

THE EFFECTS OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE ON NON-ENGLISH MAJORS' SPEAKING SKILLS AT IUH

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Abstract. The potential of virtual exchange (VE) to improve oral communication skills of learners in non-English speaking countries has not been acknowledged in the literature. However, despite the expansion of VE programs for on-demand language practices in mainstream foreign language education and the growing number of research into VE worldwide, the potential of VE has not been recognized in Vietnam. This study explored the effects of VE on the speaking skills of non-English majors at a Vietnamese technical university. It used a survey with Likert-type options, interviews, and students' language samples to examine both the perceived and actual impact of VE. The findings show that all participants believed in the encouraging effects of VE on students' debate skills, idea exchanges, learning process, sense of improvement and achievement, confidence, interaction, and speaking motivation. Five elements of speaking skills, namely Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Fluency, and Discourse Management, were improved, with Discourse Management showing the most progress and Grammar showing the least. Linguistic analysis indicates that student participants actually made progress in their oral communication skills. However, improvement varied depending on the topic, with participants showing more improvement in familiar or easy speaking activities compared to less common matters and complex situations. Based on the findings, recommendations are made for VE researchers, designers, teachers, and students.

Keywords. Virtual Exchange, speaking skills, non-English majors

1. INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of the Internet, computers, and recent advancements in technology have made online learning a new form of language teaching methods in recent years (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; Luo & Yang, 2021). Teaching a foreign language through virtual exchange (VE) is recommended as an innovative way to provide more learning opportunities to language students with limited financial resources. VE helps students connect and interact with teachers and peers worldwide as if they were in a physical class (Lee et al., 2022; Machwate et al., 2021). The recent challenges to physical mobility caused by global pandemics have led to increased interest and support for VE in many countries (O'Dowd, 2021). In EFL settings, more VE programs have been organized to improve students' English communicative competence and other knowledge and skills due to their potential economic and environmental benefits (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). Numerous studies on VE have shown its positive impacts on students' language competence, cultural awareness, cultural competences (Cunningham & Akiyama, 2018), learning performance, and persistence (Lee et al., 2022). Regarding language education, most scholars have recognized the significant role and potential of VE in improving the oral communication skills of learners in second/foreign language learning contexts (Cappellini, 2019). Specifically, VE enhances overall language skills and core linguistic developments, including the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar (Cunningham & Akiyama, 2018), socio-pragmatic competence, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Rienties et al., 2022). While various research methodologies have been employed by VE researchers, the most common type is qualitative or descriptive case studies, as noted by Rienties et al. (2022) and Lee et al. (2022). However, it should be noted that results obtained from anecdotal evidence should be interpreted with caution, since the validity of data depends on participants' memory and preferences. Baroni et al. (2019) highlighted the need for more evidence-based research to test whether VE does indeed benefit foreign language learning.

Despite the arrival of VE, the expansion of VE projects for on-demand language practices and intercultural exchanges in mainstream foreign language education, and the growing number of research studies into VE worldwide, the potential of VE has not been recognized in Vietnam. Some scholars have examined various

aspects of online learning, including factors that affect learners' interaction in online classes (Pham, 2020), teachers' and learners' perceptions of online learning (Dinh & Vo, 2020), learners' readiness (Khoa & Nguyen, 2021), the effectiveness of English online learning, and solutions to improve the quality of online education (Tran et al., 2021). However, there has been a lack of research exploring the impact of VE on English language learning in the country. For this study, the effects of VE on non-English majors' speaking skills were selected for investigation. The reason behind the selection of this macro skill is its critical role inside and outside the Vietnamese language classroom. Speaking is considered the most important aspect of communication for many second/foreign language learners, since success in language learning is often judged by spoken language proficiency (Rao, 2019). In addition, poor English-speaking skills can be a hindrance for job applicants during interviews and at work. However, despite its importance, speaking is often regarded as the weakest language skill among Vietnamese learners (Pham et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study was threefold: a) to explore the perceived effectiveness of VE in relation to non-English majors' speaking skills; b) to understand what elements of speaking skills are reported having developed; and c) to examine whether students actually make progress in their speaking performance. The study's suggestions are expected to improve the VE program at the Faculty of Foreign Languages (FFL), Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City (IUH). Additionally, the recommendations may aid in the design, improvement, and development of similar VE projects at IUH and other universities in Vietnam in the future.

In the following sections of this paper, we start with a brief review of the literature on VE. We continue with a description of the methods used to collect data and how we conducted the research at FFL. Next, the results of the study are presented. The paper ends with a discussion of the research findings and suggestions for future studies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definitions of Terms

Virtual Exchange (VE): Virtual Exchange (VE) is a term used in various ways, such as "Telecollaboration," "eTandem," or "Teletandem," depending on the context and epistemologies (for an elaborative review of VE terms, see O'Dowd (2018)). In our study, we adopt the definitions suggested by Dooly and Vinagre (2021) and Rienties et al. (2022). VE refers to "the process of communicating and collaboratively learning with peers from different locations through the use of technology" (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021, p. 393) and is organized under "the guidance of teachers or trained facilitators" (Rienties et al., 2022, p. 3). VE is highly appreciated as a teaching and learning resource that is useful for language teachers and learners in various pedagogical contexts. It is dynamic and can be used in physical or hybrid learning environments as "a stand-alone classroom activity" or "a course component" (Giralt et al., 2022, p. 116). Machwate et al. (2021, p. 3) made it clear that VE distinguishes itself from online learning due to its key features. It is not a self-guided learning process but a guided learning process supported by teachers or a group of educators/facilitators (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). It emphasizes participants' constructive interaction and dialogue, the achievement of soft skills such as group work, co-constructed knowledge and skills, and the recognition of participants' differences. The active role of teachers and learners in different geographical locations and their mutual collaboration are essential for the success of VE (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021, p. 394).

