VSTEP SPEAKING TEST FOR NON – ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS: DIFFICULTIES AND SOME SOLUTIONS

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Abstract:

    Passing the VSTEP examination is a compulsory requirement for non-English major students at universities in Vietnam to be eligible to graduate. However, students meet numerous problems when taking the VSTEP test, especially the speaking test. The study was carried out to investigate difficulties faced by non – English major students when taking the VSTEP speaking test, the root causes of these difficulties, and suggest some possible solutions to help them achieve good results. The study was conducted by giving questionnaires to 188 non-English major students from the Faculty of Information Technology, Faculty of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, and Faculty of Garment Technology and Fashion Design, the interview with four teachers at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education (UTEHY). The results of the study show that students face many difficulties in self-study speaking such as a lack of practice materials, and unfamiliarity with the format of the VSTEP speaking test. Based on the research results, several solutions have been proposed to help students pass the test easily. For example, students need to learn new words, practice pronunciation, stay calm and confident when entering the exam room, etc.

    Keywords: *Non-English major students***;** *VSTEP speaking test; Hung Yen University of Technology and Education.*

1. Introduction

Speaking skill is considered one of the most important skills that determine the success of communication. However, students face numerous difficulties in speaking English, especially in English oral exams. Most students, whether good or bad, feel nervous and anxious when taking the English-speaking test. Taking the oral test is extremely hard for non-English major students at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education (UTEHY) because most of them are at a low English level. In previous years, non-English major students at UTEHY took the B1 exam, but starting from the academic year 2022-2023, they had to take the "*Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency"* (VSTEP), a 6-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam. Speaking test is already one of the most difficult skills for them, but speaking test in VSTEP

format is even more difficult because they are not familiar with this test format, and the way to answer questions is also very difficult and different from the old one. Therefore, to help students reduce difficulties in the oral test which motivate the writers to conduct this study.

2. Literature review

According to Christensen (2023), an oral test is a kind of test that "the teacher asks the students question directly in a spoken form. The speaking test is a very common type of examination that is conducted in schools, colleges, and universities. Oral exams are also known as viva exams. In this form of examination, teachers ask a variety of questions to gauge their pupils' knowledge of the subject at hand. To demonstrate their understanding, the students will need to carefully answer the questions".

There are some challenges for students when taking the oral test. The biggest problem is nervousness and anxiety. Baldwin (2018) stated that a lack of confidence in using language is related to low proficiency in various language skills, causing them to become scared or embarrassed to make mistakes. Baker (2014) showed that fear of making mistakes becomes one of the main problems that make students hesitate to speak English in the lesson. Therefore, students' lack of confidence often happens when they recognize that the interlocutor does not understand them or when they do not understand other speakers. The next problem is pronunciation. Oflaz (2019) argued that more evidence indicates that pronunciation is an important communication problem that can hinder students from achieving higher scores in exams. Besides, students cannot answer the examiner's questions when they have trouble with listening skills. Nakhalad (2016) stated that each speaker plays two roles including a listener and a speaker. Thus, if students do not understand what is said, they cannot answer. It means that speaking is closely related to listening. Also, a lack of ideas is one of the biggest difficulties of the speaking test. He & Chen (2010) argued that it is difficult for

students to have an interesting conversation about a topic they do not know or understand. Rizkiani (2019) said that it is extremely hard for learners to answer when teachers ask them to tell things in a foreign language because they have little idea of what to say, which vocabulary to adopt, or how to use it.

Many factors are causing these above difficulties. Sokip (2020) pointed out that learning languages cannot be separated from aspects of education such as the importance of the teacher, the role of the curriculum and teaching materials, teaching methods, and teaching aids or learning environment. Sokip (2020) also argued that the duties of the teacher in the classroom are as a facilitator who can increase the learning capacity of learners. If the teacher is domineering in the class, the learners are only passive and have no interest in learning language practice opportunities. Therefore, teacher presence and classroom teaching methods play an essential role in learning a language. Besides, students' lack of practice and knowledge also causes some drawbacks for them when taking the test. Akbari (2016) believed that weakness in four language skills, poor vocabulary, limited grammar, poor pronunciation, spelling, and lack of appropriate learning strategies are the root causes that prevent them from getting higher scores on speaking tests. In his research, Akbari (2016) also pointed out that difficulties in language learning can be caused by a lack of understanding about the main role of English in their lives; which means motivation plays an important role in learning a language. If students are informed about using English in life, they can be highly motivated to learn it. If they enjoy using English, they will study better and enthusiastically.

