Improving Non-Majored Freshmen's Speaking Fluency in the E-learning Environment through the MS-Teams

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ABSTRACT

Although online learning is a must in EFL teaching contexts nowadays, not all freshmen can make progress from it, especially in the English-speaking skills. Therefore, this study aims to explore freshmen's online learning difficulties in English speaking skills and find out the solutions. The study involved about 120 non-English majors at some universities, including Nong Lam University, Banking University of Ho Chi Minh City, Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City, Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnamese National University - School of Medicine, International University, and Van Lang University in answering a questionnaire.

The results showed that learning online does not bring more progress in English speaking skills than the offline learning mode. The results further indicated that although the students are familiar with the online learning mode, they still have problems during their learning, especially with their concentration and interaction. Findings are hoped to contribute to a better understanding of non-English majors' difficulties in the online environment.

Then, a solution of adopting Miro integrated into Microsoft Teams is suggested to partly help enhance the students- students' interaction to increase the students' progress in speaking skills when learning online.

Keywords: non-English majored, freshmen, online learning difficulties, EFL, interaction

Introduction

Interaction has long been a key element in developing the students' fluency in English speaking skills. Language learners interact with each other to negotiate meanings (Long, 1981). Interactional, modified input can help language teaching and learning. (Namaziandost, Rahimi Esfahani, Nasri, & Mirshekaran, 2018; Wang & Castro, 2010). Thurmond (2003) defines types of interaction as "The learners' engagement with the course content, other learners, the instructor and the technological medium used in the course."

In the online teaching-learning environment, the interaction in speaking English among the students is limited. In the virtual learning environment, the students often type in the chat boxes to communicate so that the teacher can deliver the lesson uninterrupted. As a result, the speaking activities are not practiced sufficiently. Therefore, if the fluency level in the speaking skill is to be enhanced, there must be an increase in the classroom interaction in English, especially among students.

This study observes the effect of the correlation in the students' level and their learning online through MS-TEAMs on the development of the fluency in the students' English-speaking skills. Then, the suggestion of using MIRO integrated into MS-TEAMs is introduced to raise the students' English-speaking ability.

Literature review

The influence of student's English background on their English learning

High proficiency learners of English usually have a more positive attitude towards English learning than low proficiency ones (Huang & Tsai, 2003). There is a strong relationship between learners' English proficiency and their self-efficacy beliefs (Tilfarlioğlu & Cğnkara, 2009). High proficiency learners believe they can understand the meaning of the language if they listen and read the English materials frequently, whereas low proficiency learners think they need translation to understand better English materials (Huang & Tsai, 2003). Also, low proficiency students cannot remember or generate all ideas in English, so teachers can even use L1 (their native language) to help generate ideas (Stapa & Majid, 2017).

Students with better English competence have more learning autonomy and vice versa (Dafei, 2007). One more difference is about English learning strategies, such as metacognitive, social, and cognitive strategies, which are used more often and more adequately by learners with high English proficiency than those with low levels (Kuama, 2016; Kunasaraphan, 2015; Wu, 2008). However, Razali, Xuan, and Samad (2018) showed that there was no difference in the use of language learning strategies between learners of lower English proficiency and upper English proficiency.

Online learning: Advantages- Disadvantages

Advantages:

One advantage of online learning is its focus on the needs of individual learners rather than the instructors or the institutions' needs (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015). With online learning, learners study anytime and anywhere (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015). In addition, online learning brings fast access to instructors and peers in the online class (Fedynich, 2013). Students can even learn from other students in classrooms all over the world or consult with experts (Yuhanna, Alexander, & Kachik, 2020). The adoption of online learning has enabled faculty and learners to have easier access to electronic documents (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015; Yuhanna, Alexander, & Kachik, 2020). These days, the price of hardware, software, and internet service is affordable and decreasing (Yuhanna, Alexander, & Kachik, 2020). Besides, Unnisa (2014) showed the optimistic result that the use of new technology in online learning enhanced students' confidence. Another big advantage of online learning, as Nguyen & Tran (2021) pointed out, is that students can download and watch the recorded lecture video if they want to revise the lesson. This cannot be done in a traditional classroom.

Limitations / disadvantages:

Online learning is feasible only when participants have computer literacy and online access (Fedynich, 2013, p.5). If students and instructors have insufficient digital competence, they are likely to fall behind when learning online (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Online learning is a challenge for teachers to engage students and for students to keep their interest and motivation during lessons due to many distractions from family members, pets, or friends (Hulse, 2021). Besides, cyber classes lack instructor face time (Fedynich, 2013) and interaction (Ullah, Muhammad, & Bakhsh, 2020). There was a heavy workload in online classes (Fedynich, 2013; Ullah, Muhammad, & Bakhsh, 2020). Furthermore, learners cannot be assessed properly through online examination (Ullah, Muhammad, & Bakhsh, 2020) because there may be "piracy, plagiarism, cheating, inadequate selection skills, and inappropriate use of copy and paste" in e-learning (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015, p.36). E-learning may negatively improve learners' communication skills since they may not have adequate skills to express their knowledge (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015).

Students' autonomy

"Autonomy in learning is immediately related to innovation, creativity and self-efficacy" (Serdyukova & Serdyukov, 2013). When students' autonomy has been increased, they can have greater success in online English learning (Dafei, 2007; Lee, Pate, & Cozart, 2015). In a study on university students by Baru, Tenggara, and Mataram (2020), online learning was favored in terms of developing autonomy in learning. Octaberlina and Afif (2021) support the opinion that learners' attitudes were a big contribution to their learning autonomy characteristics. In a study by Luu (2022), university students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, just have a moderate level of readiness for online learning due to a lack of "self-directed learning ability" (p. 220). To develop autonomy and motivation for students, they need support and need satisfaction (Chen & Jang, 2010). Moreover, teachers should enhance learners' autonomy by giving them more responsibility, seeding good learning attitudes which suit each individual learner (Dafei, 2007). To fulfill those things, language teachers need to develop technological skills as well as their subject content to avoid being outdated in this new era (Bailly, 2010). Ribbe and Bezanilla (2013) recommended that teachers should try to create as authentic a learning environment as possible.

