AN INVESTIGATION INTO FACTOR CAUSING DIFFICULTIES IN PRONOUNCING OF ENGLISH-MAJORED SOPHOMORES AT TAY DO UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is seen as the most important part of communication skills which contributes to the success of language learners in their studying and career as well as the success of the teaching process of teachers. Unfortunately, English-majored students, especially English-majored juniors usually face some difficulties in speaking English. Consequently, this research entitled "An investigation into the factors causing difficulties in pronouncing of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University" is conducted to figure out some common factors which are causing problems in speaking that these English-majored students have encountered. The participants of this research are 60 English-majored sophomores of two English classes 15A, and 15B at Tay Do University. The main research instruments which will be delivered to collect the data are questionnaires, interview papers, and observations. This is a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. Based on these difficulties, English learners can find suitable learning ways to improve their pronunciation skills. Besides, understanding students' learning difficulties may also enable teachers to help students develop effective learning strategies and ultimately improve their English pronunciation abilities. The results of this study may also be useful for those who are interested in this field.

Key words: speaking skill, difficulties, pronouncing, English majored sophomores, university

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

English is the Language of International Communication. Although English is not the most spoken language in the world, it is the official language in 53 countries and is spoken as a first language by around 400 million people worldwide. English gives access to more entertainment and more access to the Internet. We can get "*smarter*" by learning English. Research from a 2012 Swiss Study shows that learning a new language can make you more creative.

To be a good communicator in English, people need to develop their linguistic competence, including communication skills that are pronunciation. According to Wikipedia "*Pronunciation is how a word or a language is spoken. This may refer to generally agreed-upon sequences of sounds used in speaking a given word or language in a specific dialect (correct pronunciation) or simply the way a particular individual speaks a word or language*". When the students make the correct sounds, their English becomes easier to understand because there are more natural and fluent. Besides, it will help the students listen to English better, because they know how to identify and recognize the sounds that other people are making. Your confidence will grow, exponentially. They can grow their confidence when they can get their message across and can understand other English speakers clearly.

English has 19 vowel sounds and 25 consonant sounds (Fromkin V. et al, 2009). Many students speak languages with fewer vowels – a lot of modern languages (Spanish, Japanese, Arabic to name a few) have no more than 5 vowel sounds, for most learners, the 19 vowel sounds present an important area of study. All students need to pay attention to accurate consonant production: voicing and placement need to be mastered. Students have to use stress

to show meaning. If a learner of English is misunderstood, it is more often due to misplaced stress than incorrect pronunciation – for this reason, stress is perhaps the most important aspect of clear speech.

Sophomores usually have to face many problems when learning English pronunciation because pronunciation is not easy. Youfu Wei and Zalun Yhou (2002) stated that "*Pronunciation is difficult, so very few people to touch it*".

Although sophomores at Tay Do University have been studied Pronunciation 1 and 2 classes in the second semester of the first year and the first semester of the second year and were taught by the foreign teachers, Ms. Hazel and Mr. Duane. The documents that have been used for teaching is Pronunciation book 1 and 2 which are provided by the school. However, English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University still face difficulties in pronouncing. Many studies have been made to find out the difficulties. Based on these studies, there are three main reasons. First, students may have difficulty with English consonant clusters. Vietnamese has consonant clusters in the initial or final position so, students always make mistakes when they pronounce. Second, word stress is also a problem that is not easy for students to study pronunciation. Finally, vowels are one of the most common problems that most Vietnamese students have faced. For the above reasons, we decided to include a study on *"An investigation into the factors causing difficulties in pronouncing of English-majored sophomores at TDU"*.

1.2 Significance of The Research

Because those students were more appropriate respondents to have they're based on challenges mentioned regarding pronunciation, this study focuses on studying the difficulties in pronunciation of English-major sophomores at Tay Do University.

1.3 The Organization of Study
The research consists of 5 chapters:
> Chapter 1: Introduction.
> Chapter 2: Literature Review.
> Chapter 3: Research Aims, Research Questions, and Hypothesis.
> Chapter 4: Research Methodology
> Chapter 5: Expected Outcome

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of pronunciation

2.1.1 Definitions of pronunciation

The concepts of pronunciation have been discussed by numerous linguists in the field with different perspectives. It results in a considerable amount of definitions describing the term, some of which were mentioned below.

The English language is recognized as a second language, and it is used as a medium of instruction in school. As second language users, students have difficulties in using the language, especially in pronunciation. Pronunciation is the way a certain sound or sounds are produced and pronunciation stresses more the way sounds are perceived by the hearer.

