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EFL LEARNERS' SELF-REPORTED SPEAKING PRIORITIZATIONS AND THEIR ASSOCIATIONS WITH SPEAKING CONFIDENCE AND PRIOR EXPERIENCE

Bao Trang Thi Nguyen[1], Dung Thi Xuan Do[2], Quynh Nhu Phan[3], and Long Quoc Nguyen[4*]
[1,3]University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Hue University, Vietnam
[2]Hue University, Vietnam
[4]Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
ntbtrang@hueuni.edu.vn[1], dungdtx@hueuni.edu.vn[2], pquynhnhu@hueuni.edu.vn[3], and nguyenlongquoc@iuh.edu.vn[4]
*correspondence: nguyenlongquoc@iuh.edu.vn
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Abstract
Despite extensive research on communication strategies used by EFL learners during oral production, relatively little is known about the specific aspects that students prioritize while speaking and how these prioritizations are associated with learner-related factors. Existing scholarship remains limited and predominantly performance-based, with insufficient attention to learners' own voices. The present study thus fills these voids by examining 244 Vietnamese EFL undergraduates' speaking prioritizations (i.e., self-reported focus on linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive communication aspects during speaking) and their associations with perceived confidence and prior experience (i.e., speaking practice frequency and prior school backgrounds). Drawing on models of attentional resources in second language speaking (Robinson, 2003; Skehan, 1998), this study collected data through a questionnaire-based mixed quantitative-qualitative design, with rating-scale items and one open-ended question. The quantitative results showed that participants reported prioritizing linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive communication aspects at varying degrees, with interactive communication rated higher than linguistic aspects. Moreover, weak-to-moderate correlations were observed between speaking prioritizations and perceived confidence as well as prior experience. Students of differing levels of perceived confidence and prior experience also reported different linguistic, non-linguistic and interactive prioritizations in speaking. The qualitative findings further identified learner-related factors that contribute to students' self-reported speaking confidence and focus of attention. The current study offers potential pedagogical implications that inform learner-responsive speaking instruction and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of oral communication development in EFL contexts.

Keywords: associations, EFL learners, perceived confidence, prior experience, self-reported speaking prioritizations

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Introduction

Enhancing English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' speaking ability has been one of the major objectives of educators and scholars over the past decades (e.g., Gabitova et al., 2023; Saieed et al., 2024; Su, 2021), especially in today's globalized world where English serves as the main medium of communication for people from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds. However, achieving this goal is challenging since producing oral language in real time is complex and places considerable pressure on students (Pawlak, 2018). To mitigate communication breakdowns, learners tend to employ a wide variety of linguistic and non-linguistic strategies (Nakatani, 2006; Rayati et al., 2022). These communication strategies (CSs) could be conceptualized as the specific actions students adopt to facilitate negotiation of meaning during interaction with others (Nakatani, 2006). Developing CSs is important in language education to train resourceful speakers who are adept at leveraging available linguistic and semiotic resources to navigate communication challenges and adapt to various discourses, genres, and styles (Pennycook, 2014).

Given the potential value of CSs, prior research has attempted to investigate the strategies EFL learners often utilize when speaking (e.g., Khan et al., 2024; Su, 2021) and affecting factors such as proficiency levels (e.g., Rayati et al., 2022) and autonomy (Shirkhani & Meigouni, 2020). Another strand of research is related to EFL learners' attentional resources during speaking (e.g., Ortega, 2005; Pawlak, 2018), mainly focusing on linguistic dimensions in task-based performances, which are found to be sensitive to task design and complexity (e.g., Fukuta & Yamashita, 2015). Insightful as these studies are, they were predominantly performance-based and thereby did not investigate learners' speaking prioritizations (i.e., self-reported focus on important linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive communication aspects during speaking), which draw on the models of cognitive capacity (Robinson, 2003; Skehan, 1998) (see Literature Review for further details).

These prioritizations thus differ from CSs (i.e., actions taken to deal with communication problems) and from task-based attentional allocation (i.e., the distribution of attention observed or inferred from actual performance) or preferences (i.e., what learners like to do) in that they can capture what learners themselves often value and intend to focus on in speaking more broadly, regardless of whether communication problems arise or whether their speaking performance is successful or whether they prefer certain strategies or not. As learner-reported judgments, speaking prioritizations may help guide, but are not equivalent to the strategies learners use or where their attention is actually allocated. Despite their potential value, relatively little is known about these prioritizations. Given learners' limited cognitive capacity (Skehan, 1998) and the spontaneous nature of oral production, it is essential to investigate EFL learners' speaking prioritizations to shed light on what they consider worth focusing on under time pressure and to respond to calls for developing resourceful speakers who strategically mobilize available means to sustain communication (Pennycook, 2014). Insights into these prioritization patterns can inform more responsive pedagogical practices, potentially enabling educators to adjust instruction, curriculum design, and support systems in ways that more effectively facilitate speaking development.

Additionally, although affective factors play a vital role in language learning (Li & Wei, 2022), most studies focused on the relationship between learners' CSs

and their anxiety (e.g., Chou, 2018). Research on the associations between learners' self-confidence (i.e., beliefs in their ability) (e.g., Su, 2021) and their speaking prioritizations is still underexplored. Investigating this connection is crucial given that confidence has been shown to influence learners' communication (Lee & Lee, 2019; Su, 2021). Furthermore, whether other learner-related factors such as prior experience (i.e., previous speaking practice frequency and prior school backgrounds) may relate to students' speaking prioritizations or not remains largely unknown. Thus, further research is warranted to shed light on the associations between individual differences and learners' self-reported speaking prioritizations.

To address these gaps, the present study aims to explore what aspects EFL students report prioritizing when speaking as well as how these prioritizations relate to their perceived confidence and prior experience. Thus, the following research questions (RQs) are formulated:

1. How do EFL learners report prioritizing linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive communication dimensions when speaking?
2. Is there an association between EFL learners' self-reported prioritizations of linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive communication dimensions and their levels of perceived speaking confidence?
3. Is there an association between EFL learners' self-reported prioritizations of linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive communication dimensions and their prior experience (i.e., speaking practice frequency and prior school backgrounds)?

Literature Review

Theoretical frameworks

Learners' attentional resources have been mainly explained from two perspectives. On the one hand, the limited-resource model (Skehan, 1998) posits that learners' cognitive capacity is limited, making it challenging for them to allocate attentional resources to multiple aspects of second/foreign language (L2) performance simultaneously. Learners may therefore experience trade-offs, sacrificing one aspect for another, such as shifting their attention between form (accuracy, complexity) and meaning (fluency). In contrast, Robinson's (2003) multiple-resource model argues that attention to both complexity and accuracy is possible without such trade-offs, but at the expense of fluency. This hypothesis is partly supported by Jackson and Suethanapornkul's (2013) meta-analysis, which concludes that task complexity was associated with greater accuracy and complexity but with reduced fluency. Yet, real-time communication draws on more than linguistic resources. Research indicates that besides linguistic strategies (e.g., accuracy-oriented and fluency-oriented strategies), L2 learners also employ non-linguistic means (e.g., gestures, facial expressions) to facilitate communication (e.g., Nakatani, 2006; Su, 2021). These strategies, from an interactional perspective (Pawlak, 2018) not only help resolve communication problems but also enhance overall communicative effectiveness. In this regard, non-verbal features and interactive communication may function either as strategies to compensate for linguistic limitations or as key elements learners prioritize to enhance communication, or as a combination of both. Thus, it is thus important to examine linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive communication aspects of speaking together.

