

Improving Students' Learning of English Pronunciation

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is an important part in learning a language since it decides whether your speaking skill is good or not. The aim of this study was find out the factors affecting pronunciation learning of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University. This study was conducted with 30 students who were from 19 to 21 years old. They were given questionnaires about the factors affecting their pronunciation learning process. The results of this study showed that the students had positive attitude toward learning pronunciation. However, they did not have many opportunities to practice speaking with native speakers. They recognized the influence of Vietnamese sounds on their pronunciation and seemed not interested in their teacher' teaching methods in pronunciation class.

Keyword: *English Pronunciation, Improving Students' Pronunciation, Factors Affecting Students' Pronunciation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is one of the most important criteria that students have to master in order to communicate appropriately and fluently. According to Fangzhi (1998), it is important to pay attention to pronunciation since it results in whether or not someone's message can be passed or not by other people. Moreover, Gilbert (cited in Otlowsky, 2004) stated that if someone cannot hear English well, she or he is cut off from the language. And if someone cannot be understood easily, she or he is cut off from conversation with native speakers. We can conclude from the statements above that pronunciation gives a significant effect to the meaning of what someone says.

Many students try to improve their pronunciation so that they can talk as a native speaker, but there are a lot of factors affecting students' pronunciation. Previously several researches were carried out to find out these factors. For example, Abbas, P. (2012) conducted a study on factors affecting EFL learners' English pronunciation learning and the strategies for instruction. The purpose of this study was to find out the factors that affected English pronunciation of English majored sophomores at Tay Do University.

Research question

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

What were the factors that affected pronunciation of the English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of pronunciation

Pronunciation can be defined as the way in which a person sounds the words of a language while speaking. Pronunciation is an integral part of foreign language learning since it directly affects learners' communicative competence as well as performance. Pronunciation has a positive effect on learning a second language and learners can gain the skills they need for effective communication in English (Abbas, 2012).

Pronunciation is one of the most important things that students have to master in order to communicate appropriately and fluently. According to Fangzhi (1998:3:9), it is important to pay attention to pronunciation since it results in whether or not someone's message can be passed or not by other people. Moreover, Gilbert (cited in Otlowsky, 2004:3) stated that if someone cannot hear English well, she or he is cut off from the language. And if someone cannot be understood easily, she or he is cut off from conversation with native speakers. We can conclude from the statements above that pronunciation gives a significant effect to the meaning of what someone says.

2.2 Factors affecting pronunciation learning

In this section, the researcher mentions some of the important factors that affect the learning of pronunciation.

Attitude

In a study on pronunciation accuracy of university students studying intermediate Spanish as a foreign language, Elliot (1995) found that subjects' attitude toward acquiring native or near-native pronunciation as measured by the Pronunciation Attitude Inventory, was the principal variable in relation to target language pronunciation. In other words, if the students were more concerned about their pronunciation of the target language, they tended to have better pronunciation of the target allophones (Elliot, 1995). This study echoed earlier research done by Suter (1976), which found that students who were more concerned about their pronunciation (p. 249) had better pronunciation of English as a Second Language (Elliot, 1995). When discussing the attitude of the second language learners in relation to their pronunciation and second language acquisition, it is necessary to note the work done by Schumann (1986) on acculturation and its role in the process of language learning. According to Gardner and Lambert students with integrative motivation would be expected to work harder to develop communication skills in the second language because they are more likely than their less interested counterparts to seek out native speakers of the language.

Mother tongue

If you start learning the local language, you'll find yourself understanding mother tongue influence a lot more, and will be able to correct it far more easily. In other languages, pronunciation might be a problem. The classic example is Germans pronouncing "W" as "V" and saying sentences like "Welcome to my home". French people not pronouncing the letter "H" is another well-known mother tongue influence. In many languages, speakers will have a "schwa". This is where they add a sound onto the end of words, such as saying Bird, "Birdda" or "Dogga" instead of Dog. This is usually caused by two things, the first being that they were taught phonics incorrectly, or have let it slip. The other cause of a schwa is because their own language has very distinct sounds and pronunciations, such as Chinese. When trying to cope with the softer sounds that English can have, it can be difficult. This is also the reason why some people struggle with correctly pronouncing different vowel sounds.

