Pronunciation Errors in English Vowels and Consonants among 3rd Year Students at Dai Nam University: Patterns and Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract:

This study investigates the most frequent pronunciation errors in English vowels and consonants among 3rd-year English students at Dai Nam University, explores the potential causes of these errors, and proposes effective teaching methods to address these pronunciation challenges. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data from recorded pronunciation tasks identified recurring errors, such as confusion between long and short vowels and substitutions for consonant sounds absent in Vietnamese phonology (e.g., /θ/ and /ð/). Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups suggest that these errors are influenced by phonological transfer effects from Vietnamese and a lack of awareness among students regarding the phonetic distinctions between Vietnamese and English. Focus group discussions with instructors highlight effective pedagogical techniques, including minimal pair drills, phonetic symbols, and visual aids, that address these specific pronunciation difficulties. The findings underscore the need for tailored pronunciation instruction that raises phonological awareness and incorporates structured practice, enabling Vietnamese EFL students to improve their pronunciation accuracy and confidence in English communication.

Keywords: Pronunciation errors, English vowels and consonants, Vietnamese phonology, phonological transfer, EFL learners

1. Introduction:

1.1. Background of the Study

Pronunciation plays a critical role in achieving oral communicative competence, which is fundamental for effective language learning. However, for non-native English learners, mastering the pronunciation of English vowels and consonants often presents significant challenges. According to Celce-Murcia et al. (2010), pronunciation is one of the most difficult aspects of language learning because it involves both segmental features (such as vowels and consonants) and supra-segmental features (such as intonation and stress). In particular, the articulation of vowels and consonants can vary greatly depending on learners' native language backgrounds, leading to persistent errors (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

For Vietnamese learners of English, certain phonetic features in English do not exist in the

Vietnamese language, creating additional difficulties in pronunciation. Vietnamese is a tonal language with fewer vowel and consonant distinctions compared to English, which is non-tonal and rich in both vowel and consonant variety. As Nguyen and Macken (2008) explain, Vietnamese speakers often struggle with English vowels and consonants because the contrasts in the two phonetic systems are significant. For instance, English vowels such as /ɪ/ and /iː/ or consonants like /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ pose difficulties because of their absence in the Vietnamese phonological system. This issue frequently leads to miscommunication in spoken English, affecting intelligibility (Kang, 2010).

The current study aims to investigate the specific patterns of pronunciation errors made by third-year students at Dai Nam University. Identifying these patterns is crucial for informing pedagogical strategies to address the unique challenges faced by these learners. Previous studies, such as those by Thomson and Derwing (2014), have emphasized the importance of understanding error patterns in pronunciation to tailor instructional approaches that improve pronunciation and overall communicative competence. By exploring the common vowel and consonant errors among these students, this study seeks to offer pedagogical implications that can contribute to more effective pronunciation teaching methods.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Pronunciation errors in English, particularly in the articulation of vowels and consonants, are a common challenge faced by non-native speakers. For Vietnamese learners of English, the phonological differences between Vietnamese and English contribute to persistent pronunciation errors that hinder communicative competence. Despite being third-year students who have undergone extensive English language instruction, many learners at Dai Nam University continue to struggle with accurate vowel and consonant production. These pronunciation issues often lead to misunderstandings in spoken communication, and in turn, affect students' academic and

professional opportunities. Previous research has identified common pronunciation errors in various learner populations, yet there is limited research focusing specifically on the patterns of vowel and consonant errors among Vietnamese learners at this stage of language development. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the specific pronunciation difficulties faced by these students and identify pedagogical strategies that can help address these issues effectively.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to identify the most common pronunciation errors in both English vowels and consonants among 3rd-year students at Dai Nam University. It seeks to explore the causes of these errors, with a particular focus on phonological interference from the students' native language, Vietnamese. Additionally, the research will provide pedagogical recommendations to enhance pronunciation teaching methods, specifically tailored to address the challenges faced by Vietnamese learners.

1.4. Research Questions

The study will address several key questions.