Building on these two models, the present study defines speaking prioritizations as learners' self-reported judgments about which aspects of speaking they generally consider most important to focus on, across linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive communication dimensions. Speaking prioritizations, however, should be distinguished from CSs and task-based attentional allocation. Strategy use refers to what learners do to overcome difficulties or sustain communication (e.g., Nakatani, 2006) while attentional allocation refers to how attention is actually distributed during performance. Speaking prioritizations, the only construct examined here, on the other hand, refers to learners' beliefs about which aspects of speaking deserve their attention. Strategy use and attentional allocation serve as reference points for interpretation and were not assessed. Resource models help explain why such prioritizations are necessary: because speakers have limited attentional resources, they cannot give equal attention to every aspect of speaking concurrently. However, prioritizations do not directly capture how learners allocate attention during oral performance; they reflect how important learners perceive each aspect to be across speaking situations. Such perceptions of this kind are assumed to reflect learners' beliefs, and they may be related to, but do not necessarily determine how learners distribute their attention in a particular task. The study's theoretical contribution is thus conceptual and integrative rather than a test or extension of either model: it brings a learner-level construct into resource-based accounts of L2 speaking.

Speaking prioritizations and assessment

L2 students' speaking performances are often assessed across multiple aspects, as reflected in the grading schemes of internationally standardized tests such as IELTS. The publicly available IELTS speaking assessment rubric (IELTS, n.d.) comprises four core aspects: fluency and coherence (e.g., hesitation, cohesive devices), lexical resource (e.g., vocabulary accuracy and diversity), grammatical range and accuracy (e.g., diversity and accuracy in grammar), and pronunciation (e.g., phonological features, intonation, stress). Each criterion is scored equally, on a scale from 0 to 9.0. However, it primarily emphasizes linguistic features while largely overlooking interactive communication and non-linguistic aspects such as gestures or facial expressions that are commonly valued in authentic interactions. Given that non-verbal features and interactive communication are also critical dimensions for facilitating communication in speaking (Nakatani, 2006; Su, 2021), and key to what makes a resourceful speaker – one who uses all available resources to enhance communication effectiveness (Pennycook, 2014) – these dimensions should also be considered when examining learners' speaking prioritizations. Thus, the current study explores EFL learners' speaking prioritizations across three dimensions – linguistic (grammatical accuracy, grammatical diversity, vocabulary accuracy, vocabulary diversity, pronunciation, connected sounds, intonation, fluency), non-linguistic (non-verbal features), and interactive communication (intelligibility, negotiation of meaning) – to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation. Notably, speaking prioritizations are referred to as the aspects EFL learners perceived as important to attend to during their oral production.

Empirical research on learners' attentional resources in L2 oral production

Research on L2 learners' attentional focus has predominantly been situated within performance-based speaking tasks, yielding mixed yet informative findings. Some studies suggest a tendency toward meaning-oriented attention, while others highlight a focus on linguistic form, depending on task conditions. For instance, Ortega (2005) reported that Spanish learners initially attended to form during planning but shifted toward form–meaning integration during performance, challenging the traditional dichotomy between the two. Conversely, Wang and Le (2014) found that Korean EFL learners prioritized meaning – particularly content and fluency – throughout both planning and production, with minimal attention to accuracy or complexity. In contrast, Pawlak (2018) observed that Polish postgraduate learners emphasized linguistic accuracy (e.g., lexis, grammar, pronunciation) to ensure interlocutor comprehension. Such discrepancies are likely attributable to variations in task design, as Fukuta and Yamashita (2015) demonstrated that different task demands substantially redirect learners' attentional orientation.

All in all, existing evidence suggests that learners' attentional priorities are highly task-dependent rather than stable or generalized preferences. Yet, little is known about what learners themselves consider most important in speaking beyond controlled task-based scenarios. This gap underscores the need to explore attentional prioritization in broader authentic speaking contexts.

Empirical research on learners' communication strategies in L2 oral production

In the broader context of L2 oral production, previous studies have explored L2 learners' self-reported strategies using questionnaires (e.g., Nakatani, 2006; Rayati et al., 2022; Su, 2021). These studies generally found that learners drew on a range of communication strategies when speaking, although the specific strategies used varied. For example, Nakatani (2006) developed the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) to examine the strategies frequently used by 400 Japanese EFL learners in speaking tasks. The OCSI categorizes strategies into eight groups: accuracy-oriented strategies (e.g., error correction, self-correction), fluency-oriented strategies (e.g., pronunciation, speech clarity), compensatory strategies such as message abandonment (e.g., dropping the intended messages), message reduction and alteration (e.g., simplifying and changing the message), negotiation for meaning (e.g., confirming comprehension, asking for clarification, repetition), non-verbal strategies while speaking (e.g., eye contact, facial expressions), social-affective strategies (e.g., managing anxiety, avoiding silence), and attempts to think in English. Nakatani (2006) found that learners most frequently used message reduction and alteration, message abandonment, and non-verbal strategies to facilitate their communication. Similarly, Su (2021) used the OCSI to investigate the CSs of 333 Taiwanese non-English majors. The findings revealed that participants predominantly relied on message abandonment, non-verbal strategies, and social-affective strategies during oral communication. However, a recent study by Rayati et al. (2022) reported EFL learners' greater focus on fluency- and accuracy-oriented strategies. This contrasts with the findings of prior research (e.g., Nakatani, 2006; Su, 2021), which may be attributed to Rayati et al.'s (2022) exclusion of two constructs – negotiation for meaning and non-verbal strategies – when adapting the OCSI.

Insightful as these findings are, the self-reported CSs might not necessarily align with learners' speaking prioritizations. Indeed, a frequently employed strategy may reflect its ease of use, learners' linguistic limitations or individual speaking habits rather than its perceived importance. Therefore, further research is needed to provide deeper insights into what aspects learners prioritize during oral production.

The role of L2 learners' speaking confidence and prior experience in oral production

Confidence

Prior research on CSs has attempted to examine the role of affective factors, primarily anxiety, in learners' oral production. For instance, Chou (2018) found that learners with lower anxiety relied more on strategies such as rehearsal and paraphrasing. In another study, Su (2021) documented that highly anxious learners were more likely to resort to message abandonment, non-verbal cues, and social-affective strategies to manage communication breakdowns. However, anxiety represents only one type of affect; the influence of positive factors, such as self-confidence, remains underexplored. Examining the role of confidence in learners' speaking is crucial, as a lack of confidence can hinder language acquisition (Krashen, 1982) and directly affect communication (Lee & Lee, 2019). While numerous studies have investigated strategies to boost learners' confidence in English learning (e.g., Li et al., 2023), only a few have investigated how confidence relates to learners' use of CSs. Su (2021) attempted to examine the relationship between confidence and speaking strategies in a study involving 810 EFL undergraduates. It was found that highly confident learners employed a wider range of strategies to sustain interaction than those with less confidence. However, research in this area remains limited; moreover, the role of self-confidence in shaping learners' speaking prioritizations is largely unclear, necessitating further investigations.

