



## INVESTIGATING PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES AND PREFERENCE FOR PRONUNCIATION INSTRUCTION

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### **Abstract:**

Pronunciation can take an important role in communication as unintelligible sounds can make listeners unable to understand the intended meaning of the speaker, so obtaining an intelligible accent or pronunciation is crucial. With this importance, the current study attempted to investigate what can cause learners difficulties when learning pronunciation. Then, it also attempted to discover learners' ideas on how they would like pronunciation to be taught. In order to have the data for the investigation, the study applied the quantitative method by using a five-point Likert scale to measure the students' degree of agreement in these two mentioned domains of investigation. A group of 40 first-year Vietnamese EFL students were employed. They are studying English as a foreign language and their major is English education. The first result showed that the students agreed learning pronunciation is difficult and they did not agree with only two items displayed in this set of questions. The second result uncovered that the students strongly agreed with the ideas exhibited in the questionnaire on how pronunciation should be instructed. These results are used as recommendations for learning pronunciation and some limitations of the study were also included.

**Keywords:** motivation, motivational activities, communicative competence, EFL intermediate students, EFL teachers

### **1. Introduction**

Pronunciation plays an integral role in helping language users in their communication. This topic can be widely discussed in the field of learning and teaching languages as foreign languages. According to [Fraser \(2000\)](#), clear pronunciation can produce intelligible speech albeit with some errors while weak pronunciation usually leads to unintelligible speech despite being proficient at other skills. This can be easy to understand that first and foremost people can communicate at an early age using either

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verbal or non-verbal although they have not yet been literate. This way of communication is innate to human beings and this has become clearer in the case of children learning their first language or mother tongue. However, in the context of learning the first language, learners can be exposed to many language contexts such as in class, in the community and in the family while it is not easy for foreign language learners to practice such language outside the language classroom. Brown (2007) said, *“foreign language contexts are those in which students do not have ready-made contexts for communication beyond their classroom”* (p. 134). Because of this difficulty, the authors would like to set objectives for the study. The first one is to investigate what pronunciation difficulties first-year Vietnamese EFL students have when they are studying pronunciation in their English bachelor program at Tra Vinh University. The second one is to explore these students’ preference for how English pronunciation is taught by their English pronunciation teachers. In hope of attaining these two objectives, the study employs the two research questions. This study hopes to find what current English pronunciation difficulties they have, and from there the study hopes to find more feasible solutions to solve pronunciation challenges that Vietnamese EFL students currently meet. The result continues to shed light on pronunciation instruction to guarantee mutual understanding.

- 1) What English pronunciation difficulties do first-year Vietnamese EFL students have?
- 2) How do they like their English teacher teaching them pronunciation?

## 2. Literature review

According to Cook (1996, cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016), pronunciation is the production of English sounds. Learning to repeat sounds and correct them if they are not pronounced correctly. As Richard and Schmidt (2013) put it, pronunciation shows speakers how to pronounce certain sounds. In addition, Otlowski (1998) said pronunciation is a way of uttering a word in an acceptable manner, ensuring intelligible speech. Porter & Garvin (1989, cited in Khau et al., 2022) defined *“pronunciation as the expression that a learner showed his or her image to seek to change someone’s pronunciation – whether of the first or second language is to temper with their self-image, and hence unethical – morally wrong”* (p.7). Based on such definitions, pronunciation targets intelligible utterances which can be understood by the conversers.

First, the author would like to go through many of the related studies on finding English pronunciation difficulties in EFL contexts.

Aulia (2018) explored what might affect a group of Banjarese-speaking students in learning English pronunciation. This investigation did not go in-depth to investigate how the learners pronounced individual sounds, but they found factors influencing how these learners pronounce English words. They used a questionnaire and a semi-interview to collect the data. It uncovered that the first language of these learners greatly influenced the way they pronounced English words. Some other factors like lack of English pronunciation knowledge and motivation had a negative impact on these learners. In

Vietnamese, people do not pronounce final sounds such as /t/ /p/, and /k/, which Vietnamese learners have to practice pronouncing these sounds when learning English.

Sahatsathatsana (2017) investigated pronunciation difficulties faced by 12 university students who used English for international communication and found that the phonemes [θ] and [ð] were the most pronounced sounds in English for Thai learners. Besides, phonetic ability, native language, prior English pronunciation learning, instruction, and motivation all contributed to making Thai learners hard to acquire these sounds, and it was hard for them to tackle the problems. This can be also true in the context of Vietnamese learners of English as many English sounds do not appear in Vietnamese.

