

Vietnamese Learners' Two Biggest Problems with English Phonology

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Abstract

This article indicates Vietnamese tertiary students' two biggest problems with English phonology, which are the long-versus-short-vowel-sound problem and the final-consonant-sound problem. The paper also clarifies the main reasons for these serious problems and recommends what should be done to tackle them.

Key Words: English phonology, problems, Vietnamese learner

Introduction

The English language has enjoyed its unrivaled and undisputed position as the first most important foreign language in Vietnam and it has been taught at every level of education in this country (Nguyen, 2017). One of the ultimate aims of many Vietnamese learners of English is to speak English like a native speaker, which is also one of the greatest challenges faced by non-native English learners all over the world. My own experience of learning English and 12 years of teaching English at different levels in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, show that a great number of Vietnamese learners have difficulties pronouncing English words correctly. This article (1) presents Vietnamese tertiary students' two problems with English phonology, (2) explains their possible reasons, and (3) finds solutions to these problems.

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Long-versus-Short-Vowel-Sound Problem

A great deal of my Vietnamese students of different majors in Ho Chi Minh City could not make any distinction between long and short vowel sounds, and they used to pronounce all vowels as short ones. For example, they could not distinguish /i:/ from /i/ and /u:/ from /u/. Therefore, they pronounced *seat* and *fool* the same as *sit* and *full*.

In my view, the main reason for my students' long-versus-short-vowel-sound problem is that our mother tongue, Vietnamese, which does not differentiate between short and long vowel sounds, has a great impact on their way of speaking English. This is because of the fact that Vietnamese is a syllable-timed language, whereas English is a stress-timed language. According to Neumann (2007), Singer (2012) and Yule (2006), in syllable-timed languages such as Vietnamese and Spanish, all the syllables take roughly the same amount of time to say; however, in a stress-timed language like English, the syllables lengthen and reduce

according to whether or not they are stressed. Therefore, it was really hard for my students, native speakers of a syllable-timed language, to distinguish between long and short vowel sounds.

In order to help my students to solve the long-versus-short-vowel-sound problem, I gave them the following suggestions and recommendations. First, whenever they see new words including short or long vowel sounds, they must use a good and reliable dictionary to check phonetic transcription for these words. Ideally, the phonetic transcription in the dictionary should be based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which is globally regarded as the standard phonetic alphabet. Second, the learners should practise using these words in daily conversations both inside and outside the English classroom. Third, the learners should ask native speakers of English to double-check their vowel sounds.

Final-Consonant-Sound Problem

Vietnamese learners of English also have a serious problem with final consonant sounds. For example, they could not distinguish between *rice* /rais/ and *rise* /raiz/. Their voiced and voiceless plosives in the final position were also the same, *hop* = *hob*, *bit* = *bid*, *back* = *bag*. In addition, they had a tendency to simplify final consonant clusters, usually by omitting the final one. Therefore, [t] in *cast* and [k] in *ask* were reduced.

There are two possible reasons for my students' difficulties. Firstly, it is likely that their problem is mainly due to the transfer of linguistic features from our first language (L1), Vietnamese, to the foreign language, English. This is called L1 transfer (Jenkins, 2007). Secondly, some of my students' mistakes could also be caused by not understanding English grammar rules. For instance, their deletion of [ed] and [s] in the following utterances shows their problems with English grammar.

- a) We waitedd for you last night.
- b) She playss the violin very well.
- c) Please give these penss to Nam.

To help the students deal with their final-consonant-sound problem, I adopted ten techniques suggested by Crystal (2003) and Holliday (2005) when teaching them pronunciation. These techniques work well for my students.

- 1) Write the whole word in phonemic script.
- 2) Point to the phonemic chart.
- 3) Exaggerate the mouth position.
- 4) Show/draw a picture of a mouth diagram.
- 5) Explain if a consonant is voiced or unvoiced.
- 6) Explain how it differs from a Vietnamese sound.
- 7) Follow up with a tongue twister.
- 8) Drill the word backwards, sound by sound, and build up the word.

- 9) Write an 'S' on the word backwards, and point to it when students don't say it.
10) Drill the whole word.

Conclusion

L1 transfer is the same reason for both the long-versus-short-vowel-sound problem and the final-consonant-sound problem of Vietnamese tertiary students of English. To ensure effective English phonology teaching and learning in Vietnam, Vietnamese instructors and teachers need a profound understanding of both their own mother tongue and the target language, English. Hopefully, the suggestions and recommendations in this paper are helpful for not only Vietnamese teachers of English but also other English teachers who are native speakers of syllable-timed languages.

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