

# WAYS OF LEARNING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION AMONG FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT VAN LANG UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** Pronunciation plays an important part in language learning and teaching. English is considered as a foreign language spoken by the most people in Vietnam. Students of native Vietnamese are thought to be influenced by their Vietnamese pronunciation, and this makes them pronounce English words inexactly. Though many studies about English pronunciation have been conducted recently to help improve the students' English pronunciation, the implementation is still overlapping and unsuccessful. This article is an attempt using questionnaire to discover how first-year English majors learn English pronunciation at Van Lang University. Based on the research data, the findings of the study are believed to apply to the learning and teaching practice at Van Lang University and similar contexts.

**Key words:** Pronunciation, English learning and teaching, English majors, practice

## 1. Introduction

English is a very necessary language used the most popularly. As a result, pronouncing words correctly when communicating in English language is a great demand for learners of English who wish to understand each other effectively. In the recent final exam of the first-year English majors on phonetics 1 at Van Lang University, many students got bad marks on this subject. Among them, some did not know how to read the international transcription given in the exam paper. In this article, questionnaire is employed to investigate how English pronunciation is learnt with the view to helping students communicate more effectively in the future. This study is an attempt to seek for appropriate answers to the questions as follows:

1. What are the best ways to help the first-year English majors learn English pronunciation effectively?
2. How have they ever improved their English pronunciation?

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Definitions of pronunciation

As defined in Cobuild Advanced English dictionary, pronunciation is the way in which a word is pronounced. According to Seidhofer (1994) as cited in Nunan (1999), the influence of the first language seems to be more apparent in the case of pronunciation than for grammar and vocabulary. Similarly, Carter and Nunan (2001) stated that pronunciation plays an essential role in the lives of an individual and society. In my point of view, the speakers are identified through

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the way they speak and denote their relationship of certain communities. Lynch and Anderson (2012) makes a change on giving advice for English learners with two important things: (1) English learners do not need native-like pronunciation of English sounds in order to be comfortably understood, that is, comfortably intelligible referring to the comfort of the listeners, rather than the speaker, and (2) pronouncing a word is actually more important for their listeners than the sounds they make.

## **2.2. Factors affecting English pronunciation**

According to Gilakjani (2012), there are three factors affecting the students' pronunciation learning: (1) students' attitude – the personal characteristics of the learners, (2) learning strategies – the planning for learning process, and (3) instructions – the emphasis on English pronunciation teaching.

### **2.2.1. The students' attitudes**

Though many students are good at English pronunciation, there are differences about the ability of pronunciation among them. It is a reality that some previous studies had been carried out to learn about the personal characteristics among the students who learn English as a foreign language. The attitude is “a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols” (Hogg and Vaughan, 2005), and Chaiken (1993) has stated that the attitude is a psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of likes or dislikes. There is always a very close relation between learning attitudes and motivation because motivation is considered as a construct made up of certain attitudes.

### **2.2.2. Learning strategies**

As cited in Brown (1980) has affirmed that strategies consist of planning for learning thinking about the learning process as it is happening, overseeing someone's production or understanding, and assessing learning after an activity is finished. In the study of factors affecting EFL learners' English pronunciation learning, Mariani (2002) has expressed on a point where learning strategies are essential components of a curriculum, as bridges between competence and process.

The difference between a good student and a bad student is thought as just a matter of aptitude. While it may be true in some cases, basically, the difference can actually be attributed to learning strategies. With effective learning strategies, the language learners are able to learn faster and easier. According to Ormrod (2010), there are seven basic strategies of teaching English pronunciation, including (1) identifying important information – the learners can't remember everything presented in the class or in a textbook, they have to choose when learning any documents, (2) retrieving relevant prior knowledge – the learners only participate in meaningful learning when they have background knowledge that can relate new information by encouraging them to retrieve relevant knowledge to the topic they are learning, (3) taking notes – it plays an important role in classroom achievement, (4) organizing information – the learners study more effectively when they take part in any activities helping them organize what they have ever been learning, (5) intentionally elaborating on information – the learners use a

strategy to help learn and make sense of new information and have elaboration in improvement, (6) creating summaries – creating a good summary is a fairly complex process, and (7) monitoring comprehension – a process in which the learners decide if they can understand what they are reading. In general, learning strategies include the awareness learning process as taking notes, using the dictionaries and other procedures. It includes the interaction among the learners in the same group; or pairs in the classroom with communicative activities. The students should engage in any language communication activities where they have to have learning motivation as well as good learning attitudes.

