

An Investigation into the Common Pronunciation Mistakes of Vietnamese Students and Possible Solutions: A Case Study at a University in Hanoi

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates common pronunciation mistakes made by Vietnamese university students learning English and explores potential solutions to improve their pronunciation skills. Conducted as a case study at a university in Hanoi, the research employs classroom observations and interviews with five English lecturers to identify frequent pronunciation errors and analyze their causes. The findings reveal that most mistakes stem from differences between Vietnamese and English phonological systems, particularly in the use of final consonants, word stress, and certain vowel sounds. These issues often result in reduced speech intelligibility and lower learner confidence. Based on the findings, the study proposes several pedagogical strategies to address pronunciation difficulties, including increased phonetic training, focused listening activities, and corrective feedback. The study aims to contribute to the improvement of English pronunciation teaching and learning in Vietnamese higher education contexts.

KEYWORDS: pronunciation mistakes, Vietnamese students, case study, solutions, higher education contexts

I. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is widely regarded as a crucial component of English language acquisition, as it directly influences learners' ability to communicate effectively and be understood by others. It encompasses not only the accurate production of individual phonemes but also the mastery of suprasegmental features such as word stress, rhythm, linking, and intonation, which contribute significantly to the naturalness, fluency, and intelligibility of speech (Roach, 2009; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010). Despite its recognized importance, pronunciation remains one of the most persistent challenges for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly in educational settings where exposure to native or near-native speech is limited and pronunciation instruction is often neglected.

For Vietnamese learners of English, the difficulty is compounded by substantial phonological differences between the two languages. Vietnamese is a tonal, syllable-timed language with a relatively simple syllable structure, while English is a nontonal, stress-timed language with complex syllable patterns and a larger inventory of both consonant and vowel sounds. These structural differences make it challenging for learners to acquire accurate pronunciation, especially in areas such as final consonant articulation, vowel length contrasts, and stress placement. Common issues include the omission or weakening of final stops, confusion between tense and lax vowel pairs such as /i:/ and /ɪ/, and the substitution of unfamiliar consonants like /θ/ and /ð/ with native equivalents (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

Motivated by the recurring pronunciation challenges observed among English majors at a university in Hanoi, this study seeks to explore the most common pronunciation errors made by Vietnamese students and identify possible pedagogical solutions to address them. Through a qualitative case study approach, the research aims to analyze the causes of these errors and offer practical strategies for pronunciation instruction. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for English language lecturers, curriculum designers, and teacher trainers in Vietnam, contributing to more effective teaching practices and improved learner outcomes in spoken English.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Factors Contributing to Vietnamese Students' Pronunciation Mistakes

Pronunciation errors among Vietnamese learners of English are primarily rooted in the phonological differences between the two languages. One major challenge is the existence of English sounds—particularly fricatives like /ʃ/, /θ/, and /ð/—that do not exist in Vietnamese. As a result, learners often substitute these with more familiar sounds from their first language, which leads to systematic mispronunciations (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010). The absence of certain articulatory habits in Vietnamese, such as the use of interdentalals, causes learners to misplace the tongue or lips during sound production. For example, the English /ð/ sound is often replaced with /d/ or /z/, due to a lack of awareness about correct tongue placement and movement (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992).

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In addition to segmental difficulties, suprasegmental features such as rhythm and intonation also pose significant obstacles. Vietnamese is a syllable-timed and tonal language, where each syllable tends to carry equal length and pitch patterns are used to distinguish meaning. In contrast, English is a stress-timed language, where unstressed syllables are shortened and speech rhythm is based on intervals between stressed syllables. This difference often leads Vietnamese learners to apply equal stress to all syllables, resulting in unnatural English rhythm. Moreover, their reliance on Vietnamese tonal contours interferes with their ability to produce natural English intonation, which is essential for expressing meaning and emotion (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Roach, 2009). These mismatches in sound systems and speech patterns significantly impact learners' intelligibility in spoken English.

2. Common Pronunciation Errors Made by Vietnamese Learners

Vowel-Related Errors:

Vowels are central to syllables and play an important role in the rhythm and melody of speech (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1996). While Vietnamese has a rich vowel system with eleven pure vowels and numerous diphthongs and triphthongs, the nature of English vowels - particularly the tense-lax distinction - often confuses learners. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) highlight that Vietnamese learners frequently produce intermediate vowel sounds instead of clearly distinguishing between pairs such as /i:/ and /ɪ/, leading to misunderstandings. For instance, the word *sleep* may be misheard as *slip* due to improper vowel articulation.

