

# Vietnamese EFL Students' Perceptions of Difficulties in Achieving English Oral Communicative Competence

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## Abstract

In response to the reform in education proposed by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) of Vietnam, the pendulum of most teaching and learning activities has swung their concentration to communicative competence-based approaches. Developing communicative competence amongst students of English has received tons of effort from related stakeholders such as teachers, students, educators, researchers and policy makers. The number of studies investigating this shift to date, however, has remained scared. The current study, therefore, aims to investigate the perception of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students about the difficulties they encounter in achieving English oral communicative competence. Sixty-five students volunteered to participate in the study. The study employed a questionnaire as an instrument for data collection. The results show that the students underwent a certain number of difficulties related to linguistic, sociocultural, discourse, formulaic, interactional and strategic knowledge in the process of achieving oral communicative competence.

**Keywords:** Difficulties, EFL students, investigation, oral communicative competence, perception

## Introduction

The realm of language pedagogy, precisely education of English, has been judiciously tailored with regard to the growth of the world. English prolongs their role as one of the world standard languages, and currently no astounding threat stands a chance of menacing English or to its global popularity. Building a sense of globalization, Vietnam has soon realized the marvelous function of English in communication, as well as undertook cooperative endeavors to initiate the rectification of language teaching which concentrates more on communicative competences. Speaking is considered as the most important in the four macro skills (Ur, 1996). In addition, the students' speaking ability is good or not depends on the communicative competence quality (Pohan, 2014). No need to say, English is one of the compulsory subjects for students at schools and universities. From these respects, the MoET of Vietnam conjointly affirms that "communicative skills are the goal of the teaching of English at the secondary school while formal knowledge of the language serves as the means to the end" (MoET, 2006, p. 6).

Meanwhile, the process of achieving communicative competence in non-English-speaking countries is reported to commit adverse problems. In the classroom, the students mostly rely on the teacher and they are supposed to be extremely passive and reluctant instead of actively participating in classroom activity (Tomlinson & Dat, 2004). They perform well at memorizing and following instructions but rather shy in sharing ideas in front of a crowd (Nguyen, 2002). Outside of classrooms, students of English can scarcely seek the opportunities for practicing the target language, and most students suppose that the course book is the only source where they can have the exposure to English (Zedjali, 2009). English communicative competence remains the most arduous skill to conquer for the superiority of second language (L2) students, yet they still suffer from oral communicating incompetence (Zhang, 2009). As the main language skills that students should improve, it has been widely noticed that they face many difficulties in speaking English (Hosni, 2014). Kaharuddin (2020) states that few universities are putting effort to teach English in accordance with students' demand and level which has sequentially influenced the outcome of the teaching process in a negative way such as the students' meagre level of English communicative proficiency. In the

same way, Vietnamese education has discerned that it is not easy for students to achieve their fluency and proficiency in English speaking competence due to certain internal and external factors (Vo, Pham & Ho, 2018).

The magnitude of English oral communicative skills undoubtedly seizes EFL students' attention most of the time. Therefore, understanding the difficulties in achieving oral communicative competences will practically provoke both teachers and students to harvest such fecund educational results (Nguyen, 2008). Communication difficulties can be categorized into minor clusters in manifold manners depending on their extent and characteristics (Rababa'h, 2005). In fact, the development of oral communicative has a close bond to the acquisition of communicative competence since the performances of speaking, even subconsciously, insist on a wide range of activities, in which students have to focus not only on the language itself but also on the communication of meaning (Littlewood, 2007). Likewise, in an oral communicative task, the students' concentration should be driven at the content of what they are saying, rather than the form (Long, 2015). Correspondingly, in case students of English yearn to be cognizant of the specific difficulties in order to ameliorate the oral communicative competence, they had better envisage their struggles in consonance with the respective components formulating a more massive term called communicative competence.

From these above-mentioned issues, it is crucially essential to investigate the perception of EFL students about difficulties in achieving oral communicative competence, to which both educators and students are beneficial. Accordingly, when being well-informed about which difficulties the students are facing, the study effectively fosters not only students of English to tackle the problem of deficiency in oral communicative competence yet it simultaneously helps other related stakeholders such as educators, policy makers or the like in planning and implementing educational activities.

