DIFFICULTIES IN PRONOUNCING SOME ENGLISH CONSONANTS OF THE EFL STUDENTS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

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ABSTRACT
The study aimed at determining causes of difficulties that first year students at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry (TUAF) encountered in pronouncing some English consonants, namely /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/. The study used a mixed method of the survey, consisting of quantitative and qualitative method, to gather and analyse the data of the survey, in which the questionnaire and mobile recording were thoroughly utilized to obtain the reliable results. On the basis of revealed causes of difficulties in producing English consonants, the researchers made some suggestions for teachers and students to be better aware of the importance of correct pronunciation on consonants in conveying and understanding the meaning of words and sentences in communications. Hopefully, it has a high potential of enhancing and improving the quality of their teaching and learning English language in general and students’ correct pronunciation in particular.

Keywords: pronunciation, consonants, sounds, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, causes of difficulties, Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry (TUAF).

INTRODUCTION
Currently, English has been a compulsory subject at all levels in education except in lower primary schools in the rural areas of Vietnam. Although communicative language teaching method has been employed instead of the Grammar Translation method with the hope that Vietnamese students will have better speaking skill, they are still poor in oral communication. In addition to this, many foreigners stated “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”.

One of the main reasons leading to poor pronunciation of Vietnamese learners of English is the difficulties in producing the English sounds that are unfamiliar with their native language, Vietnamese, such as /θ//ð/ or consonants occurring at the final position of the word such as /d/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, etc; consonant clusters; vowels; and some English features not existing in their first language such as syllable stress and connected speech as Honey, P.J. (2001) [6], Zielinski, B. (2006) [13], Yates, L. (2002) [12].

TUAF students are not the exception of poor pronunciation and mispronunciation even though most of them have learnt English since the early age. Many students can write and read English quite well but they cannot speak it correctly and fluently in real-life situations, which makes the listeners misunderstand, even results in communication breakdown. Therefore, the researchers hope that this study will benefit TUAF students in correct pronunciation. In order to facilitate the study, the following research questions are conducted:

1. What are the causes of difficulties encountered by first year students at TUAF in producing the English consonant sounds, namely /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/?
2. What are the possible solutions to the difficulties?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Dalton, D.F. (1994:3) [3] stated pronunciation can be defined “as the production of
significant sound in two senses. First, sound is significant because it is used as part of a code of a particular language. In this sense we can talk about pronunciation as the production and reception of sounds of speech. Second, sound is significant because it is used to achieve meaning in context of use. Here the code combines with other factors to make communication possible. In this sense we can talk about pronunciation with reference to acts of speaking.”

The study entitled “Common pronunciation problems of Vietnamese learners of English” of Ha Cam Tam (2009) [5] was set up to answer the question “What are the most common pronunciation problems of the students in the English department?” The data collection was administered through an oral final examination. During the exam, each of the students who had finished four years of English at English department was requested to present a talk about a particular topic in approximately five minutes. While listening to students talking, the researcher took notes of the errors related to pronunciation. Ha Cam Tam found out that Vietnamese speakers do not pronounce the ending sounds. In addition, some of the sounds, such as /ʃ, ʤ, tʃ/ are really hard for Vietnamese learners to pronounce especially when these sounds occur at the end of words. She concluded three common errors on pronunciation of her students: sound omission, sound redundancy and sound confusion.

“Vietnamese learners’ difficulties when pronouncing some English sounds /æ, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ, /ʒ/” is the study of Nguyen Thi Quynh Hoa, (2007) [9]. This study found out some difficulties of Vietnamese students when producing some English sounds such as /æ, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ, /ʒ/” and pointed out the causes of the difficulties of their pronunciation. They are as follows, students lack of real English speaking environment, influence by their native language, these sounds mentioned above have different place and manner of articulation, the students’ low ability of pronunciation, the amount of exposure and the methods of learning.

In her research entitled “Difficulties for Vietnamese when pronouncing English : Final Consonants” Nguyen Thi Thu Thao (2009) [10] indicated that... Vietnamese people have many difficulties when pronouncing English. Among those, that paper will firstly deal with the hypothesis “English word-final consonants are not pronounced in a native-like way by Vietnamese speakers”. Theoretical phonological research about final consonants in the Vietnamese language and English has been carried out to characterize the difficulties. The author collected and analyzed data from Vietnamese informants to draw the findings that Vietnamese effort to pronounce English word-final consonants was towards omitting, adding schwa or replacing by sounds closer to those existing in their mother-tongue. Results of native speakers’ evaluation of Vietnamese-accented final consonants were also concluded to clarify how comprehensible informants’ pronunciation is.

With the consideration of all factors affecting correct pronunciation above, this study was conducted to more emphasize on the causes of difficulties in producing some typical consonant sounds regarded as common errors of Vietnamese learners.