Consonant-Related Errors:

There are notable differences between the consonant systems of Vietnamese and English, which contribute to various pronunciation difficulties for Vietnamese learners. Sounds such as /f/, /v/, /z/, /θ/, and /ð/ are particularly challenging because they are not commonly found in Vietnamese. Learners often struggle to produce these unfamiliar sounds accurately, leading to frequent substitutions with more familiar ones - for instance, replacing /θ/ with /t/ or /s/, and /ð/ with /d/ or /z/. Additionally, although Vietnamese does have final stop consonants like /p/, /t/, and /k/, these are typically unreleased and pronounced with less force than in English. This can cause learners to omit or weaken final consonants in English words, resulting in errors such as pronouncing *seat* as *see*, which may hinder communication (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). These segmental issues highlight the need for explicit instruction and targeted practice in consonant articulation.

Errors in Word Stress and Intonation:

Vietnamese is a tonal and syllable-timed language, where each syllable is typically given equal weight and pitch variation carries lexical meaning. In contrast, English is a stress-timed language that relies heavily on the placement of stress within words and sentences to convey meaning and emphasis. This fundamental difference poses significant challenges for Vietnamese learners of English. Many students tend to transfer their native language's rhythmic and tonal features into English, leading to speech that lacks appropriate word stress and sounds monotonous or unnatural (Roach, 2009). For instance, Vietnamese learners often stress every syllable equally or place stress on the wrong syllable in multisyllabic words, resulting in reduced intelligibility. Additionally, they may struggle with English intonation patterns, producing speech with limited pitch variation and failing to distinguish between rising and falling intonation. These intonational mismatches can hinder both the production and interpretation of spoken English, affecting fluency and listener comprehension (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010).

This review aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are some common pronunciation mistakes of Vietnamese students when using English? RQ2: What are solutions to help students avoid pronunciation mistakes when they speak English?

II. METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research design, participants, data collection instruments, procedures, and data analysis methods used in the study. A qualitative case study approach was adopted to provide an in-depth understanding of the common pronunciation difficulties faced by Vietnamese learners of English and to explore potential pedagogical solutions as perceived by experienced English lecturers.

1. Participants

The participants in this study were five English language lecturers currently teaching at a university in Hanoi, Vietnam. These lecturers were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience with teaching English pronunciation to Vietnamese university students. All participants had a minimum of three years of teaching experience and were actively involved in speaking or phonetics instruction. Their insights were considered valuable due to their close interaction with students and their familiarity with common pronunciation difficulties. Participation was voluntary, and all interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research and consented to the recording and use of their responses for academic purposes.

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2. Data Collection Instruments

To ensure data triangulation and improve the validity of the findings, the study employed two primary instruments: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations.

2.1. Interviews with Lecturers

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with the five participating lecturers. This format allowed the researcher to explore key themes while maintaining the flexibility to probe for clarification or elaboration when necessary. The interview questions focused on identifying common pronunciation errors made by Vietnamese students, perceived causes of these errors, and pedagogical techniques or strategies the lecturers used to address them.

Each interview lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes and was conducted in a quiet environment to ensure high-quality audio recordings. All interviews were recorded using a digital device and supplemented by the researcher's written notes. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim and used solely for the purpose of this research. The interviews provided valuable qualitative insights into real classroom experiences and enabled the researcher to identify recurring themes across different participants.

2.2. Classroom Observation

In addition to interviews, classroom observations were conducted to complement and validate the data collected from the lecturers. These observations focused on real-time pronunciation instruction and student performance during English lessons, with particular attention to segmental and suprasegmental features of English speech.

The researcher observed multiple speaking and pronunciation classes, noting instances of common errors (e.g., mispronunciations, misplaced stress, monotonous intonation) as well as instructional practices (e.g., corrective feedback, pronunciation drills, modeling of articulatory positions). A structured observation checklist was used to ensure consistency in recording observations across classes. The data collected through observation helped to cross-check the claims made in interviews and provided a practical view of classroom dynamics.

3. Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process was carried out in two stages. First, the researcher arranged and conducted interviews with the five selected lecturers over the course of one week. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed soon after they were completed. After the interviews, classroom observations were conducted in several English classes involving the same lecturers. The observations aimed to verify the interview data by examining whether the pronunciation issues and solutions discussed were observable in actual teaching practice.

The combination of these two methods allowed the researcher to build a comprehensive understanding of the problem and to ensure that the data reflected both teacher perception and observable classroom behavior.

4. Data Analysis

The qualitative data gathered from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved several stages. Initially, the researcher read all interview transcripts multiple times to familiarize themselves with the content and begin identifying key themes. Next, responses from each participant were categorized according to recurring patterns and subthemes, such as specific types of pronunciation errors (e.g., vowel confusion, final consonant omission) and instructional strategies (e.g., shadowing, visual aids, real-time feedback).