## **Literature Review**

### **Definitions of perceptions**

Perception is depicted as the way that people notice things, chiefly with their senses (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries). The definition of perception is extensively contrived by copious people from famous socialists, anthropologists to philanthropists.

According to Reitz (1998), perception includes all those processes by which an individual receives information about his environment – seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling. In the same vein, perception is described as a procedure of gleaning information via physical senses and the brain activity of critical analysis (Forgus & Melamed, 1976). Grinstein and Keim (2010) argue that perception directs the sensory process in which humans touch, see, hear, smell, and taste, then spawn congruent signals from the surrounding environment.

In defiance of being framed from divergent paths, almost all of them pinpoint several similarities en masse. At length, perception is a process of subjectivity and creativity via which humans accredit literal meanings to neurological data by means of sensory receptors in response to comprehend themselves and others. Perception plays a role of human awareness and assimilation when it comes to interpreting the impetus from the outer world, as well as how we field the input in action.

### **Basic components of communicative competence**

Celce-Murcia (2008) indicate that there are six main components of communicative competence including (1) sociocultural competence, (2) discourse competence, (3) linguistic competence, (4) formulaic competence, (5) interactional competence and (6) strategic competence, which will be in turn discussed as follow.

About the first component, sociocultural competence exhibits an inseparable relation to communication competence since it refers to the activity-component of communication competence (Milrud, 2004). It is defined as the ability to execute a set of multicultural knowledge mingled with prowess in the particular circumstances of life and the fortitude to endure people from other nationalities. According to Anužienė (2015), L2 students show a dearth of acquaintance with the social values and principles regulating

interpersonal relationships in the target language; thus, this cross-cultural unfamiliarity may trammel their pursuit of career, educational success, and most importantly, social transaction and communication. Sociocultural competence is believed to be a miscellaneous phenomenon comprising a set of components that bear upon meticulous categories. There are three sub-components that are widely analyzed, namely linguistic-cultural, sociolinguistic, and cultural understanding. About linguistic-cultural, it refers to the knowledge of lexical items with the socio-cultural semantics (e.g., greeting, forms of address, and farewell, in oral and written speech). For sociolinguistics, this is the insight of the language features of social classes, different generations, genders, and social groups. Finally, cultural understanding bespeaks the knowledge of cultural peculiarities of English-speaking countries (traditions, habitual customs, standards of behavior, and etiquette) as well as the ability to understand and use them appropriately in communication while remaining a carrier of another culture (Rakhimova, 2019).

Regarding discourse competence, Cook (1989) describes it as indicative, affiliated and deliberate stretches of language that can be reciprocally apprehend by listeners and speakers to communicate. Discourse is specified as a prevailing term for language that has been used as the result of an act of communication (Richards, 1992). McCarthy and Carter (1994, p.3) construe discourse as “a view of language which takes into account the fact that linguistic patterns exist across stretches of text. These patterns of language extend beyond the words, clauses, and sentences, which have been the traditional concern of much language teaching.” Their insights about discourse put concentration on 3 characteristics consisting of complete spoken or written texts, socially meaningful language, and contextually meaningful language. Those myriad outlooks on how discourse actually operates, though reported through various approaches, bear much resemblance in general. Discourse competence involves the proficiency in understanding, generating and developing language forms longer than sentences (stories, conversations, letters, etc.) with the appropriate cohesion and coherence, etc. ...) with the appropriate cohesion and coherence, that is the act or state of keeping things together and the situation in which all the parts of something fit together well, which occur while EFL students produce languages such as speak or write in the target language; and rhetorical organization – the art of using language in speech or writing in a special way that influences or entertains people to amalgamate discrete utterances (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary). It includes the knowledge of and the ability to authorize a sequence of sentences in terms of topic/focus, given/new, event order, cause/effect (invertible); and the ability to structure and manage discourse in terms of thematic organization, coherence and cohesion, style, and rhetorical effectiveness.

