

# AN EFFECTIVE WAY OF TEACHING PRONUNCIATION IN A BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE

Ha Thanh Bich Loan, M.A.

## ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is indispensable in learning a language, especially in a Business English course, which centers on communication in business. Through learner surveys conducted at every beginning of each English semester at UEH, the need for improving pronunciation seems to be growing. Accordingly, many techniques have been used so that students can practice pronunciation in the best way possible. Teacher's serious marking and patience with correcting students' mistakes have helped raise students' awareness of correct pronunciation. After practicing properly (step by step as directed), almost all of the students have easily found their pronunciation surprisingly ameliorated. The techniques applied and their aim will be shared in more detail.

## 1. Introduction

Lee Kuan Yew, Former Prime Minister of Singapore, once invited to be an adviser for the Vietnamese Government, warned that if all the Vietnamese students in the future "can only be good at reading English, but not at listening and speaking, they will, as a matter of course, fall behind". Plus, since the early 2000s, English teaching and learning in Vietnam has been debated more than ever. In fact, as commonly commented on most of the Vietnamese daily newspapers, English speaking skill has been becoming a hot topic, and pronunciation has appeared to be the top issue. The majority of commenters stressed how badly Vietnamese students pronounce English as a result of learning with Vietnamese teachers. From the comments here and there, the writer of this article, as a teacher, was determined to do some research to find out what the real problem is and how to resolve it.

## 2. The journey to find a solution

### 2.1 What researchers argue

In order to identify what problems students often have with pronunciation, researchers recommend making some comparison and contrast between student's mother tongue and the target language.

#### 2.1.1 Tone and stress

Vietnamese is a *tone language* - with a different tone, a word has a different meaning while English is a *stress language* - without tone (thanh điệu). As a direct consequence of *mother tongue interference*, Vietnamese students put no **stress** on multi-syllable words and naturally no **sentence stress**; i.e., they treat English words as mid-level tone words (từ không có dấu).

#### 2.1.2 Final sounds and word linking

Vietnamese has no *final sounds* in a word structure, hence there is no *linking* between final sound of the first word and the beginning of the following one. On the contrary, 'when an English word is pronounced in a phrase or a sentence, linking happens at word boundaries where either two vowels or a consonant and a vowel meet' (Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1993), like '*Heate anapple*'. This is an **obstacle** for **learners** since Vietnamese words are always pronounced in form of *mono-syllables* irrespective of words in isolation, in phrases, or in sentences. As a result,

*"Some students have learned English through the eye rather than through the ear, resulting in the false notion that words should be pronounced in the way they look on the printed page, each one separated by blank spaces. Their speech typically is replete with pauses, one after every word."*

Wong (1987:48-49)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Dalton and Seidlhofer (1993)

### 2.1.3 Consonant clusters

Vietnamese does not have *consonant clusters* (a sequence of two or more consonants) in both initial and final positions. This is also a common source of *sound errors* that Vietnamese students often make. As a matter of fact, research has shown that great differences between syllable structures of English and those of Vietnamese lead to the tendency of maximum **assimilation**<sup>2</sup> of English syllables, which makes English syllables similar to ones in Vietnamese in two dimensions:

a/ Learners tend to omit one or more consonants in a consonant cluster in both initial and final positions. For example, with the word 'spring', instead of pronouncing it as /sprɪŋ/, learners pronounce it as in /prɪŋ/, or the word 'cold', instead of pronouncing /kəʊld/, Vietnamese learners pronounce it with an omission of the two final consonants as in /kəʊ/.

b/ Or they choose another solution by inserting an extra vowel in order to separate a consonant from the cluster and make a new syllable as in 'plow' -> /pəpləʊ /, 'sport' -> /səpɔ:t/

### 2.1.4 Suggestions

What does then a teacher of English do to help his or her learners improve their pronunciation then? The answer to this question involves many different elements from the learners like their **level of English**, what their **specific problems** are, etc.

From the view of communicative language teaching, Brown (1994) argues that the goal of pronunciation teaching should be *more realistically focused* on **clear, comprehensive** pronunciation.

Therefore, **at the beginning levels**, learners need to surpass *that threshold*, for if the learners' pronunciation is beneath this threshold, it will cause *bad influence on their ability to communicate*. At this stage, they have to be instructed **phonemic symbols** that help them to **use dictionaries effectively**. That means they should also be instructed the way to put stress on a word (primary and secondary stresses) so that they can *read the phonetic transcription in dictionaries easily*, and more importantly, they are *aware that dictionaries are valuable resources for their self-instruction in the long run*.

