

# Causes of Dental Sound Pronunciation Problems of University Students

Wa Thái Như Phương

*English Department, Tay Do University, Vietnam*

## ABSTRACT

*For many years now, there are a significant number of students making pronunciation mistakes, especially dental sounds. In many previous studies, researchers found the difficulty in pronouncing dental. Therefore, the aim of this study was to find out the reason why students had difficulty in pronouncing dental sounds. Twenty -five students from different majors of Nam Can Tho and Tay Do University were selected to participate in this study. An interview was used as an instrument for this survey. The results of the research revealed that the reasons given in the interview are caused by themselves. In general, the causes were from both objective and subjective causes, but subjective causes were mainly. However, they still tried to overcome these causes to improve and become more proficient in pronouncing dental sounds. From the findings of the study, some suggestions were given to help teachers and students in teaching and learning pronunciation of dental sounds.*

**Keyword:** *Dental sounds, Pronunciation problems, Causes of dental sound pronunciation problems*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is one of the important skills when learning a new foreign language. In English, to express problems effectively, we need a good voice and standard pronunciation. The better the pronunciation, the better the listener understands the problem. However, mispronunciation is a burning problem in the foreign language learning community, especially students. Pronouncing a new language other than native language is extremely difficult and fraught with obstacles. Besides, dental sounds are the sounds that cause the most difficulty with the requirement of the combination of lips, tongue, teeth and air flow in the body. Students often confuse dental sounds with other sounds, unclear pronunciation, sticking words in mouth and incorrect mouth shape. In order to overcome the unnecessary pronunciation errors, the researchers hope to find out the causes of the above problems to improve the situation in the student community. The purpose of this study was to investigate the reason why English non-majored students at Nam Can Tho and Tay Do universities had difficulty pronouncing dental sounds.

### Research question

This research was conducted in order to answer the following question:

What are the reasons why English non-majored students at Nam Can Tho and Tay Do universities had difficulty in pronouncing dental sounds?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Definition of dental sounds

Dental sounds are a type of sound that occurs very commonly in English and it is related to your pronunciation. The following are selected because they are typical in some senses:

Firstly, a dental consonant is a consonant articulated with the tongue against the upper teeth, such as /t/, /d/, /n/, and /l/ in some languages. Dentals are primarily distinguished from sounds in which contact is made with the tongue and the gum ridge.

Secondly, dental sounds involve the tongue tip (active articulator) making contact with the upper teeth to form a constriction. Examples of dental sounds in English are /θ/, /ð/. If a sound is produced where the tongue is between the upper and lower teeth, it is attributed the term 'interdental'. This definitions have reference at "Journal of the International Phonetic Association of Rogers, Derek (2004).

In this essay, we will investigate two sounds in section 2.3. is tip - dental sounds and labiodental sounds.

## 2.2 Types of dental sounds

Dental sounds has a lot of sounds like /t/, /d/, /n/, /l/, /θ/, /ð/, “v” and “f” in which there are 2 main types:

### *Labiodental sound*

According to Jay W Mark and MD (2021), author provided a definition about labiodental:

“Labiodental sound is a sound that requires the involvement of the teeth and lips, such as “v”, which involves the upper teeth and lower lip”.

Labiodental in pronunciation has two sounds included: “v” and “f”. Both of the sounds have different points compared to the Vietnamese phonetic alphabet, especially “f” is not in the Vietnamese alphabet.

### *Tips – dental sounds*

Tips - dental sounds include two sounds /θ/ and /ð/. They do not belong to the Vietnamese and they are completely foreign to Vietnamese people. Therefore, they were defined clearly as follows:

“Dental consonants occur when you block/constrict airflow by placing your slimy tongue against your upper teeth.”

## 2.3 Causes of pronunciation problem

### *The effects of mother language*

The effects of mother language are one of the topics of interest. In her thesis, Nguyen Thi To Loan (2021) also stated clearly about the influence of mother language. The thesis also mentions other research. Language transfer initiated by T. Odin (1989) in the work of the same name is understood as the influence of the knowledge that learners have previously acquired about their native language and culture or about another language, other than the target language affects the process by which learners receive and use pragmatic knowledge about the language being studied. According to this definition, negative transfer is understood as the inappropriate application of means, structures and rules in the mother tongue to the process of learning a foreign language, which makes the use of a foreign language that language deviates from the target norms. There have been many studies showing that the influence of the mother tongue is one of the causes of errors or negative displacement in the process of learning foreign languages. Many researchers on errors made by foreign language learners, such as Lado (1957), Fries (1965), Ellis (1985) also share this view. However, these studies almost exclusively focus on identifying mobility rather than specifically studying the factors affecting that transfer as well as learners' perceptions of these negative effects.

