

ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION AND CHALLENGES OF ACQUIRING PROPER PRONUNCIATION: A CASE STUDY OF THANG LONG UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The study titled "English-majored students' attitudes towards English pronunciation and challenges of acquiring proper pronunciation" aims to explore the perceptions of English-major students at Thang Long University (TLU) towards English pronunciation. Based on the quantitative data collected by a questionnaire, the study also seeks to identify the specific challenges faced by TLU first year English-majors in acquiring proper English pronunciation, which profoundly impacts their overall English communication skills and academic performance. The findings indicate that students maintain a positive attitude towards learning English pronunciation, despite facing various challenges related to psychological and phonological aspects. By identifying the underlying causes, the study aims to propose effective solutions that could improve pronunciation teaching methods, thereby boosting students' confidence and proficiency in English communication to meet the demands of a dynamic international environment.

Keywords: attitudes, challenges, English pronunciation, English-majored students, TLU

1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the current trend of globalization, English has become the dominant foreign language, turning into an indispensable capability for each individual to work in the dynamic and ever-changing international environment. Recognizing this, for many years now, English has been integrated into the curriculum at all educational levels in Vietnam, from primary education to postgraduate studies. Nearly all

universities in the country have implemented foreign language proficiency as a graduation requirement, underscoring the essential role of English in comprehensive education aimed at enhancing and expanding students' knowledge, thinking, and understanding.

When learning a language, students need to focus on various aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, and speaking.

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Among these, good pronunciation is crucial for effective speaking (Ellis, 1997). While knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is essential, students must also pronounce words and structures correctly. More importantly, pronunciation involves more than just the correct articulation of individual sounds; it also encompasses supra-segmental features like stress and intonation. Simply producing accurate sounds is insufficient, as native speakers might struggle to understand speech with incorrect stress and intonation patterns (Hamilton, 2011). Therefore, achieving good pronunciation should be a primary goal for learners.

However, as English teachers in the English Language Department at TLU for over 10 years, we have observed that English-majored students face numerous challenges in learning English, especially in pronunciation skills. These pronunciation difficulties negatively affect students' performance in classroom activities, tests, and overall grades. Learners experience difficulties in mastering English pronunciation for several reasons, among which the primary one is that the English sound system includes sounds that are unfamiliar to learners, making accurate English pronunciation harder to achieve. As a result, learners often make phonetic errors that lead to unclear speech, undermining their confidence in both speaking and listening (Zhang & Yin, 2009). Also, Gilakjani (2011) notes that ESL students struggle with pronunciation because of a lack of interest, insufficient exposure to the

target language, and teaching problems.

Another problem that triggered our interest was that a learner's positive or negative attitude towards language learning in general or towards a particular language has consistently been shown to be critical in determining their success or failure in foreign language acquisition. Strong positive attitudes towards the target language is closely linked to successful pronunciation. For instance, Kenworthy (1987) highlights that proficiency in pronunciation is influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors, with a learner's attitude playing a crucial role, along with factors such as their native language, age, exposure to the target language, and inherent phonetic ability.

Therefore, with a view to improving TLU English-majored students's pronunciation skills and enhance their overall speaking abilities, we have conducted a questionnaire survey to have an overview of their general attitudes towards learning English pronunciation and the difficulties they have encountered acquiring this important skill. This research also hopes to provide some effective solutions to help English-majored students at TLU pronounce English more accurately and intelligibly, build confidence in communication, and thereby promote other language skills to meet foreign language proficiency standards required by the labor market.

The study, therefore, aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are TLU English-major students' attitude towards learning English pronunciation?
- 2) What are the challenges they face when learning English pronunciation?
- 3) What problems with English pronunciation do they have?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. A brief comparison between English and Vietnamese speech sounds

To better understand the difficulties in pronouncing English, we have made a brief comparison between English and Vietnamese sound systems, starting with the smallest unit of language – phonemes. A phoneme or a speech sound is considered the basis of our speech (Roach, 2009). Without taking regional factors into consideration, English and Vietnamese phonemes propose significant differences regardless of some shared speech sounds as a result of common places of articulation and manners of articulation.