Instruction

Foreign language instruction generally focuses on four main areas of development: listening, speaking reading and writing. Foreign language curricula emphasize pronunciation in the first year of study as it introduces the target language's alphabet and sound system, but rarely continues this focus past the introductory level. Lack of emphasis on pronunciation development may be due to a general lack of fervor on the part of the second language acquisition researchers, second language teachers and students, that pronunciation of a second language is not very important (Elliot, 1995). For example, when an e is added to the word bit (CVC) the pronunciation of the —short i, becomes long and therefore —says its name. This type of instruction is meant to help students with decoding words for the purpose of reading rather than pronunciation

Exposure to Target Language

When we speak of the exposure that a learner has to the target language, it may come in the form of their current day-to-day life as well as the amount of prior instruction a learner received in the target language. Adult learners may have little opportunity to surround themselves with the native target language input. Whereas children who are possibly in English-speaking schools for hours during the day, their adult counterparts are likely to live and work in what these theorists call —linguistic ghettosl where they again have little meaningful exposure to the target language thus inhibiting their acquisition. Due to minimal exposure to the target language and contact with native speakers, adult English language learners often do not acquire a native-like level of pronunciation, regarding fluency, control of idiomatic expressions and cultural pragmatics (gestures, body language, and facial expressions)

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

There were 30 participants in this study who were English majored sophomores at Tay Do University. They were both males and females. Most of them had the age of 19. Others were from 20 to 23 years old. Besides, they had learnt English for 10 years. They came from different areas, both rural and urban. English was considered as their second language.

3.2 Instrument

This questionnaire embraced 6 questions and 16 statements. For the first 6 questions, students were required to give their own answer. The statements from 7 to 22 were designed with the 5-degree Likert-type scale including strongly agree, agree, no idea, disagree and strongly disagree. These statements were classified into four sections: attitude of students toward pronunciation (statement 7 to 10), exposure (statement 11 to 15), mother tongue (statement 16 to 18) and instruction (statement 19 to 22).

4. RESULTS

4.1 General results

The general results from the questionnaire were presented in the following table.

Table 1. Factors affecting students' pronunciation

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | No idea | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----------------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| <i>Attitude</i> | 29.9 | 51.7 | 9.2 | 9.2 | 0 |
| <i>Exposure</i> | 0 | 4 | 22 | 68 | 6 |
| <i>Mother tongue</i> | 29.2 | 54.2 | 10.8 | 5.8 | 0 |
| <i>Instruction</i> | 0 | 15.8 | 5.8 | 46.6 | 31.8 |

The table implied that the students had positive attitude toward learning pronunciation. However, they did not have many opportunities to practice speaking with native speakers. They recognized the influence of Vietnamese sounds on their pronunciation. Last but not least, the students seemed not interested in their teacher' teaching methods in pronunciation class.

4.2 Detailed description on factors affecting students' pronunciation

Attitude

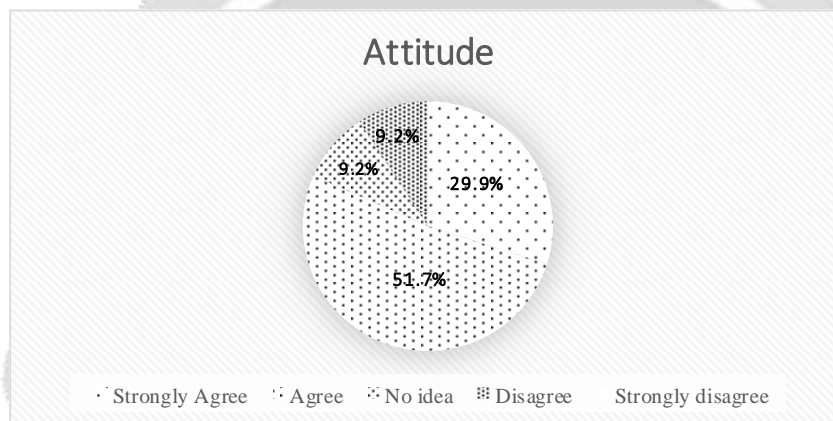


Fig 1. Students' attitude toward learning pronunciation

As can be seen from the figure, 81.6% of students had positive attitude toward pronunciation. They realized the importance of pronunciation and were interested in pronouncing. Moreover, they also found out different methods to improve it. For example, they took part in outdoor activities, English clubs and groups. Most of them spent about an hour a day to practice English pronunciation.

