

AN ACTION RESEARCH ON USING LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN PRONUNCIATION TRAINING FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	10/4/2021	The purpose of this action research is to improve student's pronunciation performance, especially in terms of English vowel sounds, through a pronunciation training program. There were 20 non-English majored students from Hanoi University of Sciences, VNU participating in this program. During 10 weeks, students were provided with explanations on English vowel production as well as the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese vowel systems before practicing these sounds with the support of Dickerson's Covert Rehearsal Model. The data were collected from questionnaires and the pre-test and post-test. The analysis of collected data proved that after the training program, students gained certain improvements in their pronunciation performance. The number of errors in pronouncing vowels decreased; nevertheless, some sounds remained problematic with learners. By studying the mistakes, the researcher found that the relationship between the mother tongue and the foreign language exists and the mother tongue language influenced negatively on the foreign pronunciation acquisition of students in this study. Besides, the use of various pronunciation learning strategies was shown to be useful for students' learning of pronunciation, especially the social strategy group.
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NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ THỰC HIỆN KHÓA BỒI DƯỠNG CHIẾN LƯỢC HỌC PHÁT ÂM CHO SINH VIÊN ĐẠI HỌC

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	10/4/2021	Mục đích của nghiên cứu hành động này là để cải thiện khả năng phát âm của sinh viên, đặc biệt là về các nguyên âm tiếng Anh, thông qua một chương trình luyện âm. 20 sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh của Trường Đại học Khoa học Tự nhiên, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội tham gia chương trình này. Trong 10 tuần, học viên được giải thích về cách tạo nguyên âm tiếng Anh cũng như sự giống và khác nhau giữa hệ thống nguyên âm tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt trước khi thực hành các âm này thông qua mô hình bồi dưỡng của Dickerson. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ bảng câu hỏi và kiểm tra trước và sau thực nghiệm. Việc phân tích dữ liệu thu thập được đã chứng minh rằng sau chương trình đào tạo, học viên đã đạt được sự cải thiện nhất định về khả năng phát âm của mình. Số lỗi phát âm nguyên âm giảm; tuy nhiên, một số âm vẫn có vấn đề với người học. Bằng cách nghiên cứu những lỗi sai về phát âm của sinh viên, nhóm nghiên cứu nhận thấy rằng có sự tồn tại mối quan hệ giữa tiếng Việt và tiếng Anh, và tiếng Việt có ảnh hưởng tiêu cực đến việc tiếp thu phát âm tiếng Anh của sinh viên trong nghiên cứu này. Bên cạnh đó, việc sử dụng các chiến lược học phát âm khác nhau đã được chứng minh là hữu ích cho việc học phát âm của học sinh, đặc biệt là nhóm chiến lược xã hội.
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1. Introduction

Whether English is learnt as a second language or a foreign language, pronunciation should be paid adequate attention by both teachers and learners since an English learner with a limited pronunciation performance may lose his self-confidence in social interactions, which “negatively affects estimations of a speaker’s credibility and abilities” [1, p. 119]. In other words, learners with good English pronunciation tend to be understood despite their frequent grammatical mistakes in the speech.

Even though pronunciation is said to be able to acquire naturally [2], pronunciation instruction has been proved to bring students chances to enhance their intelligibility and comprehensibility which are influential factors of their communicative competence [3]. Students can overcome difficult sounds by understanding how they are produced while teachers may support their learning of pronunciation by making them aware of their mispronunciation [4].

With regards to language learning strategies, O’Malley & Chamot [5] define them as “special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information”. The purpose of using these strategies is to “affect the learner’s motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes, or interacts new knowledge” [6, p. 315]. The significance of language learning strategies is appreciated in such a way that they can enhance learners’ language proficiency and develop their communicative ability [7].

With the profound influence of the development of English as an international language, Vietnamese schools are providing students with English as one of the core subjects at school. In big cities, children even can learn English before they start primary schools [8]. However, it is problematic that “many Vietnamese speakers can speak English, but only a few have intelligible English pronunciation” [8, p.1]. As observed, students at Hanoi University of Science (HUS) share the same problem. They long to speak English accurately and fluently but for some reasons, English becomes too challenging for them and they are too shy to speak English. The biggest reason might be the differences in English and Vietnamese sound systems [9] and results in some typical pronunciation errors. As for teachers, it is worth noting that not every English teacher in the university provides frequent pronunciation training for their students even though it is required in the curriculum. In addition, students lack orientation in learning and practicing as well as exposure to pronunciation of English language and often ignore it while their focus is mainly on listening, reading, speaking and writing skills. Therefore, it is believed that with regular practice, learners will improve their performance and feel confident [1].