Consonants

The numbers of Vietnamese consonants and English consonants are almost equal (22 and 24 respectively) and some of them are shared by both languages, including /m, n, ŋ, f, v, s, z, h, l/. However, the distribution of these sounds in a syllable and their sound quality differ due to the manner of articulation. The first notable discrepancy is that

plosive consonants /p, b, t, d, k, g/ are unaspirated in Vietnamese irrespective of their position while English plosives are aspirated if they are initial sounds. Secondly, there are some consonants exclusive to Vietnamese and English only. For example, the sounds /z_v/ (in *rung*), /ʃ/ (in “*sung*”), /c/ (in *chung*), /χ/ (in *khung*), /ɲ/ (in *nhung*), /tʰ/ (in *thung*) and /t/ (in *trung*) only exist in Vietnamese while /θ/, /ð/, /j/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/ and /w/ do not.

In terms of distribution, English consonants can occur in the initial, middle and final position of a syllable while Vietnamese syllables do not accept the middle position. All English consonants except /w/ /h/ /j/ can occur in the final position and must be released while in Vietnamese, there are only eight consonants that can be post-posed: /m, n, ŋ, ɲ, p, t, k/, which are not released when pronounced. Also, whereas /ŋ/ never appears in the onset of a syllable in English, it is common to see it at this position in Vietnamese (*ngủ, ngô, nghê*, etc.)

More importantly, Vietnamese phonology does not allow what is called “consonant clusters” while this is ubiquitous in English. Such combinations as /nd/, /spr/, /pr/, /pt/ or even /ŋkθs/ cannot be found in Vietnamese.

Finally, syllabic consonants are English-specific. These consonants /m, n, ŋ, l, r/ help create a syllable without the presence of a vowel sound as in *table* /teib^(ə)l/ or *factory* /fækt^(ə)ri/. On the contrary, a Vietnamese syllable coincides with a morpheme that always requires a vowel sound as its centre.

Vowels

English and Vietnamese vowels share a number of characteristics as the nature of vowels is determined by the lack of obstruction to the flow of air as it passes through articulators (Roach, 2009). The vowels of both languages are also classified on the bases of the position of the tongue, the openness of the mouth and the roundedness of the lips. However, there are a few notable dissimilarities that are potential in causing problems to Vietnamese people when pronouncing English vowels.

First, the number of English vowels is much larger than that of Vietnamese vowels. There are 25 vowel sounds in English, divided into 12 monothongs, 8 diphthongs and 5 triphthongs. In contrast, there are only 11 monothongs, 3 diphthongs and 2 semi-vowels in Vietnamese. However, there are 30 combinations of vowel sounds in Vietnamese represented by such letters as *oa, oe, oi, ai, ay, iu, eo, ao, uay, uya, uou, uôi, oai, ieu* or *yeu* and so on (Tang, 2007). It is worth noting that the vowels in Vietnamese are much more complicated than in English.

Secondly, Vietnamese vowels are not differentiated based on their length as in English. For example, /ɪ/ and /i:/ are distinct in English as short sound and a long sound though both are marked to be high front unrounded vowels, but Vietnamese has only one /i/. This is true for other pairs of long and short vowels. Also, three diphthongs in Vietnamese are centring while diphthongs in English

can be centring or closing, which is highly distinguishing.

Finally, some vowels are exclusive to English and vice versa. For example, /ă/ (in *ăn*), /ɤ/ (in *ân*), /e/ (in *êm*), /o/ (in *ông*), /ɤ/ (in *on*) and /u/ (in *ung*) do not exist in English while the English vowel /ɜ:/ sounds foreign to Vietnamese. All other vowels embrace subtle differences in their sound quality, which are potential causes of pronunciation errors for Vietnamese learners of English.

Suprasegmental features

Suprasegmental contrasts play a significant role in pronunciation. They refer to “the sound contrasts that extend over several segments” (Roach, 2003, p.36). Stress and intonation are crucial suprasegmental features of English because they have certain influences on grammatical, contextual and attitudinal meanings, which is why English is considered an intonation language. Nevertheless, Vietnamese is a tone language where a tone determines the lexical meaning of a word. For instance, Vietnamese has six tones, represented by means of diacritical marks as in *ma, má, mà, mả, mạ, mả* (each of these has completely different meanings) (Thuật, 2007).

Another feature that is distinctive of English pronunciation is the four aspects of connected speech, including rhythm, assimilation, elision and liaison, which cannot be found in monosyllabic Vietnamese.

2.2. Factors influencing pronunciation

There has been a substantial amount of research conducted on the factors that impact our pronunciation. Here is a summary of key elements that are most relevant to our study.

