

The Importance of English Communication Skills among Second-Year Students in the Department of English at Savannakhet University

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the current level of English communication skills among second-year students in the Department of English at Savannakhet University. It also explores students' perceptions of the importance of English communication in their academic and professional lives and identifies the challenges they face in developing these skills. A quantitative research design was employed, using a structured questionnaire administered to 25 second-year English major students. The questionnaire covered five main language areas: listening, speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, along with student perceptions, academic performance, career readiness, personal development, and common communication challenges such as limited vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation issues, and lack of practice, passive learning, and limited feedback. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation). Findings revealed that students perceive English communication skills as very important, especially in relation to career readiness ($\bar{x} = 4.41$), academic performance ($\bar{x} = 4.18$), and personal confidence ($\bar{x} = 4.20$). Listening ($\bar{x} = 4.32$) and pronunciation ($\bar{x} = 4.17$) were identified as essential subskills, while speaking, vocabulary, and grammar were viewed as important but more challenging. Major obstacles included lack of practice ($\bar{x} = 4.24$), limited feedback ($\bar{x} = 4.19$), passive learning environments ($\bar{x} = 3.93$), and unclear pronunciation ($\bar{x} = 3.95$). These challenges hinder fluency, confidence, and real-life communication competence. The study recommends creating more interactive, student-centered learning environments that emphasize communicative tasks. Teachers should provide more frequent and personalized feedback and encourage practice both inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, integrating career-related communication practice and building students' confidence through group discussions, role-plays, and presentations will help bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world communication demands.

Keywords: *English communication skills, student perceptions, career readiness, personal development, vocabulary*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and problem statements

English communication skills are essential for second-year students in the Department of English at Savannakhet University, both for academic success and future career readiness. As students progress beyond their foundational year, they are expected to engage with more complex academic content, participate actively in discussions, deliver presentations, and demonstrate critical thinking skills through English. Therefore, proficiency in the four key language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing (LSRW) plays a crucial role in their academic development.

English is widely used as a global language, particularly in education, business, media, and international communication. Effective communication in English enables learners to access global knowledge, interact across cultures, and integrate into regional and international communities. Communication itself is a continuous process involving speaking, listening, understanding, and interpreting both verbal and non-verbal messages. While individuals are born with the physical ability to speak, effective communication skills must be learned, practiced, and developed through education and social interaction. Ahmad (2016) emphasizes that English communication skills are essential in a globalized world where organizations and individuals aim to compete internationally. Similarly, Pawar (2022) notes that English proficiency opens doors to better educational and employment opportunities, particularly in professional careers.

In the context of Lao PDR, the importance of English has increased significantly due to globalization, regional integration, and the country's participation in the ASEAN community. University graduates, especially English-major students, are expected to possess strong communication skills to contribute effectively to national development and to work in fields such as teaching, tourism, translation, and international services. At Savannakhet University, the Department of English is responsible for preparing students with both theoretical knowledge and practical English communication skills.

However, despite the importance of English communication and continuous instruction provided by the department, many second-year students still experience difficulties in developing fluency and confidence in using English. These problems have been observed through classroom participation, informal discussions with lecturers, and students'

performance in speaking and communication-based activities. Previous studies support these observations.

Cherdchoopong (2020) identifies key obstacles in English communication, including low language proficiency, anxiety when speaking, limited opportunities to use English in real-life contexts, and low motivation. Such factors often result in ineffective communication, hesitation, and misunderstandings.

For second-year students at Savannakhet University, these challenges are particularly significant because this academic year marks a transition from basic language learning to more advanced and skill-focused courses. If students lack confidence and sufficient practice at this stage, their academic performance and professional preparedness may be negatively affected. However, there is limited empirical research that specifically examines students' actual communication skill levels, their perceptions of the importance of English communication, and the challenges they face within this particular context.

Therefore, this study focuses on investigating English communication skills among second-year students in the Department of English at Savannakhet University. By examining students' current skill levels, their perceptions of the importance of English communication, and the challenges they encounter, this research aims to provide practical insights for improving English language teaching and learning in the department.

In summary, while English is a vital tool for academic achievement and career opportunities, many students still struggle with fluency, confidence, and effective communication due to limited practice, anxiety, and motivational issues. Understanding these problems systematically is essential to enhance English communication instruction and support students' language development.

1.2 Research questions

1. What are the current levels of English communication skills among second-year students?
2. How do students perceive the importance of English communication in their academic and future professional lives?
3. What challenges do students face in improving their English communication skills?

1.3 Research objectives

1. To investigate the current level of English communication skills among second-year students in the Department of English at Savannakhet University.

2. To explore the perceived importance of English communication skills for academic and professional development.
3. To identify challenges faced by students in developing effective English communication skills.

