Difficulties in Pronunciation Encountered by English Major Freshmen at Saigon University

Quoc Hoang[1]

Saigon University, Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam[1]

Email: hquoc@sgu.edu.vn[1]

Abstract
In learning a language, it is necessary to master four skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing. Out of them, speaking skill is one of the most useful skills that the learners can use in both the process of studying English and in the future. However, to be able to speak well, the learners need to have correct pronunciation. On this account, English major students usually face many difficulties, especially the freshmen. Therefore, this study aims to find out the difficulties in pronunciation encountered by English language majors freshmen. This study applies the quantitative method. Then, through the questionnaire, the researcher analyzes the data of 106 participants. The result showed that although most of the participants appreciated the importance of pronunciation because of its benefits, they still have many difficulties in pronunciation. Specifically, some difficulties about first language, regional accent, their teacher and the transcription. Besides, the participants also confuse the sounds of vowels and consonants, and they have problems with stress, intonation and rhythm. As English major students, it can be a serious problem if they cannot overcome these difficulties. Therefore, this study helps English major freshmen at Saigon University know their own difficulties and find the suitable solutions to overcome.

Keywords*: Freshmen, pronunciation, difficulties, solutions*

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation always plays an important role in English speaking skills, as it is a necessary element for making listeners understand the speaker. Correct pronunciation helps English speakers avoid misunderstandings and mistakes that may not reflect their true level of proficiency. Moreover, it allows them to sound more professional and appealing. In other words, while listeners may still understand speakers who make slight pronunciation errors, such mistakes can make the speakers seem less confident or even discourage others from engaging in conversation with them. Beyond just being understood, correct pronunciation also supports better listening comprehension. It enables learners to understand videos, conversations, or native speakers more effectively. Pronunciation is a vital component of

speaking that helps English learners become more fluent, avoid miscommunication, and leave a positive impression during interaction.

However, not all English learners have good pronunciation, and many face significant challenges. Research conducted in various countries, including Vietnam, has explored this issue, but most studies focus only on difficulties with pronouncing consonants or distinguishing between long and short vowels. In fact, there are many other pronunciation issues, such as incorrect word stress or lack of intonation, that have not been fully addressed. At Saigon University, English language students also face these challenges. Many freshmen, even those majoring in English, struggle to pronounce words accurately and naturally. Therefore, this thesis aims to explore the pronunciation difficulties encountered by English-major freshmen at Saigon University. There is still a lack of comprehensive studies on this topic. While some studies have focused on specific sounds like /s/ and /ʃ/, pronunciation problems go beyond voiceless consonants. Issues such as tongue placement and articulation of other sounds are also common. Thus, pronunciation problems remain unresolved, and there is a need for more in-depth research into these difficulties.

Understanding this gap, the researcher decided to carry out to identify the pronunciation difficulties faced by English-major freshmen at Saigon University and propose effective solutions to help them overcome these challenges. To achieve these objectives, the following research questions are raised:

1) What pronunciation difficulties do English-major freshmen at Saigon University face?
2) What are some possible solutions to help students overcome these difficulties?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Pronunciation

Pronunciation was defined as the production of sound in two senses. The first sense was the part of a code of a particular language, and the second sense was the meaning that listeners could get in the context of use (Christiane & Barbara, 1994). O'Connor (1980) also believed that pronunciation was the way people make sound when he considered that "Language starts with the ear" (p. 1). He also supposed that a baby started to talk thanks to hearing the sound from the mother. In a study of Abbas and Narjes (2016), they listed the components of pronunciation based on the research of Pourhosein (2012) and Yates and Zielinski (2009). Specifically, it includes consonants and vowels, besides some factors that make up the feature of the speech, such as stress, timing, rhythm, intonation, pronunciation, and voice description.

