

# IMPROVING LEARNERS' PRONUNCIATION THROUGH PHONETIC TRAINING: AN EXPERIMENT ON SECOND YEAR NON-MAJORED ENGLISH STUDENTS AT VAN LANG

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## ABSTRACT:

It is strongly believed that a generally accepted goal of pronunciation pedagogy is to help learners achieve a comfortably intelligible pronunciation rather than a native-like one. In fact, acquiring native like pronunciation skills in an L2 for adult learners is incapable (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). This study aims at proposing phonetic training as a solution to help adult learners improve their pronunciation. To attain this goal, the literature of teaching pronunciation was reviewed in order to shape the theory, principles as well as implications for applying it effectively. Based on the conceptual framework, the research was carried out at Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City from September 10th to 20th October 2020 in order to collect data by means of questionnaire and the students' scores. From the research findings, some advice for teachers of English was recommended with expectation that students would be able to acquire a comfortably intelligible pronunciation in their real communication.

**Keywords:** Intelligible pronunciation, phonetic transcription, IPA.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the study

When the Communicative Approach has become a buzzword among people in the fields of language education since the late 1980s in Vietnam, both English teachers and learners seem to have fewer difficulties in their teaching and learning. But it turns out that this is not true for such ideas of Tran Thi Lan, a senior lecturer at Hanoi University of Foreign Studies at Vietnam Teacher Training Network (VTTN) conference held by British Council and Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in December 2005: "of the four language skills, speaking is always seen as the most challenging by Vietnamese students. One reason for this is neglecting pronunciation at school at all levels."

In spite of the non-native speakers' excellent vocabulary and grammar competence, they still cannot be able to communicate effectively if their pronunciation falls below a certain threshold level. In fact, English learners with correct pronunciation are likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, but learners with incorrect pronunciation will not be understood, even if their grammar is actually perfect (Wong, 1987). Therefore, Morley (1991) did consent to the importance of teaching English pronunciation in the ESL or EFL classroom; nonetheless, this significant area is still neglected or ignored at many universities and colleges around the world.

This problem is the same as most of the universities in Vietnam. Pronunciation has no position in university's curriculum for non-English

majors though pronunciation, a crucial ingredient of the learning of oral skills in a second language acquisition is always kept in mind by many English teachers.

With the aim of making learners familiar with intelligible pronunciation, there are obviously plenty of English pronunciation books in the market, and E-learning websites considered as good English resources. However, these materials are mainly written by English native speakers for general learners. None of them are exclusive for the Vietnamese with the emphasis on the special difficulties that Vietnamese learners have (Tran Thi Lan, 2005). Consequently, the demand of improving English pronunciation for Vietnamese learners has been raising because “many Vietnamese speakers can speak English, but only a few have intelligible English pronunciation so that they can be understood easily in direct communication with foreigners” (Tam Ha Cam, Vol. 21, No.1 F.L).

### **1.2. Problem of the study**

Many complaints have been made about the issue on teaching pronunciation in high school in different provinces in Vietnam. There is no doubt that both high school teachers and students are often kept under pressure by time allocations, curriculum contents, especially the expectation of students, parents and staff that students will get high mark in the examination. Hence, the format of English test for the high school graduation examination is much taken into thoughtful consideration. As a result, students are almost trained to be successful in dealing with tests based on reading comprehension, writing, and grammar. From an antidotal perspective, several teachers, especially those who teach at the 12th grade, claim that they would rather supply their students some knowledge of lexis and syntax to prepare for their examination than waste time teaching speaking skills or improving student’s pronunciation. As a matter of fact, little attention is particularly paid to pronunciation at high school although they know pronunciation is very important. Thus, students lack appreciable competence to use the language they learn in classrooms to sustain real-life communication or to get across their intended meanings when exposed to an English-speaking environment.

In line with the above issues, Dalton (2002) also agreed that “We are comfortable teaching reading, writing, listening and to a degree, general oral skills,

but when it comes to pronunciation, we often lack the basic knowledge of articulatory phonetics (not difficult to acquire) to offer our students anything more than rudimentary (and often unhelpful) advice such as, ‘it sounds like this: uuuh.’”