Linguistic competences are the macro assortment of a multitude of sub-competences whose essences strongly appertain to a group of interconnected skills, knowledge and attitudes. Three of them must provide multilateral support for each other, which enables speakers to perform a successful communication act. Linguistic competences are highly related to communication competences and they are even seen as equal (Tarango & Machin-Mastromatteo, 2017). Although they build a more inextricable link to writing competence, their materialization in expediting and self-monitoring oral communicative activities ought not to be underestimated. Paradis (1998) classifies linguistic competences into four types, namely phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics in comprehension or production. This overview does not express much disagreement with Celce-Murcia’s theory where she deduces that linguistic competences are represented by phonological, lexical, morphological, and syntactic knowledge. Semantics in linguistics is the meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence (Yule, 2010). Likewise, lexical means all the features belonging to words of a language which predominantly encompasses spelling and meaning of a word or any larger unit of language (Marconi, 2003). As a result, the coalescence of phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic elements best represents linguistic competences. For phonology, it is the study or the process of “how English sounds are pronounced” (Roach, 2009, p. 4). Regarding morphology, we realize a morphological structure exists in case a group of words showcases “partial form-meaning resemblances” (Haspelmath & Sims, 2010, p. 14). Lastly, syntax in linguistics implies the way words are arranged in order to unfold the relationships within sentences and customarily between them concerning the combination of words in both word-structure and sentence-structure (Yule, 2017).

Formulaic language has been recognized as an important element in second language acquisition (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Wray & Perkins, 2000; and Wray, 2002). Subsequently, formulaic (collocational or

phraseological) competence has procured the concession of being one distinctive pillar in 6 sub-competences of English Language Teaching from (Celce Murcia, 2007). Formulaic competence comprises a set of continuous or discontinuous phrases that are considered as wholly or fractionally prefabricated and conventionalized chunks of language. These are retained and recaptured by speakers' own memory at the time of use rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar (Wray, 2002). In a succinct way, formulaic competence is plainly the ability to adequately apply formulaic expressions into daily conversation to obtain a more natural and native style of communication. Kecskes (2008) argued that different language experiences between native and non-native speakers strongly manipulate the progress of achieving this fundamental competence. Some studies substantiate that after acquiring formulaic expressions, the endowments of students' communication ability have remarkably rocketed. For instance, Dickinson (2012) argued that as long as students are well-equipped with formulaic competence, they gain more fluency and confidence when presenting and exchanging their materials.

About the fifth component - interactional competence, Celce-Murcia (1995) states that interactional competence is defined as actional, conversational and nonverbal/paralinguistic competence. Another definition of interactional competence is it represents people's ability to constitute individual identities and accomplish social actions (Hall, Hellermann & Doehler, 2011). They indicate that interactional competence is the context-specific constellations of expectations and dispositions about the reciprocal worlds where people draw on to navigate their routes through their interactions with others, implies the ability to mutually coordinate their actions in communication, such as body languages, facial expression and eye contact. Compared to many definitions, Celce-Murcia's is one of the briefest and easiest to comprehend and apply into relevant studies.

With regards to strategic competence, it refers to a speaker's ability to exploit verbal or non-verbal communication strategies when communication problems arise, compensating for deficiencies in other areas of competence (Canale & Swain 1980). Later, Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell (1995) confirms that strategic competence, as an aspect of communicative competence, refers to the ability to surpass difficulties and tolerate confusion when communication failures emerge. Educators had better take advantage of these breakdowns to augment students' critical reflex in lieu of ruminating them as an insurmountable default. About communication strategies, one of the decisive keys is to identify whether a breakdown has occurred by paying attention to facial expressions, body gestures and frequently checking listeners' comprehension. Another definition of strategic competence in communication is that it is formed by the ability to use selective methods of carrying out pertinent speech acts to hurdle the conversation in abeyance (Tarone & Yule, 2001). Being linked together, various definitions of strategic competence convene at a room of some certain points which are ingeniously transformed into three earmarks of communicative strategies. EFL students, by and large, meet the paucity of at least one of the triple constituents, namely paraphrase (approximation; word coinage; circumlocution), borrowing/conscious transfer (literal translation; language switch; appeal for assistance; mime), and avoidance (topic avoidance; message abandonment) (Rababa, 2005; Tarone, 1983).