Research on the VSTEP test, Nguyen Thuy Lan (2020) has comprehensively evaluated the influence of VSTEP output standards on English teaching and learning at Vietnam National University and pointed out the current situation of English teaching and learning and the difficulties that students face when facing new

regulations on foreign language output standards. Nguyen Thi Mai Huu (2021) described the thinking process of candidates taking the speaking test of the English proficiency test at levels 3-5. She stated the sequence of thinking requirements in the speaking test according to each candidate's English ability level and compared the candidate's thinking process when taking VSTEP.3-5 tests in a non-test context.

In conclusion, students often face some limitations when taking the speaking test due to poor vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fear of making mistakes. The number of research on the VSTEP test, especially on students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP speaking test is still limited which motivates the authors to conduct this research. The aims of this study, firstly, are to investigate the problems that students met when taking the VSTEP oral test. Secondly, it is aimed at investigating the causes of these above problems, then the writers would like to propose some useful techniques to help students perform better in the VSTEP oral examination.

3. Research methods

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies are selected for this research. The writers' research aims at investigating students' difficulties in VSTEP speaking tests, and the root causes of these difficulties so that qualitative methodology was the best choice to achieve the study aims. Quantitative research focuses on gathering numerical data and generalizing it across groups of people or explaining a particular phenomenon. The researchers chose this method to count the percentages of each difficulty and each cause, helping the authors find out the research result successfully.

The questionnaire included six questions divided into three main parts: Part 1: questions 1-3 aim at investigating students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP test. Part 2: question 4 tries to find out the causes of these difficulties. Part 3: questions 5-6 aim at suggesting some solutions for these above difficulties. The

interview consists of three questions which were carried out during lunch break when teachers were free. All participants were enthusiastic and helpful; therefore, it was not difficult for the writers to collect data.
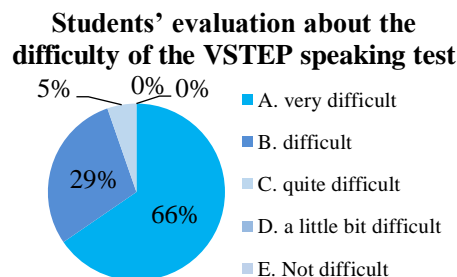
Students participating in this study are aged from 21 to 22 years old. They are fourth-year students, studying at the Faculty of Information Technology, Faculty of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, and Faculty of Garment Technology and Fashion Design. Four teachers at the Faculty of Foreign Languages are 29 to 42 years old. They are experienced in teaching speaking for non – English major students.

4. Results

4.1. Results on Students' Evaluation of the VSTEP speaking test

Results of students' evaluation of the VSTEP speaking test are summarized and presented in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Students' evaluation of the difficulty of the VSTEP speaking test

Students' evaluation about the difficulty of the VSTEP speaking test

- A. very difficult
- B. difficult
- C. quite difficult
- D. a little bit difficult
- E. Not difficult

It can be seen from Chart 1, 66% of the students supposed that the VSTEP speaking test is very difficult for them. 29% of them agreed that this test is difficult and 5% of them thought that the test is quite difficult and none of them stated that VSTEP speaking is a little bit difficult or not difficult. It means that VSTEP speaking is a really hard job for students.

4.2. Results on students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP speaking test

When asked in questionnaire 2: "What difficulties do you have when you practice speaking alone?". Their answers are described in following Table 1.

