Factors affecting English pronunciation of Vietnamese final year non-English major students and how to tackle the problem

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ABSTRACT: Pronunciation has become a growing concern for both teachers and learners of English. Many students have complained to me about how hard they struggle with their pronunciation. Hence, I have been looking for solutions to address this problem with the hope of improving English pronunciation of Vietnamese final year non-English majors and helping them become more confident and effective in communicating in English. In an effort to do so, I have tried to find out the root of this problem and the factors that affect their English pronunciation.

KEYWORDS*: pronunciation, Vietnamese final year non-English major students*

I.INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation has become a growing concern for both teachers and learners of English. Many students have complained to me about how hard they struggle with their pronunciation. Hence, I have been looking for solutions to address this problem with the hope of improving English pronunciation of Vietnamese final year non-English majors and helping them become more confident and effective in communicating in English. In an effort to do so, I have tried to find out the root of this problem and the factors that affect their English pronunciation.

II.FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION OF VIETNAMESE FINAL YEAR NON-MAJOR STUDENTS

There are several factors that influence English pronunciation of Vietnamese final year non-English major students which have been listed by several language researchers. Some of the major determiners affecting the pronunciation of these learners are listed as below.

1. **Age**

It is a commonly held belief that age has an impact on the acquisition of pronunciation. The younger people start learning English, the easier it is to attain a native – like accent. This claim is supported by many linguists and empirical studies such as Oyama's study of Italian speakers of English in America. The "critical period hypothesis" postulated by Penfield and Roberts (1959) and Lenneberg (1967) states that learners acquire second languages at their best before "lateralization" is completed. Scovel (1969) and Krashen (1973) also point out that lateralization with "increasing loss of brain plasticity" hinders native-like accent of adult learners (cited in Celce-Muricia, Brinton and Goodwin, 1996; p.15). This view is further supported by Thornburry (2004) when he claims that young learners have an advantage in pronunciation over older ones. Celce-Muricia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996) cite that older learners have more difficulties in learning a second language than their first language, since "the acquisition of the new sounds in the second language must be integrated into already existing neural networks" (p.16). According to O'Connor (1999), adults are worse at pronunciation than younger learners due to the interference of their native language. Dalton and Seidlhofer (2000) are also in favor of the idea that pronunciation are more difficult to change with age due to psycho-sociological factors. Thus, they concede that "early language learning is an advantage, especially in the domain of pronunciation" (p.8).

However, some researchers and studies have challenged this claim. The role of the critical period has gradually diminished and several "sensitive periods" during which language acquisition takes place have been proposed by cognitive scientists (Celce-Muricia, Brinton and Goodwin, 2000). Other studies show that young and older learners are

both similar in perception of the sounds of a second language (Lieberman and Blumstein, 1998 as cited in Celce-Muricia, Brinton and Goodwin, 1996).

Contradictory conclusions have been drawn about whether age has any relations with pronunciation ability. This heated debate gives us an insight into how to adapt our lessons and materials to meet the needs of each individual considering age factor.

Nevertheless, from what I observed during my teaching experience, adult learners like final year students tend to encounter more difficulties in pronunciation than children. It is much harder for them to mimic and pronounce certain words in comparison with young learners. For example, I still remember teaching the "ʃ " sound to a class of final year non-English major students and it took me much longer than teaching my six-year-old younger brother to pronounce it properly. Some even cannot pronounce it but just can pronounce "s" instead since the "ʃ "sound does not exist in Vietnamese. As Laroy (1995) points out: "adolescents often feel ridiculous producing "strange" sounds, or they may feel they look awful" (p. 8). Therefore, age has an undeniable effect on pronunciation, and yet we need to take other factors into consideration as well.

2. Amount of exposure to English

This is the most inherent factor which has an impact on correct pronunciation according to Singer's (2006, cited in Tweedy, 2012) case study of affecting Somali speakers' English pronunciation.