The Importance of Pronunciation

In the research of Pandya (2018), she considered that the role of pronunciation in expressing ideas is important. Besides, English speakers with good pronunciation are more attractive and leave a strong impression on listeners. The researcher also thought that pronunciation is just as important as grammar or vocabulary. Although they have a wide vocabulary resource and a high accuracy in grammar, many people still make the listeners because they mispronounce the words or the improper intonation and which causes misunderstanding for others. Additionally, pronunciation is a part of communication that forms society and makes people get closer, so making learners understand what speakers say by pronouncing correctly is extremely important. Abbas and Narjes (2016) extracted the statements of several authors as follows. People can understand what English speakers say, although they make

grammatical mistakes about grammar or lack vocabulary, but they cannot understand those who have an unintelligible pronunciation. Being bad at pronunciation causes difficulty for listeners, as they have to concentrate greatly on what the speakers say. It leads listeners not to want to talk with them; from that, the speakers can be low-spirited and limit their speaking. The authors showed the vital social value of pronunciation, such as intelligence, professional competence, hard work, and social advantage. For English learners who are not native speakers, they may not speak a native accent, but it will be successful if they can make the others understand what they say (Sadia, 2015; Nurjamin, 2020). As a result, pronunciation is necessary not only for speaking but also for listening.

Vowel and Consonant Sounds
Vowels are one of the main elements that make the sound when people say a word. According to O'Connor (1980), "Vowels are made by voiced air passing through different mouth-shapes" (p.79). Depending on the different positions of the tongue and lips, the shape of the mouth can be different. There are three kinds of vowels, one of which is a simple vowel. It includes /iː/, /ɪ/, /e/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɑː/, /ɒ/, /ə/, /ɜː/, /ʊ/, /uː/, /ɔː/. The second kind of vowel is diphthongs. O'Connor (1980) stated that "A diphthong is a glide from one vowel to another; and the whole glide acts like one of the long, simple vowels." (p.84). Therefore, by combining single vowels, it formed many diphthongs /ɪə/, /eə/, /eɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /aɪ/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/, /ʊə/. The last one is called vowel sequences, which can be understood as one vowel or diphthong that follows another. For instance, the phonetic transcription of the word 'fire' is /ˈfaɪə(r)/. Therefore, people can pronounce it as /aɪ + ə/.

In addition to the vowel, consonants are also an element that cannot be ignored. There are two main kinds of consonants, which is provided by O'Connor (1980), they are basic consonants and consonant sequences. There are 24 basic consonants that all English major students know. They include /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /k/, /g/, /f/, /v/, /ð/, /θ/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /h/, /r/, /l/, /w/, /j/. The same as vowel sequences, consonant sequences are also made from single consonants, but there can be more than two consonants followed one after the other. The author divided it into three kinds. The first consonant sequence is an initial sequence. O'Connor also divided it into two kinds. These are the sound /s/ which follows one of /p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, /m/, /n/, /w/, /j/, and the other one is one of /p/, /t/, /k/, /b/, /d/, /g/, /f/, /θ/, /ʃ/, /v/, /m/, /n/, /h/. And the second kind of consonant sequence is final sequences, the sounds /s/, /z/, /t/, /d/, and /θ/ are located at the end of the words. Finally, a word that ends with a consonant sequence and the next word also begins with it can be called a longer consonant sequence. Besides, depending on how the shape of the mouth is open, and the tongue can be put, people pronounce the different consonants. According to Charles (2004), voice, tongue shape, and articulators are three elements that are vital for people to successfully pronounce the sounds correctly and differentiate between consonants.

Factors Affecting English Pronunciation
According to a study conducted by Sadia (2015), the researcher brought up the following factors. Because of the influences of the first language and national accent, there are few learners who can master pronunciation. Additionally, a lack of knowledge about the difference between the letters and sounds of a word is one of the reasons that lead to misunderstandings. It is also important to emphasize the correct syllables and phonemes of words. Tania (2019) extracted the research of the author, Kenworthy, the factors that can

affect English learners' pronunciation include age, exposure, innate phonetic ability, identity, language ego, motivation, and interest. From that, the linguists divide them into two main factors: internal factors and external factors. The internal factors include age, brain, and aptitude, and the external factors are the influences of the first language. In addition to mother tongue and national accent, Pandya (2018) considered that the sounds and tone spoken by the teachers and the environment surrounding the English learners directly affect their pronunciation.

Effective Pronunciation Learning Strategies

In assent with Pandya (2018), "Language skills can be learnt through practical use, not in a classroom." Therefore, the author thought that it would be better if English learners could study with native speakers. As described in a study by Sadia (2015), which is cited by Jahan, the learners need to comprehend the function as well as the structure of the components, including sounds, stress, and variation. Moreover, in order to practice some vital fields such as complex sounds, cluster problems, 'th' words, linking words and sounds, the teachers need to have basic knowledge about them. In other words, teachers should pay more attention to teaching pronunciation instead of only teaching vocabulary and grammar. In the end, English learners should focus on rhythm and intonation to speak fluently.

