



ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS AMONG VIETNAMESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

Le Thanh Tu¹,

Tran Thanh Du²ⁱ

¹Ho Chi Minh University of Transport,
Vietnam

²Thu Dau Mot University,
Vietnam

Abstract:

In oral communication, inaccurate pronunciation or pronunciation errors may create serious consequences, such as conversational discomfort, business disruption, and negotiation failure, leading to miscommunication or, at times, regrettable occupational accidents. Unfortunately, in a number of educational institutions in Vietnam, inadequate attention has been paid to the teaching and learning of English pronunciation. This is why Vietnamese learners of English seem to have neither full awareness, and thus, nor good performance of English pronunciation. Through qualitative and quantitative data collected from an experimental survey, the study indicates that non-English majors at University of Transport, Ho Chi Minh City (UTH) encounter various pronunciation problems due to various reasons, both objective and subjective. The study also results in strategies and techniques that may be beneficial to both the lecturers and the students in teaching and learning English pronunciation at UTH in particular and in the Vietnamese contexts in general.

Keywords: English pronunciation, pronunciation problems, Vietnamese learners of English

1. Introduction

In second language (L2) learning, learners who have pronunciation problems are less likely to be properly understood in oral communication, irrespective of their excellent grammar and vocabulary (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010; Thomson & Derwing, 2014). Theoretically, pronunciation is the foundation of oral communication (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Jones, 2018). It is the pronunciation that sets up the protocol via which messages are expressed and/or interpreted during the course of a conversation or a monologue. Pronunciation performance shapes the accuracy and, thus, the success

ⁱ Correspondence: email dutt@tdmu.edu.vn

of both the speaker and the listener in oral communication. In oral communication, “*the speaker and the hearer work together to produce and understand each other’s utterances*” (Foote & Trofimovich, 2018, p.85). Practically, “*successful communication cannot take place without correct pronunciation*” (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996, p.1). The pronunciation of the speaker and the recognition from the listener have great influences on the quality of communication for both of the parties. Regarding the acquisition of speech sounds, “*the person who acquired knowledge of a language has internalised a system of rules that relate sound and meaning*” (Chomsky, 1972, p.29). Accordingly, the relation between sounds and meanings is so close. Utterances in which words with similar sound forms, such as *wine* and *wife*, cannot be distinguished are of high frequency. Such mispronunciation may cause misinterpretation and potential problems devaluing the speaker’s effort in oral communication irrespective of their reasonably good stock of vocabulary and grammatical structure.

Research shows that there is a tendency for Vietnamese learners to learn English by dealing with Vietnam-based English exams, which are designed to test learners’ competence in vocabulary, grammar and reading skills rather than listening and speaking skills (Dang, Nguyen, & Le, 2013; Ha & Murray, 2021). As a result, learning and even teaching English pronunciation is blissfully ignored. The situation of the students at UTH is a good case in point. A considerable number of English non-majored students here suffer from many difficulties in English pronunciation. It is, therefore, necessary to find a satisfactory solution to the problem, if not to put an end to the situation.

2. Literature review

Presented in this section are pieces of relevant literature, including definitions of basic terms employed in the study, related aspects of the English sound system, the process of pronunciation acquisition, relevant theories and research, and principles and techniques in pronunciation teaching, all necessary for the subsequent sections.

2.1. Elements of pronunciation

To set the theoretical background for the study, this section reviews related pronunciation elements, including the articulators, speech sounds, voiced sounds and voiceless sounds, airstream mechanisms, vowels, diphthongs, triphthongs, consonants, syllabic consonants, consonant clusters, syllables, word stress.

- **Word stress**

Word stress is the emphasis placed on a specific syllable of a word. In English, not every syllable in a polysyllabic word is pronounced with the same loudness and length of time, so each syllable in such a word can be stressed or unstressed. Stressed syllables are louder than the others - i.e. the air comes out of our lungs with more power, but they might also be longer or pronounced with higher or lower in pitch. Syllables that are not pronounced with such emphasis are usually referred to as unstressed syllables, and they are usually

not pronounced as clearly as the others. Stress is usually represented in the phonemic chart and transcription by the symbol /' / placed before the stressed syllable. In words that have secondary stress, we include the symbol /, / before the appropriate syllable (e.g. destination: /, det@ 'neIS@n/).

- **Sentence stress**

Sentence stress is the emphasis on certain words within a sentence. Most sentences have two basic types of words - content words, which are usually stressed, and function words, which are often unstressed. Content words are the important words that carry the meaning of the sentence, whereas function words are not very important words because their function is just to make the sentence grammatically correct. *“Sentence stress is the pattern of stressed and unstressed words across a sentence. Normally, this emphasis is on words that carry important information, although this can change significantly, depending on the specific meaning the speaker wants to communicate”* (British Council, n.d.).

- **Connected speech**

Connected speech is a kind of pronunciation in which certain words are lost, and certain phonemes linked together as utterances are pronounced naturally. Learners whose instruction has focused heavily on accuracy suffer a *“devastating diminution of phonetic information at the segmental level when they encounter normal speech”* (Brown, 1990).

- **Intonation**

“Intonation describes how the voice rises and falls in speech. The three main patterns of intonation in English are: falling intonation, rising intonation and fall-rise intonation” (Cambridge Online Dictionary, n.d.)

- **Assimilation**

Assimilation is *“the tendency of a sound to move to the place of articulation of one following”* (Finch, 2000, p.61)

- **Elision**

“The nature of elision may be stated quite simply: under certain circumstances, sounds disappear. One might express this in more technical language by saying that in certain circumstances, a phoneme may be realised as zero, or have zero realisation or be deleted. As with assimilation, elision is typical of rapid, casual speech” (Roach, 2009, p.113).