The language theories of Postovsky (1974), Asher (1977), and Krashen (1982) posit that considerable amounts of comprehensible input must be received before learners can speak (cited in Celce-Murcia et al, 2001). Thus, the number of hours learners spend in daily exposure to English is crucial for their language acquisition (Celce-Murcia et al, 2000; Griffiths, 2008; Kenworthy, 1998 and Singer, 2006 as cited in Tweedy, 2012, p.14). The opportunity to live in an English-speaking country or an environment where English is spoken would be advantageous for English learners to improve their pronunciation (Celce-Murcia et al, 2000; Griffiths, 2008 and Kenworthy, 1998). Supra-segmental features such as stress and intonation are usually not acquired through materials and dictionaries, but via verbal communication (Shumin, 1997, cited in Gilakjani, 2012, p.124). However, "it is not merely exposure that matters" (Kenworthy, 1998), but the way learners take advantage of such opportunity is important (Griffiths, 2008 and Kenworthy, 1998). "Fossilized speakers" such as immigrants and learners who use their first language at home and work do not gain many benefits in acquiring the language. During these recent years, many Vietnamese final year students decide to study abroad for a postgraduate degree. However, they choose to share the rooms with their Vietnamese friends to save money and have a Vietnamese community to hang out with. Some only use English at school and do not interact much with native speakers. Thus, even when they study abroad in an English-speaking country, their English and pronunciation do not improve much. On the contrary, some learners may not live in an English-speaking country but they use English for work and school in everyday life and thus have chances to expose to English more often (Celce-Murcia et al, 2000; Griffiths, 2008 and Kenworthy, 1998).

With the advent of Vietnam joining WTO, more and more foreign investors and visitors have come to Vietnam and there are more chances for Vietnamese learners to expose to English. As Tweed (2012) states: "English functions as an International language and a regional language within ASEAN nations". Moreover, more jobs have English requirements and the use of English at work has increased significantly during these recent years. Final year students can apply for internships and volunteer opportunities in international companies and NGOs. They should make use of these opportunities to enhance their pronunciation.

3. Aptitude

This controversial factor has been discussed by a number of researchers. It is generally thought that some people have more talent for pronunciation than others, or strong in "phonemic coding ability", the ability to distinguish and mimic sounds (Griffiths, 2008). Purcell and Suter (1980) and Strevens (1974, cited in Griffiths, 2008, p.201) emphasized the role of mimicry in pronunciation accuracy. On the contrary, others argue that each individual has shown this basic ability through developing our native language (Snow and Shapira, 1985, cited in Celce-Murcia et al, 2000, p.18, Florez, 1998, cited in Tweedy, 2012, p.15 and Kenworthy, 1998). However, we are different individuals and different methods of training should be designed to meet specific demands of each individual (Kenworthy, 1998). In Vietnam, the class size is so large that teachers encounter challenges in adjusting the pronunciation lessons to suit the abilities and needs of individual learners. Due to time constraint of the lessons and large size of the class, little attention has been paid to pronunciation.

Carroll (1965, 1968, cited in Celce-Murcia) classifies four traits of language aptitude: phonemic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, inductive language learning ability and memory. It seems to me that Vietnamese final year non-

English majors are weak in phonemic coding ability due to their L1 transfer, whereas they are strong in the following three traits. However, the first trait is still the major concern in pronunciation.

4. Attitude and Motivation

Stevick (1976, cited in Celce-Murcia et al, 2000, p.18) notes that "we need to go beyond language aptitude and educational or cultural experience" to see how learning process is influenced by learner's personal characteristics. In large-scale classes of Vietnam, there are a wide range of students with different abilities and personalities which affect their pronunciation that needs to be further investigated. (Gilakjani, 2012). Students' attitudes can contribute to their pronunciation success. The more concerned they are about pronunciation, the better pronunciation they can attain (Elliot, 1995, cited in Gilakjani, 2012, p. 12). Guiora (1972, cited in Celce-Murcia et al, 2000, p.18) and Kenworthy share the same view that "language ego" (personality) and "sense of identity" are significant elements of correct pronunciation acquisition. This view is further developed by Schumann (1986, cited in Celce-Murcia et al, 2000, p.18)'s "ego permeability" hypothesis. Schumann also suggests the "acculturation model" which explains how social and affective factors contribute to language acquisition. He points out that affective variables seem to play a more critical role than sociocultural ones in the acquisition of language.

