

## SOME COMMON PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS FACING VIETNAMESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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### **Abstract**

*This paper was written for my improvement of teaching English Pronunciation. As a teacher of the English language, I wish to learn more about the aspects that influence language learners when they learn how to speak English. Therefore, I want to explore some common difficulties that Vietnamese students encounter when they learn to pronounce the English sounds so that I can teach effectively and help them communicate more effectively. The paper covers a number of frequent pronunciation difficulties that cause problems for Vietnamese learners of the English language. These difficulties include tense and lax vowels, consonant endings, stress and tones. I find this paper a useful reference source for both teachers and students, who want to improve their pronunciation of English.*

*Key words: Common Pronunciation Problems, Vietnamese learners, English*

### **Tóm tắt**

*Bài này được viết nhằm mục đích nâng cao hiệu quả giảng dạy môn ngữ âm tiếng Anh cho bản thân. Là một giáo viên tiếng Anh, tôi muốn tìm hiểu thêm về các khía cạnh có ảnh hưởng đến người học ngôn ngữ khi họ học cách nói tiếng Anh. Vì vậy, tôi muốn tìm ra một số khó khăn phổ biến mà sinh viên Việt Nam gặp phải khi học cách phát âm âm tiếng Anh để dạy và giúp người học giao tiếp hiệu quả hơn. Bài viết này tập trung vào tìm hiểu những khó khăn thường gặp của học viên Việt Nam khi phát âm tiếng Anh. Những khó khăn này bao gồm các nguyên âm ngắn và nguyên âm dài, các phụ âm cuối, trọng âm và ngữ điệu. Bài viết này là một nguồn tham khảo hữu ích cho cả giáo viên và sinh viên- những người muốn cải thiện ngữ âm tiếng Anh của mình.*

*Từ khóa: Các vấn đề ngữ âm thường gặp, học viên người Việt Nam, Tiếng Anh*

### **Introduction**

Learners of English often expect to be able to speak that language like a native speaker. However, they encounter many factors to gain their desire. One of the common factors that they find difficult is the pronunciation of another sound system. Learners find that their mother tongue influences their pronunciation of English. Avery and Ehrich argued that, “the native language affects both

the ability to produce English sounds and the ability to hear sounds” (Avery and Ehrich, XV). Pronunciation is most definitely the first aspect that people can notice in second language learners when they are speaking English. Nation (2009) stated, “When some teachers and students complain about difficulties in speaking, they are often talking about pronunciation” (p.75). Pronunciation also plays a very important role in learning

a language, as Derwing and Munro (2005) claimed that, “having good pronunciation of the language can help in normal communication, particularly intelligibility” (as cited in Nation & Newton, 2009. p. 75). In this paper, I will talk about some common difficulties in pronunciation that Vietnamese speakers face when learning how to speak English. There are four major features that can cause problems for them. Firstly, the complexity of tense and lax vowels in English creates confusion for Vietnamese learners. Secondly, a variety of dialect differences and consonant positions can cause confusion. Consonant clusters also lead Vietnamese speakers to make mistakes when they speak English. Now, finally, the stress and tones in the English language vary widely. Where the Vietnamese language is syllable-timed, the English language is stress-timed.

#### **Method of writing this paper**

To complete this paper, I will use secondary evidence from previous research as well as my first-hand experience of teaching English as a foreign language.

#### **Problems with vowels**

Firstly, I will briefly describe some aspects that relate to the term vowel. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1996) offered two definitions of vowels. The first definition for vowels is “the tools of poets” as vowels allow poets to create assonance and rhythm. Thus, vowels help shape language musically and make it pleasing to the ear. For the second definition, these authors defined that, “vowels are the core or peak of the syllable” (p. 93).