**At the advanced levels**, pronunciation goals can focus on elements that enhance communication: **intonation features**. Dealing with **stress** and **intonation**, Doff (1988: 118-119) emphasizes: "Stress is a very important feature of spoken English. It is the *most convenient focal point* for any course in pronunciation because it can play **two roles**. On the segmental side, **word stress** is decisive for the quality of individual sounds; on the *intonation* side, it signifies prominence. *Lack or misplacement of stress may cause misunderstanding in communication* since 'different stressing can change the meaning of a word or make it completely unrecognizable' (Ponsonby, 1987:14)<sup>3</sup>. **Intonation** is likewise very important in *expressing meaning*, and especially in *showing your feelings* (e.g. surprise, anger, disbelief, gratitude). However, *intonation patterns are quite complex* and it is better for students to **acquire them naturally rather than try to learn them consciously**." This is so convincing as it is not simply theoretical, but very **practical**. The reason is that *much research calls for teaching intonation because of its importance for comprehension in oral communication*. But how or by what ways is intonation taught? The answer to this has not been explicit so far.

## 2.2 What teachers say

Actually, many ideas from the teachers who directly teach in their classrooms, but not from research, show *their concerns for teaching intonation*, some of these ideas cited from Dalton and Seidlhofer (1993: 7.1) are as follows:

- "I no longer explicitly teach intonation to general classes, though I teach it implicitly in "say this after me" exercises. My direct efforts to get students to use English (i.e. mainly my own) intonation were not rewarding."
- "I find it difficult to mould my intonation to that in textbooks ...; the subjective element is too strong. No doubt my students had a similar problem."

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<sup>2</sup> Nguyen Quy Mao, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1994.

- “The one glaring omission in my current approach is that I am still having problems with fully integrating stress and intonation in my teaching of English pronunciation.”

And Roach (1991) warns us that:

“... *the rules and generalizations that could be made about conveying attitudes through intonation, those which are not actually wrong are likely to be trivial to be worth learning ... the complexity of the total set of sequential and prosodic components of intonation and of paralinguistic features makes it a very difficult thing to teach ... The attitudinal use of intonation is something that is **best acquired through talking with and listening to English speakers** ...*” (Roach, 1991:168)<sup>4</sup>

At this point, Doff (1988), Roach (1991) and Harmer (1991) also emphasize that for **intonation teaching**, *let the students acquire intonation subconsciously by talking with and listening to speakers of English as much as possible, especially listening*; i.e., what people usually listen to will **infect them naturally**, and they begin to **feel and do the same way**.

### 2.3 What students think

In the study by Vitanova and Miller<sup>5</sup> (2002), some statements from the subjects (after participating in a course in detailed phonetic and phonological instruction) are as follows:

“Another big problem is that what I learned about the pronunciation of some words was wrong. And it has become a bad habit to pronounce those words in a wrong way and I even don’t notice it. For example, I couldn’t pronounce the word ‘hot’ well because my pronunciation of the vowel sound was not correct. But it’s difficult to overcome this problem because **I thought I was right and it’s hard to find someone who is willing to point out all my mistakes during our conversation.**”

“And I think now is very important that I realize when I said something wrong and most of the time **I correct myself.** ... and my best way to improve my pronunciation is to **listen more carefully to people around me** ...”

“... What is important is that I have learned the ways to improve my pronunciation and **realized my weakness**, then I can practice and apply the rules to me in the future.”

According to Kenworthy (1987), in the early stages of learning, learners are dependent on their teacher for instruction, correction, and feedback on their performance (**‘Please correct my pronunciation whenever I make a mistake.’**<sup>6</sup>), since at this stage the learners do not know which features of pronunciation are important and which are not, **and they cannot recognize what their problematic sounds are**. However, with their teacher’s instruction, they gradually obtain basic knowledge and skills, so they can become **less dependent** on the teacher for feedback so that they can **self-correct their performance**. Once they can self-correct, they develop the skills for self-monitoring and *self-evaluating* their own performance. The author also emphasizes that it is important for learners to realize that they are able to *monitor their own speech and make adjustments without the teacher interference*. Thus, the focus on self-monitoring is one of the most **efficient techniques** found for improving pronunciation (Paulston and Bruder, 1976). Yule, Hoffman and Damico (1987)<sup>7</sup> also stress that self-monitoring is necessary for creating *independent and competent learners* and is a part of consciousness raising process.

Thompson and Gaddes (2005) also agree that once students are taught how to self-monitor and how to self-correct, their learning becomes **more personal**. Furthermore, the teacher should take advantage of the positive aspects of teaching adults to help them become more **autonomous** learners who can *identify, understand and overcome their weaknesses*. Additionally, at the early stage, the teacher can *monitor his learners individually and give each student particular feedback*. The teacher’s praise for the **progress** of a student will make him/her *eager to take part in practice of pronunciation* (Paulston and Bruder, 1976); i.e., **individual attention** will increase **motivation** for language learning in the classroom context.