Prior experience: Speaking frequency and school backgrounds

In addition to affective factors, the role of other individual differences warrants investigation in L2 oral production, given their importance in language learning (Dörnyei, 2006). One such factor is prior speaking (practice) frequency, which has been shown to be positively associated with learners' L2 competence, as highlighted by Lightbown and Spada (2021). Another significant individual difference is learners' prior school backgrounds, specifically whether their previous schools were located: in urban, rural, or mountainous areas. This factor is worth examining as research has linked previous schooling to English performance (Ma et al., 2024). Indeed, previous learning experiences have been shown to play a pivotal role in language acquisition (Snyder et al., 2015). For instance, Pham (2021) found that Vietnamese students in urban areas benefit from "diverse English learning resources outside the classroom, whereas students in rural areas primarily rely on formal school education" (p. 41). This might suggest the possible role of students' prior experience in how they allocate their attention during L2 speaking, thus shaping their speaking prioritizations. Nonetheless, empirical evidence remains scarce, indicating the need for further research.

Method

Design

The present study adopted a questionnaire-based mixed-methods design, in which a primarily quantitative component (closed-ended rating-scale items) was complemented by an embedded qualitative component (one open-ended question) (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Both components were collected concurrently within the same questionnaire, with the quantitative data as the main source. The open-ended responses played a supplementary and explanatory role: they elicited learners' reasons for their self-rated speaking confidence, and thus provided accounts for interpreting the quantitative associations between confidence and speaking prioritizations. This integration provided in-depth insights into learners' perceptions of speaking prioritizations and allowed the quantitative patterns to be interpreted in light of their own explanations.

Participants

Convenience sampling was adopted to recruit second-year English majors at a university in Vietnam to participate in the present study. They were enrolled in a two-credit speaking course as part of their Bachelor program in English Studies and English Language Teaching in the first semester of academic year 2024-2025 at the research site. By the end of the speaking course, these students were expected to achieve a B2 level of speaking proficiency according to CEFR. Their speaking test performance was evaluated across various criteria such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and interactive communication, which were based on the B2 marking criteria for speaking (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2008). A formal procedure was applied to ensure the ethical integrity of the research. Firstly, an invitation was sent to the class groups of the same course taught by one of the authors and those by colleagues at the research site, with full information about the purposes of the study and what participants were required to do. Students were explicitly informed that participation was voluntary and that they could decline or withdraw at any time without any consequences. A cover letter was also placed at the beginning of the questionnaire to provide detailed information about the study again, highlighting the voluntary nature of participation. Notably, no identifiable private information (i.e., name or class or contact information) was collected in the questionnaire to ensure anonymity. Of the approximately 937 students invited across multiple classes, 244 (about 26.04%) responded, which suggests that most students exercised their right not to participate. These participants gave their informed consent prior to participation and were assured data confidentiality as well as identity and privacy protection.

In total, 244 students volunteered to complete a questionnaire on their self-reported prioritizations in the English-speaking process. Specifically, 207 (84.83%) were female, 34 (13.93%) were male and 3 (1.24%) identified themselves as of other gender. They were aged 19 on average (M=19.12; SD=.59) and rated themselves at varying degrees of confidence in speaking English. They also reported coming from different prior high school backgrounds with locations in different mountainous (18 students or 7.37%), rural (108 or 44.26%) and urban (118 or 48.37%) areas, largely in central Vietnam. Additionally, their previous frequency of in-class English speaking instruction varied (see the Findings section).

Instrument and procedure

The main instrument was a questionnaire aiming to survey students' self-reported prioritizations and the extent of their prioritized dimensions in English speaking. It was composed of two main parts (see Appendix). Part 1 was to obtain students' background information encompassing their age, gender, prior experience (i.e., frequencies of speaking practice and previous high schools), and their perceived levels of English-speaking confidence, followed by an open-ended question eliciting the reasons for their self-reported confidence level. These individual factors have been found to be associated with students' speaking performance (e.g., Ma et al., 2024; Su, 2021), and it is hypothesized that they might be related to what EFL students attend to while speaking English. Part 2 was designed in a closed-ended 6-point Likert scale to probe into learners' general judgments of how important each aspect is to them (from 'do not prioritize at all' to 'highly prioritize', see Appendix).

The questionnaire therefore operationalizes perceived prioritizations rather than actual allocation of attentional resources during real-time speaking (see Theoretical Framework section). Each item followed the stem "To what extent do you prioritize … when speaking English?" These items were categorized into three broad groups: linguistic aspects (i.e., vocabulary accuracy, vocabulary diversity, grammar accuracy, grammar diversity, pronunciation accuracy, connected sounds, intonation and fluency), non-verbal communication (i.e., body language), and interactive communication (i.e., intelligibility and negotiation of meaning). The choice of these dimensions rested on three considerations. First, they align with the aspects of speaking that students in this context are taught and assessed on, so the items are relevant to participants and terms they already know, which helps reduce the risk of misinterpretation. Second, learning and teaching activities are context-dependent (Ellis, 2008) and influenced by language testing (Cheng, 2014), so assessment criteria are a plausible source of what learners in this setting consider important. Third, the criteria cover linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive aspects, which corresponded to the assessment aspects in standardized tests such as IELTS and CEFR tests by Cambridge. We acknowledge that this approach may incline students to highly rate the aspects on which they are assessed, and we discuss this possible washback in the Discussion and Limitations sections.

The questionnaire was designed in Vietnamese to facilitate comprehension and thus ensure greater response accuracy. Delivered online via a Google Form format, it enhanced data collection and constellation as well as student participation. After repeated piloting with similar groups of students (who were not included in the official data collection) and subsequent revisions, the questionnaire link was sent to the target groups of learners by the teachers in charge. It remained active for a two-week timeframe to gather as many responses as possible. The questionnaire took about 12 minutes to complete.

Evidence for the validity and reliability of the questionnaire came from four sources. First, the items correspond to the course assessment criteria and cover linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive dimensions, adhering to content relevance. Second, the item stem and response labels refer explicitly to prioritizing aspects of speaking, matching the construct of perceived prioritization defined in this study, demonstrating construct alignment. Third, internal consistency was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .905$, with corrected item-total correlations > .30 for all 11 items;

Field, 2018). Fourth, the questionnaire was carefully reviewed by two experienced researchers in applied linguistics, and piloted before administration, thus enhancing its reliability and objectivity.

Data analysis

Responses to the Likert-scale items were imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 27.0) for statistical analysis. Since the Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests indicated that all data were not normally distributed (all p values < .001), non-parametric statistics were employed.