### **Related studies on investigating students' difficulties in achieving language communicative competences**

In literature, a considerable number of studies investigating the issue of students' communicative competences has been conducted. Scarcella and Oxford (1994) conducted a study examining reasons why students had difficulties learning to communicate in the target language. They concluded that students often have to deal with the shortage of linguistic and interactional competence. For the linguistic aspect, students suppose that pronunciation of English has predominantly challenged the way they perform a successful act of communication because it is hard to keep themselves from being interfered by their mother tongues. They further mentioned intonation as a factor that causes difficulties in understanding and exchanging information due to the students' failure to use weak and strong forms.

The results are along the same lines with those of a study conducted by Le (2008) in which he stated that many students could not often pronounce English with equal stress, flat intonation and no rhythm at all due to the influence of Vietnamese pronunciation. About the interactional competence, most students responded

that they let their fear overshadow the confidence required for a natural conversation with other speakers. Moreover, some learners felt uncomfortable in their very first reluctant attempts at a presentation or a speech that is quite formal in the target language. Gürler (2015) indicated that EFL students had poor senses of self-confidence which is seen as a facilitator to communicate, especially speaking effectively in the target language.

Ahangar and Izadi (2015) state that the lack of linguistic competence in terms of lexical knowledge is the cause of vocabulary limitation, which blocks students from expressing their ideas and feelings fluently and exactly in the target language. Students would overuse their native language and avoid speaking in other languages with little knowledge of vocabulary.

According to Vo, Pham and Ho (2018), one common challenge to achieve oral communicative skills encountered by most students is the dearth of strategic competence – a set of suitable speaking strategies to express ideas and freely produce discourse in the target language. ELF students’ speaking skills, an aspect of oral communicative competence, was investigated in another study conducted by Cao, Thai, Le, Thach, Chau and Phu (2021). The result indicated that a primary cause of the low fluency in English oral communication was the lack of vocabulary essential to convey thoughts and ideas, which is related to linguistic competence, precisely lexical knowledge. The previous studies synthesize the struggles that students have to encounter while attempting to achieve oral communicative competence, which includes difficulties in linguistic competence, interactional competence, and strategic competence.

## Methods

### Research aims

The study is conducted with the aim of investigating EFL students’ perceptions of difficulties in achieving English oral communicative competence. Accordingly, the study suggests pedagogical implications for conducting better language education activities contributing to promoting language students’ communicative competence. To this end, the following research question was formulated:

RQ: What are Vietnamese EFL students’ perceptions of difficulties in achieving English oral communicative competence?

### Research design

This study employed a quantitative research design to gain better understandings of the issue of students’ difficulties in achieving communicative competence in English learning (Creswell, 2014). A thematic analysis method (Charmaz, 2006) was adopted for data analysis to explore how students believed about difficulties they encountered in each of the particular group of components related to language communicative competence.

### Research participants

Sixty-five students of English including 37% of males and 63% of females at a university, volunteered to participate in the study. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years. All of the participants have had at least 9 years of learning English. At the time of the study, the students were in the 4th semester of their 8-semester training program at university. More details of the data of participants can be seen in table 1 below.

**Table 1: Detailed description of participants**

Total number of participants	65
Education background	BA students
Major	
– English Studies	28 (43%)
– English Language Teacher Education	37 (57%)

Gender	
– Males	24 (37%)
– Females	41 (63%)
Average years of learning English	9
Average age	19.7

### Research instruments

This study employed a questionnaire for collecting data. In fact, using questionnaires brings about many benefits for researchers. For one, it allows researchers to get data from a large number of participants at their own convenience (Gillham, 2008). Besides, using questionnaires consisting of a series of questions and statements helps participants respond to their thoughts in a deep manner (Brown & Hedges, 2009).