Vietnamese has three types of vowels, including acute (front): /i, e, ε, ε̃/, light grave: /u, ʌ, ʌ̃, a, ă/, grave (back): u, o, ɔ, ɔ̃ [10]. Whereas, according to [11, pp. 14-25], a single English vowel is identified with four features: (i) the length of the vowel, (ii) the level of the tongue, (iii) the part of the tongue and (iv) the degree of lip rounding. There are 12 single vowels in English, including 5 long vowels and 7 short ones. However, with regards to short vowels, Roach [11] separates the vowel /ə/ from the others as he supposes that this sound, which has another name, “schwa sound”, has some special features.

In addition, according to Chu [10], Vietnamese has more long vowels and fewer short vowels than English. Both Vietnamese and English share three single vowels: /ɪ/ as in “sit”, /e/ as in “egg” and /ʊ/ as in “would.” In addition to these shared sounds, Vietnamese contains four additional single vowels, /ɛ/ as in *tên* “name,” /u/ as in *mừng* “happy,” /ʌ/ as in *lớn* “big,” /ɔ̃/ as in *tân* “new” and three diphthongs /ɪe/ as in *miền* “region” /uo/ as in *uống* “drink” and /uʌ/ as in *hướng* “direction”.

Recognizing the usefulness of learning strategy instruction, researchers tried to figure out certain models for teachers and learners to follow. O’Malley & Chamot [5] found two approaches of teaching and learning strategies from Oxford’s model: direct (overt) and embedded training

(covert). The former involves informing students about the value and purpose of learning strategies while the later, as its name, provides instruction on the use of learning strategies included in materials without explicit explanation of learning strategies [5].

Dickerson's Covert Rehearsal Model was proved to be successful as it is based on the idea that it takes time for students to gain progress in pronunciation and this progress does not necessarily happen in class. Dickerson [12] describes covert rehearsal as (1) Finding privacy to practice; (2) Practicing aloud; (3) Monitoring production for target features; (4) Comparing production with models; (5) Adjusting production to match the models; (6) Practicing the adjustment out loud until accurate and fluent (as cited in [13, p.34]).

In the present study, students in the training process were encouraged to follow every step of this model because of two reasons. On the one hand, Dickerson's model is supposed to be "the only instructional model that deals with pronunciation strategy training" [14, p.32]. The researcher stated that while other works tend to focus on classifying pronunciation learning strategies or fail to offer a practical framework, the Covert Rehearsal Model can give "precise instruction on strategy development" (p.33). On the other hand, the effectiveness of this model has been proved by some research such as studies conducted by Dickerson (as cited in [14]), Sardegna [15] and Ingels [16] who applied this model into the teaching interventions and gained positive results as support for the benefit of this model. In this study, students are instructed to conduct every step of the model in practicing each targeted vowel. Besides, the instructions also include possible learning strategies that they can employ during each step.

2. Methodology

This study employed an action research method with the aim to improve the pronunciation of non-English majored students in Hanoi University of Sciences (HUS) through the pronunciation training process. In this training, students were given detailed instructions in terms of English vowels as well the similarities and differences between Vietnamese and English vowels. Moreover, the training gave students chances to practice English with the use of various pronunciation learning strategies attached to steps of Dickerson's Covert Rehearsal Model (DCRM). All of the activities in this course were to help students develop their acquisition of English vowels. Specifically, the study is an attempt to find answers for the following research questions:

1. Are there any problems of learners when producing English vowel sounds? If yes, what are they?
2. To what extent does pronunciation training using DCRM enhance students' pronunciation performance?

This research was conducted in a class with 20 students. Of these students, there are four males and sixteen females, ranging from 18 to 20 years old. They had passed the English A1 course and received equal learning opportunities as well as learning materials such as course books or supplementary materials from the teacher.

Through the questionnaire, fifteen out of twenty students admitted that they could not remember all sounds and their symbols. A pre-test was also delivered to cross check the problems with pronunciation which students stated in the questionnaire. Results from the pre-test taken by learners before the intervention matched this admission. Figure 1 depicts the number of students with their correct answers in the pre-test.