To find what pronunciation Sudanese learners of English had when learning pronunciation, Ahmed (2017) employed a questionnaire and test to test these students' pronunciation ability. It disclosed that these students had problems with word stress and intonation (albeit in this current study not attempting to investigate a supra-segmental aspect of pronunciation). Again, the mother tongue of the language learners had a negative influence on English pronunciation learning as in Aulia (2018).

Shak et al. (2016) investigated a group of low oral proficiency Malaysian students to see what pronunciation difficulties they had. They applied the qualitative methodology using the form of reading aloud voice which was recorded. It revealed that the students had problems pronouncing vowels (pure short vowels, pure long vowels and diphthongs), consonants (plosives, fricatives and affricates), silent letters, and the '-ed' form.

Barros (2003) investigated what individual sounds that Arabic speakers of English considered difficult to learn. They interviewed the learners in English to see how these learners pronounced English words while answering the interview questions. Then, they also had the participants take part in sentence reading and minimal pair reading to see how these learners pronounce these intended sounds. It revealed that the learners mispronounced the phonemes /t/, /d/, /v/, /dʒ/, /ð/, /ŋ/, and /p/. Many Vietnamese speakers of English may also encounter many of these sounds. For instance, the northern say /l/ for /r/ and the southern say /g/ for /r/.

Since learning pronunciation can be challenging, this paper would also like to review the way teachers instruct pronunciation.

Pourhossein Gilakjani (2016) reviewed the literature on pronunciation instruction. The author emphasized the indispensability of teaching pronunciation and the role of pronunciation English teachers. The author emphasized real oral communication, assembling a native-like way of pronunciation (such as pronouncing syllables, stress patterns, and rhythm). Accurate pronunciation should be prioritized instead of encouraging learners to speak fast but inaccurately. Learners should be then exposed to accent varieties like British accents, American accents and others. Finally, learners should be always motivated by using constructive and encouraging feedback.

Thomson and Derwing (2014) had a review on how pronunciation was taught, and they found many interesting methods to help ameliorate L2 pronunciation. One of the

methods was to build the learners' confidence in interacting with other L2 accented individuals. Next, the learners would benefit from informed instruction, which can be either of much help in shaping productions or creating the willingness to participate in the communication. Moreover, language teachers should individualize instruction, assigning work to students to meet each individual needs. Thus, skilled instructors need to determine the pronunciation needs to satisfy these groups.

Hişmanoğlu (2006) suggested pronunciation should be cooperated in teaching language skills. The author also added that when teaching pronunciation, the language teacher needs to bring other aspects into consideration. Those aspects are namely psychology, neuro-linguistics, sociology, semiotics and computer technology, age, target language exposure, aptitude, the student's attitude and motivation, the influence of the native language, amount and type of prior pronunciation instruction, stresses, and nonverbal aspects of communication.

Dauer (2005) was concerned about English as a lingua franca, something to do with the standard language/accent. It focused on segmentals (consonants and vowels) and it did not emphasize supra-segmental aspects (rhythms, word stress, and intonation). A matter of unintelligibility should be brought into the discussion as it is hard to attain the standard pronunciation in EFL contexts like in Vietnam and Thailand.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research design**

The study used the quantitative method to collect the data for investigation. The questionnaire with two major domains was employed. The first domain asked the participants about their difficulties in learning English pronunciation. The second domain elicited the participants to give their responses to their preference for ways of learning English pronunciation from their English pronunciation teachers. The study lent support from the statistical analytical software SPSS (Social Package for the Social Sciences) to analyze the data.

#### **3.2. Participants**

The participants were 40 first-year Vietnamese EFL students who are matriculating in a four-year English bachelor program at Tra Vinh University. Their age ranges from 18 to 19. Thirty of them are females and 10 are males. They had completed 3 years of English education in primary school, 4 years of English education in secondary school, and 3 years of English education in high school. All these programs treat English as a foreign language. As set by the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, the students who graduate from high school are expected to reach English B1 level complying with CEFR (Common European Framework for Reference). With such English language background, these students were considered the appropriate participants for the study.