Students' Concentration and Interaction in online learning

Students may be present in online classes but do not interact or participate actively or show interest in learning (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). To improve speaking skills, students need to be engaged in interactive activities with the help of their teacher's input and feedback (Goh, 2006; Lear et al., 2010). Interaction in the form of feedback can help students improve their performance and feel more satisfied with the online course (Espasa & Menesses, 2010). Interaction and engagement can promote effective online teaching and learning (Le, 2021; Song et al., 2004). Another important thing to keep student concentration is that the online lesson should be student-centered (Croxton, 2014; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Moreover, interpolated tests should be used in online learning to reduce mind wandering among learners and increase notetaking among them (Szpunar, Moulton, & Schacter, 2013). There is a significant relationship between teaching styles and students' academic engagement (Shaari, Yusoff, Ghazali, Osman, & Dzahir, 2014). Courses with "text-based content, individualized learning, and limited interaction" are less favored by students than those more interactive

courses with the integration of multimedia (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012, p. 120). Technological tools used in online classes make great contributions to the interaction and concentration of students in lessons (Hermanto & Srimulyani, 2021).

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the survey was seeking to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the effect of the correlation in the students' level and their online learning condition on the development of the fluency in the students' English-speaking skills?

2. To what extent is it possible to increase the students' English-speaking ability through online learning?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The participants are non-English majored students at some universities in Vietnam, including Nong Lam University, Banking University of Ho Chi Minh City, Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City, Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnamese National University - School of Medicine, International University, and Van Lang University.

The students have just finished their high school's education. Although they have been pursuing different majors, they are all in their first year at university.

Design of the Study

The study was quantitative research in which the simple random sampling scheme randomly sampled the participants.

Data collection & analysis

The data is collected by means of an online form. It was collected once at the time the students were in their first English online course at university. Those data served as a means to know the students' current fluency level in the English-speaking skills in relation to their online learning conditions and their achievement.

Results/Findings and discussion

What is the effect of the correlation in the students' level and their online learning condition to the development of the fluency in the students' English-speaking skills?

The students' English-speaking background

The students' English level

About the students' general English ability, the majority of them, about 67,9%, self-evaluate that they are in the medium level. More concernedly, about a quarter of the participants state that they possess the "poor" (5.2 %) or even "very poor" (8%) English ability.

1. What level of English do you think you are in? (bạn nghĩ khả năng tiếng Anh của bạn ở mức độ nào?)
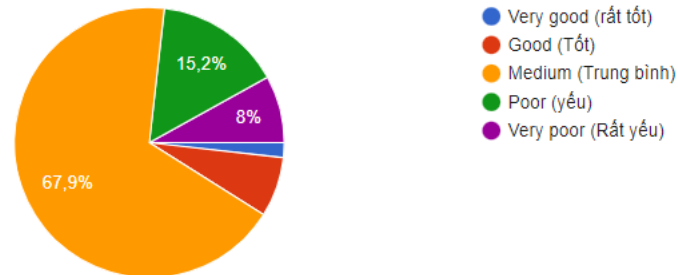
112 câu trả lời

Figure 1: The students' English ability

The students' English-speaking level

 The pie chart shows that the number of students who are not confident with their English-speaking ability outweighs the ones in other English skills. Although the percentage of "medium" English Speaking skills is considerably lower (46.4 %) when compared with the general English skill (67.9 %) in the first pie chart, the percentage of "medium" level decreases because the percentage of "poor" English speaking skill increases. Besides, the "poor" English speaking skill (33 %) doubles the "poor" general English ability (15 %) in the first pie chart. Therefore, the data in the pie chart shows that fewer students are strong in their English-speaking skills.

2. What level of English speaking skill do you think you are in? (bạn nghĩ khả năng Nói tiếng Anh của bạn ở mức độ nào?)
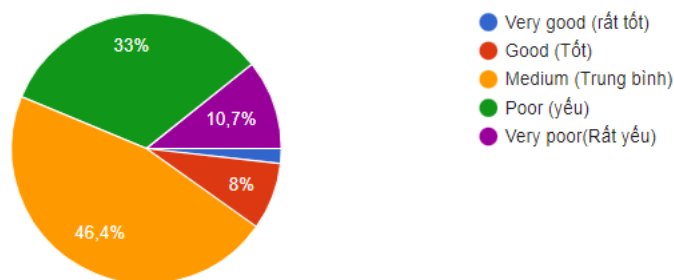
112 câu trả lời

Figure 2: The student's English-speaking ability

The students' fluency in the English-speaking skills

The third pie chart shows that more than half of the students are not fluent in their English-speaking skills. Firstly, most of them (43.8%) state that they are at the "poor" level of English-speaking skills. Moreover, 12.5% of the participants self-evaluated their fluency in the English-speaking skill as "very poor". Besides, as shown in Figure 3b, in comparison with the first and the second Figure, although the percentage of the "medium" level decreases noticeably, the percentage of the poor level in fluency in Figure 3 (43.8 %) is almost double the one in the general English-speaking skills (Figure 2) and three times higher than the same category in the general English-speaking skills (Figure 3a). Therefore, the data about the student's speaking fluency in Figures 3a and 3b, which is consistent with the data in Figures 1 and 2, shows the descending trend of the student's fluency in the English-speaking skills.

3. What level of FLUENCY in speaking English do you think you are in? (bạn nghĩ độ LƯU LOÁT trong kỹ năng Nói tiếng Anh của bạn ở mức độ nào?)
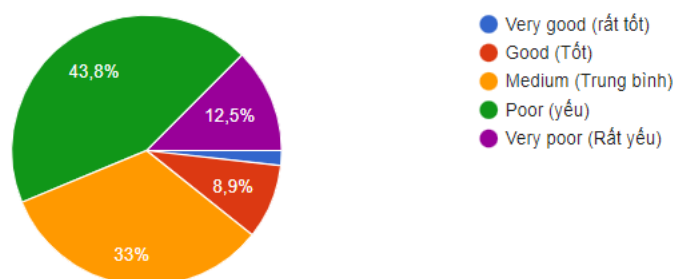
112 câu trả lời

- Very good (rất tốt)
- Good (Tốt)
- Medium (Trung bình)
- Poor (yếu)
- Very poor (Rất yếu)