Native language

Learners from different linguistic backgrounds often speak a target language in varying ways, with their pronunciation sometimes being only slightly different and at other times significantly different from that of native speakers. Kenworthy (1987) emphasizes that a student's native language is the most influential factor affecting their pronunciation, particularly when it comes to foreign accents. Familiarity with the native language's sound system can help students identify and address their pronunciation challenges. In this context, as Senel (2006) points out, it's important to recognize that interference or negative transfer from the first language can lead to errors in aspects such as aspiration, intonation, rhythm, and melody in the target language. These issues often arise when the rules for combining sounds in syllables differ between the two languages.

Phonetic ability

Brown (1992) refers to phonetic ability as phonetic coding ability. It is widely believed that certain individuals possess superior listening skills for a foreign language compared to others. For instance, they can distinguish between different sounds

more precisely and replicate sounds more effectively. This ability is crucial for achieving accurate pronunciation. Additionally, research indicates that phonetic ability is not solely innate; it can be improved through increased effort, focused practice, and heightened awareness of the nuances in sounds. As such, enhancing phonetic ability is seen as a key factor in improving learners' pronunciation in a second language. Kanoksilapatham (1992) proposes that some aspects of language learning involve focusing on specific sounds and getting aware of their variations..

Learner's age

Children tend to acquire accents rapidly, but this ability appears to decline with age. As they grow older, their native language increasingly interferes with learning a second language. Pronunciation is particularly challenging for adult learners to master. A key reason for this is that younger learners can more effectively grasp the sound system, whereas the learning process for adults is often hampered by their age (Zhang & Yin, 2009).

Learning and instruction

Foreign language teaching typically concentrates on four key areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In most cases, pronunciation is emphasized during the first year of study, as students are introduced to the alphabet and sound system of the target language. However, this focus on pronunciation tends to diminish in more advanced levels. Many researchers have

investigated whether explicit pronunciation instruction benefits second language learners. Findings indicate a notable improvement in learners' intelligibility, with better ratings for comprehensibility and accent over time. For instance, Derwing and Rossiter (2003) demonstrated that 30 language learners were able to modify their pronunciation during a reading task. Therefore, learning and instruction exerts a profound impact on students acquiring a proper pronunciation.

2.3. Previous studies

The difficulties encountered by learners of English in pronunciation has always been an intriguing topic. The researchers reviewed multiple studies on the challenges learners face when acquiring English pronunciation and identified significant issues encountered by students globally.

A large amount of research has attempted to address the challenges pronouncing particular speech sounds or certain pronunciation features. For example, Tam (2005) examined final exam data from fourth-year English majors and noted significant issues with consonant pronunciation, such as omitting sounds like /dʒ/, /k/, /t/ and confusing sounds such as /t/ or /tr/ with /tʃ/, /ð/ with /z/ or /d/, and /ʃ/ with /s/. Binturki's (2008) research shows that due to the influence of inter-language among Saudi speakers, their speech includes errors in producing specific challenging sounds, particularly in distinguishing

between /p/ and /b/ as well as /v/ and /f/. Similarly, Ahmad (2011) conducted a study to identify which English consonant sounds posed the most difficulty for Saudi EFL learners. His findings aligned with those of Binturki's, confirming that the participants had significant trouble with sounds such as /p/, /b/, /v/, /t/, and /ŋ/. Tweedy (2012) identified misplaced stress as a common pronunciation problem among Vietnamese students learning English. Muhammed and Taha (2014) studied English majors at Koya University and found issues related to stress and intonation patterns. Probing further into the pronunciation errors, Uyen (2019) attempted to identify the primary pronunciation errors and potential causes of these issues. Her study indicated four key pronunciation errors: the omission of final consonants, incorrect pronunciation of consonant clusters, substitution of certain sounds, and mispronunciation of English vowels and claimed that these errors were attributed to a lack of phonetic knowledge, discrepancies between the English and Vietnamese language systems, and negative transfer effects related to the articulation of Vietnamese learners.

As regards learners' attitude towards English pronunciation, Tsunemoto and McDonough (2021) examined the connection between Japanese EFL learners' attitudes toward English pronunciation and the degree of their accentedness. Through an analysis of the attitude survey, three key factors were identified: the perceived importance of pronunciation, interest in English

sounds, and confidence in pronunciation. Their findings revealed a positive relationship between the attitudes of learners and their pronunciation attainment. Similarly, Almaqrn and Alshabeb (2017) investigated the attitudes of Saudi English students towards proper pronunciation and the use of podcasts as a tool to facilitate pronunciation improvement. The analysis revealed that, despite limited progress in their pronunciation, participants held positive attitudes towards accurate English pronunciation and a strong acceptance of podcasts and generally positive attitudes towards their use, supporting the value of assessing learners' attitudes towards new Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) tools before implementing them in practice.