About the questionnaire, it was designed based on Celce-Murcia's (2008) questionnaire for investigating learners' difficulties in achieving language communicative competence. The questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section was designed to collect participants' demographic data including their names, age, gender, major, and their years of learning English. The second part consisted of 25 Likert-type items. The Likert-type items were given a numerical score (5 = Strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree) and categorized into six clusters. Cluster 1 included 8 items (1-8) which related to students' perceptions of difficulties in achieving linguistic competence. Cluster 2 included 4 items (9-12) which investigated students' perceptions of difficulties in achieving sociocultural competence. Cluster 3 included 4 items (13-16) which focused on investigating students' perceptions of difficulties in achieving discourse competence. Cluster 4 included 3 items (17-19) which aimed to investigate students' perceptions of difficulties in achieving interactional competence. Cluster 5 included 2 items (20-21) which related to students' perceptions of difficulties in achieving formulaic competence. Finally, cluster 6 included 4 items (22-25) which focused on investigating students' perceptions of difficulties in achieving strategic competence.

### Data collection procedures

This study lasted for 9 weeks from late March to June, 2021. At the very first phase, the researcher consulted her supervisor about the topic of the study. Many reasons were taken into account and ultimately the study was formed. After thorough discussion on the foundation of the study, the researcher began reading related materials, books and articles to design the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was then double-checked by the supervisor and an independent expert in the field for its reliability and validity. Thirty-one students of English Language Education from course 43 volunteered to help pilot the questionnaire. The collected data were analyzed with the help of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 20. It should be said that the reliability of the questionnaire was high ( $\alpha=0.97$ ), indicating that the questionnaire can be used for the study.

As for the official data collection, sixty-five students of English from course 45, at the SFL, Can Tho university volunteered to take part in the study. The participation of students in the study is congenial for several reasons. First of all, they have been exposed to the university environment for at least three semesters, which is long enough to adapt and accustom themselves to the act of self-monitoring and reflecting their perceptions. Secondly, language skills including oral communication are centrally taught and consolidated in the sophomores' year whereas the last two years will expertly delve into principles and methodologies, which renders the participants applicable for associating their learning process with the questionnaire purpose.

To collect data, prior to the formal day of meeting, formal emails were sent to lecturers in charge to ask them for permission to conduct the study in their classes. After that, the researcher herself directly came and met the participants and asked for their consent in participating in the study. Before distributing the questionnaire to the participants, the researcher stated purposes of the activity and also significance of the research. The design and content of the questionnaire were also carefully explained. In addition, the researcher gave participants the instructions on how to fill in the questionnaire.

### Data analysis

The collected data were descriptively and quantitatively analyzed with the help of SPSS to investigate EFL students' perceptions of difficulties in targeting English oral communication competence. The Cronbach alpha indicated that the reliability level was high ( $\alpha = 0.9$ ). This result implies that the data could be used for data analysis afterwards.

## Results And Discussion

### Results

Overall, the results from descriptive statistics of data collected from the questionnaire (see Table 2) indicate that the students had difficulties in achieving linguistic competence (MLC=3.41), sociolinguistic competence (MSC=3.52), discourse competence (MDC=3.45), formulaic competence (MFC=3.91), and strategic competence (MSTC =3.66). However, the results show that the students shared a fairly neutral viewpoint on difficulties in achieving interactional competence (MIC =3.17).

**Table 2: Descriptive results of students' difficulties in achieving communicative competence**

Difficulties in communicative competence	Average means
Students' difficulties in achieving LC	3.41
Students' difficulties in achieving SC	3.52
Students' difficulties in achieving DC	3.45
Students' difficulties in achieving FC	3.91
Students' difficulties in achieving STC	3.66
Students' difficulties in achieving IC	3.17

The results indicated that students generally agreed that they had to deal with certain difficulties (MLC = 3.41). In particular, the students believed that they lacked essential vocabulary resulting in their poor performance in communicating in the target language (item 1; M = 3.88) and they had to struggle for remembering different definitions or usages of the same word (item 2; M = 3.97). Dealing with the question whether students had difficulties in distinguishing between English homophones and homonyms, the results appeared to be disapproving (item 3; M = 2.45). The students also showed a strong agreement on having difficulties in achieving correct grammatical principles while smoothening speaking (item 4; M = 3.57), correct pronunciation of English words (item 5; M = 3.62), speaking English with natural intonation (item 6; M = 3.6), and remembering the word order in different types of sentences such as negation, interrogation, exclamation, etc. (item 8; M = 3.68). Lastly, dealing with difficulties reported in using correct parts of speech of a word (item 7), the students showed that they disagreed with this (M = 2.49). In other words, most of the students shared no difficulties in using parts of speech of a word correctly in communication.