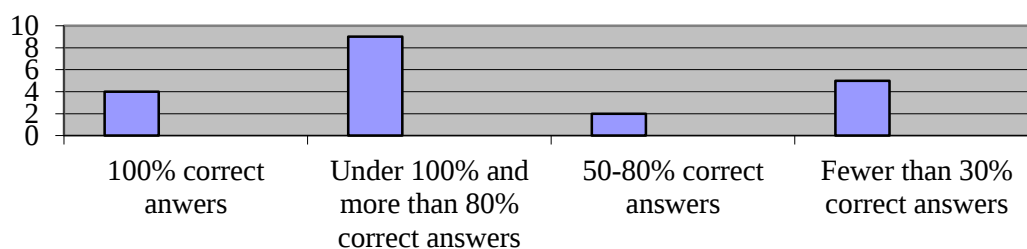


Figure 1. The number of students in relation to their correct answers

The action research lasted after 15 weeks, during the training course, students were not only given an explicit explanation on English vowel sounds as usual but also instructed to apply Dickerson's Covert Rehearsal Model in practicing their pronunciation of English vowels. With this model, they were encouraged to use a variety of learning strategies that were introduced by the teacher based on Oxford's taxonomy. In order to ensure the quantity as well as the quality of the "English A2" course content, the teacher could not prolong the training course for more than 10 weeks. Therefore, there was only one cycle implemented in this study. Reflection from this cycle would be a valuable suggestion for the next cycles in another study. The current study followed a five-step cycle model of [17] with: (1) Diagnosing; (2) Action planning; (3) Taking action; (4) Evaluating; (5) Specifying learning. After the training program, a questionnaire was delivered to students to investigate their evaluation of the effectiveness of learning strategies that they used. The reflective reports were used to collect students' attitudes towards the training program. Lastly, students took the post-test with a similar procedure to the pre-test.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1 Problems of learners when producing English vowel sounds

As stated in the previous parts, learners' problematic sounds were identified through the analysis of the recordings that they had after the pre-test. The researcher recorded their voice and listened again to spot the mistakes in their pronunciation of the English vowels. In this part, some common problems that students had in the pre-test were considered. These problematic sounds can be divided into two main groups. The first group includes incorrect sounds due to the tendency of replacing an English vowel with another in Vietnamese. The second group consists of mispronounced letters caused by using incorrect sounds for its representing letter in English.

The problematic sounds of the first group were summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Incorrect pronunciation of sounds

English problematic sounds	Vietnamese sounds used to replace	Examples	No. of students with mistakes
/æ/	/e/	has, can, map	18
/ʌ/	/uə/	wonderful	10
/əʊ/	/o/	home, most	20
/ə/	/o/	European	15

3.1.1. Problems with letter "a"

When pronouncing the word "Pacific" in the text of the test, students could not decide which is the correct way to pronounce it and many incorrect ways of pronouncing this letter were observed. The exact sound for the letter "a" in this case is /ə/ as the stress falls on the second syllable. However, 13 out of 20 students in the pre-test failed to make it right. 9 out of these students used the sound /a/ (represented by letter "a" in Vietnamese) to apply for the letter. In the

meantime, 3 students pronounced it as /e/ which is one of the sound represented by “a” in English like in “make” or “cake”. Especially, there was a student pronouncing “a” as /e/ which may not be very common in English.

3.1.2. Problems with the letter “i”

In English, “i” can represent a variety of sounds such as /ɪ/ in “fish”, “film”, “him”, /i:/ in “police” or /aɪ/ in “find”, “bike”, “wide”, etc. Therefore, it was easy to understand why the students in this study were confused when deciding whether to choose /ɪ/ or /aɪ/ to pronounce the letter in the tests. After all, they put /ɪ/ for “i” instead of /aɪ/ or vice versa. For example, the letter “i” in “wine”, “lifestyle” or “nightlife” should be pronounced as /aɪ/ but about 5 to 6 students used /ɪ/ wrongly. In contrast, more than half of students pronounced the word “liberal” incorrectly as they thought /aɪ/ was the right sound.

3.1.3. Problems with letter “e”

With this letter, the most frequently-mispronounced words are “incredible” /ɪnˈkredəbl/ and “valley” /ˈvæli/. Regarding the pronunciation of “incredible”, the first letter “e” was pronounced as /ɪ/ instead of /e/ by one-third of students in the pre-test. This number reduced to three students in the post-test. Letter “e” in “valley” was mispronounced as /ei/ by 70% of students (equal to 14 students) in the pre-test.

According to [4], among factors that affect the acquisition of foreign language pronunciation, the influence of the native language is the most significant. In this study, it is impossible to compare the impact level of various factors such as the native language, age, the amount of exposure, the phonetic ability, etc.; nevertheless, it is sensible to confirm the relationship of the native language and the target language as some common mistakes in pronouncing vowels were identified in the study. The results are consistent to Carlisle [14], with the study on the effect of Spanish as the native language towards English pronunciation performance, proved that the addition of the sound /e/ before word-initial /s/ in English was the result of wrongly-applied the mother tongue phonological rules. Another study conducted by Ly [18] showed that some of the Chinese consonants had been used to replace English dental fricatives which do not appear in the Chinese language.

