TOWARDS IMPROVING UEH'S UNDERGRADUATES' PRONUNCIATION USING *PRONUNCIATION POWER* SOFTWARE

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Abstract

A remarkable number of undergraduates of Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics (UEH) tend to pay inadequate attention to the acquisition of the English sound system and therefore are not well-aware that English pronunciation should be one of the first things, if not the very first thing, to be acquired if they want to speak the language well. Accordingly, the students more or less fail to understand their interlocutors as well as to make themselves precisely interpreted in various circumstances of communication no matter how excellent their grammar is. As a matter of fact, a number of English sounds do not really exist in Vietnamese, especially those in the English consonant system, but frequently occur in common words that are usually employed in everyday conversations; however, a large number of UEH's undergraduates make plenty of pronunciation mistakes in their speaking.

By getting the students to be explicitly exposed to the conscious acquisition of the sound system of English using the software *Pronunciation Power*, the paper helps suggest a number of strategies that could be practically applied to assist UEH's undergraduates in improving their English pronunciation. Also, it is essential to note that the application of the teaching strategies is expected to be an effective way not only to better learners' pronunciation of the English sound system but also to empower them with some listening and speaking skills. Hopefully, the suggested strategies are beneficial to certain aspects of teaching and learning English pronunciation to a wide variety of Vietnamese learners of English

Statement of the problem

The results of poor pronunciation are tragic, because the content of a speech may be altered due to the speaker's mispronunciation. Therefore, even if one uses great vocabulary and grammar, people may simply not understand what he/she means. Practically, communicative competence has recently been considered the first priority of most EFL teachers as well as learners. From this perspective, it is pronunciation that partially shapes the speaker's success. Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin [1996:1] state that "successful communication cannot take place without correct pronunciation". That means pronunciation produced by a speaker and that recognised by a listener have great influences on the quality of communication for both. Furthermore, Chomsky [1972: 29] points out: "the person who acquired knowledge of a language has internalized a system of rules that relate sound and meaning." Accordingly, the relation between pronunciation and interpretation is close.

Nevertheless, students at University of Economics, Ho Chi Minh City (UEH), keep mispronouncing English words but do not make great efforts to improve their pronunciation. They mistakenly assume that their pronunciation is good enough, and thus, there is no need to spend time and efforts on pronunciation. In fact, a considerable number of UEH's undergraduates fail to pronounce English sounds properly. Utterances in which words with similar sound forms, such as *white* and *wine*, cannot be distinguished are very common. Such mispronunciation certainly leads to misinterpretation and potential discomfort devaluing the speaker's effort in oral communication. Therefore, it is a must to find a satisfactory solution to the problem.

Related terms and theory

Speech sounds

As stated by Buchanan [1963: 18], "vocal sounds are produced in the human body by the organs of what is called the vocal tract[1]. Vocal sounds which are organized to communicate information are called speech sounds." According to Fromkin and Rodman [1993: 198], every language of the world contains the two basic classes of speech sounds often referred to as consonants and vowels.

In order to produce a consonant, the speaker has to obstruct the flow of air as it travels through the mouth. That is, a consonant is articulated with the flow of air blocked in the mouth. From this perspective, Finegan [1994: 34] defines consonants as "sounds produced by partially or completely blocking air in its passage from the lungs through the vocal tract." In other words, only when there is a partial or complete obstruction of the air passage from our lungs through our vocal tract can we make a consonant. In the same vein, Richards *et al* [1992: 78] claim that a consonant is a speech sound where the air stream from the lungs is either completely blocked, partially blocked or where the opening is so narrow that the air escapes with audible friction. In the production of some consonants, the air is blocked in the mouth but allowed to escape through the nose.

As Avery and Ehrlich [1995: 28] held, vowels are differentiated from consonants by the relatively wide opening in the mouth when air travels from the lungs out of the body. In the production of vowels, there is relatively little obstruction of the air stream somewhere in the mouth in comparison to that of consonants. In other words, a vowel is a speech sound which is produced with no obstruction of the airflow in the mouth. Sharing the same point of view, Richards *et al* [1992: 403] define a vowel as "a speech sound in which the air stream from the lungs is not blocked in any way in the mouth or throat, and which is usually pronounced with vibration of the vocal cords, e.g. English /i:/ in /si:/ *see* and /u:/ in /tu:/ *too*." According to Finegan's definition [1994: 39], vowels are produced by "passing air through different shapes of the mouth and different positions of the tongue and lips unobstructed by narrow passages (except at the glottis)."

