

SOME PROPOSED MEASURES TO HELP VIETNAMESE LEARNERS CONFRONT WITH THE ENGLISH FINAL CONSONANT CLUSTERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper has described one of the most difficulties that is the English final consonant clusters encountered by Vietnamese learners of English. The major factor causing the difficulty is the big difference between English and Vietnamese inventory, especially in the number of consonant clusters occurring at final position of word and the way they are pronounced. In confronting with the difficulty, most of Vietnamese learners employ consonant productions. These inevitably affect their intelligibility to their listeners. Some measures are proposed to help Vietnamese teachers and learners to improve the learners' pronunciation.

Key words: *Consonant cluster; inventory; final position; consonant production*

INTRODUCTION

English has reached its significant role in Vietnam since 1986 due to the "Open Policy" of Vietnamese government. Many foreigners from English language backgrounds came to Vietnam for their investments and traveling. This has created the movement of learning English among people from rural to urban areas in Vietnam. Moreover, the cooperation in education among domestic universities and offshore ones has stimulated the large number of Vietnamese students learning English to meet the requirement of foreign universities. Currently, English has been a compulsory subject at all levels in education in Vietnam. Although, communicative language teaching method has employed instead of the Grammar Translation method with the hope that Vietnamese students will have better speaking skill, they are still poor in oral communication. As commented by a native – English speaker (Ha, 2005) "many Vietnamese speakers can speak English, but only a few direct communications with foreigners". Another Australian teacher, Macneil (1987) has the same comment about Vietnamese student pronunciation. The information data collected by Victorian Adult Migrant Education Service (Tran, 2002) also reveals that Vietnamese people have the highest level of pronunciation need of all language groups coming to Australia.

One of the main reasons leading to poor pronunciation of Vietnamese learners of English is likely the difficulties in produce the English sounds that are unfamiliar with their native language, Vietnamese such as /θ//ð/ or consonant occurring at the final position of the word such as /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, / tʃ /, /s/ consonant clusters; vowels; and some English features not existing in their first language such as syllable stress and connected speech. (Honey, 2001; Tran, 2002; Zielinski, 2006; Yates, 2002).

Among these difficulties, final consonant cluster seems to pose great difficulty for Vietnamese learners of English (Tran, 2002). Thus, as a teacher of English, I would like to explore the reasons leading to this difficulty, the consequences and some measures to help the learners improve their pronunciation.

VIETNAMESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AND DIFFICULTY WITH FINAL CONSONANT CLUSTER IN ENGLISH

Unlike many language in the world, English is very rich at consonant clusters which can occur in the initial position (e.g. brekdown, street), medial position (e.g. export, ecstasy) or final position of a word (e.g. sips, asks). (Lado, 1957; Tran, 2002). Word-initial consonant cluster and word medial consonant cluster can have up to three consonant, but word-final consonant cluster can be the combination of four consonants (e.g. sixths, gambled.) (Daniel, 1971). According to Major

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(1997), the longer consonant cluster is the more difficult it is for the learners who do not have cluster in the phonotactic system of their native of first language such as Korean, Japanese, Mandarin and Vietnamese as well. Moreover, the majority of studies on second language acquisition of learners have showed that final consonant clusters are more troublesome for learners of English than initial and medial consonant clusters are (Osburne, 1996).

Due to the interference of the first language, Vietnamese students often make errors with final consonant clusters such as: consonant reduction and deletion. (Tran, 2002; Zielinski, 2006; Honey, 200; Sato, 1984; Benson, 1986). While reduction refers to the deletion of one or two consonants in a consonant of cluster such as n/nt in /entrəns/; (Zielinski, 2006) t/st in /fɜːst/ (Sato, 1984), total deletion refers to the omission all consonants in a consonant cluster, for examples -/nd/ in /kɑːnd/; -/st/ in /laːst/; -/kst/ in /nekst/.

Specially, the omission of plural maker /s/ /z/ or tense marker /t/ /d/ is common errors of Vietnamese learners of English when they dealing with consonant clusters. For example, /wɔːk/ instead of /wɔːkt/ in *walked* or /preərənt/ in *parents*. The errors may be resulted from the English writing of Vietnamese people. Due to the difference in grammatical system between Vietnamese and English in term of tense and plural makers, 'ed' and 's'; 'es' respectively, Vietnamese learners often omit these morphological, in their speech, the final consonant clusters containing /t/, /d/, /s/ and /z/ are often deleted.