To address RQ1 about EFL learners' prioritized aspects when speaking, descriptive analysis was adopted, with median (*Mdn*) and range (*Rng*) values being reported. Friedman tests and post-hoc analysis using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were performed to examine the differences in speaking prioritizations of the three broad dimensions (i.e., linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive communication aspects). For RQ2, Spearman (*rho*) tests were conducted to examine the associations between participants' confidence and their speaking prioritizations. The correlation coefficients (r_s) included three levels: weak (.10), moderate (.30) and strong (.50 or above) (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). To further explore these associations, Mann-Whitney U tests were run to examine the differences between students' speaking prioritizations across two confidence groups. Because confidence was measured with a single ordinal item on a six-point scale, responses were dichotomized into low (1-3) and high (4-6) groups. This cut-point reflects the conceptual boundary between the lower and upper halves of the scale. Median and mean values were both reported to provide further details regarding the differences between the groups. The significance threshold was set at .05. Effect sizes (r), following Field's (2018) guidelines ($r = |Z|/\sqrt{N}$), were interpreted as small (.20), medium (.40), and large (.60) (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014).

Regarding RQ3, previous speaking frequency was measured using a single five-point item and grouped into three categories: low (1–2), medium (3), and high (4–5). The midpoint was kept as a separate category so that students who chose the middle option were not automatically classified as having either low or high speaking frequency. We recognized that grouping responses in this way might lose some detail about differences within each category and may affect statistical power. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as differences between broad groups rather than as precise changes in speaking frequency. Notably, as there were three groups regarding speaking practice frequency (low, medium, high) and prior school backgrounds (mountainous, urban, and rural areas), Kruskal–Wallis tests were first run, with p value set at .05. Effect sizes were calculated as $\varepsilon^2 = H/(n-1)$ (Tomczak & Tomczak, 2014) and interpreted as small (.01), medium (.06), and large (.14) following Cohen's (1988) convention for eta-squared values. Significant results were followed by Dunn's (1964) pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction for multiple tests (significance value adjusted to .017 for three comparisons). Effect sizes were calculated as $r = |Z|/\sqrt{N}$ (N is the total number of observations in the two groups being compared), interpreted as small (.20), medium (.40), and large (.60) (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014).

Students' reasons for their reported levels of confidence (elicited by the open-ended question, n = 244) were analyzed qualitatively using inductive theme-based analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The analysis aimed to identify the aspects

that learners linked to their confidence in order to help interpret the quantitative associations between confidence and speaking prioritizations. First, each response was read carefully, and key information was highlighted and assigned initial codes. Second, the codes were compared and grouped into categories, which were then developed into themes. A pattern was treated as recurring when the same code appeared across the responses of multiple students, and the themes were refined iteratively until consensus between the coders was reached. The analysis was inductive: codes, categories, and themes were derived from the data rather than from a predetermined framework. The first and fourth authors independently coded 37 responses (15.16%) and then compared their findings, with an agreement of 89.19% (McHugh, 2012). All coding differences were resolved through follow-up discussion before the remaining responses were coded by the first author. The prominence of each theme was described by the number and percentage of responses coded under it, and themes were presented in order of frequency. These frequencies were used descriptively to show which reasons were mentioned most often. The illustrated responses, written in Vietnamese, were translated into English by the fourth author and checked by all the other authors for accuracy. Pseudonyms were used for all quoted respondents to ensure confidentiality.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

EFL learners' speaking prioritizations

Regarding RQ1, the results (Table 1) illustrate that students attended to four main linguistic aspects during their speaking, encompassing vocabulary accuracy, pronunciation, intonation, and fluency (*Mdn* = 5.00 each). Similarly, non-linguistic features and intelligibility – one sub-dimension of interactive communication – were also prioritized by participants (*Mdn* = 5.00 each). Moreover, the *Rng* values (4.00 and above) indicated considerable variations in all the examined aspects among learners.

Table 1. Participants' speaking prioritizations

Dimension	Sub-dimension	*Mdn*	*Rng*
Linguistic	Grammar accuracy	4.00	4.00
	Grammar diversity	4.00	5.00
	Vocabulary accuracy	5.00	5.00
	Vocabulary diversity	4.00	5.00
	Pronunciation accuracy	5.00	4.00
	Connected sounds	4.00	5.00
	Intonation	5.00	5.00
	Fluency	5.00	5.00
Non-linguistic	Non-verbal features	5.00	5.00
Interactive communication	Intelligibility	5.00	4.00
	Negotiation of meaning	4.00	5.00

The Friedman test revealed a significant difference in learners' prioritizations of the three broad dimensions ($\chi^2 = 13.89$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). Post-hoc analysis using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests (Table 2) showed that learners prioritized interactive

communication significantly more than linguistic dimensions ($p < .001$), with a small effect size ($r = .22$). However, no substantial differences were found in linguistic and non-linguistic prioritizations ($p = .345$), nor between interactive communication and non-linguistic dimensions ($p = .036$) since the significance values did not meet the adjusted .017 threshold.

Table 2. Wilcoxon signed-rank test results across three broad dimensions

	Mdn/ M	*Rng*	Linguistic & Non-linguistic dimensions	Linguistic– & Interactive communication dimensions	Interactive communication & Non-linguistic dimensions
Linguistic	4.63/4.52	4.13	$Z = -.94$	$Z = -3.51$	$Z = -2.91$
Non-linguistic	5.00/4.64	5.00	$p = .345$	$p < .001$*	$p = .036$
Interactive communication	5.00/4.53	4.50	$r = .06$	$r = .22$	$r = .19$

*Note. *significant differences; significance level was adjusted at .017 (=.05/3) for three comparisons.*

EFL learners' speaking confidence and prioritizations

RQ2 examined the association between learners' perceived speaking confidence levels and their speaking prioritizations. Quantitatively, a large number of students considered themselves not confident in their English speaking ($n = 162$; 66.4%). Their self-reported confidence was further categorized into two levels: low confidence ($n = 162$; 66.4%) and high confidence ($n = 82$; 33.6%).

To identify the associations between participants' speaking confidence and prioritizations, a series of Spearman tests were run. It was found that speaking confidence had positive moderate associations with the three broad themes of prioritizations (p values < .001, r_s values close to .30). Specifically, grammar diversity, connected sounds, fluency, and intelligibility showed weak but positive correlations with speaking confidence (p values <.05; r_s values close to .10). Additionally, moderate associations were found between confidence and vocabulary accuracy, vocabulary diversity, pronunciation accuracy, intonation, non-verbal features, intelligibility, and negotiation of meaning. However, no significant correlation was observed for grammar accuracy ($p = .163$, $r_s = .011$).