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a web-based program that participants can access via computers or cell phones. Most VE programs use video conferencing for real-time communication. Synchronous features such as audio, video, chat, breakout rooms, interactive whiteboard, feedback, and application sharing make VE like a real classroom. Participants can send written or recorded messages synchronously and asynchronously (Martin & Parker, 2014).

Speaking Skills: We adopt the Cambridge approach (Cambridge, 2009), which specifies that speaking ability consists of "multiple competences," is "both a knowledge and a processing factor," and is "a situated social practice" (p. 4). We support the view that speaking combines cognitive and socio-cognitive elements, including lexis, grammar, pronunciation, lexico-grammar, chunks of language, and knowledge of pragmatics and phonology.

Components of Speaking Assessment: In examining the progress in the speaking performance of learners in this study, we found that the features of the Vietnamese Standardised Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) speaking exams, as cited from Nguyen (2020), are suitable for our research's purpose as they reflect the

aforementioned concept of speaking skills. The assessment criteria of the VSTEP speaking exams include five elements: grammar (range and accuracy of sentences and structures), vocabulary (range and control of the vocabulary repertoire across different topics and situations), pronunciation (intelligible articulation of individual sounds, word and sentence stress, and intonation to express intended meanings and functions), fluency (control of hesitation and management of extended speech across topics and situations), and discourse management (performance of thematic development, coherence, and cohesion).

2.2. Virtual Exchange and Second/Foreign language education

The literature on Virtual Exchange (VE) in foreign language education has grown rapidly over the past two decades (Luo & Yang, 2021; O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019). Researchers have paid special attention to how VE improves participants' foreign language competence, as evidenced by studies documenting its significant role in enhancing different areas of second/foreign language education. For example, VE has been shown to increase comfort and engagement in dialogues, improve confidence, and provide participation opportunities (Al-Qahtani, 2019). VE can also help to promote learning autonomy and motivation (Canals, 2020; Luo & Yang, 2021), confidence in second language learning (O'Dowd, 2021), positive learning experiences (Dooly & Sadler, 2013), and overall language skills (Jajere, 2020). Benefits related to the development of the core features of language skills include improved pragmatic competence (Cunningham & Akiyama, 2018; Rienties et al., 2022), better pronunciation, fluency, grammar, comprehension, and vocabulary (Hamouda, 2020), and enhanced accuracy (Cunningham & Akiyama, 2018).

However, some researchers have cast doubt on the reported benefits of VE in the language learning context. In the study by Banditvilai (2016), the lack of in-person interaction contributed to a feeling of disconnection, which posed challenges for some students. Participants with low functionality (unequal participation) expressed disappointment with the outcomes of the VE concerning pair collaboration (Ryder & Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). Luo and Gui (2021) reported some challenges faced by students in their VE program, including a lack of depth in group discussion, gaps in target language proficiency, and irrelevance to target language improvement. Students with proficient language ability reported more learning opportunities than those with lower ability (Banditvilai, 2016; Jiang et al., 2014). Some participants found several activities challenging and demanding in terms of language requirements and were unable to participate accordingly (Baroni et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2014).

In addition, although an increasing number of scholars consider VE ideal for the development of second/foreign language competence, several gaps in the methodology of most VE studies have been identified, resulting in a critical concern when interpreting results. Specifically, the findings of these studies are often based on participants' ratings of Likert-scale items, comparisons of participants' scores on pre- and post-tests, or self-reported qualitative data such as interviews or written texts. Not much research is supported by linguistic data providing nuanced and detailed insights into how real improvements are made in participants' second/foreign language competence (Baroni et al., 2019).

For example, Al-Qahtani (2019) conducted research with 30 teachers and students at a women's English department. Each group of participants answered a specific questionnaire that asked for their perception of the effectiveness of VE. Participants agreed with the significant role of VE in enhancing oral communication skills in three aspects: increased comfort and engagement in dialogues, improved confidence, and increased opportunities for participation. Discussion was based on the perceived value of VE among the students and teachers. Similarly, Hamouda (2020) conducted a study with 70 English majors at Qassim University to explore the impact of VE on their speaking skills. The author assigned participants to two groups: a control group and an experimental group. Data tools included an oral speaking test, a questionnaire, and interviews. The study found that the students in the experimental group had higher post-test scores than the control group students in pronunciation, fluency, grammar, comprehension, and vocabulary. The interesting features of the VE and the relaxed learning environment were attributed to better final grades. Similarly, Kudo et al. (2017) and Tian and Wang (2010) listed several benefits that students reported through their participation in VE, such as improved core linguistic competence, accuracy, and fluency. The participants perceived being better at speaking, writing, listening, and reading. In the study of Lee and Markey (2014), participants highlighted that VE contributed to the prevention of language fossilization, improvement in lexical knowledge, and acquisition of native-like pronunciation. However, study conclusions were drawn based on participants' perceptions and not on language samples. It remains

unclear from the self-reported data or the test scores how students progressed and which improvements they made in different elements of speaking skills.