Similarly, classroom observation notes were reviewed and coded according to the same thematic framework. The findings from interviews and observations were then synthesized to provide a triangulated perspective. Any discrepancies or unique insights were noted and discussed in the results and discussion sections.

By combining teacher interviews and direct classroom observations, this study ensured a more holistic and validated representation of the common pronunciation challenges Vietnamese students face and the strategies used to address them in realworld settings.

IV. RESULTS

This section presents the key findings from the data collected through semi-structured interviews with five English lecturers and multiple classroom observations conducted over several pronunciation-focused sessions. The data were analyzed thematically and organized into two primary categories: (1) common pronunciation problems frequently encountered by Vietnamese students, and (2) recommended pedagogical solutions suggested by the lecturers. These insights are supported by direct quotes from interview participants to enrich the validity and depth of interpretation.

1. Common Pronunciation Mistakes

The analysis revealed that pronunciation challenges faced by students could be grouped into two broad areas: segmental errors, which involve individual sounds (consonants and vowels), and suprasegmental errors, including stress, intonation, and rhythm. All lecturers agreed that these mistakes stem primarily from first-language interference and a lack of targeted pronunciation training.

Segmental Errors:

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Consonant Misarticulation and Omission

Final consonant sounds proved to be one of the most persistent problems among students. Vietnamese, unlike English, often features unreleased final stops, making it difficult for learners to produce final consonants clearly and audibly. The result is frequent omission or weakening of sounds like /p/, /t/, and /k/. This often leads to ambiguity or misinterpretation in communication. One lecturer described:

“When students say ‘seat’ but it sounds like ‘see’, the listener might misunderstand completely. It’s a small sound but makes a big difference.”

Additionally, learners struggled with consonants absent in the Vietnamese language, such as /θ/, /ð/, and /v/. These were often substituted with more familiar alternatives, like /t/ or /d/, due to articulatory limitations and a lack of awareness. A participant reflected:

“Many of my students replace /θ/ with /s/ or /t/, saying ‘tink’ instead of ‘think’. It’s a common error, but if not corrected early, it becomes a fossilized habit.”

Vowel Substitution and Confusion

Vowel sounds posed another major challenge. Vietnamese learners frequently mispronounced English vowel pairs that differ in tongue tension and length, such as /i:/ vs. /ɪ/ or /u:/ vs. /ʊ/. According to the lecturers, this confusion often resulted in entirely different words being heard by native listeners.

“One student said ‘ship’ when they meant ‘sheep’, and the class didn’t understand. These vowel distinctions are subtle but crucial in English,” noted a lecturer.

The production of diphthongs and triphthongs also presented difficulties. Instead of fully articulating these gliding vowels, students often shortened them into monophthongs or omitted their transitions altogether. These pronunciation habits were regularly observed in classroom presentations, where students’ speech lacked fluidity and native-like quality.

Suprasegmental Errors:

Incorrect Word Stress Placement

Given the syllable-timed nature of Vietnamese, students frequently misapplied stress in English multisyllabic words. Many learners either stressed every syllable equally or emphasized the wrong syllable, resulting in unnatural pronunciation. A teacher remarked:

“I often hear students say ‘eco-NOM-y’ instead of ‘e-CON-o-my’. It’s a small shift, but it makes them sound less fluent.”

Flat and Unnatural Intonation Patterns

Another common suprasegmental issue was the flatness of students’ intonation when speaking or reading aloud. Vietnamese students, influenced by the tonal nature of their mother tongue, tended to use a narrow pitch range, which reduced expressiveness.

“They speak in a flat tone—even when asking a question. It’s like reading a grocery list. This makes it hard for the audience to stay engaged,” shared one of the lecturers.

Classroom observations confirmed these findings, with many students speaking in a monotone, regardless of context. This often made their communication seem robotic or emotionally detached.

2. Suggested Pedagogical Solutions

The second theme of the findings focuses on the strategies and techniques proposed by lecturers to address these pronunciation issues. The lecturers emphasized that solutions should be practical, adaptable, and suitable for integration into regular classroom practice.

Focused Sound Instruction:

All lecturers advocated for deliberate and frequent practice of problem sounds. Instead of relying solely on communicative tasks, they recommended drilling specific consonants and vowels using techniques such as minimal pairs and targeted pronunciation exercises. One lecturer emphasized:

“If students don’t work on these sounds systematically—like practicing ‘this’ vs. ‘dis’—they’ll keep making the same mistakes even as their vocabulary improves.” **Visual and Kinesthetic Techniques:**

To help students better understand the physical aspects of articulation, lecturers suggested using phonemic charts, diagrams of the mouth, and even mirrors. These tools allow learners to visualize the shape and movement of their articulators.