Mann-Whitney U tests in Table 3 further show significant differences in speaking prioritizations and the levels of confidence. Particularly, the high-confidence group considered vocabulary accuracy, vocabulary diversity, pronunciation accuracy, intonation, and connected sounds more important for speaking than the low-confidence group (all p values < .05, all values of mean differences being positive), albeit with small effect sizes (almost all r values close to .20). Moreover, students with high confidence prioritized non-verbal features more significantly than those with low confidence ($p < .001$) with a small effect size ($r = .23$). In terms of interactive communication, while there was no significantdifference in perceived prioritizations of intelligibility between the two groups, the high-confidence group reported attending to negotiation of meaning to a significantly greater extent than the low-confidence group ($p = .006$), with a small

effect size (r = .18). Overall, learners' speaking prioritizations differed according to their confidence levels, both linguistically and non-linguistically.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U test results for speaking prioritizations across confidence levels

Aspect	Low confidence (n = 162)	High confidence (n = 82)	Differences (High-Low)	Group comparison			
	Mdn/M	*Mdn/M*	*Mdn/M*	*U*	*Z*	*p*	*r*
Grammar accuracy	4.00/4.11	4.00/4.44	.00/.33	5699	-1.89	.059	.12
Grammar diversity	4.00/3.70	4.00/4.00	.00/.30	5815	-1.64	.101	.10
Vocabulary accuracy	5.00/4.69	5.00/5.10	.00/.31	5181	-2.99	.003*	.19
Vocabulary diversity	4.00/4.18	5.00/4.57	1.00/.39	5418	-2.32	.020*	.15
Pronunciation accuracy	5.00/5.01	6.00/5.38	1.00/.37	5447	-2.46	.014*	.16
Connected sounds	4.00/4.19	5.00/4.60	1.00/.41	5496	-2.29	.022*	.15
Intonation	5.00/4.49	5.00/5.13	.00/.64	4465	-4.36	<.001*	.28
Fluency	5.00/4.71	5.00/4.99	.00/.28	5796	-1.71	.087	.11
Non-verbal features	4.50/4.34	5.00/4.89	.50/.55	4797	-3.70	<.001*	.23
Intelligibility	5.00/5.02	5.00/5.22	.00/.20	5886	-1.55	.122	.10
Negotiation of meaning	4.5/4.52	5.00/4.88	.50/.36	5219	-2.77	.006*	.18

*Note. *significant differences; significance level set at .05*

Qualitative data obtained from the follow-up open-ended question of the questionnaire revealed three main reasons leading to students' perceived confidence levels, as delineated below.

Practice and exposure

Regular practice and exposure to English were the most frequently mentioned reasons for students' speaking confidence. About 40.3% of students in the high confidence group described how consistent engagement with English, whether through individual study, multimedia input, or interaction with others, helped them feel confident when speaking. For example, Duong shared:

> *I am quite confident in my speaking because I often read news and watch online videos in English. In these videos, I could learn a lot of useful words and gain a better understanding of cultures in English-speaking countries*.

Similarly, Hoa noted the importance of communicating with foreigners:

> *I have confidence in English speaking since I had a lot of opportunities to talk to foreigners before*.

Early exposure to English also played a role, as Kha reflected:

> *I was exposed to English linguistics and culture quite early, and my family always encouraged me to practice speaking English regularly… I'm used to speaking English naturally and don't feel too much pressure when I speak*.

In addition, prior test experience and participation in public speaking contests further strengthened confidence. For example, Ha commented:

> *I once partook in a public speaking contest and also had an IELTS score of 6.5 , so I'm fairly confident in my speaking skills*.

In contrast, many students with lower confidence (20.4%) commonly reported limited practice opportunities and insufficient exposure to English. Earlier education that focused heavily on grammar and controlled exercises left little room for oral communication. To illustrate, Hoai explained:

> *From middle school to high school, I was never guided to improve my English speaking by my teachers. In class, my teachers just gave lectures and assigned drill exercises; there were no speaking activities or practice*.

Another student elaborated on the exam-oriented focus of previous classroom practice that de-emphasized learning English to communicate:

> *I did not have much exposure to English, partly because in rural areas, speaking did not receive much attention; rather classroom instruction was exam-oriented examination*. [Minh]

Similarly, minimal use of English outside the classroom also contributed to students' unwillingness to communicate. Ngoc was not confident in speaking English because she did not "*often talk to [her] teachers or friends in English*".

These contrasting experiences showed that confidence might grow through frequent and meaningful contact with English, which helped students speak with less pressure. When practice and exposure were limited, both in and beyond the classroom, students reported a lower level of confidence.

Perceived English proficiency

Confidence was found to be tied to students' perceived level of English proficiency, especially vocabulary and pronunciation. Confident students (about 31.2%) believed that a solid linguistic foundation allowed them to express themselves in English with ease. This was demonstrated in the following remarks:

> *I have adequate pronunciation and vocabulary repertoires to discuss fundamental topics.* [Thanh]

> *I feel confident in speaking English as I think I have sufficient vocabulary and fine pronunciation to respond to most of the teachers' questions*. [Vy]

On the other hand, 62% of the students with low confidence frequently pointed to deficiencies in vocabulary and pronunciation as major obstacles. Vinh explicitly attributed his low confidence to the restricted lexical resource he possessed:

> *I am not confident because I do not have enough vocabulary to express what I want to convey*.

Pronunciation issues were also a common concern, as exemplified in students' struggle:

> *My non-standard English pronunciation is a major challenge in my speaking. I have tried very hard to improve it, but I have not been successful*. [Nghia]

The findings suggested that confidence was closely related to learners' self-evaluation of their linguistic knowledge, mostly in phonological and lexical dimensions.

Affect

Positive emotions associated with English speaking also played a meaningful role in shaping students' confidence. About 14.3% of the students with high confidence reported feeling relaxed and unpressured when speaking English. For instance, Manh's comfort in speaking contributed to his confidence:

> *I feel really comfortable talking to other people in English, without any barriers*.

Others echoed this ease, noting that they felt confident because they were "*not shy when speaking English*. Several students further highlighted intrinsic motivation that boosted their confidence (e.g., Tri stating, "*I feel confident because English is my favorite subject*").

However, negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, pressure, and shyness, were reported by 20.4% with low confidence to be major contributors to low speaking confidence. Fear of making errors, particularly in pronunciation or grammar, was prevalent. Ngoc stated:

> *I am not confident at all because I am afraid of mispronunciation when communicating in English.*

Others worried about being judged, especially given their status as English majors, as Hoa explained:

> *I am afraid of using incorrect grammar, wrong vocabulary, or mispronunciation, and of being judged by others because I'm majoring in English.*

A number of students reported feeling peer pressure when comparing their accents with those of their classmates ("*I felt that my accent is not as nice as my friends'. They speak with an American accent!*"). Others considered themselves being too shy or timid to speak in English ("*I feel that I am quite shy*") or suffering an inferiority complex about their abilities ("*I am inadequate about my ability*"). Students also described anxiety due to the cognitively taxing act of speaking for its involved recall of ideas to encode. As Van shared:

> *I am really nervous when speaking in front of other people, so I often forget what I have wanted to say.*

Equally, idea generation in the real time speaking added pressure for many students. For example, one student stated:

> *When I speak, I can't think of ideas quickly enough to speak fluently and smoothly. That's why I'm not completely confident yet.* [Linh]

Clearly, such accounts underscore suggest that affective factors are linked to students' speaking confidence, which highlighted the need to create a comfortable and low-pressure learning environment.

EFL learners' prior experience and speaking prioritizations

RQ3 explored the association between learners' prior experience (previous speaking practice frequency and prior high school background) and speaking prioritizations. The results are presented below.