Rienties et al. (2022, p. 10) have highlighted the lack of VE studies that use an evidence-based approach to examine whether actual improvements are made. Participants' perceptions of linguistic gains are subject to bias, especially when they report their own experiences, which may lead to invalid data. Additionally, the assessment process of linguistic skills developed by participants poses a challenge for the pedagogical implications of VEs. For instance, oral skills were inaccurately assessed through written essays (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021) or text comments (Baroni et al., 2019). Researchers have encountered difficulties in tracking changes in language output to provide insight into the development of foreign language competence (Baroni et al., 2019, p. 56).

Last but not least, an important gap in the literature is the lack of VE research in developing economies. While VE has been developing for more than 20 years, most of the research has been conducted in Western countries (Luo & Yang, 2021). No studies have been conducted on this issue in the Vietnamese context to date. The benefits and suggestions that have emerged from VE studies in other countries may not be applicable to Vietnamese teaching and learning conditions. Therefore, it is significant to conduct this study to examine to what extent VE can benefit the speaking skills of Vietnamese learners. In our study, a mixed-method approach will be used to elicit participants' perceptions and language samples, which may shed light on the language improvements that participants made during the VE (if any). This will help fill the gap in the literature.

The research questions that the present study addressed are:

1. Do teachers and students perceive the VE as effective in developing students' speaking skills?
2. What specific elements of speaking skills are reported to have improved through the VE?
3. Is there evidence of actual progress in students' speaking skills as a result of participating in the VE?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants and Context of the study

The study was part of a VE project conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages during the second semester of the 2021–2022 academic year for a duration of four months. Project participants included 8 teachers and 55 non-English majors from different universities. Of these, thirty-five students (14 females, 21 males from Vietnam, Taiwan, Egypt, Poland, and Colombia) and six teachers (three females, three males from Taiwan, Egypt, Poland, the USA, and Colombia) completed the online survey. Fifteen students agreed to join the interviews, and language samples were collected from six of the students. The age range of the students was 18 to 22 years, and for the teachers, it was 38 to 60 years. The students' English proficiency levels ranged from high A2 to low B1 (CEFR). The VE aimed to increase student participants' English language and intercultural proficiency, and this present study focuses on the effectiveness of the VE on students' speaking skills. Meetings were organized online via Zoom every two weeks, and each meeting lasted about 90 minutes, during which participants engaged in various activities, such as discussions, presentations, debates, and teamwork. The VE covered seven topics: Introduction, Jobs, Food and Drink, Education, Entertainment, Love, Tourism, and a Finale.

3.2. Methods

Our study used a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to "obtain different but complementary data . . . to best understand the problem" (Morse, 1991, p. 122). Triangulation can help enhance the strengths and overcome the weaknesses of each method (Chun, 2015). Using different methods can expand and validate results, as the phenomenon can be viewed through multiple lenses. Data tools in our study included questionnaires, semi-structured individual interviews, and recordings of language production samples.

The questionnaires comprised two sections. The first section gathered data about the participants' background information. The second section consisted of 27 questions that explored their perceptions of the improved elements of speaking skills (5 items), the benefits of the VE (11 items), and the challenges (11 items) they faced with respect to speaking proficiency. The reliability of items for the perceptions of the improved elements of speaking skills, the benefits, and the challenges was found 0.938, 0.974, and

0.913 respectively. The questionnaires were distributed online to teachers and students during the final VE meeting. All participants were briefed on the study's objectives and gave their consent to the use of data from the Zoom meetings and surveys by the researchers. Pseudonyms were employed in this study. Six teachers and 35 students responded to the surveys.

Semi-structured individual interviews with participating students were conducted one week after the questionnaires were completed. Of the 35 students, 15 agreed to participate in the interviews. One researcher asked a series of pre-determined open-ended questions to each individual participant. These interviews provided more insight into participants' perspectives on the perceived enhancement of their speaking abilities, as well as the advantages and obstacles they faced in relation to their speaking competence. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. Sample questions used in the semi-structured individual interviews are: "Do you believe that the virtual exchange program improves your speaking ability? Please give some examples to support your answer" and "What are the interesting parts of the virtual exchange program?".

Since six out of the 15 students attended most of the VE meetings (ranging from 5 to 8 meetings), samples of the spoken language production of these six students were extracted from the primary Zoom meetings and breakout rooms for data analysis. To track any improvements in participants' language samples over time (if any), the VSTEP rubrics for speaking tests (cited from Nguyen, 2020) were used. We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and SPSS version 20 to analyze the qualitative and quantitative data, respectively.

