



# Improving EFL Speaking Competence through Information-Gap Activities: A Case Study from Vietnam

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**Abstract :** Developing speaking competence remains a persistent challenge for non-English major students in Vietnamese universities, where traditional instruction often emphasizes grammar and passive language practice. This study investigates the effectiveness of Information-Gap Activities (IGAs) in improving both speaking performance and motivation among non-English major freshmen at a public university in northern Vietnam. Employing a quasi-experimental design, the research involved two intact classes: one experimental group (27 students) receiving IGA-based instruction and one control group (30 students) taught through conventional textbook-based speaking tasks. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, a motivation questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative analysis showed that while both groups improved, the experimental group achieved greater gains in speaking performance; however, the between-group difference did not reach statistical significance. More notably, students in the experimental group reported higher levels of speaking motivation, increased confidence, and reduced anxiety in using English orally. Interview responses revealed that learners found IGAs more engaging, purposeful, and relevant to real-life communication than traditional classroom activities. The study concludes that IGAs are an effective strategy to foster speaking motivation and promote learner participation, especially in contexts where students are hesitant to speak. It recommends integrating IGAs into tertiary-level English instruction and providing teachers with the necessary training to implement task-based learning successfully. Future research should examine the long-term impacts of IGAs and their effectiveness across varying proficiency levels and educational contexts.

**IndexTerms** - Information-Gap Activities, Speaking Motivation, Non-English Majors, Task-Based Instruction, Vietnamese EFL Learners.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, English has solidified its role as the global lingua franca in domains such as international business, diplomacy, education, and technology (Crystal, 2003). As a result, the ability to speak English fluently and confidently is increasingly regarded as a core competency for university students worldwide, regardless of their academic disciplines. For students in non-English-major programs, communicative proficiency in English is no longer optional but essential for academic success, employability, and global engagement (Richards, 2008; Burns, 2017). In Vietnam, English has been positioned as a priority foreign language in national education policy since the implementation of the National Foreign Language Project 2020, aiming to enhance the communicative competence of Vietnamese students in the global workforce (MOET, 2008). However, despite significant curricular reforms and expanded access to English education, many students continue to struggle with oral communication, particularly at the university level.

This issue is especially prevalent among non-English major freshmen at universities in northern Vietnam, who typically arrive with years of exposure to English grammar and vocabulary but demonstrate low confidence, limited fluency, and reluctance to engage in spontaneous speaking. Studies by Nguyen (2020) and Pham & Nguyen (2019) found that students in Vietnamese tertiary EFL contexts often avoid speaking in class due to fear of making mistakes, low self-efficacy, and lack of interactive opportunities. Traditional classroom practices, which are still dominated by grammar translation and teacher-centered approaches, tend to prioritize accuracy over fluency, limiting students' chances to engage in real-time, meaningful communication (Hoang, 2013; Nguyen & Newton, 2020). Consequently, many students perceive speaking lessons as intimidating or irrelevant, which undermines their motivation—a factor that plays a pivotal role in successful language acquisition (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gardner, 1985). In response to this challenge, IGAs offer a pedagogically sound and practically applicable alternative. Rooted in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), IGAs require learners to work in pairs or groups to exchange missing information in order to complete a task. These activities simulate real-world communication, thereby encouraging

authentic language use, negotiation of meaning, and cooperative learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Ellis, 2003). Research from various EFL contexts has demonstrated that IGAs help learners lower affective filters, increase classroom interaction, and develop both fluency and confidence in speaking (Ismaili & Bajrami, 2016; Ortiz Neira, 2019). In the Vietnamese context, recent studies (Duyen, 2021; Tran, 2018) also affirm that IGAs can positively influence student participation and foster a more communicative learning environment, though their use remains limited in university-level speaking courses.