Previous speaking frequency and speaking prioritizations

Students' speaking frequency was categorized into three levels: high-frequency (n = 38), medium-frequency (n = 98), and low-frequency (n = 108). To explore the relationship between students' speaking prioritizations and their previous speaking frequency, a series of Spearman correlation tests were conducted. A significantly positive, moderate association was found between students' previous speaking frequency and their linguistic prioritizations ($p < .001$, $r_s = .235$), while weak correlations were observed with non-linguistic and interactive communication aspects (p values < .05, r_s values under .20). Particularly, the results indicated significant but weak correlations between students' previous speaking frequency and most linguistic prioritizations (p values < .05, r_s values under .20), except for pronunciation (p = .096, r_s = .136) and fluency (p = .492, r_s = .044). Moreover, the non-linguistic variable was associated with previous speaking frequency (p = .006, r_s = .175). Regarding interactive communication, whereas no significant association was observed for intelligibility (p = .746, r_s = .021), a weak association was observed for negotiation of meaning.

The results of Kruskal–Wallis tests further revealed significant differences in prioritized aspects among the three groups for grammatical accuracy ($H(2) = 7.14$,

p = .028, ε^2 = .029), vocabulary use (H(2) = 10.66, p = .005, ε^2 = .044), vocabulary diversity (H(2) = 12.27, p = .002, ε^2 = .050), intonation (H(2) = 7.84, p = .020, ε^2 = .032), connected sounds (H(2) = 9.88, p = .007, ε^2 = .041), non-verbal features (H(2) = 8.01, p = .018, ε^2 = .033), and negotiation of meaning (H(2) = 10.52, p = .005, ε^2 = .043). All significant effects were small (ε^2 < .06). No significant differences were found for grammatical diversity (H(2) = 4.97, p = .083, ε^2 = .020), pronunciation accuracy (H(2) = 2.77, p = .251, ε^2 = .011), fluency (H(2) = .82, p = .665, ε^2 = .003) or intelligibility (H(2) = 0.23, p = .891, ε^2 = .001), with effect sizes close to zero.

Pairwise comparisons using Dunn's tests (Table 4) show that there were no significant differences between the low- and medium-frequency groups as well as between the medium- and high-frequency groups in all seven aspects (p values > .017). However, significant disparities were observed in grammar accuracy, vocabulary accuracy, vocabulary diversity, connected sounds, non-verbal features, and negotiation of meaning between the low- and high-frequency groups. The latter prioritized these aspects more substantially than the former, with small effect sizes (r values ranging from .19 to .29). Notably, prioritizations in intonation were similar in both groups, (p values = .019, not meeting the adjusted .017 threshold).

Table 4. Pairwise comparisons across previous speaking frequency groups

Aspect	Speaking frequency						Dunn's tests
	Low (n =108)		Medium (n=98)		High (n=38)		
	Mdn	*M*	*Mdn*	*M*	*Mdn*	*M*	
Grammar accuracy	4.00	4.04	4.00	4.28	4.00	4.61	*High>Low* (Z = -2.54, p=.011, r=.21)*
Vocabulary accuracy	5.00	4.66	5.00	4.86	5.00	5.24	*High>Low* (Z = -3.24, p=.001, r=.27)*
Vocabulary diversity	4.00	4.09	4.50	4.37	5.00	4.79	*High>Low* (Z = -3.44, p=<.001, r=.29)*
Connected sounds	4.00	4.10	4.50	4.37	5.00	4.84	*High>Low* (Z = -3.09; p=.002, r=.26)*
Intonation	4.50	4.49	5.00	4.83	5.00	5.00	*High>Low (Z = -2.34, p = .019, r = .19)*
Non-verbal features	4.50	4.34	5.00	4.58	5.00	4.95	*High>Low* (Z = -2.80, p=.005, r=.23)*
Negotiation of meaning	4.00	3.98	4.00	4.19	5.00	4.74	*High>Low* (Z= -3.23, p=.001, r=.26)*

*Note. *significant differences; p adjusted to .017 for multiple comparisons*

Previous school backgrounds and speaking prioritizations

Students' self-reported data indicated a variety of high school backgrounds: urban (n = 118 or 48.37%), rural (n = 108 or 44.26%), and mountainous (n = 18 or 7.37%) areas. To examine the relationships between learners' prior school

backgrounds and their speaking prioritizations, Kruskal–Wallis tests were run. The results revealed significant differences between the three groups of school backgrounds in vocabulary diversity ($H(2) = 7.16$, $p = .028$, $\varepsilon^2 = .029$), intonation ($H(2) = 10.40$, $p = .006$, $\varepsilon^2 = .043$), fluency ($H(2) = 6.88$, $p = .032$, $\varepsilon^2 = .028$), non-verbal features ($H(2) = 9.55$, $p = .008$, $\varepsilon^2 = .039$), and negotiation of meaning ($H(2) = 13.71$, $p = .001$, $\varepsilon^2 = .056$). All effects were small ($\varepsilon^2 < .06$), although the effect for negotiation of meaning approached the medium threshold. No significant differences were found for grammatical accuracy ($H(2) = 1.52$, $p = .469$, $\varepsilon^2 = .006$), grammatical diversity ($H(2) = 1.50$, $p = .473$, $\varepsilon^2 = .006$), vocabulary use ($H(2) = 1.86$, $p = .396$, $\varepsilon^2 = .008$), pronunciation accuracy ($H(2) = 1.38$, $p = .502$, $\varepsilon^2 = .006$), connected sounds ($H(2) = 3.33$, $p = .190$, $\varepsilon^2 = .014$), or intelligibility ($H(2) = 5.68$, $p = .059$, $\varepsilon^2 = .023$).

Dunn's tests were used for pairwise comparisons to examine differences between the groups. Table 5 shows that students from mountainous areas placed greater emphasis on intonation ($p = .006$, $r = .24$) and fluency ($p = .009$, $r = .15$) (with small effect sizes) as well as negotiation of meaning ($p < .001$, $r = .31$, with a medium effect size) than those from the countryside. Moreover, learners from urban areas focused more on non-verbal features than their counterparts from the countryside ($p = .007$, $r = .15$, with a small effect size). For other comparisons, no statistically significant differences were recorded between the groups. Overall, prior school backgrounds were found to be associated with students' perceived prioritizations when speaking.

Table 5. Pairwise comparisons across prior school background groups

Aspect	Prior school backgrounds						*Dunn's tests*
	UA ($n = 118$)		MA ($n = 18$)		RA ($n = 108$)		
	Mdn	*M*	*Mdn*	*M*	*Mdn*	*M*	
Vocabulary diversity	4.00	4.43	5.00	4.72	4.11	4.00	*p values > .05*
Intonation	5.00	4.82	5.00	5.22	4.50	4.49	*MA > RA* (Z = 2.74, p = .006, r = .24)*
Fluency	5.00	4.81	5.50	5.39	5.00	4.69	*MA > RA* (Z = 2.62, p = .009, r = .15)*
Non-verbal features	5.00	4.69	5.00	4.89	4.00	4.30	*UA > RA* (Z = 2.72, p = .007, r = .15)*
Negotiation of meaning	4.00	4.29	5.00	5.00	4.00	3.94	*MA > RA* (Z = 3.46, p <.001, r = .31)*

*Note. *significant differences; p adjusted to .017; UA = Urban Areas; MA = Mountainous Areas; RA = Rural Areas*

Discussion

EFL learners' speaking prioritizations

A key finding of this study is that learners reported prioritizing all three broad dimensions – linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive – in their oral production. This result generally resonates with previous research on CSs which reported that

EFL learners employed a variety of techniques including language-related strategies (e.g., accuracy, fluency), non-verbal features (e.g., social-affective strategies), and interactive communication (e.g., negotiation of meaning) to overcome speaking challenges (e.g., Nakatani, 2006; Su, 2021). However, it is important to interpret this comparability with caution, as CSs do not always equate learners' speaking prioritizations, as noted earlier. Given that the current study appears to be the first to explore EFL learners' prioritized aspects in oral production, further research is warranted to confirm these findings.

