The Influence of Vietnamese Phonological Features on First-year EFL Students' Spoken English in Classroom Interaction

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Abstract

This research aims to to find out (1) what Vietnamese phonological features appear in first-year EFL students'speech and (2) how such Vietnamese phonological features influence their speech. The data were collected by recording student-student interaction in a speaking class and the units of analysis were at the level of vowel and consonant phonemes. The data were transcribed ,and analyzed to see the phonological patterns appearing in first-year EFL students'speech.Then these recordings were given to three native speakers to listen to discover how many percents they could understand the students' speech and what phonetic problems they recognized from what they had heard. The study involved a sample of 6 first-year students of Ton Duc Thang University all of whom studied in the same class, had the same level of English and were of the same age .The findings of the study indicated that most of first-year students had a tendency (1) to omit the ending sounds (2) to replace the dipthongs with the vowels; (3) to mispronounce consonant sounds (4) to leave out one or two consonants in a consonant clusters and (5) to insert sound redundancy.

Keywords: EFL students, phonological features, phonological patterns, phonetic problems

1. Introduction

Since 2006, English has become a dominant foreign language in Viet Nam in general and in most of big cities such as Ho Chi Minh and Ha Noi in particular. The need to learn English for communication becomes so urgent that a lot of language centers have been set up. However, many foreigners have commented that "Many Vietnamese speakers can speak English but only a few have intelligible English pronunciation to be understood easily in direct communication with foreigners". Among many foreigners teaching English at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Ton Duc Thang university, Ronald, confides that his Vietnamese students' pronunciation is sometimes difficult for him to understand.If that is the case, pronunciation really has big influence on communication among students at TDTU and whether the conversation is successful or not depends much on the speaker's pronunciation. "Up to a certain proficiency standard, the fault which most severely impairs the communication process in EFL/ ESL learner is pronunciation rather than vocabulary or grammar" (Hinofitis and Baily 1980).

Nobody denies that pronunciation plays an important role in learning a language and that mispronunciation may lead to failure in communication. What Vietnamese phonological patterns appear in students' EFL first-year students' speech and how these phonological patterns affect students'pronunciation is really a question not only for many language researchers but also for EFL Vietnamese teachers as well because it

seems that there have not been any empirical studies on this issue carried out in the Vietnamese university context so far.

2. Research questions:

This study will focus on finding out the influence of Vietnamese phonological features on Vietnamese EFL first-year students' spoken English in classroom interaction. In doing so, the researcher will address his attention on the following specific questions:

2.1 What Vietnamese phonological features appear in EFL first-year students'speech?

2.2 How do these Vietnamese phonological features influence Vietnamese EFL first-year students'speech?

3. Research Methodology

This study is descriptive. The study makes use of the qualitative method.

3.1 Participants and setting:

The study involves a sample of six 19-year-old first-year students at Ton Duc Thang University (TDTU)all of whom study in the same classand have the same level of English (pre-intermediate level) .A colleague, an English lecturer at TDTU, is invited to the classroom to help with the recording and three native teachers all of whom are from England and lecturers atTDTUare also invited to evaluate students'speech.

The study was carried out atTDTU, which is situated at 19 Nguyen HuuTho street, Tan Phong ward, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City.

3.2 Data collection techniques:

The unit of analysis is vowel and consonant phonemes. The main research tool is the sound recordings of student-student interaction in a classroom which were used to find out what phonological features of Vietnamsese appear in EFL first-year students'speech. The students were asked to work in pairs to tell each other about their last vacation and their conversations were recorded by the CD recorders which are set up around the class and with the support of a colleague teaching at TDTU

In order to see how Vietnamese phonological features affect students' speech, all the sounds recordings collected were given to three native speakers all of whom are from England to listen and then a questionaire was also delivered to them for their remarks on the students' speech.

3.3 Treatment of the data:

In treating the data, the researcher followed three steps:

Firstly, the data gathered from the sound recordings (conversations) were transcribed.

Then, these data will be classified and categorised in term of phonological features to see the phonological patterns.

Next, the data gathered (sound recordings) together with the data from the questionairs for native teachers were tabulated, presented , analyzed, and interpreted.