METHODOLOGY

Research Methods

To achieve the research objectives, this study was conducted through the quantitative method. Quantitative method was used in this study because the quantitative method is a method that is very popular and is seen as a suitable method for this research. It helps the researcher collect the data in a fast way, and it is not very costly. Moreover, the quantitative method can find out and describe difficulties in pronunciation from the viewpoint of English major freshmen who have faced them during the process of learning English.

Participants

To have a deeper understanding into the difficulties in pronunciation, the researcher chose randomly 106 English major freshmen of tutorial year 2024-2028 at Saigon University as the participants for this study. The researcher chose English major first-year students because of two reasons. Firstly, they are new students and almost no students have learned to pronounce properly since they were in middle school and high school. And when they first entered the university, freshmen did not learn about subjects. pronunciation, so this group of subjects will encounter a lot of errors when pronouncing. Moreover, they all went through the same 12 years of schooling from elementary school to high school, so the researcher will easily find out their similarities and differences during the process of learning English. Secondly, they are learning, learned and will learn the pronunciation during the learning process at Saigon University. And most importantly, as a student majoring in English, having correct pronunciation is compulsory. Therefore, it is necessary for the freshmen to know their difficulties in pronunciation. Thanks to that, they can know what mistakes they faced to overcome it more easily.

Research Instruments

Because of the effectiveness of questionnaires in collecting the information on a wide scale, it is the instrument that was used to collect data. The evaluation questions were carefully researched based on previous studies to insert in the questionnaire. There are a total of 6

parts and 27 questions in there. Part 1 has 2 questions about personal information of survey participants. Part 2 from question 2 to 7 is the evaluation of students about the importance of pronunciation. Followed by part 3, this part focuses on studying students' difficulties in the process of studying the pronunciation and it consists of 5 questions from 8 to 12. Part 4 from question 13 to 15 studies students' difficulty in pronouncing vowels. The same as part 4, part 5 from question 16 to 22 also asks about students' difficulty in pronouncing consonants. The final part is part 6, consisting of 5 sentences from 23 to 27, asking about students' difficulties with stress, intonation and rhythm. This study used mainly closed-ended questions. Specifically, in part 1, participants only need to type in a pre-formatted answer. And from part 2 to part 6, the answers are divided by level from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

Data Collection Procedures

After designing the questionnaires to collect the data from the English major first-year students, it was created by Google Forms. The questionnaire is divided into 6 parts, and the questions are closed-ended questions, so the participants just choose the answer from their point of view. Then, thanks to the help of my friends who are also first-year English students, they helped me send the link to the survey to the Zalo and Facebook group classes. The collection procedure takes place from the first semester of the academic year 2022-2023, from November 29th, 2024, to December 8th, 2024. Therefore, it takes 10 days to collect data from the students. That time is long enough for the participants to give their thoughtful answers.

Data Analysis Methods

After finding the research method, determining the population and sampling, selecting the research instrument, and submitting the survey, the researcher spent more than one week getting data from English major freshmen at Saigon University. The data was analyzed by three procedures. At first, the researcher collected and synthesized the data from the answers to the questionnaires on Google Forms. After that, the researcher started to analyze, evaluate, and interpret the data. This is an important step in identifying students' pronunciation difficulties, so it has been done very carefully. Finally, the researcher presented the results as descriptive statistics such as column and pie charts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Student Difficulties in English Pronunciation

From Table 1, it can be concluded that first-year students almost always have a lot of difficulties with their native language and regional accent. Not all the sounds of languages around the world are the same, specifically Vietnamese. There are sounds in English that are not available in Vietnamese, such as /θ/, /ð/, /dʒ/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/, /æ/, and so on. Therefore, it is difficult for learners to pronounce correctly, as well as confuse the sounds of Vietnamese. According to Mrs. Hanh, about the pronunciation errors of North Central students, when they pronounce the sound /j/ as the first sound of words or syllables in English, for example, yes, young, European, etc. They tend to pronounce it as the sound /z/. Additionally, the fact that teachers do not correct pronunciation or mispronounce is also one of the big problems in learning and practicing speaking skills. However, it can be seen that a class is often very crowded, so it is difficult for teachers to correct, particularly the pronunciation, for their students. Finally, transcription is also one of the important factors to help students pronounce

correctly in the learning process. Therefore, students need to know how to read the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

