

IMPROVING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION SKILL FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT ACADEMY OF FINANCE

MSc. Vu Le Anh* - MSc. Pham Thi Thu* - Le Tuyet Mai*

Abstract: *It is not deniable that pronunciation is considered one of the most important parts of learning English helping learners enhance their communication in both speaking and listening comprehension. To reach a level of a clear and precise pronunciation has never been an effortless task; however, it is a far more problematic one for non- English major students. Though many studies about English pronunciation have been conducted recently to help improve the students' English pronunciation, the implementation is still overlapping and unsuccessful. In this article, two data collection instruments (questionnaire for students and interview with teachers) are used to find out the common mistakes that non- English major students at Academy of Finance usually make. At the same time, some useful solutions are also suggested for non- English major students at Academy of Finance to deal with their pronunciation errors and improve their English pronunciation skill.*

• Keywords: *segmental features, suprasegmental features, pronunciation errors, non-English major students, pronunciation skills.*

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1. Introduction

Academy of Finance is considered one of the leading public universities in the country in terms of economic training. In order to help students meet the requirements of the knowledge economy and the 4.0 revolution, students must constantly improve their English learning capacity; in which improving English pronunciation skills is an important part to improve English learning capacity.

Pronunciation is one of the most important parts of English in communication because there is a difference between the sign and its sound. When we communicate with others, it is not only necessary to have a good vocabulary, but also to have a good pronunciation. The way we speak instantly communicates something about ourselves to those around us. People who pronounce English well will be more likely to be understood by others even if they make mistakes in other parts, while people who don't pronounce well will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect. We also often judge people by the way they speak, so people with poor pronunciation may be judged as incompetent or lacking in knowledge, even though the listener only reacts to their pronunciation. Many learners find pronunciation to be one of the most difficult aspects of English to learn and need a lot of help from teachers. Surveys of learner needs consistently show that learners feel the need to practice their

pronunciation in the classroom.

Aware of this importance, in fact, many students at Vietnamese universities in general and the Academy of Finance in particular are still unable to pronounce English correctly. The main reason is that the traditional teaching method from lower levels of education focuses too much on grammar, which has led to this problem. Many students are unable to pronounce English words and sentences correctly. They usually pronounce them with equal accents, even intonation, and no rhythm. They also often make pronunciation mistakes even for words that have been used repeatedly. This makes our research team feel the need to have more in-depth research on pronunciation errors that students often encounter, find out the causes and propose solutions to make teaching and learning pronunciation more effective. This is the reason why the authors chose the topic "Improving English pronunciation skills for non- English major students at Academy of Finance" as the article topic.

2. Students' common mistakes in english pronunciation

2.1. Mistakes with segmental features

2.1.1. Omission of sounds

Omission of final consonants

As in the case of several Asian languages, Vietnamese does not contain words ending with

* Academy of Finance

consonants; so naturally, learners are usually very confused with final consonants and thus end up deleting most of them. The consonants commonly omitted are: /z/, /s/, /t/, /v/, /ks/, /dʒ/.

Omission of Medial sounds

Some sounds occurring in the middle of words are also omitted by learners as such occurrence is an unfamiliar phonetic phenomenon: These sounds are: /z/, /s/, /t/, /v/, /ks/, /dʒ/.

Voiced-Voiceless distinction

Vietnamese does not distinguish between voiced and voiceless sounds, while English distinguishes these two types of sounds very clearly. That is why many Vietnamese people in general and students in particular have difficulties when they want to pronounce English as standard as native speakers.

2.1.2. Substitution

Replacing /t/, /tr/, /dʒ/ with /tʃ/

A significantly common error committed by learners is to replace /t/, /tr/ and /dʒ/ with /tʃ/. That shows that learners struggle greatly with the concept of combining purely alveolar sounds with post palatal ones.

Confusing /ð/ for /d/ or /z/

Almost all Vietnamese learners find it difficult as most English learners to place the tongue tip between the teeth, so they resort to an easier solution that is to bring the tip into contact with the back of the teeth or alveolar sometimes in the form of /d/ or /z/.