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<sup>4</sup> Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1994

<sup>5</sup> University of Cincinnati, USA.

<sup>6</sup> Kenworthy, J. 1987

<sup>7</sup> Cited from Vitanova & Miller. 2002.

## 2.4 What is happening in the classroom

Except for some students with good pronunciation thanks to **listening to and speaking English frequently**, the majority of students have difficulty recognizing even familiar words from listening exercises. This is mainly because of their wrong pronunciation (**vowels, consonants, clusters, final sounds, and word stress**) as well as the *speaker's speed*, or **linking** between words while it takes a great deal of time for them to improve.

## 2.5 Essential factors for effective pronunciation improvement

According to recent research, there are three sources that a student can get helping from: (1) a native speaker, (2) his/her teacher, and (3) an English dictionary.

Nevertheless, except for one-to-one tutoring (with a native speaker), in a non-native environment of English like in Vietnam, it is not always easy to find out **native speakers** of English for **immediate help** with pronunciation although it is not difficult to make friends with them through online chatting. In addition to this, since the time to learn English in classroom is **limited**, the chance to ask the **teacher** for help is rare; moreover, it is impossible for a student to ask his or her teacher for **any help at any time**. In this situation, the teacher's role is to give some instructions, remarks, advice, etc. as a consultant.

That is the reason why it is helpful to learn **the ways to learn**; in other words, students need to learn strategies for learning in order to be able to self-monitor and self-assess their progress as well as weaknesses. That is to say **learning independently** or **self-instructing** is the best way to get success, for one can learn **whatever, wherever, and whenever** he/she wants.

Recent research points out that to make pronunciation **self-instructing** effective, students should generally take the following:

- 1) **Immerse** in the target language by listening as much as possible from real life English like YouTube and Podcast, etc. This makes learners become acquainted with the way the language is spoken in real life.
- 2) Focus on the music/ speaker's feelings behind the words to improve **intonation**.
- 3) Play English songs and **sing along** to practice *final sounds, linking, and word contraction*.
- 4) Listen to each audio track (it may be a conversation, a short talk, ..), then **imitate** the speaker's voice (*word stress, reduction, linking, intonation, rhythm, accent, ...*) by looking at the script, reading out loud and at the same time recording it. After that, listen to the recording and compare it to the audio track. This process can be repeated until the recording sounds similar to the audio track. That is one of the best ways of improving pronunciation without a teacher or native speaker. This is also a good way of self-correcting.
- 5) In case of checking pronunciation of a word without an audio track available, online reliable English **dictionaries** like Oxford, Longman, Cambridge, and so forth can instantly and effectively help thanks to the phonetic transcription and the recorded sound of that word. Students look at the sound symbol and word stress, listen to the speaker (in both American and British accents), and **pronounce along** simultaneously. This will easily be done with a smart phone, which almost all students keep beside themselves nowadays. However, to be able to use those dictionaries efficiently, of course, the students have to be trained skills for using it, especially knowledge about *phonemic symbols*.

A real example of the effectiveness of self-monitoring and self-evaluation is that Nguyen Minh Tan<sup>8</sup>, an excellent student of class 98B, Department of English Linguistics and Literature, University of Social Sciences and Humanities - Ho Chi Minh City, shared his English learning experiences, especially in improving pronunciation: 'To hear well in English, you must have accurate pronunciation. One of the best ways to improve pronunciation is using *phonetic transcription in dictionaries, reading aloud* conversations or reading passages, etc. in order to hear the pronunciation of yourself and identify your mistakes to correct them in time'

## 3. Techniques applied in a Business English course (Market Leader)

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<sup>8</sup> Noi San Truong Dai hoc KHXH & NV. No. 2. 2001

Each context of learning and teaching generates its particular problems, which need to be investigated to find a suitable solution to improve the situation.

### 3.1 UEH students' pronunciation background

Like students at other universities in Ho Chi Minh City, the students at UEH are from different English backgrounds, but in general, they are not very good at pronouncing English due to less pronunciation practice, less listening and speaking at high schools. Their *errors* center on things as mentioned above (for Vietnamese students), which are final sounds, clusters, word linking, stress, and intonation.

Psychology, students recognize their poor pronunciation but do not know how to improve it, that is, they do not know *what and how* to correct. If possible, just some errors are corrected because there are too many errors, with a large sized class but little time in classroom for their teacher (whether a native teacher or a Vietnamese one) to handle student by student. Nonetheless, the students are often passive in their learning; they spend too little time listening to English sources.