3.2 The relationship between pronunciation training and students’ pronunciation performance

The answer to this question is based on the comparison of the scores of the pre-test and post-test. The pre-test was taken by students before the training course while the post-test was completed after the course had finished. The two tests were used to discover the effectiveness of two main measurements of the course. The first one is the explicit instruction of English vowel sounds in class with the notice of differences between the English and Vietnamese sound system. The second one is the practice at home following the DCRM. However, it is impossible to evaluate the level of effectiveness of each measurement through the two tests so any effect found from the comparison of the two test scores is considered to be the result of those solutions in combination. It is important to notice that the marking of the tests was based on the number of mistakes made by students. Therefore, the higher the mark they got, the more mistakes they had. Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics of these two tests.

Table 2. Comparison of the means and standard deviation between pre-test and post-test

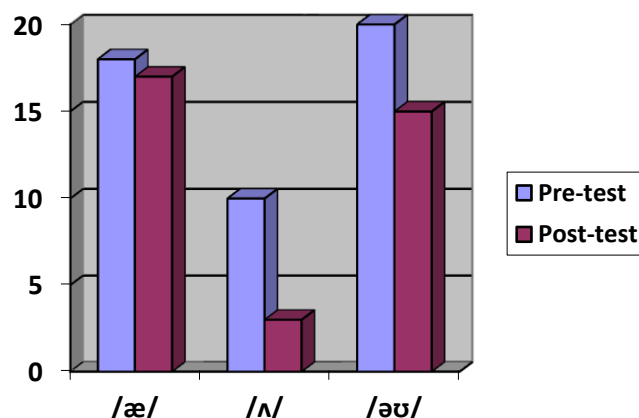
	PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS		
	Mean	N	S.D
Pre-test	15.85	20	4.295346
Post-test	10.80	20	2.706717

Table 3. *The results of paired samples t-test of pre-test and post-test*

PAIRED SAMPLES TEST							
	Paired Differences				<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>			
Pair: Pre-test Post-test	5.05	1.157	2.63	7.47	4.3636	19	0.0003

From Table 3, it can be seen that the mean of the pre-test was 15.85 (S.D = 4.29) in comparison with 10.8 (S.D = 2.7) of the post-test. As noticed above, the students' with better pronunciation of vowels would get lower marks because they made fewer mistakes. Therefore, when the score of the pre-test was higher than in the post-test, it means that the number of mistakes was reduced in the post-test. Then it can say that students made progress in the pronunciation of vowel sounds. Looking at the average scores of the two tests, it is possible to state that students' mispronunciation had been improved. Moreover, the Standard Deviation figures show that there were bigger differences in learners' pronunciation performance in the pre-test while in the post-test this gap was reduced. In the paired sample t-test, the p-value is $0.0003 < 0.05$. This suggests that after the training course, students gained a significant improvement in their vowel sound production. In other words, students became more aware of their problems and managed to produce English vowels more correctly.

Based on the analysis of sound problems in the previous part, group 1 includes three sounds that more students pronounced wrongly than any other sound with the same way of mispronunciation. They are the vowels /æ/, /ʌ/ and /əʊ/. The changes in numbers of students making mistakes with these sounds are illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** *Numbers of students having troubles with sounds in Group 1*

As seen from Figure 2, problems with two sounds /æ/ and /əʊ/ were more popular than with the sound /ʌ/ since in the pre-test, the number of students pronouncing wrongly the vowels /æ/ and /əʊ/ was twice as many as those with the mispronunciation of /ʌ/ and even higher than that in the post-test. It is noticeable that in the pre-test, every student had trouble pronouncing the sound /əʊ/ as they replaced it with the sound /o/ in Vietnamese. In the meantime, almost all of them (18 students) pronounced the sound /æ/ incorrectly. However, the improvement in pronouncing these two sounds is quite different. While after the training course, 5 among 20 students with wrong

pronunciation of the sound /əʊ/ had shown their improvement, almost none of the learners mispronouncing the vowel /æ/ remained the same mistake in the post-test. There was not much improvement that had been observed with this sound. The most considerable change in students' pronunciation can be seen in the sound /ʌ/. This change was positive as the number of students in the post-test that had the incorrect pronunciation of the sound reduced to one-third of the number in the pre-test (from 10 students to only 3 students in the post-test).

The other group of mispronounced words was with mistakes mainly from the pronunciation of the three letters "a", "e", and "i". Those mistakes were attached to the pronunciation of some particular words appearing in the text of the two tests. The popularity of the problems was counted by the number of students. Table 4 presents related data with the mentioned of wrong sounds used.