“When I demonstrate how to place the tongue for /ð/, it makes a huge difference. They need to see it to believe they’re doing it wrong,” said a teacher.

Listening and Shadowing Activities:

Teachers recommended shadowing techniques where students mimic native speakers in real-time, which reinforces correct stress and rhythm. Listening activities were seen as a foundation, but imitation was considered more effective in achieving natural pronunciation.

“Listening is good, but speaking with the audio - shadowing it - is even better. That’s how students start to sound more fluent.”

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Real-Time Feedback and Correction:

Immediate correction, delivered gently, was favored by all lecturers. This approach helps students become more aware of their errors and improves retention. Teachers emphasized the importance of balancing feedback with encouragement.

“Students thank me later when I correct them right away. Otherwise, they keep practicing the same mistake,” commented one lecturer.

Integration into Broader Skills Lessons:

Rather than treating pronunciation as a standalone topic, lecturers preferred incorporating it into listening and speaking activities. They felt that this method helped students apply what they had learned in meaningful contexts.

“If pronunciation is isolated, students don’t transfer it. When it’s part of a speaking task or listening exercise, they’re more likely to use what they’ve practiced.”

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study shed light on the persistent pronunciation challenges faced by Vietnamese university students learning English, which largely stem from the significant phonological differences between Vietnamese and English. The identification of common segmental errors such as final consonant omission and substitution of unfamiliar consonants aligns with previous research by Avery and Ehrlich (1992) and Celce-Murcia et al. (2010), confirming that first-language interference remains a major obstacle for learners. The frequent omission or weakening of final stops, for instance, highlights the transfer of Vietnamese phonotactic constraints, where unreleased final consonants are typical, into English pronunciation. This transfer negatively affects intelligibility, as demonstrated by lecturers’ observations and classroom examples.

Similarly, vowel confusion and the difficulty distinguishing between tense and lax vowels emphasize the complex nature of English vowel phonemes for Vietnamese learners. These errors not only impair clear communication but also illustrate the intricate articulatory demands required to master English vowels, which differ substantially from the relatively simpler vowel system in Vietnamese. The observed challenges with diphthongs and triphthongs further suggest that learners may benefit from more explicit and sustained phonetic instruction targeting these sounds.

Beyond segmental issues, suprasegmental features emerged as critical areas of difficulty. The study’s findings on word stress and intonation errors underscore how Vietnamese learners’ reliance on their syllable-timed, tonal native language influences their acquisition of English’s stress-timed rhythm and intonation patterns. This supports Roach’s (2009) and Celce-Murcia et al.’s (2010) assertions regarding the complexity of suprasegmental features in pronunciation teaching. The tendency to apply equal stress across syllables or to produce monotonous intonation contours contributes to speech that sounds unnatural and impairs listener comprehension. Such difficulties can hinder learners’ communicative effectiveness and confidence, further emphasizing the need for targeted pedagogical interventions.

The pedagogical strategies proposed by the participating lecturers reflect best practices recommended in the literature. The emphasis on focused sound instruction, including minimal pairs and articulation drills, addresses the core segmental problems by helping learners differentiate and produce problematic sounds more accurately. The use of visual and kinesthetic aids—such as phonemic charts and mouth diagrams—can enhance learners’ metalinguistic awareness and provide tangible guidance for correct articulation, which is especially useful for articulatory unfamiliarity as with interdental sounds (/θ/, /ð/).

Moreover, the incorporation of listening and shadowing techniques aligns with recent research advocating for interactive and communicative pronunciation practice that integrates auditory input with active production. Shadowing helps learners internalize natural stress and intonation patterns, thereby improving suprasegmental features. Immediate and constructive feedback, as suggested by the lecturers, plays a vital role in preventing fossilization of errors and maintaining learner motivation. Finally, integrating pronunciation instruction into broader language skills lessons reflects a holistic approach that enhances transferability and real-world application, which has been shown to increase learner engagement and retention.

While the study offers valuable insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size of five lecturers and observations from a single university limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand to multiple institutions and include learners’ perspectives to triangulate data further. Additionally, quantitative measures of learner pronunciation improvements following the implementation of suggested strategies would provide stronger empirical support.

In conclusion, this study confirms that Vietnamese learners’ pronunciation difficulties are deeply rooted in phonological contrasts with English and that multifaceted, contextually relevant teaching approaches are essential to address these challenges effectively. By adopting a combination of focused sound practice, visual aids, shadowing, immediate feedback, and integrated classroom activities, educators in Vietnam can better support learners in achieving more intelligible and natural English pronunciation, ultimately enhancing their communicative competence and confidence.