Places of articulation

Places of articulation are defined a bit differently by linguists. They refer to "parts of the mouth and throat (the *oral cavity*) that are used in the production of speech sounds" [Richards *et al*, 1992: 280] or "the unmovable parts of the mouth involved in the articulation of speech sounds" [Avery and Ehrlich, 1995: 11]. In other words, a place of articulation is the area in the mouth at which a consonantal closure or constriction occurs. For instance, when the sounds /p/ and /b/ are made, the two lips come into close contact whereas the lower lip moves to touch the upper front teeth so that we could exactly produce the /f/ and /v/ sounds.

Manners of articulation

As defined by Fromkin and Rodman [1993: 193], a manner of articulation is the way in which "the air stream is affected as it travels from the lungs up and out of the mouth and nose". That is, a manner of articulation is the kind of closure or constriction used in making a consonant. For example, the air stream is completely obstructed in the mouth by the two lips then suddenly released to cause some kind of explosion in order for the sounds /p/ and /b/ to be produced properly; therefore, /p/ and /b/ are referred to as plosives in terms of manners of articulation.

Tongue Height

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[1] "The vocal tract is the air passages which are above the vocal cords and which are involved in the production of speech sounds." The vocal tract can be divided into:

- THE NASAL CAVITY, which is "the air passage within and behind *the nose*";
- THE ORAL CAVITY, which is "the air passage within the mouth";
- THE PHARYNX, which is the air passage extending "from above *the vocal cords* up to *the soft palate* (*velum*) at the back of the mouth."

[Richards, Platt and Weber, 1987: 214; 308]

The height of the tongue allows us to distinguish high, low and mid vowels: the vowels in *beat*, *bit*, *boot* and *book* are all considered to be high vowels because they are made with the tongue raised above its rest position; the vowels in *bat*, *botch* and *bar* are all considered to be low vowels because they are made with the tongue below its rest position; the vowels in *bet*, *but* and *bought* are all considered to be mid vowels because they are made with the tongue neither high nor low in the mouth. Since the tongue is much lower, the mouth is open much wider for the vowel of *bat* than for that of *beat*.

Frontness/Backness

Which part of the tongue that is involved in the production of a vowel allows us to classify it either front, back or central: the vowel of *beat*, which is made with the front part of the tongue high in the mouth, is referred to as a high front vowel; the vowel of *boot*, which is made with the back part of the tongue high in the mouth, is referred to as a high back vowel; the vowel of *bat*, which is made with the front part of the tongue low in the mouth, is referred to as a low front vowel; the vowel of *botch*, which is made with the back part of the tongue low in the mouth, is referred to as a low back vowel. The vowels in *but* and *birth*, which are made with neither the front nor the back part of the tongue, are referred to as central vowels. When these vowels are pronounced, the tongue is neither high nor low in the mouth; therefore, they are called mid central vowels.

Tenseness/Laxness

The vowels in *beat*, *bought*, *boot* and *birth*, which are produced with extra muscle tension, are tense. The vowels in *bit*, *bet*, *botch*, *book* and *but*, which are produced without this tension, are lax. Tense vowels are produced with much more effort than lax vowels.

Lip Rounding

The back vowels in *boot*, *book*, *bought*, and *botch* are all pronounced with the lips rounded, i.e. with the corners of the lips brought towards each other and the lips often pushed forwards, resulting in some protrusion. The low back vowel in *bar* is the only English back vowel that occurs without lip rounding. All non-back vowels are also unrounded. The front vowels in *beat*, *bit*, *bet*, and *bat* are all pronounced with the lips more or less spread, i.e. with the corners of the lips moved away from each other as for a smile. All English front vowels are more or less spread. The central vowels in *but* and *birth* are all pronounced with the neutral lips, i.e. with the lips neither rounded nor spread. All English central vowels are neutral.

inimal pairs

"A first rule of thumb to determine the phones of any language is to see whether substituting one sound for other results in a different word. If it does, the two sounds represent different phones. When two different forms are identical in every way except for one sound segment that occurs in the same place in the string, the two words are called a minimal pair." [Fromkin and Rodman, 1993: 218]. In the same vein, Nilsen and Nilsen [1973: 15] state that a minimal pair includes two words that are pronounced alike except for a single phonemic difference such as *hat-hit* and *thing-sing*.

