

DIFFICULTIES OF VIETNAMESE LEARNERS WITH THE LENGTH OF ENGLISH SOUNDS WHEN THEY PRODUCE AND SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

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SUMMARY

Pronunciation is a problem which usually occurs to Vietnamese learners of English. Many learners have difficulty pronouncing English sounds, therefore, they have difficulty in listening and speaking English. While these two skills are very important for learners when they begin to work in an environment using English. Moreover, Vietnamese learners still complain about incorrect pronunciation from colleagues, partners, and even their teachers. In this paper, I would like to investigate one of pronunciation problems of Vietnamese learners: *English sounds made by Vietnamese learners are too short* and give some suggested solutions to overcome this problem. The findings of this paper will help Vietnamese learners become aware of the length of the sounds they produce. This is considered one of the most significant problematic features which attracts much interest from linguists and teachers of English in Vietnam. There are some concepts chosen to be clarified in this part:

- The omission of final sounds.
- Long and short vowel distinction.
- Suggested ways to overcome this problem.

Key words: *English sounds, solution, pronunciation, omission of final sounds, long and short vowel distinction.*

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays international cooperation is one of the most important strategies of each country to promote its socio-economic development. To integrate successfully into the global economy, foreign language is considered to be indispensable. The reasons for learning a new language are varied, but the importance of learning foreign languages is universal: it will always benefit you in one way or another. However, learning a new language is not easy for Vietnamese learners because of many different points which are not similar to mother tongue, Vietnamese language. One of the most considerable points is pronunciation which is noticed a lot by English learners. It is the biggest challenge when using English in daily communication as well as at work or at universities, because a word is pronounced incorrectly or wrong intonation which may

lead to misunderstandings of listeners. These sometimes bring unexpected effects or even break good relationships. Therefore, the assignment focuses on one of problems of pronunciation.

ANALYSIS

The omission of the final sounds

Vietnamese people have many difficulties when pronouncing English. One of those is the omission of the final sounds which makes the sounds shorter. The way English speakers pronounce the ending sounds is completely different from the one deeply rooted in Vietnamese speakers, making it more difficult for them to achieve appropriate English pronunciation. Consequently, Vietnamese learners have been reported to make phonetic errors leading to incomprehensible speech in English.

Almost every English consonants appear word-finally, except for /h/, /w/ and /j/ (Cummins, 1998). Ending sounds of English

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were omitted so frequently, because Vietnamese language does not have ending sounds to pronounce. In addition, some of the sounds, such as /ʒ, ʒ, ʒ/ are really hard for Vietnamese learners to pronounce especially when they occur at the end of words. Teachers usually have to spend lots of time helping learners practice these sounds, as they find them difficult to pronounce. For instance, the manner of articulation of /ʒ /: the air-stream escapes through the narrow groove in the centre of the tongue and causes friction between the tongue and the alveolar ridge. This is normally difficult for Vietnamese learners because we do not have the same sound in our language, especially when this sound occurs at the final position of a word.

Consonants cluster reduction

After reviewing results of some studies of errors with consonant sounds, Treiman (1989) classified them into 6 types, one of which is cluster reduction. This is the “deletion of one or more consonants from a target cluster so that only a single consonant occurs at syllable margins”^[1]. In the present study, final consonant clusters were greatly simplified to a single consonant by the speakers. Apart from simplification of final consonant clusters, the speakers also eliminated the final consonant clusters from the words. For examples:

- ‘silk’ /silk/: Speaker often omit the /k/ from the alveolar-velar /lk/ cluster.
- ‘told’ /təʊld/: Speaker often omit both /l/ and /d/ from alveolar-alveolar /ld/ cluster.
- ‘squeezed’ /skwi:zd/ is pronounced as [skwi:z_] by eliminating the final stop /d/.

As we all know, in Vietnamese the voiceless stop consonants /p/, /t/, and /k/ may occur at the end of a word but these consonants are never released in final position and are much shorter than their English equivalents. /p/ is generally not aspirated in English and is often not released which means air is not allowed to escape from the mouth. Learners may have difficulties hearing this sound and may omit

the /p/ when speaking. For example, the word “cab” is pronounced as /kæ/, “stamp” as /stæm/ or “camp” as /kæm/. Similar to /p/, /t/ is also not released in final position. The reason for this is that the mouth forms a *t* sound but the tongue stays on the roof of the mouth and the air does not escape. As a result, learners may omit the *t* when pronouncing. Therefore, the word “wait” is pronounced as /wei/, “start” as /sta:/ or laughed as /la:f/.