4. RESULTS

4.1. RQ1: Do teachers and students perceive the VE as effective in developing students' speaking skills?

Quantitative data

Table 21 and Table 2 present the descriptive statistics for the perceived benefits and challenges of the VE. Overall, all participants strongly believed in the positive impact of the VE. For student participants, enriched interaction was rated the highest (M=4.37), followed closely by improved speaking motivation, confidence, improved speaking weaknesses, and reduced communication anxiety. Participating teachers also believed that the VE was beneficial to student participants' speaking skills, as the means for ten items were high. Specifically, six items, namely building debate skills, exchanging ideas, the learning process, the sense of improvement and achievement, confidence, and interaction, were rated highly at 4.5 each, followed by reduced communication anxiety, improved speaking motivation, improved speaking weaknesses, and developed ideas. The lowest mean (M=3.83) was recorded for item 11 (Improved critical thinking). Regarding challenges, both student and teacher participants perceived that the VE itself did not present any serious obstacles to students' learning process (Mean ≤ 3). Technical problems (item 18) received the highest ratings (Mean=3 for teacher participants and Mean=2.97 for student participants).

Table 1: Students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of the VE

Benefits	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
6. It helped me reduce communication anxiety.	2.9	2.9	5.7	37.1	51.4	4.31
7. Its activities built up my debate skills gradually.	2.9	2.9	2.9	54.2	37.1	4.2
8. It encouraged my exchange of ideas.	5.7	0	2.9	45.7	45.7	4.26
9. I found my group leader's support beneficial to my learning process.	5.7	0	2.9	48.6	42.9	4.23
10. The feedback made by the language experts encouraged a sense of improvement and achievement.	5.7	0	5.7	45.7	42.9	4.2
11. Its activities improved my critical thinking.	2.9	2.9	8.6	51.4	34.3	4.11
12. It motivated me to learn speaking skills.	2.9	2.9	2.9	40	51.4	4.34
13. It helped me recognize my speaking weaknesses.	5.7	0	5.7	34.3	54.3	4.31
14. It made me feel more confident to participate in my future English speaking classes.	5.7	0	0	45.7	48.6	4.31
15. It enriched the interaction among participants.	2.9	2.9	2.9	37.1	54.3	4.37

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16. The Padlet helped me develop my speaking ideas.	5.7	0	5.7	54.3	34.3	4.11
Challenges	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
18. I had technical problems when participating in the virtual class.	22.9	17.1	17.1	25.7	17.1	2.97
19. Ninety minutes was too long for each meeting.	25.7	51.4	17.1	2.9	2.9	2.06
20. It was difficult to follow the language experts' speaking speech.	25.7	34.3	22.9	11.4	5.7	2.37
21. I could not catch up with my teammates' speech.	20	37.1	34.3	2.9	5.7	2.37
22. I did not have enough vocabulary to join speaking activities.	17.1	42.9	20	17.1	2.9	2.46
23. I was not interested in the study topics.	42.9	42.9	5.7	0	8.6	1.89
24. The activities were not well-organised.	48.6	28.6	11.4	5.7	5.7	1.91
25. The class did not provide enough speaking opportunities.	42.9	34.3	14.3	2.9	5.7	1.94
26. Participants were not friendly.	60	25.7	5.7	2.9	5.7	1.69
27. I felt pressure when participating in the class.	42.9	34.3	17.1	0	5.7	1.91

Table 2: Teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of the VE

Benefits	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
6. It helped students reduce communication anxiety.	0	0	0	66.7	33.3	4.33
7. Its activities built up students' debate skills gradually.	0	0	0	50	50	4.5
8. It encouraged students' exchange of ideas.	0	0	0	50	50	4.5
9. I found group leaders' support beneficial to students' learning process.		0	0	50	50	4.5
10. The feedback made by the language experts encouraged a sense of improvement and achievement.	0	0	0	50	50	4.5
11. Its activities improved students' critical thinking.	0	0	33.3	50	16.7	3.83
12. It motivated students to learn speaking skills.	0	0	0	66.7	33.3	4.33
13. It helped students recognize their speaking weaknesses.	0	0	0	66.7	33.3	4.33
14. It made students' feel more confident to participate in future English speaking classes.	0	0	0	50	50	4.5
15. It enriched the interaction among participants.	0	0	0	50	50	4.5
16. The Padlet helped students develop their speaking ideas.	0	0	16.7	50	33.3	4.17
Challenges	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
18. Students had technical problems when participating in the virtual class.	0	16.7	66.7	16.7	0	3
19. Ninety minutes was too long for each meeting.	16.7	50	16.7	16.7	0	2.33
20. It was difficult to follow the language experts' speaking speech.	0	100	0	0	0	2
21. Students could not catch up with teammates' speech.	16.7	33.3	50	0	0	2.33
22. Students did not have enough vocabulary to join speaking activities.	16.7	66.7	16.7	0	0	2
23. Students were not interested in the study topics.	33.3	50	16.7	0	0	1.83
24. The activities were not well-organised.	33.3	50	0	16.7	0	2.17
25. The class did not provide enough speaking opportunities.	33.3	50	16.7	0	0	1.83
26. Participants were not friendly.	66.7	33.3	0	0	0	1.33
27. Students felt pressure when participating in the class.	16.7	50	33.3	0	0	2.17

Qualitative data

Information gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 student participants supported the survey data regarding the benefits of the VE. All participants highlighted the important contribution of the VE and believed that it improved their confidence, participation, motivation, critical thinking, and natural response. Participants made it clear that the atmosphere created by the members' interaction and the effective arrangement of different activities in the VE resulted in positive changes in their learning process.