This study aims to explore the extent to which IGAs can enhance the speaking motivation and performance of non-English major freshmen at a university in northern Vietnam. Specifically, it seeks to (1) identify key barriers that hinder students' willingness to speak English, (2) assess the effectiveness of IGAs in improving speaking competence and classroom engagement, and (3) propose practical recommendations for integrating IGAs into tertiary-level English instruction. By addressing both performance and motivational dimensions, this study contributes to the growing effort to transform Vietnamese EFL classrooms into more interactive, learner-centered spaces that promote not just language knowledge but language use

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most critical skills in second language acquisition, especially in real-world communication. Unlike reading or writing, speaking requires learners to process and produce language in real-time, integrating vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and pragmatic awareness simultaneously. According to Nunan (2003), speaking is not only the most demanded skill in global contexts but also the most anxiety-inducing for learners, particularly in environments where oral communication is not prioritized. For non-English majors in Vietnam, speaking often remains underdeveloped due to a lack of authentic practice and interaction, despite years of exposure to the English language in formal education.

Motivation plays a central role in language learning success. Gardner (1985) classified motivation into integrative (desire to connect with the language culture) and instrumental (utilitarian needs), both of which influence a learner's persistence and willingness to communicate. Dörnyei (2001) later emphasized the dynamic and situational nature of motivation, suggesting that classroom factors, peer interaction, and task design can significantly affect learners' motivation, especially in speaking classes. In many Vietnamese tertiary settings, where speaking classes are often viewed as intimidating and examination-oriented, students lack the motivation to take risks or speak freely. This results in a passive learning environment that hinders oral skill development.

Information-Gap Activities are a key component of CLT, an approach that shifts the focus from rote learning to meaningful communication. IGAs require learners to communicate with each other to complete a task by exchanging information that only one party possesses. These tasks mirror real-life interactions, making them effective for improving fluency, interactional competence, and learner autonomy. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), IGAs are particularly useful in low-anxiety environments and foster spontaneous language use, which is essential for developing speaking skills. Research by Littlewood (2004) and Ellis (2003) confirms that IGAs stimulate engagement, reduce fear of making mistakes, and promote negotiation of meaning which is considered as key aspects of communicative competence.

IGAs, as a core component of CLT, have been empirically validated across various EFL settings for their effectiveness in promoting both speaking competence and learner motivation. Globally, studies have demonstrated that IGAs enhance students' fluency, interactional competence, and willingness to communicate. For instance, Ortiz Neira (2019), in a study with Chilean eighth-grade students, reported that IGAs improved oral fluency and created a more engaging learning environment. Similarly, Ismaili and Bajrami (2016) found that IGAs significantly contributed to learners' confidence and motivation by providing real-life communication opportunities. In Turkey, Dilber and Komur (2022) examined the role of two-way information-gap tasks in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms and found notable increases in student motivation and participation. These findings are supported by earlier work from Littlewood (2004) and Ellis (2003), who argued that IGAs promote negotiation of meaning, reduce language anxiety, and encourage spontaneous speech—all of which are essential for the development of communicative competence in EFL learners.

In the Vietnamese context, recent research has begun to explore how IGAs function in tertiary education, particularly among non-English major students. Duyen (2021) surveyed EFL teachers and reported that IGAs were seen as highly beneficial for increasing student participation and reducing passivity in speaking classes. A study conducted at Dong Nai Technology University (2019) concluded that IGAs helped improve elementary students' speaking abilities by offering a more interactive and learner-centered environment (Nhan, 2019). Likewise, research at the University of Danang found that students exposed to IGAs demonstrated increased engagement, better vocabulary use, and stronger confidence when speaking (Nam, 2019). These findings are particularly relevant in Vietnamese universities, where many non-English majors often struggle with low speaking motivation due to exam-oriented instruction and limited communicative exposure. Collectively, the global and local empirical evidence underscores the pedagogical value of IGAs and supports their integration into EFL speaking curricula. This study builds on these insights by applying IGAs to non-English major freshmen at a university in northern Vietnam and examining their impact on speaking motivation and classroom participation.

While numerous global and Vietnamese studies have explored the positive effects of IGAs on learners' speaking competence and motivation, much of the existing research focuses on English majors, younger learners, or general classroom implementation without specifically addressing the unique challenges faced by non-English major freshmen at the university level. In particular, limited empirical attention has been paid to how IGAs can be adapted and applied within large, exam-oriented, and often demotivating tertiary EFL classrooms—settings that are common in public universities across Vietnam. Moreover, although several Vietnamese studies have confirmed the benefits of IGAs in promoting interaction and confidence, few have systematically evaluated their impact using a mixed-method approach that combines speaking performance assessment with motivational data.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by targeting a specific, under-researched learner population: non-English major freshmen at a university in the north of Vietnam. These students often possess foundational grammar knowledge from high school but demonstrate reluctance and anxiety when engaging in oral communication. By investigating both the motivational impact and speaking outcomes associated with IGAs, this study offers a dual contribution: (1) it provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of IGAs in tertiary EFL contexts, and (2) it informs practical pedagogy by offering adaptable, communicative strategies that can be used by instructors