Features and advantages of Pronunciation Power

There are two versions of the software: *Pronunciation Power 1* and *Pronunciation Power 2* (abbreviated to *PP1* and P*P2* respectively) published by *English Computerized Learning Inc.* Two selected features of these softwares, which are used in English teaching, are *Lessons* and *Exercises*. Lessons provide learners with audiovisual descriptions of all English speech sounds from which they can choose a particular sound to study.

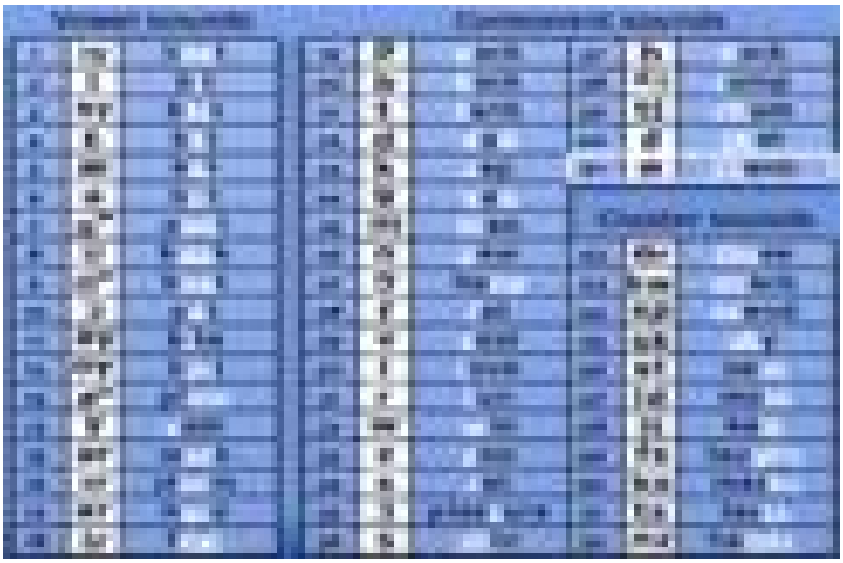


Figure 1: *List of sounds from Lessons* in *PP1* and *PP2*

Side View and *Front View* depict both the "inner workings" and "outer workings" of the vocal tract during articulation. Also included in both of the softwares is *Air Flow Legend*, which lists major air flow qualities including voicing, obstruction and release, replicated when activating the *Side View* video.

Figure 2: *Side View, Front View* and *Air Flow Legend* as observed in *PP2*

Side View Legend (available only in *PP2*) visualizes the articulators and their positions while *Description* (available only in *PP2*) tells the learner how to "operate" the articulators when pronouncing a particular sound. Meanwhile, *Suggestion* (also available only in *PP2*) offers the learner particular tips for the production of particular sounds.

Figure 3: *Side View Legend* as observed in *ProPower2*

Figure 4: *Description* as observed in *PP2*

Figure 5: *Suggestion* as observed in *PP2*

Exercises is a collection of various kinds of pronunciation exercises, only three of which are used in ET — *Sample Words*, *Comparative Words*, and *Listening Discrimination.* This choice was based on their directness to teaching technique.

Figure 6: Interfaces of *Exercises* as observed in *PP2*

Suggestions

Getting students to employ correct articulators

In order for the proper production of a sound, it is important at the presentation stage for students to experience the inner workings of the articulators involved. In fact, animations or videos are the best choice for such illustration as we can see the lively production of /T/, for example, in Figure 7 below:

Figure 7: **Articulators involved in producing /T/ as observed in *ProPower2***

The *Side View* in Figure 7 gives students both the animation of the inner workings of the articulators when /T/ is made and the nature of this consonant with reference to the *Air Flow Legend*. The video clip of a native speaker producing /T/ as in the *Front View* certainly serves as a perfect addition to what students have experienced in the *Side View.* In addition, with this software, teachers can play the animation backwards or forwards accompanied by a native audio or pause at any point of the production to draw students' attention to the tongue position. As a result, students can apply the articulators with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

During the practice stage, the teacher should utilize the fortes of pair work in language teaching. Students are supposed to be seated in face-to-face pairs so that when one student says a word, the other can check whether or not his/her partner places the articulators correctly for the sounds in practice when a word is produced. After that, at the production stage, the teacher may let each student think of a word that has the target sound and then call on them to say it aloud without repeating their peers' words. This will certainly get the students' brain to work, and therefore activates them much more.