Having domino effect of high school environment, non-English majors at Van Lang University (VLU) are not an exception when dealing with pronunciation for some reasons:

First, the course book used for the second-year students is *The Business – Intermediate*, Macmillan (including four units for each semester). Most of the English teachers at (VLU) who have been using the English course book for four years agree that it is a really good course book in that students are well-interacted in a variety of business English situations including both in and out of the workplace. In fact, the course book is the ideal course for students who need to communicate in English when working, travelling and socializing. However, looking at the contents of the book, there is no room for the pronunciation though the course book design is much focused on developing the four skills of English. However, students are always given the chance to practice pronunciation by reading the new words loudly after the teacher’s model when teachers teach reading, speaking, and listening sections, but the fact remains that students just copy or imitate the sounds of the words from the teacher’s model because they are not currently surrounded by ‘scaffolding of good understanding of basic knowledge of pronunciation’. As a result, mispronouncing the words and not knowing how to pronounce what they are taught in class whenever students cannot recall them are frequently-faced issues. That is the reason why most of the English teachers are stressful for their preoccupations with improving students’ English pronunciation or even face a dilemma in teaching pronunciation although they are very enthusiastic, conscientious, and experienced teachers.

Second, in accordance with the school policy, the credits of English subject are 5 credits equal to 75 study periods (45 min. for each study period) in each semester (15 weeks for each semester). However, there are only 60 study periods for study in class and 15 periods for self-study via E-learning website. With the emphasis on bringing the best learning environment to the students as well as strictly following the learner-centeredness policies, Academic Department are asked not to give a tight

schedule of English to the students. Hence, the schedule of learning English is arranged in two weekdays. In terms of self-study, students still get much support from the teachers via E-course such as lessons teaching in class uploaded on the e-learning website, forum for students' discussion, e-tests, e-assignment, etc. The E-learning course is offered to each teacher at the beginning of each semester by the Department of Information Technology in order to help both English teachers and students have good interaction. As a consequence, students find happy and comfortable when learning English.

With the limited time, both teachers and students however need to work very hard if they want to catch up with the format of the final examination which is worth 50% of the overall final grade for the course. In fact, most of the students are not well-prepared with the basic knowledge of phonetic training for some reasons. Therefore, students cannot be successful in improving their pronunciation though they find interested in learning English.

Third, with the result of the speaking examination at the end of each semester, it shows students really experience themselves some obstacles in pronunciation.

In short, the only stipulation is that "anyone who wants to gain communicative competence has to study pronunciation" (Wei, M. 2009). In other words, students have to overcome the above difficulties in order to reach the path to success in improving their pronunciation.

### **1.3. Aim of the study**

In particular, this study will examine the research conducted on improving learners' pronunciation through phonetic training. To achieve this, the following research questions must be taken into serious consideration:

1. What pronunciation problems do the second-year non-majored English students at Van Lang University encounter?

2. To what extent, does phonetic training improve the learners' pronunciation?

### **1.4. Significance of the study**

This study will be conducted for several expected outcomes. First, it will make the English teachers at VLU reconsider the pivotal role of improving learners' pronunciation through phonetic training beside other main skills of English.

Second, the findings obtained from this study will contribute a significant change for the perspectives

of teaching and learning L2 pronunciation communicatively at VLU at the level of intermediate. First, teachers will know how to incorporate the basic knowledge of phonetic training into their own teaching effectively. Then the students will know how to devote special attention to intelligible pronunciation which is essential for their communication.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Definition of pronunciation**

According to E W Stevick (1978:145) pronunciation can be defined as: "Pronunciation is the primary medium through which we bring our use of language to the attention of other people. It is a process of materializing of features relating to the system of sounds/ phonemes, the syllabic structure, prosody (word stress and intonation) while speech/oral verbal message is constructed."

### **2.2. Preliminary considerations in teaching pronunciation**

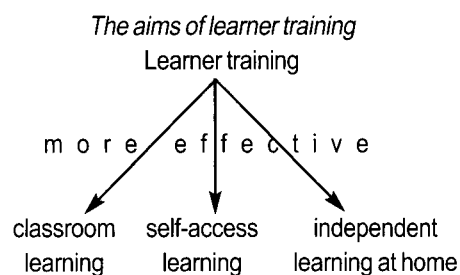
Avery (1995: xiii) mentioned two opposing views on teaching pronunciation in the ESL classroom. While one side believes that teaching pronunciation helps reduce foreign accent, the other side argues that teaching pronunciation to adult learners is a waste of time because of the brain fossilization after puberty. He advocates that none of these views are precise. The biological, socio-cultural, personality and linguistic factors play a certain role in the acquisition of the second language sound system. Therefore, it is possible for Avery (1995: xiii) to conclude that "while practice in pronunciation may not make perfect, ignoring pronunciation totally can be great disservice to ESL students."