2. Literature review

2.1. English communication skills

English communication skills play a vital role in today's globalized world, providing learners with access to academic, professional, and social opportunities. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, communication competence is increasingly viewed not as the mastery of isolated language components, but as the ability to use language meaningfully and appropriately in real situations. Research consistently emphasizes that effective communication is grounded in interaction. Frisby, Berger, and Burchett (2015) highlight the importance of positive teacher–student communication, arguing that supportive and respectful interaction creates an environment in which learners feel confident to express ideas and participate actively. Such interaction fosters engagement and enhances language development, suggesting that communication involves both linguistic accuracy and interpersonal meaning-making. Extending this view, Nguyen, Nguyen, and Bui (2024) argue that English communication proficiency requires not only grammatical and lexical knowledge but also reflective speaking. Learners must be aware of context, audience, and communicative purpose in order to convey messages effectively. This perspective aligns with communicative language teaching principles, emphasizing that successful communication depends on appropriateness as much as correctness.

Listening also plays a central role in communication development. Erickson and Astorga (2016) explain that listening and speaking are inseparable skills, as effective speaking relies heavily on the ability to interpret spoken input accurately. Through active listening, learners acquire sensitivity to intonation, contextual cues, and conversational norms, all of which directly support spoken communication. Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that English communication skills are multifaceted, requiring linguistic competence, interactional awareness, and reflective language use. Overall, English communication is not merely the exchange of information but a process of meaningful interaction. These theoretical foundations establish communication as a dynamic skill set, providing a framework for examining learners' listening,

speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar abilities in the present study.

2.2. The current level of English communication skills

2.2.1. Listening

Listening is widely recognized as a foundational skill in language learning. Renandya (2016) defines listening as the ability to recognize and understand spoken language in real time, emphasizing that listening vocabulary differs from reading and writing vocabulary due to the immediacy of spoken input. This distinction highlights the cognitive demands unique to listening. Yavuz (2017) further emphasizes listening as a core component of communicative competence, noting that learners' ability to understand spoken input significantly affects their overall communication performance. Lynch and Mendelsohn (2013) expand this view by describing listening as a complex interpretive process supported by visual cues, prior knowledge, and contextual understanding. Similarly, Rost (2002) and Goh (2000) conceptualize listening as an active and strategic process involving prediction, inference, and evaluation. Despite its importance, listening remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners. Field (2008) and Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) note that difficulties in decoding spoken language, recognizing intonation patterns, and processing information quickly often hinder comprehension. These challenges suggest that weaknesses in listening can negatively affect learners' speaking performance, reinforcing the need to assess listening competence as part of overall communication skills.

2.2.2. Speaking

Speaking is the most visible and frequently evaluated aspect of communication. Hidayah (2018) and Mitasari (2022) define speaking as a productive oral skill that involves expressing meaning appropriately within context, rather than merely producing grammatically correct sentences. Crystal (2016) emphasizes the global importance of English speaking skills, given English's role as an international language. Bygate (1987) and Nunan (1991) stress that speaking is inherently interactive, requiring speakers to respond to listeners, manage meaning, and process information simultaneously. Thornbury (2005) and Brown (2004) further highlight fluency, coherence, and social appropriateness as essential elements of effective speaking. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996) add that successful speaking involves both linguistic and paralinguistic features, such as stress, intonation, and body language. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that speaking competence depends on the integration of linguistic knowledge, interactional skills, and confidence, making it a critical

area of investigation in assessing students' communication abilities.

2.2.3. Pronunciation

Pronunciation plays a crucial role in spoken intelligibility. Maidment (2014) emphasizes that communicability depends on both segmental and suprasegmental features, including stress and intonation. Even when grammar and vocabulary are adequate, poor pronunciation can lead to misunderstanding. Nation (2013) argues that pronunciation should be integrated into listening and speaking instruction rather than taught in isolation. Kobilova (2022) supports this view, noting that inaccurate pronunciation can severely hinder comprehension and reduce learners' confidence. These findings highlight pronunciation as a key factor influencing both speaking performance and learners' willingness to communicate.

2.2.4. Vocabularies

Vocabulary knowledge underpins all language skills. Alqahtani (2015) and Heshmatifar (2013) emphasize that vocabulary contributes directly to listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency. Susanto (2017, 2023) and Simamora and Oktaviani (2020) further argue that vocabulary is central to language instruction, as it enables learners to comprehend input and express ideas accurately. Diamond and Gutlohn (2006) describe vocabulary as a continuously developing resource, acquired through both incidental exposure and explicit instruction. Moody et al. (2018) demonstrate that vocabulary size strongly predicts reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. These findings suggest that limited vocabulary can constrain communication and reduce learners' confidence in using English.