Table 1. *Students' Difficulties in English Pronunciation*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
8. My first language negatively affects my English pronunciation.	3.8% 4	0% 0	5.7% 6	46.2% 49	44.3% 47
9. My regional accent negatively affects my English pronunciation.	5.7% 6	0,9% 1	3.8% 4	61.3% 65	28.3% 30
10. Teacher does not correct pronunciation errors in class	6.6% 7	15.1% 16	6.6% 7	34.9% 37	36.8% 39
11. Teacher does not put emphasis on pronunciation while taking English classes	7.5% 8	16% 17	2.8% 3	42.5% 45	31.1% 33
12. I often have difficulties in reading phonetic transcriptions.	7.5% 8	0% 0	3.8% 4	39.6% 42	49.1% 52

From statement 8 of Table 1, it shows that 44,3% (47 people) strongly agree and 46,2% (49 people) agree that their first language negatively affects their English pronunciation. Besides, only 4 out of 106 participants are not affected by their native language, so this is one of the major difficulties that first-year students at Saigon University face.

In addition to the mother tongue, regional accents are also one of the difficulties that students face. Therefore, 65 people (61,3%) agreed with the statement "My regional accent negatively affects my English pronunciation" and also 30 people (28,3%) chose "strongly agree". Although the number of participants choosing "agree" is higher than "strongly agree", they still had difficulty in this regard. And only 7 people were unaffected by their regional accent, of which 6 chose "strongly disagree" and 1 chose "disagree".

In addition, teachers are also those who support students in correcting and practicing pronunciation. However, more than 50% of the participants agreed with the statement "Teacher does not correct pronunciation errors in class", of which 34,9% chose "agree" and 36.8% chose "strongly agree". It proves that most teachers didn't correct the pronunciation of students in the class. This problem is due to the large number of students in the class, so the teacher could not correct the pronunciation for each person. But there were still students whose teachers corrected their pronunciation in class because the remaining 28,3% of participants chose "strongly disagree", "disagree", and "neutral" for this statement, of which 6,6% strongly disagree, 15,1% disagree, and 6,6% neutral.

In order to correct students' pronunciation errors, the teachers need to pronounce correctly first. But there are still many teachers who pronounce words incorrectly. Specifically, 45 (42,5%) participants agreed that their teacher didn't focus on pronunciation when teaching, and 33 (31,1%) participants agreed with this. This is a huge obstacle for students in the process of learning and practicing speaking English. Only 8 people chose "strongly disagree" and 17 people chose "disagree" with this statement. The remaining 3 people who chose "neutral" will probably learn with a few teachers with correct pronunciation and vice versa.

Phonetic transcription is also one of the important factors to help students pronounce correctly in the learning process. But up to 94 out of 106 participants still can't read it, specifically 52 people chose "strongly agree" and 42 people chose "agree" with the last statement in this section. And in the total of 106 participants, only 8 people can read the phonetic transcription because they chose "strongly disagree".

Student Difficulties with English Vowels

It can be concluded that, firstly English major freshmen at Saigon University have difficulty with distinguishing short vowels and long vowels. There are the following pairs of short and long vowels: /iː/ and /ɪ/; /æ/ and /ɑː/; /ɒ/ and /ɔː/; /ə/ and /ɜː/; /ʊ/ and /uː/. These are pairs of sounds that are hard to distinguish, and 95.3% (Table 2) of the participants in this survey have many difficulties with them. With each vowel and consonant, there will be a way to open the mouth and place the tongue in a different position to be able to make the correct sound for each sound. For instance, when pronouncing the sound /ɪ/, the mouth of the speakers will be smaller than when reading the sound /iː/, and the tongue is also placed at a lower position (Ann, 2013). Basically, English learners who know how to read phonetic transcription can know that the /iː/ sound will be longer than the /ɪ/ sound. However, when reading a complete word, most of them cannot distinguish those sounds. Although /ʌ/ and /ə/ are not the long and short vowel pairs mentioned above, these two sounds have similar pronunciation and are difficult to distinguish. According to Ann (2013), both of these sounds are short vowels, but when pronouncing the /ʌ/ sound, students need to put the tongue back a little. And for the /ə/ sound, students put the tongue forward and up a little more.