Figure 3a: The students' fluency in the English-speaking skills

THE COMPARISON OF Figure 1, 2, and 3
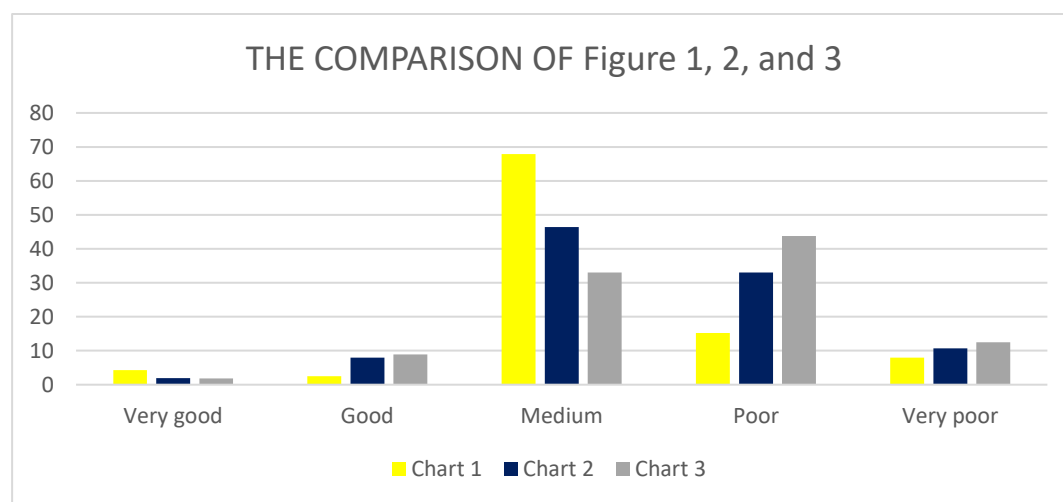
Chart 1   Chart 2   Chart 3

Figure 3b: The students' fluency in the English-speaking skills

The student's strengths and weaknesses

The data in Figures 4 and 5 show that the students have different strengths and weaknesses. Relating to their strength, about half of the students (46.4 %) state that they are better at pronunciation. Meanwhile, about 61.6 % of them admit that they have weaknesses with their vocabulary when speaking the English language. Besides, about the use of grammar in the English-speaking skills, it is regarded as the strength (29.5%) and the weakness (50.9%).
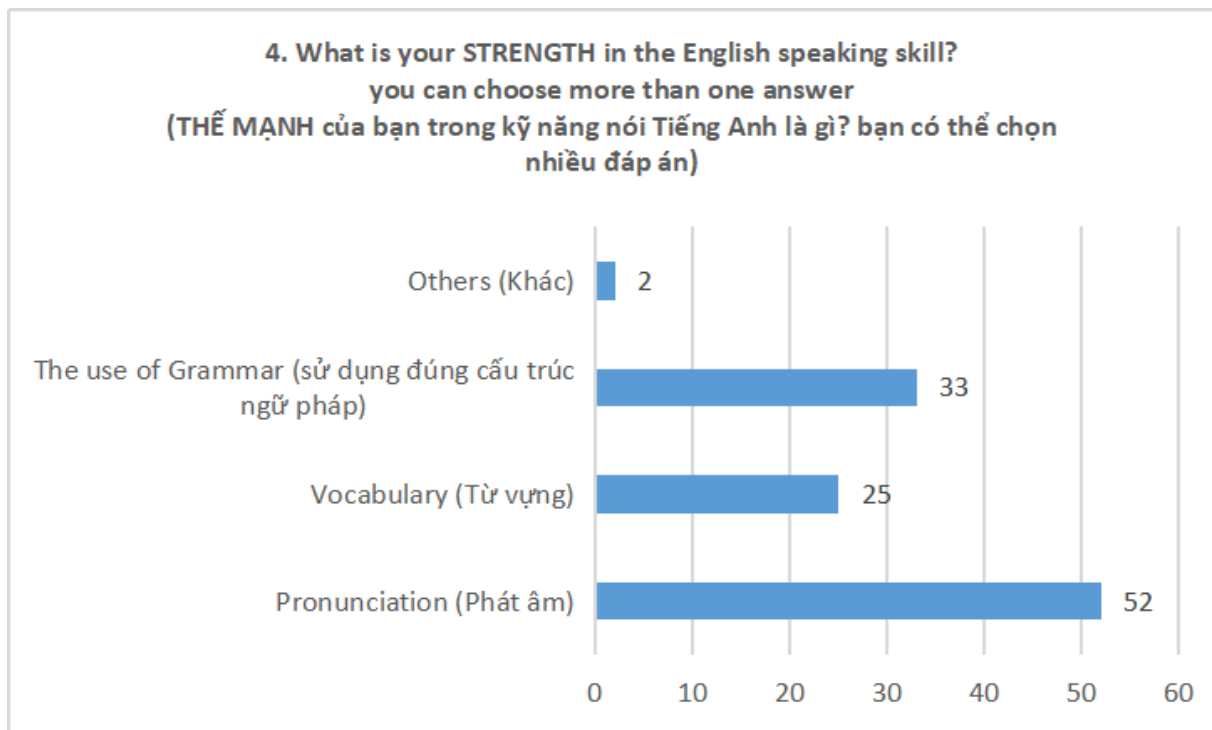