- **Minimal pairs**

Minimal pairs are *“pairs of words that differ in meaning on the basis of a change in only one sound”* (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992, p.39). A minimal pair *“consists of two words pronounced alike except for a single phonemic difference”* (Nilsen & Nilsen, 1973, p.15).

- **The articulators**

Articulators are a “complex set of muscles that can produce changes in the shape of the vocal tract” (Roach, 2009, p.8).

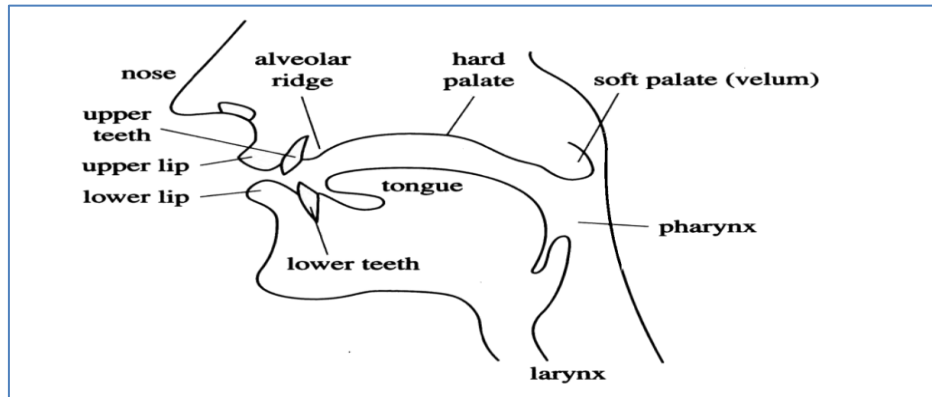


Figure 2.1.1: The articulators (Roach, 2009, p.8).

- **Speech sounds**

“Vocal sounds are produced in the human body by the organs of what is called the vocal tract. Vocal sounds which are organized to communicate information are called speech sounds” (Buchanan, 1963, p.18)

- **Voiced sounds and voiceless sounds**

“The airstream from the lungs moves up through the trachea, or windpipe, and through the opening between the vocal cords, which is called the glottis. If the vocal cords are apart, the airstream is not obstructed at the glottis, and it passes freely into the supraglottal cavities (the parts of the vocal tract above the glottis). The sounds produced in this way are voiceless sounds [...]. If the vocal cords are together, the airstream forces its way through and causes them to vibrate. Such sounds are called voiced sounds” (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993, p.187)

- **Airstream mechanisms**

“The production of any speech sound (or any sound at all) involves the movement of an airstream. Most speech sounds are produced by pushing lung air out of the body through the mouth and sometimes through the nose. Since lung air is used, these sounds are called pulmonic sounds; since the air is pushed out, they are called egressive. The majority of sounds used in languages of the world are thus produced by pulmonic egressive airstream mechanisms. All the sounds in English are produced in this manner” (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993, p.186-187).

- **Vowels**

Vowels are “speech sounds which are produced with no oral obstruction whatsoever” (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993, p.198).

- **Diphthongs**

Diphthongs are “sounds which consist of a movement or glide from one vowel to another” (Roach, 2009, p.17). There are eight diphthongs in English pronunciation: /aI/, /eI/, /OI/, /E@/, /I@/, /U@/, /aU/, and /@U/

- **Triphthongs**

A triphthong is “a glide from one vowel to another, and then to a third, all produced rapidly and without interruption” (Roach, 2009, p.18-19). There are five triphthongs in English pronunciation: /aI@/, /eI@/, /OI@/, /@U@/, and /aU@/.

- **Consonants**

Consonants are “sounds produced by partially or completely blocking air in its passage from the lungs through the vocal tract.” (Finegan, 1994, p.34).

- **Syllabic consonants**

In the case of syllables in which no vowel is found, a consonant, either l, r or a nasal (m, n, ŋ), stands as the peak of the syllable instead of the vowel, and we count these as weak syllables like the vowel examples given earlier in this chapter. It is usual to indicate that a consonant is syllabic by means of a small vertical mark (ˑ) beneath the symbol, for example, “cattle” /ˈkætl̩/.

- **Consonant clusters**

A consonant cluster is a group of 2, 3 or 4 consonant sounds produced in a row. Examples of consonant clusters with 2 consonant sounds are /bl/ in ‘black’, /sk/ in ‘desk’ and the /pt/ at the end of ‘helped’. Examples of clusters with 3 consonant sounds are /str/ in ‘string’, /sks/ in ‘tasks’ and the /kst/ in ‘sixty’. Examples of clusters with 4 consonant sounds in a row are /ksts/ in ‘texts’ and /mpst/ in ‘glimpsed’ (Harding, 2019).

- **Syllables**

“Phonetically, [...] syllables are usually described as consisting of a centre which has little or no obstruction to airflow and which sounds comparatively loud; before and after this centre (i.e. at the beginning and end of the syllable), there will be greater obstruction to airflow and/or less loud sound” (Roach, 2009, p.56).

- **Word stress**

Word stress is the emphasis placed on a specific syllable of a word. In English, not every syllable in a polysyllabic word is pronounced with the same loudness and length of time, so each syllable in such a word can be stressed or unstressed. Stressed syllables are louder than the others - i.e. air comes out of our lungs with more power, but they might also be longer or pronounced with higher or lower in pitch. Syllables that are not pronounced with such emphasis are usually referred to as unstressed syllables, and they are usually not pronounced as clearly as the others. Some longer words may have more than one

strong syllable, but one of them tends to stand out more than the other. They are referred to as primary and secondary stress, the former being the stronger. Stress is usually represented in the phonemic chart and transcription by the symbol /' / placed before the stressed syllable. In words that have secondary stress, we include the symbol /, / before the appropriate syllable (e.g. destination: /, det@ 'neIS@n/).