### 3.3. Instrument

In order to have the data for the study, a questionnaire consisting of two major domains was applied. The questionnaire comprised 20 questions. The first domain (10 items) attempted to elicit the students' responses to pronunciation difficulties they cope with when learning English pronunciation. The second domain (10 items) asked the students about how they preferred their English teachers teach them pronunciation. To make the data reliable and easy for interpretation, the author used a five-point Likert scale to measure their responses (1 for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for neutral, 4 for agree, and 5 for strongly agree).

### 3.4. Procedures

The author, after concerning the literature on EFL students' difficulties or challenges in learning English pronunciation and his own English learning and teaching English pronunciation, began to script the questions which were then given to the other two colleagues for proofreading. Next, the questions were adjusted and improved. Then, the author had the participants who were in his English class survey the questionnaire. They were told about the purpose of the survey and were seated comfortably in the room. They were given 15 minutes to complete the survey. The author also explained some items in the questionnaire in Vietnamese when necessary. After time was up, 40 copies of the questionnaire were collected and the author said "thank you" to the participants.

### 3.5. Data processing

The author devised the SPSS to analyze the responses given by the participants. First, the author calculated the questionnaire reliability for further analysis of individual responses in the two domains: one domain for difficulties that the Vietnamese EFL students encounter and one domain for their ideas on the teacher's way of teaching pronunciation. Finally, the results of individual responses to the two domains were discussed.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Results

**Research question 1:** What English pronunciation difficulties do first-year Vietnamese EFL students have?

The reliability of the first questionnaire of the ten items about pronunciation difficulties is illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** The reliability of the questionnaire about pronunciation difficulties

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.817	10

The Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire reached .817, which is reliable enough for use and for further analysis.

**Table 2:** Overall mean score of the ten items about the students' pronunciation difficulties

	Mean	Min.	Max.	Range	Max./ Min.	Variance	N of Items
Item Means	3.559	2.000	4.125	2.125	2.063	.388	10

As can be seen in Table 2, the mean score of 3.559 showed that the students agreed with the difficulties that they encounter when they learn English pronunciation.

**Table 3:** Descriptive analysis of the first-year Vietnamese EFL students' pronunciation difficulties

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
1) When learning English pronunciation, I think the word stress is difficult.	40	1.00	5.00	3.9500	1.03651
2) When learning English pronunciation, I think sentence stress is difficult.	40	1.00	5.00	3.7500	.98058
3) When learning English pronunciation, I think intonation (e.g. rising and falling intonation) is difficult.	40	1.00	5.00	3.5750	.98417
4) When learning English pronunciation, I think it is hard to pronounce consonant sounds.	40	1.00	5.00	3.9500	1.06096
5) When learning English pronunciation, I think it is hard to pronounce vowel sounds.	40	1.00	5.00	3.6500	1.09895
6) When learning English pronunciation, I think it is hard to link sounds together.	40	1.00	5.00	3.7250	1.10911
7) When learning English pronunciation, I think it is hard to recognize the word that the speaker is saying due to an accent (e.g. British accent, American accent and other accents).	40	2.00	5.00	3.7750	.91952
8) When learning English pronunciation, I think it is hard to remember how to read English international phonetic transcription.	40	1.00	5.00	4.1000	.98189
9) I don't have the aptitude to learn English pronunciation.	40	1.00	5.00	2.7000	2.7000
10) I think I cannot learn English pronunciation.	40	1.00	5.00	2.0500	1.08486
Valid N (listwise)	40				

As can be seen in Table 3, two statements did not receive high agreement from the students. They belong to Item 10 (M=2.0500, SD=1.08486) and Item 9 (M= 2.7000, SD=2.7000). Only one item, Item 8 "When learning English pronunciation, I think it is hard to remember how to read English international phonetic transcription" obtained a mean score of 4.1000, and a standard deviation of .98189, showing that the students were quite strong support with this statement. The rest reached the mean scores below 4.00, but the mean scores fell within the range of 3.5750 and 3.9500, meaning they all agreed with such statements.

**Research question 2:** How do they like their English teacher to teach them pronunciation?

The reliability of the second questionnaire of the ten items about the students' ideas on how pronunciation should be taught is illustrated in Table 4 below.

**Table 4:** The reliability of the questionnaire about how pronunciation should be taught

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.851	10

The Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire reached .851, which is reliable enough for use and for further analysis.

**Table 5:** Overall mean score of the ten items about the students' ideas on how pronunciation is taught

	Mean	Min.	Max.	Range	Max./ Min.	Variance	N of Items
Item Means	4.333	3.900	4.550	.650	1.167	.055	10

As can be seen in Table 5, the mean score of 4.333 showed that the students strongly agree with the ideas on how pronunciation is taught by their pronunciation teachers.