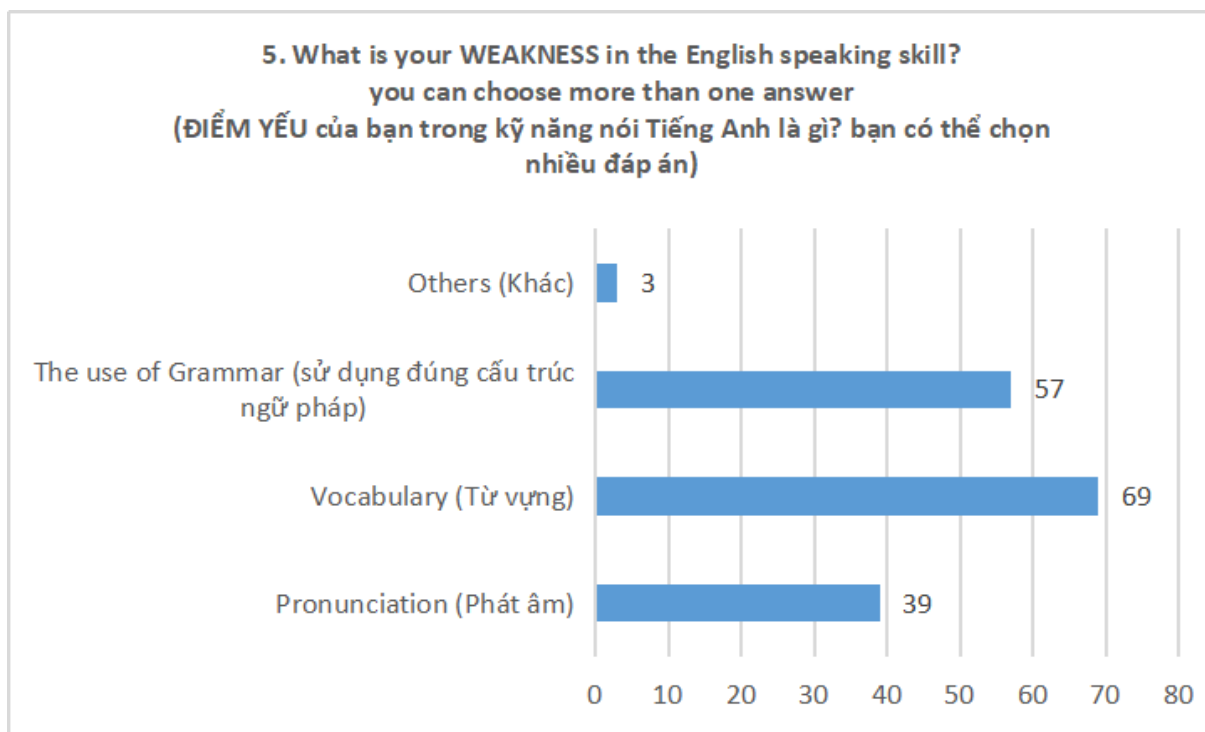
Figure 4: The students' strength

Figure 5: The students' weaknesses

The students' conditions of learning online

The familiarity with learning online

The data in Figure 6 shows that the students have different learning conditions. To begin with, the majority of the students are not much familiar with learning English in online classes (49.1 %). Besides, although there is about a third (33 %) of the students who admit that they are familiar with learning online, there is still about 10% of the students who state that they are not familiar with it. In this survey, the diversity of data shows that the students have different experiences with learning online and will obviously have various paces of their English achievement.
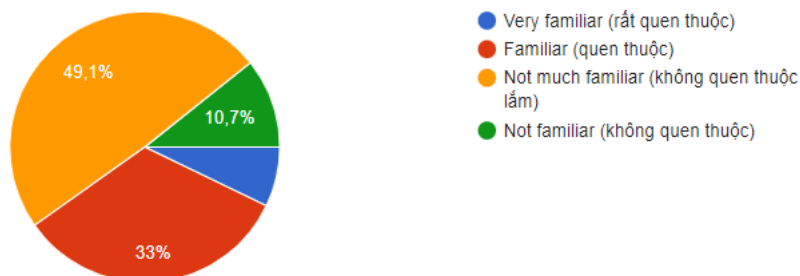

Figure 6: The familiarity with learning online

The troubles with learning online

The troubles that the students face, the majority of which are not considerable, are about their English ability and the features of the online classes. To make it clearer, although the number of participants who are not familiar with learning online is high (49.1 %, as stated in Figure 6), it is surprising that 65.2 % of the students just have a few difficulties when learning online.

 Moreover, the troubles the students face are mainly about their concentration (with the rate of 80 out of 112 students), interaction with the teacher (59 students), and interaction with their classmates (47 students), not much about technological devices and abilities (less than 20 %).

7. Do you have troubles when learning English online? (bạn có gặp khó khăn khi học ENGLISH online không?)
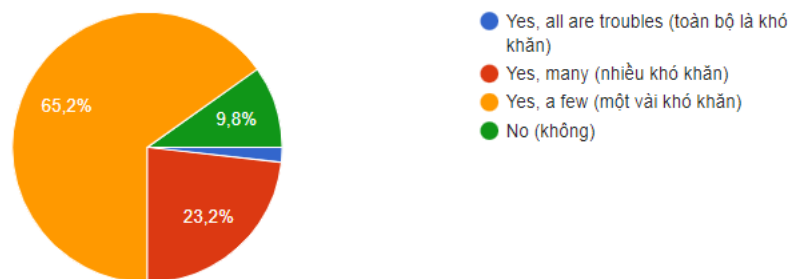
112 câu trả lời

- Yes, all are troubles (toàn bộ là khó khăn)
- Yes, many (nhiều khó khăn)
- Yes, a few (một vài khó khăn)
- No (không)

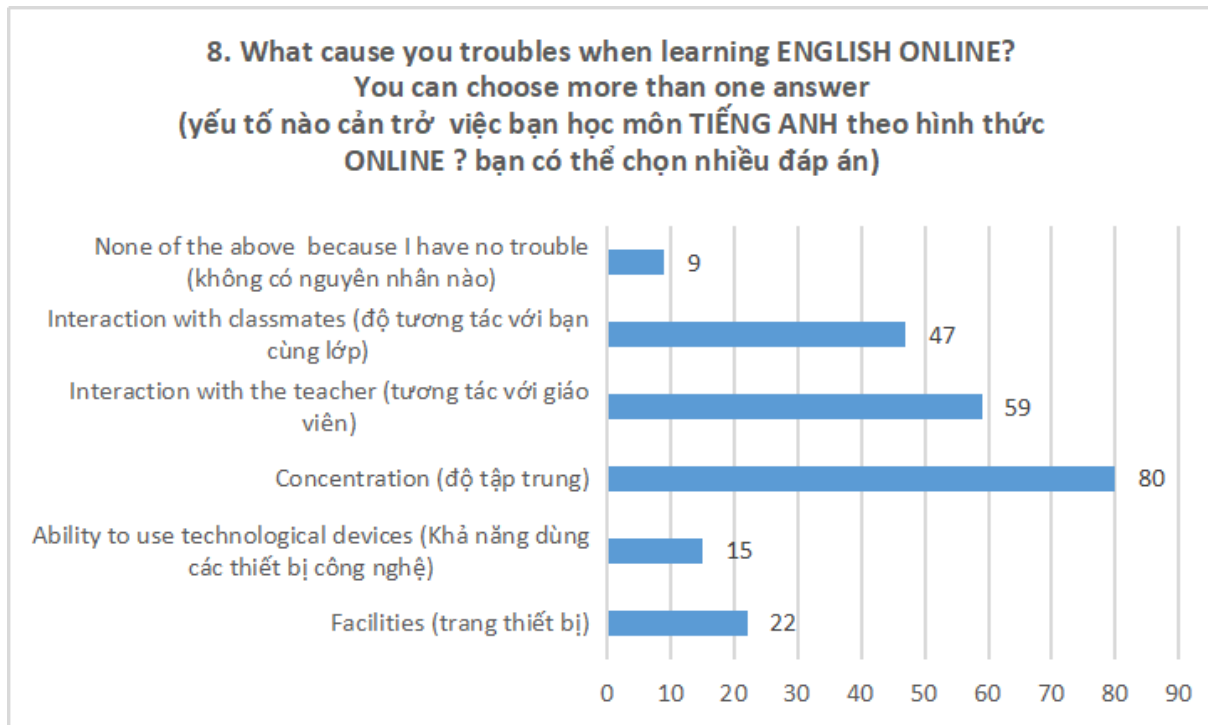**Figure 7: Troubles with online learning**