### *Confusion between sounds*

A common bad habit in pronunciation is confusing sounds. The confusion between the sound pair /θ/ and /t/, /d/ and /ð/, /f/ and /v/ is easy to misunderstand and miswrite. On the other hand, we usually swallow the final consonant. Leaving out the last sound or mispronouncing the last sound makes it difficult for listeners to understand and not accurately capture the content we want to convey. When pronouncing or speaking, we also need intonation to express meanings, attitudes, and intonations that can mislead the listener. Confusing sounds, omitting the last sound, wrong intonation is a bad thing that needs to be corrected.

### *Laziness in pronunciation*

There are many students who really want to learn English but they do not know where to start. They have tried to volunteer to study seriously but they are too lazy and no more after that. A new subject or a new foreign language always takes time to practice, learn and more often enough for pronunciation practice. Not to mention, English has many categories such as listening, reading, writing, vocabulary and the students' time is spent on it, but the pronunciation is too weak. We are not sure if the remaining categories, they practice or are still lazy. If you still don't spend time practicing, increase speed how long you are waiting? 5 years or 10 years or never.

### *Passivity in transcribe phonetically*

Mispronunciation is also affected by the passive way of viewing the phonetic transcription of words. The confusion between sounds is also caused by the above reason. When we say a new word, we often say it by reflex or thinking in our head that it is right or using pronunciation tools to say it out of habit. From there we learn to pronounce in a one-sided way that doesn't matter the pronunciation of words. The phonetic transcription of a new word is the most accurate document for pronouncing a word, and it's easy to find in an Oxford or Cambridge dictionaries.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Participants

In this study, the participants were twenty-five students from different majors in Nam Can Tho and Tay Do Universities. There were five freshmen of Electronics and Communication Technology, seventeen juniors of Pharmacy, three juniors of Bachelor of Business Administration and one junior of Banking and Financial Sector.

There were 16 males and 9 female participants in the research. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22. Besides, they all spoke Vietnamese as their first language and English as their foreign language. All of them were pre-intermediate level, they were considered at equal level.

### 3.2 Instrument

In this study, the instrument used was the interview. The reason why we used interviewing as a vital instrument was that interviewing has some advantages over some other types of surveys in that they are cheap, quick and efficient. That interview was particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences. The interviewer could pursue in detail information which the questionnaire could not respond to.

The interview included two main sections. The first section was about students' personal information such as age, class, university, gender, years of learning English and some general questions about their English proficiency. The second section of the interview included six questions. Twenty-five students were invited for indirect interviews via audio recording. The goal of the conducted interview was to collect data individually. The interview took place in twenty minutes in order to get more ideas about causes of mispronunciation of dental sounds by non-English majored.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 The effects of mother language

For the interview, the first interview question was about the effects of mother language: *"Have you ever thought that your poor pronunciation is the cause of the influence of your mother language?"* Out of the twenty-five interviewers, thirteen students agreed with the idea that English was difficult to pronounce due to the effects of their mother tongue, specifically Vietnamese. Besides, they explained why there was such a problem.

*"Mother tongue greatly affects pronunciation because the short tongue cannot pronounce properly."* (Female, 21, Business Administration)

*"My mother tongue affects my pronunciation. Because Vietnamese already has intonation on words, English has its own accent and intonation."* (Female, 20, Pharmacy)

However, two of them still thought that English could be improved and pronounced well if practiced hard, not because of the effects of their mother tongue.

*"I think not. Because pronunciation depends on the amount of time that you practice. If you practice a lot, you will pronounce correctly. Therefore it has nothing to do with the mother tongue."* (Female, 21, Business Administration)

### 4.2. Confusion between sounds

The confusion between sounds always caused difficulties for students. All twenty-five students interviewed said that they always confused the sounds /θ/ and /t/, /d/ and /ð/, /f/ and /v/. They wanted to fix it but it seems to take time.