### **2.3. Strategy training**

According to Richards et al (1993:35), strategy training is training in the use of learning strategies in order to enhance learners' effectiveness. A number of approaches to strategy training are used, including: (1) Explicit or direct training: learners are given information about value and purpose of particular strategies; (2) Embedded strategy training: the strategies to be taught are not taught explicitly but are embedded in the regular content of an academic subject area, such as reading, math or science; and (3) Combination strategy training: explicit strategy training is followed by embedded training.

Hedge (2000) suggests ways that language teachers can perform to help ill-equipped language

learners. Teachers should use positive attitudes to inspire them with useful strategies. Such preparation can be psychological and practical preparation. In addition to the preparation, Holec (1985) and Dickinson (1987) said that psychological preparation is “a change in perception about what learning involves and a change in the expectation that language can only be learned through the careful control of a specialist teacher.” As for practical preparation, it involves a range of techniques with which learners can enhance their learning. Meanwhile, Hedge (2000) defines learner training as “a set of procedure or activities which raise learners’ awareness of what is involved in learning a foreign language, which encourages learners to become more involved, active and responsible in their own learning, and which helps them develop and strengthen their strategies for language learning.” The following figure shows Hedge’s attitude on learning training:



(Source: Author’s research)

Hedge (2000) divides learner training activity into three categories according to its primary aim:

- Activities which help learners to reflect on their learning
- Activities which train strategies and equip learners to be active
- Activities which encourage learners to monitor and check their own progress

**2.4. Phonetic training**

According to Kenworthy, J. (1987), “Intelligible pronunciation” is the speaker’s intended utterance fully understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation. That is, students are able to understand, accept and declare to be organized meaningfully in oral communication. It is indeed “an essential component of communication competence” (Morley, 1991). In fact, pronunciation plays an important role in helping the learner become an intelligible speaker (Morley, 1998). For

this reason, teachers should know how to incorporate pronunciation into their courses. There should be emphasis on meaningful communication when teaching pronunciation to students. In contrast, pronunciation is actually an exciting challenge for both teachers and learners since it is related to different important aspects such as stress, rhythm, linking and assimilation and consonant and vowel sounds. Therefore, this study only focuses on an International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), a technique from the Reform Movement, which may involve doing phonetic transcription as well as reading phonetically transcribed text to improve learners’ pronunciation and word stress because of the limited time (a five-week phonetic training course).

**3. Design and methodology**

**3.1. Design of the study**

In this study, the quantitative approach was strictly followed by the researcher in that he expected to gather a collection of quantitative data including students’ answers to questionnaire, and their scores on the pre-test, progress test and post-test to find out the answers in relation to the research questions raised in chapter 1.

**3.2. Research instruments**

Particularly, the questionnaire and three tests considered as the research tools were conducted as follows.

**3.2.1. Questionnaire**

Questionnaire is a kind of written instrument that “presents respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to interact either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers” (Brown, 2001, p. 6). The reason why questionnaire is chosen as one of research instrument is that it is one of the most common methods of data collection on L2 research which is easy to construct as well as convenient to collect the data.

**3.2.2. Tests**

A test is “a procedure used to collect data on subjects’ ability or knowledge of certain disciplines” (Seliger, 1989, p. 176). In this research, tests were used to collect data about subjects’ ability and knowledge of the second language acquisition in the field of pronunciation.

In line with the definition of Seliger, the deep thoughts of Wiggins, G. (1998) also contrasted through the table below.