2.2.5. Grammar

Grammar provides the structural foundation for meaningful communication. Nordquist (2018), Myhill (2018), and Sioco and de Vera (2018) conceptualize grammar as a system for organizing meaning rather than a set of isolated rules. Huddleston (1984) and Nelson (2019) explain that grammatical knowledge develops progressively, from basic structures to more complex sentence patterns. Leech and Svartvik (2002) advocate for communicative grammar instruction, which supports both accuracy and effective language use. According to Canale and Swain (1980), grammatical competence is an essential component of communicative competence, enabling learners to convey meaning clearly and coherently. Thus, grammar remains a critical element of communication, particularly in academic and professional contexts.

2.3. Students' Perceptions of Communication Skills

Beyond actual proficiency, students' perceptions of communication skills play a significant role in language development. Perceptions influence motivation, confidence, and willingness to communicate in English, especially in EFL contexts. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) emphasize that students' perceptions of their communication abilities play a crucial role in shaping their motivation to learn and use a language effectively. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, learners who appreciate the importance of communication are more likely to participate actively in speaking, listening, and interactive activities, which contributes to gradual improvement in communicative competence. Similarly, Wenden (1991) argues that learners' beliefs about language learning particularly regarding the value of speaking and interaction strongly influence their willingness to engage in communicative tasks. When students view communication skills as essential for academic achievement or future career success, their motivation to develop these skills increases. This perspective is especially relevant in non-native English contexts such as Laos, where learners may have limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom. In such environments, positive perceptions of communication skills become even more important in encouraging active participation and sustained language development.

Overall, students' perceptions of communication skills have a strong impact on their motivation, confidence, and engagement in English learning. When learners value communication as a tool for academic and professional success, they are more likely to take part in interactive language activities, resulting in improved communicative competence.

2.3.1. Academic performance

Vongxay (2020) investigated Lao university students and found that most English majors considered communication skills to be the most important competence for careers in teaching and tourism. However, despite recognizing its importance, many students reported anxiety when speaking in front of others and expressed low confidence in their pronunciation, which negatively affected their speaking performance. Similarly, Tran (2019), in a Vietnamese university context, revealed that although students acknowledged the value of English speaking skills for employment opportunities, they often had limited chances to practice speaking within academic environments. Other studies indicate that students frequently associate English communication with academic tasks such as presentations, classroom discussions, and collaborative group work. Goh and Burns (2012) suggest that learners who experience

success in these communicative activities are more likely to develop positive perceptions of their language abilities, which in turn encourages increased engagement and continued practice. From a broader Southeast Asian perspective, Sobhi and Preece (2018) report that students' attitudes toward English communication are closely linked to their sense of self-efficacy. Learners who believe in their ability to communicate successfully in English tend to view communication skills as valuable, whereas those with lower confidence often perceive them as intimidating or unnecessary. In addition, perceptions of communication skills are strongly influenced by students' future career goals. Nunan (2003) emphasizes that the modern workplace increasingly requires effective communication across cultures and languages, making students' awareness of the role of English in their professional futures a key factor in shaping their learning attitudes.

In conclusion, students' perceptions of communication skills are shaped by multiple factors, including self-confidence, motivation, prior academic experiences, and career aspirations. In the Lao university context, where English is learned as a foreign language, promoting positive perceptions of communication skills is essential for enhancing students' language development and preparing them for future professional demands.

2.3.2. Career readiness

In today's globalized workforce, proficiency in English communication is increasingly recognized as a vital factor for professional success. For students enrolled in English-related programs, particularly in EFL contexts like Laos, career readiness is closely linked to their ability to communicate effectively in both spoken and written English. The theory of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), underscores the need to tailor language instruction to learners' professional goals. This perspective suggests that students who understand how communication skills apply to specific career contexts such as tourism, translation, education, or international business are more likely to value and develop these skills. Empirical studies support this view. Suwanarak and Phothongsunan (2008) found that Thai university students preparing for careers in international business and education prioritized English speaking and writing as essential for workplace readiness. Similarly, Vongxay (2020) reported that Lao English majors regarded strong communication skills as critical for employment in teaching and tourism. These findings indicate that students increasingly recognize English proficiency as a key factor in enhancing their competitiveness in