In conclusion, researchers from various linguistic backgrounds have made rigorous attempts to identify the challenges associated with pronouncing specific speech sounds or particular pronunciation features, causing learners' errors and lack of confidence when pronouncing English. Most of the studies used pronunciation tests and observations as main data-gathering instruments and have pointed out common pronunciation problems among learners of English as a second or foreign language. However, we aim to address this issue from the students' perspectives, recognizing the crucial role that learner autonomy and self-reflection play in language acquisition. Consequently, this research was conducted through a survey examining learners' attitudes and self-reflections on the challenges

they encounter in learning pronunciation, as well as the overall difficulties they experience with English pronunciation.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

Conducted on 162 first-year English majors who had just finished two pronunciation courses at Thang Long University, the study employed the quantitative method by means of a questionnaire. The questionnaire has two main parts. Part 1 focuses on the students' general perception regarding the necessity of learning English pronunciation and their interest in this subject. Part 2, which has both close-ended and open-ended questions, delves into common challenges associated with different aspects of pronunciation and the learning programme. The survey was conducted after first-year English majors at TLU finished two pronunciation courses, each of which lasted nine weeks, ensuring that they all had sufficient experiences to reflect on their learning process and personal factors.

The data collected from the survey were analyzed descriptively to determine means and standard deviation and inferentially using an independent sample t-test and Spearman's correlation, where appropriate. Data analysis was undertaken using SPSS, version 20. The results are also given in percentage (out of 162 responses from students) whenever possible. Finally, the findings were discussed in relation to the research objectives and existing literature to provide a comprehensive view of the students'

attitude towards English pronunciation and challenges encountered by them.

TABLE 1: Participant information (n = 162)

(a) Gender		(b) English learning experience	
Female	131	< 5 years	3
Male	27	5 - 10 years	64
Other	4	≥ 10 years	95
(c) A course on pronunciation before university			
Have experience	63		
No experience	99		

TABLE 2: Students' perception of pronunciation

	1	2	3	4	5
I find a proper pronunciation necessary.	0	0	3.7	35.2	61.1
Good pronunciation skills are not as important as learning vocabulary and grammar.	9.3	63	21	6.2	0.5
Communicating is more important than sounding like a native speaker of English.	0.5	13.6	33.4	39.5	13
It is necessary to understand the difference between English sounds and Vietnamese sounds.	0	0	7.4	46.9	45.7

Data reported in %. 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree

It is noticeable that 90.8% of those polled found pronunciation courses necessary whether they have taken an English pronunciation course before university or not. As shown in Table 3, the Sig. (2-tailed) is 0.959 > 0.05, so there is no significant correlation between the learners' past experience with pronunciation courses and their evaluation of how important the courses are.

TABLE 3: Correlations between students' previous experience (Q1) and their attitude towards the importance of pronunciation course (Q5)

			Q5	Q1
Spearman's rho	Q5	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.004
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.959
		N	162	162
	Q1	Correlation Coefficient	-.004	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.959	.
		N	162	162

Moreover, when it comes to the results of the independent samples t-tests (Table 4), it shows that there is no difference between male and female students in their love to learn English pronunciation, their active participation in pronunciation classes, their pronunciation practice outside class and their efforts to find different resources to learn English pronunciation. However, there is a significant difference between the two genders in the determination to learn even when pronunciation is not required. As can be seen in Table 4, the result of Levene's test (p-value = 0.913 > 0.05) indicates that the variances are equal across the two groups, so the result for the actual independent samples t-test is the one corresponding to Equal variances assumed. That is p-value = 0.026 < 0.05. It shows that male students (mean = 4.22) are more positive than female counterparts (mean = 3.89) in learning pronunciation when it is not compulsory. Generally, although both male and female students are active learners in pronunciation classes, male will be more determined to learn this skill when it is not required.