In fact, final consonant cluster reduction is also employed by English native – speaker for an economy effort (Kelly, 2000) and considered as an aspect of phonological processes (Osburne, 1996). Therefore, some complex consonant clusters can be simplified by English native speakers such as /æks/ for /ækts/; /teks/ for /teksts/ (Kelly, 2000). One of the rules to reduce any consonant in the final consonant cluster is that the consonant appearing between the other two within words

(e.g. costly) or between words with morphological marker such as tense and plural (e.g. lifts, products) or in compound nouns or and phrasal (e.g. landlord, bread and butter) (Selkirk, 1972:193 cited in Osburne, 1996) is deleted. However, a few Vietnamese learners can apply the rule appropriately when they produce a speech, especially spontaneous one. Even some speakers who are very fluent and competent in English make errors with final consonant cluster such as the subjects in Osburne's study (1996) who is "an extremely advanced user of English" and subjects in Nguyen's study (1995) who are doing MA in TESOL.

THE REASONS LEADING TO THE DIFFICULTY

The finding of many studies on Vietnamese learners of English has revealed that the influence of their first language, Vietnamese is the major contributor to the difficulty for Vietnamese learners. (Tran, 2002; Zielinski, 2006; Honey, 2001). According to Lado (1957), who builds the CA hypothesis, the learners who learn a particular second or foreign language will find some features of that language easier, while other features more difficulties. The easier elements are similar to those in his native language and the difficult ones are different from his native language. Thus, the difficult Vietnamese learner face with final consonant cluster can be resulted from the big differences between Vietnamese and English inventory of final consonant clusters and the way to produce them.

The first difference is that consonant clusters in English are variable and can be in any position of a word, while there are no consonant clusters in Vietnamese. According to Derwing et al (2002), there are about 180 consonant clusters in English and they can appear at the final position of words and 16 consonants that can be there as well. In comparison, only six out of the twenty-two consonants /p, t, m, n, ŋ, k / in Vietnamese can appear in the final position of a word and almost all these consonants are unreleased or

“held in” (Tran, 2002; Tang, 2007). Consequently, the habit of “swallowing” the final consonant sounds in the learners’ mother tongue inhabits the production of final consonant sounds in English (Ha, 2005).

Secondly, the way to pronounce final consonant sounds in English is completely different for Vietnamese learners of English. (Ha, 2005). It is because almost all final consonant sounds in English are pronounced and released and the maintenance of even air pressure though long utterance is required (Macneil, 1987). Although some sounds in final consonant clusters may be elided such as the case of /t/ and /d/ or partially pronounced, the speech organs should be moved to the required position and then move to the other position for the following sounds (Ha, 2005). Such as way of producing final consonant sounds poses great difficulty for the learners who are familiar with the way of using short pulses of air-pressure that cut off before the end of the syllable (Macneil, 1987).

THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DIFFICULTY

As Vietnamese learners have difficulty in pronouncing final consonant clusters, they often produce non-standard consonant in the final position of the word. Consequently, the non-standard features will have negative influence on the intelligibility which is defined as “the extent to which the speech signal produced by the speaker can be identified by the listener as the words the speaker intended to produce”. (Zielinski, 2006: 23). According to some authors such as Derwing et al (2002), Tran (2002) and Yates (2002), consonant cluster reduction and deletion cause the most difficulty for native English speakers to understand. It is because native – English listeners often rely on consonants to determine word boundaries and identify the words (Zielinski, 2006). For example, three native Australian English listeners find non-standard consonant clusters produced by a Vietnamese speaker of English the most difficult for them to identify which words he intended to say. (Zielenski, 2006).

The finding of the study done by Ingram, & Nguyen (2003) on Vietnamese speakers’ intelligibility judged by English speakers from different language backgrounds such as Chinese, Arabic, Japanese reveals that Vietnamese learners of English may have potential problems being understood correctly by not only native speakers but also non-native English listeners and their speech is the most difficult to comprehend. Thus, the errors made by Vietnamese learner in dealing with consonant clusters in English may reduce their intelligibility and can lead to breakdown in communication.

THE PROPOSAL MEASURES TO HELP VIETNAMESE STUDENTS TO OVERCOME THE DIFFICULTY

Since Vietnamese students’ errors in dealing with final consonant clusters are the main source for their intelligibility, it is extremely important to have some approaches in helping Vietnamese students dealing with final consonant clusters in English.