- **Sentence stress**

Sentence stress is the emphasis on certain words within a sentence. Most sentences have two basic types of words - content words, which are usually stressed, and function words, which are often unstressed. Content words are the important words that carry the meaning of the sentence. Whereas, function words are not very important words because their function is to make the sentence grammatically correct. *"Sentence stress is the pattern of stressed and unstressed words across a sentence. Normally, this emphasis is on words that carry important information, although this can change significantly, depending on the specific meaning the speaker wants to communicate"* (British Council, n.d.).

- **Connected speech**

Connected speech is a kind of pronunciation in which certain words are lost, and certain phonemes linked together as utterances are pronounced naturally. In real-life interaction, phonetically ambiguous pairs like "a new display"/"a nudist play", are rarely a problem as we are actively making predictions about which syntactic forms and lexical items are likely to occur in a given situation. Non-native speakers, however, are rarely able to predict which lexical item may or may not appear in a particular situation. They tend to depend almost solely on the sounds which they hear. Learners whose instruction has focused heavily on accuracy suffer a devastating diminution of phonetic information at the segmental level when they encounter normal speech (Brown, 1990).

- **Intonation**

"Intonation describes how the voice rises and falls in speech. The three main patterns of intonation in English are: falling intonation, rising intonation and fall-rise intonation" (Cambridge Online Dictionary, n.d.)

- **Assimilation**

Assimilation is *"the tendency of a sound to move to the place of articulation of one following"* (Finch, 2000, p.61)

- **Elision**

"The nature of elision may be stated quite simply: under certain circumstances, sounds disappear. One might express this in more technical language by saying that in certain circumstances, a phoneme may be realised as zero, or have zero realisation or be deleted. As with assimilation, elision is typical of rapid, casual speech" (Roach, 2009, p.113).

- **Minimal pairs**

Minimal pairs are “*pairs of words that differ in meaning on the basis of a change in only one sound*” (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992, p.39). A minimal pair “*consists of two words pronounced alike except for a single phonemic difference*” (Nilsen & Nilsen, 1973, p.15).

2.2. Techniques of teaching pronunciation

With reference to the essentiality of pronunciation teaching, Avery & Ehrlich (1995, p.164) assert that: “*A separate class should be devoted to pronunciation teaching, or pronunciation did not get taught at all; [...] pronunciation can and should always be integrated into all aspects of language teaching and reinforced in all classes*”. It becomes obvious that no matter what way and extent, pronunciation should be regularly included in every class. This may be considered the first rule of thumb in pronunciation teaching. The question is how to add up such an inclusion. Within the scope of the study, the discussion focuses on discrete sounds only.

When it comes to sound presentation procedures, Doff (1988, p.114) suggests the following steps:

- 1) saying the sound alone;
- 2) saying the sound in a word;
- 3) contrasting the sound with another one;
- 4) writing words on the board;
- 5) explaining how to make the sound;
- 6) getting students to repeat the sound in chorus;
- 7) getting individual students to repeat the sound.

These procedures can be fostered by the flexible application, which varies considerably from teacher to teacher. Such application can be practically supported by the employment of particular techniques so that specific objectives can be reached. In order to get the best of the application, it is important to bear in mind that techniques must be consistent with a methodⁱⁱ, and therefore, in harmony with an approachⁱⁱⁱ as well” (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p.15).

Richards et al. (1992, p.20) define techniques as “*different kinds of classroom activity*”. A variety of pronunciation teaching techniques have been applied in language classes. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996, p.8-9) ten techniques in teaching pronunciation as follows:

- Listening and imitating;
- Making use of phonetic training;
- Making use of minimal pair drills;
- Making use of contextualized minimal pairs;
- Making use of visual aids;
- Making use of tongue twisters;
- Developing approximation drills;

ⁱⁱ “*Different ways of teaching language... are referred to as methods.*” (Richards et al., 1992: 20)

ⁱⁱⁱ Approaches refer to “*different theories about the nature of language and how languages are learned.*” (Richards et al, 1992, p. 20)

- Practising vowel shifts and stress shifts related by affixation;
- Reading aloud/recitation; and
- Recording learners' sound production.

Contributing more to the current tendency of teaching English pronunciation, Kelly (2000) suggests that the teaching of pronunciation involves the teaching of productive skills and receptive skills^{iv}. In the author's view, the procedure consists of two steps:

- 1) the learner studies how to identify the differences between phonemes, especially when there is no contrast in L₁;
- 2) the learner applies what has been learnt in their production of sounds.

Based on this procedure, the following techniques in teaching pronunciation are suggested (Kelly, 2000): *Eliciting and drilling; Chaining; Making use of substitutions; Making use of minimal pairs; Making of tongue twisters; Making use of pronunciation and spelling activities; Making use of homographs and homophones*'.

In the current study, depending on the nature of the elements, appropriate techniques are used as remedial methods for these students' pronunciation improvement.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

Conducted with the participation and for the sake of Vietnamese learners of English, the current research paper aims to achieve three basic purposes:

- 1) to identify common problems of English pronunciation encountered by Vietnamese learners of English;
- 2) to find out the causes of these problems; and
- 3) to propose effective solutions to those problems.

Consequently, the study done for and reported in this research paper are contextually designed to seek the answers to these specific questions:

- 1) What are the common problems of English pronunciation encountered by Vietnamese learners of English?
- 2) What are the fundamental causes of these problems?
- 3) What are the viable solutions which can help Vietnamese learners of English overcome these problems?