4. Research Results

4.1 Vietnamese phonological patterns appearing in students'speech:
4.1.1. Leaving out the final sounds:

Table 1
The omission of the final sounds in student's speech

Student	/t/	/k/	/d/	/tʃ/	/dʒ/	/f/	/s/ /z/	/l/
A	went, hate, about,next	like, photogenic	did	coach			was, sisters photos	
B	went,ate, restaurant, market, last,great, don't	fantastic, take,park	seafood, enjoyed, intend , need	beach, much	change		animals, parks plans	
C	about, it,	take,think, back	did				was, is, photos, problems	
D	went, coconut, next, but	week, seasick	good, travelled , island, tired			life	province, pagodas, coconuts, photos, was, houses, places	travel, well, will, ,wond erful
E	last, about,it,next ,	like,think	did				was, please, because	well,
F	left, went, market, boat, bought, great	think, motorbike, like	and, arrived, stayed, food,		bridge	life	thanks, parents,, nice, peace,	well, hotel, will

It is easily seen in the table 1 abovethat all of the students drop the final sounds like /d,k,t, f,l, s, tʃ,dʒ / of every word they speak. The pattern of dropping of the final sounds in EFL first-year students' speech is likely to come from the Vietnamese language. According to Cao Xuan Hao, 2001,pp.36, the final sounds in Vietnamese do not have any sound effect because it is only an "absolute silent interval", therefore when pronouncing an English word with one final consonant, learners hardly pronounce it. Moreover, Ha Cam Tam (2005) also stated in her study of the phonetic errors of the students that the habit of "swallowing" the ending sounds in the mother tongue is a negative transference inhibiting the pronunciation of final sounds in the target language.As a matter of fact, all of the students in this study forget to pronounce the final sounds in such words as ***went, like, beach, was***, etc. Nguyen Thi Thu Thao (2007)

especially focused on the differences between Vietnamese and English also concluded from her findings that Vietnamese students have a tendency to omit the sounds that are foreign or difficuIt for them. It can be asserted that leaving the final sounds is a typical phonological pattern that always appear in Vietnamese EFL first-year students'speech.

4.1.2 Omitting the consonant clusters:

It's very surprised to find out that the majority of Vietnamese EFL first-year students tend to omit one or more consonants in a consonant cluster in both initial and final position, which Nguyễn Quý Mão (2003) discusses in his book. In this study, students don't pronounce one or two of these consonant clusters **pl , pr, xt, fl, st, ft** in such words as **plan, place, problem, pray, province, next, float, stay** and **left**.They pronounce *plan* /læn/, *place* /leɪ/, *problem*/'roləm/, *pray* /reɪ/, *province* /'rovin/ ,*next* /ne/, *float* /lot/ , *stay* /teɪ/ and *left* /le/This phonological pattern is easily found in Vietnamese EFL high school students'speech because of great difference between the consonant structures of English and Vietnamese. (Nguyễn Quý Mão (2003) ; Nguyễn Lương Ngọc (1997); Nguyễn Thị Thu Thảo (2007)).

4.1.3   Using short vowels to replace dipthongs:

Table 2
Students'use of short vowels to replace dipthongs

Phonetic problems	Student	Examples found in students'speech
	A,B	**great** /greɪt/ is pronounced /grɪt/
	B	**ate** /eɪt/ is pronounced /et/
the dipthong /eɪ/ is	A	**hate** /heɪt/ is pronounced /het/
pronounced like the vowel	B	**change** /tʃeɪndʒ/ is pronounced /tʃendʒ/
/e/ or /I/	F	**grapefruit** /'greɪpfru:t/ is pronounced/'grepfru:t/
	C	**take** /teɪk/ is pronounced /tek/
	A	**coach** /kəʊtʃ/is pronounced / kotʃ/
the dipthong /əʊ/ is	D	**pagoda** /pə'gəʊ də/ is pronounced /pə'go də/
pronounced like the vowel	F	**floating** /'fləʊ tɪŋ/ is pronounced /'flo tɪŋ/
/o/	F	**boat** /bəʊt/ is pronounced /bot/

Table 2 indicates that most of Vietnamese EFL first-year students tend to replace the dipthong like /eɪ/with the short vowellike /e/ or /I/; and the dipthong like /əʊ/ with the short vowel like/o/. It can be inferred from the information in the table 2 that the pattern in spelling between the two languages lead learners to the mispronunciation for example the letter *a* in these following words *hate, change,take*is similar to a pure vowel *a* in such Vietnamese words as an, anh, bánh. However, in English the letter *a* represents a dipthong not a pure vowel as in Vietnamese. Lado, 1957,pp.21 stated that pronunciation problems are the consequences of the similarities found in two languages-the mother tongue and the target language.

4.1.4 Mispronuncing consonants:

Table 3
The mispronunciation of the English consonants

Student	The mispronunciation of the consonants	examples
F	/t/	town
C	/t/	hotel,take
D	/t/	tired
D	/p/	pogoda
F	/p/	people
B	/ʃ/	shopping
D	/ʃ/	show
C	/ʃ/	vacation
A	/θ/	mother
E + F	/θ/	thank
E + F	/θ/	think
B +E	/ð/	there

As it is shown in table 3, most of EFL first-year students mispronounce such consonant sounds as /t, k, p , ʃ, θ , ð /. This is true with what Ha Thi Bich Loan (2005) said in her M.A. thesis. According to her, some consonant sounds in English such as /p/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ʒ/ do not exist in Vietnamese, and the students therefore mispronounce them. It is easily noticed that the alveolar plosive /t/ in initial position of a word is pronounced like plain dental plosive /t/ in Vietnamese without aspiration ; the bilabial plosive /p/ is pronounced like retroflex plosive /b/ in Vietnamese, which is produced with the end of the tongue turned up against the hard palate; the palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ/ is pronounced like alveolar fricative /s/; the dental fricative/θ/ is pronounced like aspirated dental plosive /ʰt/ and finally the dental fricative /ð/ is pronounced like voiced dental plosive / d / in Vietnamese.