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4. Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers meaningful insights into the pronunciation challenges faced by Vietnamese learners of English and the strategies used by teachers to address them, it also presents several limitations that open avenues for further investigation. Since the study was conducted on a small scale, with five teachers at a single university in Hanoi, future research should consider expanding the participant pool to include a broader range of schools, regions, and educational levels. Doing so may help determine whether the types of pronunciation errors observed here are widespread or vary depending on geographical or institutional factors.

Additionally, further research could adopt a learner-centered approach by involving students more directly, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. For example, controlled experimental studies could measure the impact of specific pronunciation instruction techniques, such as shadowing, minimal pair exercises, or technology-assisted learning tools, on students' performance. Tracking learners' progress before and after the implementation of such techniques could offer valuable evidence about their effectiveness and suitability for different learner groups.

Another promising direction for future inquiry would be exploring the beliefs and attitudes of students toward learning English pronunciation. Investigating how learners perceive the importance of pronunciation, what difficulties they are most aware of, and what methods they find helpful could provide useful information for designing more engaging and responsive teaching practices. Similarly, examining differences between beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners in terms of the types of pronunciation errors they make could reveal how these issues evolve with proficiency.

Finally, in light of recent advances in educational technology, future research could examine how digital tools such as mobile applications, AI-powered pronunciation feedback systems, or interactive online resources can be integrated into classroom teaching and self-study programs. Understanding how these tools support pronunciation development in the Vietnamese context would be a valuable contribution to the field and could help modernize and personalize pronunciation instruction.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research has examined the typical pronunciation errors encountered by Vietnamese English learners and proposed practical measures to tackle these issues. The study shows that the root of many pronunciation problems lies in the marked differences between the sound systems of Vietnamese and English, particularly regarding individual sounds such as vowels and consonants, as well as features like word stress and intonation patterns.

Interference from the learners' native language significantly influences these pronunciation challenges. Moreover, a lack of sufficient focus on pronunciation within English teaching, combined with limited training for lecturers in this area, further hinders learners' progress. The findings emphasize the need for deliberate and systematic pronunciation instruction, including focused practice on difficult sounds, the use of visual and auditory tools, and the provision of immediate, constructive feedback.

Enhancing lecturers' knowledge of phonetics and equipping them with effective teaching methods is essential for improving learners' speaking abilities. At the same time, learners require more opportunities to engage with authentic English speech and to practice in supportive, interactive settings. Addressing both linguistic and educational factors is crucial for enabling Vietnamese learners to develop clearer and more confident spoken English skills.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Interview Questionnaire for Lecturers General Information:

- Name of Lecturer: _____
- Years of Teaching Experience: _____
- Current Subjects Taught: _____
- Academic Qualification: _____

Interview Questions:

1. What are the most common pronunciation mistakes you have observed among Vietnamese students learning English?
2. In your opinion, what are the main causes of these pronunciation errors?
3. Which specific English sounds (consonants or vowels) do your students struggle with the most? Could you give some examples?

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4. How do you usually teach pronunciation in your classes? Do you integrate it into other skills (e.g., speaking/listening) or teach it separately?
5. What teaching techniques or tools have you found most effective in helping students overcome pronunciation difficulties?
6. How do students usually respond to pronunciation correction? Are they aware of their mistakes?
7. Do you provide real-time correction during speaking tasks? If yes, how do you do it to maintain a positive learning environment?
8. What challenges do you face when teaching pronunciation to Vietnamese students?
9. What recommendations would you make for improving pronunciation instruction in the Vietnamese EFL context?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding teaching English pronunciation to Vietnamese learners?

APPENDIX 2: Classroom Observation Checklist

Observer Name: _____

Date of Observation: _____

Class Level: _____

Teacher Observed: _____ Lesson Topic: _____ *A. Pronunciation Errors*

Observed:

Type of Error	Observed? (✓/X)	Notes/Examples
Final consonant omission		
Substitution of /θ/, /ð/, /v/, /z/		
Vowel confusion (/i:/ vs. /ɪ/)		
Diphthong/triphthong simplification		
Incorrect word stress		
Monotonous or flat intonation		

B. Teacher Strategies Noted:

Strategy Used	Observed? (✓/X)	Notes/Comments
Use of minimal pair drills		
Use of phonemic symbols/IPA		
Visual demonstration (mouth diagram, mirror)		
Listening and shadowing activities		
Real-time corrective feedback		
Integration of pronunciation in activities		



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