CASE STUDY

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A CASE STUDY ON PRONUNCIATION ERRORS OF ENDING CONSONANT CLUSTERS BY STUDENTS AT THE PRE-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

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Abstract

With the aim of studying English for real communication, speaking is being noticed more, in which pronunciation plays a crucial role. Getting the necessity of finding out the answer to what pronunciation mistakes are frequently made by students, this research looks deeper at this matter by observing several classes carried out by teachers in HCMUNRE to understand more about the kinds of pronunciation errors. The observation focuses mainly on ending sound mistake as it is one of the most common errors made by Vietnamese students under the effect of mother tongue. It is the research result that helps the teachers recognize the specific mistakes in their students' speaking performance and suggests some better ways to improve the teaching strategy.

Keywords: pronunciation errors, consonant clusters, pedagogical suggestion

Introduction

The University of Natural Resources and Environment in Ho Chi Minh City is a public university under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. In this university, the TOEIC preparation program has been chosen for teaching ESL. Despite the fact that the traditional TOEIC test included only two skills of Reading and Listening, it has now been changed into four skills. Furthermore, speaking is undeniably inseparable from any ESL class as it will benefit the Listening lessons in long term.

The major number of learners in this study are pre-intermediate students who are in the process of starting to make acquaintance with native pronunciation and learn how to speak the sounds out correctly. As a result, it is quite important to establish good habit for them, avoiding mistakes in pronouncing later. Grasping the importance of this, many teachers investigate time to find out suitable methods of teaching pronunciation. As recognizing

the necessity of fact, the purpose of these papers firstly is to observe the teaching pronunciation techniques used in HCMUNRE for pre-intermediate students. This observation not only adds some experiences for the author but also provides sources for later evaluation. Then, from the field notes and information observed and evaluated, the author would like to synthesize and withdraw the most effective ways or an improvement on her own methods which she is herself applying to students. These papers, hence, provide a lot of useful information for teachers, supplementing them precious experiences with correcting students' errors.

Literature review

Pre-intermediate level is just like a step in a scale to judge a student's English proficiency. It is some overlapping between the levels. In most cases, this level belongs to students in their first two years of English studies. This period is crucial as it helps to

build the fundamental knowledge which is later fossilized to create better language competence.

Pronunciation is the way we pronounce the sound which is undeniably vital because it helps people to communicate well. There have been many different opinions over the years about the role of pronunciation in language teaching and about how best to teach it. In the communicative approach, which persists today with criticism from some quarters, holds that oral communication is the primary use of language and should therefore be central to most instruction, the prominence of pronunciation has been stressed by it (Carey 2002:3). It is particularly important to include effective pronunciation tuition in beginners' language lessons, as this gets them off to a very good start in their general language acquisition, and minimizes the risk of 'fossilization', or stabilization of pronunciation habits, that make ESL speakers difficult for native speakers to understand (Murat Hişmanoğlu, 2006). Students can be expected to do well in the pronunciation of English if the pronunciation class is taken out of isolation and becomes an 'integral part of oral communication class (Morley 1991:496). In this approach, the goal of teaching and learning pronunciation has changed from the attainment of 'perfect' pronunciation to the more realistic goals of developing functional intelligibility, communicability, increased self-confidence, the development of speech monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies for use beyond the classroom (Morley 1991:500)

In teaching pronunciation, some items should be taught: 44 phonemes (20 vowels and 24 consonants), word stress, reduced form, sentence stress, rhythm, linking, intonation. The suitable elements of English pronunciation for students cover both segmental and supra-segmental features involving sounds, stress, and intonation. Firstly, learning sounds is the basic competence that should be gained by students, which means they have to learn it until they realise how to produce the right sounds in English pronunciation automatically (Harmer, 2007). Secondly, stress is the second aspect after sound production that can create different meanings of words per sentences. As English speakers tend to store vocabulary items according to

their stress patterns, stress errors can seriously disrupt communication (Brown, 1983). Thirdly, intonation is one of the important elements that should be taught in secondary level of students since it can cause different meaning toward the expression.