Jenkins (2006) conducted an interview study to assess whether English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) pronunciation teaching is possible by looking at eight non-native speaker (NNS) teachers' attitudes towards NNS and NS English accents. It shows that previous experiences, present situation and how they perceive their accent affects their future success have a strong impact on their accent identity. Many speakers tend to prefer native-like accent since they consider General American or Received Pronunciation to be "good accent" and link with their career success. This situation is prevalent among Vietnamese final year non-English major students since they tend to think that a native-like accent will be beneficial for their future jobs and avoid. Teachers also try to teach their students how to sound like native speakers. However, as Jenkins points out, "if they see an ELF identity as being to their future social and economic benefit, then they may choose to promote that identity through an ELF accent" (p. 88).

Motivation is another factor that affects pronunciation of learners. There are often two classifications of motivation: internal and external motivation, and integrative and instrumental motivation (Griffiths, 2008). Gardner and Lambert (1972, cited in Dalton & Seidlhofer, p.11) differentiates between instrumental and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation focuses on the practicality of language, for example a job while integrative motivation reflects "learners' interest in the people and the culture" (Garden and Lambert). Schumann claims that the role of instrumental motivation is not significant. However, as Lukmani (1972, cited in Celce-Murcia et al., p.19) postulates: "The intensity of motivation is often as important as the type of motivation at play". Therefore, even a learner with integrative motivation but less intense cannot pronounce as well as a high instrumental motivated learner.

These determiners can have an influence on deciding and following pronunciation goals for learners as stated by Florez (cited in Tweedy, p.16).

5. First language transfer

5.1. Comparisons of English and Vietnamese pronunciation.

Of the six hypotheses of second-language phonological acquisition: contrastive analysis, error analysis and avoidance, inter-language analysis, markedness theory, language universals, and information processing theory, the most established is the contrastive analysis hypothesis (Celce-Murcia et al). Crystal (2003, cited in Gilakjani, 2012) states that: "The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis suggests that by contrasting the features of two languages, the difficulties that a language learner might encounter can be anticipated". There are huge differences between English and Vietnamese pronunciation which cause difficulties for Vietnamese learners in pronouncing English, with Vietnamese belonging to the Austro-Asiatic language family, while English a part of the Indo-European family (Tweedy, 2012).

First, at the micro level, the differences between these language families cause some typical segmental errors: "dropping of final consonant sounds; difficulty in pronouncing some consonant sounds such as /ð/, /θ/, /z/, / dʒ/, /s/ and /ts/, as well as some initial consonant clusters such as sp-, dr-, br-, fr-, pl-, and str-" (Nguyen, 2002, cited in Tweedy, 2012). Moreover, "consonant clusters in the word-final position can be especially problematic" (Nguyen, 2008, cited in Tweedy, 2012; p.19).

However, vast Vietnamese-English differences at the macro level (suprasegmentals) are more severe to intelligibility.

Second, Vietnamese is a tonal language but English is not. Therefore, Vietnamese has no word stress system (Byrne et al., 1996, cited in Tweedy, 2012, p.20). The monosyllabic nature of Vietnamese makes it difficult for Vietnamese learners to pronounce polysyllabic words in English. Thus, Vietnamese learners also never have to pronounce cluster of consonants.

Third, English is a stress-timed language while Vietnamese is syllable-timed (Tweedy, 2012). According to Nguyen (2006, cited in Tweedy, 2012, p. 24), "negative transfer is likely the culprit for much of the difficulty in word stress for

Vietnamese speakers of English, resulting in a tendency of Vietnamese students to pronounce all syllables with the same prominence". These errors can affect intelligibility.

As Meng, et al. (2009, cited in Tweedy, 2012, p. 47), language transfer can influence segmental and supra-segmental features, and "the interference can become fossilized with age".

