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## IMITATION TECHNIQUE IN IMPROVING 2<sup>nd</sup> YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' ORAL COMPETENCE DISCOURSE AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION

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### SUMMARY

Many learners at Thai Nguyen University of Education recognize that they have difficulties in communicating in English even after many years of learning English. They are smart in grammar but their speaking skill is not good. They always face many mistakes in pronunciation such as final consonants, word stress, intonation and other problems which sometimes lead to misunderstanding in communication with foreigners. Moreover, these EFL university teachers rely too much on traditional teaching methods in textbooks without paying attention to their students' problems. An unsuitable method may make students lack motivation in study. Hence, these students need a learning technique to help them to overcome problems in English pronunciation and improve their speaking skill. One of the effective techniques that has been experimented in many countries is Imitation Technique. The technique helps learners to feel the rhythm of English and express their ideas better and more efficiently by practising copying the native speakers' voice, words, stress and intonation. Therefore, the study is to investigate the current of 2<sup>nd</sup> year non-English major students' Oral Discourse Competence at Thai Nguyen University of Education, especially the most common pronunciation mistakes and suggest the Imitation Technique to help learners overcome these problems.

**Keywords:** *Oral Discourse Competence, Pronunciation, Intonation, Stress, Final Consonants, Imitation Technique*

### INTRODUCTION

It cannot be denied that English plays an important role since it becomes the global language and it has penetrated deeply into the domains of business, communication, entertainment, art, education, science and technology. Also, it helps people access information and creates fresh opportunities for international cooperation among countries over the areas of the world. As a result, the Vietnamese government has promoted the level of English proficiency to Vietnamese people by teaching English as a compulsory subject from the lowest level at Primary school to higher level at college or university. Moreover, it has been the outcome standard mandatory for students at the university. Unfortunately, many people think that teaching English focuses mainly on the English grammar and vocabulary teaching, which is the most important competence for learning [1]. Many Vietnamese students still

have to encounter problems in learning English, especially in learning English pronunciation. They cannot use and communicate in English fluently because they have learnt English just to pass regular tests or examinations. They always cope with many difficulties such as final consonants, word stress, intonation and facial expressions.

Therefore, Imitation Technique is considered a beneficial way to help students overcome problems in speaking English and improve their speaking skill.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

It is no doubt that communication plays a vital role in human life. According to Chaney (1998) [2], speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in different of contexts. Besides, Rebecca (2006) [3] stated that speaking is the first mode in which children acquire language, it is part of the daily involvement of most people with language activities, and it is the prime motor of language change. It also provides our main data for

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understanding bilingualism and language contact. Speaking, one of the skills in learning foreign language besides listening, reading and writing, has been taught since the students entered primary school. However, it is not easy for the students to communicate in English.

### **Discourse Competence**

Discourse competence is a component of communicative competence. According to the classification of communicative competence as given by Canale and Swain (1980) [4], communicative competence is divided into four components: grammatical competence, discourse competence, socio-linguistic competence and strategic competence. In other words, it is the ability to understand, create and develop the larger content and longer sentences with the appropriate cohesion, coherence and rhetorical organization to relate ideas.

### **Pronunciation**

It is the fact that there are many factors that affect English speaking, and pronunciation is well recognized as one of the most important. Hinofitis and Baily (1980, pp.124-125) [5] reported that up to a certain proficiency standard, the fault which most severely impairs the communication process in EFL/ESL learners is pronunciation, rather than vocabulary or grammar.

According to Lynda Yates and Beth Zielinski [6], "Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning. It includes attention to the particular sounds of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual sound, such as intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm (supra-segmental aspects), how the voice is projected (voice quality) and, in its broadest definition, attention to gestures and expressions that are closely related to the way we speak a language". Furthermore, Helen Fraser (2000) [7] also regarded that pronunciation "includes all those aspects of speech which make for an easily intelligible flow of speech, including segmental articulation, rhythm, intonation and phrasing,

and more peripherally even gesture, body language and eye contact.

In conclusion, pronunciation includes the role of individual sounds and sound segments that are features at the segmental level as well as supra-segmental features such as stress, rhythm and intonation.

### **Intonation**

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary [8], intonation is defined as "the rise and fall of the voice in speaking, especially as this affects the meaning of what is being said". Besides, Brazil, Coulthard & Johns (1980) [9] also pointed out that intonation in English might also convey a speaker's involvement in a conversation as well as a desire to take a turn of talk or leave a conversation. Whereas, Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani (2012) [10] regarded that intonation can be thought of as the melody of the language. It is the way the voice goes up and down based on the context and meanings of the communication.