working with demotivated or passive university learners. Through this lens, the research not only addresses theoretical gaps but also responds to an urgent pedagogical need in Vietnamese higher education.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quasi-experimental design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the effectiveness of IGAs in enhancing speaking performance and motivation among non-English major freshmen. Specifically, the research aimed to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do Information-Gap Activities improve the speaking performance of non-English major freshmen at a university in northern Vietnam?
2. How do Information-Gap Activities influence the speaking motivation of non-English major freshmen toward English speaking classes?

A pre-test and post-test approach was used to measure students' changes in speaking performance, while a motivation survey and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore learners' attitudes toward the use of IGAs in speaking classes. The research was carried out at a public university in northern Vietnam, where English is a compulsory subject for all non-English majors in their first year. A total of 57 freshmen majoring in International Business participated. These students had studied English for at least seven years but had limited experience with communicative speaking activities. They were divided into two intact classes: the experimental group (27 students) received IGA-based instruction, and the control group (30 students) followed traditional speaking practice methods such as textbook dialogues and structured drills. Both groups were taught by the same instructor and followed the same institutional curriculum to ensure instructional consistency.

The intervention lasted 12 weeks, with two 50-minute speaking sessions per week. The experimental group engaged in IGAs such as "Find Someone Who," "Spot the Difference," and "Role-play with Hidden Information," all adapted to suit learners' proficiency levels and lesson goals. The control group, in contrast, participated in more conventional, teacher-centered instruction. Three primary instruments were used for data collection: (1) Speaking Pre- and Post-tests, assessed via a rubric covering fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, and interaction; (2) a Motivation Questionnaire, adapted from Gardner's AMTB, incorporating Likert-scale and open-ended items to measure confidence, interest, anxiety, and perceived learning value; and (3) Semi-structured Interviews with 10 randomly selected students from the experimental group to gain deeper insight into their learning experience. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired- and independent-sample t-tests to measure changes in performance and motivation. Thematic coding was applied to the qualitative data to identify key patterns related to learner engagement, motivation shifts, and perceived benefits of IGAs.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 1. Results of the pre-test and post-test

Table 1 below presents the descriptive statistics of speaking test scores for both the experimental and control groups before and after the instructional intervention. At the pre-test stage, the two groups demonstrated comparable speaking proficiency, with the experimental group averaging a score of 5.80 (SD = 0.70) and the control group slightly lower at 5.76 (SD = 0.68). This near equivalence suggests that both groups began the study with similar baseline abilities, thereby allowing for a meaningful comparison of instructional effects. After the 12-week treatment period, both groups showed improvement. The experimental group, which received instruction through IGAs, achieved a mean post-test score of 6.55 (SD = 0.75), representing an average gain of 0.75 points. Meanwhile, the control group, which followed a traditional speaking instruction format, recorded a post-test mean of 6.30 (SD = 0.73), with an average gain of 0.54 points.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Speaking Scores**

Group	Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	Pre-test	27	5.80	0.70
Experimental	Post-test	27	6.55	0.75
Control	Pre-test	30	5.76	0.68
Control	Post-test	30	6.30	0.73

Although both groups benefited from continued speaking practice, the descriptive data indicate a more notable improvement in the experimental group. The greater mean gain suggests that IGAs may offer advantages in fostering communicative growth, particularly through interactive and student-centered tasks. However, the relatively modest difference in post-test means (6.55 vs. 6.30) and the slight increase in standard deviation in both groups imply that learner progress varied and may have been influenced by individual factors such as motivation, participation, or prior speaking exposure. While these descriptive results point to a potential benefit of IGAs, further inferential analysis is required to determine whether the observed differences are statistically significant and attributable to the treatment itself.