Table 2. *Student Difficulties with English Vowels*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
13. I often confuse long vowels with short vowels.	1.9% 2	0% 0	2.8% 3	46.2% 49	49.1% 52
14. I don't know how to differentiate between /æ/ and /ɑː/ sounds.	1.9% 2	1.9% 2	1.9% 2	38.7% 41	55.7% 59
15. I don't know how to differentiate between /ʌ/ and /ə/ sounds.	2.8% 3	2.8% 3	2.8% 3	44.3% 47	47.2% 50

Further research on transcription, there are 2 main components: vowels and consonants. In this part, the researcher will analyze students' difficulties in pronouncing consonants. From the data in Table 2, the participants mainly had difficulty in distinguishing similar sounds, concretely long vowels and short vowels; /æ/ and /ɑː/ sounds; /ʌ/ and /ə/ sounds. These sounds easily lead to misreading one word with another, and the listener will misunderstand the meaning of the sentence

Nearly 100% of participants confused long vowels and short vowels. Almost all English learners could not distinguish these pairs of sounds, including first-year English language students at Saigon University. A total of 95,3% of participants agreed with the statement "I often confuse long vowels with short vowels." Specifically, 49,1% of participants chose "strongly agree" and 46,2% chose "agree". And only 2 participants chose "strongly disagree", which means that they can distinguish long vowels and short vowels.

Also, the statement "I don't know how to differentiate between /æ/ and /ɑː/ sounds" also agreed upon by many people. There were 59 people (55,7%) who chose "strongly agree"

and 41 people (38,7%) chose "agree" that they cannot distinguish the above sound pair and only 4 people could distinguish, and 2 people held a neutral opinion.

Finally, the sounds /ʌ/ and /ə/ also cause many difficulties for people to distinguish them. And obviously, there are 47 people who agreed and 50 people who strongly agreed with this last statement. The same as the above analyses, there are very few people who can differentiate these pairs of sounds, namely, only 6 people.

Student Difficulties with English Consonants

The same as vowels, English major freshmen at Saigon University also face many difficulties with consonants. To mention the omission of the final consonants and confuse similar sounds. Generally, first-year students tend to omit the final consonants may originate in the influence of the mother tongue because Vietnamese people do not pronounce the final sounds when speaking Vietnamese. Thus, this is an obstacle for Vietnamese students, especially first-year English students at Saigon University. As some examples of Pandya (2018), the words "fog" and "fox" do not seem the same, but if the speaker does not pronounce the last consonant, the two words will be easily confused with each other. Final consonants help listeners realize what tense the speakers use if they clearly pronounce regular verbs. The tense is not only a structure but also a tool to help others determine the time when the action happens. For tenses like present perfect or simple future, there are auxiliary or modal verbs ahead of the main verb, so even if the speaker does not pronounce the final sounds of the verb, the listeners still understand. However, for the present simple and the past simple, the listeners will not know or even misunderstand the time period in which the event happened. In addition, students still have difficulty distinguishing similar sounds (Table 3). As mentioned, each sound in English has a slightly different way of opening the mouth, placing the tongue, and pushing the breath, which students do not pay too much attention to when speaking Vietnamese. A typical example of this situation is the words weather /ˈweðə(r)/ and birthday /ˈbɜːθdeɪ/. Although the two words the same letter "th", the letter "th" of word weather is represented by /ð/ and /θ/ is for birthday. Most students cannot distinguish them because the way to pronounce them is the same, and there is only one difference. That is the sound /θ/ is the voiceless consonant, and /ð/ is the voiced consonant. Therefore, when speaking English, it is difficult for them to differentiate them.

Table 3. *Student Difficulties with English Consonants*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
16. I always omit the final consonants when pronouncing.	5.7% 6	0% 0	8.5% 9	42.5% 45	43.4% 46
17. I always get confused between voice and voiceless sounds.	6.6% 7	0.9% 1	7.5% 8	44.3% 47	4.1% 43
18. I always confuse the consonants /t/, /tr/, /dʒ/ with /tʃ/.	9.4% 10	15.1% 16	4.7% 5	40.1% 43	30.2% 32
19. I always get confused between the consonants /ð/ with /θ/.	2.8% 3	0% 0	5.7% 6	37.7% 40	53.8% 57
20. I always confuse the consonants /ð/ with /d/ or /z/, for instance, weather and birthday.	4.7% 5	0.9% 1	4.7% 5	34.9% 37	54.7% 58
21. I usually get confused between /dʒ/ and /g/ sounds.	3.8% 4	13.2% 14	6.6% 7	34.9% 37	41.5% 44