TABLE 4: Independent samples test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Q6	Equal variances assumed	.012	.913	-2.254	156	.026	-.337	.149	-.632	-.042
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.434	40.728	.019	-.337	.138	-.616	-.057

Group Statistics

	Q2	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Q6	1	131	3.89	.719	.063
	2	27	4.22	.641	.123

The results of this current study clearly demonstrated that the majority of TLU English-majored students appreciated the necessity of proper pronunciation, the important role of pronunciation compared to grammar and vocabulary in mastering English. However, when comparing the results of this study to those of recent research (i.e. Almusharraf, 2021; Levis, 2005; Low, 2021; Uchida & Sugimoto, 2019), it shows a surprising finding that learners in this study context less desire to attain second language (L2) native-like pronunciation. Although they value proper pronunciation, it is more important for them to achieve communicative effectiveness than sounding like a native speaker of English. This tends to go in line with older studies by Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) and Harmer (2001) that learners might like to maintain their first language (L1) accent. It is critical to note here that maintaining L1 accent is a current trend in EFL and ESL teaching and learning as English is now a lingua franca which is widely used by people of different cultural identities around the world. The idea that “intelligible pronunciation suffices for communication” is prevalent among researchers (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Vančová, 2019). Therefore, the goals for pronunciation teaching have also shifted from L1 accent-free or native-like pronunciation to comprehensibility.

Because the students appreciated the importance of pronunciation, it is not unusual that they also valued the necessity of pronunciation courses, especially a majority of the students found pronunciation courses

necessary whether they have taken an English pronunciation course before university or not. Learners also reported being active not only in participating into pronunciation classes but also finding learning resources and practicing outside classroom. These findings reinforce their earlier claim that learners appreciate the importance of pronunciation and learning pronunciation both intra- and extra-curricular. In general, TLU learners participating in this study reported positive attitudes towards teaching and learning pronunciation. A similar conclusion was drawn by Almaqrn and Alshabeb (2017), Sardegna et al. (2018), Uchida and Sugimoto (2019), Tsunemoto and McDonough (2020), and Tsunemoto and McDonough (2021). These studies all indicate that such positive attitudes towards L2 pronunciation might eventually influence how learners develop their language skills. For example, Sardegna et al. states that students owning positive attitudes towards learning pronunciation are less anxious about L2 learning in general and use more strategies to improve pronunciation than those who are not. Accordingly, positive attitude will help learners study better and are more likely to succeed in pronunciation in particular. One more noticeable fact found by this study is the stronger preference of male students to learn pronunciation voluntarily than female learners. This finding really challenges the common belief that females are better and work harder than males at languages.

Research question #2: challenges facing TLU English-majored

students in studying English pronunciation

To address the second research question (i.e. What are the challenges they face when learning English pronunciation?), descriptive statistics, illustrated in Table 5, show that students reported having problems with insufficient length of the pronunciation course (M = 3.17, SD = 0.9), complicated English sound system (M = 3.48, SD = 0.92), the influence of Vietnamese accent on pronouncing English sounds (M = 3.18, SD = 1.063), the influence of Vietnamese sounds on pronouncing English sounds (M = 3.35, SD = 1.036),

students' poor listening skill (M = 3.2, SD = 0.996), lack of opportunities to practice English pronunciation inside class (M = 2.63, SD = 0.877). It is also revealed that learners did not find it challenging to learn English pronunciation with a non-native speaker (M = 2.27, SD = 0.796). Most of the respondents did not agree with such statements as "Teachers don't provide a variety of resources to practice English pronunciation" (M = 2.08, SD = 0.713), "Teachers don't provide guidance on how to practice pronunciation outside class" (M = 2.27, SD = 0.924) or "Teachers don't often correct pronunciation errors in class" (M = 1.7, SD = 0.631).

TABLE 5: Challenges of studying English pronunciation at TLU

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
I find learning English pronunciation with a non-native speaker ineffective.	162	1	5	2.27	.796
I find the length of the pronunciation course insufficient.	162	1	5	3.17	.900
I find the English sound system complicated.	162	1	5	3.48	.920
I find that Vietnamese accent causes problems with pronouncing English sounds.	162	1	5	3.18	1.063
I find that Vietnamese sounds cause problems with pronouncing English sounds.	162	1	5	3.35	1.036
I find it difficult to learn English pronunciation because I am not good at listening.	162	1	5	3.20	.996
I don't get enough opportunities to practice English pronunciation inside class.	162	1	5	2.63	.877
Teachers don't provide a variety of resources to practice English pronunciation.	162	1	5	2.08	.713
Teachers don't provide guidance on how to practice pronunciation outside class.	162	1	5	2.27	.924
Teachers don't often correct pronunciation errors in class.	162	1	4	1.70	.631
Valid N (listwise)	162				

