native speakers, helping students adjust their articulation, practice reflexes, and improve the natural flow of their speech. Third, the VirtualSpeech app - a virtual reality tool - can help students practice speaking in a simulated exam room. This app also provides feedback on pronunciation, fluency, and content presentation, allowing students to improve their weaknesses with specific guidance and clear direction.

In addition to students actively practicing, teachers also play a crucial role in guiding, supporting, and creating opportunities for students to develop sustainable speaking skills. Teachers can organize mock speaking sessions based on actual exam formats, encourage students to practice in pairs or small groups to increase opportunities for using English, and integrate official learning materials such as sample tests, situational videos, and online language learning platforms. Moreover, teachers should provide direct, constructive feedback, correcting pronunciation and structural errors in each lesson to facilitate ongoing improvement. Most importantly, creating a positive learning environment that encourages confidence, collaboration, and proactivity will help students feel comfortable, not afraid of making mistakes, and willing to express themselves in English. This is the key element to enhancing learning outcomes and best preparing for the B1 Cambridge exam

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