Secondly, I wish to provide some information about Vietnamese vowels. As Honey stated, “the highly complex Vietnamese vowel system possesses eleven pure vowels

and many more diphthongs and triphthongs”. As a Vietnamese native speaker, I understand that those pure vowels are as follows: /a/, /ã/, /â/, /o/, /ô/, /ơ/, /e/, /ê/, /u/, /ư/, and /i/. In general, most of Vietnamese vowels are free of positions, which mean that they can stand-alone. Some, however, cannot. People can usually recognize Vietnamese diphthongs and trip-thongs by the spelling (p. 239).

So, according to Honey, there are some similarities between the two vowel systems. The Vietnamese language often carries alternatives to the closest pure vowel in pronouncing the pure vowel in English, such as: /o/ /ô/ for low and /e/ /ê/ for may. People can only distinguish some pairs of Vietnamese diphthongs by the length of the constituent vowels, such as /ai/ meaning to sew and /mai/ meaning tomorrow (p. 240). As a result, by replacing and pronouncing English in that way, Vietnamese speakers face a large number of problems when speaking in English.

Another important factor in vowel section that causes problems for Vietnamese speakers is the confusion between the tense and lax vowel sounds in English. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) pointed out that, “the distinction between tense and lax vowel pairs of English almost always creates problems” (p. 96). Vietnamese learners of English cannot pronounce the two vowels of each pair correctly. These authors figured out that second language learners could pronounce “neither the tense nor the lax vowel, but a vowel between the two. Failure to make these distinctions can lead to misunderstandings” (p. 96). Avery and Ehrlich also offered an illustration for this problematic phenomenon, such as words like sleep, taste, and stewed.

When Vietnamese speakers pronounce these words, English native speakers may hear slip, text, and stood, instead (p. 96).

To finalize this discussion on the problems of vowels for Vietnamese people in learning English, I would like to describe my own experiences in learning and teaching English as a foreign language for several years, in order to describe specific problems. For many years of learning English, I faced difficulties in pronouncing the tense and lax vowels in English correctly. With my experience of teaching English at a public school in Vietnam, I realize that most of my students have problems with a number of vowels, as follows:

### **Problem with /i:/ versus /I/**

While teaching these two sounds to my students, most of them could not distinguish the differences between these sounds. When teaching, I took some minimal pair words, such as “seat” and “sit”, “sheep” and “ship”. I tried to lengthen the /i:/ sound for them to listen, so that they could recognize the differences. They told me that there was a difference between them, the pair, due to the /i:/ sound is longer than /I/ sound. However, when the students practiced pronouncing these sounds, they pronounced both sound exactly the same.

### **Problem with /u:/ versus //**

Similarly to the issue concerning /i:/ and /I/ sounds, my students learned how to pronounce /u:/ and // sounds, and they could distinguish the differences between them. However, in English, there are many words with ‘oo’ that may be pronounced as neither /u:/ nor //. This can produce confusion for Vietnamese learners; as a result, students projected the same sound for both /u:/ and //. For example, the word ‘good’ is pronounced

as /g d/. In contrast, the word ‘pool’ is /pu:l/. For the most part, my students vocally could not distinguish the differences between them. Therefore, I have concluded that when my students have spoken these types of words, they associate these words as illustrating the same sound.

### **Problem with /e/ versus /æ/**

Vietnamese students cannot identify the vowel /e/ and /æ/, such as in bed and bad (Avery and Ehrlich, p. 156). The confusion between /e/ and /æ/ may be considered as the most serious problem that Vietnamese speakers encounter when they learn to speak English vowels. They cannot identify the differences. Learners usually make numerous mistakes with these sounds. According to Avery and Ehrlich, “students often pronounce these two vowels in exactly the same way. Most commonly, students fail to lower their tongue and jaw far enough in attempting to produce the /æ/ sound” (p. 99).

### **Confusion between // and //**

These two sounds are somewhat easier to recognize than the vowel sounds as discussed above. However, in some certain instances, they still demonstrate mispronunciation of them. For instance, the word ‘love,’ may be pronounced as /l v/ or /l v/.