**Table 6:** Descriptive analysis of the Vietnamese EFL students' ideas on how pronunciation is taught

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
1) I like my teacher to teach me how to distinguish Vietnamese sounds from English sounds.	40	1.00	5.00	3.9000	.95542
2) I like my teacher to teach me more sounds that are much different from Vietnamese sounds.	40	2.00	5.00	4.1000	.77790
3) I like my teacher to teach me English international phonetic transcription.	40	3.00	5.00	4.5250	.59861
4) I like my teacher to give us more time to practice English sounds in class.	40	3.00	5.00	4.4750	.64001
5) I like my teacher to give us more exercises to practice English sounds outside the classroom.	40	2.00	5.00	4.0750	.85896
6) I like my teacher to review English sounds in every class meeting.	40	2.00	5.00	4.4000	.77790
7) I like my teacher to have us play pronunciation games in class.	40	2.00	5.00	4.2500	.95407
8) I like my teacher to show us his or her strategies to learn pronunciation.	40	3.00	5.00	4.5500	.59700
9) I like my teacher to correct my pronunciation if it is not correct.	40	2.00	5.00	4.5250	.71567
10) I like my teacher to send us useful websites to practice English pronunciation.	40	3.00	5.00	4.5250	.64001
Valid N (listwise)	40				

As depicted in Table 6, only one item “I like my teacher to teach me how to distinguish Vietnamese sounds from English sounds” reached the mean score below 4.00, but it was still high as the mean score was 3.9000 with its standard deviation of .95542. The rest were very high, meaning the students were in strong support of the ideas displayed in the questionnaire, such as Item 3 (M= 4.5250), Item 4 (M=4.4750), Item 6 (M=4.4000), Item 8 (M=4.5500), Item 9 (M=4.5250), and Item 10 (M=4.5250).

## 4.2. Discussion

### 4.2.1. The first research question

What English pronunciation difficulties do first-year Vietnamese EFL students have? Generally, the students agreed with the statements in the questionnaire which asked the students about the students’ difficulties when they learn English pronunciation. The only item that reached the greatest mean score belongs to Item 8 “When learning English pronunciation, I think it is hard to remember how to read English international phonetic transcription”, with a mean score of 4.1000. The two items that obtained the second highest mean score in this set of the questionnaire are “When learning English pronunciation, I think word stress is difficult” and “When learning English pronunciation, I think it is hard to pronounce consonant sounds”, which equally attained the mean score of 3.9500. It suggests that many of them do not know international phonetic transcription well or they cannot remember the phonetic symbols representing the English sounds. Moreover, word stress and consonant sounds give them a hard time learning and memorize the stress of multi-syllable words and many of the English consonant sounds. That is true when the Vietnamese do not ask its speakers to pronounce final sounds and to stress a syllable in a word. As mentioned earlier, Sahatsathatsana (2017) found some consonant sounds difficult for Thai speakers of English. They are the sounds [θ] and [ð]. This is also true in the context of Vietnamese speakers who are not familiar with such sounds which do not exist in Vietnamese and they are really hard to pronounce. Some of the other sounds found in Barros (2003) can also make Vietnamese speakers of English much more difficult to pronounce such as /t/, /v/, /dʒ/, /ŋ/, and /p/. The northern Vietnamese speakers often misspell /t/ as /n/ as in ‘lôi’ and vice versa. Then, the southern Vietnamese speakers often misspell /r/ as /g/ as in ‘rô’ and ‘ruôt’. For this aspect, the students’ mother tongue greatly affects the EFL speakers of English as mentioned in Aulia (2018), Ahmed (2017), and Hişmanoğlu (2006).

The rest of the items had the mean scores of below 3.9500, but they fell in the range between 3.5750 and 3.7750, which were seen to also support the students’ agreement of such items (Item 2: M=3.7500, Item 3: M= 3.5750, Item 5: M=3.6500, Item 6: M= 3.7250, Item 7: M= 3.7750). In this cluster, stress, intonation, vowel sounds and the ability to recognize words through accents were found to be difficult. This is in line with Dauer (2005), Gilakjani (2016), and Aulia (2018).