Examples of participants' voices are:

In Taiwan we don't have a lot of chance to speak, so we don't...we don't have chance to practice our ... English, and...we will think a lot to...think a lot about our grammar or our vocabulary... I more be able to communicate easy, and it becomes to me...more opinions for questions (S1).

I think the...in school...study in school mostly focus on the grammar and the...hand-writing. . . in school...the lesson in school usually focus on the...grammar and writing, . . . We don't have opportunity to do speech or listen. . . But, here, we have the opportunity to speak with others, speak and listen . . . (S7).

I think...I become more confident to speak in English. And I think I'm a pretty...shy, shy person. It's easier for me to express my thoughts...and...it was the stress...stress, you know...from the people from the other countries, it was stressful, but...after sometime, I got custom to and it's...to say easier (S15).

It's quite hard for me at first to...discuss the custom to so many people, and...it's quite hard to...speak up because don't have the courage to . . . speak up and...saying something. Overall, after some time, it was easier to communicate with others (S10).

We are able to speak freely; we didn't worry about somebody charging us...about communication. . . Yes, definitely. I said the...fluency, the ease to speak to pick up my own voice, and...not being afraid to ask questions and...yes, communicating (S6).

Yes, I think I have many improvements my English speaking. In the first week, I can't explain my thought clearly and...I very afraid of speaking in front of others. I felt I had a little bit pressure. Now, we are in [the meeting seventh], I think I can express my thoughts more...clearly and confident, yes. . .

I don't like to think more, but in the breakout room session, I have to think a lot more than before, and I have to...think about . . . so many thoughts. And I think that.... can improve my critical thinking, yes. . . In this project, I practice how to speak, practice how to...pronounce, and talk with more people.

And that's what I think the...practice isn't easy a practice, though I...I'm taking some classes that improve speaking in global class, but I think this project provides me more chances to say about...to express my thoughts, yes (S3).

In terms of challenges, three students mentioned that they lacked vocabulary to join discussions; their grammar structures were incorrect; or they had difficulty understanding the accents of students coming from different countries. These challenges hindered their engagement in discussions with other participants.

Examples of students' ideas are:

I have accent problem. I can't understand students from other areas clear (S4).

Grammar is a problem with me. Sometimes I'm not sure my grammar is correct. I always think my grammar is wrong (S2).

My grammar is not good. I did well for the first three week but for the rest of the project, I didn't know how to tell my idea correct. I didn't have enough English to exchange idea with members. My discussion was quite short (S14).

4.2. RQ2: What specific elements of speaking skills are reported to have improved through the VE?

Quantitative data:

Data from Table 3 and Table 4 show that all participants perceived five elements of speaking skills, namely Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Fluency, and Discourse Management, were improved during the VE (Mean > 3). Grammar was thought to develop the least by both teachers and students (Mean = 3.6 and 3.83 respectively). The students believed Discourse Management to be improved the most (Mean = 4.2). The teachers also rated students' improvement in that specific element highly (Mean = 4.17).

Table 3: Students' perceptions of improved elements of speaking skills

The VE improved my	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
Grammar	2.9	2.9	34.3	51.4	8.6	3.6
Vocabulary	2.9	2.9	5.7	51.4	37.1	4.17
Pronunciation	2.9	2.9	5.7	57.1	31.4	4.11
Fluency	2.9	2.9	2.9	60	31.4	4.14
Discourse management	2.9	2.9	2.9	54.3	37.1	4.2

Table 4: Teachers' perceptions of students' improved elements of speaking skills

The VE improved student participants'	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
Grammar	0	0	50	16.7	33.3	3.83
Vocabulary	0	0	16.7	50	33.3	4.17
Pronunciation	0	0	16.7	83.3	0	3.87
Fluency	0	0	33.3	16.7	50	4.17
Discourse management	0	0	16.7	50	33.3	4.17

Data from semi-structured interviews

Interviews with 15 students present supportive information for quantitative data. A close look at the reported comments shows that the students thought they made important improvements in four specific elements of speaking skills: Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Fluency, and Discourse Management. In addition, some students shared that they learned simple grammar structures while doing exercises on Padlet (one activity of the VE), which they then used during the discussions.

I think I can pronounce word in more accurate way. . . I join the meeting, I hear friends speaking, and I realize ...oh, I pronounce this wrong before, and I check myself and help myself improve, yes (S14). Well, I can express my thoughts more...comprehensive, yes because when I speak English in front of others, I could just say some words and short sentences. In this project, I think I have to practice more skills. I need to organize my thoughts, and express more (S12).

I think I can organize the words together . . . in a sentences faster than before. I could...learn more words, and...learn how to express myself more detail (S6).

I would say...vocabulary. Sometimes I will meet new words, so it helps ... I would hear your word that I don't know, and I just try to find out what it means. ...I don't speak English that much ... in my country. The VE provides me changes to speak and improve my fluency (S3).

