

## PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS - A CASE STUDY OF ETHNIC STUDENTS ANALYSING ERRORS OF PRONUNCIATION IN SPEAKING ENGLISH

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### SUMMARY

This paper attempts to investigate the main difficulties and errors of a group of 20 ethnic students encounter when pronouncing English consonant sounds. The students in the case study come from remote areas of Thai Nguyen province in the North of Vietnam. During the time at their school, practicing English in class is rarely used. They have never had chances to speak to foreigners. As a result, they do not have any kind of exposure to a native English environment. The paper has analysed and synthesised the data and found that the ethnic speakers in this case had some particular errors such as omission of final consonant and consonant clusters sounds, as well as difficulties in pronouncing /θ/, and /s/ and /ʃ/ and word stress problems. Finally, the paper suggests appropriate solutions for the kind of errors in order to help learners enhance English pronunciation.

**Keywords:** *Errors of pronunciation, consonant sounds, clusters sounds, word stress*

### Learner Background

All students were born in 1992 and grew up in ethnic families (Tay) in the North of Vietnam. Their parents are farmers in remote area in Thai Nguyen province. After graduating upper secondary school, like many other students, they took the entrance university examination and entered IT University.

They have learnt English since they were at lower secondary school (from grade 6 to grade 12). At that time, grammatical method was considered as popular in teaching foreign language in Vietnam. The structure of language is, therefore, more concentrated. Teachers only pay attention to introduce grammar rules and give students grammar exercises in class. Although students know well the rules as well as do grammar exercises, they have a lot of difficulties in other skills such as speaking and listening. Because teachers spend more time in teaching and practicing the rules, students have no time for speaking or listening skills in class. Moreover, Vietnam is a monolingual country. Students do not have opportunities to practice English outside classroom. As result of this, these learners could not make a simple conversation in English and have made many mistakes in pronunciation when speaking.

After two years at university, they have learnt more new subjects and have more chances to communicate with other students coming from different parts of her country. They found that many friends can speak English well. One time they and some students met a foreigner teacher in the campus of university. He asked them a lot of things about student life as well as their study. Although the friends translated most time, they felt difficult to understand what the foreigner teacher said. The only spoke some simple words and sentences when greeting. After four years of learning English in secondary in Vietnam the still had many difficulties in speaking English. In fact, there are many reasons why she couldn't speak English. In Vietnam, students had no chances to practice speaking English in side as well as outside class. They also never communicated with foreigners during the time at school.

Therefore, language barrier became a big problem in participating club activities which used English. Students lacked of confidence to speak in front of native speakers and they worried about making mistakes. However, they joined English club in university where they have had more opportunities to practice listening and speaking English. After time their English is better and better in comparisons with the first time. At present, they can communicate with native speaker

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confidently though they still making many errors in pronunciation.

These students said that they like English language and want to speak English more

fluently. Their writings are still not good so that they are planning to take English courses with the hope that their English will be improved.