Learners will certainly make mistakes in both spelling and pronunciation, no matter what method is used. In his articles, Kenneth summarized 4 types of mistakes that should be corrected: grammatical mistakes, vocabulary mistakes, pronunciation mistakes (errors in basic pronunciation, errors in word stressing in sentences, errors in rhythm and pitch), written mistakes. There are also some other interesting researches about learners' errors in their first step getting to know pronunciation of a second language. In Vietnam, Ms Ha C. T. in her papers researching the common mistakes of Vietnamese students pointed out many mostly mistaken sounds: which ones are often omitted/redundant, words that were most commonly mispronounced…

Data collection

Ten teachers of five years experienced and their classes are the participant of this research. The teachers should be experienced no less than 5 years so that they have already cumulate lessons of their own in how to teach effectively. Most of students are at pre-intermediate level of English proficiency. During 3 months of the course, they study a 2.5 hour period in 15 sessions per week. Their course book is *Tactics for the TOEIC test – Introductory course* with 4 sections each unit: grammar, vocabulary, test tactics, practice. Pronunciation lesson lies in vocabulary part and practice.

Firstly, a test will be piloted to check the students' competence in English in general and of pronunciation in particular. Some recordings of students' voices will be recorded when they read aloud one given text. In these papers, I suppose that their knowledge of grammar is unsteadily formed while the notion of pronunciation is at the zero level. Next step is observing the classes for 1 month. During the time of observation, the authors will take note of the errors that students usually encounter and the ways the teachers correct them.

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The information will be analyzed according to each teacher in different classes. The field notes will be used to find out what mistakes students often make most and the activities the teachers use in class. The mistakes will be focused just on ending sounds, because at this level, stress or intonation has not been taught yet. These variables will be listed in a table to calculate for the relation, using one tool of assessing data in social science.

Findings

From analyzing the data collected, 230 pronunciation errors related to final clusters were found, including 200 reduction errors (87%) and 30 substitution errors (13%).

Reduction errors

Below is the table which demonstrates the details of the reduction error of students found in the data from recordings.

Table 1: **Reduction errors found in the data from recordings**

Consonant clusters			Sound(s) omitted	Repetition times
Pre-final + Final + (Post-final)	Pre-final /l/	/ld/	/l/, /d/ or /ld/	8
		/ls/	/s/	1
		/lp/, /lps/	/l/	7
		/lz/	/z/	1
		/lf/	/f/	1
		/lθ/	/θ/	5
		/lt/	/t/	4
		/lvz/	/v/	1
		/lvd/	/vd/	1
		/lm/	/l/	1
	Pre-final /n/	/nt/ or /nts/	/t/ or /ts/	39
		/nd/ or /ndz/	/d/ or /dz/	43
		/ns/	/s/	1
		/nz/	/z/	2
		/ndʒ/, /ndʒd/	/dʒ/ or /dʒd/	2
		/nθs/	/θ/	1
	Pre-final /m/	/mz/	/z/	1
		/mp/	/p/	1
	Pre-final /ŋ/	/ŋk/	/k/	3
	Pre-final /s/	/st/	/t/	48
Final + Post-final(s)		/ts/	/s/	1
		/pts/	/t/	1
		/kt/ or /kts/	/t/ or /ts/	11
		/ks/ or /kst/	/s/ or /st/	6
		/vd/ or /vz/	/d/ or/z/	4
		/bz/	/z/	1
		/gd/	/d/	1
		/tʃt/	/t/	1
		/fts/	/s/	1
		/dz/	/z/ or /zd/	2

From the Table 1, it can be seen that the errors with final clusters /nt(s), nd(z), st/ are very common to the subjects. The times these final clusters appeared in the subjects' talk are also relatively high (/nt(s)/ -

39 times; /nd(z)/ - 43 times; /st/- 48 times). Therefore, it should be noted for correcting. In addition, some of the sounds such as /θ, dʒ/ at the end of words are really hard for Vietnamese learners to pronounce, so subjects tend to delete them. Details of the two types of final clusters are as followed.