Table 4. *The number of students with the most common mispronounced letters*

Words	Mispronunciation	Number of students	
		Pre-test	Post-test
Pacific	Pronounced "a" as /a/	9	12
	Pronounced "a" as /eɪ/	3	0
	Pronounced "a" as /e/	1	1
incredible	Pronounced the first "e" as /ɪ/	7	3
wine	Pronounced "i" as /ɪ/	7	7
liberal	Pronounced "i" as /aɪ/	11	8

From Table 4, it can be seen that the changes in the number of students having the same pronunciation mistakes occurred in three different ways. The positive effect of the training process could be seen through the decrease in the quantity of students who all had problems with the pronunciation of the letter "e" in the word "incredible" or "i" in "liberal". However, the improvement could not be found in some other cases. While there were no longer students who pronounced the letter "a" in the word "Pacific" as /eɪ/ in the post-test, more students mispronounced it as /a/ at the end of the training course. In fact, there were 9 students observed to have this kind of error in the pre-test, but this number increased by 3 people in the post-test.

The findings have shown another aspect of the effectiveness of this training course. In general, most of the problems in the pre-test had been improved in the pre-test since there were fewer students repeating these problems in the post-test. However, the improvement could not be considered in some cases. For example, every student in the study incorrectly pronounced the sound /əʊ/ in the pre-test but after the training with the notice of the teacher on how to pronounce this sound, 15 out of 20 students remained the wrong way of pronunciation in the post-test. In contrast, the training showed to be the most useful in the improvement of pronouncing the sound /ʌ/. Despite unstable enhancement in students' pronunciation of problematic vowels in group 1 (including English vowels mistaken with Vietnamese ones), the training course could be more or less proved to be effective. For the second group of problems which were caused by students' confusion in choosing the right sound for its representing letter, it is noticeable that besides improvement, some problems remained the same in the post-test. Particularly, there was a wrong pronunciation of the letter "a" in the word "Pacific" produced by more students in the post-test than in the pre-test. These findings revealed that even though the training could make students aware of their mistakes and encourage them to produce vowels correctly, it is impossible to ensure the positive impact of the training course in helping students correcting every pronunciation error that they had. In conclusion, by answering the second research question, the researcher confirmed that the effectiveness of the training course towards the improvement of students' pronunciation performance was shown in the way that it helped students reduced the number of mistakes they made in their speech. However, with some problematic sounds, little improvement of students proved that the training course could not do much for students.

4. Conclusion and implications

The findings of this study provide strong support for including explicit English pronunciation explanations in the teaching syllabus. Appreciation from students on the pronunciation instruction suggests that they can benefit from the formal teaching of English vowels. The profits that students can gain from pronunciation lessons are not only the knowledge of how to produce the correct sounds but also the raising of their awareness. Firstly, students may recognize the relationship between pronunciation and other English skills, especially speaking and listening skills. Helping students have accurate pronunciation means helping them become more ready for speaking and listening skills. Secondly, in this study, students were more motivated in the English lesson thanks to the learning of pronunciation. Therefore, having English sound production explained explicitly may bring more interest for students in learning English.

It can be seen from the collected data that students in the training program employed various learning strategies to support their pronunciation acquisition and practice. The findings also suggest that among a wide range of learning strategies, students only found some of them useful for their pronunciation improvement. The learning tactics of the social strategy group were rated as the most effective while the affective learning strategy and memory strategy group ranked the last in the effectiveness scale. Being less helpful than social learning strategies, some of the cognitive and metacognitive learning tactics stood in next positions. In fact, the strategies of these two groups dominated the middle places of the ranking list. Nevertheless, all research measures of the current study do not allow the researcher to go deeper to explore the reason why students made such ratings for pronunciation learning strategies.

Although there was no consensus on deciding the usefulness of learning strategies, the assessment made by students proved that the support of pronunciation learning tactics had been recognized. In other words, sharing the same view of various researchers [18], [5], [7], the researchers can affirm that pronunciation learning strategies play an important role in learners' learning process.

It is impossible for the teacher to conduct a training course without finding of the current situation of his/her teaching context. It is suggested that the more careful the investigation, the better the solutions. Having a thorough grasp of the teaching condition, the teacher may find more realistic solutions for his/her problems. Also, it is essential for teachers to understand their students' needs as they are the main participant of the program and they can gain something from that. For students, the most effective training program is the one that can satisfy their needs the best. In addition, improvement in students' pronunciation, as well as their positive reflections on the use of this model and learning strategies, suggests the great potential of the Covert Rehearsal Model in supporting students' learning process. Besides, learning strategies should be used in combination as the supporter of each other.

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