	10.4%	12.3%	6.6%	42.5%	28.3%
22. I always get confused between the consonants /ʃ/ with /s/.	11	13	7	45	30

The next component in the transcription that people also easily make mistakes when pronouncing is consonants. With this component, in addition to confusing voiced and voiceless sounds; /t/, /tr/, /dʒ/ with /tʃ/; /ð/ with /θ/; /ð/ with /d/ or /z/; /dʒ/ and /g/; /ʃ/ with /s/, people often omit the final consonants when pronouncing. But for the sounds /t/, /tr/, /dʒ/ and /tʃ/; /dʒ/ and /g/ sounds; /ʃ/ and /s/, the number of participants can distinguish more than the rest.

The final consonant is an extremely important sound in making a sentence clearer and more attractive. But from Table 3, a lot of participants ignore this last sound when speaking. There were 46 participants (43,4%) choosing "strongly agree" and 45 people (42,5%) choosing "agree" and only 6 people (5,6%) choosing "strongly disagree" and 9 people (8,5 %) keeping a neutral opinion.

There are also voiceless and voiced consonants in consonants, but according to the survey results, only 8 participants can distinguish these two types of consonants, specifically 7 students (6.6%) chose "strongly disagree" and 1 student (0.9%) chose "disagree". The remaining 43 students chose "strongly agree" and 47 students agreed with this second statement.

For the next statement "I always confuse the consonants /t/, /tr/, /dʒ/ with /tʃ/." there were 32 participants who strongly agreed and 43 participants who agreed. Additionally, there were 5 people who were neutral with this statement, 16 people disagreed and 10 people strongly disagreed. It proved that 26 out of 106 people were not confused the consonants /t/, /tr/, /dʒ/ with /tʃ/.

The consonants /ð/ and /θ/ are two sounds that are not only difficult to distinguish from each other, but also very difficult to pronounce because they are not available in other languages and require a lot of practice by learners. So 57 participants strongly agreed and 40 participants agreed with the statement "I always get confused between the consonants /ð/ with /θ/." Only 3 students disagreed and 6 students were neutral with this statement.

For the consonants /ð/, /d/ and /z/, when people reach them separately, it is very different, but when reading a particular word, many people cannot read it correctly and lead to confusion. Therefore, the answer "strongly agree" accounted for 54,7% and the answer "agree" accounted for 34.9%. The remaining answers "neutral" accounted for 4,7%, 0,9% for "disagree", and 4,7% for "strongly disagree".

With the next statement, "I usually get confused between /dʒ/ and /g/ sounds.", although there were 44 participants who strongly agreed and 37 people agreed, there were still 14 participants who disagreed and 4 people strongly disagreed. It proved that for this statement, more people could distinguish this pair of consonants than the rest. In addition, there were 7 people who held a neutral opinion.

This pair of sounds /ʃ/ and /s/ is not too difficult to distinguish, but the number of people who confuse them is still very high. Specifically, 75 participants were confused, 7 people had a neutral opinion, and 24 people were distinguishable. Of which, 30 people strongly agreed, 45 people agreed, 13 people disagreed, and 11 people strongly disagreed with the statement "I always get confused between the consonants /ʃ/ with /s/."

Student Difficulties with Stress, Intonation, and Rhythm

In addition to pronouncing correctly, English major freshmen also need to emphasize the right stress and focus on intonation when speaking. Besides, O'Connor (1980) also argued that each language has its own melody, and each melody depends on the pronunciation of the word. Thanks to that, the melody can express the emotions of the speaker through the way of rising and falling, as well as emphasizing when speaking. However, because of the influences of their first language, many first-year students at Saigon University still cannot raise and lower their voice, emphasize the correct sound, and even mix in the Vietnamese accent. Table 4 lists data on freshmen's difficulties with stress, intonation, and rhythm.