*"Yes, of course. I was fighting the TH declaration, and from day to day I was practicing it."* (Male, 18, Information Technology)

*"Yes, I have. I confuse the sounds between /f/ and /v/."* (Female, 20, Banking and Financial Sector)

*"I am very confused and mistaken between sound pairs such as /θ / and /t/, /d/ and /ð/, /f/ and /v/. They are easy to misunderstand and wrong to write."* (Female, 21, Business Administration)

### 4.3 Laziness in pronunciation

Only one of the participants practiced almost every day, the other students didn't put too much effort on practicing.

*"I don't usually practice pronunciation. There are only occasional classes like 3 times a month."* (Female, 21, Business Administration)

We can see four out of twenty-five participants didn't put too much effort on practicing their pronunciations except classes at the university. This is one of the reasons why they had problems in pronunciation, especially dental sounds pronunciation.

### 4.4 Passivity in phonetic transcription

Most of the time participants used the dictionary only for looking up the meaning of the word they wanted to know and they found it difficult to read the word exactly by looking at the phonetic transcription in the dictionary.

*"Looking up the dictionary is very difficult to understand and the transcription in the dictionary makes it difficult for me to distinguish between the pronunciation of dental sounds and other sounds."* (Female, 21, Business Administration)

And some of the participants shared that they rarely used the dictionary for looking up words

*"Honestly, I rarely use a dictionary. I just rely on the context and guess what it means. However, the phonetic transcription in the dictionary confuses me sometimes and I choose not to use it. Instead, I listen to how other the native people pronounce it."* (Male, 18, Information Technology)

#### 4.5 The way to overcome the above reasons

All of the participants agreed that the only way to overcome the problems is practicing more

*"I look for videos on YouTube that help with the correct pronunciation of dental sounds. If I work hard, it will take about 2-3 months."* (Female, 20, Pharmacy)

*"I will try to learn and practice pronunciation, hopefully my English can be better in the future to be able to communicate with native speakers. I can't estimate how long it will take, but I'll try to make it as short as possible."* (Female, 21, Business Administration)

Even knowing that practice makes perfect but the difficulty in learning new things is not always easy as it seems to be, a participant shared that

*"I find it very difficult and sometimes make me depressed and want to give up."* (Female, 20, Banking and Financial)

As a temporary conclusion, besides hard practicing we need to have perseverance to climb up to the top.

## 5. CONCLUSION

After conducting this research by analyzing important information collected from students of different majors, the researcher finally figured out the students mispronouncing dental sounds due to various reasons including: the effects of the mother tongue, confusion between sounds, laziness in pronunciation, and passivity in phonetic transcription. Throughout the collected data, the researchers realized that the students were facing difficulties in pronunciation, especially dental sounds pronunciation. Therefore, as researchers we would like to submit some implications for teaching and learning for both teachers and sophomores English at Tay Do University. For teaching, teachers should encourage students to practice their pronunciations by giving them some minor examinations and making them speak English during the class. Thus, they could identify the causes that affected the pronunciations of students and then they could help the students correct the mistakes. For learning, students should dynamically practice their pronunciation because only practice could make their speaking skills more fluent and they would become more and more confident in their pronunciations. Besides, they should be fond of learning by learning more in their leisure time so that they could learn tips and then apply these for practicing pronunciation, due to the rise of the internet students could find all the study materials all over the internet. These suggestions would be particularly advantageous for students in their learning pronunciations process.

## 6. REFERENCES

- [1]. Emmanuel A. G. (2019). *"Pronunciation difficulties of English inter-dental sounds"*. The Supporting Methods of Pair Drills and Reinforcement. GRIN Verlag.
- [2]. Derek R. (2004). "Illustrations of the ipa". *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 34(1), 117 – 121. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100304001628>
- [3]. Jay W. M., MD (2021). *"Definition of labiodental sound"*. The Webster's New World™ Medical Dictionary.
- [4]. Nguyen Thi To Loan (2021). *"Research the effect of mother language on the articles of English first year students of Hung Vuong university of foreign language"*. Faculty of Foreign Languages of Hung Vuong University of Foreign Language.
- [5]. Rastislav M. (2017). "Pronunciation of English dental fricatives by Slovak university EFL students". *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 7(3), 15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v7n3p11>
- [6]. Rogers, Derek, d'Arcangeli & Luciana (2004), "Italian", *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 34 (1): 117–121, Doi:10.1017/S002510030400162