#### *Students' difficulties in achieving sociocultural competence*

The results indicated that students generally agreed that they had to deal with certain difficulties (MSC = 3.52). To illustrate, the students found challenging when using English words and phrases in appropriate contexts, such as formal/informal, approving/disapproving, etc. (item 9; M = 3.57); understanding rhetoric and figurative languages, such as simile, hyperbole, metaphor, etc. (item 10; M = 3.54). The results also indicated that the students agreed on not being knowledgeable enough about cultural differences in expressing ideas (item 11; M = 3.57) and not getting used to the diversity of English accents and dialects spoken by other communicators (item 12; M = 3.71).

#### *Students' difficulties in achieving discourse competence*

The results generally indicated that students had to deal with certain difficulties in achieving discourse competence (MSC = 3.45). To be specific, the students struggled with arranging the words by producing an emphasis or inversion sentence to transfer their ideas effectively (item 13; M = 3.74); accustoming themselves to adjacency pairs – a couple of sentences, sometimes three sentences that come accordingly within two speakers in a real conversation (item 14; M = 3.54); understanding the actual illocution of indirect speech acts, for instance, using a declarative to request others, or an interrogative to confirm something (item 15; M = 3.51) and figuring out the substitution and ellipsis in the utterances (item 16; M = 3.57).

#### *Students' difficulties in achieving formulaic competence*

Regarding difficulties in achieving formulaic competence, the results showed that students generally agreed that they had to deal with certain difficulties (MSC = 3.91). The students agreed that they could not use English proverbs effectively. They had to translate word by word when dealing with proverbs and this could not help them much in conveying what they were saying (item 20; M = 3.8). In addition, the rarely-seen English slangs, acronyms, and abbreviations that suddenly appear in communication make the students unable to achieve success in communication (item 21; M = 4.02).

#### *Students' difficulties in achieving strategic competence*

The results indicated that students generally agreed that they had to deal with certain difficulties in achieving strategic competence (MSC = 3.66). Specifically, the results showed that the students had to pause for a while before responding in the target language because of their slow reflex (item 22; M = 3.6). Moreover, they shared that it is hard to balance between fluency and accuracy while producing understandable and natural English (item 23; M = 3.8). Students allegedly approved of the statements that describe their difficulties in delaying, lengthening, and ending the conversation appropriately and politely (item 24; M = 3.57) and in how to predict or divine other speaker's upcoming utterances all along the conversation (item 25; M = 3.68).

#### *Students' difficulties in achieving interactional competence*

With regard to difficulties in achieving interactional competence, the results indicated that students showed a neutral viewpoint (MSC = 3.17). Dealing with difficulties in having less body language while communicating, the students disagreed (item 17; M = 2.75), and also shared a neutral perception about having less eye-contact towards the other speakers during the conversation (item 19; M = 3.17). However, the students agreed that they got into troubles in communication due to their shortage of self-confidence and flexibility (item 18; M = 3.58).

### **Discussion**

The raised research question of the study asked, “What are EFL students' perceptions of difficulties in achieving English communicative competence?”. The results showed students' agreement on certain difficulties in achieving the six proposed components regarding English language communicative competence.

#### **Students' difficulties in achieving linguistic competence**

For linguistic competence, students inclined a greater extent of agreement with item 1 and item 2 than other items, which indicated that lexical knowledge played a phenomenal role in fulfilling successful acts of communication. Within linguistic knowledge, lexis is an essential component for language, specifically language development. Limited lexical knowledge can increase the rate of EFL students' demotivation and frustration. That is why students ought to attain an essential basis of lexis that enable them to reach a higher level of development in communication skills (Caro & Rosado, 2017).