Most people speak the dialect of standard English with an accent that belongs to the part of the country they come from or live in. Learners of British English commonly hear RP (Received Pronunciation), which is an accent often used on the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and other news media and in some course materials for language learners, but it is also common to hear a variety of regional accents of English from across the world. In Oxford Advanced Learner's English Dictionary (2010: 1175) *pronunciation is the pronunciation of a language or a specific word or sound. Cook (1996 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016) defined pronunciation as the production of English sounds*. Pronunciation is learned by repeating sounds and correcting them when produced inaccurately. When learners start learning pronunciation, they make new habits and overcome the difficulties resulting from the first language.

According to Yates (2002 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016), "*pronunciation is the production of sounds that are used for making meaning*". Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning. It includes attention to the particular sounds of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual sound, such as intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm (supra-segmental aspects), how the voice is

projected (voice quality) and, in its broadest definition, attention to gestures and expressions that are closely related to the way we speak a language. According to James (2010), *acceptable pronunciation can be understood based on the following basic levels. In level 1, what the speaker is saying is not understandable to people*. In level 2, what the speaker is saying can be understandable to people, but the speaker's pronunciation is not acceptable to listen to because he/she has a strange and heavy accent. In level 3, people understand the speaker and the speaker's English is acceptable to listen to.

To summarize, the definitions above show that pronunciation is an indispensable factor in communication. Definitions help learners with clarity and provide optimal solutions to improve their English proficiency effectively.

2.1.2 The importance of pronunciation

Pronunciation is vital to proper communication because the incorrect use of pronunciation inevitably leads to the message being misunderstood by the recipient. The proper use of English pronunciation inclines to highlight and add value to an individual speaking English. Consider the following: in a situation where a student's grammar and vocabulary are exceptionally good, he or she may be able to write good English. But, if that same student lacks fundamental knowledge of pronunciation despite having an excellent knowledge of grammar, etc. his or her communication in English will be severely impeded. He or she will be able to write in English, but will not be able to construct a meaningful sentence when speaking and thus fails at communicating a message.

A study carried out by Rajadurai (2001) on the attitude and concern for accurate English pronunciation among a group of Malaysian ESL teacher trainees showed that more than 80% of the trainees agreed that pronunciation is an important element in English communication.   Besides, pronunciation is also important for listening comprehension skills in English. The standard pronunciation that is, learners, know how words are pronounced. Therefore, it is very helpful for listening comprehension. According to Anil (2008) "*pronunciation reinforces listening you've recently learned through repeated exposure. Specifically, hearing someone say the word the first time after you learned its pronunciation can be very reassuring*". In short, no one can deny that pronunciation is very important in learning to communicate. So, now that we are all convinced of the importance of pronunciation, what steps can we take to make sure our pronunciation stays razor-sharp and crystal clear? Firstly, every time you encounter a new word, look it up in the dictionary, which will show you the correct pronunciation. Learn how to read the International Phonetic Alphabet used in dictionaries to represent speech sounds. Next, try to tune in to the language of native speakers to get used to their accents. This is especially important, as many English speakers do not pronounce the same words in the same way, often due to geographical differences, such as between British and American speakers. Listen to English songs, watch movies or pay attention while speaking to your native English-speaking friends. Finally, remember that with pronunciation, like all aspects of English communication, practice makes perfect. You can even practice in front of a mirror and pay special attention to the way your mouth moves when producing speech sounds.

In short, no one can deny that pronunciation is very important in learning to communicate. Because, the first step of communication is to pronounce correctly, which helps listeners to correctly understand the message being conveyed. Moreover, learners want to communicate like a native speaker, then pronunciation is an aspect that must be mastered. From the above points of view, the research will show that correct pronunciation brings many benefits and consequences of mispronouncing.

2.2 Difficulties in pronunciation

2.2.1 Problems with English Consonant Clusters

A consonant cluster is "*a sequence of two or more consonants*." (Richards, Platt, and Platt, 1992, p.79). Consonant clusters in English may occur in word-initial position as in "*draw*", in word-medial position as in "*instrument*" and word-final position as in "*garaged*". According to Roach (1990, p.68), "*when we have two or more consonants together we call them a consonant cluster." The number of consonants that go together is varied. "The largest initial consonant cluster in English contains three consonants*" as in "*strong*" (Kuiper and Allan, 1996, p.64). In contrast, there are no consonant clusters in modern Vietnamese. English has a "*limited number of permitted combinations of consonants in initial and final clusters.*" (Avery and Ehlich, 1995, p.54) Some of the following consonant clusters are taken from Avery and Ehrlich (1995, p.55) such as /-ʃl/, /-lʃ/, /-rʃ/, /-ltʃt/, /-rtʃt/, and /-ndʃd/. Vietnamese students share many of the same pronunciation errors that students from elsewhere do - consonant clusters, long and short vowel sounds, and swapping one consonant sound for another.