ASEAN and global job markets. Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) further supports this notion by suggesting that education, including language training, enhances individual productivity and potential future earnings. In this context, students' investment in English communication skills can be viewed as a strategic step toward improving employability. Beyond career readiness, English communication competence is crucial for academic success. In higher education, students are expected to participate actively in class discussions, deliver presentations, and comprehend academic texts. For English majors, communicative competence extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include fluency, clarity, and meaningful interaction within academic settings. Canale and Swain's (1980) Communicative Competence Theory highlights that successful academic performance relies not only on linguistic knowledge but also on sociolinguistic and discourse skills. Students who recognize the importance of English communication for academic tasks—such as structured writing, persuasive presentations, and interactive discussions tend to perform better (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Empirical evidence reinforces this connection. Hosni (2014) found that EFL learners who regularly engaged in oral communication activities demonstrated higher achievement in language subjects. Similarly, Khan and Khattak (2011) observed that speaking confidence and listening comprehension significantly predicted academic performance among university students in Pakistan. In the Southeast Asian context, Vongxay (2020) noted that Lao students who actively used English in academic activities, including in-class discussions, group work, and presentations, reported higher grades and greater satisfaction with their learning. These findings underscore the importance of fostering students' perception of communication as a critical academic tool, not merely a skill. From a pedagogical perspective, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) emphasizes that learners develop best through interaction and verbal scaffolding. Engaging students in meaningful communication within their zone of proximal development allows them to enhance both language proficiency and subject knowledge simultaneously, positioning communication as both a means and demonstration of learning. In addition, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) stresses that communicative performance is a key indicator of academic language proficiency. Students who can express, argue, explain, and question effectively in English are more likely to succeed in academic contexts where critical thinking and communication are integrated into assessment.

In conclusion, students' perceptions of English communication skills are strongly influenced by their career aspirations. Encouraging learners to view these skills as essential for professional and academic development can increase motivation, engagement, and practical application of English in the classroom.

2.3.3. Personal development and confidence

Communication skills are also crucial for personal development, particularly in enhancing self-confidence, reducing anxiety, and fostering a positive attitude toward language learning. In EFL contexts, the ability to express oneself in English is closely connected to learners' sense of identity, agency, and academic self-esteem. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) suggests that emotional factors such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence can either facilitate or hinder language acquisition. A high affective filter, resulting from fear or embarrassment, may prevent students from speaking or taking risks with the language. Conversely, learners with a low affective filter who feel confident and supported are more likely to participate actively and make progress. Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997) further highlights the role of personal beliefs in learning. Self-efficacy refers to learners' confidence in their ability to perform specific tasks. Students with high self-efficacy in English communication are more likely to take initiative, persist through challenges, and seek opportunities to practice, which in turn enhances both their confidence and overall language competence.

Empirical studies support these theoretical perspectives. Mahmoudi and Mahmoudi (2015) found that students with higher self-confidence in speaking English participated more actively in class and achieved better results in oral assessments. Similarly, Peng and Woodrow (2010) reported that learners' willingness to communicate was strongly influenced by their internal motivation and self-perceived competence. In the Lao context, cultural attitudes toward public speaking and emphasis on language accuracy can exacerbate anxiety among EFL learners. Creating supportive classroom environments and providing positive reinforcement can help reduce fear and build communicative confidence.

In summary, fostering students' personal development through communication practice not only strengthens their English skills but also equips them for broader social and professional engagement.

2.4. Challenges students face in improving their English communication skills

2.4.1. Linguistic factors:

Limited vocabulary, poor grammar, unclear pronunciation

Linguistic competence is the foundation of effective communication in any language. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, deficiencies in key areas such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation can significantly impede their ability to communicate fluently and accurately in both academic and professional contexts.

Limited Vocabulary

Vocabulary is crucial for both comprehending and producing language. Learners with a limited vocabulary often struggle to express complex ideas, which can result in hesitation, misunderstandings, or communication breakdowns. Nation (2001) suggests that a minimum of 2,000–3,000 high-frequency word families is necessary for basic communication, yet many EFL students fall short of this benchmark. Laufer and Nation (1995) further emphasize that vocabulary size is one of the strongest predictors of language proficiency, particularly in speaking and writing tasks. Therefore, developing a robust vocabulary is essential for learners to convey ideas clearly and communicate effectively.

Poor Grammar

Grammar provides the structural framework necessary for clear communication. Learners who lack mastery of fundamental grammar rules often produce sentences that are incomplete, confusing, or ungrammatical. Ur (1996) notes that grammatical errors can lead to misinterpretation, especially in spoken communication where immediate revision is not possible. Errors in tense, subject-verb agreement, or sentence construction can distract listeners and weaken the intended message. According to Canale and Swain's (1980) Communicative Competence Model, grammatical competence is a core component of overall communicative ability, enabling learners to construct coherent and accurate utterances. Mastery of grammar is therefore essential for expressing ideas precisely and effectively, particularly in oral interactions.