### **2.2.3. Instructions**

English language teaching (ELT) should focus on four skills as listening, speaking, reading and writing. According to Nunan (1999), pronunciation has to be taught in the beginning of English learning as the target language's alphabet and sound system. Lack of emphasis on the development of pronunciation is due to a general lack of fervor on the part of the second language acquisition researchers. Elliot (2012) has ever stated that there may be absence or emphasis on pronunciation improvement with second language teaching. This may be due to a general weakness of interest both by teachers and students. This may be due to a general weakness of interest both by teachers and students.

### **2.3. Principles for pronunciation teaching**

According to Fraser (2001), the teacher should base on these principles as familiar point of view about practicing English pronunciation well, such as (1) having a suitable curriculum-helping the learners acquire some basic concepts on which they are able to build more complicated understanding, (2) being learner-centered – the process in a form that the students are able to use and act upon, (3) helping learners become self-reliant – involving in both thinking and doing, (4) giving opportunities to practice – emphasizing cognitive understanding, (5) knowing what's best – the need of information. Regarding the teaching of pronunciation, Nunan (2003) has developed and specified five principles: (1) foster intelligibility during spontaneous speech – when a teacher teaches pronunciation, he has to reinforce the intelligibility during the free speech, (2) keep affective considerations firmly in mind – teachers encourage learners to improve their pronunciation habits, (3) avoid the teaching of individual sounds in isolation – teachers use integrated skills to teach pronunciation and give learners any opportunities to have meaningful communication among learners considered as more exciting, memorable and enjoyable activities, (4) provide feedback on learner progress – teachers should convince and guide them in practicing English pronunciation, (5) realize that ultimately it is the learner who is in control of changes in pronunciation – teachers give them models and information. Basically, it is very essential for students to practice their pronunciation even outside the classroom.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Data collection**

In order to collect the data, the researcher distributed questionnaire about students' English pronunciation teaching and learning to forty first-year English majors. The

questionnaire includes (1) the importance of pronunciation learning, (2) the ways of learning pronunciation effectively, (3) how to teach English pronunciation in the classroom, (4) English pronunciation learning, and (5) attitudes towards English pronunciation learning. Based on it, the researcher can find out the answer for the questions mentioned in introduction part.

### 3.2. Participants

The participants in the study were forty first-year English majors consisting of ten males and thirty females. Based on the results of phonetics 1 among four English first-year classes that the researcher has taught, forty English first-year majors of class K24-N2 who got high marks ranged from 6.5 to 9.0 were chosen as good sample to investigate the ways of their English pronunciation learning for this study as shown in the following table. Table 1 showed that fifteen students got from 6.5 to 7.0 marks with the ratio 37.5% and twenty-five students getting from 8.0 to 9.0 gained 62.5%.

**Table 1.** The final results of class K24-N2 on phonetics 1

Number of the students	The final results of class K24-N2 on phonetics 1	
	6.5-7.0	8.0-9.0
40	15 (37.5%)	25 (62.5%)

### 3.3. Data collection

In order to gain the results, the research data were collected from questionnaire having directly delivered to forty first-year English majors about the opinions on the ways that the students have ever learnt English pronunciation. The mean was used as the main measure including all the values in the data set for its calculation. Based on the students' answers, the researcher used Excel to calculate mean in statistics analyzed and explained in Part 4.

## 4. Findings and discussion

The study investigated the pronunciation skills of a class with forty first-year English majors at Van Lang University. The collected data from questionnaire were analyzed and interpreted.

### 4.1. The importance of English pronunciation

Table 2 indicates that the majority of the students expressed an agreement with the items of this statement. They strongly agreed with correct pronunciation help them communicate more successfully and confidently, avoid misunderstanding what they say and is an important part of English language learning proved with the mean (M=1.4; M=1.9; M=1.8). They are all aware of pronunciation as an essential skill which needs practicing regularly with the mean (M=2.1).