Using minimal pairs as a teaching and learning tool

Minimal pairs are supposed to expose students to a comparative and contrastive environment where distinction in place and manner of articulation of the sounds to be acquired can be clearly felt. In this way, students learn the sounds with not only higher motivation but also better awareness owing to the fact that the delicate phonetic border between these sounds can be directly exposed to the experience of the students. It is also recommended that minimal pairs be presented with "minimal pictures" to further support students in terms of meanings and also to make the learning process livelier. Also, the phonemic transcriptions of the words should also be simultaneously provided in order to strengthen students' acquisition of the sounds in terms of denotative relationship between

the particular phonemic symbols and the sounds they refer to. Furthermore, once students have studied some sounds, teachers can select the sounds which may cause difficulty in production or recognition to present to students in the so-called *integrated minimal pairs* — three or more words that can form minimal pairs interactively — to add some more challenge and also motivation to the learning process. The difficulty of the activities may grow based on the gradual increase in the number of words given. First, teachers should give three words that can form two or three integrated minimal pairs; then, four; and next five or even more as demonstrated in Figures 8 and 9.

Figure 8: **Minimal pairs for /b/ and /p/**

Figure 9: **Minimal pairs for /s/, /z/and /S/**

In Figure 9, the words are arranged in mixed order of from one to three minimal pairs. This arrangement can smoothly lead students to higher challenge with gradual increase in difficulty. After that, teachers can provide more challenging tasks with up to four or five words which can form integrated minimal pairs as in the examples found in the figures numbered 10, 11 and 12.

Figure 10: **Three words forming integrated minimal pairs**

Figure 11: **Four words forming integrated minimal pairs**

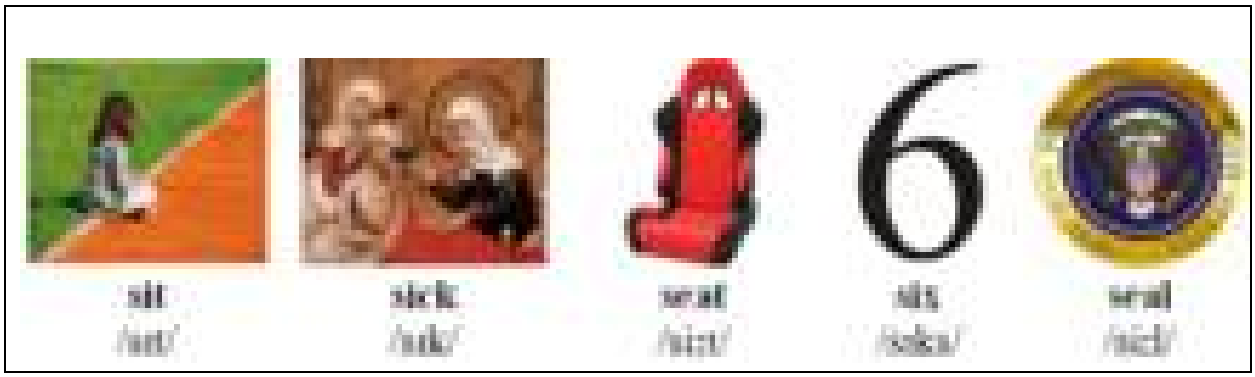
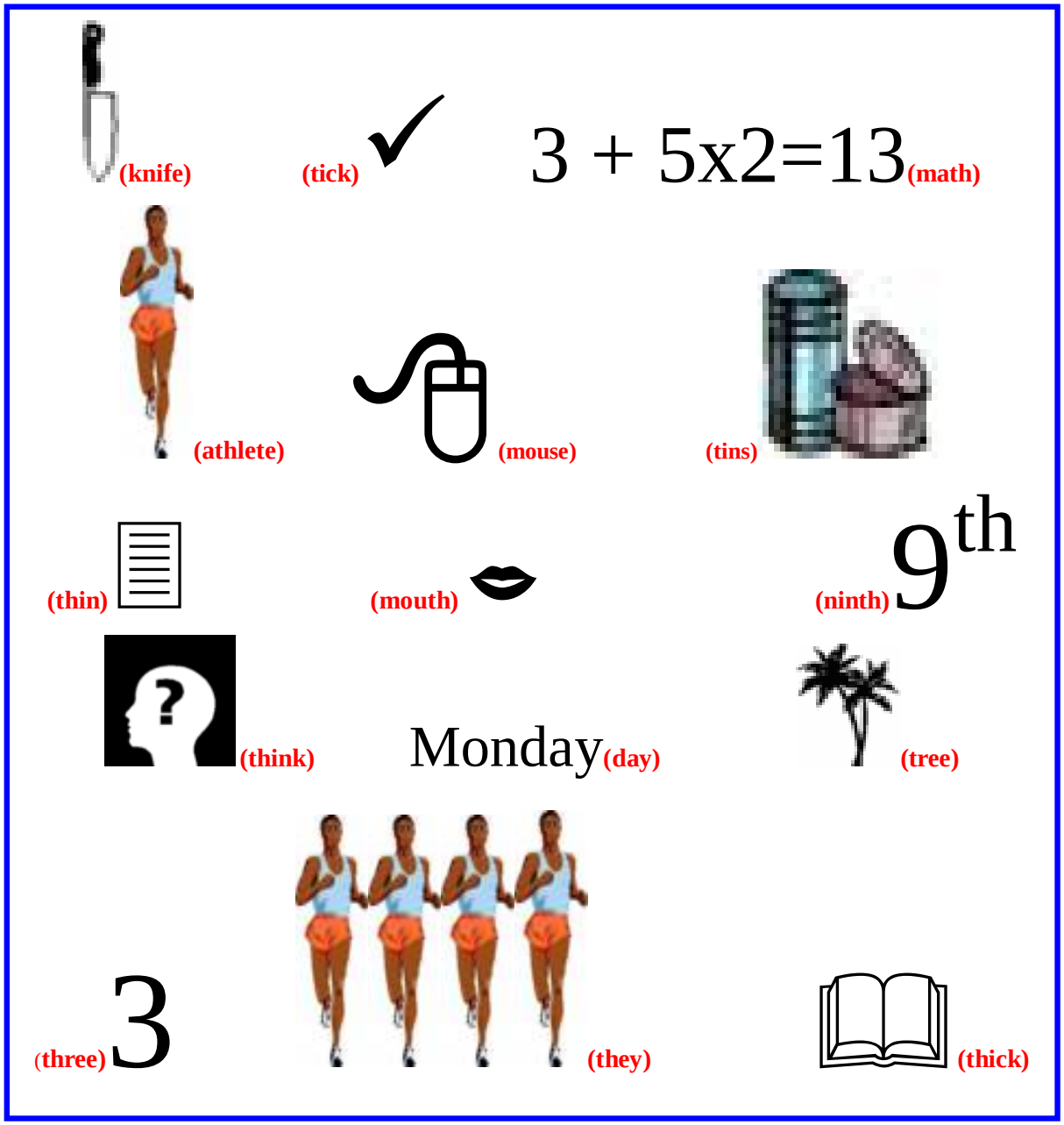