3.2. Research methods

In the current study, both qualitative and quantitative methods are employed. Qualitatively, the researcher's knowledge and experience as well as the qualitative results

^{iv}"Language skills are the mode or manner in which language is used. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are generally called the four language skills. Sometimes, speaking and writing are called the active/productive skills and reading and listening the passive/receptive skills." (Richards et al, 1992, p. 205)

^v"Homographs are words which have the same spelling, but with different pronunciations. Homophones are words which have the same pronunciation, but with different spelling." (Kelly, 2000, p. 20)

of the class observations and interviews, were utilized so as to recognize the pronunciation errors and the difficulties that the participants were encountering. The remedies for these issues were also made accordingly. Quantitatively, the results of the quantitative analysis of the statistics collected from the data collection, including recordings, tests, interviews, and observations, were used to prioritize both the problems identified and evaluate the effectiveness of the remedies.

3.3. Research participants

The current study is conducted with the participation of 56 randomly selected students from UTH who have been taking English courses sponsored by The Maritime Education and Human Resource Center (abbreviated to UT-STC), one of UTH's international partners. These students are from 3 classes: Elementary 1 (18 students), Elementary 2 (19 students), and Elementary 3 (19 students).

3.3. Research instruments

The instruments used in this study include classroom tasks, audiovisual aids and technological tools.

- **Classroom tasks:** A variety of classroom activities and exercises are self-designed, as well as some exercises from textbooks, reference books, and other published sources adapted by the researcher.
- **Audiovisual aids:** An LCD projector and screen, a loudspeaker and a laptop serve as audiovisual aids for the process of teaching and learning.
- **Technological tools:** Three application softwares are designed for learning English pronunciation: *Pronunciation Power 1* and *Pronunciation Power 2* (abbreviated to *ProPower1* and *ProPower2*, respectively), published by English Computerized Learning Inc.



Figure 3.3.1. Interfaces of *ProPower1* and *ProPower2*

Two selected features of this software that are used in this study are Lessons, Exercises, and *View*. *Lessons* provide the learner with audiovisual descriptions of all English speech sounds from which the learner can choose a particular sound to study. *Exercises* is a collection of various kinds of pronunciation exercises, only three of which are used in ET - *Sample Words*, *Comparative Words*, and *Listening Discrimination*. This choice is based on their directness to teaching techniques.



Figure 3.3.2. Interfaces of Exercises as observed in *ProPower2*

Side View and *Front View* depict both “inner workings” and “outer workings” of the vocal tract during articulation. Also included in both of the software is *Air Flow Legend*, which lists major airflow qualities, including voicing, obstruction and release, replicated when activating the *Side View* video.



Figure 3.3.3: *Side View*, *Front View* and *Air Flow Legend* as observed in *ProPower2*

Side View Legend (available only in *ProPower2*) visualizes the articulators and their positions.

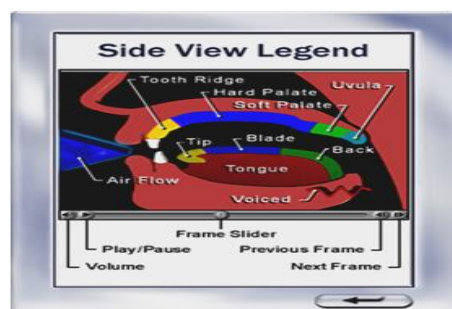


Figure 3.3.4: *Side View Legend* as observed in *ProPower2*

Description (available only in *ProPower2*) tells the learner how to “operate” the articulators when pronouncing a particular sound.



Figure 3.3.5: Description as observed in ProPower2

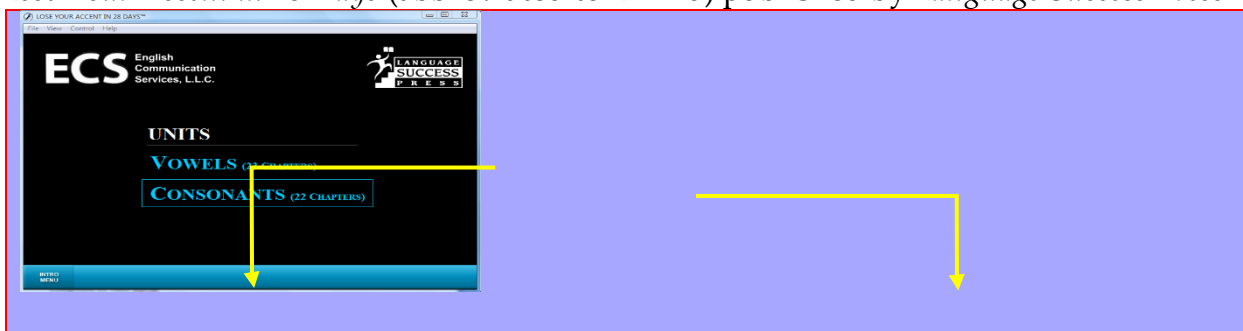
Suggestion (available only in ProPower2) offers the learner particular tips for the production of particular sounds.



Figure 3.3.6: Suggestion as observed in ProPower2

Description and *Suggestion* available in ProPower2 are well suited to experimental teaching because they are really simplified instructions which can make a special impression on student acquisition of the sounds.