Figure 8: The causes of troubles when learning online

The students' practicing the speaking skill online (in relation to the range of online speaking activities)

Troubles with the English skills when learning online

According to Figure 9, a large number of students always have trouble with learning English speaking skills online. To make it clearer, about 63 students (56.3%), the second-highest number in the chart, agree that they have trouble learning speaking skills online. Moreover, this percentage is almost the same as the highest one (about 65 students, 58 %). This is consistent with the data in the previous Figure (Figure 7) that the students' weakness is in the speaking skill, not with the technological issues.
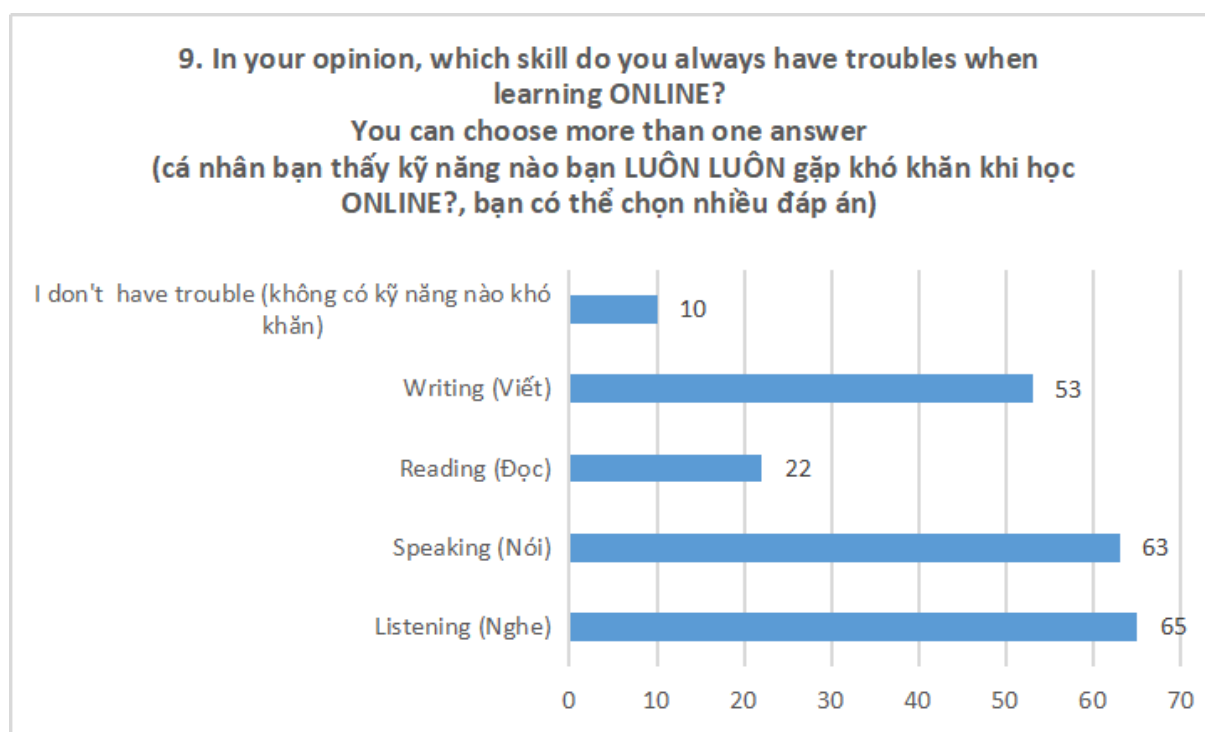