Confusing /f/ for /s/ or /s/ for /f/

Students often use /s/ and /f/ interchangeably, however /f/ is more commonly confused for /s/ especially when it is the initial sound in a word as in [shoe], which becomes [sue] and sometimes when it's final as in [cash] which becomes [cass]. There are times when the opposite is true but more commonly when /s/ is located in the middle of the word as in [castle] which sounds as [cashol]. Due to the lack of distinction between the two sounds, it's very difficult to establish a pattern of error.

Confusing /dʒ/ for /z/

Since /dʒ/ is one form of consonants cluster (/d/ + /ʒ/), learners confuse it with a number of other consonants most commonly as follows: /j/ /d/ /s/ /t/ /z/ /tʃ/ then is normally either omitted when it's the final sound in a word or substituted for one of the consonants mentioned in the beginning of this section.

Confusing /r/ for /z/

The Vietnamese language does not have consonant /r/ in its phonetic system at least not as it is produced by Americans or most native English speakers in the world. It is, therefore, commonly mistaken for /z/ especially in the North of Vietnam.

Confusing /θ/ for /t/

As voiced /ð/ is confused for /d/ or /z/, voiceless /θ/ is confused for /t/. For many learners, it is simply odd or embarrassing to have the tongue visible to others. Also, most often, the problem for English learners is to be able to produce either /ð/ or /θ/ smoothly along with /z/ /t/ /d/ and mainly other alveolar sounds. That means practicing these sounds in isolation is likely to be ineffective.

Confusing /æ/ for /ʌ/ or /e/

This error is among many generated by the learners' unawareness of the gap that exists between the English spelling and pronunciation. Vowel /æ/ is quite often spelled with letter [a] or [e] which learners would then read as /ʌ/ or /e/.

2.1.3. Insertion

Consonants clusters

The consonants cluster phenomenon is quite unfamiliar to the Vietnamese language and hence complex, that is why many pronounce consonants clusters [pr] [pl] [tr] [kr] [kl] [fl] [ks] [sk] [st] [ts] are pronounced like /pər ə/, /pəl ə/, /kəs ə/, /kəl ə/, /fəl ə/, /kəs ə/, /sək ə/, /sət ə/, /təs ə/.

2.2. Mistakes with supra segmental features

2.2.1. Stress errors

Word stress errors

This type of mistake is a serious problem. It may lead to misunderstandings, and the speaker's meaning, or intention may not be at all clear. An added complication is that there are plenty of words that have a different meaning when they are stressed differently.

Sentence stress errors

Just like placing the stress on the wrong syllable within a word, placing stress on the wrong word in a sentence may lead to confusion or the speaker's inability to convey exactly what he/she means.

2.2.2. Linking errors

Learners had been taught that in English, there is a link between two words when the first word ends in a consonant sound and the next word begins with a vowel sound. However, when speaking

English, they usually forget that rule. It is because their mother tongue - Vietnamese does not have this phenomenon.

2.2.3. Intonation errors

No rising pitch

This is the intonation mistake learners encounter most often. Yes/No questions typically have a rising pitch towards the end, and lots of learners end their sentences flat so they do not sound like questions at all. They sound like statements. Learners often have more trouble imitating the rising than the falling intonation.

3. Solutions to effectively improve english pronunciation skill for non-English major students at Academy of Finance

3.1. For teachers

3.1.1. Explaining where and how sounds are physically produced

Teaching students how to use their mouth, tongue, throat and voice (articulatory phonetics) helps them produce the sounds of English.

Understanding where the sounds are produced (place of articulation), and how (manner of articulation), helps them visualize movements which would not normally be visible. This can be done with the aid of a diagram representing a cross-section of the human head and the parts of our body used to produce sounds, i.e. the articulators

It is particularly worth investing time in sounds which do not exist in the students' native language or are pronounced differently.