The first outstanding feature can be recognized from students' answers about challenges they face in learning pronunciation is that their difficulties do not come from their teachers. They have been given various resources and instructions to practice inside and outside the classrooms and received feedback for their practice to correct their errors. Especially, most students find that it does not matter to study with a non-native speaker. This reinforces their earlier belief that pronunciation for effective communication is more important than native-like one. The finding also goes in line with previous researchers like Derwing & Munro (2015) and Saito et al. (2020). It shows that learners in this study context have been aware that comprehensible and intelligible pronunciation is the most appropriate pronunciation goal for English learners. From this and the discussion mentioned in the previous part, some implications can be withdrawn as follow: (1) learners must be familiar with different English varieties and several English accents spoken by people from different linguistic backgrounds; (2) learners need to adjust their listening to what they actually hear, not to what they expect to hear (i.e., native-speaker accents), and (3) students should understand different accents encountered when using English with different speakers (Low, 2021). It is, certainly, critical to note here that aiming at nativelikeness should not be discouraged. Students have the right to and should be self-motivated to pursue the perfection, to improve their own capability. However, if teachers let students pursue such idealistic goals, they might end up

with disappointment and demotivation when they cannot achieve those goals (Derwing & Munro, 2015). This, actually, was mentioned by the survey respondents as one barrier to their success in pronunciation when they answered the open-ended question. According to Derwing and Munro, too-high aims may make students start feeling shameful or hesitant about their accented L2 pronunciation. Therefore, Saito et al. (2020) asserts that it is important to have an adequate understanding of foreign accents and positive beliefs towards comprehensibility for L2 pronunciation development. Then, having quality phonetic course(s) is necessary.

On the other hand, results show that most challenges come from students' own problems. Most students find they are influenced by their L1 accent and sounds. This, actually, is the prominent problem to L2 learners that has been long acknowledged by the existing literature (as stated by Kenworthy, 1987). Besides, poor listening skill also hinders polled students' pronunciation progress. Although it is said that the aim of teaching and learning pronunciation now is no longer L1 accent-free or native-like, it will be problematic if L1 accent distorts learners' L2 pronunciation. Therefore, it is necessary to control L1 effects to set appropriate goals to help students have adequate understanding of foreign accents and be able to produce proper pronunciation.

Furthermore, TLU English majored are challenged by the pronunciation course-related issues. The length of the pronunciation course was considered insufficient, so students did not have enough opportunities to practice pronunciation inside class. This issue needs to be taken into account seriously by curriculum designer(s) and course developer(s). In addition, EFL instructors should also be aware of their learners' needs in pronunciation and present not only appropriate materials but also further opportunities both inside and outside classrooms to help students practice various strategies (e.g., pronunciation

exercises, audios and videos, online dictionaries, and online programs).

Research question #3: Problems with English pronunciation

The open-ended questions helped answer the last research question (i.e. What problems do TLU English-majored students have with English pronunciation).

In response to the question of “What do you find most difficult in English pronunciation?”, 42% of the respondents named intonation, 22.8% chose stress, 17.9% blamed consonant clusters, 9.3% and 8% pointed to consonant sounds and vowel sounds respectively.

