

APPROACHES TO TEACHING LISTENING AND SPEAKING IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE WITH A FOCUS ON ERROR PRONUNCIATION CORRECTION

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ABSTRACT

This action research report investigates the effectiveness of various teaching approaches to improve listening and speaking skills in non-major English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at Dong Nai University. Pronunciation accuracy plays a crucial role in effective oral communication, particularly in second language acquisition. The study specifically addresses challenges related to pronunciation errors, including the differences in English phonetic sounds, and explores strategies for error correction within structured lesson plans. Over several action research cycles, the research incorporates a range of instructional techniques—such as explicit correction, focused listening activities, peer feedback, and interactive speaking exercises—aimed at enhancing both accuracy and fluency. Data were collected through classroom observations, audio recordings, and assessments to measure improvements in pronunciation and overall speaking ability. The findings highlight that targeted error correction, integrated within listening and speaking lessons, significantly boosts students' pronunciation accuracy while fostering greater fluency. However, the study also identifies several challenges, including students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom and their difficulty in distinguishing between similar phonetic sounds. The report concludes with recommendations for language instructors to adopt adaptable and reflective teaching methods that integrate error correction into dynamic lesson plans, addressing the specific pronunciation challenges faced by non-major students and improving their overall listening and speaking proficiency.

Keywords: *action research, approaches, listening and speaking, lesson plans, accuracy, fluency, non-major students, differences of phonetic sounds, pronunciation error correction*

INTRODUCTION

I have been teaching English for ten years and this year I am in charge of teaching non-English major students at Dong Nai University, Dong Nai Province, Vietnam. My students come from different parts of the country and most of them are from the countryside or mountainous areas, so they also speak their native language with a variety of regional accents. They are students of fine arts, mathematics, physics, physical education etc., who study general English as part of the curriculum. This means that they learn English to meet the requirements for graduation.

The English course covers four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, its particular emphasis is on listening and speaking. The course book I use is *Life* by John Hughes, Helen Stephenson, Paul Dummett-Cengage. Though this book has a pronunciation component, I still feel the need to design or adopt some pronunciation activities to incorporate into my teaching. My students have encountered lots of pronunciation difficulties that are often caused by the transfer of their mother tongue to English. Here are the common ones that I have identified:

- Difficulty in pronouncing vowel sounds that do not exist in Vietnamese: Students tend to substitute the sound /e/ as in 'bed' for English /æ/, so 'bad' may sound like 'bed'.
- Students find it quite hard to distinguish between long and short vowels in English. A student might want to say, "The lady beat the door.", but instead actually says, "The lady bit the door." This type of mispronunciation would lead to misunderstanding, in some situations, it might even be a social disaster.

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

Based on the students' errors that seem particularly widespread and persistent, I have developed two pronunciation lessons and tried out with my students. It should be suggested that they are pronunciation components that can be integrated into other lessons rather than complete lessons. The first activity focusses on the vowel sound /æ/ that is problematic for students. The second one deals with long and short vowels in English.

Lesson plan 1:

Time: 20 minutes

Objectives:

- To give students practice in pronouncing the vowel sound /æ/ that is problematic for them.
- To help students distinguish the sound /æ/ from /e/.

Preparation: a list of words containing the sound /æ/ and /e/. They are divided into three groups:

Group 1 (verbs)	Group 2 (adjectives)	Group 3 (nouns)
marry stand get	sad wet fat	hat head mat
said swam help	red black damp	men van band
met sat send	merry angry flat	stamp apple cattle
lend has beg	mad fresh bad	bag egg letter

Teaching procedures:

1. Presentation:

- Saying the sound /æ/ alone.
- Saying the sound in a word and then in a sentence for students to repeat.
- Explaining how to make the sound (using Vietnamese).
- Contrasting /æ/ with the sound /e/ by giving some minimal pairs e.g. sat/set; mat/met; land/lend; marry/merry etc.,
- Asking students to repeat the sounds in chorus and individually.