Exposure

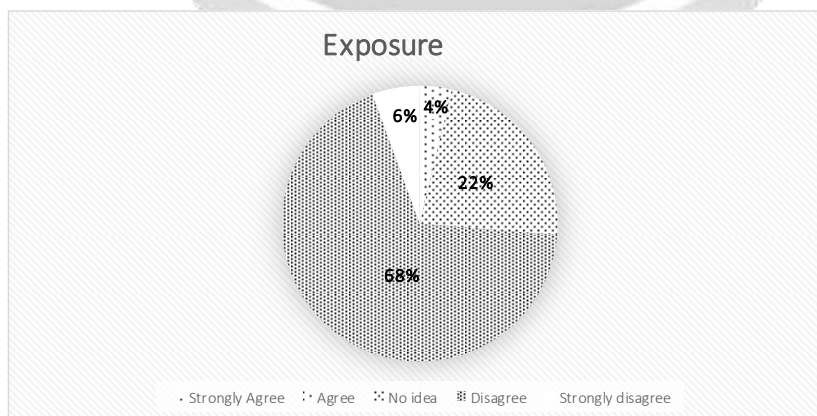


Fig 2. Exposure affecting students' pronunciation

As we can see from figure 2, 74% of students had difficulties in using the language they learnt in reality. They admitted that they could not communicate with foreigners because they didn't have any opportunities. The students agreed that they had to have a part time job if they wanted to contact foreigners. Without exposure, it was more difficult for the students to learn pronunciation.

Mother tongue

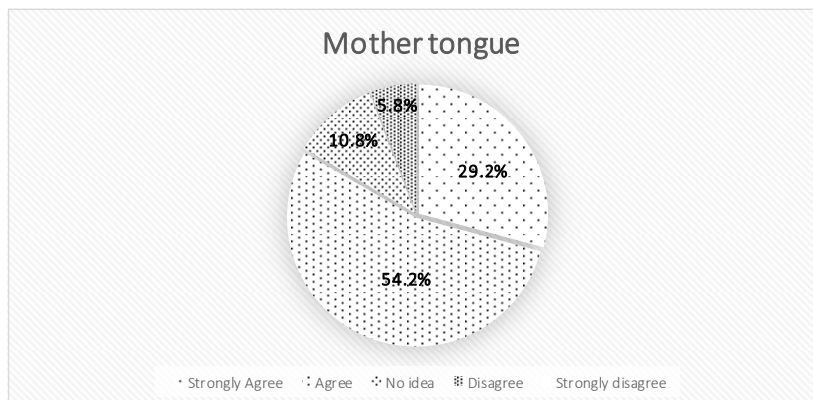


Fig 3. Mother tongue affecting students' pronunciation

From figure 3, we can see that 83.4% of students admitted that they were influenced by mother tongue when pronouncing English sounds. Specifically, they felt hard to pronounce some English sounds that do not have the equivalents in Vietnamese alphabet. Also, they usually forgot final sounds when they spoke. They tried to read word-by-word, which made their voice sounded unnatural. The fact that the students always spoke mother tongue outside the class made their pronunciation could not be improved.

Instruction

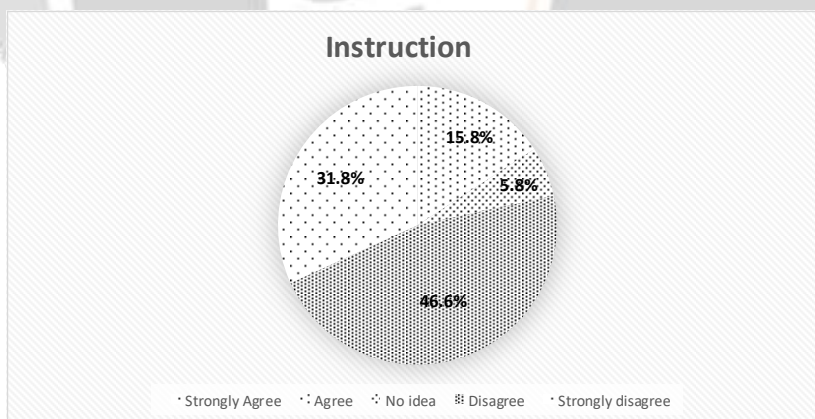


Fig 4. Instruction affecting students' pronunciation

As can be seen from figure 4, 78.4% of students weren't interested in the teaching methods in pronunciation class. There weren't many creative activities in pronunciation lessons. They expected that the teachers could give out more games that are useful for them to practice pronunciation skill.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to figure out methods to improve pronunciation of the English majored sophomores at Tay Do University by investigating the factors that affected their pronunciation. The conclusion was that the students had positive attitude toward learning pronunciation. However, they did not have opportunities to practice speaking with native speakers and their pronunciation was influenced by their mother tongue. In addition, the teaching methods seemed to be a factor that negatively affected students' pronunciation.

6. REFERENCES

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