**Table 3.3 Research Instruments**

<b>Research instruments</b>	<b>Purposes</b>
Questionnaire on the research participants' background	To find out whether there were any similarities between two research groups
Pre-test	To identify (1) the homogeneity in English pronunciation background of the two research groups; and (2) level of the two groups are equal to each other
Formative test	To see the effectiveness of the treatment as well as to monitor progress toward goals within a course of study
Post-test	To access overall achievement of course goal

**Table 3.4 Summary of formative and summative assessment**

	<b>Formative assessment</b>	<b>Summative assessment</b>
Grading	Usually not graded	Usually graded
Purpose	Improvement: to give feedback to instructor and students about how well students understand specific material	Judgment: to derive a grade, and to allow students to work intensively with course material
Focus	Very focused on whether students have acquired specific skills or information	Less focused on specific skills or information; instead, allows students to demonstrate a range of skills and knowledge
Effort	Requires little time from instructors or students; simple; done in class	Requires more time from instructors and students; complex; done outside of class

**4. Findings**

**4.1. The similarity of the two groups in terms of general background and English pronunciation background**

Through the data collected from the questionnaire, it was assumed that the research participants of the two groups have similarity background, which establishes a firm base to compare their changes after a course in the controlled way and the experimental one.

From the pre-test scores, it could be concluded that the research participants were weak at pronouncing the long vowel sounds as well as the consonant sounds which did not existed in Vietnamese. (Wrong answer was above 58%)

They lack the basic knowledge of phonetic as well as pronunciation. Most of the participants did not have clear understanding of pronunciation terms. This led to the high percentage of incorrect answers. What they learnt about pronunciation was indeed not systematical; hence they just had a dim

memory on pronunciation aspects. As a result, they could not retrieve as many pronunciation aspects as necessary to complete the whole pre-test.

Pronunciation had great effect on language skills. Ones who did not perform well in the pre-test were simultaneously not good at speaking and listening and vocabulary because they are not confident enough in communication. Incorrect pronunciation formed wrong concepts of English sounds in their mind; consequently, they could not recognize familiar words when pronounced correctly. Similarly, learners with bad pronunciation usually learn vocabulary by writing the vocabulary items down as many times as possible without trying to say them aloud. Their simple techniques of looking at and writing down words cause high retention loss of vocabulary.

In conclusion, there is an alarming need to help them improve pronunciation ability.

**4.2. The effect of phonetic training through the post-test after the treatment**

The participants in both groups showed improvement in both perception and production assessment. This fact inferred two implications. For the controlled who did not receive the treatment also made some improvement. They just followed the course book program.

Another positive sign of the participants was that they have some better insights into pronunciation terms as the percentage of missing did not appear in the post-test. After completing the tests, the participants to some extent gain better knowing in pronunciation.

## **5. Recommendations, limitations and conclusions**

### **5.1. Recommendations**

#### *5.1.1. Possible amendment to the experimental teaching materials and process*

The optimistic assessments by co-teachers inferred the correct direction that the researcher had followed. The researcher-teacher would be confident to keep implementing the lessons to his next classes. And the improvements the co-teachers suggested would be done by the researcher to make the lessons meet the original target. The learning capacity of learners should be cared for, which means the short, valuable break time should not be skipped. And the motivation of learners should be reinforced by checking the homework assignment regularly.

#### *5.1.2. Suggestions for students*

#### *Playing an active role in pronouncing and making efforts in developing self-study*

Learners should learn to make responsibility for their own study. Whether they could pronounce English intelligibly or not depends on their will and effort. It is important to realize the goal of studying in university, which makes self-study priority. Schooling provides knowledge; self-study makes knowledge complete. In order to make the learning of a foreign language a success, language learners should firstly develop motivation and interest in second language learning. Learners can encourage themselves by investing sufficient time for English at the very beginning, choosing the most suitable learning ways like listening to English songs, having phonetic training via websites and pronunciation teaching and learning software, etc. Having a good basic knowledge of pronunciation, language learners would be confident to do further study in the new language. The second important

step to reach the success is to set the short-term and long-term goals for the language study. For instance, improving pronunciation in one month, or being able so speak English fluently in two and a half months, etc. However, setting goal without planning strategies to make plans come true would be a futile effort. Therefore, learners with study goals should manage their time, then set a suitable time table at their own pace, choose suitable learning strategies and stick to the time table.

#### *Being equipped with sources to self-learn pronunciation*

In the golden age of information technology, language learners also benefit a lot from a variety of learning sources such as many websites for practicing pronunciation, pronunciation exercises, etc. Learners can equip themselves with the following pronunciation materials. For ones who love working with computer can use the following online sources. (See appendix 11)

Through the pronunciation learning sources, students can self-study to improve their pronunciation based on the background knowledge of pronunciation trained in class.