Lose Your Accent in 28 Days (abbreviated to LYA28) published by Language Success Press^{vi}:



^{vi} core part of the complete pronunciation syllabus composed by Judy Ravin, the CEO of English Communication Services (ECS), LLC, a reduction training company, and published by Language Success Press, whose website can be accessed at <http://www.lessaccent.com>

VOWELS (CHAPTERS 1-23)	CONSONANTS (CHAPTERS 1-22)
1 - /i/ and /ɪ/ seat, sit 2 - /eɪ/ and /ɛ/ taste, test 3 - /æ/ and /ɑ/ hat, hot 4 - Practice with /ɑ/ 5 - /ə/ some, much 6 - /ɔ/ boss, call 7 - Practice with /ɔ/ 8 - /ʊ/ good, could 9 - /u/ knew, you 10 - Practice with /ʊ/ and /u/ 11 - /oʊ/ clothes, old 12 - /aɪ/ why, night 13 - Practice with /aɪ/ 14 - /aʊ/ out, now 15 - Practice with /aʊ/ 16 - /ɔɪ/ enjoy, coin 17 - /ə/ birds, girl 18 - /ɑə/ car, large 19 - /iə/ hear, year 20 - /ɛə/ air, hair 21 - /ɔə/ four, more 22 - /aɪə/ fire, buyer 23 - /aʊə/ flour, hour	1 - /p/ /b/ /f/ /v/ and /w/ 2 - /s/ and /z/ sip, zip 3 - /θ/ and /ð/ think, this 4 - Practice with /θ/ /s/ /t/ and /d/ 5 - /ʃ/ sure, should 6 - /ʒ/ decision, vision 7 - Practice with /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ 8 - /tʃ/ choose, challenge 9 - /dʒ/ job, judge 10 - /y/ year, yes 11 - /tʃ/ /dʒ/ and /y/ 12 - /t/ two, tomorrow 13 - /d/ drive, day 14 - /h/ has, how 15 - /r/ right, read 16 - /l/ look, light 17 - Practice with /l/ 18 - Final /l/ I'll, well 19 - /l/ with /d/ told, sold 20 - /r/ and /l/ electrical, parallel 21 - /m/ /n/ /ŋ/ 22 - /k/ and /g/ keep, great

Figure 3.3.7: Interfaces of LYA28

LYA28 seems to be a perfect addition to ProPower2. While LYA28 provides video clips of sample words and an utterance in which a relevant minimal pair is employed, ProPower2 only gives those of discrete sounds.

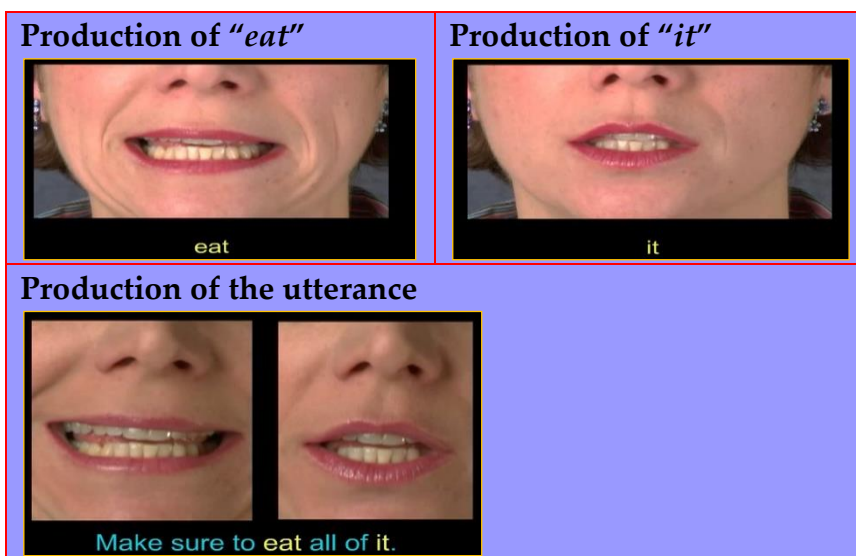


Figure 3.3.8: Interfaces of video clips for “eat” and “it” as observed in LYA28

One application software named *All Audio Recorder - Version 2.10* produced by Microsoft Corporation serves as the sound recording tool during the research project. Its interface looks like this:



Figure 3.3.9: Interface of *All Audio Recorder - Version 2.10*

3.4 Research design

The study was divided into three main stages, each of which has different specific functions and purposes.

Stage 1: Identifying pronunciation problems and their fundamental causes

This stage is aimed at identifying the common mistakes made as well as the difficulties posed to UTH's students in terms of English pronunciation. Such identification is done using both qualitative tools (researcher's knowledge and experience, class observations and interviews) and quantitative tools (diagnostic pronunciation tests, recordings, and technological analysis). The fundamental causes of such pronunciation issues are sorted out, which lays the foundations for Stage 2.

Stage 2: Developing remedies and carrying out the experimental teaching

This stage primarily includes developing class activities, homework and exercises, which serve as practical remedies for the problems identified in Stage 1. These remedies are based on the primary causes identified in the previous stage and are grouped adequately so that they can work well for the case of the study subjects.

Stage 3: Evaluating the effectiveness of the remedies

Collectively, the data analysis results are used to evaluate the remedies in the cases of the specific problems identified. Such analysis can also point out the necessary path modifications for better application of the solutions found.