Unclear Pronunciation

Pronunciation is a critical aspect of spoken communication. Learners who struggle with pronunciation are often misunderstood, even if they possess adequate grammar and vocabulary. Common challenges include incorrect stress, intonation, and misarticulation of consonant and vowel sounds. Gilakjani (2012) highlights that pronunciation difficulties can negatively affect learners' confidence and willingness to speak, causing some to avoid communication altogether. In many EFL classrooms, pronunciation receives insufficient attention, which

further exacerbates these challenges. Effective pronunciation is therefore essential for ensuring comprehension, building confidence, and encouraging active participation in communication.

Overall, linguistic competence including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation is fundamental to effective English communication. Deficiencies in any of these areas can hinder learners' ability to convey ideas clearly and confidently, emphasizing the need for comprehensive language instruction that addresses all three components.

2.4.2. Environmental Factors

Environmental factors play a significant role in shaping students' opportunities and motivation to develop English communication skills. Among these factors, lack of practice, passive learning environments, and limited feedback are major challenges that impede language development, particularly in EFL contexts such as Laos.

Lack of Practice

Developing communication competence requires frequent interaction in the target language. However, many EFL students have limited exposure to real-life English communication, which restricts their fluency, confidence, and ability to use English spontaneously. According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), language learning is most effective in social contexts that allow learners to engage meaningfully with others. Similarly, Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983) emphasizes that interaction provides learners with opportunities to negotiate meaning and adjust language output in real time. Empirical studies support this claim: Pham (2017) found that Vietnamese university students rarely used English outside the classroom, resulting in low speaking proficiency, while Vongxay (2020) reported that Lao EFL learners faced similar limitations in practice opportunities, negatively affecting their confidence and performance.

Regular practice and real-life interaction are therefore crucial for developing effective communication skills. In many EFL contexts, the scarcity of opportunities to use English outside the classroom constrains learners' fluency, spontaneity, and self-assurance, leaving their speaking abilities underdeveloped.

Passive Learning Environments

In many traditional classrooms, instruction is teacher-centered, focusing heavily on grammar rules and rote memorization. This passive approach reduces student participation and limits opportunities for developing communicative competence. Constructivist learning theories (Bruner, 1961; Piaget,

1970) argue that learners actively construct knowledge through exploration and interaction, but this process is disrupted in classrooms where students are treated as passive recipients. Chantavilasvong and Sukwichai (2019) observed that Thai EFL students often remained silent in class due to fear of speaking and a lack of engaging activities. Similar patterns have been reported in Lao classrooms, where teacher-centered practices limit student interaction and impede communicative development.

Teacher-centered instruction reduces opportunities for active participation and communication practice. When classrooms emphasize memorization and rule-based teaching, students rarely engage in meaningful interaction, which can result in low confidence, fear of speaking, and weak communicative ability.

Limited Feedback

Constructive feedback is essential for language improvement, as it helps learners identify errors, reflect on performance, and make corrections in future communication. However, many teachers provide minimal individualized feedback due to time constraints or large class sizes. Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985) highlights the critical role of output and feedback in language learning; without it, learners may repeat mistakes, leading to fossilization of incorrect language forms. Nguyen and Boers (2021) found that students who received regular, timely feedback demonstrated greater improvement in speaking and writing than those who received only grades or generic comments. In many Lao universities, the lack of speaking-focused assessments and feedback opportunities prevents students from understanding their progress and areas for improvement.

Constructive feedback is therefore vital for helping learners correct errors and enhance language skills. Limited feedback opportunities can leave students unaware of their mistakes, hindering their development in both speaking and writing.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research design

The purpose of this study on the importance of English communication skills of 2nd year students, Department of English at Savannakhet University so this study employs quantitative approach. The quantitative is used in analysing and describing the data to assess the importance of English communication of 2nd year students.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 25 second-year students majoring in English from the Department of English at Savannakhet University. A purposive sampling method was employed to select the participants. This method was chosen because the study specifically focuses on second-year English major students, who are considered information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives.

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are selected based on specific characteristics that align with the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2014).

3.3 Research instruments

The primary research instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire, which was designed to investigate the level of English communication skills, students' perceptions of the importance of English communication, and challenges faced by second-year English major students at Savannakhet University.

3.3.1 Development of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed based on a review of relevant literature on English communication skills, communicative competence, and students' perceptions in EFL contexts. Concepts from Communicative Competence Theory (Canale & Swain, 1980), English communication skills frameworks (Brown, 2004; Nunan, 1991), and previous empirical studies focusing on English communication challenges and perceptions (Cherdchoopong, 2020; Vongxay, 2020) were used to guide the construction of the questionnaire items.

Some items were adapted and modified from questionnaires used in previous studies related to English communication skills and students' perceptions. The adaptation involved simplifying the wording, adjusting the content to match the Lao university context, and aligning the items with the objectives of the present study. This ensured that the instrument was both contextually relevant and theoretically grounded.