### **5.2. Limitations**

None of the researchers are carried out without certain limitations. This one is not an exception. There are three major limitations to the research. First, the sample in the research was small and limited to Intermediate level only; therefore, the research results cannot be generalized to various English learners. Second, the activities designed in the treatment were not to cover all important aspects of pronunciation; and these activities were somewhat simple. These imperfect points would be modified eventually when the study carrier does further research in his own teaching career. Finally, the most necessary amendment the researcher would like to make is the duration of experimental teaching. Because it was only 5 weeks, which is not long enough for expected improvements to occur; hence, the researcher, to some extent, not satisfied with the study results. And these limitations opened new research directions to the study writer. In his new researches in the future, he wishes to amend these weak points to satisfy his desires of changing English learners' pronunciation for better.

### **5.3. Conclusions**

Based on the result of the study, the following conclusions seem appropriate:

Improving students' pronunciation through phonetic training is of big interest to both English teachers and learners at VLU. Students can indeed acquire intelligible pronunciation in the L2 when they become active participants in their own learning and the teacher supports their efforts by employing a wealth of techniques to aid students in their efforts to improve their pronunciation. However, it was really a challenging and rewarding experience for both.

Both teacher and learners in the experimental class faced two major challenges. First, teacher got to work really hard to design lesson plans to adjust the teaching time to fit the treatment in the time constraint of the school's program. In fact, the teacher-researcher had to double the working time for preparation. Similarly, learners had to invest more time for English lessons; they tried to manage time to make English a priority in five weeks of experimental learning.

Another challenge for the teacher was students' long-lasting habit of dependence on the teacher. The study was the first step to break such a bad habit; hence, as the pioneer, the researcher faced a hard time to remind students of working hard and being more active in the process of improving their pronunciation. However, it was not always successful to remind them. Students have got used to delaying reviewing lessons until the examination time. They did not have plans to open the notebook

to review, to analyze, or to widen the newly-learned knowledge.

Next, the present syllabus and course book may not help second-year non-majors at VLU improve their pronunciation. There was not enough time for them to enhance the pronunciation and the course book were also not well-prepared for pronunciation teaching as well as training.

To sum up, the research was carried out to fulfill the desire to improve learners' pronunciation through phonetic training so that learners could be able to know how to read the IPA, phonetic transcription as well as word stress to self-improve their pronunciation or even improve their English competence in general and hopefully make them familiar with the English working environment for their future job. Thanks to such instruments as questionnaire, pre-test, formative test, post-test, the study showed positive result in making progress on perception, and performance. Being in the support of the pre-test, students' weaknesses in pronunciation were revealed. Therefore, the treatment lessons in the experiment teaching could make use of its effectiveness. Then the post-test was designed to measure the progress made by the learners after the experimental teaching of phonetic training. The result shows positive improvements of the learners. Such data encourage the researcher to do further research in the teaching method ■

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CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC THÔNG QUA GIẢNG DẠY PHÁT ÂM:  
NGHIÊN CỨU ĐỐI VỚI SINH VIÊN NĂM HAI  
KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC VĂN LANG**

**● VƯƠNG TRẦN GIA NHƠN**

Trường Đại học Văn Lang

**TÓM TẮT:**

Mục tiêu chung của việc giảng dạy phát âm là giúp người đọc phát âm dễ hiểu hơn là phát âm giống người bản xứ. Trên thực tế, việc đào tạo người lớn đạt được các kỹ năng phát âm trong nhóm L2 giống với người bản xứ là mục tiêu không thể đạt được (Larsen-Freeman và Long, 1991). Nghiên cứu này nhằm đề xuất việc đào tạo ngữ âm là một giải pháp giúp học viên người lớn cải thiện khả năng phát âm của họ. Các tài liệu về giảng dạy phát âm đã được xem xét để định hình khung lý thuyết, các nguyên tắc cũng như nắm được ý nghĩa để áp dụng hiệu quả. Dựa trên khung khái niệm, dữ liệu đã được thu thập từ sinh viên tại Đại học Văn Lang từ ngày 10/9 đến 20/10/2020 thông qua bảng câu hỏi và điểm số. Dựa trên kết quả nghiên cứu, một số khuyến nghị dành cho giáo viên giảng dạy tiếng Anh đã được đưa ra với kỳ vọng rằng học viên có thể phát âm dễ hiểu thông qua việc giảng dạy phát âm.

**Từ khoá:** Phát âm tự nhiên, phiên âm, IPA.