2. Practice:

- Writing the list of words containing these two sounds on the board.
- Dividing students into pairs.
- Asking students to make sentences as many as possible using the words on the board or their own words. For instance, "Betty met a fat man".
- Asking students from each pair to say one of their sentences, paying attention to the pronunciation of the two vowels.

Description

This is how I did the first one in class. I began the activity by saying the sound /æ/ clearly on its own several times and asked students to repeat it. Then I said the sound in a word (e.g. 'hat', 'had', 'cat') and in a sentence (e.g. My Dad had a black hat) and had students repeat it. Next, I explained how to produce the sound. After that I contrasted the sound /æ/ with /e/ by giving some minimal pairs and asked students if they felt a difference in the jaw position for the two sounds and pointed out that /æ/ is more 'open' than /e/. Finally, I asked students to work in pairs, making their own sentences using the words written on the board or using their own words. While the students were working in pairs, I walked around and helped them with any difficulties.

In the end, I had my students read aloud their sentences, paying attention to the pronunciation of the sounds. I noticed that at first some students felt embarrassed to pull funny faces when practicing the vowel sound /æ/, but this soon passed and the students seemed to have fun and to get interested in making their own sentences. Some made some funny sentences such as "Betty is sad because she has a red head like an apple." "Dad gets angry because Pat often wets the bed on Saturday." or "Ten men in a band are standing in front of a bank and begging a fat man in a van for an egg and an apple."

Lesson plan 2

Time: 25 minutes

Objectives:

- To help students distinguish the two sounds / i : / and / ɪ /
- To give students listening and speaking practice

Preparation: audio-tapes, a cassette, handouts.

Teaching procedures:

1. Presentation:

- Saying the sound / i: / alone, using a rubber band to show the length of the vowel.
- Getting students to repeat the sound chorally then individually.
- Giving them some words containing the sound / i: / e.g. eat, we, see, pea, me, tree...
- Saying the sound / ɪ / alone.
- Saying some words containing the sound / ɪ / e.g. sit, pip, nip, hit, click...

2. Practice

- Asking students to listen to the teacher and say if the words are the same or different.

Activity 1: SAME or DIFFERENT

(Listen to the teacher and say if the words are the same or different)

Teacher’s note:

1. peace	piss	6. bid	bead	11. mill	meal	16. kick	kick
2. sit	seat	7. leap	lip	12. meet	meat	17. slip	sleep
3. sheep	sheep	8. week	weak	13. dip	dip	18. pill	peel
4. lick	leak	9. heat	hit	14. sill	seal	19. jean	gene
5. cheeks	chicks	10. fist	feast	15. bin	bin	20. dim	dim

- Getting feedback.
- Dividing the students into pairs.
- Giving each student a handout.

Activity 2:

Underline the words containing / i: /

Listen and practice this conversation between two doctors

A: *Have you been busy this evening?*

B: *Pretty busy. My first patient was Jim Beaton. He had twisted his knee. He slipped on a banana skin on the street. I think he just needs to rest his knee. He’s very fit.*

A: *My first patient was Mrs. Neale. She keeps being sick, and it’s just because she eats too much.*

B: *A lot of patients don’t really need treatments. They feel ill because they do silly things. We can give them pills to treat some illnesses, but they need to keep fit and eat sensibly.*

- Getting Ss to listen to the conversation.
- Asking students to repeat chorally and then do the exercise as required with a partner.
- Asking students to work in pairs practicing the conversation.
- Having some pairs to read the conversation to the whole class paying attention to the pronunciation of the two sounds / i: / and / ɪ /.
- Getting feedback.