1.4.1. What are the most frequent pronunciation errors in both English vowels and consonants among 3rd-year students at Dai Nam University?

1.4.2. What are the potential causes of these errors, particularly examining the influence of Vietnamese phonology?

1.4.3. What teaching methods can be adapted to better address these pronunciation challenges?

1.5. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to address a critical gap in the understanding of pronunciation errors among Vietnamese learners of English. By identifying the specific patterns of vowel and consonant errors, this research will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on second language (L2) phonology and pronunciation pedagogy. Moreover, this study is particularly important for language instructors at

Dai Nam University and similar institutions, as it will provide evidence-based recommendations for improving pronunciation teaching practices.

For students, improved pronunciation skills are likely to lead to greater intelligibility, which is essential for effective communication in academic and professional contexts. In the broader context of English language teaching (ELT) in Vietnam, this study will offer insights that can inform curriculum design and instructional approaches, particularly for learners whose native language significantly differs from English. Ultimately, by addressing the specific challenges faced by Vietnamese learners, this research aims to enhance the overall effectiveness of English language education in Vietnam.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. The Importance of Pronunciation in Second Language Learning

Pronunciation is a critical aspect of second language (L2) learning, as it directly influences intelligibility and communicative competence. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010) emphasize that accurate pronunciation is essential for learners to be understood by others, regardless of their proficiency in other language skills. Learners with good grammar and vocabulary may still face significant communication barriers if their pronunciation is poor (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Thus, mastering pronunciation—particularly of vowels and consonants—is crucial for effective spoken communication in English.

For Vietnamese learners of English, pronunciation errors are common due to significant differences between the phonological systems of Vietnamese and English. Vietnamese is a tonal language with a simpler vowel and consonant inventory compared to English, which makes certain sounds difficult to produce accurately (Nguyen & Macken, 2008). As a result, Vietnamese learners may mispronounce sounds that do not exist in their native language, such as the English vowel contrasts between /ɪ/ and /iː/ or the consonant sounds /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. Such errors can lead to misunderstandings and reduced comprehensibility in both academic and professional settings (Kang, 2010).

2.2. Phonological Interference in Pronunciation Errors

Phonological interference, or the influence of a learner's first language (L1) on the pronunciation of a second language (L2), is one of the primary causes of pronunciation errors. The theory of L1 interference suggests that learners tend to transfer the phonological rules and habits from their native language when learning an L2, which can result in systematic errors (Odlin, 1989). This is particularly evident in the case of Vietnamese learners of English. Vietnamese phonology lacks certain vowel distinctions found in English, and its consonant system is more limited, particularly with respect to final consonant clusters, which are common in English (Nguyen, 2010). As a result, Vietnamese learners often have difficulty producing sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/, which do not exist in their L1 (Nguyen & Ingram, 2006).

Research by Swan and Smith (2001) has shown that phonological interference is not limited to individual sounds but can also affect prosodic features such as stress and intonation. Vietnamese learners, for example, may transfer the tonal patterns of their L1 into their English speech, leading to unusual intonation patterns that native English speakers find difficult to understand. Such issues can exacerbate the problems caused by segmental pronunciation errors, making it more challenging for learners to achieve comprehensible speech.

2.3. Common Pronunciation Errors among Vietnamese Learners of English

Several studies have explored the specific pronunciation challenges faced by Vietnamese learners of English. Nguyen and Macken (2008) found that Vietnamese learners consistently struggle with English vowels, particularly with distinguishing between short and long vowel sounds (e.g., /ɪ/ vs. /iː/). This is because Vietnamese has fewer vowel contrasts, and learners often substitute familiar L1 sounds for

unfamiliar L2 sounds (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Similarly, consonant errors are frequent, especially in the pronunciation of English sounds such as /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /θ/, and /ð/, which do not exist in Vietnamese (Nguyen, 2010).