To examine the reality of Vietnamese students’ pronunciation, I carried out a survey on 10 students of Chu Van An high school, Thai Nguyen City. Most of them omitted fricatives at the end when they pronounce English words. For example, 8 of them pronounced the word “leaf” as /li:/; 9/10 pronounced “believe” as /bili:/ or “sixth” as /sik/. These show the omission of the sound /v/, /f/ and /θ/ in final position. Also, the sound /s/ is rarely made at the end of the word. The words like “niece”, “nice” and “notice” are often made wrongly by 7 of them.

Omission of grammatical endings and contractions

There were four types of grammatical endings mentioned in this article. They were grammatical endings of third person singular, plural form, past tense and contraction. All of these do not occur in Vietnamese grammar. In the survey, 5 of above ten students omitted the final fricative /z/ in ‘orders’ /ɔ:dəz/ which represents grammatical endings of third person singular. Omission of the plural marker occurred in ‘stamps’ /stæmps/ when 3 students omit the /s/ from bilabial-alveolar /sp/ cluster. Omission of the past tense marker could also be observed. 8 of ten students had problems with ‘squeezed’ /skwi:zd/ where there is a final consonant cluster. Subsequently, the omission of /t/ occurred in ‘stopped’ /stɒpt/ when 6 students eliminated /t/ from bilabial-alveolar cluster.

Vowels in English

Vowels in English are described in term of four factors: (i) the length of the vowel, (ii) the level of the tongue, (iii) the part of the tongue and (iv) the degree of lip rounding. There are 11 single vowels in English, including 5 long vowels and 6 short vowels^[2].

Vowels are classified as long and short, depending on the length of the vowels. Long vowels include /a:/, /ɔ:/, /ɜ:/, /u:/, /i:/. Short vowels include /i/, /e/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɒ/, /ʊ/.

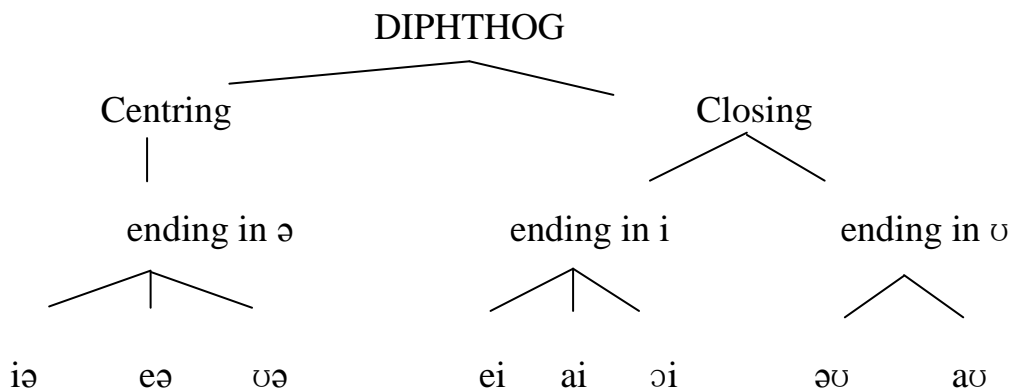
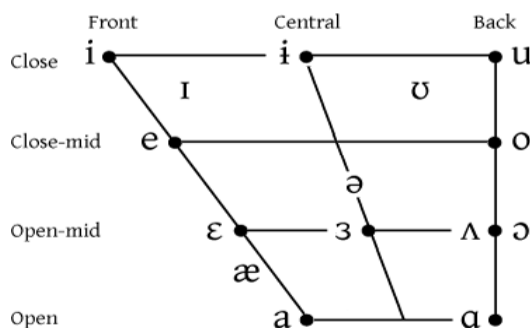
To make the description clearer, a chart of English vowels is given below.^[3]

In addition to single vowels, English has a large number of diphthongs- sounds which consist of a movement from one vowel to another. A vowel which remains constant and

does not move is called a pure vowel, or single vowel. In English, there are eight diphthongs as they are showed below.^[4]

English vowel also has the kind of vowel called trip thong. A trip thong is a movement from one vowel to another and then to a third. All produced rapidly and without interruption. The trip thongs can be composed of the five closing diphthongs described in the last section, with ə added on the end. Therefore we have five trip thongs:^[5]

- ei + ə = eiə: *mayor , player*
- ai + ə = aiə *liar, fire*
- ɔi + ə = ɔiə *loyal, royal*
- əʊ + ə = əʊə *lower, mower*
- aʊ + ə = aʊə *power, hour*



Distinction of long and short vowels

Most English learners did not consistently distinguish long and short vowels. Most of the Vietnamese vowels are quite identical with their English counterparts in terms of manner and position of articulation, but there are more vowel contrasts in English than in Vietnamese, and some of the contrasts such as /i/ and /i:/ or /ʊ/ and /u:/ do not exist in Vietnamese at all. In this study, words with long vowels showed the greater tendency to be realized as short vowels. For instance, 9 of 10 students in my survey mispronounced *Bead* [bi:d] as *bid* [bid], *Fairy* [fe:ri] as *ferry* [feri].