3.3.2 Structure of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of three main parts:

Part I: General Background Information

This section collected demographic information about the participants, including gender, age, and years of studying English. The data from this part were used to describe the characteristics of the sample group.

Part II: English Communication Skills

This section focused on students' self-reported levels of English communication skills, including listening, speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Participants were asked to indicate their level of

agreement or frequency of use using a Likert-scale format. These items were designed to reflect students' perceived competence in each communication skill.

Part III: Perceptions of Importance and Challenges

This section examined students' perceptions of the importance of English communication skills for academic performance, future careers, and personal development, as well as the challenges they face in improving these skills. The items addressed factors such as confidence, motivation, practice opportunities, and anxiety in using English.

This part contained closed-ended items using a five-point Likert scale, where

5 = Strongly agree,

4 = Agree,

3 = Moderate,

2 = Disagree,

1 = Strongly disagree.

These items were designed to measure students' perceptions of the importance of English communication skills for academic performance, future careers, and personal development.

Language and Validity Considerations

To ensure accurate understanding and reliable responses, the questionnaire was administered in Lao, the participants' first language. The original items were prepared in English and then translated into Lao. This approach was adopted to minimize misunderstanding and improve response accuracy (Creswell, 2014).

Before data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by English language instructors from the Department of English to check for clarity, relevance, and content validity. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback.

3.4 Data collection

The data collection was conducted during the second semester of the academic year at the Department of English, Savannakhet University, located in Nongphue Village, Kaisone Phomvihan City, Savannakhet Province. The participants were 25 second-year English major students.

Before collecting the data, the researcher requested permission from the Department of English and coordinated with course lecturers to arrange a suitable time for administering the questionnaire. On the day of data collection, the researcher met the participants in their classroom.

First, the researcher explained the purpose and objectives of the study, the importance of honest responses, and the procedures for completing the questionnaire. The participants were informed that

their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential and used only for academic purposes.

Next, the questionnaires were distributed to all participants. Clear instructions were given, and the researcher remained in the classroom to answer any questions or clarify unclear items. The participants completed the questionnaires individually, which took approximately 15–20 minutes.

After completion, all questionnaires were collected immediately by the researcher. The researcher checked the questionnaires for completeness before coding and preparing the data for analysis. No major problems occurred during the data collection process, and all questionnaires were returned, resulting in a 100% response rate.

3.5 Data analysis

After data collection, all completed questionnaires were checked for completeness and accuracy. The data were then coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistical techniques were employed to analyze the quantitative data, including frequency, percentage, mean (\bar{x}), and standard deviation (SD).

3.5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize and describe the characteristics of the participants and their perceptions of the importance of English communication skills.

3.5.2 Percentage (%)

Percentages were used to analyze and describe the data in Part I (General Background Information) of the questionnaire, such as gender and academic background. Percentage is commonly used in educational research to present proportions clearly and meaningfully (Best & Kahn, 2006).

The formula used to calculate percentage was:

$$P = \frac{F}{N}100$$

P : Represents percent

F: Represent frequency changing in percent

N: Represent number

3.5.3 Mean (\bar{x})

The mean, also known as the arithmetic average, was used to analyze data in Part II (Importance of English Communication Skills). The mean represents the central tendency of respondents' ratings and is appropriate for analyzing Likert-scale data in descriptive studies (Creswell, 2014; Pallant, 2020).

The formula for calculating the mean is:

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum X}{N}$$

\bar{X} : The average

$\sum X$: The summation

N: The number of sources

To interpret the level of importance of English communication skills, the mean scores were classified according to the following criteria adapted from Likert (1932):

Mean Score Range	Interpretation
5.00 – 4.20	Very Important
4.19 – 3.40	Important
3.39 – 2.60	Moderate
2.59 – 1.80	Unimportant
1.79 – 1.00	Not Important

3.5.4 Standard deviation

The standard deviation was used to measure the variability or dispersion of responses around the mean. A low standard deviation indicates that respondents' answers are close to the mean, while a high standard deviation shows greater variation among responses (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020).

The formula for calculating standard deviation is:

$$S.D. = \sqrt{\frac{\sum(X - \bar{X})^2}{N - 1}}$$

S.D: The standard deviation

Σ : The summation

x: Each value in the population

\bar{x} : The mean of value sample

N: The number of the sample

Both the mean and standard deviation were used to interpret students' perceptions of the importance of English communication skills among second-year students in the Department of English at Savannakhet University.