5.2. Common pronunciation errors of Vietnamese learners

5.2.1. Word final consonants and consonant features

Nguyen (2007, p.10) states that: "Vietnamese is supposed to be easy to phonetically acquire when speakers have an efficient input, especially of the tones". Thus, it is difficult for Vietnamese speakers to learn English since it takes a foreigner two months to learn Vietnamese phonology and be able to pronounce any Vietnamese word while even native speakers of English spend their whole life learning how to pronounce new words with the help of a dictionary (Tran, 2005, cited in Nguyen 2007, p.10). Osburne (1996, cited in Nguyen 2007, p.13) concludes that :"In addition to cluster reduction, optional deletion of single, syllable-final consonants, especially fricatives, which is attested for Vietnamese L1 speakers […] was found", and "Consonants omitted, however, were always final consonants not permitted by Vietnamese". She also notes that "Vietnamese is non – rhotic so there is no /r/ sound at the end of English syllables spoken by Vietnamese". Seven final consonants which are strange to Vietnamese learners are: /s; z; f; v; ð; d; l/ (Nguyen, 2007, p.18)

Nguyen (2007, p. 29)'s data show that "difficulties of Vietnamese speakers in English final consonants result in: omitting the ending sounds that are too foreign or difficult for them, especially those who contains semi-vowels before consonants, reducing and moving the final consonants and clusters towards their first language to single unaspirated or nasals or semi-vowels and adding schwa in final clusters".

5.2.2. English sounds which are foreign to Vietnamese speakers

Cam Tam (2005) listed the most often mispronounced sounds which the results of her study show, among which the most common is the combination of /tr/. The second most typical errors are /ʃ/, /dʒ/, /tʃ/.

5.2.3. Redundant sounds

The most frequently redundant sounds which Cam Tam found in the data are /z; s/. A number of students "did not pronounce these sounds in words where they occurred, however, added them to other words such as "goods", peoples" etc". (Cam Tam, 2005)

5.2.4. Suprasegmental level:

Since Vietnamese is a syllable-timed and tonal, it is expected that Vietnamese speakers can encounter problems attaining proper English stress and rhythm patterns (Byrne, Butcher and McCormack, 1996, cited in Tweedy, p. 6). This can lead to "communication breakdown" (Cam Tam). Therefore, word stress, sentence stress and intonation should be paid attention to since changes affect meaning.

III. CONCLUSION

In light of these factors which have an impact on English pronunciation of Vietnamese learners, there are some possible solutions to address the pronunciation problem in Vietnam.

First, we have to bear in mind that the younger the learners start learning English, the better their pronunciation is. Thus, we should pay attention to English pronunciation during the early stages of life. Moreover, we should correct our errors in pronouncing English to avoid forming bad habits and fossilization occurring.

Second, we could boost the motivation and concern for good pronunciation by setting a clear pronunciation goal and persuading learners of the vital role of pronunciation in communication. There are a variety of English since there are many English speakers in the world. Therefore, choosing a model to teach pronunciation is really complicated and a tough decision to make.

There are two different objectives of pronunciation which we should take into consideration: "perfection" and "intelligibility" i.e. "having native-like pronunciation" and "making yourself understood" (Kenworthy, 1998; Harmer, 2007; Dalton and Seidlhofer, 2000; Hewings, 2004; O'Connor, 1999). As Kenworthy suggests, we can emphasize that a "native-like" accent will not be realistic and shift the focus to intelligibility. He also suggests that we can show concern for learner's pronunciation and their progress to make them pay attention to it.

Third, teachers should be trained more properly on effective pronunciation teaching strategies (Breitkreutz et al., 2001, cited in Tweedy, p. 57) since prior pronunciation instruction is also crucial for learners.

Fourth, traditional methods of teaching should be innovated, with an emphasis on suprasegmentals (Tweedy). Bott (2005, cited in Gilakjani, p.122) states that "teaching suprasegmentals before segmentals to intermediate and advanced NNSs could be more beneficial in a shorter period of time". This view of opinion is advocated by Morley (1991,

cited in cited in Gilakjani, p.122) when he suggests paying attention to supra-segmental features and emphasizing their application in communicative approaches to pronunciation learning and teaching.

Fifth, according to Cam Tam, as far as aptitude is concerned, aptitude test would be needed to "filter" language efficiency people. In case language aptitude exam cannot be implemented, it would be ideal to spend time for pronunciation practice with them to improve their pronunciation.

One more suggestion is trying to have students exposed to English as much as possible. In order to improve pronunciation, learners should listen to English as much as they can.

The final recommendation is that applying technology to pronunciation teaching. It has been supported by empirical research, including Seferioglu (2005)'s study. Learners of English can have more exposure to English through specifically designed software programs.

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