Some suggested strategies

Learning pronunciation rules

When learners first study a foreign language, they have to face with phonetic symbols, alphabetical systems and pronunciation rules. There are many sounds which are strange to learners as they may not appear in mother tongue. To solve this problem, I taught my students how to pronounce individual sounds correctly, and then, how to combine these sounds within a word. In addition, the word stress in English should be also be noticed. This will help them speak naturally like native speakers. When meeting new words and phrases, record them and try to repeat them in a way that foreigners often do. It is said that learning a foreign language is imitating and reproducing what you hear and what you see. As a result, after implementing the solutions stated above, the group of ten students has made remarkable progress in their pronunciation. They care more about the final sounds when producing and often try to distinguish long and short vowels.

Useful learning sources for improving pronunciation and speaking

Books are endless learning sources for learners. There are many good books for learners to practice pronunciation. Some are *Ship or Ship* by Ann Baker, *English Pronunciation in Use* by Mark Haccock,

English Pronunciation for International Learners by Paulette Wainless Dale and Lillian Poms and *Pronunciation Pairs* by Ann Baker & Sharom Goldstein. From these books, students will be taught how to pronounce correctly through pictures and they can compare the pairs of sounds which are similar.

Nowadays, information technology has brought a lot of benefits to humans. One of these is helping people update knowledge faster and more effectively. There are many interesting channels for learners to listen to native speaker's voices. I advised my students to make use of these useful sources. For example, through programs in CNN, BBC, or VOA, students have the chance to get acquainted to various accents, as well as imitate the way they produce the sounds and intonation.

Beside those interesting programs, English learning related websites on which pronunciation rules and further practice are presented clearly are easy to look for on the Internet. When students access these websites, they will get relaxed when they practice pronunciation by hearing interesting songs and quizzes or humorous poems and funny stories.

CONCLUSION

This paper has mentioned some common difficulties with the length of sounds faced by Vietnamese learners when pronouncing English. English sounds made by Vietnamese learners are often too short because they omit the final consonants or the vowels they produce are not long enough. To help learners improve their pronunciation and speaking skills, I would like to suggest some useful strategies: Learners should take notice of pronunciation rules. Last but not least, learners need to consult some learning sources including reference books, channels, and websites related to English learning.

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TÓM TẮT

KHÓ KHĂN CỦA NGƯỜI VIỆT NAM VỚI ĐỘ DÀI CỦA ÂM TIẾNG ANH KHI PHÁT ÂM VÀ MỘT VÀI KHUYẾN NGHỊ ĐỀ XUẤT

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Phát âm là một vấn đề khó khăn với người Việt Nam học tiếng Anh. Đa số người học gặp khó khăn trong phát âm, do vậy họ gặp khó khăn trong nghe và nói tiếng Anh. Trong khi đó, hai kỹ năng này rất quan trọng đối với người học khi họ bắt đầu làm việc trong môi trường sử dụng tiếng Anh. Thêm vào đó, người học Việt Nam vẫn phàn nàn về sự phát âm chưa đúng của đồng nghiệp, bạn bè và thậm chí của giáo viên của họ. Trong bài báo này, tôi muốn tìm hiểu một trong những vấn đề khó khăn về phát âm của người học: Người Việt Nam thường phát âm quá ngắn, qua đó tôi xin đưa ra một vài khuyến nghị cho giải pháp của vấn đề này. Bài báo này sẽ giúp người học tiếng Anh chú ý đến độ dài của âm khi họ nói. Đây cũng là một trong những vấn đề còn tồn tại đã thu hút rất nhiều sự quan tâm của các nhà ngôn ngữ và giáo viên tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam. Sau đây là những khái niệm chính được làm rõ trong bài báo này:

- Sự lược bỏ âm cuối
- Sự phân biệt nguyên âm dài và nguyên âm ngắn
- Một vài gợi ý để giải quyết vấn đề này.

Từ khóa: Âm trong tiếng Anh, giải pháp, phát âm, sự lược bỏ âm cuối, phân biệt nguyên âm ngắn và nguyên âm dài.

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