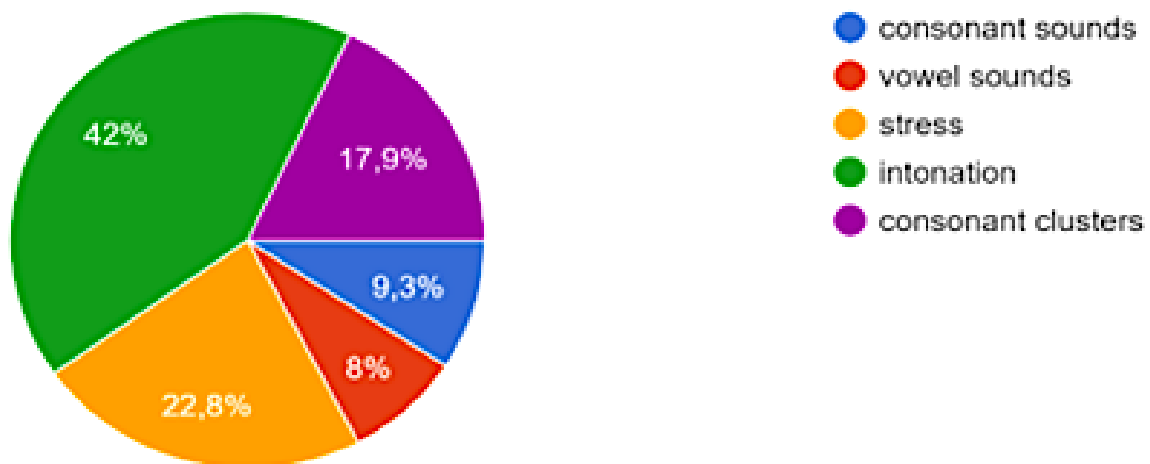


Figure 1: Major perceived difficulties in pronunciation aspects

The large number of respondents complaining about intonation can be anticipated from the typological distinction between two languages with Vietnamese being a tone language while English an intonation one. However, a review of studies on the problems Vietnamese learners of English have in pronunciation does not indicate intonation as a major obstacle, compared with challenges with individual sounds and connected speech.

The following three questions aimed to deeper investigate the sounds and pairs of sounds that were perceived to be the most difficult by students to pronounce and distinguish. The last question tried to explore additional difficulties students encountered besides all the earlier-mentioned. It revealed that TLU

English-majored students experienced a number of obstacles which can be summarized in the Table below:

TABLE 6: Additional difficulties regarding pronunciation aspects

2. What sounds do you find most difficult to pronounce for you?
/k/, /g/, /æ/, /ɑ:/, /b/, /s/, /əʊ/, /z/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ʌ/, /ɪ/, /i:/, /ɔ:/, /ð/, /θ/, /ʃ/,
consonant clusters in words (e.g. /skt/ in asked, /θr/ in thriller, /skr/ in squirrel)
3. What pairs of sounds do you find most difficult to distinguish?
/b/ - /p/; /æ/ - /ɑ:/ - /e/; /iə/ - /eə/; /v/ - /f/; /d/ - /t/; /ɪ/ - /i:/; /ʊ/ - /u:/, /æ/ - /ʌ/;
/ɪd/ - /t/ - /d/; /tʃ/ - /dʒ/; /s/ - /ʃ/; /ɪz/ - /s/ - /z/, /z/ - /s/, /ð/ - /θ/
4. If you have any other problems with learning English pronunciation, please specify
Some students do not know how to pause correctly to divide the long utterance into meaningful, understandable chunks
Some students do not know how to produce a long speech fluently
Some always raise their voice at the end of any sentences they speak out
Some can pronounce individual words correctly but cannot produce a proper and fluent sentence
Some have troubles when sounds are connected or changed when they stay next to each other
Some have problems with strong/weak sounds and rhythm in English
Some students often feel nervous and lack confidence before they speak
Some students often feel nervous and lack confidence before they speak
Some students cannot find his/her motivation to study, practice at home
Some are demotivated when they cannot produce sounds properly

In response to question 3 in part 2 above, most of the students claimed that they found the English sound system complicated. Their answers to four open-ended questions contributed to illustrate this point and help draw a complete picture of difficulties students encountered in studying English pronunciation. From the survey results, it is crystal clear that TLU students mostly have troubles with consonant-related sounds, namely typical single consonant sounds (e.g. /k/, /g/, /b/,

/s/, /z/, /ʒ/), consonant clusters (e.g. /skt/ in asked, /θr/ in thriller, /skr/ in squirrel), diagraph sounds (e.g. /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ð/, /θ/, /ʃ/), final consonant sounds in words (/ɪd/ - /t/ - /d/, /ɪz/ - /s/ - /z/) in ed- and s/es endings. Besides, they also have difficulties pronouncing some single vowel sounds (/æ/, /ɑ:/, /ʌ/, /ɪ/, /i:/, /ɔ:/) and diphthong (/əʊ/). Students also reported that they found it difficult to distinguish voiced and voiceless consonants (e.g. /b/ - /p/, /v/ - /f/, /d/ - /t/, /z/ - /s/, /ð/ - /θ/), vowel