**Table 1.** Omission of final consonant and consonant clusters sounds /z, s, ks, /

Description of error	Omission of final consonant and consonant clusters sounds /z, s, ks, /
<p><b>Examples of incorrect usage</b></p>	<p><b>Intended word → produced word</b></p> <p>Vietnamese → /vjetnə'mi:/                      z F consonant deletion</p> <p>years → /jɪz:/    z F consonant reduction</p> <p>activities → /æktivɪ'tɪ/                      z F consonant deletion</p> <p>bananas → /bə'nɑ:nə/                      z F consonant reduction</p> <p>likes → /laɪ/    ks F consonant cluster deletion</p> <p>works → /wɜ:k/    s F consonant cluster reduction</p> <p><b>Reasons why choosing the speaker's difficulty.</b></p> <p>Omission of final consonant and consonant clusters sounds /z, s, ks, / is selected and is the areas of difficulty of the speaker. When speaking, the speakers often drop or reduce final consonant and final consonant cluster sounds. It can effect on communication between the speakers and other people, especially native listeners. In this case, it also lessens intelligibility of listeners while listening. Although, it does not effect very much on intelligibility, sometimes, listeners confuse the way pronunciation and the meaning of words.</p>
<p><b>Description of error</b></p>	<p>1. When speaking, the learners often forget to pronounce the final consonant sounds and final consonant cluster sounds such as /z, s, ks/. 2. In this production, the speakers do not pronounce or reduces final consonant sounds /z/ as well as final consonant cluster sounds /ks, s/ so that the sounds of words are change and the meanings as well. The speakers need to study again consonant sounds and consonant cluster sounds and how to make these sounds when they are at final positions. For example:</p> <p>- Vietnamese → /vjetnə'mi:/ the speakers need to pronounce the final sound /z/. The speakers should add /z/ sound at the end of the word by putting the front of the tongue lightly the pump behind the upper teeth, let the air pass through and add voice. In addition, there are two examples (years; bananas, activities) which the speakers reduce the ending sound /z/ when they are plurals. The speakers need to add /z/ sound at the end of words similarly to the word "Vietnamese".</p> <p>- likes → /laɪ/ the speakers delete final consonant cluster sound /ks/ of the word "likes" so that listeners may be confuse with another word such as lie /laɪ/. The speakers need add /ks/ sound at the final position of the word when pronouncing. Especially, the speaker note that both sounds /ks/ are pronounced together. Firstly, to make /k/ sound, put the back of the tongue against the roof of the mouth, then try to breathe out, but don't let the air escape and finally release the air suddenly. The following step is adding /s/ sound. This sound is similar to the /z/ sound above, but don't add the voice. It is the same as the sound of a snake.</p> <p>- works → /wɜ:k/ the speakers need to add sound /s/ when speaking this word. Consonant clusters are pronounced together. Therefore, after the sound /k/, the speakers need to remember to pronounce /s/ by putting the front of the tongue lightly the pump behind the upper teeth, then let the air pass through. It is similar to the sound of a snake.</p>
<p><b>Discuss possible reasons</b></p>	<p>The learners' first language is Vietnamese which is monosyllabic. The feature of each word is a single syllable. Vietnamese language only has six consonant sounds at the end of the words such as / p, t, k, m, n, ŋ/ ([5],[4]Ngo, 2005 and Tran, 2002) and,</p>

	<p>especially, they are often unreleased or “held in” while English has variety of more complex consonant sounds and sound sequences across syllable positions / b, f, d, g, v, s, z, l, pt, ks, θ, ʃ, ð, tʃ, .../ [1](Kelly, 2000) while they may be released in English. In addition, Vietnamese learners tend to pronounce final stops /p, t, k / unexploded in all contexts (Honey, 1991).</p> <p>Although English /z/ is the same as /z/ in Vietnamese, Vietnamese /z/ only occurs in initial position [4](Tran, 2002). Therefore, learners have problems with /z/ sound in media and final positions. In this case, the speakers reduce /z/ sound in all final positions when pronouncing plurals (years /jɪz:/, bananas /bəˈnɑ:nə/).</p> <p>Moreover, Vietnamese language has no consonant clusters [3](Asian language notes, 1976) and consonant clusters are not permitted in any position within a word [4](Tran, 2002). It will be hard for learners to pronounce consonant clusters, especially final consonant /s/, when following a consonant, is frequently omitted such as /ks/. The speaker can not make these sounds together. She can pronounce well single consonant sound such as “work /wɜ:k/” but in case “works” she can not make /ks/ sound at the same time. Therefore, Language one has intensively affects on pronunciation of the speaker when learning a foreign language as English. It will lessen intelligibility between the speaker and listeners while communicating.</p>
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**Table 2.** Difficulties in pronouncing /θ/

Description of error	Difficulties in pronouncing /θ/
<b>Examples of incorrect usage</b>	<p>three → /t<sup>h</sup>ri: /</p> <p><b>Reasons why choosing the speaker’s difficulty.</b> Like most Vietnamese learners, the speaker has problem in pronouncing /θ/. Similar to reasons in Table 1, when the speaker uses /t<sup>h</sup>/ in Vietnamese to replace /θ/ sound in English, it can cause misinterpretation for native listeners because it is the first time they have heard /t<sup>h</sup>/.</p>
<b>Description of error</b>	<p>1. The speakers have produced t<sup>h</sup> / θ in the initial position of the word. 2. In this production, the place of the tongue is fine (Dental sound) but rather than pushing the air through when breathing out, the speaker holds the sound and makes voiced alveolar plosive in Vietnam, while /θ/ is an unvoiced dental fricative, produced by making light contact between the tongue tip with the back of the top, front teeth or tongue tip may protrude between the lips. The soft palate is raised. /θ/ is unvoiced and fortis. The speakers should put the front of the tongue lightly the back of the top teeth or between the upper and lower teeth. Then let the air pass through as the speaker breaths out.</p>
<b>Possible explanation</b>	<p>There is not the sound /θ/ in Vietnamese [5],[4](Ngo, 2005 and Tran, 2002), so it is difficult for the speaker to pronounce /θ/ sound. Although Vietnamese has the same spelling /th/ as in English such as “thơ - poem”, pronunciation is different. /th/ in Vietnam is a stop and alveolar [5](Ngo, 2005) while in English /θ/ is dental fricative and dental sound [1](Kelly, 2000). Therefore, the speaker may think that the sound / t<sup>h</sup> / in Vietnamese is the same as /θ/ in English so that learners often pronounce /t<sup>h</sup>/ instead of /θ/ in some words. In addition, because of the speakers’ habit of pronouncing /t<sup>h</sup>/ in their native language, it seems to be difficult to pronounce/θ/ correctly. Finally, the speakers may know how to say the words containing /θ/ correctly, but they feel uncomfortable when they have to put their tongue forth.</p>