Surprisingly, the students tend not to agree with the two items “9: I don’t have the aptitude to learn English pronunciation” with M=2.7000, and “10: I think I cannot learn English pronunciation” with M=2.0500, inclined to the disagreement scale. They thought



they have the aptitude to learn English pronunciation and they did not think they could not learn English pronunciation. Therefore, these two items can be removed from the list of pronunciation difficulties.

#### **4.2.2. The second research question**

How do they like their English teacher to teach them pronunciation? The overall mean score of this set of questions about how the Vietnamese EFL students like their teacher to teach them pronunciation is higher than that of the set of questions about their pronunciation difficulties. Only Item "I like my teacher to teach me how to distinguish Vietnamese sounds from English sounds" received a mean score of below 4.00, but the mean score 3.9000, SD= .95542 is still high, suggesting that the students agreed with this way of teaching. The students all agreed that the pronunciation teacher should teach them by helping them to recognize the English sounds that are very much different from those in Vietnamese. Moreover, they need their teacher to teach them English international phonetic transcription with M=4.5250, which had been mentioned in the domain of pronunciation difficulties. Furthermore, they need their pronunciation teacher to allow them more time to practice English sounds in class with M=4.4750 and condition them to practice English sounds outside the classroom with M=4.0750. Pourhossein Gilakjani (2016) had reminded the pronunciation teachers of practice of intonation patterns, stress and accent diversity. This is true in everyday life when speakers of different regions and dialects can make outsiders misunderstand the meaning through different accents, stress and intonations. In addition, reviewing English sounds in every class meeting is also favored by these students, which can be a good one to help students retain what they have learnt previously. Playing pronunciation games in class with M= 4.2500 is also meaningful. As known, careful preparation of pronunciation games, I mean, focusing on the target sounds, stress, or intonation, can be very helpful and fun. Any forms of practice can be helpful as mentioned by Thomson and Derwing (2014), who needed dedicated teachers who can assign sufficient assignments to adjust to different students' needs. More interestingly, the students are aware of strategies to learn pronunciation with M= 4.5500. They know that strategies can help them tackle the pronunciation problem. It can be noteworthy that these students are not afraid of being corrected. This idea is aligned with Cook (1996), who considered that pronunciation is a system of sounds and mispronunciation needs correcting. They also gave their strong agreement to this statement with M=4.5250. Finally, they realize that it is useful to have websites to practice English pronunciation with M= 4.5250. Among the suggestions by previous authors, Hişmanoğlu (2006) suggested pronunciation teachers should consider many aspects to bring into the classroom. The author mentioned many factors that can help affect pronunciation such as psychology, neuro-linguistics, sociology, semiotics, computer technology, age, L2 language exposure, aptitude (but this is not agreed upon by the students in this current study), the student's attitude and motivation, the influence of the native language (that is true to many findings), amount and type of prior pronunciation instruction, stresses, and nonverbal aspects of communication. The last

point to mention here is to create the image of English. The students need to see English as a lingua franca as what Dauer (2005) had mentioned because doing this will help bring students motivation to learn.

## **5. Conclusion**

The current study attempted to reach two objectives. The first objective is to find out what pronunciation difficulties a group of Vietnamese EFL students have when they learn English pronunciation. Then, the second objective of the study is to discover what pronunciation instruction this group of students prefer in their pronunciation class. The survey used a five-point Likert scale to collect the data from 40 first-year students who choose English as their major at a university. The result showed that the students agreed with the difficulties that they encountered in the questionnaire. Those difficulties are word stress, sentence stress, intonation, vowel and consonant English sounds, linking sounds, recognition of words through sounds/accents, and memorizing English international phonetic transcription. Then, the students strongly agreed with the ideas of teaching pronunciation displayed in the questionnaire. They are distinguishing sounds in both English and Vietnamese, different sounds in the two languages, teaching English international phonetic transcription, practicing more pronunciation in and outside the classroom, reviewing pronunciation, playing pronunciation games, teaching more pronunciation strategies, correcting mispronunciation and introducing valuable websites to practice pronunciation.

These results have brought invaluable information to both EFL learners of English and EFL teachers. However, the study has some limitations. It should have investigated more specific English sounds which should have been recorded for further qualitative analysis. Then, the study should have more samples of different groups of Vietnamese students who are studying English as a foreign language in different enrollment years. Different experiences and background of exposing to English pronunciation can propose different ideas on pronunciation difficulties and ways of teaching pronunciation. Finally, the study should have surveyed the EFL teachers, too as this group can give the study more ideas on how pronunciation to be taught and tackled.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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