I can organize my ideas. I can learn the way the language teachers and friends use words or talk their ideas. I can also learn some basic grammar structures to link my words (S1).

4.3. RQ3: Is there evidence of actual progress in students' speaking skills as a result of participating in the VE?

The data collected from language samples of six participants over four months indicate positive changes in five elements of speaking: vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and discourse management. However, the linguistic gains were more commonly observed with frequently encountered topics and activities. The students displayed limited progress when learning less common subjects and situations.

Vocabulary

Students did not display a wide range of vocabulary across all topics. They had trouble finding relevant words and structures for some topics and activities. Lexicon repetition, wrong word choice, and incorrect word forms were often found. Examples are as follows.

It's called Kosheri, uh, Kosheri. It's a ... a very traditional food in Egypt. It's contained and many, many layers and it's uh okay I will say it, it's contained the first layer. It begins with a layer of rice, okay and

over it, a layer of macaroni, and layer over it, a layer of lentil over it, a layer of a tomato sauce and fried the onion, so it's very delicious (S1W1).

This is my school uniform as an example of uniforms in Egypt. The orange uniform is for primary. The blue one is for secondary and the green one is for high school. And I think as a head teacher, I want them to wear a uniform because I feel it is better than dressing up because dress up in Egypt and in school it will be like a competition between the students who will, we are better than uh summer someone else, but at university we have a freedom to choose our closets and outfits and that's it. Thank you (S1W2).

Fluency

Fluency was better when the students talked about familiar topics. Self-correction and repetition occurred when they discussed less familiar situations. Examples are provided below.

Uh, I think you know university students wear makeup and they can, the first, they will feel, so they will feel good. And because they want to make themselves beautiful, and so I think they will they wear makeup to school is not any vote, so I think it is, I, the first I agree with. And then the second, I think when they, when students in university wear makeup, and this is makeup, can makeup, can make them, so make them more confident and that they will not, uh, and then I think it is, well, this will be making more good mood, so I think the two point is I agree with. Then the student will, the student should make wearing makeup to school (S2W6).

Uh here's our story, so started uh. Harry and Taylor Swift fall in love with Tyler and they got married. They went, they came back, they came to Vietnam to the, uh, to visit our country, and they met Cardi B, uh, Cardi B and tennis with our friends. But then Cardi B fell in love with Aaron. Uh, Cardi B and Taylor Swift fight each other. After that uh Taylor is a winner, so Taylor and Harry, uh, had a happy ending, yeah, uh. This is my... our story (S2W7).

Pronunciation

As has been shown in Table 5, in the first few weeks, some students demonstrated incorrect intonation for yes/no or wh-questions, which they were able to rectify in the later weeks. An analysis of students' speech during subsequent meetings revealed a noticeable improvement in their intonation. Rather than omitting intonation altogether, students began to use appropriate rising or falling intonation at the end of yes/no and wh-questions, respectively.

Table 5: Examples of intonation produced by students

Intonation	
Before	After
Where do you come from? (S4W1)	Is it full of beans? (S4W7)
Are you a language teacher? (S4W1)	Do you often listen to music? (S4W6)
Can you give us some reasons? (S4W3)	What kind of music did you usually listen? (S4W6)
What do you do in your free time? (S5W2)	How often do you listen to a USA music? (S5W6)
Are you a waitress? (S5W2)	Where can you buy the food? (S5W7)
Can anyone answer that question? (S5W3)	
How do students dress in Poland? (S5W3)	

However, frequent errors were still made with pronunciation of past simple /ed/ and silent letters /w/. Some students tended not to pronounce /s/ or /t/ at the end of the words. Besides, they showed efforts with word stress but rarely made sentence stress. These pronunciation errors were common throughout eight weeks (see Table 6).

Table 6: Examples of mispronunciation produced by students

Words/sentences in English	Mispronunciation	Accurate pronunciation
Denied (S2W1)	/di'naɪ/	/di'naɪd/
Science (S2W1)	/'saɪən/	/'saɪəns/
Student (S2W3)	/'stju:dn/	/'stju:dnt/
Answer (S2W5)	/ansuwer/	/'ɑ:nsə(r)/
Knowledge (S2W5)	/knauledʒ/	/'nɒlɪdʒ/
Harry and Taylor Swift fall in love with Tyler and they got married (S2W7).	Harry and Taylor Swift fall in love with Tyler and they got married.	Harry and Taylor Swift fall in love with Tyler and they got married.

Discourse management

Towards the end of the VE, students were able to develop speaking ideas with relative ease. Examples below demonstrate that their speech was more elaborate, containing more details and examples, when comparing their production in weeks 2 and 3 with that of weeks 6 and 7. However, not all supporting ideas were relevant. In addition, the use of linking words confined to simple connectors such as *and*, *but*, *then*, *so*. Some complex cohesive devices were used inaccurately. For example:

So I think the uniforms from the men have the arm cuts is to make sure that they can balance the elegance of the dress and you can see the the man can work uh can can do the things that can show the flexibilities yeah (S3W2).

Personally I would like travel to new place because like you know, I'm still young and I still want to like explore the world, not just only like return to one place where I already know a lot about it yeah (S3W3).