Description

I started the lesson by drawing students' attention then using a rubber band to demonstrate the sound / i: /. I said the sound several times and pulled the rubber band at the same time. Then I said the sound in a word (e.g. 'we', 'meat') and in a sentence (e.g. we heat the meat easily.) and ask the students to repeat it. Next, I explained in Vietnamese how to produce the sound. After that I contrasted the sound / i: / with / ɪ / by giving some minimal pairs (e.g. read/rid; seat/ sit; reach/ rich). Then I said some minimal pairs and asked the students to say if the sounds were the same or different. Next, I gave the students worksheets and asked them to work in pairs to listen to the conversation then do the task as required. I walked around to help the students with pronouncing the words in the conversation and correcting the errors they made. Finally, I had the students practice the conversation in pairs then asked some pairs to read the conversation to the whole class. It seemed that all of the students were highly motivated to do the tasks. Some burst out laughing when they mispronounce a few words.

REFLECTION ON THE TWO PRONUNCIATION LESSONS

Pronunciation improvement aims at getting the learners to pronounce accurately enough to be easily and comfortably comprehensible to other speakers. One of the reasons for teaching pronunciation that Poedjosoedarmo, G. (2003) suggests is to improve intelligibility. Even if most language learners will only be using English to speak with other foreigners of the language, if each goes off in his own direction with pronunciation, communication is bound to break down. This is the reason why teachers have a responsibility to help students to communicate with a certain degree of linguistic accuracy. Although it is normally unnecessary to teach the sounds of English individually, in some cases, it is useful to focus on a particular sound which is causing difficulty.

Effective teaching of listening and speaking skills in English must address common pronunciation challenges, particularly those involving subtle phonetic differences such as the vowel sound /æ/. Learners whose first languages lack this sound often struggle to both recognize and produce it accurately, leading to confusion with similar vowels like /e/ or /a:/. These mispronunciations can impact both clarity and comprehension in communication. By incorporating focused listening activities that highlight minimal pairs and guided pronunciation practice, teachers can help students develop an ear for the distinct features of /æ/ and improve their spoken accuracy. Emphasizing the perception-production link, especially with challenging sounds, is essential for building learners' confidence and competence in real-world English communication.

According to Harmer, J (1998), teachers of English need to be sure that students can be understood when they speak and they need to be able to say what they want to say. This means that their pronunciation should be at least adequate for that purpose. The sound /æ/ does not exist in the Vietnamese language. This makes it very hard for the students to recognize this sound and even more difficult for them to pronounce it correctly. My lessons help students listen to the difficult sounds, recognize them, and try to produce them as correctly as possible. Through the second lesson, the students can see the difference between the sounds / i: / and / ɪ /. This helps them concentrate on pronouncing words clearly and correctly. Therefore, making teachers of English, students and others aware of the importance of accuracy in spoken language will help avoid misunderstandings in communication.

CONCLUSIONS

What I have learnt from “Teaching Listening and Speaking” workshop and from the two lessons above is that deliberate correction and training does improve pronunciation and if it is so it seems a pity to neglect. Sometimes, it is necessary for the teachers to give short sessions directing attention to and giving practice in aspects of pronunciation that are clearly problematic for them, as well as casual correction in the course of other activities. Often, I myself find my English fossilized. When I have tried out these pronunciation activities, I am surprised at their effectiveness with the students. They not only help me feel more confident when dealing with pronunciation in the classroom but make the students aware of the importance of accuracy in spoken language as well.

Error correction in English phonetics is essential for improving clarity and fluency in speech. By addressing common issues such as mispronunciations, incorrect stress patterns, and intonation errors, learners can enhance their pronunciation and communication skills. Phonetic awareness, combined with consistent practice, helps individuals overcome regional or individual speech habits that may impede understanding. Ultimately, focusing on phonetic accuracy not only boosts confidence but also facilitates more effective interaction in both professional and social contexts.

From the two pronunciation lessons, I believe that students would make progress when they are made aware of correct pronunciation of words in a second language. Moreover, they would understand the necessity of error correction.

Problems are unfortunately numerous and those have been identified in this paper are not exhaustive. However, it is important for me, a language teacher, to be aware of problems of students and find ways to help them. I would carefully observe my students’ pronunciation, identify the problems and decide which should be given high priorities in order to build lessons on. I am definitely sure that reducing errors and improving accuracy and fluency would increase students’ motivation and engagement in language learning.

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