### **Problems with consonants**

To examine the problems that Vietnamese speakers meet when they learn to speak English, I will explain general problems based on the work of several linguists. I shall also point out specific problems based on my own learning and teaching experiences.

According to Honey, “the Vietnamese consonant system is very different from that of the English, and there is considerable variation between dialects. Vietnamese

learners of English can be expected to come across particular difficulty with some or all of the following sounds: /f/, /θ/, /ð/, /z/, /l/, /r/, /v/, /w/ (p. 240).

Vietnamese speakers can pronounce words with final voiceless stop consonants /p/, /t/ and /k/, as these voiceless stop consonants occur at the final position of a word in Vietnamese. However, Vietnamese speakers pronounce these consonants with extremely short duration, and therefore, the sounds are never released at the end position of a word. It can be very difficult for English native speakers to hear these sounds from Vietnamese speakers. For example, a Vietnamese learner of English producing the word seat may sound like see (Avery and Ehrlich, 1992, p. 153).

#### **Problem with voiced versus voiceless stops**

Vietnamese speakers of English have a number of problems with the voiced versus the voiceless stops in word final position, /b/, /p/, /d/, /g/ vs. /p/, /t/, /k/. Based on Avery and Ehrlich's statement, "Vietnamese has no voiced stops at the ends of words" (p. 154). Additionally, Vietnamese learners of English encounter problems with words final fricative consonants /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /s/, /z/, /l/ and /r/. Vietnamese speakers can pronounce fricatives such as /f/, /v/ and /s/ at the beginning of English words. However, fricatives do not occur in word-final position in their mother tongue. Thus, omission of a fricative at the end of words usually occurs when they speak English. The word 'beef' may be pronounced like /bi:/, month as /m n/, or such as the following sentence:

*The boys always pass the garage on their way home.*

*May sound like:*

*The boy always pa the gara on their way home* (Avery and Ehrlich, p. 154).

Being a native speaker of Vietnamese, I also face many difficulties in pronouncing English consonants. During the time I taught English as a foreign language at a secondary school and at a university, I had trouble explaining to my students the difficulties they had. In reading books about problems with pronunciation, I gained more knowledge and experiences about English pronunciation. I realized that most Vietnamese speakers, even those who are very proficient in English still endure problems with the following English consonants featured in this abstract.

**Problem between consonant /s/ and /z/** Vietnamese speakers often get confused between /s/ and /z/. They replace /s/ for /z/, so that a word such as peas is pronounced as peace. In conversational situations, the /s/ sound may present two types of problem. The first problem is that in the spelling of some words, the /s/ sound is omitted. For example, the word because is often pronounced as /bik/. The second problem that many speakers encounter is the redundancy of the /s/ sound. As mentioned above, the /s/ and /z/ sounds do not occur at the final position in Vietnamese words, but for English words, they do. Consequently, when speaking, Vietnamese learners of English are over aware of these sounds and the over-awareness leads them to make pronunciation mistakes. Vietnamese often add the /s/ sound in both adjectives and non count nouns. For example, instead of saying very good, many speakers say very goods, and a lot of money turns out sounding like a lot of moneys.

#### **Problem with /θ/ and /ð/**

Vietnamese speakers often create a heavily

voiceless stop /t/ instead of a voiceless fricative /θ/ in a word like thank. Apparently, they vocalize the sound /t/ based on their language since in Vietnamese the letter th is combined by a heavily aspirated /t/. So, the word three can be pronounced exactly like tree. Vietnamese learners of English commonly produce /d/ or /z/ for /ð/ sounds, so the word than may sound like /dæn/ or /zæn/ (Avery and Ehrlich, 1992, p. 155).

#### **Problem with word-final / /**

When Vietnamese speakers learn how to produce the voiceless fricative / / in word-final positions, they may produce this sound as / /. For example, the word ‘march’ may sound like /ma / (Avery and Ehrlich, 1992, p. 155).