3.5. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through class observations, recordings of student performance, surveys, and face-to-face interviews with students. The class observations led to the hypothetical identification of the pronunciation mistakes and difficulties posed to the intended students. Then, a number of diagnostic tests were designed to sharpen the reliability of the identification. Simultaneously, surveys and interviews were conducted to find out the root causes of the pronunciation problems that the students were facing. Next, the pronunciation remedies, including exercises, practice and explanation, were employed to help the students improve their English pronunciation. Finally, the data on how much progress the students had made regarding English pronunciation were collected utilizing further observation and tests. The data were then grouped into subsets for ease and better analysis. The data collection was completed in 6 months. The analysis of the data was conducted both qualitatively and quantitatively to launch findings that could be as reliable and valid as possible.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings from specific cases

Through the means of class observations, recordings of student performance, surveys and face-to-face interviews with the students, the study has successfully identified a number of common problems with English pronunciation that the intended students encounter. From the observation, the fundamental causes of such problems have been sorted out. Some techniques and exercises have also been developed to help the students overcome pronunciation problems.

Problem 1: Production of extra /s/

- **Description:** A lot of students automatically added an extra sound /s/ in the word-final position for the cases of monosyllabic words and after a certain syllable for the cases of polysyllabic words. The former occurs in almost every word that does not end in /s/ or /S/. In some cases, the original final consonant of the word is replaced by /s/.

Examples:

Original word	Original phonetic transcription	Phonetic transcription of student pronunciation
My	/maI/	/maIs/
Because	/bI"kOz/	/bIs"kOz/
Captain	/"k&pt@n/	/"k&pst@n/

- **Causes:** Qualitative analysis of observations and interviews indicates that the students have had the practice of mispronouncing the additional /s/ for a long time. This mispronunciation has become a habit of pronunciation.
- **Solutions:** It is advisable to provide students with competence and performance of syllable structure and raise their awareness of pronunciation accuracy.

Problem 2: Poor production of final consonants

- **Description:** Almost all of the students tend to either omit the pronunciation of final consonants or mispronounce these sounds.

Examples:

Original word	Original phonetic transcription	Phonetic transcription of student pronunciation
House	/hAUz/	/hAU/
Life	/lAIz/	/lAI/
Is	/Iz/	/i/

- **Causes:** This problem has its roots in the fact that the Vietnamese language does not employ a clear production of final consonants. This is why the articulators of

Vietnamese speakers do not find the practice of producing final consonants familiar.

- **Solutions:** Using minimal pairs is an effective way to improve students' pronunciation of final sounds.

Problem 3: Poor performance of word stress

- **Description:** The students pronounce polysyllabic words with wrong stressed syllables, and in some cases, they employ no stress at all.

Examples:

Original word	Original phonetic transcription	Phonetic transcription of student pronunciation
Visit	/'vIzIt/	/vI"zIt/
Industry	/'Ind@stri/	/In"d@stri/
recommend	/%rek@"mend/	/"rek@%mend/

- **Causes:** Some students do not learn and/or practise the pronunciation of lexical items when they learn them because they take almost written exams. Accordingly, these students form a habit of pronouncing English words in a way that is easy for them rather than the words being correctly pronounced. In addition, as Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language, its nature has almost no word stress control. As a result, when it comes to a polysyllabic word in English, it is difficult for Vietnamese students to articulate.
- **Solutions:** First, provide students with the nature of syllable structure and word stress. Raise students' awareness of the relation between lexical meaning and word stress; for example, different word stress can distinguish the meaning of one word from another. Then, provide students with common confusing cases of word stress, such as the cases of *recommend*, *visit*, *industry*, and so on. Next, give students some simple sentences with monosyllabic words, substituting the monosyllabic words with polysyllabic ones. Last but not least, ensure students remember that it is necessary to check the pronunciation of any word before using it in oral communication.

Examples:

"He is a cook."

"He is a captain."

"He is a navigator."

Problem 4: Poor performance of sentence stress

- **Description:** The students speak English in a way that can be described as monotone articulating of utterances. As a result, every word they make in an English utterance has the same stress.

Examples:

Students' performance	Native speakers' performance
The boy is eating an apple.	The boy is eating an apple .
I can't come to the party on Sunday.	I can't come to the party on Sunday .
Why did you choose this major?	Why did you choose this major ?

- **Causes:** Again, the tonic nature of the Vietnamese language is a fundamental cause of this problem.
- **Solutions:** Provide students with the nature as well as the basic rules of sentence stress. If necessary, use audiovisual demonstration to help the students figure out the problem.

Problem 5: Missing and/or confusing /l/ and /n/

- **Description:** Most students have difficulty pronouncing the sounds /l/ and /n/ when these sounds are in the medial or final positions. Another problem is that some students, especially those from northern Vietnam, are confused between /l/ and /n/.

Examples:

Original word	Original phonetic transcription	Phonetic transcription of student pronunciation
Mile	/maɪl/	/maɪ/
Mine	/maɪn/	/maɪ/
foundation	/faʊn"deɪs@n/	/faʊ"deɪs@n!/
Like	/laɪk/	/naɪk/ or /naɪ/

- **Causes:** The basic cause of this problem is the interference of the students' dialects or local accents. Another cause is that /l/ and /n/ have the same place of articulation: they are both alveolar sounds.
- **Solutions:** Using minimal pairs and explaining the nature of /l/ and /n/. As observed, provide the difference in the way the airflow is released for the pronunciation of /l/ and /n/: The former is through the oral cavity, and the latter is through the nasal cavity.

Problem 6: Mispronunciation of the ending -ed

- **Description:** Students tend to pronounce the ending "ed" as /ɪd/ for almost every case.

Examples:

Original word	Original phonetic transcription	Phonetic transcription of student pronunciation
Stopped	/stɒpt/	/"stɒpɪd/
Cleaned	/kli:nd/	/kli:nɪd/

- **Causes:** This is caused by the improper acquisition of the pronunciation of the ending -ed in previous classes.
- **Solutions:** Use sound-based techniques instead of letter-based ones to reteach the pronunciation of -ed.