Figure 9: Troubles with the English skills when learning online

The way the speaking skill is practiced

Apart from less than half of the students who volunteer to speak out the language and discuss orally with a partner online, the main way of practice is practicing alone (71 out of 112 students). Moreover, 13 out of 112 students choose to keep silent during their English speaking sessions. Despite the reasons for this silence, which can be because of the lack of interest in the speaking tasks, or the student's lack of confidence in voicing the language, this silence leads to the students' insufficiency in the practice time and obviously affects the students' fluency in the English-speaking skills.
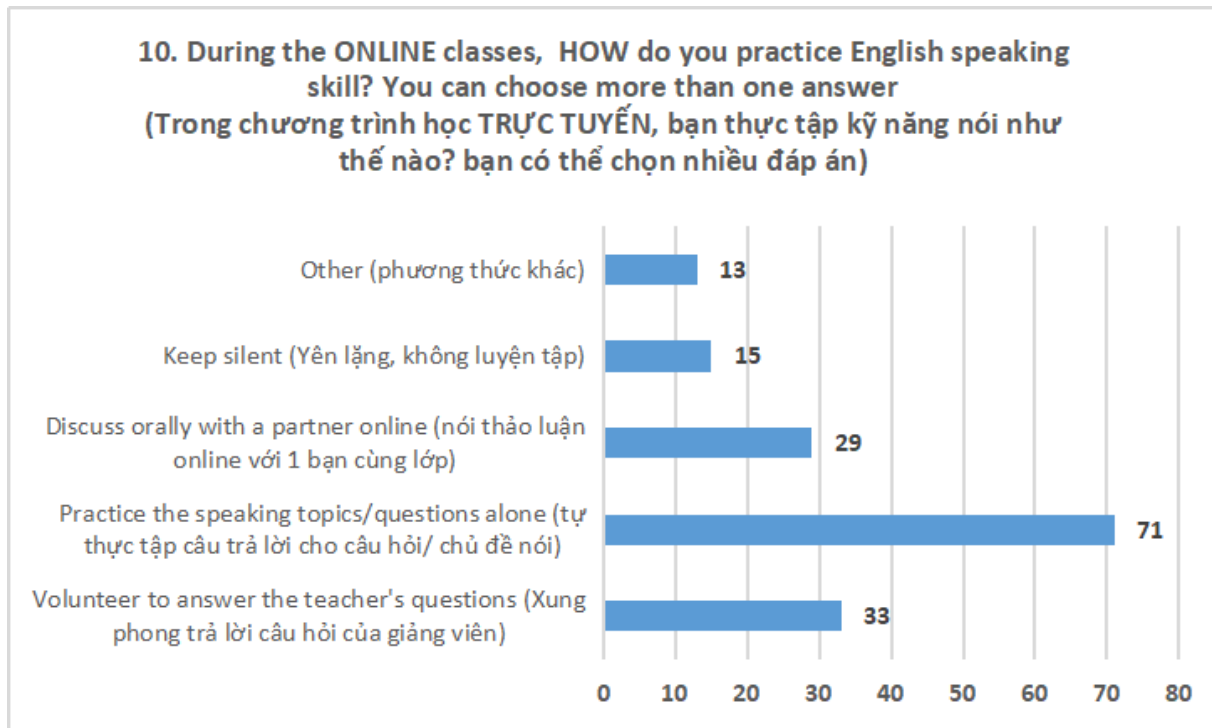
Figure 10: The way the speaking skill is practiced

The students' concentration

The pie chart shows that 63.4% of the participants concentrate at the medium level in practicing the speaking skill online. It is consistent with the data mentioned in Figure 8 that the most troublesome element affecting the students' learning online is their concentration. However, it is clear that there is an upward trend of their concentration as the percentage of "very concentrated" and "much concentrated" is much higher than the opposite side with "less concentrated" and "least concentrated". This trend partly shows the students' effort in their language learning.
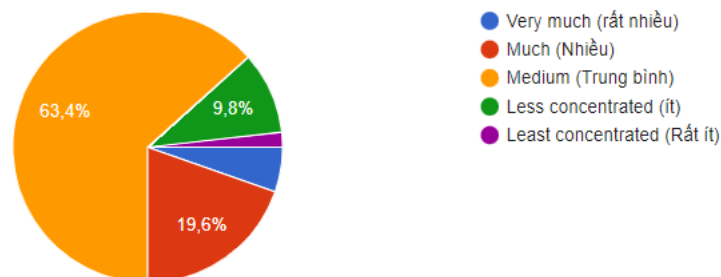

Figure 11: The student's concentration

The students' interaction in the relationship with the speaking activities

 The data in Figure 12 and Figure 13 show a contradictory result. As in Figure 13, although the participants come from different colleges with different non-majored English teaching programs, the activities in which they are instructed to do are diverse (53.6 %), and quite diverse (29.5%). Moore (2011) thinks that classroom activities can engage students in learning activities, facilitate learning by doing, and practice communication skills. To put it another way, in this survey, a sufficient amount of speaking activities is supposed to boost the interaction in the English-speaking classes.

However, in this study, the ample number of speaking tasks can not do much to increase the students' interaction. The data in Figure 12 suggests that more than half of the students (54.5%) have medium interaction in their English learning. The second-largest group in this Figure (with 27.7 %) is "less interactive". It can be inferred that the students have certain obstacles in developing their English proficiency. According to Rivers, W. M. (1987), 'Through interaction, students can increase their language store". In this study, this inadequate interaction is considered as an unavoidable result of the combination of the majority's medium English background (Figure 1-5), their trouble with the online learning environment (Figure 7-8-9), and their learning the speaking skill online (Figure 10).

12. How is your INTERACTION in learning the English speaking skill ONLINE? (Độ TƯƠNG TÁC của bạn như thế nào trong việc học kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh TRỰC TUYẾN?)
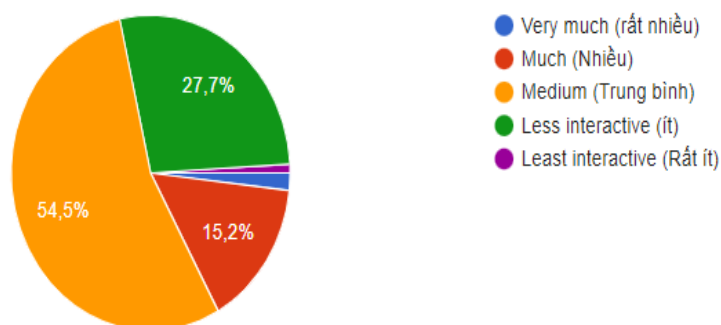
112 câu trả lời

- Very much (rất nhiều)
- Much (Nhiều)
- Medium (Trung bình)
- Less interactive (ít)
- Least interactive (Rất ít)

Figure 12: the students' interaction

13. In your ONLINE curriculum, How do you feel about the English Speaking activities? (Trong chương trình học TRỰC TUYẾN, bạn thấy các hoạt động speaking như thế nào?)
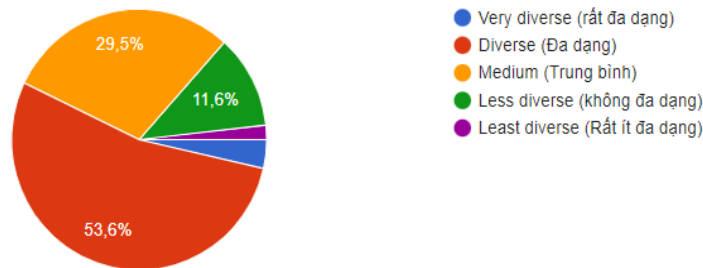
112 câu trả lời

- Very diverse (rất đa dạng)
- Diverse (Đa dạng)
- Medium (Trung bình)
- Less diverse (không đa dạng)
- Least diverse (Rất ít đa dạng)

Figure 13: The English speaking activities

To what extent can the student's fluency in English speaking ability during online learning be increased?