Table 4. *Student Difficulties with Stress, Intonation, and Rhythm*

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
23. I always have problems with stress.	7,5%	0%	3,8%	35,8%	52,8%
	8	0	4	38	56
24. I don't focus on sentence stress when I read a full sentence.	7,5%	0%	4,7%	38,7%	49,1%
	8	0	5	41	52
25. I don't link sounds when pronouncing.	3,8%	1,9%	1,9%	44,3%	48,1%
	4	2	2	47	51
26. I don't have the intonation when speaking.	6,6%	1,9%	0,9%	42,5%	48,1%
	7	2	1	45	51
27. I always mispronounce words whose parts of speech are both verbs and nouns. For example, increase (v) and increase (n).	2,8%	0%	5,7%	32,1%	59,4%
	3	0	6	34	63

First, with the section "I always have problems with stress.". The majority of students who chose to agree with this view is quite high, which accounted for 35,8% (38 students), and students who strongly agreed, accounting for 52,8% (56 students). This proved that most students have problems with accents when learning pronunciation. A small part of students hold a neutral opinion, accounting for 3,8% (4 students). However, there are still students who strongly disagree with this item, accounting for 7,5% (8 students).

Next, for the statement "I don't focus on sentence stress when I read a full sentence.". Most students have difficulty because they cannot emphasize the stress of sentences. Specifically, students who chose to agree with this point of view accounted for 38,7% (41 students), and strongly agreed accounted for 49,1% (52 students). Besides, there is still a neutral percentage of students with this view of 4,7% (5 students). However, there is a small percentage of students who will not have any difficulty in this regard, at 7,5% (8 students).

Additionally, for the statement "I don't link sounds when pronouncing." The data shows us that most students will find it difficult to connect sounds when pronouncing. Specifically, students who chose to agree with this point of view accounted for 44,3% (47 students), and strongly agreed accounted for 48,1% (51 students). However, there was a small percentage of students who chose to disagree with this viewpoint at 1.9% (2 students) and strongly disagree with 3.8% (4 students).

Also, with the section "I don't have the intonation when speaking.". There are also many students who do not have intonation when speaking. Survey data has shown that the percentage of students who choose to agree with this view is 42.5%, equivalent to 45

students, and 48.1% strongly agree, equivalent to 51 students. However, there are still students who choose to disagree with this view, accounting for 1.9% (2 students) and strongly disagree with 6.6% (7 students).

Finally, with the section "I always mispronounce words whose parts of speech are both verbs and nouns. For example, increase (v) and increase (n)". Most students found it was easy to mispronounce words that contain both verbs and nouns. Specifically, students choosing to agree with this point of view accounted for 32.1% (34 students) and those choosing strongly agreed accounted for a fairly high rate of 59.4% (63 students). Besides, there were still students who kept neutral on this point of view, accounting for 5.7% (6 students). However, there was a small percentage of students who did not feel this difficulty at all, accounting for 2.8% (3 students).

Solutions for English Major Freshmen to Overcome the Difficulties in Pronunciation

To be able to pronounce correctly, English major freshmen at Saigon University need to comprehend the knowledge about pronunciation. Fortunately, English language students will study the subject of Phonetics and Phonology in the second year, so students need to focus on studying this subject so that their pronunciation can improve.

Moreover, O'Connor (1980) was right when he considered that people start to talk after listening. He brought out an example of a baby that hears the sounds from their mother and imitates. But if a baby is born deaf, they cannot talk because they do not hear anything. Thus, listening and speaking skills are closely related to each other, students can improve pronunciation through listening and speaking practices.

To be able to distinguish the vowels and consonants, practice is also indispensable. Pandya (2018) has the same idea that the best way to improve pronunciation is to practice with native speakers. Students can practice at home or enroll in communication classes to have the opportunity to listen to native speakers. However, for students who don't have too much time to join the communicative classes, they can learn through a learning application called Cambly - recommended by blogger - Nguyen Newin. There will be native teachers who are available 24/7 to help students clear up their queries.

Besides, the attitude of an individual is really vital. There are many ways to improve pronunciation, but to successfully do that, students need to have a self-disciplined attitude towards learning. All methods will be meaningless if students remain indifferent and do not focus on improving their own difficulties.

Last but not least, the teachers play an important role in teaching and improving the pronunciation of students. The teachers must have correct pronunciation, so for teachers with incorrect pronunciation, the school can review and organize small lessons to avoid the teacher's incorrect pronunciation. Besides, teachers should pay more attention to correcting pronunciation for students. Because of the limitation of time so teachers can alter them whenever they read. Moreover, teachers can organize some activities for them to practice, such as role-play, a listening game, or discussing a topic. Abbas and Narjes (2016) believed that pronunciation can be improved by integrating with other skills, such as listening and speaking skills, so teachers should let students practice the above activities continuously in class. Abbas and Narjes also recommended that teachers take more time to explain the differences between the English sounds and the mother tongue. From that, students can be aware of the difficult sounds that they may encounter.