Considering the first case (Pre-final + Final + (Post-final)), there were two tendencies to which the final clusters are mispronounced basing on the pre-final consonants:

- Deleting the pre-final

- Deleting the final or post-final sounds

Firstly, when the liquid sound /l/ stands as the pre-final, it tends to be omitted. This type of error was found in 33% of the subjects (10 students).

e.g.   child   /tʃaild/ → /tʃaid/

             help   /help/ → /hep/

             film   /film/ → /fim/

The consonant following /l/ is also deleted (accounting for 53%).

e.g.   difficult /difikəlt/ → /difikəl/

             health   /helθ/ → /hel/

Secondly, when /n/, /m/, /ŋ/ - nasal sounds – stand as pre-final, the students tend to delete all or keep the first and the last sound in a cluster while deleting the middle ones. The phenomenon was found in 100% of the subjects.

e.g.   went   /went/ → /wen/

environment   /invairənmənt/ → /invairənmən/

friends   /frendz/ → /fren/

Thirdly, when the pre-final sound is a fricative /s/, the students tend to delete the final sounds. 26 students commit this error (87%).

e.g.   fast   /faːst/ → /faːs/

        first   /fɜːst/ → /fɜːs/

        ask   /aːsk/   → /aːs/

Considering the second case {Final + post-final(s)}, it is noted that the final consonant is hardly deleted while the second element of two-element clusters and third of three-element clusters are often omitted. Many students just pronounced the first consonants of the long clusters and delete all the consonants that go after them.

e.g.   next   /nekst/ → /nek/ (/s/ & /t/ were deleted)

 mixed /mɪkst/ → /mik/

There were a few cases of deleting a second element of three-element clusters. For example, accepts /əksepts/ was pronounced as /əkseps/ (/t/ was deleted).

In short, the analysis above shows that the students seriously committed the sound omission error. It is easy to understand why final clusters were omitted so frequently. As known, Vietnamese is monosyllabic language, so the students never have to pronounce clusters of consonants. Furthermore, the habit of "swallowing" the ending sound in the mother tongue is in fact a negative transference that inhibits the pronunciation of ending sounds in general and final clusters in particular in the target language.

Substitution errors

The substitution error comes second of the two common final cluster errors that the subjects committed. The following table incorporates the data on students' substitution errors found from recordings.

Table 2: Substitution errors found in the data from recordings

Consonant clusters	Sound(s) substituted	No. of subjects with errors	Repetition times
/lθ/	θ=t or 'th' in Vietnamese	2	2
/ʃt, st/	ʃ=s	2	2
/pt/	t = d	1	1

/nz, mz, dz, vz, lz, ŋz/	z = s	14	21
/ndʒ/	dʒ = z	2	2
/nt/	t = s	1	1
/nd/	d =t	1	1

As has been shown in Table 2, the subjects tend to replace the English sound by the Vietnamese one or confuse between similar sounds. The English sound replaced by Vietnamese one is /θ/, for example, health /helθ/ → θ pronounced as 'th' in Vietnamese. It can be explained that this sound is strange to Vietnamese speakers. Because of the influence of mother tongue, the students simply substitute them with Vietnamese similar sound.

Regarding sound confusion, the most frequent errors are /s/ and /z/ (repeated 21 times). For instance, loves /lʌvz/ → /lʌvs/; kids /kidz/ → /kids/. The mispronunciation of /z/ to /s/ sounds to be due to the fact that the students often push the air through the mouth too hard.

Also in reference to the confusion of sounds, the mispronunciation of /dʒ/ to /z/ may be due to the carelessness and laziness of the students. The students who made this kind of mistake usually do not try to find out how the tongue acts in each case, instead, they make all these sounds similar which results in their mispronunciation as found in this study. The mispronunciation of /θ/ to /t/ may be because of the difficulty the students had when articulating the sound /θ/ at the end of the word.

Strategies to correct final clusters errors

It is stated in the previous discussion that the difficulty with final clusters should result from teachers' neglect, students' carelessness or laziness, and the negative influence of the mother tongue. Within the limited scope of this research, I would like to suggest some activities as well as techniques only for correcting the final cluster errors that the students in HCMUNRE made.

Firstly, the results show that students tend to make more final cluster errors in real speeches than with single words. Therefore, it is important to help them form a habit when pronouncing these final clusters. The following are some activities compiled and adapted from Pham (2009), Deshayes (2005)

and Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin (1996) to help this group of students practise final clusters.