Problem 7: Mispronunciation of consonant clusters

- **Description:** The students tend to drop a consonant in a consonant cluster or add a schwa after the first consonant in the cluster so as to ease the pronunciation of the cluster.

Examples:

Original word	Original phonetic transcription	Phonetic transcription of student pronunciation
Sister	/'sɪstə/	/sɪtə/
sometimes	/'sʌmtaɪmz/	/'sʌmtaɪm/ or /'sʌmtaɪ/
construction	/kən'strʌkʃən/	/kən'trʌkʃən/
Question	/'kwɛstʃən/	/'wɛstʃən/ or /'wɛsən/
Play	/pleɪ/	/pə'leɪ/

- **Causes:** This problem originates from the fact that there are almost no consonant clusters in the Vietnamese language.
- **Solutions:** Raise students' awareness of the difficulties that the pronunciation consonant clusters pose to Vietnamese learners of English as a natural part of learning. Use the support of audiovisual aids to teach the pronunciation of English consonant clusters. The *ProPower 1* is a good case in point.

Problem 8: Poor performance of connected speech

- **Description:** Almost all of the students cannot produce connected speech naturally and automatically when speaking English.

Examples:

Students' performance	Native speakers' performance
I'm an engineer.	I'm an engineer.
This is why I like it.	This is why I like it.
There are five of us at the moment.	There are five of us at the moment.

- **Causes:** The students just learned by heart some cases of common connected speech. This is partly due to their poor control of final sounds and partly due to lack of awareness as well as practice of connected speech.
- **Solutions:** Explain the basic nature of connected speech. Some other cases of assimilations or elisions should also be included if the students are good enough in terms of pronunciation.

Problem 9: Poor performance of intonation

- **Description:** The students have poor awareness and performance of intonation. Specifically, they speak English with almost no intonation processing in mind. As a result, it is very difficult to fully understand what is expressed or implied by their utterances with reference to intonation.

Examples:

Students' performance	Native speakers' performance
We need paint, scrapers, and brushes.	We need paint, scrapers, and brushes.
Where do you live?	Where do you live?
Are you an engineer or a navigator?	Are you an engineer or a navigator?

- **Causes:** The students lack the practice of intonation though they said that they learned the relevant knowledge at school. However, the knowledge they got was quite theoretical and not practical as expected.
- **Solutions:** Teachers should explain the basic intonation patterns to the students and provide them with more opportunities to practice intonation.

4.2. Overall Findings and Discussion

The overall findings can be generally presented in Table 5.1 below:

Table 5.1: Rates of pronunciation improvements made by the students after the experimental teaching

Problems		Number of cases before experimental teaching	Number of cases after experimental teaching	Rate of improvement
1. Production of extra /s/		51	3	94.11%
2. Poor production of final sounds		56	9	83.92%
3. Poor performance of word stress		56	9	83.92%
4. Poor performance of sentence stress		56	12	78.57%
5. /l/ and /n/	Missing	56	10	82.14%
	Confusing	6	1	83.33%
6. Mispronunciation of the ending -ED		56	6	89.28%
7. Mispronunciation of consonant clusters		56	6	89.28%
8. Poor performance of connected speech		56	16	71.42%
9. Poor performance of intonation		56	12	78.57%

It is inevitable that Vietnamese learners of English face many pronunciation obstacles when communicating in English. The overall statistics indicate that the most difficult pronunciation problem that the students have is connected speech. Next comes the problem of intonation and sentence stress with the same number of cases recorded. Due to the nature of the pronunciation aspects, the reasons for these problems can be varied. It can be inferred from the survey results that both the common errors committed by Vietnamese learners of English and the difficult problems posed to them are believed to

result from both objective and subjective factors. While the former originates from the influence of the student's mother tongue or the differences between English sounds and Vietnamese ones, the latter comes from the students' poor awareness of the importance of pronunciation, their improper acquisition and even their lack of relevant practice or exposure to the pronunciation aspects involved.

Throughout the study, most of the suggested teaching techniques are proved to be practically useful. For remedies and better production of these aspects, teachers must raise students' awareness of the phonological phenomena, giving descriptions and providing them with more opportunities to practice these aspects.

As pronunciation is one of the most influential factors in speaking and listening comprehension practices (Gilbert, 1993), students must master the pronunciation of a language in order to communicate effectively in that language. Unfortunately, the problem may arise when pronunciation teaching is not included as a separate session in the language curriculums, especially in those for non-English majors. It is then suggested that these pronunciation features should be incorporated into the listening or speaking classes. With the strategies and techniques put forward in the study, teachers can make effective remedial interventions, all with an effort to raise students' awareness and give them opportunities to practice and master these aspects of pronunciation. In the era of Industry 4.0, teachers must give students sufficient instructions so that students can take online pronunciation courses or practice pronunciation themselves.

5. Conclusion

With the aims beforehand, this study was conducted to identify problems concerning English pronunciation encountered by non-English majors at UTH. Through qualitative and quantitative data, the study shows that non-English majors at UTH encounter various pronunciation problems almost due to their lack of practice and exposure to English pronunciation, their poor knowledge and performance of essential elements of English pronunciation (namely individual sounds, syllables, stress and intonation.), the interference of their mother tongue, and even their perceptions towards the importance of pronunciation in their language learning. These problems can be two significant groups:

- 1) segmental problems, including individual sounds, consonant clusters, and
- 2) suprasegmental problems, including stress, intonation and connected speech.