4.1.5 Inserting sound redundancy

In the previous studies of some Vietnamese researchers about the phonetic errors, the so-called "sound redundancy" was found to be one of the problem facing Vietnamese EFL students. In her study, Ha cam Tam concluded that most of Vietnamese students had a tendency to over pronounce the ending sounds /s/ and /z/ and therefore they add /s/ or /z/ at the end of the word. However, in this study , only one student (student B) was found to have this tendency. Other students seem to omit the ending sounds even the sounds /z/ or /s/.

4.2 The influence of Vietnamese phonological features on students' speech:

Table 4
Native teachers'ability to understand students'speech

Question1: How many percent do you understand the students in these three conversations to which you have listen?

Teacher	Conversation1	Conversation1	Conversation1
A	50-60%	70-80%	60-70%
B	60-70%	70-80%	60-70%
C	60-70%	80-90%	70-80%

Table 5
The phonological problems found in students'speech

Question 2: What are some of the following phonological problems that you can find in students'speech?

Teacher	leaving the final sounds out	omitting or reducing the consonant clusters	using short vowels to replace dipthongs	mispronouncing consonant sounds	inserting sound redundancy
A	X	X	X	X	
B	X	X		X	X
C	X	X	X		

As shown in table 4and 5 ,the native speakers' ability to understand Vietnamese first-year students speaking English is from 60 to 80 percent just because the Vietnamese phonological features appear so much in their English speech. All of three native speakers agree that Vietnamese first-year students omit a lot of the ending sounds,and consonant clusters. Two out of three native teachers also show that a lot of consonants and vowels are mispronounced. All of these make their speech hard to understand.

5. Significant of the finding

For the researcher, this study gives him an opportunity to find out the Vietnamese phonological features in his EFL students'speech so that he can help his students speak with better pronunciation because Duncan Wilson- a British Council Director in Ho Chi Minh city said on Thanh Nien newspaper on November 13th 2004 that "Despite your good capicity of vocabulary and grammar, if your pronunciation is bad, it will be impossible for your listeners to understand what you want to say."

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study show that the first language has a great influence on the second language acquisition especially pronunciation.The findings from this study is somewhat similar to what Baker (1982) found in his study. It is easily seen that a lot of Vietnamese phonological features are found to appear in Vietnamese EFL first-year students' speech.

Firstly, the final English sounds such as /d,k,t, f,l, s, ʧ,dʒ / are left out because these final sounds are said to have no sound effect in Vietnamese.

Secondly, consonant clusters are omitted or reduced due to the different consonant structures between English and Vietnamese.

Thirdly, dipthongs are replaced by short vowels because of the similarities in spelling pattern between the two languages.

Finally, some consonant sounds are mispronounced because these sounds do not exist in Vietnamese. There is a tendency to move strange English sounds to similar sounds which exist in the mother tongue.

These Vietnamese phonological patterns frequently appear and have a great influence on the Vietnamese EFL students in general and on EFLfirst-year students'speech in particular. As a matter of fact these Vietnamese phonological features make their English speech fairly difficult for native speakers to understand.

7. Implications and recommendation

The implication for language teachers is that learning a language is to know how to compare and contrast the phonological features of that language with those features in the first language in order to have a good pronunciation as Kent (2001) states that " in situations where continual mispronunciation occurs, understanding is certainly lost, that is, that oral communication is not successful." Therefore the teaching of pronunciation should be taughtfrom the very first day of the students' learning.

It should be noted that Vietnamese students usually drop the final sounds, reduce or omit the consonant clusters , mispronounce some vowels and consonants mentioned above. It is the teacher's responsibility to help his students to be aware of these phonetic problems so that they can avoid making such mistakes in their speech.

It often seems tiring and boring to learn pronunciation so the teacher shoudn't spend too much time on requiring students to practice pronunciation. Thus the teacher should integrate pronunciation practice into the main lesson of the day and should spend a few minutes every day on a contrast between two or more sounds or work on the individual phonemes.

Last but not least, the pronunciation practice should be various. To make students interested in practising the pronunciation, different interesting pronunciation tasks and games should also be used. It is a very good idea to have students get access to the internet and recommend them some websites that can help them with the pronunciation.

It is hoped that students can get better pronunciation through regular practice of pronunciation because Pronunciation teaching not only make students aware of the different sounds and sound features but can also improve their speaking greatly (Jeremy Harmer 2007).

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