4. Results

4.1 General Information

Table 4.1 Gender of the Participants (N = 25)

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	10	40
Female	15	60
Total	25	100

Table 4.1 shows that 60% of the participants were female, while 40% were male. This indicates a slightly higher female representation among second-year English major students at Savannakhet University.

Table 4.2 Age of the Participants

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18–20 years	24	96
21–25 years	1	4

Total	25	100
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As shown in Table 4.2, most participants (96%) were between 18–20 years old. This indicates that the sample group is relatively homogeneous in terms of age.

English Use in Daily Academic Life

Table 4.3 Use of English in Daily Academic Life

Frequency of Use	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very often	14	56
Occasionally	11	44
Rarely	0	0
Never	0	0
Total	25	100

Table 4.3 indicates that all students use English in their academic life. More than half of the students (56%) reported using English very often, suggesting active engagement with English in their studies.

4.2 Level of English Communication Skills

Table 4.4 Level of English Communication Skills

Skill Area	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Level
Listening	4.32	1.06	Very Important
Speaking	4.13	1.08	Important
Pronunciation	4.17	0.99	Important
Vocabulary	4.13	0.92	Important
Grammar	4.01	1.03	Important

Table 4.4 shows that listening skills received the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 4.32$), indicating that students consider listening to be very important for effective communication. Speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar were all rated as important, with mean scores above 4.00. This suggests that students recognize the importance of all language skills, although listening is perceived as the most critical.

4.3 Students' Perceptions of Communication Skills

Table 4.5 Students' Perceptions of English Communication Skills

Aspect	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Interpretation
Overall importance	4.16	0.95	Important
Academic performance	4.18	1.05	Important
Career readiness	4.41	0.89	Very Important
Personal development & confidence	4.20	0.94	Very Important

As shown in Table 4.5, students strongly perceive English communication skills as important for multiple aspects of their lives. Career readiness

received the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 4.41$), indicating that students strongly associate English communication with future employment opportunities. Personal development and confidence were also rated as very important, highlighting the role of communication skills in building self-confidence.

Challenges in English Communication Skills

Linguistic Challenges

Table 4.6 Linguistic Challenges in English Communication

Challenge	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Level
Limited vocabulary	4.18	0.88	Important
Poor grammar	4.10	0.93	Important
Unclear pronunciation	3.95	1.12	Moderate

Table 4.6 indicates that limited vocabulary and poor grammar are major linguistic challenges faced by students. Unclear pronunciation was rated at a moderate level, suggesting that while it is a concern, it is less problematic than vocabulary and grammar.

Environmental Challenges

Table 4.7 Environmental Challenges in English Communication

Challenge	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Level
Lack of practice opportunities	4.24	0.91	Very Important
Passive learning environment	3.93	0.92	Moderate
Limited feedback from teachers	4.19	1.08	Important

Table 4.7 shows that lack of practice opportunities is the most serious environmental challenge faced by students. Limited feedback and passive classroom environments also negatively affect students' communication development, indicating a need for more interactive and feedback-rich teaching approaches.

In summary, second-year English major students at Savannakhet University perceive English communication skills as essential for academic success, career readiness, and personal development. Although students value listening and speaking skills highly, they face challenges related to vocabulary, grammar, and limited opportunities for practice. These findings highlight the importance of interactive teaching methods, increased communicative practice, and constructive feedback to enhance students' English communication competence.

5. Discussion

The findings indicated that second-year English majors at Savannakhet University perceive

English communication skills as very important, with most mean scores above 4.00. This suggests that students are highly aware of the value of these skills and actively recognize their role in academic, professional, and personal development.

5.1. Level of English Communication Skills

Students scored higher in receptive skills such as listening (mean = 4.32) than in productive skills like speaking (mean = 4.13). This pattern is consistent with Erickson and Astorga (2016) who emphasize that listening serves as the foundation for speaking. A possible reason for this is that the university curriculum prioritizes listening comprehension through lectures, audio materials, and teacher explanations, which allows students to develop understanding before attempting active production. In contrast, speaking and pronunciation involve real-time language construction and are affected by anxiety, vocabulary recall, and fear of making mistakes, which may slightly lower scores compared to listening. Vocabulary (mean = 4.13) and grammar (mean = 4.01) were also rated important. Students' high scores may reflect both awareness and active engagement in improving these areas. For example, classroom activities such as group discussions, presentations, and reading assignments likely reinforce vocabulary acquisition and grammar practice, even if application in spontaneous speech remains challenging.