3.1.2. Explaining the difference between voiced and unvoiced consonants

Voiced consonant sounds - as the name implies - are produced by using your vocal cords. If you touch your throat when saying these sounds, you can actually feel a vibration. On the other hand, unvoiced consonant sounds are produced by letting air flow and moving parts of your mouth without using voice. In English, voiced consonant sounds are /b/, /d/, /dʒ/, /g/, /v/, /ð/, /z/, /ʒ/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /j/, /l/, /r/, /w/, whereas unvoiced consonant sounds are /p/, /t/, /tʃ/, /k/, /f/, /θ/, /s/, /ʃ/ and /h/.

3.1.3. Providing the rules of word stress, sentence stress, and intonation patterns to students

Word stress

Word stress refers to the emphasis placed on one syllable within a word. English relies on stressed syllables to convey meaning and clarity.

Key Rules of Word Stress

Single-syllable Words: Usually stressed in isolation, e.g., cat, dog.

Polysyllabic Words: The stress varies depending on the word type:

+ Nouns: Stress is often on the first syllable (e.g., TABLE).

+ Verbs: Stress shifts to the second syllable (e.g., deCIDE).

Compound Words: The first part is typically stressed (e.g., BOOKstore).

Sentence stress

Sentence stress highlights specific words in a sentence, usually content words like nouns, verbs, and adjectives, to convey meaning.

Types of Words in Sentence Stress

Content Words: Carry meaning and are stressed (e.g., cat, run, beautiful).

Function Words: Provide grammatical structure and are typically unstressed (e.g. and, the, of).

Intonation patterns

Intonation patterns refer to the pitch variation in speech. It adds emotion, clarifies intent, and signals the type of sentence.

Common Intonation Patterns

Rising Intonation: Used in yes/no questions.

Are you coming? ↗

Falling Intonation: Common in statements and WH-questions.

I'm going home. ↘

Where are you going? ↘

3.1.4. Varying pronunciation teaching techniques

Below are some techniques that can be helpful in encouraging and monitoring the learning of pronunciation:

Naturalistic method

In this method, learners are exposed to the language for some time. They don't have the pressure to imitate; they just listen to the sounds without any stress. After some time, they are asked to repeat those sounds in the same pattern. This method is similar to that of the natural acquisition of a language. Speech shadowing is one of the famous techniques used in this method.

Phonetic transcription method

This is an age-old and time-tested method to teach pronunciation. In this, the second language

learners are given a detailed description of the standard phonetic alphabet and the other rules of pronunciation. It requires a lot of attention and hard work from the students, as learning the code is not so easy. This method has one advantage in which if the learner becomes aware of the phonetic alphabet, he can learn the pronunciation of the new words also by referring to a standard dictionary.

Minimal pair drills method

Minimal pairs are the pairs of words or phrases that differ in only a single sound. So, the teacher makes the students understand the basic patterns of each and every sound in the target language. The teacher selects the words which differ by a single sound and these words are drilled continuously in the class so as to make them understand the difference in sounds. These drills improve the listening perception and oral production.

Sentence drills or contextualized minimal pairs

After this level, gradually the students are made to listen to the sentences, with words that sound similar, but differ in the meaning they convey. Here, students learn through context.

Vowel shifts and stress shifts drills

Drilling of the exercises in stress shifts and vowel shifts makes the students speak more appropriately.

Reading aloud

Reading aloud is a technique in which the learners are allowed to read a passage with correct intonation and stress. This gives the teacher to correct students then and there in the class room itself. Immediate correction prevents the learners from forming false notions on pronunciation.

Recordings

In this, the learners are made to listen to the audio clips and are asked to record their production of the same. Nowadays, number of software is available to enhance pronunciation skills. For example, K-Van solutions - it gives the students an audio clip and a space for recording their voice. The students can listen to their own voice and correct themselves.

3.2. For learners

3.2.1. Identifying the learners' problems themselves

With the goal in mind, students need to be able to identify which specific areas of pronunciation give them the most trouble. There are universal areas of

pronunciation that affect specific language groups. These will be different for everyone and can depend on the issues that are mentioned in the previous section. When learners find out their error with which area of pronunciation, it would be better for them to correct that error:

- Error with sounds: Find out how to say it correctly. Look at the right mouth and tongue position and then look at themselves in the mirror to make sure they are doing it correctly. Practice the correct sound repeatedly until it becomes second nature - use minimal pair words.