The students' improvement

Learning English in online classes brings benefits to the minority of the students. Firstly, about 15.2% of the participants state that they have "much more progress" or "more progress" than when they learn English offline. Secondly, just 8 percent of the students report that they have "no progress", which can be due to the students' current poor language proficiency, not because of the learning environment (online or offline). Moreover, as shown in the pie chart, nearly half of the participants state that they achieve less progress when learning English in online classes than in offline classes. It is not to mention that the second-highest percentage in this pie chart is achieving "the same progress" as learning in the offline environment.

14. When compared to learning English in offline classes, does Learning English in ONLINE classes bring you MORE IMPROVEMENT? (nếu so sánh với việc học tiếng anh trực tiếp trên lớp, việc học tiếng anh ONLINE có làm bạn tiến bộ hơn không?)

112 câu trả lời

- Much more progress (Tiến bộ hơn rất nhiều so với học trên lớp trực tiếp)
- More progress (Tiến bộ hơn so với học trên lớp trực tiếp)
- The same progress (tiến bộ, cũng giống như học trên lớp trực tiếp)
- Less progress (ít tiến bộ hơn học trên lớp trực tiếp)
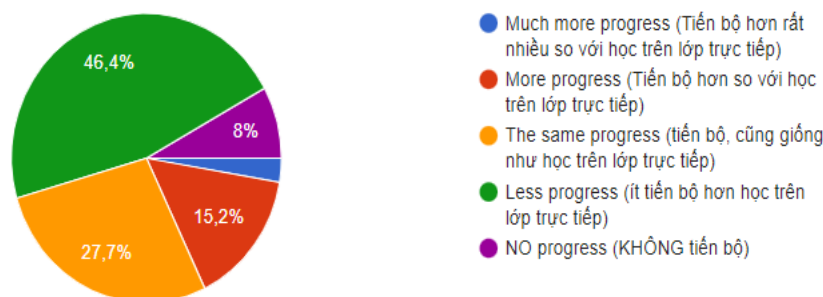- NO progress (KHÔNG tiến bộ)

Figure 14: The students' improvement

The reasons for the progress

When being asked about the reasons for their progress, about 82 out of 112 students (73.2 %) agree that their autonomy is the main contributor to their improvement in their English speaking skills. This justifies that although the students' interaction level is majorly medium (Figure 12), the majority of them have motivations in learning the speaking skill by trying to expose themselves in English (self-practicing the speaking topics, volunteering to answer the questions in English) (Figure 10)
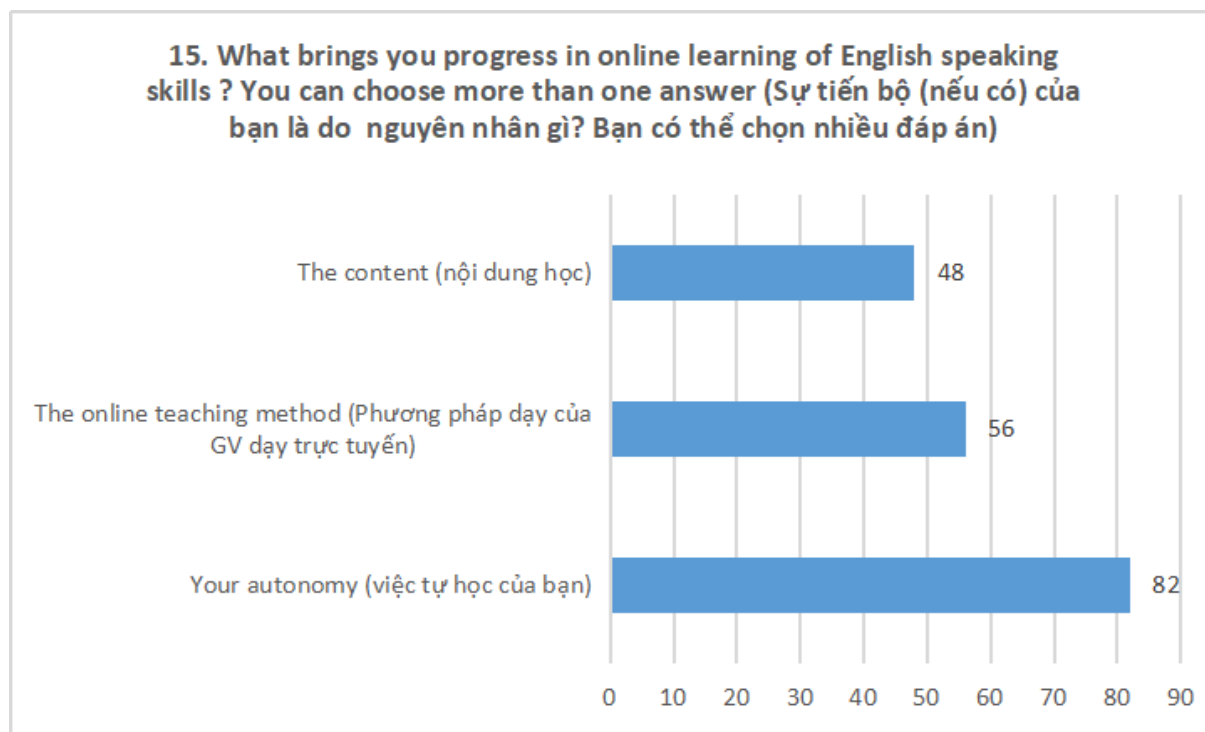

Figure 15: The reasons for the progress

Discussion & Suggestions

About the students' English background, it can be seen that many students have trouble achieving fluency in English speaking skills. Firstly, the percentage of the poor level in speaking's fluency is high. Moreover, this percentage is almost double the one in the general English-speaking skills and three times higher than the same category in the general English skill. Therefore, it is inferred that the students' fluency in the English-speaking skills is the weak point of the majority of the participants. It is not to mention the fact that the participants come from many majors in different universities shows their different paces of acquisition. As Maleki, A., & Zangani, E. (2007) states that "English language proficiency is a good indicator and predictor of academic achievement for those students who are majoring in English (the EFL area),". The combination of different acquisition paces and troubles with the fluency in the speaking skill makes online learning and teaching more complex.