5.2 Students' Perceptions of Communication Skills

The overall perception of communication skills (mean = 4.16), as well as career readiness (mean = 4.41) and personal development (mean = 4.20), were among the highest scores. This reflects strong motivation among students to improve English for academic success and future employment. There are several possible explanations for these high scores such as, awareness of global and regional career opportunities, University emphasis on English and cultural and social factors. Students know that English proficiency is critical for teaching, tourism, business, and international collaboration in ASEAN, which aligns with Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) ESP theory and Becker's (1964) Human Capital Theory. The Department of English likely encourages regular English use in classes, presentations, and assignments, increasing students' recognition of its importance. Regarding the cultural and social factors in Laos, English is increasingly valued as a key skill for personal and professional mobility. Students may internalize societal expectations, which motivates high ratings of importance.

5.3 Challenges in English Communication Skills

Despite high mean scores for importance, students reported challenges in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and limited practice. Linguistic challenges align with Canale and Swain's (1980) Communicative Competence Theory and highlight that awareness of importance does not always equate to mastery. For example, Limited vocabulary may persist despite students understanding its relevance, because learning new words requires repeated exposure and active use in speaking or writing. Grammar difficulties and unclear pronunciation indicate that traditional classroom instruction may emphasize correctness and accuracy over spontaneous communication, affecting students' confidence in production.

Environmental challenges, such as passive learning environments (mean=3.93) and limited feedback (mean = 4.19), further explain why students perceive communication as important but still face obstacles. According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) and Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983), meaningful interaction and timely corrective feedback are essential for skill development. High mean scores in importance may thus reflect students' motivation and recognition of needs, while challenges persist due to structural limitations in classroom practice or insufficient real-life interaction opportunities.

In summary, the high mean scores (> 4.00) indicate that students:

- Are highly motivated and recognize the value of English communication for academic, career, and personal development.
- Perform stronger in receptive skills due to curriculum emphasis and classroom exposure.
- Face linguistic and environmental challenges, suggesting that awareness of importance does not automatically translate into competence.

These findings highlight that motivation, curriculum design, exposure, and feedback are key factors influencing students' perceptions and performance. Instructional strategies that increase interactive practice, vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation training, and constructive feedback could help translate high awareness into higher actual competence.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to (1) investigate the level of English communication skills, (2) examine students' perceptions of these skills, and (3) identify the challenges second-year English majors face at Savannakhet University. The findings show that

students highly value English communication for academic achievement, career readiness, and personal development. Although students demonstrated a moderate level of communicative competence, receptive skills were stronger than productive skills, indicating persistent difficulties in speaking and writing. The study also revealed several key challenges, including limited practice opportunities, grammatical difficulties, pronunciation issues, and low confidence. Environmental factors such as passive learning environments and limited teacher feedback further constrained students' communicative development. Despite these challenges, students showed strong motivation to improve their English communication skills and recognized its importance for future professional success.

These findings highlight the need for more communicative, student-centered instructional approaches that provide increased opportunities for interaction, constructive feedback, and confidence-building activities. Addressing these issues can help bridge the gap between students' positive attitudes and their actual communicative performance, ultimately enhancing English proficiency in EFL university contexts.

7. Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, several practical recommendations are proposed to further enhance the already high level of English communication skills among second-year English majors at Savannakhet University:

1. Enhance productive skills (speaking and writing): Although students demonstrated high overall communication skills, productive skills such as speaking and writing showed slightly lower mean scores compared to receptive skills. Therefore, classroom time should focus more on interactive speaking and writing activities that encourage spontaneous and meaningful communication, including presentations, debates, and collaborative writing tasks.
2. Strengthen linguistic competence: Given students' challenges with vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, English instruction should integrate communicative grammar exercises, vocabulary expansion strategies, and

9. References

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pronunciation practice to support accuracy and fluency in real-life communication.

3. Adopt interactive, student-centered teaching methods:

To address environmental barriers such as passive learning environments, instructors should use pair work, group discussions, role-plays, and task-based activities to provide students with opportunities to actively use English in authentic contexts.

4. Provide regular and constructive feedback: Students highly value feedback for improving their communication skills. Teachers should provide timely, specific, and actionable feedback, particularly on speaking and pronunciation, to help students maintain confidence and refine their language use.
5. Increase opportunities for English use beyond the classroom:

Universities should create extracurricular programs, English clubs, workshops, and presentation opportunities that allow students to practice English in social, academic, and professional contexts, reinforcing their language skills and boosting confidence.

8. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings:

Sample size and scope: The study involved only 25 second-year English majors at Savannakhet University, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other academic levels, programs, or institutions. Future studies could include larger and more diverse samples.

Focus on quantitative data: The study primarily relied on descriptive statistics and did not include qualitative data such as interviews, classroom observations, or peer evaluations, which could provide deeper insights into students' communication behaviors and challenges.

Contextual factors: External factors such as teaching styles, institutional policies, and classroom environment were not examined in depth, yet they may influence students' communication skills and perceptions. Future research could investigate these variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

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