**Table 3.** Difficulties in pronouncing /s/ and /ʃ/

Description of error	Difficulties in pronouncing /s/ and /ʃ/
<p><b>Examples of incorrect usage</b></p>	<p>English → /'ɪŋɡlɪs/      s/ʃ F consonant                      she → /si:/      ɪ F consonant deletion  <b>Reasons why choosing the speaker's difficulty.</b>                      Confusing two sounds /s/ and /ʃ/ is another difficulty of the speakers. They have the same problem in L1 because their dialect is in the North of Vietnam. Many people have difficulties in pronouncing /ʃ/. Thus when speaking English, she makes /s/ instead of /ʃ/ sound. Confusion /s/ and /ʃ/ can reduce intelligibility for listeners and creates misinterpretation.</p>
<p><b>Description of error</b></p>	<p>1. The speakers have produced /s/, /ʃ/ in the final position of the word.                      2. In this production, the speakers can recognize it is unvoiced and affricative. The place of tongue blade is right. However, they confuse /s/, /ʃ/ when pronouncing. Because of lacking of raising the front of the tongue, they only make /s/ instead of /ʃ/.                      The speakers should remember to move the tongue slightly back when produce the sound /ʃ/.</p>
<p><b>Discussion possible reasons</b></p>	<p>The speakers produce /s/ replacing /ʃ/ when speaking. In this case the speakers recognize the important of final consonant sound in English. However, they confuse between two sounds /s/ and /ʃ/ because of some their language one and their background. Firstly, in Vietnamese language there are only six consonant sounds at the end of the words: /p/, /t/, /k/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/ [5](Ngo, 2005). In addition, six final consonants are unreleased or 'held in', while English has variety of more complex consonant sounds and sound sequences across syllable positions (/b/, /f/, /d/, /g/, /v/, /s/, /z/, /ʌ/, /p/, /t/, /θ/, /ʃ/, /ð/, /tʃ/, /mpt/, /ks/ ...) [1](Kelly, 2000). Secondly, The speakers come from the North of Vietnam in which many people have difficulties in pronouncing consonant /ʃ/ (Asian Language Note, 1976). They tend to make the sound /s/. The speakers are the examples of many people in the North of Vietnam [3](Asian Language Note, 1976) so that they faces difficulties in pronouncing /ʃ/, particularly in final positions. Finally, the differences in types of phonemes and the variety of consonants may cause difficulties for the learners when they pronounce the last consonant sounds such as /s/ and confuses /s/ and /ʃ/.</p>

**Table 4.** Words stress

Description of error	Word stress problem
<p><b>Examples of incorrect usage</b></p>	<p>Produced words → intended words                      birthday /bɜːθ'deɪ/ → /<sup>1</sup>bɜːθ.deɪ/                      community /<sup>1</sup>kəmjʊː.nə.ti/ → /kə<sup>1</sup>mjuː.nə.ti/                      homework /həʊm<sup>1</sup>wɜːk/ → /<sup>1</sup>həʊm.wɜːk/                      handicapped /hæn.dɪ<sup>1</sup>kæpt/ → /<sup>1</sup>hæn.dɪ.kæpt/  <b>Reasons why choosing the speaker's difficulty.</b>                      In English, stress plays an important role in spoken language. In case study of the speakers, they stress words in different ways from the native speakers. It may reduce intelligibility as well as misinterpretation for listeners because it can change the meanings and emotions of the speakers.</p>