In sum, the students' evaluation for the statement mentioned above was positive. The majority of the students realized that English pronunciation is very important in English language learning. They were aware of the fact that pronouncing English accurately makes them more confident in communicating it. It actually helps others understand more about what they want to say.

**Table 2.** The importance of pronunciation

Themes	The choices of the students					Mean
	SA (1)	A (2)	N (3)	D (4)	SD (5)	
The importance of pronunciation						
1. It is an important part of learning English	10	30	0	0	0	1.8
2. It is an essential skill that you need to practice regularly	7	27	3	3	0	2.1
3. Accurate pronunciation help you communicate more successfully and confidently	25	15	0	0	0	1.4
4. It helps others avoid misunderstanding what you say	4	36	0	0	0	1.9

#### 4.2. Factors affecting English pronunciation learning

As presented in Part 2 the factors are affecting pronunciation learning as attitude, learning strategies and instruction.

##### 4.2.1. Attitude

Table 3 highlights the mean of the students' opinions on attitudes towards English pronunciation learning with (M=1.2; M=1.8; M=1.7) about the issue is that pronunciation skill is very important, teachers provide the students with an excellent model of English pronunciation, and from that the students can accurately recognize the difference between native like and nonnative pronunciation.

In summary, all items in "attitudes towards English pronunciation learning" showed that the students put all their thought in the production that their teacher provided them, and through that, they can distinguish the difference between native like and nonnative pronunciation for the development of communication.

**Table 3.** The students' attitudes towards English pronunciation learning

	The choices of the students					Mean
	SA (1)	A (2)	N (3)	D (4)	SD (5)	
<b>The students' attitudes towards English pronunciation learning</b>						
1. Pronunciation is very important to me	33	7	0	0	0	1.2
2. I believe that teachers provide me with an excellent model of English pronunciation	13	24	3	0	0	1.8
3. I can accurately recognize the difference between native like and nonnative pronunciation	8	12	5	3	2	1.7

##### 4.2.2. Learning strategies

Theoretically, strategies consist of planning for learning thinking about the learning process as it is happening, overseeing someone's production or understanding, and assessing learning after an activity is finished.

4.2.2.1. *Planning for pronunciation learning*

It is only through language that the learners could communicate with each other; share their ideas, tell others they have experienced to express their wishes and desires, solve complex problems by drawing on information they read or hear. To achieve these objectives, however, they have to learn the language as communication.

It can be seen from Table 4 that the students strongly agreed and agreed with the items through mean (M=1.8; M=1.9; M=1.7) on doing a lot of drills, trying to imitate native speakers' sound, and learning how to pronounce the language correctly the first time. However, they showed their uncertainty when they have to strictly listen to the teacher and pay attention or listen and repeat with the mean (M=2.1; M=2.4). In English pronunciation learning, most of the students expressed their agreement on trying to imitate native speakers and based on the transcription to pronounce words.

**Table 4.** Planning for pronunciation learning

Themes	The choices of the students					Mean
	SA (1)	A (2)	N (3)	D (4)	SD (5)	
<b>Having good English pronunciation</b>						
1. Listen and pay attention	2	33	3	2	0	2.1
2. Listen and repeat	3	24	8	3	2	2.4
3. Do a lot of drills	12	26	2	0	0	1.8
4. Imitate native speakers of English	10	25	5	0	0	1.9
5. Learn how to pronounce it correctly the first time	15	22	3	0	0	1.7

4.2.2.2. *English pronunciation learning*

Table 5 shows the mean of the students' opinions on the process of pronunciation learning. The mean of the students who contented with all items in this statement was recorded for learning with Vietnamese teachers (M=2.0), practicing with native speakers (M=1.3), and learning through videos (M=1.8). It is remarkable that the students liked to learn with their friends shown by the mean (M=1.1), they said that learning with native speakers helped them develop communication quickly and improve pronunciation significantly. Since English is spoken as a foreign language in Vietnam, students do not have a good chance to practice speaking English.

