

REALITY OF TEACHING PRONUNCIATION FOR EFL STUDENTS IN QUANG BINH UNIVERSITY

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***Abstract.** Pronunciation is a small part of English language teaching however it plays a very important role in learners' communicative competence. Unfortunately, until now pronunciation teaching is still overlooked and has many problems. As a teacher of English in Quang Binh University, in this article, the author would like to discuss some features of pronunciation teaching and some encountered problems in reality with the hope that lecturers, syllabus designers, materials developers and policy makers should have a serious view towards those problems and find out suitable solutions to improve the quality of pronunciation teaching.*

***Key words:** pronunciation, teaching pronunciation, materials, methodology*

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1. Pronunciation's definitions

Pronunciation is the act of uttering with articulation; the act of giving the proper sound and accent; utterance; as, the pronunciation of syllables of words; distinct or indistinct pronunciation" (Webster, 1913) [6]. Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning. It includes attention to the particular sounds of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual sound, such as intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm (suprasegmental aspects), how the voice is projected (voice quality) and the way we speak a language (gestures and expressions). Although those different aspects of pronunciation are mentioned in isolation, they all work in combination when we speak.

1.2. The importance of pronunciation

Pronunciation is an integrated and integral part of second/ foreign language learning since it directly affects learners' communicative competence as well as performance to a substantial extent. In [1], Gilbert believed that the skills of listening comprehension and pronunciation are interdependent, and contended that "if they (learners) cannot hear well, they are cut off from language. If they (learners) cannot be understood easily, they are cut off from conversation with native speakers." Wong in [4] also pointed out that even when the non-native speakers' vocabulary and grammar are excellent, if their pronunciation falls below a certain threshold level, they are unable to communicate efficiently and effectively. Wong in [4] added the lack of knowledge of pronunciation could even affect learners' reading and spelling.

Indeed, pronunciation is definitely the biggest thing that people notice when a person is speaking. The way we speak conveys something about ourselves to the people around us. Learners with good pronunciation in English are more likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners whose pronunciation is difficult to understand will not be

understood, even if their grammar is perfect. Such learners may avoid speaking in English, and thus experience social isolation, employment difficulties and limited opportunities for further study, which may affect their settlement in abroad countries. We also often judge people by the way they speak, and so learners with poor pronunciation may be judged as incompetent, uneducated or lacking in knowledge, even though listeners are only reacting to their pronunciation.

2. PRONUNCIATION TECHING IN QUANG BINH UNIVERSITY

2.1. Reality

In Vietnam, at the tertiary level, the importance of teaching pronunciation for students has also been realized for years. However, “in reality, many Vietnamese students fail in communicating in English with their colleagues in Japanese or Korean companies. In spite of that fact, those students still think that the Japanese’s English or the Korean’s English has spoilt their “standard” English” [3]. Tran in [5] also found out that the “standard” English mentioned by those students was the one that they were taught at universities and their lecturers were Vietnamese people who were educated abroad or had never been. So it is really necessary for lecturers to identify which variations of pronunciation are appropriate to teach their students.

Quang Binh University (QBU) certainly is bearing those problems, too. Established on October 24th 2006 on the basis of Quang Binh Teachers’ Training College, founded in 1959, over the past 50 years of development, the University has now become a prestigious center of training teachers, fostering the staff for many sectors and conducting scientific research projects in the northern central part of Vietnam. Among a variety of departments, Department of Foreign Languages is one of the largest departments in the university with the English staff consisting of fourteen lecturers. These lecturers also had teaching experience of various lengths:

Table 1. Lecturers’ years of teaching experience

No of Lecturers	Years of Teaching Experience
7	> 15
4	6-10
3	2-5

The main responsibility of English staff is to educate English for all students in the university, either non-majored or majored students. Being aware of this important task, every year, every term, lecturers at the Department of Foreign Languages have to update, compile, and compose teaching materials again and again to follow the newest changes.

Table 2. Numbers of students at the Department of Foreign Languages

Class	No of students
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English Course 54 (University Level)	12
English Course 53 (University Level)	10
English Course 55 (University Level)	30
English Course 55 (College Level)	22
English Course 54 (College Level)	12

However, as a teacher, I would like to disclose here some problems in teaching pronunciation that must be carefully considered in Quang Binh University in particular and the other universities in Vietnam in common.

2.2. Some shortcomings of pronunciation teaching in QBU

2.2.1. Curriculum

In deed, based on the study schedule assigned by the QBU’s Training Bureau, every academic year students have approximately two hundred periods for all subjects. Unfortunately, none of those are for pronunciation teaching. Time for pronunciation teaching is integrated ambiguously into the teaching process without any detailed guideline.

Concerning this shortcoming, only half of teachers expected to get more time for pronunciation teaching in classes; the rest were indifferent. Explaining for this indifference, a young female teacher stated that:

“Pronunciation is important but students can practice by themselves, teachers should only spend a little time teaching pronunciation in classes, which can save time for other important skills.”