#### **Problem with /p/ vs. /f/ and /b/:**

In Vietnamese language, the voiceless stop /p/ does not occur in initial places of words. As such, Vietnamese speakers can substitute a voiced stop /b/ or a voiceless fricative /f/ for /p/. Examples of this are that the word pool may sound like fool, and pop may sound like bop. In contrast, in the final positions, these consonants often provoke confusion for learners. For example, lab might sound like lap (Avery and Ehrlich, 1992, p. 155).

#### **Problem with liquid /l/ and nasal /n/**

In Vietnamese language, these two sounds exist. However, people in many parts of Vietnam, especially for those who live in the north of Vietnam cannot distinguish the differences between them in their mother tongue. They usually find themselves confused between the /n/ sound and /l/ sound. Thus, when they speak English, they always make mistakes with these sounds. One example of this is that they say /lθw/ for the word no or /lain/ for nine, or they may say /snθwni/ for

the word ‘slowly’.

#### **Consonant clusters**

According to Avery and Ehrlich “Vietnamese has no consonant clusters in initial or final position” (p. 155). Therefore, many English consonants do not appear in Vietnamese, which can lead Vietnamese students to make mistakes when they speak English. Avery and Ehrlich also said that, “Vietnamese students tend to omit one or more consonants from a difficult cluster” (p. 155). The most common mistake is the deletion of consonant s in the middle of words, for example, they say /æb æk/ for abstract (Honey, p. 240).

#### **Problem with grammatical ending s**

When words end in s in forms of consonant-vowel-consonant, the /s/ sound is frequently omitted. For examples, sits may turn to /sIt/ and wants may become /wan/. Sometimes, Vietnamese speakers tend to omit both /t/ and /s/ sound in the word wants. As, Nguyen (2007) stated, “clusters ending with voiceless /s/ and /t/ cause quite lot of problems for informants” (p. 23).

Some other final consonant clusters such as /kt/ as in walked, /t/ as in washed, /d/ as in judged, and /ld/ as in filled are very difficult for Vietnamese learners to pronounce. According to Nguyen (2007), “two-consonant cluster that contain /l/ in /lz/, /lt/, /ld/, or /lf/ are observed to be really difficult for all speakers since the sound itself never appears in the first language” (p. 22). For instance, the words world may be pronounced as /w /, myself may be pronounced as /mayse/. These mistakes can be very difficult for Vietnamese learners to overcome.

#### **Word stress and tones**

Ngo, a Vietnamese lecturer at Harvard

University claimed that “Vietnamese is a tonal language in which changes of the pitch level and/or contour signal changes in meaning” (p. 7). He also mentioned that Vietnamese is syllable-timed language, and English is stress-timed language (p.7). In syllable-timed language, each syllable is given the same amount of time pronounced about the same length, but in stress-timed language, the stress syllables come at regular intervals. Consequently, Vietnamese learners have problems with timing of stressed words.

Vietnamese speakers are not able to vocalize stress by tone in English words due to syllabic tone (Honey, p. 241). They articulate every individual syllable with its characteristic tonal pattern, and without tonal pattern, listeners cannot recognize the differences between Vietnamese words. In addition, in compound words that consist of two or more syllabic units, each syllable keeps its own characteristic tone. Whereas, the word stresses in English occur variously. The stress may appear in the first, the second, the third or the fourth syllable of words. The word record may have the stress on the first (if it functions as a noun) or second syllable (if it functions as a verb). Consequently, Vietnamese speakers of English meet difficulties with word stress.

### **In conclusion**

Vietnamese speakers come across various difficulties in learning English pronunciation. The complications of vowels, particularly between tense and lax vowels in English can be tough to learn. In addition, the differences between consonant positions, consonant clusters, word and tones lead Vietnamese students of English to meet a large number of difficulties. As a result, Vietnamese speakers often come across pronunciation problems

when communicating in English.

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