The consonant system in Vietnamese also differs significantly from that of English, particularly with respect to final consonants. Vietnamese lacks the final consonant clusters that are common in English, leading learners to either omit these sounds or replace them with similar sounds from their native language (Nguyen & Ingram, 2006). These systematic errors can impede communication and affect learners' confidence in using English in both academic and social contexts.

2.4. Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching Pronunciation

Effective pronunciation teaching is essential to help learners overcome the challenges posed by phonological interference. According to Morley (1991), explicit instruction in pronunciation can significantly improve learners' intelligibility and reduce the frequency of pronunciation errors. A combination of focused pronunciation exercises and communicative practice can help learners become more aware of the phonological differences between their L1 and L2, and develop strategies to produce unfamiliar sounds more accurately (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

Thomson and Derwing (2014) highlight the importance of corrective feedback in pronunciation teaching. They argue that immediate, focused feedback helps learners correct errors as they occur, which enhances their ability to internalize the correct pronunciation of problematic sounds. Additionally, Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) advocate for the use of technology in pronunciation training, including the use of apps and software that provide learners with visual representations of sound patterns, allowing them to compare their own speech with that of native speakers.

For Vietnamese learners, targeted exercises that focus on the most problematic vowel and consonant sounds can be highly effective. Nguyen (2010) suggests that teachers should prioritize sounds that do not exist in Vietnamese and provide ample opportunities for learners to practice these sounds in a communicative context. Moreover, addressing prosodic features such as stress and intonation can help learners develop more natural speech patterns and improve overall intelligibility (Swan & Smith, 2001).

2.5. Vietnamese Phonological System and Its Impact on English Pronunciation

The phonological system of a learner's native language plays a significant role in shaping how they acquire the pronunciation of a second language. For Vietnamese learners of English, the substantial differences between the phonological systems of Vietnamese and English often lead to systematic pronunciation errors. Understanding the key characteristics of the Vietnamese phonological system can provide insights into the specific challenges these learners face in acquiring English pronunciation.

2.5.1. Vowels in the Vietnamese Phonological System

The Vietnamese vowel system differs significantly from that of English, particularly in terms of the number of vowel contrasts. Vietnamese has fewer vowels, and they are often categorized according to tongue height, frontness, and lip rounding (Nguyen & Macken, 2008). This system lacks certain vowel distinctions that are central to English, such as the contrast between short and long vowels (e.g., /ɪ/ and /iː/). English vowels such as /æ/ (as in cat) or /ɜː/ (as in bird) are particularly challenging for Vietnamese speakers to produce, as there are no direct equivalents in their native language.

For example, Vietnamese learners might substitute the English vowel /ɪ/ with the closer Vietnamese vowel /i/ or struggle to produce the distinction between /ɪ/ and /iː/, leading to frequent mispronunciations (Nguyen & Ingram, 2006). This vowel reduction can cause confusion in spoken communication, where vowel length and

quality play a crucial role in distinguishing words. Consequently, Vietnamese learners often exhibit errors in both perception and production of English vowels (Derwing & Munro, 2015), which affect their overall intelligibility in spoken interactions.

2.5.2. Consonants in the Vietnamese Phonological System

In terms of consonants, the Vietnamese system is less complex than English. Vietnamese lacks several consonant sounds that are critical to English pronunciation, particularly in the areas of fricatives and affricates. Sounds such as /ʃ/ (as in ship), /ʒ/ (as in measure), and the interdental fricatives /θ/ (as in think) and /ð/ (as in this) do not exist in Vietnamese. Vietnamese learners often substitute these unfamiliar English sounds with those that are phonetically closest in their L1. For example, /ʃ/ may be pronounced as /s/, and /θ/ may be substituted with /t/ (Nguyen, 2010).

Additionally, the final consonant system in Vietnamese is quite restricted compared to English. Vietnamese does not allow consonant clusters in word-final positions, which are common in English (Nguyen & Ingram, 2006). For instance, in the word desk, Vietnamese learners may omit the final /sk/ cluster and pronounce the word as des. This omission is a form of phonological simplification, driven by the learners' tendency to apply L1 phonotactic constraints to the L2. As Swan and Smith (2001) point out, this kind of transfer from L1 to L2 can result in systematic and predictable pronunciation errors.