### **Stress**

Stress is defined as "the emphasis we give to individual syllables within a word as well as the emphasis given to words within utterances" [11]. It is used to highlight information. According to Peter Roach (1983) [12], "All stressed syllables have one characteristic in common, and that is prominence. Stressed syllables are recognized as stressed because they are more prominent than unstressed syllables". In the other word, stress is produced by the pitch change, syllable length or movement of the voice up or down. Stress is important at three different levels:

- + Word level – multisyllabic words have one or more syllables that are stressed
- + Sentence level – the most important words tend to be stressed
- + Contrastive stress – the most important words carry greater stress.

### **Final consonants**

The common problem of Vietnamese speakers when they speak English is mainly the pronunciation of final consonants [13].

According to Honey [14], “the Vietnamese consonant system is very different from that of the English, and there is considerable variation between dialects”. Most Vietnamese students feel unconfident and difficult in pronouncing with some of the following sounds: /f/, /θ/, /z/, /p/, /t/, /k/”. They pronounce these consonants with extremely short duration. That is the reason why the native speakers cannot hear these sounds and understand what they are talking about.

### **Imitation technique**

Imitation involves complicated cognitive capacities and plays a critical role in human learning [15] [16]. It is a fact that a person can very easily acquire a language, especially English through this technique. Imitating a native speaker can improve your English pronunciation and expression faster than any other methods. Learners should play English videos everywhere with sub-titles such as a film or a talk show if they want. They can listen to pronunciation, stress and intonation of the words in these videos and then copy them. By the way, learners will reduce their accent and pronunciation problems more quickly and can communicate as a native speaker. Furthermore, a nice English song can be selected. According to Ratnasari (2007) [17] singing English song is believed to have direct influence on the pronunciation skills. Besides, students are interested in singing than speaking [18]. This will help them to understand the pronunciation of the native speaker. Imitation will definitely help learners to study in an easy and perfect way.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **The subjects of the study**

The subjects of this study are 20 2<sup>nd</sup> non-English major students at Thai Nguyen University of Education (TUE) ranging in the same age group of 19-20 years. Most of them had at least 7 years of learning English. Furthermore, they are 2<sup>nd</sup> year non-English major students who studied English and took part in English speaking exams in the first-year at TUE. These 20 selected students were taken randomly (consisting of both male and

female) in two groups A and B with 10 students in each group. That made this study become more reliable because their level is different. The Imitation Technique was only applied in group B. After that, 20 students participated in 2 speaking tests to evaluate the benefits of the technique.

#### **Questionnaire**

Questionnaire was designed focusing on research questions for the learners. It was employed to find out information concerning learners' attitude to learning English, experience of learning English pronunciation and their challenges of English pronunciation as well as the limitations of some traditional methods. This questionnaire is a good way of collecting large amounts of quantitative information.

The students' questionnaire was delivered to 20 2<sup>nd</sup> year non-English major students under teacher's permission after the lesson. The researcher was always ready to clear up any queries of participants in the process of responding to questions. Particularly, the researcher encouraged students to give truthful answers and avoid copying answers from their friends.

#### **Comparison**

The researcher made a comparison between two groups. One group used Imitation Technique in learning English and another group did not use it. The researcher found the differences between two classes, before and after applying the method. The comparison aimed at the effectiveness of Imitation Technique in Oral Discourse Competence of 2<sup>nd</sup> year non-English major students at TUE. Two groups studying in two different methods may lead to different results in the study. By using a pre-test and a post-test, the researcher could prove the great process of Imitation Technique over the traditional methods.

#### **Procedure of data collection:**

The data was collected with the following procedure:

The researcher designed a pre-test to assess the level of all the subjects. It was a transcript about 150 words which was given to the subjects on December 18<sup>th</sup> 2017. Each of the students was asked to present the transcript in five minutes. During this time, the subjects were encouraged to express their pronunciation, facial expressions as well as gestures related to the topic of the paragraph. After the test, the researcher marked the test of all the students under the guidance of the supervisor. Then, 20 students were divided into two equal groups in quality and level: group A and B.

In the research, Imitation Technique was only applied to the group A for 2 months. In the first week, the researcher guided the students of group A how to apply the Imitation Technique in improving their pronunciation under teachers' permission. Students were allowed to play an English video with subtitles. It may be a short-film, news or a TV show. The researcher also suggested that learners should choose a video that they like to practice because it would help them feel comfortable and relax. Exercises would be finished for 3-5 minutes. During this time, the participants were asked to listen to the pronunciation, the stress and the intonation of the words in the video. Then, the learners tried to copy them and repeat again and again. In addition, some useful websites were introduced to all the students of group A such as YouTube, BBC World News and CBC News. The subjects practiced Imitation Technique from December 18<sup>th</sup> 2017 to January 11<sup>th</sup> 2018. It means that the subjects had eight weeks to practice with this technique. The researcher required the students to do homework every week. They had to focus on stress, intonation, final consonants, as well as express their feeling by using facial expression and gesture. Then, they had to self-check with modal videos and find out issues that they should continue to improve in the next weeks. The researcher

regularly checked students' homework and gave feedback to them.