(Quoted from a questionnaire)

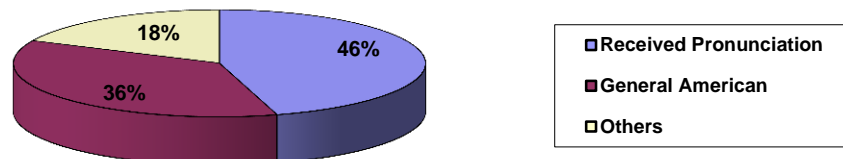


Figure 1. Variations of English pronunciation used in QBU.

One more problem is that although every teacher could determine clearly the goals of pronunciation teaching were to help students either imitate the accents of native speakers or speak clearly enough to be understood by both native speakers and non-native speakers, they

could not give answer to the question “How does this goal differ from the assigned goal of teaching pronunciation in your university?”. A teacher had explained this when being interviewed as below:

“In my own opinion it is so hard to compare the goal of teaching English pronunciation with the assigned goal of teaching pronunciation in my university. There have not been any researches, seminars or the assigned goal of teaching English pronunciation in Quang Binh University yet. Teachers themselves understand the importance and have to define their own goal of teaching pronunciation; they try to correct errors in pronunciation of students when they pronounce English incorrectly. All they do are based on their experience. However, in my opinion, this way is not really effective.”

(Quoted from a questionnaire)

Apart from curriculum, lack of sufficient materials and facilities for teaching and learning are also a problem.

2.2.2. Materials

The results collected from the questionnaires reflected clearly that materials for teaching in the DFL of QBU are very poor and inconsistent. Figure 4.3 in the findings proves this conclusion to be true.

As mentioned before, three variations of pronunciation existing in QBU is RP, LFC, and GA, respectively ranked according to degree of favor. However, the investigation indicated that all the course books and teaching materials teachers currently used mainly presented GA and RP. Rare of them related to LFC.

Being asked about this, a teacher answered indefinitely:

“Actually, I do not really pay attention to which variations my materials represent. I use all available books that are useful and related to my subjects. May be, almost my materials represent RP. Some of them are GA. A few even represents Australia English.”

(Interview, noted on May 15th, 2014)

This deficiency is really a problem that teachers and the administrators must consider seriously. Moreover, the quality of the current sources of materials is not really high. Some opinions below noted from the interviews given to teachers reflect this reality.

“My materials come from many sources. As you know, original books cost us too much money. My books are mainly written or translated by Vietnamese authors.”

(Interview, noted on May 15th, 2014)

“My teaching materials are compiled by myself and my colleagues. They are actually a mixture of many other books from a variety of sources. We gather all of books related to our

interest and then compile into a course book, regardless of which variations they represent and where they come from.”

(Interview, noted on May 15th, 2014)

Commonly, there exist three sources of materials in the DFL of QBU. The first ones come from abroad. They are written predominantly by English native speakers for general learners. None are exclusively for the Vietnamese with the focus on the special difficulties that Vietnamese learners have. The second ones are written by Asian authors, Vietnamese authors. Unluckily, almost those locally produced books used to teach/learn EFL do not usually embody pronunciation components and lessons. The rest are compiled by teachers by themselves. Unfortunately, until now there are not any guidelines or frameworks for this work.

2.2.3. Teaching methods

As a result of lack of time in curriculum, assigned goals of teaching as well as materials, teaching methods are also affected. Each teacher has his or her own ways of teaching and evaluate in pronunciation teaching. Dealing with some situations given out in the questionnaires, teachers had many different ideas.

To teachers who prefer RP or GA, they tend to oblige students to imitate exactly all phonetic features of those variations. Forty percent of teachers feel very unpleasant and try to correct students immediately when they don't speak the same variation of pronunciation as them. In addition, those teachers also feel very unpleasant when some students' pronunciation is affected by their local accents even though the others still understand them. It is clear that this way of teaching is very stressful and hard because RP or GA has some features that Vietnamese students find it extremely difficult to imitate.

Other forty percent of teachers who support LFC encourage their students in those cases as long as the students can make themselves be understood. They still encourage their students to try their best to practice pronouncing correctly, yet sympathize them if they can not and let them take it easy in their own ways of pronouncing as long as the others can understand them. To their opinions, it is not interesting to strictly focus on teaching one specific variety. However, it is essential to bear in mind the needs and interests of the individual student. The differences between English varieties should function as stimulant and urge in language learning.

The rest of teachers seem to be indifferent towards their students' pronunciation. They even do not concern which variations of pronunciation that their students are using. Concerning the supposed opinion in question number 13: ***“I often feel unpleasant when some students' pronunciation is affected by their local accents even though the others still understand them”*** (Question 13 in questionnaire); forty percent of teachers feel neutral. They think that those matters are normal because each person has their own choice. They let their students completely

free in their pronunciation even when they make mistakes or cannot make themselves be understood by the others.

3. CONCLUSION

It is evident that pronunciation should be viewed in the same light as the other facets and skills of the communication, especially through listening and speaking. The teaching of pronunciation has to aim at intelligibility as an essential component of communicative competence [2]. Therefore, lecturers, syllabus designers, materials developers and policy makers should have a serious view towards those problems and find out suitable solutions to improve the quality of pronunciation teaching.

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