- **Brainstorming**: Ask students to think of words that contain the target sound of the lesson. When students provide a quite enough number of words, give them communicative activities so that they can practice the sound using those words.

The following example is a brainstorming task to practise the final cluster /nt(s)/:

- Ask students to find at least five words containing the final cluster /nt(s)/.

E.g. *went, plant, excellent, want, important, parents, restaurants, spent*

- Practice: Work in pairs. Tell your partner what you did last summer holiday using at least five words that you have just listed above.

- **Dialogues:** With a word list containing the target sounds of the lesson, teachers can ask students to work in pairs and create their own dialogues using those words. Next, students practise the dialogues they have created.

- **Short oral presentation:** Teachers ask students to find at least five English words with final clusters on a certain topic. Then each learner presents a personal list to the class and makes a short oral presentation that includes at least five of the words. Classmates should evaluate the speaker's production of consonant clusters as to how accurate, natural, and easily intelligible they sound.

More other interesting activities could be used in teaching pronunciation in general and final clusters in particular. What needed is to make it fit the aim of the lesson.

Secondly, the results indicate that the subjects in this research had difficulty with pronouncing long clusters (three-element clusters), clusters containing the difficult sound such as /ʃt, ndʒ/, and clusters with the consonant "l" and its following consonants. To help correct these final clusters errors, I adopted some teaching suggestions from other researchers (Deshayes, 2005; Kelly, 2000; Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 1996; Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Kenworthy, 1987; Tench, 1981). Hopefully, these suggestions can partly lessen the students' problems.

- **Demonstration and Explanation**: These techniques are essential for students to pronounce the difficult final clusters correctly, and then use them without mistake and difficulty in communication. For example, for clusters with the consonant 'l' as the pre-final, to avoid insertion error between 'l' and its following consonants (except for /θ, t, d, s, z, n/), we can demonstrate and explain: "Say /l/ and prolong it, as /lllll…./; gradually close the lips while the /l/ is still being produced; open the lips but keep the /l/." With the consonants articulated with the tip and blade of the tongue above, learners need to consciously keep the tongue in the /l/ position until the /l/ merges into the following sound.

- **Practicing using two words**: For example, to practice the final cluster /ld/ as in "field", use the phrase "feel down". The students can gradually eliminate more and more of the second word. Ex: *feel down → feel dow → feel d → field*

- **Breaking down consonant clusters**: Add and change sounds gradually to practice long clusters, for instance, *'six', 'sixth', sixths'*. Practice slowly at first and then speed up as confidence increases.

- **Simplifying final clusters in colloquial speech:** Teachers can raise awareness among students about how native speakers simplify final clusters and offer students more practice with cluster simplifications that native speakers often make in colloquial

speech to avoid simplifying consonant clusters inappropriately.

Some important deletions should be noted for students as follows: (1) the loss of a fricative when two or more fricatives occur together; for example, /θ/ is lost in *asthma*, /ð/ is lost in *clothes brush*; (2) the deletion of /t/ and /d/ in informal speech when they occur between two other consonants (e.g. frien**d**s, bes**t** man, chil**d**'s); (3) the loss of /k/ in similar contexts, e.g. asked. A sample dialogue can be used for students' practising cluster simplification

Summary of major findings

The major findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

Firstly, there are two major types of errors that the students in HCMUNRE often make with final clusters: Reduction, Substitution. The first type of error –Reduction- is committed by most of the students As the influence of mother tongue, which is there must be no more than one consonant at the final position, students often delete one or more elements of the final clusters. For the second type of error – Substitution – students tend to replace an English sound by a Vietnamese one or confuse similar sounds. The results show that students often confuse /z/ with /s/, /ʃ/ with /s/, or /dʒ/ with /z/.

Secondly, some strategies are suggested for the group of students participating in this study, including Brainstorming, Dialogues, Short oral presentation, Information gap activity, Demonstration and Explanation, Practicing using two words, Breaking down consonant clusters, and Simplifying consonant clusters in colloquial speech. Those strategies focus on developing students' habit of pronouncing final clusters in the speaking process as well as helping them overcome the difficult final clusters.

*) In these papers, I use the word "mistake" and "error" with similar meanings referring to something wrong or inaccurate.

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