2.5.3. Tonal Nature of Vietnamese

One of the most distinctive features of the Vietnamese language is its tonal nature. Vietnamese is a tonal language with six different tones, meaning that the pitch contour of a word determines its meaning (Nguyen & Macken, 2008). English, on the other hand, is not a tonal language but relies on stress and intonation patterns to convey emphasis and meaning. The tonal nature of Vietnamese can interfere with

English pronunciation, particularly in the area of intonation. Vietnamese learners may use tone patterns from their native language when speaking English, resulting in unnatural intonation patterns that native speakers find difficult to interpret (Swan & Smith, 2001). This intonational interference can exacerbate the challenges posed by segmental errors in vowels and consonants, further reducing the learners' overall intelligibility.

2.5.4. Phonological Transfer and Its Implications

The influence of the Vietnamese phonological system on English pronunciation errors is a classic example of phonological transfer, where learners unconsciously apply the phonetic rules and constraints of their L1 to their L2 (Odlin, 1989). This transfer is often most pronounced in the early stages of language learning but can persist even in advanced learners, particularly when the L1 and L2 phonological systems are as different as those of Vietnamese and English. Studies have shown that such transfer can lead to both segmental and supra-segmental errors in pronunciation, affecting learners' ability to communicate effectively (Nguyen & Macken, 2008).

The impact of phonological transfer has important pedagogical implications. Teachers must be aware of the specific pronunciation challenges faced by Vietnamese learners and design instruction to address these issues explicitly. According to Derwing and Munro (2015), targeted pronunciation instruction that focuses on problematic sounds—such as English vowels and consonants not present in Vietnamese—can help learners develop more accurate pronunciation. Additionally, providing ample practice with intonation and stress patterns, rather than tone, can help learners avoid intonational transfer from Vietnamese to English.

3. Methodology:
3.1. Research Design

This study aims to identify the most common pronunciation errors in English vowels and

consonants, explore potential causes rooted in Vietnamese phonology, and recommend effective teaching methods to address these challenges. The research addresses three primary questions: (1) what are the most frequent pronunciation errors in both English vowels and consonants among 3rd-year students at Dai Nam University? (2) What are the potential causes of these errors, particularly examining the influence of Vietnamese phonology? And (3) what teaching methods can be adapted to better address these pronunciation challenges? This mixed-methods design employs both quantitative and qualitative approaches, with quantitative data identifying the frequency and types of pronunciation errors and qualitative data providing insights into their causes and gathering input on effective teaching methods.

3.2. Participants

The participants for this study will consist of approximately 30 third-year English majors at Dai Nam University, all of whom are Vietnamese, ensuring a consistent linguistic background to examine Vietnamese phonology's influence on English pronunciation. The homogenous background of participants will facilitate a clearer analysis of cross-linguistic influences on pronunciation errors. Data collection is divided into three phases: identification of pronunciation errors, exploration of potential causes, and examination of pedagogical methods.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

In the first phase, the study will employ quantitative methods to identify and categorize the most common pronunciation errors. Students will be provided with pronunciation tasks, including a list of words, sentences, and a short reading passage that encompass a variety of English vowels and consonants known to be challenging for Vietnamese speakers. Each student's performance will be recorded in a controlled setting, ensuring high-quality audio for subsequent analysis. An error analysis framework will be developed to systematically categorize the types of pronunciation errors observed, enabling researchers to tally the frequency of each type of

error across participants. This analysis will identify patterns in the types of errors made with specific vowel and consonant sounds, providing a descriptive overview of the most common pronunciation challenges.