sounds represented by the same letter(s) (e.g. /æ/ - /ɑ/ - /e/, /ɪə/ - /eə/) and short and long vowel sounds (e.g. /ɪ/ - /i:/, /ʊ/ - /u:/). This study's findings confirm the learners' earlier claim in Part 2 that their pronunciation is affected by their L1 and reinforce other researcher's finding that students often feel comfortable with the sounds also existing in their mother tongue and have problems with those which are exotic (Al-Zayed, 2017). For instance, Vietnamese does not have words ending with consonant clusters, so there is no doubt that Vietnamese English learners are not accustomed to pronouncing words that way. Al-Zayed also points out that non-native English learners tend to pronounce the nearest sound from their L1 phonemes to the English phonemes. This can be proved in Vietnamese learners' case when they pronounce /ð/ and /θ/ (both represented by the letters "th", which is similar to the Vietnamese combination "th" /t'/). Vietnamese students often pronounce /θ/ as /t'/, and /ð/ as /z/ in Vietnamese.

In addition to all the above-mentioned challenges, TLU English majors disclosed that they also experienced a number of difficulties such as pausing, fluency, sentence stress, rhythm, liaison, elision, and assimilation. Besides, students' psychological issues also matter to their pronunciation performance. Their nervousness and lack of confidence prevent them from producing proper and fluent utterance. Some students do not have enough motivation to practice at home to improve their pronunciation. Some other cannot overcome their own initial failure in pronunciation,

become demotivated then miss the chance to master English pronunciation.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The investigation into the perceptions of TLU English-major students regarding English pronunciation and the challenges they encounter in achieving accurate pronunciation yielded significant findings that may benefit students, teachers, and curriculum designers.

Firstly, the study found that a large majority of students expressed a positive attitude toward the importance of proper pronunciation and the necessity of pronunciation courses. While they believe that sounding like a native speaker is not imperative, they acknowledge that intelligibility is equally crucial in communication, alongside grammar and vocabulary.

Secondly, the challenges TLU English majors face in learning pronunciation primarily stem from inadequate practice time both in and outside the classroom, as well as personal difficulties. Many students find English sound systems complex, and their pronunciation is heavily influenced by their native language, which negatively impacts their listening skills and, consequently, their ability to acquire accurate pronunciation. Additionally, a lack of confidence and motivation further exacerbates these challenges.

Thirdly, the students encounter various pronunciation issues, particularly with intonation, connected speech, similar sound

pairs, and foreign speech sounds absent in their native language.

Although these findings align with those of previous studies, this research uniquely contributes to the literature by specifically addressing both the personal and phonological challenges faced by TLU English majors in mastering pronunciation from their own perspectives. It provides insight into the broad range of issues they confront during a brief course, enabling the development of tailored pedagogical implications for the TLU context.

For teachers, it is advisable to incorporate consistent and structured pronunciation training during three main pronunciation courses in their first academic year. This should include lessons that specifically address common pronunciation difficulties, emphasizing particular sounds, intonation and aspects of connected speech. Teachers' extensive relevant expertise in teaching pronunciation is required to provide students with a comprehensive explanation of sound production and various pronunciation features, as well as plentiful practice exercises with minimal pairs and sound recognitions. It is also crucial to offer students detailed constructive feedback tailored to their individual needs, helping them recognize their mistakes and suggest ways to avoid them and improve their overall pronunciation. To maximize practice time in class for students, multimedia resources that offer clear pronunciation examples should be provided for students before class,

enabling them to arrive prepared for practice and ready to focus on problems hard to deal with personally. Incorporating authentic audiovisual materials, such as videos, podcasts, and recordings, into lessons can expose students to a variety of accents and speaking styles. By guiding students through the practice and analysis of pronunciation features found in these materials, teachers can help them achieve more accurate and natural pronunciation. Finally, creating a supportive and dynamic classroom environment that encourages active engagement in pronunciation practice is essential. It is important to foster a safe space where students feel comfortable taking risks and experimenting with pronunciation, thereby boosting their confidence in self-correction and self-improvement.

For students, they can achieve substantial progress in their pronunciation skills by taking a proactive approach. It is advisable to utilize various tools such as pronunciation apps, online resources, and language exchange partners to improve their pronunciation. By securing every opportunity to practice and seek feedback both from teachers and peers, they can pinpoint areas that need enhancement. Another valuable strategy is engaging with authentic language materials. Students should immerse themselves in genuine English audiovisual content such as movies, TV shows, podcasts, and music. By closely observing native speakers' pronunciation and practicing the imitation of their intonation, stress patterns, and connected speech,

students can develop a more natural and fluent pronunciation.

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