**Table 5.** Ways of English pronunciation learning

Themes	The choices of the students					Mean
	SA (1)	A (2)	N (3)	D (4)	SD (5)	
<b>Ways of English pronunciation learning</b>						
1. Your Vietnamese teachers	4	29	7	0	0	2.0
2. Native speakers	29	11	0	0	0	1.3
3. Video (singers, actors, presenters, etc)	11	28	1	0	0	1.8
4. Friends	39	1	0	0	0	1.1
5. Parents or other members in your family	2	3	11	24	0	3.4

In sum, the students' evaluation for the process of pronunciation learning was positive. The majority of the students realized that language learning should be cooperated with native speakers, friends, and their teachers and through videos where they could imitate the sound or the accent of the singers, actors or presenters.

#### 4.2.3. Instructions

**Table 6.** How to teach English pronunciation in the classroom

Themes	The choices of the students					Mean
	SA (1)	A (2)	N (3)	D (4)	SD (5)	
How to teach English pronunciation in the classroom						
1. Learn how pronounce vowels and consonants	11	29	0	0	0	1.7
2. Learn how to pronounce transcription	2	33	5	0	0	2.1
3. Listen and pay attention	7	28	3	2	0	2.0
4. Listen and repeat	5	27	2	6	0	2.1
5. Practice in individual and in pairs	12	25	3	0	0	1.8
6. Introduce the idea that should be reading aloud	8	31	1	0	0	1.8
7. Be encouraged to speak English as much as they possibly can	22	18	0	0	0	1.5

Table 6 shows the mean of the students' opinions on how teachers taught English pronunciation in the classroom on page 5. The mean of the students who contented with the items in this statement was recorded (M=1.7; M=2.0; M=1.8; M=1.8; M=1.5) of learning how pronounce vowels and consonants, listening and paying attention, practicing in individual and in pairs, introducing the idea that should be reading aloud, and being encouraged to speak English as much as they can. It is clear that pronunciation learning was needed to help language learners communicate and use that language knowledge. At the beginning of language learning, the learners need to learn how to pronounce vowels and consonants, and in the process of learning, they need to do a lot of practices by being encouraged to speak the language as much as possible. The mean of the items learning how to pronounce transcription and trying to listen and repeat are the same (M=2.1), but they are all aware of basing on the transcription as a good guide to pronounce the words and think the good way of learning process is listening and repeating.

It can be concluded that in this statement the students had good chance to practice the real language and focus on English pronunciation learning.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

The research investigated the ways of learning English pronunciation among first-year English majors at Van Lang University. Although the topic is not new, it has been prompted that helping the first-year English majors at university the ways of learning English pronunciation is a very important part because it makes them more confident in communication with others. From the results of this study, it is advised that English learners should consider the ways of learning English pronunciation as basic principles to help them pronounce English words correctly when

communicating with others. Therefore, a great demand for English learners is that they can understand what others say, and others can also identify what they want to say.

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## CÁCH HỌC PHÁT ÂM TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM NHẤT TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC VĂN LANG

**Tóm tắt:** Phát âm đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc học và dạy ngôn ngữ. Tiếng Anh được coi là một ngoại ngữ được nhiều người ở Việt Nam nói. Học sinh người Việt Nam từng bị ảnh hưởng cách phát âm tiếng Việt, và điều này làm cho họ phát âm các từ tiếng Anh một cách không chính xác. Mặc dù nhiều nghiên cứu về phát âm tiếng Anh đã được tiến hành gần đây để cải thiện phát âm tiếng Anh của sinh viên, việc thực hiện vẫn còn chông chéo và không thành công. Bài viết này sử dụng bảng câu hỏi để khám phá cách những sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng anh năm thứ nhất học phát âm tiếng Anh tại Đại học Văn Lang. Dựa trên dữ liệu nghiên cứu, kết quả của nghiên cứu sẽ được áp dụng cho việc học tập và thực hành giảng dạy tại Đại học Văn Lang và các bối cảnh tương tự.

**Từ khóa:** Phát âm, dạy và học tiếng Anh, sinh viên chuyên tiếng Anh năm thứ nhất, thực hành