Table 1. Students' difficulties when practicing English alone

Students' difficulties when practicing speaking English alone	Number of students agreed	Percent
I feel confused about the structure of the speaking test	156/188	82.98%
I do not have enough resources to practice speaking English	178/188	94.68%
I have difficulties in identifying and correcting my speaking	109/188	57.98%
I do not have an English-speaking environment	145/188	77.13%
I have difficulties in selecting suitable materials for my level to practice speaking	170/188	90.43%
I rarely practice speaking alone	100/188	53.19%
I am easily distracted when practicing English speaking alone.	59/188	31.38%
I cannot manage time for self-study and practice properly	79/188	42%
I do not have the motivation to practice speaking alone.	168/188	89.35%

According to Table 1, 94.68% of them chose "I do not have enough resources to practice speaking English", 90.43% of them had difficulties in selecting suitable materials for their level to practice speaking. 89.35% of them did not have the motivation to practice speaking alone. 82.98% of the students felt confused about the structure of the speaking test. 77.13% of them did not have an English-speaking environment. Besides, they had problems identifying and correcting their speaking. They rarely practiced speaking alone, they could not manage time for self-study and practice properly. They were also distracted when practicing English speaking alone. It means that these problems are both internal and external causes.

Furthermore, when students take the VSTEP speaking directly, they had many problems that need changing. Those difficulties are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP oral test

Students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP oral test?	Number of students agreed	Percent
I am nervous and anxious when taking the test	188/188	100%
I am not confident in answering the examiner's questions.	188/188	100%
I have problems choosing an appropriate word	168/188	89.36%
I have problems using appropriate grammatical patterns	170/188	90.42%
I do not understand the situation of part 2	150/188	79.79%
I have limited vocabulary resources which causes difficulty in expressing ideas and developing the ideas for the topic.	175/188	93.08%
I cannot express ideas smoothly and often have unnatural pauses when speaking.	146/188	77.66%
I have poor listening and analytical skills, not being able to fully understand the opinions of the examiner, which lead to off-topic answers	156/188	82.98%

According to Table 2, 100% of the students admitted that they were nervous and anxious when taking the test and they were not confident in answering the examiner's questions. 93.08% of them had limited vocabulary resources which causes difficulty in expressing ideas and developing the ideas for the topic. 90.42% of them had problems using appropriate grammatical patterns. 89.36% of them had problems choosing an appropriate word. They had poor listening and analytical skills, not being able to fully understand the opinions of the examiner, which lead to off-topic answers which account for 82.98%. 79.79% of them did not understand the situation of part two so they did not complete the oral test successfully. In addition, 77.66% of the students could not express ideas smoothly and often have unnatural pauses when speaking.

Furthermore, from the result of the interview, teachers stated some obvious problems that students met during oral test time. Firstly, all students were too nervous and anxious when taking the exam which made them lose their confidence in presenting their ideas. Secondly, their vocabulary resource was limited and they could not understand the topic or develop their ideas. Moreover, many students did not understand the format of the test and they did not know how to answer the test. All the above problems prevent students from getting good results on speaking tests.

4.3. Results on the causes of students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP speaking test

Through the survey, the authors determined that many reasons cause difficulties for students when taking the VSTEP speaking test. These causes are summarized and shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The causes of students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP speaking test

The causes of students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP speaking test	Number of students agreed	Percent
I am lazy in practicing speaking	159/188	84.57%
I don't have enough materials to practice	145/188	77.12%
I don't have a chance to practice VSTEP speaking topics in class	188/188	100%
My course book doesn't have a VSTEP speaking format	188/188	100%
Time for speaking periods is limited	165/188	87.76%
My teacher does not encourage me to speak in class. They do not correct my pronunciation.	150/188	79.79%

According to Table 3, some typical reasons cause students' difficulties when taking the oral test. Firstly, 100% of them supposed that their course book did not have a VSTEP speaking format and they did not have a chance to practice VSTEP speaking in class. Besides, 87.76% of the participants pointed out that time for speaking periods in class is limited so they did not have much time to practice speaking in class. Another factor that causes students' difficulties are that they were lazy in practicing speaking (84.57%). 79.79% of them stated that their teachers did not encourage them to speak in class and their teachers did not correct their pronunciation. 77.12% of them showed that they did not have enough materials to practice.