**Table 2. Comparing speaking score within each group**

Group	Mean Difference (Post-Pre)	t	df	p-value
Experimental	0.75	3.85	26	0.001
Control	0.54	2.95	29	0.006

To assess whether the improvements observed in each group's speaking scores were statistically significant, paired-sample t-tests were conducted comparing the pre-test and post-test results within both the experimental and control groups. As shown in Table 2, the experimental group's mean speaking score increased by 0.75 points—from 5.80 (pre-test) to 6.55 (post-test)—with a corresponding t-value of 3.85 and a p-value of 0.001. This result indicates a statistically significant improvement in speaking performance among students who were exposed to Information-Gap Activities ( $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, the control group, which followed a traditional speaking instruction method, also showed a significant gain of 0.54 points (from 5.76 to 6.30), with a t-value of 2.95 and a p-value of 0.006.

These findings confirm that both instructional approaches contributed positively to students' speaking development over the 12-week period. However, the larger mean gain and higher t-value in the experimental group suggest that IGAs may have yielded a

stronger effect on individual learner progress. The statistically significant within-group improvements validate the use of speaking-focused classroom activities in general, but they also imply that the collaborative, interactive nature of IGAs might have provided more opportunities for students to actively use language in meaningful contexts. Although the difference in magnitude between the two groups' improvements cannot be directly compared through this analysis alone, the paired t-test results reinforce the idea that IGAs are a pedagogically promising tool for enhancing oral language performance in EFL university settings.

To determine whether the experimental group outperformed the control group in speaking performance after the intervention, an independent-sample t-test was conducted using the post-test scores of both groups. As shown in Table 3, the experimental group achieved a higher mean score ( $M = 6.55$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) compared to the control group ( $M = 6.30$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ). However, the t-test yielded a t-value of 1.65 with a p-value of 0.104, which exceeds the conventional significance threshold of 0.05. This result indicates that, although the experimental group had a numerically higher mean score, the difference between the two groups' post-test performances was not statistically significant.

**Table 3. Comparing post-test speaking score between groups**

Group	Mean (Post-test)	t	df	p-value
Experimental	6.55	1.65	55	0.104
Control	6.30			

The findings suggest that while IGAs may lead to greater gains in speaking performance compared to traditional methods, the margin of improvement was not large enough to rule out the possibility of random variation in this case. This outcome could be attributed to several factors, including the relatively small sample size, varying degrees of student engagement, or the limited duration of the treatment period. It is also possible that certain speaking subskills—such as fluency and interaction—improved more noticeably than others like grammatical accuracy or pronunciation, thereby balancing the overall score. Nevertheless, the positive trend observed in the experimental group supports the potential of IGAs as a supplementary strategy for enhancing speaking competence, warranting further exploration in longer-term or larger-scale studies.

## 2. Results from the motivation questionnaire and semi-structured interview

Analysis of the Likert-scale items in the motivation questionnaire revealed moderate to strong positive shifts in students' speaking motivation:

- 87% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that speaking through IGAs was more engaging than traditional methods.
- 80% felt more confident using English orally after participating in pair and group tasks.
- 76% reported that they were less anxious about speaking in front of classmates when tasks required mutual information exchange.
- 84% stated that the speaking activities felt more purposeful and closer to real-life communication.

While not every student reported dramatic changes, the overall pattern suggested that IGAs successfully enhanced motivation, reduced speaking-related anxiety, and encouraged more active participation compared to previous learning experiences.

Interview data further supported the quantitative findings. Most students described the IGA lessons as “less stressful,” “more fun,” and “more useful for real communication.” Several participants highlighted that having a reason to speak—such as completing a puzzle or finding missing information—gave them a clear purpose, which made the speaking tasks feel more natural. One student noted, “*Before, I was scared to speak because I didn't want to make mistakes. But during the games, I was focused on the task, not on being perfect.*” Another remarked, “*I liked speaking more in this class because it felt like we were actually using English to do something, not just repeating sentences.*”

However, a few students expressed concerns, such as unfamiliarity with the format at the beginning or unequal participation during group tasks. These responses suggest that while IGAs were generally motivating, their success also depended on classroom management, task design, and peer dynamics.