SUBJECT AND METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted to 100 freshmen students at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry. A mixed method of the survey, consisting of quantitative and qualitative method was used to investigate the causes of difficulties in pronouncing some English consonants, namely /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/ of TUAF students. First, the data including books, journals, e-journals and other kinds of materials on the subject had to
be reviewed carefully. Then, the certain and detailed problems and difficulties in teaching and learning pronunciation at TUAF will be collected and analysed through a survey questionnaire and mobile recordings. According to Burns, A. (1999:22) [2], the quantitative approach is employed when the researcher aims at achieving objectivity and control as it is held that it can “offer ways of testing hypothesis that are widely accepted or standardized”. Therefore, to gain an overview of difficulties in producing the English consonant sounds mentioned above, a survey questionnaire was conducted to the 100 first-year non major students in English. On the other hand, according to Burns, A. (1999) [2], qualitative research is the methodology of studying the participants’ opinion, actions and experiences through mobile recording and observation. One strong point of the qualitative method is that the data collected is usually “extensive” and “detailed” based on research.

Table 1. Students’ opinions on the causes of difficulties in producing these consonant sounds /θ/, /dθ/, /ʃ/, /θʃ/, /zʃ/, /θz/.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Causes of difficulties in producing these consonant sounds /θ/, /dθ/, /ʃ/, /θʃ/, /zʃ/, /θz/</th>
<th>No. of sts</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I do not know how to pronounce these sounds.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I do not pay much attention to pronouncing, especially to the final sounds/ clusters.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I am actually confused when producing these sounds.</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I only practice pronunciation and speaking English language in class.</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I think I can not pronounce these words accurately because I always pronounce them as Vietnamese sounds though I know they are not the same as my Vietnamese.</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I think the English and Vietnamese phonetic sound system are the same.</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I sometimes substitute this sound to the other one.</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>When learning at secondary school, my teacher rarely asked us to pronounce them but only to do the grammar and vocabulary exercises.</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from table 1 and table 2 synthesized from students’ pronunciation recorded through mobile phone, there is a great number of difficulties in producing consonant sounds /θ/, /dθ/, /ʃ/, /θʃ/, /zʃ/, /θz/. Most of the respondents (92%) expressed their confusion of pronouncing them, namely /θ/ is pronounced as /θθ/, /θ/ is pronounced as /s/, /θ/ is produced as /θ/, /θ/ is as /ʃ/, /dθ/ is replaced by /ʃʃ/, /dθ/ is replaced by /ʒʃ/, /dθ/ is replaced by /ʒʃ/, /θ/ is replaced by /ʃʃ/, /θ/ is replaced by /ʒʃ/, /θ/ is replaced by /ʒʃ/ and /ʃʃ/ is replaced by /ʃʃ/. Two third sometimes had a
substitution among sounds closer to those existing in their mother-tongue, such as /θ/ and /th/, /θ/ and /t/, /θ/ and /s/, /ð/ and /ʒ/, /ʃ/ and /dʒ/, etc. Even, 34% of the respondents confirmed that they did not know how to pronounce these sounds partly due to the influence of their mother tongue. Moreover, more than half of them regarded their errors in producing these sounds as totally native language influence. Based on the mobile recording shown in table 2, it disclosed the sounds /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/ are really difficult for Vietnamese learners to pronounce especially when they occur at the end of words. Therefore, they tended to be omitted during the process of pronunciation. The findings manifest that low pronunciation ability and mother tongue’s influence bring about considerable interference in communication in non native language. According to Lado (1957) [7], who builds the CA hypothesis, the learners who learn a particular second or foreign language will find some features of that language easier, while other features more difficult. The easier elements are similar to those in his native language and the difficult ones are different from his native language. In addition to that, 73 percent of the students stated that “they only practice pronunciation and communication in English in the language classroom”, which is considered lack of English language learning environment and 69% of them confirmed “When learning at secondary school, my teacher rarely asked us to pronounce them but only to do the grammar and vocabulary exercises” reflecting the students’ poor teaching and learning background. The findings imply that the students learned English with extrinsic motivation, which results in a passive way of learning and low motivation to English language learning. Motivation refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning and positive attitude towards learning the target language. To succeed in learning English, therefore, the students need to be intrinsically motivated as well. The intrinsic motivation is often understood as the learner’s natural interest. According to Ryan & Deci (2000) [11], intrinsic motivation is the most important kind and it is defined as the desire to engage in an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonant sounds</th>
<th>Students’ errors</th>
<th>Correct pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/θ/</td>
<td>/θ/ is replaced by /th/ as in Vietnamese&lt;br,eg. thanks /θæŋks/</td>
<td>/θæŋks/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/θ/ is replaced by /s/ as in Vietnamese&lt;br,eg. birthday /ˈbəzdi/</td>
<td>/ˈbəzdi/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/θ/ is replaced by /t/ as in Vietnamese&lt;br,eg. worth /wɔːt/</td>
<td>/wɔːt/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/θ/ is replaced by /ʃ/ as in Vietnamese&lt;br,eg. thick /θɪk/</td>
<td>/θɪk/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ð/</td>
<td>/ð/ is replaced by /ʒ/ as in Vietnamese&lt;br,eg. together /ˈtaːɡə ʒə/</td>
<td>/ˈtaːɡə ʒə/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/ð/ is replaced by /dʒ/ as in Vietnamese&lt;br,eg. rather /ˈrərə dʒə/</td>
<td>/ˈrərə dʒə/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/ð/ is replaced by /z/ as in Vietnamese&lt;br,eg. this /zɪs/</td>
<td>/zɪs/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ʃ/</td>
<td>/ʃ/ is replaced by /θʃ/</td>
<td>/θʃ/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION

The causes for these difficulties in producing English consonant sounds /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/ are due to the following reasons. Firstly, the way the students pronounced the consonants under the study was interfered by their native language, Vietnamese, which resulted in the incorrect pronunciation, the omission or the deviation of the consonant sounds. Secondly, it is their low pronunciation ability that prevented them from producing these sounds correctly. Thirdly, their passive ways of learning a foreign language is a bad common habit of many Vietnamese learners of English. Inappropriate techniques used by teachers, poor learning background, teaching and learning language environment inefficiency are the next causes, which are also blamed for students’ mispronunciation. Finally, the most important cause for all English learners is the limitation of phonetic knowledge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn, the following are hereby recommended:

1. Teachers of English language may be well-trained to adapt to the demands of the learners; hence it is recommended that education officials should give them more seminar, workshops that will keep them well informed of innovations in language teaching.

2. In English classes, relevant communicative activities, that is audio recorded, role-play, discussion, pair work and group work can be applied to develop students’ pronunciation.

3. It is essential for teachers to be flexible, innovative and creative in organizing the class and guiding learners during the lessons by using individual, pair, group and whole class work. By doing that, teachers will make the classroom more pleasant, relaxed and dynamic. Furthermore, teachers had better modify the criteria in pronunciation practice to give students confidence and change their techniques, such as using hands and arms to conduct choral pronunciation practice or trying to use visual aids, avoiding explaining theory all the time but making full use of demonstrations.

4. It is necessary that teachers have a grasp of articulatory phonetics, a well-trained ear, knowledge of the phonology of both the mother tongue and the target language. Teachers will predict the influence of mother tongue to the target language by noticing and analyzing actual problems as they occur and then remedying the situation.
EFL teachers should be able to analyze pronunciation or perception difficulties, bearing in mind the phonological systems of English and the learner’s native language, and give students immediate practical assistance.

5. Students should be taught from the individual sounds basically to minimal pairs, to sentences, to a text and/or dialogue which more closely resembles real-life natural situations.

6. Students need to focus attention to all the sounds, with particular attention on the characteristics associated with them; may be position of the tongue or shape of lips. Students need to contrast these specifics with the positions associated with the misplaced sound.

REFERENCES

TÓM TẮT

NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN TRONG VIỆC PHÁT ÂM MỘT SỐ PHỤ ÂM TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC NÔNG LÂM LÀM THÁI NGUYỄN

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Trường ĐH Nông Lâm - Đại học Thái Nguyên

Nghiên cứu này nhằm nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu về những nguyên nhân gây ra những khó khăn của sinh viên năm thứ nhất trường Đại học Nông Lâm Thái Nguyên trong quá trình phát âm một số phụ âm tiếng Anh, cụ thể là các phụ âm /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/. Nghiên cứu đã sử dụng các phương pháp định lượng và định tính để thu thập và phân tích số liệu của khảo sát, trong đó bao gồm hỏi và ghi âm thông qua điện thoại để sử dụng kỹ lưỡng nhằm thu thập được kết quả đáng tin cậy.

Trên cơ sở những nguyên nhân của khó khăn trong việc phát âm các phụ âm tiếng Anh kể trên, một số đề xuất được đưa ra nhằm giúp giáo viên và sinh viên có nhận thức đúng đắn về tầm quan trọng của việc phát âm đúng các phụ âm trong việc truyền tải và hiệu ứng nghĩa của các từ, các câu trong giao tiếp nhằm nâng cao chất lượng dạy và học tiếng Anh nói chung và phát triển khả năng phát âm chuẩn của sinh viên nói riêng.

Từ khóa: sự phát âm, phụ âm, các âm, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, nguyên nhân của những khó khăn

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