In my opinion, I, uh, prefer the inner beauty, so the makeup might, um, make you forget about the inner beauty, like, uh, you focus on the outside but not the inside, the more important part. And my second point is, uh, wearing makeup like, or too much makeup can distract your other people, like other students, like in the class, in the course, like we wear too much too much makeup or too much perfume can affect the people like, um, I can confuse that distract or like stuff, like that, uh, and it's hard for them to focus on the lessons or the lecturer (S3W6).

I would text my boss. I think it would be a little embarrassing if I just talk to him in person and I would send a message to test, uh, how he react. And if he just, you know, ignore my message, maybe then I will send another message to see if he reply me and if he does, then I will just remind him again about the money he borrow from me (S3W7).

Grammar

Students mostly used simple structures in their talk. However, errors frequently occurred, especially with verb tenses and articles. Some students had attempts to use complex sentences but made many errors. For example:

Uh, food that is special for Taiwan, uh, you mean, it's in Taiwan and it's, it's special for us. Uh, we have stinky tofu, stinky tofu. Yeah, it's very stinky, but it kind of tastes good, and it's our specialty. Actually, okay we have a cake, blood cake. Yeah and I know it's very weird and I don't like that, either. But it's very famous actually and it's popular in Taiwan (S5W3).

In my opinion, Vietnam is one of the countries that should be on everyone's list. Travelers like we beside the famous destinations such as Hanoi or near Zhang Beach, there's quite a lot of hidden beauties waiting to be discover, so ... so today I would like to acknowledge those place, so first, firstly, we shall start with uh destinations located in Taobang Province. It is not only associated with the history and the reverse revolutionary relief of Vietnam but you also will be amazed by the beautiful scenery of so passing through the price field or peaceful village (S4W7).

I would text my boss. I think it would be a little embarrassing if I just talk to him in person and I would send a message to test, uh, how he react. And if he just, you know, ignore my message, maybe then I will send another message to see if he reply me and if he does, then I will just remind him again about the money he borrow from me (S3W7).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Data indicated that all participants believed in the positive impact of the VE on student participants' oral communication skills. The VE was seen as a beneficial tool that improved students' debate skills, exchange of ideas, learning process, sense of improvement and achievement, confidence, interaction, speaking motivation, and speaking weaknesses. It also helped to reduce students' communication anxiety and supported the development of their speaking ideas. These positive effects are confirmed by researchers such as Hamouda (2020), Luo and Yang (2021), and O'Dowd (2021) who have reported on the pedagogical benefits of VE in developing students' oral communication skills. In Hamouda's study (2020), students displayed a favorable attitude towards using VE to improve their speaking skills as it helped them with idea expression, interaction, and critical thinking. In Luo and Yang's research (2021), English majors valued the role of VE in speaking classes as it enhanced their learning motivation and improved their language skills. O'Dowd (2021) and Rienties et al. (2022) also reported on the usefulness of VE in helping students gain more confidence as language communicators.

Our study identified four factors that hindered the participation of some students in the VE: technical problems, lack of vocabulary, inadequate grammar structures, and difficulty in understanding different English accents. Similar obstacles were also mentioned by VE researchers in the literature. Many participants experienced technical problems when joining VE for the first time in Hamouda's (2020) study. Students in Alshumaimeri and Alhumud's (2021) research identified the lack of vocabulary as a major challenge in their development of oral communication skills. Similarly, Fondo and Jacobetty (2020) stated that students' perception of insufficient vocabulary, grammatical rules, and difficulties in understanding partners due to different accents created significant affective barriers to their participation in VE practices. In this research, the VE was found to have brought about certain linguistic development among the students, based on the participants' views. Five elements of speaking skills, namely Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Fluency, and Discourse Management, were strengthened during their participation in the VE. Grammar showed the least improvement while Discourse Management showed the most. These findings are consistent with previous research that also relied on the perspectives of students and teachers. Hamouda (2020) and Luo and Yang (2021) noted the crucial role of VE in enhancing students' pronunciation, fluency, grammar, comprehension, and vocabulary. In the study of Rienties et al. (2022), students felt that they made the greatest gains in fluency, pronunciation, and intonation, while the lowest gains were in grammar. Similarly, in a study by Lee and Markey (2014), students reported a perceived increase in lexical knowledge rather than grammar.

Our study differs from previous research by incorporating a new source of data: students' language samples, into the exploration of linguistic gains. Most studies on VE have relied on participants' self-rated scales or perceptions, which can be biased. Consequently, findings regarding the effectiveness of VE in these previous studies should be interpreted with caution. The results of our collected language samples provide insight into whether the students actually achieved linguistic gains during their participation. Our study shows that student participants did indeed make progress in their oral communication skills, as indicated by linguistic analysis. However, the linguistic improvements varied depending on the topics. Certain positive changes were observed in familiar or easy speaking activities, rather than less common or complex situations. Two reasons can explain the limited learning progress of students in our study. Firstly, the four-month duration of the VE did not provide enough opportunities for the students to practice and improve their speaking skills. Secondly, certain activities and topics in the VE were too challenging for the students and not meaningful to their language-learning process, and therefore did not benefit their speaking skills much.