<b>Description of error</b>	<p>1. The speakers have made stress on the second syllable or the first syllable of the word.</p> <p>2. In this production, the speakers do not recognize the right stress. They stresses on the second syllable while the right stress on the first syllable. In this case, the speakers need to change word stress on the first syllable. The first syllable /bɜːθ/ is stressed with a long vowel /ɜː/ and /deɪ/ is weak sound. Thus, the speakers should practice again the word “birthday” with stress on the first syllable.</p> <p>community /<sup>1</sup>kəmjuː.nə.ti/ → /kə<sup>1</sup>mjuː.nə.ti/</p> <p>homework /həʊm<sup>1</sup>wɜːk/ → /<sup>1</sup>həʊm.wɜːk/</p> <p>handicapped /hæn.dɪ<sup>1</sup>kæpt/ → /<sup>1</sup>hæn.dɪ.kæpt/</p> <p>Similar to the word “birthday”, the speakers stress the word ‘homework’ and ‘handicapped’ on the final syllable. The speaker needs to stress on the first syllable /həʊm/, /hæn/ and other syllable /wɜːk/, /dɪ.kæpt/ are weak sounds. The word ‘handicapped’ has three syllables, the speakers pronounce word with three syllables and has problem with incorrect tress and final consonant clusters /pt/ so that the speakers should practice the right tress on the first syllable and consonant cluster sound /pt/.</p>
<b>Discussion possible reasons</b>	<p>Vietnamese, a monosyllabic tone language, has no system of word stress [7], [4](Nguyen, 1970, cited in Nguyen and Ingram, 2005 and Tran, 2002). Vietnamese is monosyllabic because a large proportion of words consist of single syllables and tonal because pitch variations signal meaning differences for other homophonous words [4](Tran, 2002). In contrast, English is a stress language. Stress represents levels of relative prominence among syllables in spoken language [7](Hulst, 2005, cited in Nguyen and Ingram, 2005). Therefore, Vietnamese learners often face difficulties in word stress because of influencing mother tongue. Learners never have experiences of word stress before. Most learners drop word stress or pronounce wrong stress. As a result, when speaking, the speakers stress words wrongly.</p>

In summary, these above sections have discussed ethnic students’ areas of difficulty in pronunciation. Although the have made many errors in speaking, they seems to be confident and communicate in English successfully.

Regarding to pronunciation, omission final consonant and consonant cluster sounds such as / s, z, k, ks, ld/ are the frequently errors. In addition, they have problems when making the sound /θ/ and /ʃ/. They often uses /t<sup>h</sup>/ instead of /θ/ in English. It is very typical difficulty of Vietnamese learners because there is not /θ/ in Vietnamese language. The students also confuse the sound /s/ and /ʃ/. It is hard for them to make /ʃ/ because they have this problem in her first language. Despite of the errors, they speaks quite well and they can express their feelings and thinking as well.

In order to speak English fluently, learners should concentrate to solve their areas of difficulty in pronunciation with more practice

speaking and listening to native speakers. As result, after time the pronunciation will be improved.

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## TÓM TẮT PHÂN TÍCH LỖI PHÁT ÂM TIẾNG ANH CỦA NHÓM SINH VIÊN DÂN TỘC

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Bài báo nghiên cứu những khó khăn chủ yếu và lỗi phát âm tiếng Anh của nhóm sinh viên dân tộc trong khi phát âm các âm phụ âm. Nhóm sinh viên tham gia nghiên cứu đều đến từ vùng sâu, vùng xa của tỉnh Thái Nguyên ở miền Bắc Việt Nam. Trong suốt thời gian học phổ thông, học sinh rất hiếm khi được thực hành nói tiếng Anh ở trên lớp cũng như giao tiếp với người nước ngoài. Do vậy họ thiếu môi trường trường giao tiếp và kinh nghiệm trong giao tiếp tiếng Anh. Bài báo đã tổng hợp, phân tích các lỗi phát âm tiếng Anh mà người học thường gặp sau: bỏ âm phụ âm ở vị trí cuối từ và các phụ âm đứng liền nhau; những khó khăn khi phát âm các âm /θ/, /s/, /ʃ/ và các lỗi về trọng âm. Từ những lỗi đã thu thập và phân tích trên, bài báo đã lựa chọn các giải pháp phù hợp với người học để mang lại hiệu quả cao nhất.

**Từ khóa:** *Lỗi phát âm, âm phụ âm, âm phụ âm đi liền nhau, trọng âm*

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