The results revealed that students showed a high level of agreement on difficulty in phonological struggles (item 5 and 6). This can be explained due to the fact Vietnamese sound system is different from English, whose pronunciation has various articulators and in supra-segmental manner and there is intonation with stress and pitch (Herman, 2016). As for the syntactic aspect, grammar rules (item 4 and 8) are said to be



troublesome since Vietnamese students usually transfer non-conjugated verbs and implied tense and aspect into English.

Another explanation is that the students often transfer Vietnamese sentential structures into English, particularly the use of the copula and phrasal structures. They tend to “string together English words using Vietnamese word order” (Dao, 2008, p. 37). However, the students disagreed on having difficulties distinguishing English homophones, homonyms (item 3) and finding it hard to select the correct part of speech of a word (item 7). Although English has a large number of homophones and homonyms which can cause misunderstanding for L2 communicators, they can be recognized based on the position in the sentence and more importantly, the context that they appeared (Bajracharya, 2018). For the correct part of speech of a word, students can rely on the principles of word formation they already knew, such as various suffixes used to create nouns, adjectives, etc.) thanks to doing homework diligently (Kwiatkowska, 2015).

### **Students’ difficulties in achieving sociolinguistic competence**

For sociolinguistic competence, students agreed that they had to deal with the lack of knowledge and experience when it comes to cross-cultural communication. They admitted having difficulties to use the words in a correct context (item 9) due to the fact that many words have fixed meanings in different norms (Bajracharya, 2018). Under certain circumstances, students were confused when native speakers of English used a rhetorical phrase to express their ideas (item 10) because in order to truly understand English, students should have basic knowledge of some most common types of figurative language (Putri, Oktoma & Nursyamsu, 2016). As for cultural differences, students agreed that they lacked the knowledge necessary for effective communication with speakers of English (item 11). According to Seeger (2011), whether talking or liaising globally with partners from other cultures, understanding the way people convey their ideas is eternally a key professional skill that is increasingly important in today’s multicultural environment.

Last but not least, the language itself, with hundreds of accents and dialects depending on where the speakers are from, considerably affects the way EFL students perceive and filter the input information (item 12). It is a reasonable barrier that most students struggle with because there are more than 1600 samples recorded from 120 countries and territories and many of them still remain unknown.

### **Students’ difficulties in achieving discourse competence**

Regarding discourse competence, the results revealed that the students met certain difficulties in attempting to carry out a scientifically favorable and efficient communication act. The students agreed that they had difficulties in arranging the words into inversion and the like to emphasize their ideas (item 13) since the usage of inversion, which is considered as a literary device for the writer purposefully put words, phrases or sentences in a non-traditional order, remains unpopular and unfamiliar with Vietnamese students (Nguyen, 2016). Likewise, the term “adjacency pair” causes difficulties for students to apply into communication (item 14) because they lack the discourse knowledge in turn-taking conversation. It is generally considered the smallest unit of communicative exchange as one sentence doesn't make for many conversations (Nordquist, 2020). Students simultaneously showed their agreement on having difficulties understanding indirect speech acts (item 15). When an illocution is performed indirectly through the performance of another speech act, it is hard for L2 students to figure out the exact purpose of the surface speech act unless they are well-equipped with the ability to rely on their mutual shared background information, the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the communicators (Yule, 2008). Students admitted dealing with difficulties understanding what the substitution and ellipsis represent in the utterances. It can be explained as the lack of experience in replacing and omitting language items to avoid repetition of words or phrases (Nordquist, 2020).

### **Students’ difficulties in achieving formulaic competence**

With regard to formulaic competence, students showed strong agreement that they were not well-informed enough about fixed and prefabricated chunks of language, which causes confusion and mistakes while communicating. Substantial L2 literature indicates that the acquisition of native-like formulaic competence is burdensome for L2 students as their findings demonstrate that students’ produced language is rife with the underuse, overuse, and misuse of some formulaic phrases like English proverbs, idioms, and daily

expressions (item 20) (Howarth, 1998; Nesselhauf, 2003; Gyllstad, 2007; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Alali & Schmitt, 2012; Paquot & Granger, 2012). Similarly, the conventional usage of some slangs, abbreviations and acronyms of English has become language barriers for students in communication (item 21) since they are something that students have never heard of before and less chance of discovering and attaching such unfamiliar short-forms (Laufer & Waldman, 2011).