2.2.2 Problems with Word Stress

Word stress is not only an important key to understanding spoken English but also one of the most popular problems encountered by English learners. Native speakers of English use word stress naturally. Word stress is so natural for them that they don't even know they use it.

Ngo, a Vietnamese lecturer at Harvard University claimed that "*Vietnamese is a tonal language in which changes of the pitch level and/or contour signal changes in meaning*" (p. 7). He also mentioned that Vietnamese is *a syllable-timed language, and English is a stress-timed language* (p.7). In syllable-timed language, each syllable is given the same amount of time pronounced about the same length, but in stress-timed language, the stress syllables come at regular intervals. Consequently, Vietnamese learners have problems with the timing of stressed words. *Vietnamese speakers are not able to vocalize stress by the tone in English words due to syllabic tone* (Honey, p. 241). They articulate every individual syllable with its characteristic tonal pattern, and without a tonal pattern, listeners cannot recognize the differences between Vietnamese words. In addition, in compound words that consist of two or more syllabic units, each syllable keeps its characteristic tone. Whereas, the word stresses in English occur variously. The stress may appear in the first, the second, the third, or the fourth syllable of words. The word record may have the stress on the first (if it functions as a noun) or second syllable (if it functions as a verb).

Consequently, Vietnamese speakers of English meet difficulties with word stress.

2.2.3 Problems with Vowels

Firstly, I will be briefly describing some aspects that relate to the term vowel. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1996) offered two definitions of vowels. The first definition for vowels is "*the tools of poets*" as vowels allow poets to create assonance and rhythm. Thus, vowels help shape language musically and make it pleasing to the ear. For the second definition, these authors defined that, "*vowels are the core or peak of the syllable*" (p. 93). Secondly, I wish to provide some information about Vietnamese vowels. As Honey stated, "*the highly complex Vietnamese vowel system possesses eleven pure vowels and many more diphthongs and triphthongs*". As a Vietnamese native speaker, I understand that those pure vowels are as follows: /a/, /ă/, /â/, /o/, /ô/, /ơ/, /e/, /ê/, /u/, /ư/, and /i/. In general, most of the Vietnamese vowels are free of positions, which means that they can standalone. Some, however, cannot. People can usually recognize Vietnamese diphthongs and trip-thongs by spelling (p. 239).

So, according to Honey, "*there are some similarities between the two vowel systems*". The Vietnamese language often caries alternatives to the closest pure vowel in pronouncing the pure vowel in English, such as lo /lô/ for low and me/mê/ for may. People can only distinguish some pairs of Vietnamese diphthongs by the length of the constituent vowels, such as may /mai/ meaning to sew, and mai /ma-i/ meaning tomorrow (p. 240). As a result, by replacing and pronouncing English in that way, Vietnamese speakers face a large number of problems when speaking in English. Another important factor in the vowel section that causes problems for Vietnamese speakers is the confusion between the tense and lax vowel sounds in English. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) pointed out that, "*the distinction between tense and lax vowel pairs of English almost always creates problems*" (p. 96). Vietnamese learners of English cannot pronounce the two vowels of each pair correctly. These authors figured out that second language learners could pronounce "*neither the tense nor the lax vowel, but a vowel between the two. Failure to make these distinctions can lead to misunderstandings*" (p. 96). Avery and Ehrlich also offered an illustration for this problematic phenomenon, such as "*words like sleep, taste, and stewed. When Vietnamese speakers pronounce these words, English native speakers may hear slip, text, and stood, instead*" (p. 96). (Dung. N. T, 2014, "Some common pronunciation problems facing Vietnamese learners of English")

2.3 The previous studies

Many research has been carried out to determine the challenges with English language pronunciation that students have experienced.

The research paper entitles "Some common pronunciation problems facing Vietnamese learners of English" by Dung (2014) was written for his improvement in teaching English Pronunciation. As a teacher of the English language, he wishes to learn more about the aspects that influence language learners when they learn how to speak English. Therefore, he wants to explore some common difficulties that Vietnamese students encounter when they learn to pronounce the English sounds so that he can teach them effectively and help them communicate more effectively. The paper covers several frequent pronunciation difficulties that cause problems for Vietnamese learners of the English language. These difficulties include tense and lax vowels, consonant endings, stress, and tones. He

finds this paper a useful reference source for both teachers and students, who want to improve their pronunciation of English.