According to the teachers' interview results, they believe that the causes of students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP exam are both objective and subjective. In terms of objective reasons, firstly, the curriculum does not have a VSTEP format in the course book, so students cannot practice that type of lesson. Secondly, the amount of time to study in class is not much, and the number of students in the class is large (usually 35-40 students); therefore, teachers cannot pay close attention to every single student. Thirdly, some teachers are lazy and not enthusiastic in encouraging their students to practice speaking skills. They focus on teaching grammar more than speaking skills. Moreover, there are not many materials for this

VSTEP speaking skill, so it is difficult for students to study and practice at home. In terms of the subjective side, students have low English levels and are too lazy to practice speaking. It is, therefore, no doubt that their speaking ability has not improved.

4.4. Results on some solutions to help students do the VSTEP speaking test better

The results of solutions to help students achieve higher scores in the VSTEP speaking exam are described in detail in Tables 4 and 5 below:

Table 4. Students should do themselves to get better speaking results

Students should do themselves to get better speaking results	Number of students agreed	Percent
I must study harder by learning vocabulary, grammar, structures	188/188	100%
I have to practice speaking every day with my classmates, my friends	167/188	88.83%
I should take part in a speaking English course	132/188	70.21%
I should participate in an English club	100/188	53.19%
I am well-prepared to participate in the test	188/188	100%

It can be seen from Table 4, 100% of the participants agree that they must be well-prepared to participate in the test, and they must study harder by learning vocabulary, grammar, and structures. They have to practice speaking every day with their classmates and their friends, they should take part in a speaking course, and they should participate in an English club which stands at 88.83%, 70.21%, and 53.19% respectively.

Table 5. Students' expectations for the teacher's support in the learning and revision process

Students' expectations for the teacher's support in the learning and revision process	Number of students agreed	Percent
Teachers should introduce the format of the VSTEP oral test clearly	188/188	100%
Teachers should suggest a way to answer each part in detail	188/188	100%
Teachers should provide topics for students to practice	178/188	94.68%
Teachers should spend more time correcting students' pronunciation	160/188	85.1%

According to Table 5, students expect their teachers to help them improve their speaking skills. 100% of the participants agreed that teachers should introduce the format of the VSTEP oral test clearly, and suggest a way to answer each part in detail. Moreover, 94.68% of the students expect teachers to provide topics for them to practice, and 85.1% of them hope teachers spend more time correcting their pronunciation.

Based on the third interview question for the teacher "Can you suggest some ways to help students perform better in the VSTEP examination?", teachers advise students to work hard on daily pronunciation, learn new words, and practice their speaking skills more. Students should prepare well in terms of knowledge and spirit when taking the speaking test. Preparing well for their exam will help them stay calm, and confident and achieve the best results. Students should join English clubs to have the opportunity to practice and practice speaking more. Teachers need to guide students in more detail about the VSTEP speaking format, how to respond, and most importantly, correct their pronunciation and ideas promptly.

5. Discussion

5.1. Students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP speaking test

Based on the results of questionnaires and interviews, the authors can summarize the two main difficulties that students meet when taking

the VSTEP speaking test.

Firstly, they had problems during study time and practice before taking the test. They faced many difficulties such as a lack of resources to practice speaking skills, a lack of vocabulary, a lack of social knowledge leading to a lack of ideas, and not knowing how to develop ideas for their topic. They did not know how to choose suitable resources for their speaking ability, and they did not have a good language communication environment, so it was difficult for them to practice speaking themselves. They also couldn't recognize their mistakes and correct them when pronouncing. Their self-study ability was not good, or they were distracted and did not know how to manage time for self-study. Most of the students did not understand the structure of the VSTEP speaking test because they had never taken it and were not introduced. It means that many of them were still confused and did not know what specific test they had to do.

Secondly, students met difficulties when taking the speaking test. Almost all of the students were nervous and nervous when entering the exam room; some of them were scared, trembling, and confused about what to say after hearing the examiner's question. Moreover, students' listening comprehension skills were limited, so some students did not seem to understand what the examiner asked, leading to an off-topic. They did not know how to ask the examiner to repeat questions or suggest keywords. Therefore, they could not answer the question. In addition, the vocabulary was limited, and the sentence structure was limited, so they couldn't develop their ideas and expand their answers.