### **Students' difficulties in achieving strategic competence**

For strategic competence, the results are quite compatible to Vo, Pham and Ho's (2018) study in which the students were reported to have lacked the communication strategies in performing successful acts of communication. The habits of thinking in Vietnamese when listening and speaking English existed for so long can make students respond slow and hesitantly (item 22). The process of listening in English then translating into Vietnamese keeps repeating and gradually becomes a greater waste of time. This is one of the failed strategies in communication preventing L2 students from catching up with the speed of other speakers.

Another problem of strategic deficiency is that the students found it hard to balance between their fluency and accuracy (item 23). It is controversial that which is more important between fluency and accuracy. The raised question created a certain amount of pressure on EFL students because becoming equal in producing semantically and grammatically correct English utterances requires limitless practice and more than that, appropriate and applicable strategies (Göksu, 2012). When communication breakdowns suddenly happen, EFL students often become speechless instead of using their skills to postpone, lengthen or end the conversation effectively (item 24) as they lack the needed strategies to overcome communication difficulties and tolerate the confusion coming within (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell, 1995). Most students in communication, especially in transactional cases, do not know how to predict and divine what the other speakers are going to say (item 25). Prejudices of different people make them only listen to and interpret the things they want to. Similarly, the senders have to predict the receivers' response based on the way they serve their interest or objectives and withhold the information that they do not want the receiver to be confused and respond in the wrong (Bajracharya, 2018).

### **Students' difficulties in achieving interactional competence**

Regarding interactional competence, the results showed that students shared a neutral viewpoint on having less interactional skills while communicating. In other words, most of the students disagreed that they had less body gestures, facial expressions (item 17) and eye contacts (item 19) when having a conversation in English. In fact, most L2 students have the intentions to express their ideas through body languages and eye-contact when they feel like the native speakers do not understand their utterances because nonverbal language is an innate ability for people to send and receive wordless messages when sounds cannot be interpreted (Vu, 2010). However, students strongly agreed that they still felt insecure while speaking English with native speakers (item 18). This is along the lines with Scarcella and Oxford (1994) whose study implies that being incompetent in other linguistic domains, such as inaccurate pronunciation and lexis limitation, can lead to students' fear to make mistakes while interacting with other people.

### **Conclusion**

The present study explores the perceptions of EFL learners about difficulties in achieving oral communicative competence. The results indicate the students' agreement on having difficulties in achieving linguistic, sociocultural, discourse, formulaic, and strategic competence, yet showed that the students shared a neutral viewpoint on dealing with difficulties in achieving interactional competence. The study, therefore, on the one hand helps EFL students to deal with the problem of deficiency in oral communicative competence, and on the other hand, it also helps other related stakeholders such as educators, school leaders, policy makers or the like in making plans and implementing innovative educational activities concentrating more on practicing speaking English which facilitate students to make progress in achieving oral communicative competence.

### **Limitations and recommendations for further studies**

Albeit the current study contributes to the investigation of EFL students' perceptions towards difficulties in achieving English oral communicative competence, it unavoidably has limitations.

At first, the number of students participating in this study remained small and they all came from the SFL in Can Tho University. Thus, the results of this study cannot be postulated for more EFL students beyond Can Tho University.

Secondly, this study employed a questionnaire as the only instrument for data collection. Inevitably, the study could not find out in-depth results into the perception of EFL students about the difficulties they encounter in the attempt of achieving oral communicative competence. Thus, it is recommended that further studies should be carried out by means of questionnaires and some other instruments such as interviews or classroom observations to harvest more recognition and knowledge of the students' perceptions about the oral communicative difficulties.

There are some suggestions for further studies that can be considered. After gaining the results of how EFL students show their perceptions about difficulties in achieving oral communicative competence, it is reasonable to conduct a study primarily on solutions to accommodate students to overcome those difficulties. In addition, measuring and remarking the effect of the innovatively adapted solutions on eliminating the oral communicative barriers amongst students are worth being taken into consideration.

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