Figure 12: **Five words forming integrated minimal pairs**

Using games to arouse students' interest in pronunciation classes

For those who regard pronunciation as a boring subject that may get their mouth tired, games seem to be the perfect choice in such classes because they can motivate students much more. Once the classroom motivation is increased, students seem more likely to get involved in the activity. Actually, games can highly activate students and create competitively relaxing atmosphere in the classroom.

It is really convenient that there are many sources where the teacher can seek for games relevant to pronunciation practice. Commonly used games that require involvement of team work or many participants are *Run Board*, *Circle Jumping*, or *Find someone who*, etc. For example, to conduct the game named *Run Board*, the teacher needs to prepare a sub-board with some pictures enclosed with samples right below. The class is divided into two teams, and the teacher invites three or four representatives from each team to come to the board. The teacher then reads word after word while students listen and slap on the appropriate picture that the word describes.



Getting students to record their own pronunciation

Like "phonetic mirrors", self-recordings enable students to review their own pronunciation of English at any time with better analysis and/or comparison to that of a native speaker. Such reviews are supposed to pinpoint what students should do to get closer to native pronunciation of English. With the wide availability of modern recording devices nowadays, it seems feasible to apply this strategy in most cases, actually.

Conclusion

In recent time, learners have been getting more and more high-demanding in English classes, which requires the teacher to do his best in order to make class atmosphere as hilarious and welcoming as possible. Only by doing this can the teacher highly motivate his students and help them actively get involved in the learning process. Then, teaching English pronunciation with the

support of software comes to play the role because not only does technology empower students with correct native demonstration of sound production but it also builds up fun and relaxation inside the classroom. Therefore, software assistance proves to be effective for improving a great number of UEH undergraduates's pronunciation.

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