Due to little direct and frequent correction as well as remarks and evaluation from teacher or someone like that, students do not know *where* to start; thus, they hardly have *motivation and awareness* of practicing pronunciation.

### 3.2 Solutions

In the first session of each semester, students are notified of taking a small **pronunciation test**, which is also in a series of tests in each term such as Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing, Vocabulary and Grammar. Teacher chooses from the audio scripts and audio tracks in Market Leader course book. The contents depend on which module students are going to study in; e.g., for the two first modules, the scripts may be taken from Market Leader elementary, or even pre-intermediate, depending on students' level.

The criteria to grade each student's performance include *final sounds, linking, word stress, sentence stress, intonation, rhythm, and contraction*. And the speaker in each audio track is considered the standard and target for students to achieve.

For the beginning, students are **assigned** randomly one script to read along its audio track. After students are acquainted with this technique, teacher can give each of them a wide range of scripts to practice before the test. This aims to force students to experience more and more new words with **new** sound, stress, linking, etc.

In regard to **error correction**, many researchers such as Paulston and Bruder (1976), Kenworthy (1987) assert that it is important to provide *immediate feedback*. In other words, at the early stage (practicing sounds in words), errors should be corrected immediately by the teacher modeling correct form and the student imitating. But if he or she cannot imitate, according to them, there are three ways to get students to achieve an acceptable pronunciation if imitation is not sufficient: (1) by giving linguistic description (give them brief explanations to make them understand what they are doing wrong), (2) by *comparing the sound to one in the native language*, and (3) by *modification of another English sound*.

Teacher's positive **remarks** or evaluation on student's performance nearly always bring benefits to students, which motivates them to make more practice of pronunciation by themselves. In the case of students making errors repeatedly, ask them to listen to the audio again and again until the speaker's pronunciation *infects* them naturally, then make a recording many times to eliminate as many errors as possible so that what they utter is *like the speaker*. Actually, this procedure has been applied to UEH's students from K35 – Module 4 (since the first term of school year 2012) up to now (K41). Feedback from the students shows that they realize that their pronunciation is getting much better, and obviously they are more and more motivated in learning English in general.

Plus, providing students with phonemic symbols through **encrypting phonetic transcription** into words is considered an exciting game, so they will not feel tired of complex sounds that do not exist in Vietnamese:

/ weəðeəz ə wɪlðeəz əweɪ /

(Where there's a will there's a way.)

/ 'ɒnɪstlɪdæts əldə 'mʌniəv gɒt /

(Honestly that's all the money I've got.)

/ 'eniθŋhi:laukt ʃi: 'diɪnt ænd vaɪs 'vəsə /

(Anything he likes she didn't and vice versa.)

Listening to **English songs** in classroom is also a helpful activity for students to practice final sound, sound linking, contraction, and so forth.

Besides, **dictionary activity** is important as well owing to technology development. Today, almost every student – young, active, and nimble – has a smart phone that is extremely useful for them to practice English listening whenever and wherever they wish, especially for checking pronunciation of new words or “unsure” words in addition to making recordings from the audio scripts.

With limited time for the English learning program at tertiary level, non-majors in English have no official pronunciation course like the ones in English, so trying to find an appropriate way to deal with their difficulties in pronunciation is always teachers' aspiration.

#### 4. Recommendations

##### 4.1 Learning program

In the whole English teaching program for non-majors, there should be **pronunciation tests** throughout all English modules in order that students are really **aware** of their improving pronunciation. This will enhance their self-monitoring and self-instructing, that is, they are eager to look up, compare, contrast, correct themselves through a variety of native-English sources on the Internet using their smart phone or laptop.

##### 4.2 Teachers

As to teachers, **time** is a considerable issue. However, it is advisable to arrange 10 -15 minutes per session to check 4 or five students' pronunciation through their pronunciation task. If some student does not perform well, show him/her what their strengths and weaknesses are, and give him/her more time to practice at home and do it again later (in the following session).

##### 4.3 Continuity

After each module, students may meet a **different teacher**, so it would be better if this kind of test stays continued.

#### 5. Conclusion

*Practice makes perfectis* considered an immortal saying, as a “compass” for a person who wants to master a skill, and practicing pronunciation is not an exception. Therefore, teachers should encourage students to **listen** to a wide variety of native-English sources, from books to the Internet and **mimic** them by making audio recordings, then comparing, contrasting, self-correcting, and self-evaluating. This technique is similar to the one called **shadowing**, which is considered really efficient to high-level students, and expected to be applied to UEH's students soon.

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