- Word stress: Listen to English words and try to work out their stress. Learn the correct stress or words and practice repeatedly. Be careful of words that change meaning depending on word stress.

- Long difficult words: Break them down and they will become easier. Practice each individual syllable then put them back together.

- Sentence stress: Listen to native speakers. Words considered harder to hear are generally words that are not stressed such as articles (a or the) or pronouns. The words that carry the meaning (nouns and verbs) are more likely to be stressed than those that do not. Shadow reading (when you listen to a native speaker recording and you read aloud at the same time) or copying a native English speaker will help with sentence stress.

- Fluidity and intonation: Try to speak fluently and naturally. Shadow reading and copying native speakers will again help with this.

3.2.2. Listening to English things

Listening to English podcasts, radio stations, TV shows, or movies is a great way for students to practice pronunciation. Especially with resources like TV shows or films where students can pause them, encourage them to repeat some lines they hear while they're watching. Then they can play back the clip and compare their pronunciation to the clip. The more that students listen to these types of materials, the easier they can also work on their intonation and stress.

If they want to take it a step further, tell them to record themselves saying the lines using a smartphone or computer app and then play it back. It's easier for students to hear their own pronunciation mistakes when listening to a recording of themselves speaking.

3.2.3. Looking in the mirror

Pronunciation is a very physical thing, and students need to train their mouths to make sounds they may not have ever made before. Tell your students to look in a mirror while they say some sentences in English. Here, they can again use a video clip to repeat what they hear, watch the actors' mouth movements closely, and then try to replicate those movements by looking in the mirror. This link has some visual representations of what the mouth should look like for certain English letter sounds and Sounds of English has tons of videos and audio clips of native speakers pronouncing common sounds.

3.2.4. Following English pronunciation resources

There are a lot of resources to help students work on their pronunciation. YouTube channels such as Rachel's English and Elementary English have fun videos to help students work on English sounds as well as intonation. Many Things also have a section dedicated to pronunciation where students can listen to recordings of random sentences or word groups and repeat them back. This website has 10 minute podcasts dedicated to breaking down English pronunciation and going through sets of words with similar sounds.

3.2.5. Recording the voice

Learners should record their own voice reading aloud on a tape recorder or a computer. This is a necessary step in developing self-awareness to improve pronunciation skills. Learners could record themselves reading the same reading passage every day or every week as they implement these techniques. Also, recording of a native speaker reading the same passage (such as an audio book, podcast, or a native speaker friend) could facilitate your process.

3.2.6. Practicing more and more

Practice alone is fine; however, it would be better to practice with someone else. Find role models. Language role models are people in your life who speak well and have worked hard to get there. They can help learners understand the process and what it takes to improve their pronunciation. Role models to imitate are people with accents that learners want to imitate. Native speakers and people who are naturally talented usually do not understand the processes that guide their pronunciation, but they are good role models to imitate.

4. Conclusion

It is undeniable that pronunciation is one of the most important parts of English to communicate. However, in fact, like many Vietnamese learners, a vast majority of non-English major students at Academy of Finance find it difficult to learn this important English skill. They usually make mistakes when pronouncing English sounds despite having a positive attitude towards learning pronunciation as well as partly being aware of the role of error correction.

Survey questionnaires and interviews helps the authors record some common pronunciation mistakes that learners frequently make. They are errors with segmental features (omission, substitution and insertion errors) and errors with supra segmental features (stress, linking and intonation errors) of English pronunciation.

These are because of some certain reasons. The main justification is phonetically differences between Vietnamese and English. Another reason is learners' motivation and attitude. Insufficient drill and practice among the students also contribute to learners' mispronunciations.

The findings of this study reveal that in order to improve pronunciation skill for non-major English students at Academy of Finance, it is important and necessary for the teachers to vary their teaching techniques and activities in class which focus on not only sounds but also supra segmental features of pronunciation. Besides, students need to identify their problems and find out effective ways to overcome their difficulties in learning English pronunciation. Moreover, it would be better if the managers of Academy of Finance give more supports for teachers and learners through specific actions.

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