These findings suggest important conclusions and implications for the successful design and implementation of future VE programs. Firstly, the study reinforces the argument that VE is indeed effective for improving the speaking competence of non-English majors. It is a cost-effective alternative to learning English and should be highly recommended in EFL settings. Secondly, the topics and tasks in VE programs should be carefully selected based on the interests and language proficiency levels of the participants, in order to ensure positive learning outcomes for all students. Our study findings illustrate that overly challenging topics and tasks can impede students' progress in learning speaking skills. To develop effective, relevant, and suitable learning materials for EFL students, future VE teachers may consider creating, validating, and revising speaking materials based on the revised Bloom's taxonomy. Aligning

learning activities with the six levels of thinking, spanning from simple to challenging, can provide a systematic approach to lesson planning which enhances learning outcomes. This enables students to be equipped and acquainted with diverse learning encounters that range in complexity. To view an example of how speaking materials were developed based on the revised Bloom's Taxonomy, refer to Rampeng, Atmowardoyo, and Noni's (2021) study.

In our study, data showed that students exhibited positive changes when engaging in familiar or straightforward speaking activities, compared to less common or intricate situations. This finding is not surprising, given the current proficiency levels of students in the virtual environment, which range from A2 to low B1. Research shows for learners who do not have high levels of English proficiency, the frequency of English study plays a crucial role in effectively advancing to the next level of proficiency (Kartal, G., & Sarigul, E., 2017). Since English language skills are developed gradually over time, it is recommended that the duration of VE be extended to more than four months, or conducted every semester to give students more opportunities to practice and improve their oral communication skills. Additionally, in order to obtain gradual improvements in the five elements of speaking skills (Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Fluency, and Discourse Management), recordings of each meeting should be reviewed by both students and teachers for further analysis of language production. Detailed feedback from the teachers can provide students with clear instructions on the areas they need to focus on in order to improve their language production. Furthermore, through receiving feedback on their language use, students can gain a greater awareness of how they are communicating with others. Detailed feedback can aid learners in monitoring their progress over time, resulting in improved communication skills and more effective speaking abilities. The present study has some limitations. The sample size was relatively small, and it would be important to conduct replication studies with larger samples to validate the findings. Moreover, language samples of some participants were not collected throughout the data collection period because some of them skipped meetings, which calls for a cautious interpretation of the findings. Additionally, our study was conducted over four months. Future evidence-based research should be longitudinal for at least six months to detect developments or changes in the students' learning progress at the group and individual levels. It would also be of great interest to compare students' linguistic competence before and after the VE program (pre- and post-test scores), along with a fine-grained corpus analysis of data (Rienties et al., 2022) in future studies. Such data would enable researchers to indicate the degree of language development more accurately. It is important to investigate whether participants' lexical and grammatical competences develop at the same speed over time or not.

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HIỆU QUẢ CỦA CHƯƠNG TRÌNH TRAO ĐỔI ẢO ĐỐI VỚI KỸ NĂNG NÓI TIẾNG ANH CỦA SV KHÔNG CHUYÊN NGỮ TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐH CÔNG NGHIỆP THÀNH PHỐ HỒ CHÍ MINH

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Tóm tắt: Tiềm năng của chương trình trao đổi ảo (TĐA) trong việc cải thiện kỹ năng giao tiếp của người học ở các quốc gia không nói tiếng Anh đã được công nhận trong nhiều tài liệu. Tuy nhiên, mặc dù đã được thực hiện ở nhiều nơi trên thế giới và ngày càng có nhiều nghiên cứu về TĐA, tiềm năng của TĐA vẫn chưa được ghi nhận ở Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu này khám phá tính hiệu quả của TĐA đối với kỹ năng nói của sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học kỹ thuật của Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu sử dụng công cụ khảo sát, phỏng vấn và phân tích các mẫu ngôn ngữ của người học để kiểm tra tính hiệu quả trên thực tế và trên nhận thức của người tham dự. Kết quả cho thấy rằng, tất cả đối tượng nghiên cứu đều tin tưởng vào tính hiệu quả của chương trình TĐA đối với kỹ năng tranh luận, trao đổi ý kiến, quá trình học tập, ý thức cải thiện và thành tích, sự tự tin, tương tác và động lực phát biểu của người học. Năm thành tố của kỹ năng nói, cụ thể là: Ngữ pháp, Từ vựng, Phát âm, Lưu loát và Quản lý diễn ngôn, đã được củng cố. Ngữ pháp được cải thiện ít nhất trong khi Quản lý diễn ngôn được củng cố nhiều nhất. Quá trình phân tích ngôn ngữ chỉ ra rằng người học thực sự đã tiến bộ trong kỹ năng giao tiếp. Tuy nhiên, sự tiến bộ là không đồng đều giữa các chủ đề học. Người học đạt được nhiều tiến bộ đối với các hoạt động mang tính chất quen thuộc. Với các chủ đề ít phổ biến và các tình huống phức tạp, sự tiến bộ còn hạn chế. Dựa trên những kết quả nghiên cứu, chúng tôi đã đưa ra một số đề xuất và khuyến nghị cho các nhà nghiên cứu, nhà thiết kế, giáo viên và người học.

Từ khóa: trao đổi ảo, kỹ năng nói, sinh viên không chuyên

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