In the second phase, qualitative methods will explore the potential causes of these pronunciation errors. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the student participants to gather their perceptions of their pronunciation difficulties. These interviews will address areas such as their awareness of specific pronunciation issues and their understanding of differences between Vietnamese and English phonology. To further explore phonological influences, common pronunciation errors will be compared with features of Vietnamese phonology, such as the absence of certain sounds (e.g., $/\theta/$ as in think or $/\eth/$ as in this) and fewer vowel distinctions. Thematic analysis of interview responses will identify patterns that reveal phonological transfer effects, providing insights into how Vietnamese phonology may contribute to specific types of pronunciation errors.

In the final phase, qualitative data collection will focus on exploring effective teaching methods. Focus group discussions will be held with English instructors at Dai Nam University, aiming to understand the specific pronunciation challenges faced by Vietnamese students and the teaching techniques that have proven effective. Instructors will be invited to share successful strategies, such as phonetic drills, minimal pairs practice, or visual aids like tongue placement diagrams, which address common pronunciation issues arising from cross-linguistic differences. Thematic analysis of these discussions will identify best practices for teaching pronunciation, focusing on methods that effectively bridge the gap between Vietnamese and English phonological systems.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative analysis of the pronunciation errors will provide a statistical overview of the most common errors among 3rd-year students, while qualitative analysis of the interview and focus

group data will reveal themes and insights related to phonological causes and pedagogical solutions. The findings from this study are expected to pinpoint specific pronunciation challenges that Vietnamese students face in English, clarify the influence of Vietnamese phonology on these errors, and provide evidence-based recommendations for teaching pronunciation. By identifying methods tailored to Vietnamese learners, this research will contribute valuable insights to the development of pronunciation-focused curricula and training programs for English instructors, ultimately supporting the improvement of English pronunciation skills among students at Dai Nam University.

4. Findings:

4.1. Common Pronunciation Errors in Vowels

The analysis of recorded pronunciation tasks revealed several consistent patterns in errors among 3rd-year students. In vowel pronunciation, common issues included confusion between long and short vowel sounds, especially with sounds such as /iː/ and /ɪ/, where students often pronounced sheep as ship. Additionally, diphthongs posed significant challenges, with many students struggling to accurately produce sounds like /eɪ/ in face or /aɪ/ in time. For consonants, the most frequent errors included difficulties with sounds that do not exist in Vietnamese, such as /θ/ and /ð/ (often substituted with /t/ or /d/, resulting in think becoming tink or this becoming dis). Another common error involved replacing the /ʃ/ sound with /s/, leading to pronunciations like sip instead of ship.

4.2. Potential Causes of Pronunciation Errors: Influence of Vietnamese Phonology

Interview data and phonological comparisons indicated that many pronunciation challenges stemmed from phonological transfer effects between Vietnamese and English. Vietnamese does not have certain sounds found in English, such as /θ/, /ð/, and /ʃ/, leading students to substitute them with phonetically similar sounds available in their native language. Additionally, Vietnamese has a smaller inventory of vowel

sounds compared to English, contributing to frequent errors in distinguishing between long and short vowels as well as diphthongs. The interviews also highlighted that many students were unaware of the differences between English and Vietnamese phonetic rules, which further exacerbated their difficulty in correctly producing unfamiliar sounds. This lack of awareness suggests that without explicit instruction on these differences, students may struggle to correct these phonological errors.

4.3. Teaching Methods for Addressing Pronunciation Challenges

Focus group discussions with instructors provided valuable insights into effective teaching methods to help address these pronunciation errors. Instructors reported that using minimal pairs (e.g., sheep vs. ship, think vs. sink) in drills was highly effective for raising students' awareness of subtle sound differences. They also found success with phonetic symbols and visual aids, such as mouth diagrams, to illustrate tongue and lip placement for challenging sounds like /θ/ and /ʃ/. Another effective method was integrating listening activities that focused on native pronunciation, allowing students to repeatedly hear and imitate sounds that are difficult to produce. Overall, instructors emphasized that consistent, targeted practice using visual and auditory resources helped students overcome pronunciation barriers. However, they also highlighted that individualized feedback and explicit instruction on cross-linguistic phonetic differences were crucial in helping students understand the roots of their pronunciation errors.