These findings align with the findings from the previous sections, which showed moderate but meaningful gains in speaking performance in the experimental group. The motivational boost observed here likely contributed to these gains. Students' increased confidence and willingness to participate in English-speaking tasks may have supported their performance growth, even if the improvements were not statistically superior to the control group in post-test comparison. Taken together, the results indicate that IGAs play an important role in creating a more motivating and communicative learning environment, which can positively influence learners' affective engagement and gradually support language development.

## 3. Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the pedagogical value of IGAs in enhancing both speaking performance and learner motivation among non-English major freshmen at a university in northern Vietnam. While the improvement in speaking performance was moderate and did not reach statistical significance in between-group comparison, the within-group gains and attitudinal shifts among experimental participants highlight the potential of IGAs to foster meaningful engagement in oral communication tasks. These results align with a growing body of research in both global and Vietnamese contexts that emphasizes the importance of communicative, student-centered instruction in EFL speaking classrooms.

The improvement in speaking scores observed in the experimental group mirrors earlier findings by Ortiz Neira (2019) in Chile and Ismaili and Bajrami (2016) in Kosovo, where students involved in IGA-based tasks exhibited significant gains in oral fluency and communicative confidence. Similarly, Dilber and Komur (2022) found that IGAs increased learners' motivation and willingness to speak in ESP contexts in Turkey. In these studies, learners reported greater satisfaction and reduced anxiety, attributing these outcomes to the purposeful and interactive nature of the tasks. The results of the present study align with these outcomes, especially in terms of reduced anxiety and increased motivation, as indicated by both the questionnaire and interview responses.

In the Vietnamese context, this study reinforces the findings of Nguyen Thi Mai Duyen (2021), who reported that EFL teachers viewed IGAs as effective tools for promoting student engagement in speaking classes. Likewise, the study echoes the results from Tran (2018), who observed that information-gap tasks increased the quantity and quality of student talk in group settings. However, unlike studies such as Nguyen & Pham (2020), which reported significant improvements in both fluency and accuracy after long-term implementation of task-based speaking lessons, the present study revealed only moderate gains over a 12-week period. This

discrepancy may be due to several factors, including the relatively short treatment duration, learners' initial unfamiliarity with task-based formats, and unequal participation levels in group tasks.

One of the key contributions of this study lies in its dual focus on both performance and motivation, an area that has often been overlooked in prior Vietnamese research. While many local studies focus solely on speaking outcomes or learners' perceptions, this research combines quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more holistic view of how IGAs impact learner engagement and performance. The finding that students felt more confident and less anxious during speaking tasks confirms Dörnyei's (2001) assertion that motivation is highly situational and can be influenced by task design and classroom environment. It also aligns with Harmer (2001), who emphasized that meaningful interaction and task purpose are central to building speaking confidence in EFL learners.

Despite the generally positive outcomes, the moderate performance improvement—without a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups—suggests that IGA effectiveness is not automatic but rather context-dependent. Factors such as task difficulty, student proficiency, and classroom management all play a role in determining the success of task-based instruction. Moreover, the increase in score variability (as shown in standard deviations) indicates that IGAs may benefit some learners more than others, particularly those who are more socially engaged or have higher baseline confidence in speaking.

In summary, the study supports the international and Vietnamese literature advocating for communicative language teaching approaches, particularly IGAs, in EFL speaking classrooms. It contributes local evidence to the growing recognition that student motivation and engagement are essential drivers of language learning, especially for non-English majors who may not view English as central to their academic identity. However, the findings also call for a cautious and reflective approach to implementing IGAs—one that considers learner readiness, scaffolding, and sustained support over time.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of IGAs in enhancing speaking performance and motivation among non-English major freshmen at a university in northern Vietnam. The findings revealed that while IGAs led to moderate but statistically significant improvement within the experimental group, they also had a notable positive impact on learners' motivation, confidence, and engagement in speaking activities.

These results suggest that integrating IGAs into university EFL classrooms can foster a more communicative and learner-centered environment, helping to bridge the gap between grammatical knowledge and oral fluency.

To build on these findings, educators are recommended to incorporate IGAs regularly into speaking lessons, ensuring tasks are well-scaffolded and suited to learners' proficiency levels. Training programs should also be provided to help teachers design and manage effective task-based activities. Finally, future research should explore longer-term interventions, larger sample sizes, and skill-specific outcomes to better understand the sustained impact of IGAs on EFL learners.

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