The study resulted in strategies and techniques that may benefit both the lecturers and the students in teaching and learning English pronunciation at UTH, particularly in the Vietnamese context in general. The study also shows that audiovisual aids and the suggested teaching methods, which employ contrastive phonetical contexts, can generally help improve the performance of English pronunciation of students, particularly at UT-STC and in Vietnam. It should be noted that teaching pronunciation is very important not only in helping students improve their production of spoken English

but also in helping them improve their listening comprehension, responding to the needs of both students and teachers alike.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Lê Thanh Tu is currently a lecturer of English at HCMC University of Transport. He earned an M.A. in TESOL from USSH, Ho Chi Minh City and has been pursuing a doctorage degree in TESOL at Tra Vinh University in Viet Nam. His research interests include EFL and ELF teaching methodologies.

Tran Thanh Du, a PhD in Contrasive Linguistics, serves as a lecturer and also head of the Institute of Foreign Languages at Thu Dau Mot University in Binh Duong province, Vietnam. His research interests include English language teaching methodology and linguistics studies.

References

- Avery, P., & Ehrlich, S. (1992). *Teaching American English pronunciation*. Oxford University Press, New York. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Teaching_American_English_Pronunciation.html?id=Fu-dBgAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y
- British Council (n.d.). *Sentence stress*. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/sentence-stress>
- Brown, G. (1990). *Listening to spoken English* (2nd edition). London, New York: Longman. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Listening_to_Spoken_English.html?id=gFZ5AAAAIAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Sullivan A., & Buchanan, C. D. (1963). *A programmed introduction to linguistics: Phonetics and phonemics*. Boston: Heath. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/A_Programed_Introduction_to_Linguistics.html?id=1wFZAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Cambridge Online Dictionary (n.d.). *Intonation*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/intonation>
- Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M., & Goodwin, J. M. (1996). *Teaching pronunciation - A reference for teachers of English to speakers of other languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Teaching_Pronunciation.html?id=twC-H4a8VcYC&redir_esc=y
- Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M., & Goodwin, J. M. (2010). *Teaching pronunciation: A coursebook and reference guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved

- from <https://www.cambridge.org/pw/cambridgeenglish/teacher-development/teaching-pronunciation-2nd-edition>
- Chomsky, N. (1972). *Aspects of the theory of syntax* (8th edition.). Cambridge: The M. I. T Press. Retrieved from <http://www.colinphillips.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/chomsky1965-ch1.pdf>
- Dang, T. K. A., Nguyen, H. T. M., & Le, T. T. T. (2013). The impacts of globalisation on EFL teacher education through English as a medium of instruction: An example from Vietnam. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 14(1), 52-72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2013.780321>
- Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (2015). *Pronunciation fundamentals: Evidence-based perspectives for L2 teaching and research* (Vol. 42). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. Retrieved from <https://benjamins.com/catalog/llt.42>
- Doff, A. (1988). *Teaching English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Teach_English_Teacher_s_Workbook.html?id=c5uzNNHYGSsC&redir_esc=y
- Finch, G. (2000). *Linguistics terms and concepts*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-1-349-27748-3>
- Finegan, E. (1994). *Language - Its structure and use* (2nd edition). Harcourt Brace & Company. Retrieved from <https://ces.wu.ac.th/news/03/n25966.pdf>
- Foote, J. A., & Trofimovich, P. (2018). Second language pronunciation learning: An overview of theoretical perspectives. In O. Kang, R. I. Thomson, & J. Murphy (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary English Pronunciation* (pp. 75-90). London and New York: Routledge. Retrieved from <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Contemporary-English-Pronunciation/Kang-Thomson-Murphy/p/book/9781032096148>
- Fromkin, V., & Rodman, R. (1993). *An introduction to language fifth edition*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/An_Introduction_to_Language.html?id=5JPgUk86nJsC&redir_esc=y
- Gilbert, J.B. (1993). *Clear speech: Pronunciation and listening comprehension in North American English* (2nd edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/us/cambridgeenglish/catalog/english-academic-purposes/clear-speech-4th-edition/components>
- Ha, X. V., & Murray, J. (2021). The impact of a professional development program on EFL teachers' beliefs about corrective feedback. *System*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102405>
- Harding, G. (2019). *English consonant clusters practice - Record and listen*. <https://www.speechactive.com/english-pronunciation-consonant-clusters>.
- Jones, T. (2018). Pronunciation with other areas of language. In O. Kang, R. I. Thomson & J. Murphy, L., *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary English Pronunciation* (pp.

- 370-384). London and New York: Routledge. Retrieved from <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Contemporary-English-Pronunciation/Kang-Thomson-Murphy/p/book/9781032096148>
- Kelly, G. (2000). *How to teach pronunciation*. Pearson Education Limited. Retrieved from <https://andrianilina.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/how-to-teach-pronunciation-kelly-gerald.pdf>
- Nilsen, D. L. F., & Nilsen, A. P. (1973). *Pronunciation contrasts in English*. New York: Regents Publishing Company, Inc. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/36805836_Pronunciation_Contrasts_in_English
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <https://www.novaconcurso.com.br/blog/pdf/richards-jack-c.-&-rodgers.pdf>
- Richards, J. C., Platt, J., & Platt, H. (1992). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. London: Longman. Retrieved from http://www.saint-david.net/uploads/1/0/4/3/10434103/linguistic_term_dictionary.pdf
- Roach, P. (2009). *English phonetics and phonology: A practical course* (4th edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from https://assets.cambridge.org/9780521717403/frontmatter/9780521717403_frontmatter.pdf
- Thomson, R. I., & Derwing, T. M. (2014). The effectiveness of L2 pronunciation instruction: A narrative review. *Applied Linguistics*, 36(3), 326-344. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amu076>

Creative Commons licensing terms

Authors will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions, and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of English Language Teaching shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).