4.4. Summary of Findings

The study revealed that pronunciation challenges among Vietnamese students primarily stem from phonological differences between Vietnamese and English. The most frequent errors involved both vowel and consonant substitutions that correlate closely with sounds absent in Vietnamese. The findings underscore the importance of tailored teaching methods, including minimal pair drills, phonetic instruction, and visual aids, to address

these specific phonological challenges. This research highlights the need for explicit instruction on phonological differences between languages and suggests that an emphasis on listening and targeted pronunciation practice can significantly aid students in overcoming these pronunciation errors.

5. Discussion:

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the pronunciation challenges faced by 3rd-year English students at Dai Nam University, particularly in the context of vowel and consonant sounds that are absent or significantly different in Vietnamese. The frequent pronunciation errors observed, including confusion between long and short vowels (e.g., /iː/ and /ɪ/) and challenges with certain consonants (e.g., /θ/ and /ð/), underscore the influence of Vietnamese phonology on English pronunciation. These errors are consistent with patterns identified in second language acquisition research, where learners often substitute unfamiliar sounds with those that are phonetically similar in their native language. This phenomenon of phonological transfer highlights the need for English language instruction that explicitly addresses these cross-linguistic differences.

The study's qualitative data further revealed that many students lack awareness of the distinct phonetic rules governing English sounds compared to Vietnamese. This lack of awareness may contribute to persistent errors, as students are unaware of the specific areas needing improvement. Therefore, raising phonological awareness among learners could play a significant role in helping them understand the underlying causes of their pronunciation difficulties. These insights align with research emphasizing the importance of explicit pronunciation instruction in foreign language education, particularly in contexts where learners' native phonological systems differ considerably from the target language.

The pedagogical methods identified in this study offer practical solutions to address these pronunciation issues effectively. Techniques such as minimal pair drills, visual aids for sound articulation, and phonetic instruction are instrumental in helping students discern and produce sounds that are challenging due to cross-linguistic differences. The success of these methods is supported by prior studies in pronunciation teaching, which highlight the efficacy of targeted, structured practice combined with phonetic training in overcoming pronunciation barriers. However, it is also apparent from the focus group discussions that pronunciation training must be coupled with individualized feedback and consistent practice, as students benefit most from ongoing reinforcement and direct guidance on specific pronunciation challenges.

Despite these contributions, it is essential to acknowledge the study's limitations. The sample size was limited to 30 participants, which may not fully capture the diversity of pronunciation issues among all 3rd-year students. Additionally, the study focused on students' spoken production in controlled tasks, which may not entirely reflect their pronunciation challenges in spontaneous speech. Future research could expand this study by incorporating a larger sample size and analyzing pronunciation in more varied speech contexts. Moreover, longitudinal studies could assess the effectiveness of specific teaching interventions over time, offering insights into how sustained phonological training impacts pronunciation improvement.

6. Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study highlights the prevalence of pronunciation errors among Vietnamese EFL learners, particularly in English vowels and consonants that have no direct equivalent in Vietnamese phonology. The research underscores the influence of phonological transfer from Vietnamese, which leads to predictable patterns of substitution and mispronunciation in English. To address these pronunciation challenges effectively, the study recommends adopting teaching methods that incorporate minimal pair drills, phonetic symbols, visual aids, and listening

activities tailored to Vietnamese learners' specific needs.

The implications of these findings are significant for English language instructors and curriculum designers. By focusing on phonological awareness and targeted pronunciation practice, instructors can help students more effectively overcome the phonological barriers that affect their spoken English proficiency. These recommendations support a more tailored approach to pronunciation instruction, recognizing the unique phonological influences present in Vietnamese-speaking learners of English. Ultimately, this research contributes to a better understanding of how cross-linguistic phonological influences shape pronunciation errors and provides evidence-based strategies for helping learners improve their pronunciation accuracy, fostering more effective and confident communication in English.

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