First of all, teacher should point out the difficulty of Vietnamese students in dealing with consonant clusters, the errors they made and the consequences of making English non-standard consonant production. The acknowledgement of the errors will help students to pay more attention in producing the final consonant clusters. However, teachers should not overcorrect all students’ errors. This will have negative impact on students’ confidence. As the fear of “losing face” is one of Vietnamese culture aspects, teachers should very careful when giving the correction to the students. Thus, teachers should point out that final consonant clusters are troublesome for not only Vietnamese students but for English learners from different background such as Chinese, Japanese and Korea. Even some native-English speakers have to struggle with this difficulty (Bowen,1975; Templey, 1993). The teachers’ encouraging will be helpful to students in confront with final consonant clusters in English.

Secondly, when teaching students final consonant clusters, teachers should point out the rules of simplification employed by native-English speakers in dealing with complex consonant clusters not only within a word but also between the words. For example, /t/ and /d/ are often elided when they appear between two other consonants as in *lifts* /lɪfts/ instead of /lɪftz/ and *carved statuette* /kɑ:v stætʃu:t/ instead of /kɑ:vdstætʃu:t/ (Kenworthy, 1987). More examples and exercises in this area will facilitate students with consonant clusters and help them to omit consonants in consonant cluster in appropriate way that can not affect their intelligibility.

Moreover, teacher should not consider pronunciation teaching as “fixing problem” but rather as “teaching how to speak” (Yates, 2002). As final consonant clusters are variable and large in number, accounting for 180 (Derwing et al, 2002), and can be ranked from the less to the most difficult for Vietnamese learners (Tran, 2002), teachers should take these features into consideration. For example, teachers should help students more in practicing the most difficult consonant clusters and give more time for students to be competent in the particular group of consonant clusters.

Furthermore, when teaching students pronunciation in general and final consonant clusters in particular, teachers should use appropriate technique. For example, choral drills will be useful for all students to get used with new sounds in the target of language without any worry about trying to communicate and individual drills help teachers in assessing their students individually. (Yates, 2002). However, when students can produce a particular consonant cluster correctly, the activities for teaching pronunciation to students are needed to establish in meaningful and communicative way. For instance, “past tense game” is useful for students in practicing /t/ and /d/ in past tense making and exchanging the information about what happened to them by making sentence that contains the verbs in the past tense. (Yates, 2002).

Last but not least, teachers should not teach pronunciation separately but rather teaching it in combination with grammar and structures of the target language. For example, in the case of the omission of plural maker /s/, /z/ in the speech, Vietnamese students also often omit “s” or “es” in their English writing when they have to indicate plural nouns in English. This is because Vietnamese and English have difference in some features of grammatical system as mentioned above. Therefore, focusing on form and grammatical aspect can help students to reduce the risk of making errors in term of final consonant clusters containing morphologically markers such as tense or number.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has described the most difficulty that is the final consonant clusters in English encountered by Vietnamese learners of English. The major factor causing the difficulty is the big difference between English and Vietnamese inventory, especially in the number of consonant clusters occurring at final position of word and the way they are pronounced. In confronting with the difficulty, most of Vietnamese learners employ consonant production. These inevitably affect their intelligibility to their listeners. As a teacher of English, I have proposed some measures to help Vietnamese teachers and student improve learners’ pronunciation.

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TÓM TẮT

MỘT SỐ BIỆN PHÁP GIÚP NGƯỜI HỌC VIỆT NAM KHẮC PHỤC KHÓ KHĂN TRONG VIỆC PHÁT ÂM CÁC CỤM PHỤ ÂM TIẾNG ANH

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Bài viết miêu tả một trong những khó khăn nhất mà phần lớn người Việt Nam học Tiếng Anh gặp phải là các cụm phụ âm cuối trong tiếng Anh. Yếu tố chính gây ra khó khăn này là sự khác biệt lớn giữa hệ thống âm tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt, đặc biệt là các cụm phụ âm ở vị trí cuối cùng của từ và cách chúng được phát âm. Khi gặp những khó khăn này, hầu hết người học sử dụng cách phát âm một phụ âm. Điều này đã ảnh hưởng tới khả năng hiểu của người nghe. Một số phương pháp được đề xuất để giúp giáo viên và học viên Việt Nam nhằm cải thiện cách phát âm của người học.

Từ khóa: *Cụm phụ âm, hệ thống âm vị, vị trí cuối, cách phát âm âm cuối.*

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