Another was based on the research paper of Luu Trong Tuan (2011). Vietnamese EFL learners' difficulties with English consonants. Studies in Literature and Language, 3 (2), 56-67. The research was conducted to examine the most problematic English consonants facing the students at Hung Vuong University. Data collated from the questionnaire survey reveals that the students have the most difficulty in pronouncing the English fricatives /ʃ/, /ʒ/ and the affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ among the English consonants surveyed. The students tend to substitute Vietnamese sounds for English sounds.

Through these studies, we could realize that English major students are facing some difficulties in pronouncing. Hence, the researchers find out the three common problems that English majored sophomores in Tay Do University usually encountered which are English consonant clusters, word stress, and vowels.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH AIMS – RESEARCH QUESTIONS –HYPOTHESIS

3.1. Research aims

This study aimed to find out some common errors in pronouncing English consonant clusters, word stress, and vowels of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University and the study also showed the causes of these errors so that the students could avoid making mistakes as well as find ways to improve their pronunciation.

3.2. Research questions

This study was undertaken to deal with the three following research questions:

1) *Do the English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University encounter problems in pronouncing English consonant clusters?*
2) *What are English-majored sophomores' problems in pronouncing word stress?*
3) *What are the causes of English-majored sophomores' errors when they pronounce the vowels?*

3.3. Hypothesis

According to most English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University, pronunciation is the most difficult skill. Although they have been learning pronunciation for 2 terms, they still have faced some difficulties in English pronunciation. Through the literature review and research questions, it is hypothesized that pronouncing abilities of the English-majored sophomores would be improved and developed.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design

This is a descriptive study. The elements to determine the reliability and validity of the research are the target population and the research instruments. Questionnaire will be use to collect quantitive data to investigate the participants' problems in learning pronunciation. Moreover, the interview will be use with selected participants to provide the qualitative data for further understanding of their ideas.

4.2 Research participants

The participants of this study will be about 70 students from the English majored course 15 at Tay Do University. In fact, they are selected randomly, including both males and females. Their English level is the immediate and they study in the different classes. In particular, all students have completed three modules in pronunciation at Tay Do University. The main material of majored English in speaking subject is the Interaction 1, teaching by foreign teachers. In addition, the participants practice some extensive topics give by their teachers in class

4.3 Instrument

In this study, the researcher investigates some problems in learning pronunciation of English majored sophomore. To answer the research questions and hypotheses as well as to obtain more insights about the results of students' consisting of a questionnaire and an interview.

4.3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire is administered to the participants at the beginning of the class because the participants are very comfortable at this time. The question consists of 25 items in order to survey the problems in learning pronunciation of English majored freshmen at Tay Do University. They are asked to rate each item by level of agreement. Such items are on the scale ranging from 1 to 5 corresponding strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), no idea (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). These items are divided into three categories as following table:

Items	Difficulties in learing pronounciation in English
Part 1: 1-5	The student's bachgronud in learing pronounciation
Part 2: 1-7	The student's ideas about their problems in consonant cluster
Part 2: 8-14	The student's ideas about their problems in word stress
Part 2: 15-20	The student's ideas about their problems in vowel

4.3.2 Interview

The paper interview is designed to get the specific information from the sophomores English-majored in TD university about pronounciation skills. It consists of 5 questions to ask about students' difficulties in learing pronounciation in English

CHAPTER V: EXPECTED OUTCOME

English majored sophomores at Tay Do university have face many problems when praticing it as well as have some common mistakes in learning pronounciation particularly problems: consonant clester, word stress and vowels

5.1 Consonant Cluster

A consonant cluster is a sequence of two or more consonants. Consonant clusters occur in English in word-initial position, word-medial position and word-final position. In contrast, there are no consonant clusters in modern Vietnamese. English has a limited number of permitted combinations of consonants in initial and final clusters. Through this study, the researcher expected that the students can overcome the difficulty of consonant clusters by recognize and understand it.

5.2 Problems with Word Stress

Word stress is an important key to understanding spoken English and one of the most popular problems encountered by English learners. Native speakers of English use word stress naturally; they don't even know they use it. Vietnamese speakers are not able to vocalize stress by the tone in English words due to syllabic tone. They articulate every individual syllable with its characteristic tonal pattern. The researcher hoped that by recognizing and understanding word stress, students would be able to overcome its difficulty.

5.3 Problems with Vowel

Vietnamese speakers often confuse the tense and lax vowel sounds in English by replacing them with one another, resulting in a large number of problems when speaking in English. The Vietnamese language often caries alternatives to the closest pure vowel in pronouncing it, such as lo /lô/ for low and me/mê/ for may. People can usually distinguish some pairs of Vietnamese diphthongs by the length of the constituent vowels such as may /mai/ meaning to sew, and mai /ma-i/ meaning tomorrow. The researcher hoped that by conducting this study, students would be able to overcome the difficulty of vowel recognition and understanding.

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