5.2. The causes of students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP speaking test

Based on the questionnaire results and interviews, the authors summarize two main reasons leading to difficulties for students when taking the VSTEP speaking test.

The first reason was a subjective factor. Most of the non-English majors at UTEHY had low English levels; however, they were not hardworking and had no sense of self-study and self-improvement. In speaking class, they were afraid of making mistakes and did not dare to speak English. In addition, some of them did not focus on studying; they often made noise and did personal things in speaking class, so their speaking ability was not good. They did not have the spirit of self-reading and self-finding for topics, leading to a lack of ideas and not knowing how to develop ideas. Moreover, they did not pay attention to practicing pronunciation, and practice their speaking skills in front of a crowd, which led to a loss of confidence, anxiety, and stress when saying something.

The second factor is an objective reason. Due to the current non-specialized English classes at the school, the number of students was quite large, with an average of 35 to 40 students per class, with little time in class. In the total of four years of the university, the students had seven credits of English, equivalent to 105 periods during three semesters; so teachers could not check and correct each student's mistakes one by one. Moreover, their classroom books did not have the format of the VSTEP speaking test, so it was natural for them not to know the exam structure. Furthermore, some teachers only focused on teaching vocabulary and grammar; they spent little time teaching speaking. They did not encourage students to practice speaking and correct their mistakes.

The above reasons are the main reasons why students have difficulty speaking on tests, and to achieve the desired results, they must overcome the above reasons.

5.3. Some solutions help students improve their scores in the VSTEP speaking test

Improving the results of the speaking test requires the efforts of both students and teachers. Students themselves need to work hard and make more effort in learning new words, practicing pronunciation, and practicing speaking every day. Working hard and joining English clubs to have more opportunities to interact and communicate with people will help them feel more confident and calm when communicating. Moreover, they should also

participate in a speaking course or a specialized speaking course in VSTEP format so that they can experience more with exam questions, master the test structures and be more confident when taking the test. And another important thing is that they should prepare psychologically, and get enough sleep before the test day, which will help them be more alert and confident when taking the exam. Besides, teachers are also factors that contribute to the success of students. In class, teachers should supplement and provide the structure of speaking test, guide them on how to answer, create opportunities for them to communicate more, and encourage them to be calm and confident during exam time. Here are ten basic techniques that teachers should advise their students before they enter the exam room, specifically as follows:

Be sure to identify the topic of the question the examiner asks: In part 1 of the VSTEP speaking test, the examiner will ask two topics and each topic includes three questions. Therefore, students should focus on the examiner's questions. Besides, students pay much attention to types of questions such as Yes/No questions or Wh-questions to give suitable answers.

Practice VSTEP speaking test: Each Speaking section tests different sub-skills. For example, the social interaction section tests descriptive and explanatory skills. So, knowing the test format and spoken language for each section will help students get a good score for that section.

Practice the speaking English right before the exam time: When students are speaking Vietnamese in English, it is easy to get a 'stiff tongue' and speak unnaturally. If right before the exam time, they repeat the introduction of a close friend, for example, it will help them speak fluently in the first part, but the beginning will go down, and the tail will fall.

Expand the logical answer: When taking the exam, students should extend their answers long enough to show their language ability. Several ways of developing ideas can be used as descriptions, explanations, or examples

following:

What do you do in your free time?

Well, I have various interests such as watching TV, listening to music, and chatting with friends on social networking websites. At the weekend, I love going to the cinema to watch movies, too.

Keep eye contact when speaking to the examiner: When answering questions, students should look at the examiner to show respect and confidence in their communication.

Do not learn by heart the answer: Students should not memorize the answers so that when they enter the exam room, they have to remember what they should say. Instead, during their learning process, they can read many sample speeches, but take notes on the best sentence structures, write them in the form of ideas, and then develop them into complete sentences on their own.