Notably, interactive communication was prioritized over linguistic aspects, likely because communicative competence is regarded as one of the key goals in the learning and teaching of English (Savignon, 2003) and emphasized in participants' speaking assessments. Moreover, learners might also have wanted to prioritize meaning over form in view of the time pressure in spontaneous speaking (Skehan, 1998). Furthermore, the absence of a significant difference in prioritization between linguistic and non-linguistic aspects might suggest that students probably wanted to attend to both dimensions in their oral production at a similar level. This pattern may be consistent with the current study's educational context, where speaking performance was evaluated using both linguistic and non-linguistic criteria. Such assessment practices likely encouraged students to attend to both aspects, as language tests and evaluations have been shown to be associated with learning and teaching processes (e.g., Cheng, 2014).

It is also worth noting that learners placed greater importance on vocabulary accuracy, pronunciation accuracy, intonation, and fluency than on grammar accuracy, grammatical diversity, vocabulary diversity, and connected sounds. This may be because vocabulary carries most meaning, and pronunciation, intonation as well as fluency are all key aspects of speaking (Brown & Lee, 2015), thus being perceived as potentially more central to oral communication. These aspects were also mentioned repeatedly by a majority of students in their narratives in connection with their speaking confidence or lack thereof. Using diverse words or grammatical structures or suprasegmental features such as linking sounds is assumably more challenging. Indeed, research has shown that greater diversity and complexity in speech performance are more characteristic of proficient learners (e.g., Malicka & Levkina, 2012). Thus, learners with limited linguistic resources who are under communicative pressure may have a tendency to prioritize aspects they perceived as more useful for delivering their intended message (e.g., vocabulary accuracy, pronunciation accuracy, fluency), which is consistent with the limited-resource model by Skehan (1998).

These findings could also be interpreted in light of a possible washback lens from the course's own speaking assessment. Language tests and evaluations have been shown to influence learning and teaching processes (e.g., Cheng, 2014). Participants were enrolled in a speaking course in which test performance was evaluated against criteria for pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and interactive communication. The fact that the questionnaire items were developed from these same criteria might have oriented students to rate the aspects they had been assessed on as high priorities. That said, this is a tentative explanation which warrants further research in different assessment contexts with a different design to gain a better understanding of washback effects on learners' speaking prioritizations.

EFL learners' perceived confidence and speaking prioritizations

Another major finding lies in the significant correlations between EFL learners' perceived confidence and all three broad aspects of speaking prioritizations. By emphasizing speaking-related prioritizations, these outcomes extend Su's (2021) findings on the significant association between confidence and CSs. In the present study, more confident students tended to prioritize the key components of effective speaking than less confident counterparts. This correlation may speak to the role of positive affective factors in cognitive processing such as decision-making and problem-solving (Pekrun & Stephens, 2010; Su, 2021). In this regard, a higher self-reported level of confidence might have freed up the attentional resources (Skehan, 1998), assisting students in attending more substantially to the speaking dimensions. However, given the cross-sectional, self-reported design and the limited scholarship on confidence and speaking prioritizations, further investigations are needed to confirm these results.

With respect to the differences in speaking prioritizations by confidence levels, the high-confidence group was found to place greater emphasis on linguistic (i.e., vocabulary accuracy, vocabulary diversity, pronunciation accuracy, intonation, and connected sounds) and interactive communication (i.e., negotiation of meaning) than the low-confidence group. These findings may be related to the fact that students attributed their high confidence to their good command of English, as evidenced in the qualitative data. In other words, although proficiency was not measured directly, students who perceive themselves as having a good command of English may have more linguistic resources to handle more sophisticated language use such as grammatical and lexical diversity and complexity to fine-tune their speaking performance. This notion corroborates previous research which documented that proficient learners were more likely to produce accurate and complex speech performance (e.g., Malicka & Levkina, 2012). The high-confidence group also prioritized negotiation of meaning more substantially than the low-confidence group. Perhaps, more competent learners tended to employ more meaning-negotiation strategies as a way to actively manage and enhance communication than their less competent counterparts (e.g., Nakatani, 2006). This might suggest a possible link between perceived speaking confidence and self-reported proficiency, as more proficient students may sustain communication better, while less proficient learners are more inclined to abandon or simplify their intended messages. (Nakatani, 2006; Su, 2021).

It was noteworthy that the high-confidence group prioritized non-linguistic dimension (i.e., non-verbal features) more considerably than the low-confidence group. One possible interpretation is that the high-confidence speakers might have had more available attentional resources if they were less preoccupied with constructing and monitoring their verbal output. This freed capacity could be compatible with greater attention to non-verbal cues (like gestures, facial expressions, and posture) to enrich their communication. In contrast, low-confidence speakers may have wanted to devote more attention to forming correct verbal expressions, leaving less focus on non-verbal channels. However, this explanation is only tentative, and given the self-reported nature of the data, further empirical evidence is clearly needed.

EFL learners' prior experience and speaking prioritizations

It is noteworthy that learners' previous speaking frequency was significantly correlated with all three broad dimensions of speaking prioritizations. Specifically, the high-frequency group reported attending to linguistic (i.e., grammar accuracy, vocabulary accuracy, lexical diversity, connected sounds, intonation), non-linguistic (i.e., non-verbal features), and interactive communication (i.e., negotiation of meaning) more substantially than the low-frequency group. These results may be explained in two primary ways. First, regular opportunities for output help learners internalize language patterns and achieve automaticity, which might be associated with greater linguistic competence (Lightbown & Spada, 2021; Swain, 2000). Frequent practice could lessen the cognitive load and help them attend to more aspects during speaking. Second, since practice frequency and confidence were significantly associated, the high-frequency group may also have been more self-assured, possibly allowing them to prioritize a wider range of dimensions, as explained earlier.

Another notable finding is the significant variation in speaking prioritizations across different school backgrounds, which resonates with previous research on the influence of prior experience (Snyder et al., 2015) and geographical factors (Ma et al., 2024) in language learning. Specifically, urban students were found to prioritize non-verbal aspect more than students in the countryside. This difference is hypothesized to be related to urban students' greater exposure to communicative English environments (e.g., English-speaking clubs, international interactions, and digital media). Through repeated authentic interaction, learners may experience that successful communication depends not only on language but also on delivery (e.g., eye contact, facial expressions). Additionally, students from mountainous regions placed greater emphasis on two broad dimensions of speaking encompassing linguistic (i.e., intonation, fluency), and interactive communication (i.e., negotiation of meaning) compared to those from the countryside. One hypothesis could be that differences in accents and pronunciation among students from mountainous areas (including ethnic minority groups) may lead them to pay greater attention to these aspects when communicating. However, accent and ethnicity were not examined in the present research, so this hypothesis requires direct investigation.