By the end of two months, the researcher designed a post-test to both group A and B. The test would demonstrate the effectiveness of Imitation Technique in enhancing 2<sup>nd</sup> non-English major students' Oral Competence Discourse at Thai Nguyen University.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **Analysis of data from students' questionnaires**

According to the result from students' questionnaires, most of the students studied English over 10 years (80%). The others that are 20% of the total number of respondents have learnt English for 7 to 10 years. However, they only spent about 1-2 hours learning English instead of practicing regularly. In fact, more than half (65%) of the respondents spent about 1-2 hours per day learning English while the rating of the item "over 4 hours" was lowest (10%). That is the reason why they did not have confidence in their pronunciation and committed a lot of mistakes. A list of pronunciation mistakes was also given and 100% of the respondents answered that they had to face problems related to stress, intonation and final consonants. Although all the students applied some methods to improve their pronunciation in English, they did not experience about Imitation Technique. It seems to be a new technique for the subjects. The striking majority (100%) said that they practiced pronunciation by listening to English audios, attending English centers and joining in English classes at school, except imitating native speakers (Imitation Technique).

### **Analysis of data from video recording**

After a pre-test, all students in group B who applied Imitation Technique under the guidance of the researcher were required to make videos to prove that they used this technique in improving their English pronunciation. In the first week, most of students had a common problem with pronunciation. They could not pronounce the final consonants; for example, missing off the

final 't' at the end of a word like 'planet', 'different', 'night', the final 'f' at the end of a word like 'life', 'wife', 'safe'. They also could not express their feeling or attitude because their intonation and stress were poor. However, students' pronunciation was improved in the next weeks. All the pronunciation mistakes such as stress, final consonants and intonation were reduced and students also became more confident.

At the end of this study, researcher had a post-test for both groups. The results of the test showed that all students in group A (not applying Imitation Technique) still made the same mistakes of two months ago. Whereas, group B (applying Imitation Technique) had much better results. It means that Imitation Technique is an effective method of learning pronunciation which helps students be able to communicate and become confident as native speakers.

#### CONCLUSION

English has been accepted as the dominant means of communication in most of the world. When you speak a foreign language, pronunciation plays an essential role. If you are unable to pronounce exactly, this may cause misunderstanding. At the end of the study, the researcher goes to explore the most common pronunciation errors, which are final consonants, stress and intonation, that 2<sup>nd</sup> non-English major students at Thai Nguyen University of Education have to face in learning English. Moreover, the researcher also suggests the Imitation Technique to help learners solve these problems.

Although Imitation is a new technique for non-English major students at Thai Nguyen University of Education, it brings significant positive effects in enhancing English pronunciation. Learners can apply the technique to study at home without attending classes. Imitation Technique equips students with effective study method to practice final consonants, word stress and tone of voice. In addition, this study provides a better

technique for teachers in teaching English and practising pronunciation. Furthermore, future researchers can use the study as a reference in their researches.

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### TÓM TẮT

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Nhiều sinh viên tại trường Đại học Sư phạm – ĐH Thái Nguyên nghĩ rằng họ gặp khó khăn trong giao tiếp bằng tiếng Anh ngay cả sau nhiều năm học tiếng Anh. Họ thông thạo về ngữ pháp nhưng kỹ năng nói của họ thì không tốt. Họ luôn phải đối mặt với nhiều lỗi trong phát âm như phụ âm cuối, trọng âm, ngữ điệu và các vấn đề khác, cái mà đôi khi gây sự hiểu lầm trong giao tiếp với người nước ngoài. Hơn nữa, những giáo viên dạy ngoại ngữ ở trường đại học phụ thuộc quá nhiều vào phương pháp giảng dạy truyền thống trong sách giáo khoa mà không quan tâm đến vấn đề sinh viên gặp phải. Một phương pháp nhằm chán và không phù hợp có thể khiến cho sinh viên mất đi động lực trong học tập. Do đó, những sinh viên này cần một phương pháp học tập để giúp họ vượt qua những vấn đề về phát âm tiếng Anh và nâng cao kỹ năng nói. Một trong những kỹ thuật hiệu quả được thử nghiệm ở nhiều quốc gia là kỹ thuật bắt chước. Kỹ thuật này giúp người học cảm nhận được nhịp điệu của tiếng Anh, nói có cảm xúc hơn bằng cách sao chép từ ngữ, trọng âm và ngữ điệu. Do đó, nghiên cứu này nhằm khảo sát thực trạng khả năng nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên không chuyên năm thứ 2 của Trường Đại học Sư phạm – ĐH Thái Nguyên, đặc biệt là những lỗi phát âm phổ biến và đề xuất kỹ thuật bắt chước để giúp học sinh khắc phục những lỗi này.

**Từ khoá:** Khả năng nói tiếng Anh, phát âm, ngữ điệu, trọng âm, phụ âm cuối, kỹ thuật bắt chước

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