Ask the examiner to repeat the question if students do not understand: When taking the VSTEP speaking test, students can ask the teacher to repeat the question or a word that is not clear or they can ask for an explanation:

Excuse me, could you repeat the question, please?

Could you explain that, please?

Give themselves time to think before answering: In the social communication test, the examiner will ask students and they will answer right away with no time to prepare. The following ways will give them more time to answer the question fluently.

Method 1: Using opinion words

Personally, I think; In my opinion/ view; From my point of view; To be honest/ to tell the truth; I would say that…

Method 2: Repeat the question or use synonymous words/structures

What do you like doing in your free time?

What I like doing in my spare time, …

Method 3: Comment on the questions

It's a tricky question for me.

It's an interesting question.

Correct their mistakes themselves when taking the VSTEP speaking test: If students

realize their mistakes while speaking, correct them. Because of that, they won't be deducted points for that mistake anymore

Feel free to speak confidently: Exam psychology always makes students tense during the speaking test. However, the examiner always creates a comfortable atmosphere for them, so before starting the test takes a deep breath to calm down. While speaking, treat it as a conversation between two friends so that they do not feel overwhelmed. Besides, they should speak loud enough and not be afraid.

These above tips will help students overcome difficulties when taking the VSTEP speaking test. If students study hard and apply these methods effectively, their speaking tests will become simpler and lighter. They will not suffer from pressure to meet foreign language output standards before graduation.

6. Conclusion

The study has just shown the difficulties that non-English major students at Hung Yen University of Education and Technology face when taking the VSTEP speaking test. The first difficulty is psychological fear, stress, and anxiety when taking the speaking test. The second difficulty is the lack of exam preparation materials. The next difficulty is that there is no speaking environment where all students in the class are equally lazy to speak. The study also showed the causes leading to the above difficulties due to students' weak language ability and laziness in practice. Moreover, the lack of reference materials and the lack of attention of teachers in speaking lessons due to the short program duration and large class, the teacher cannot correct speaking skills for the whole class are the root causes leading to the above difficulties for students. Since then, the author has come up with several solutions for students to achieve the highest results in their speaking tests. The authors hope that this study will benefit both students and lecturers in learning and teaching English speaking skills in general and helping students prepare to take the VSTEP exam to meet the foreign output standards language in particular.

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THI NÓI CHUẨN ĐẦU RA VSTEP CHO SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH: KHÓ KHĂN VÀ MỘT SỐ GIẢI PHÁP

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Tóm tắt:

Vượt qua kỳ thi VSTEP là yêu cầu bắt buộc đối với sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh tại các trường đại học ở Việt Nam để đủ điều kiện tốt nghiệp. Tuy nhiên, sinh viên gặp rất nhiều khó khăn khi làm bài thi VSTEP, đặc biệt là phần thi nói. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện nhằm tìm hiểu những khó khăn mà sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh gặp phải khi làm bài thi nói VSTEP, nguyên nhân sâu xa của những khó khăn này và đề xuất một số giải pháp khả thi giúp các em đạt được kết quả tốt. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện bằng cách phát phiếu câu hỏi cho 188 sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh đến từ Khoa Công nghệ Thông tin, Khoa Điện – Điện tử, Khoa Cơ khí và Khoa Công nghệ May và Thiết kế Thời trang, phỏng vấn 4 thầy cô giáo tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ, trường Đại học Sư phạm Kỹ thuật Hưng Yên (UTEHY). Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy sinh viên gặp nhiều khó khăn khi tự học nói như thiếu tài liệu luyện tập, chưa quen với dạng bài thi nói VSTEP. Dựa vào những kết quả nghiên cứu, một số giải pháp như sinh viên cần chăm chỉ học từ mới, luyện phát âm, bình tĩnh, tự tin khi bước vào phòng thi v.v đã được đưa ra nhằm giúp sinh viên vượt qua bài kiểm tra nói của mình dễ dàng hơn.

Từ khóa: *Sinh viên không chuyên ngữ; Thi kỹ năng nói theo chuẩn VSTEP; Trường Đại học Sư phạm Kỹ thuật Hưng Yên.*

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