The findings suggest that speaking prioritizations can be a multidimensional and learner-related construct. Learners reported prioritizing non-linguistic and interactive aspects alongside linguistic ones, which extends beyond the linguistic trade-offs usually addressed by resource models (Robinson, 2003; Skehan, 1998). At the same time, they also rated message-conveying features (e.g., vocabulary and pronunciation accuracy, intonation, fluency) higher than diversity and complexity features, which aligns with the limited resources model (Skehan, 1998) at the level of perceived importance. Prioritizations were further associated with confidence, practice frequency, and school background, indicating that perceived priorities are linked to learners' experience and self-beliefs, beyond task demands. These contributions, nonetheless, are conceptual and tentative since the study neither tests the resource models nor proposes a new theory.

Conclusion

The present study investigated Vietnamese EFL undergraduates' self-reported speaking prioritizations in oral production and their associations with perceived confidence, previous speaking frequency, and prior school backgrounds. Analysis of 244 questionnaire responses as well as answers to an open-ended question revealed several key findings. First, participants reported attending to all three broad dimensions of speaking (linguistic, non-linguistic, and interactive) but prioritized interactive communication more than linguistic aspects. Second, students' perceived confidence showed moderate positive correlations with speaking prioritizations in all three dimensions while the correlations with previous speaking frequency were from weak to moderate for the different linguistic, non-linguistic and interactive aspects. Compared with students with low self-reported confidence, highly confident students assigned greater importance to several specific aspects, with significant differences observed only between students who reported practicing speaking at low and high frequencies. Third, in terms of school background, students from rural areas tended to place less importance on several aspects, albeit modest in size, than their peers: those from mountainous areas reported greater attention to intonation, fluency, and negotiation of meaning while those from urban schools focused more on non-verbal features. Finally, qualitative data further revealed that confidence could be related to speaking frequency and prior school backgrounds.

These findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, while the sample size can be considered reasonable, the distribution of participants across groups (e.g., school backgrounds, levels of confidence) was disproportionate. This shortcoming could be addressed in future studies by recruiting participants of more balanced representation. Second, the questionnaire items were derived from the target speaking course's assessment criteria, which may have shaped participants' responses. Thus, future studies could use items that are independent of any single assessment framework or compare learners from different assessment contexts to examine how far these prioritization patterns might reflect washback effects. Third, because this study was cross-sectional and relied primarily on self-reported data, the relationships reported here should be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects, and the explanations offered are tentative. It is therefore necessary to employ both speaking performance and survey data in future longitudinal research to obtain more comprehensive insights. Fourth, the qualitative data were limited, as they were gathered from a single open-ended question regarding confidence. For deeper understanding, future research should collect additional qualitative data, such as interviews on other constructs (e.g., prioritizations, frequency). Fifth, confidence and speaking frequency were each measured using a single item; future studies might need to employ multi-item scales to capture these constructs more comprehensively. Sixth, the current study used convenience sampling at one single university, the findings may not generalize to other contexts. Future research should therefore recruit larger and more diverse samples from multiple universities. Lastly, this study did not consider language proficiency levels as an independent variable. Given its potential mediation in learners' use of CSs (e.g., Nakatani, 2006), future research could incorporate language proficiency as a factor in studying learners' speaking prioritizations.

Despite these limitations, the present study offers several pedagogical implications. To begin, it is important that speaking teachers attend to the varying degrees of attention that students report allocating to the different linguistic, non-linguistic dimensions of speaking as well as its interactive communication. Self-reported prioritizations might reveal weaknesses or strengths that students possess, thus providing valuable insights that shape classroom instruction. What's more, it is crucial for teachers to recognize the various sources of students' (un)confidence in order to foster positive emotions in English speaking classes. For instance, since low confidence arose from many sources including limited linguistic ability (e.g., insufficient vocabulary or poor pronunciation), fear of making mistakes, and a lack of practice and exposure, it is essential to create a supportive environment for students to speak English and overcome their fear of speaking while helping them to develop language proficiency through input-based exposure and output-based activities (Newton & Nation, 2020). Speaking tasks that suit students' proficiency levels and their interests might drive up their motivation to communicate in English. At the same time, because students placed considerable importance on interactive communication, teaching them how to mobilize all their linguistic and non-linguistic resources can help sustain communication and achieve their communicative goals in learning an L2.

By providing opportunities for students to speak English despite perceived linguistic limitations, teachers can help build confidence through experience rather than expectation. Moreover, given that perceived confidence, speaking frequency and prior educational background were associated with learners' speaking prioritizations, teachers should take these factors into account when evaluating students' oral performances. Furthermore, since mixed-background students with differing levels of speaking confidence and practice are common in the research context and perhaps in other educational settings, educators should offer tailored guidance and ample speaking opportunities, both inside and outside the classroom. In the current development of technologies, students can equally draw upon a variety of online resources to practice speaking English with people of different localities in different multimodal synchronous or asynchronous forms. With sustained practice and support, learners' self-confidence is likely to grow, enabling them to pursue more complex oral skills and, ultimately, communicate more effectively.

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Appendix. The questionnaire

Part 1. Background Information and Confidence Items

Item	**Response options**
Your major:	Short answers
Your gender:	Male/ Female/ Other
Your age:	Short answers
In your previous English classes in high school, how often did you practice speaking English?	1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Usually 5. Always
How would you rate your current confidence level when speaking English? Why?	1. Very unconfident 2. Unconfident 3. Somewhat unconfident 4. Somewhat confident 5. Confident 6. Very confident
What are the reasons for your (un)confidence?	Short answers
Where is your previous high school located?	1. Urban area 2. Rural area 3. Mountainous area

Part 2. Speaking Prioritization Items

Item
Linguistic dimensions
1. To what extent do you prioritize using accurate grammar when speaking English?
2. To what extent do you prioritize using a variety of grammatical structures when speaking English?
3. To what extent do you prioritize using appropriate vocabulary when speaking English?
4. To what extent do you prioritize using a variety of vocabulary when speaking English?
5. To what extent do you prioritize accurate pronunciation when speaking English?
6. To what extent do you prioritize using appropriate intonation when speaking English?
7. To what extent do you prioritize linking sounds properly when speaking English?
8. To what extent do you prioritize fluency when speaking English?
Non-linguistic dimensions
9. To what extent do you prioritize using non-verbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, posture, etc.) when speaking English?
Interactive communication dimensions
10. To what extent do you prioritize using communication strategies (explaining, using synonyms, asking for clarification, checking the listener's understanding, etc.) when speaking English?
11. To what extent do you prioritize being understood by others when speaking English?

Note. All items were rated on a 6-point scale: 1 = Do not prioritize at all, 2 = Almost do not prioritize, 3 = Somehow do not prioritize, 4 = Somehow prioritize, 5 = Prioritize, 6 = Highly prioritize.