Questions asking about the students' condition of learning online show that although the majority of the students are not familiar with learning online, once learning in that mode, they just have a few difficulties. Not relating much to the technological issues, obstacles are mainly about the online learning environment. In other words, they have trouble with interaction with their teacher and among themselves. They also have difficulties concentrating on the lessons.

The variety of the speaking activities in the class does not enhance the students much. It is shown by the way the students choose to practice the speaking skill- a concerning number of the students choose to practice the speaking task alone. That main mode of practicing the speaking skills among the participants can lead to various problems. As the students' self-practice, they, especially the low-level students, cannot self-correct their mistakes in the use of grammar, word choices, pronunciation, etc. This will be hard for them to move to the next level of progress. As a result, the poor students are getting more and more silent and less interactive in the lessons.

The students' improvement, if possible, is mainly through their autonomy. It means that the online learning environment does not help much in their fluency in English speaking skills. That is why it is suggested that the learners should be given more freedom and scopes to interact in the E-learning environment.

Findings partly help to understand the effect of the relationship between the students' level and their online learning condition on the students' improvement. Because students have different paces of learning and various weaknesses in their English-speaking fluency, instructors should pay attention to those characteristics so that they can give suitable teaching methods to different groups of students in their online teaching. Among the solutions, grouping the students to different language abilities also helps decrease the variety in language ability.

Findings also suggest that teachers should find ways to maximize the student's concentration and interactions with their students as well as the one among the students. However, because the diversity of classroom activities does not help much in increasing the concentration and interactions as mentioned above and the students' progress mainly comes from their autonomy, teachers should focus on ways increasing the students' self-learning, helping them consciously increase their interaction (with their teacher and peers), and consequently increase their concentration while interacting.

In offline classes, teachers usually elicit students' responses by calling on them to answer questions to encourage interaction and concentration. This method, however, is only limited to some specific students and cannot cover the whole class. As Moorhouse and Kohnke (2020) recommended, one way to facilitate interactions in language classrooms is through response cards. Response cards are cards on which students write their answers and then hold up to display. According to Twyman and Heward (2018), response cards effectively increase participation and improve learning outcomes for students at all levels. Nevertheless, in Microsoft Teams online classes, eliciting and managing students' responses is challenging because interactions can only be carried out through webcams and microphones. It is not feasible to ask all students to turn on their webcams and microphones simultaneously. With Microsoft Teams, students can type in their answers in the chatbox, but it takes a lot of time and effort to check all of their responses. This issue can be solved by applying Student Response Systems (SRS) such as Mentimeter, Kahoot, etc., which provide a better and more flexible way

for students to respond using their electronic devices. Those platforms, however, can only facilitate interactions between teachers and students and are unhelpful for peer interactions.

A better way to organize pair work and group work, as well as enhance interaction between teacher – students and students with each other, is through MIRO, a visual collaboration platform that can be integrated into Microsoft Teams. MIRO allows users to collaborate and share ideas with each other as if they were in the same room. MIRO provides users with a board that both teacher and students can see, edit, and add information in a classroom context. With MIRO, teachers can upload notes, videos, images, or tasks onto a board and invite students to interact and collaborate with each other. In this way, MIRO can help facilitate interaction between teacher – students and between students with each other and students with the lesson content. Therefore, with a wide range of features and functionalities, MIRO can be an effective tool for language teachers to enhance the student's speaking skills when learning online.

Potential benefits of MIRO in Online Language Classrooms

In MIRO, teachers can sign up for a free account, create a virtual board and add various features such as text, sticky notes, mind maps, YouTube videos, or links to external websites. The board can be shared directly with students via a link which can be provided by clicking on the "Invite members" on the top right corner. The students, then, can also edit the content on the board under the teacher's supervision.

There are some potential pedagogical benefits of applying MIRO in language classrooms to enhance interaction and concentration, as well as to improve speaking skills.

Firstly, as MIRO is an excellent tool for brainstorming ideas, it can be used to elicit students' opinions about a specific topic as a warm-up activity before a speaking task. Based on students' responses, teachers can structure the lesson content according to students' previous knowledge and interests in order to enhance their engagement. For example, teachers can ask an open-ended question and allow students to add their ideas in the form of post-it notes to the board.

Secondly, MIRO can be useful in evaluating students' concentration and attitude during class. As it is hard to keep students' attention during an online lesson, the teacher can create a warmer activity to liven up and increase energy after each section of a lesson. For instance, the teacher can ask students to use an emoji or write a short sentence to show their feelings and expectations. This not only draws students' attention back to the lesson but is also useful in helping the teacher find out whether the students are paying attention to the lesson. Besides, at the end of the class, the platform can be used to collect students' questions and expectations about the lesson content.

Thirdly, MIRO is also useful for group work activities. Teachers can create several frames and divide the class into smaller groups. Each group will be then assigned to a frame as their own working space. For example, the groups are asked to collect information about a specific topic. Each group member will work together and post what they can find (videos, images, text, links to websites, etc.) in their own group's working area on the board. Teachers can check all the groups' progress in real-time and provide assistance if necessary. Besides, after completion, the students can also see other groups' works, like in a gallery. They can also comment and discuss directly on the board.

In addition, MIRO can also be used for individual work. Students can create their own MIRO boards and use them as digital workbooks with each frame for an assignment. Students can add

text or upload videos of their oral assignments and share them with their teachers for feedback. Since the students will use the board for the whole semester, the teachers can encourage students to respond to the feedback and edit the assignments according to students' abilities and track their progress easily.

One potential limitation of MIRO is that a free account can allow teachers to create up to 3 interactive boards. Besides, some features such as voting, video chat, and timer will also be unavailable. However, with various features and an intuitive interface, MIRO can be an efficient tool for improving speaking skills in online language classrooms.

Conclusion

When being taught the speaking skill in the online environment with the support of MIRO integrated with MS-Teams, non-majored students will have better interaction with their peers and, consequently, greater learning motivation and concentration, even with big-sized classes. The students' fluency in their speaking performance will be enhanced by improving those.

However, further research should be carried out to find out how to improve the students' speaking fluency by improving the students' mistake self-correction via the use of MS-Team because mistake self-correction will support the interaction.

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