CONCLUSION

Based on the 2 research questions posed, this study came to two conclusions. The first is the difficulty in pronunciation for first-year English students. After analyzing and discussing the survey results, the researcher found the difficulties of students as follows. The first is the influence of their mother tongue, local accent, and teachers. In addition, they also have difficulty reading the phonetic transcription. The second is the difficulty in pronouncing vowels and consonants, they are mainly unable to distinguish sounds that are pronounced similarly and often omit the final consonants. And finally, their difficulty in emphasizing the stress, intonation, and rhythm of words or sentences.

The second conclusion is the solution for students to overcome difficulties in their pronunciation. From the above difficulties, the researcher has proposed the following solutions. The background knowledge for pronunciation is extremely important, so when the English major freshmen have the opportunity to study this subject, they need to be very focused to be able to get a solid foundation. From there, students can more easily improve their pronunciation. Attitude is also a necessary factor for the development of all skills, including pronunciation. Therefore, learners need to be self-disciplined and seriously improve their pronunciation. And finally, teachers are always companions and support students throughout the learning process, so they need to monitor students more closely and at the same time create many activities to improve pronunciation for students.

In the process of carrying out this study, the researcher inevitably encountered difficulties. So here are some recommendations. First, because of not having much experience, in the process of carrying out this study, the researcher still encountered many shortcomings. Therefore, students who can participate in conducting scientific research from the second or third year of university will have a great advantage. Secondly, because of the limitation of time, the researchers should allocate a reasonable time to avoid not finishing the study in time. At the same time, completing the research paper is also convenient for the researcher to correct errors more easily. Finally, choosing a topic and research method is very important. Depending on the title of the topic, there will be an appropriate research method. In addition, there are research topics that have not been widely studied by many people, so it will be difficult to find references. Therefore, the researcher should carefully consider the topic title and research method to make it easier to carry out.

REFERENCES

Abbas, P. G., & Narjes, B. S. (2016). How can EFL teachers help EFL learners improve their English pronunciation?. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 7 (5), 967-972*. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0705.18

Ann, B. (2013). *Ship or Sheep?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Charles, W. K. (2004). *The pronunciation of English*. United Kingdom: MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall.

Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. and Goodwin, J. (2010). *Teaching Pronunciation: A Course Book and Reference Guide*. Cambridge University Press, New York.

Christine, D. & Barbara, S. (1994). *Pronunciation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nurjamin, L. R. (2020). The Priorities of English Pronunciation Elements for Indonesian Junior High School Students. In *English Education and Applied Linguistics (EEAL) Journal* (Vol.

3, Issue 1). https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4d5b/587587584b6e9370aeb66531971481a2cf9a.pdf

O'Connor, J. D. (1980). *Better English pronunciation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pandya, D. P. (2018). Importance of pronunciation in English language communication. *Parivar Vidhyalaya (Gujarati Medium), 7 (2), 2277-7733*. Retrieved November 9, 2022 from http://www.voiceofresearch.org/doc/Sep-2018/Sep-2018_5.pdf

Pourhosein Gilakjani, A. (2012). A study of factors affecting EFL learners' English pronunciation learning and the strategies for instruction. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 2*(3), 119-128.

Sadia, K. S. (2015, August). *English pronunciation difficulties of students in the Sub-Urban areas of Sylhet: A secondary scenario*. Retrieved November 12, 2022 from https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/61807589.pdf

Sodalin, S., & Chan, H. (2021). *English pronunciation challenges for English major university students in Battambang province*. Retrieved November 25, 2022 from https://cefcambodia.com/2021/08/09/english-pronunciation-challenges-for-english-major-university-students-in-battambang-province/

Syed, F. J., & Abbas, H. A. (2021). Pronunciation problems encountered by EFL learners: An empirical study. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ), 12*, 194-212. doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol12no4.14

Tania, A. K. (2019). A descriptive study: factors affecting the pronunciation of English language (L2)*. Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends, 1(2), 1-16. doi: https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct.12.01*

Yates, L., & Zielinski, B. (2009). *Give It a Go: Teaching Pronunciation to Adults*. AMEP Research Centre.