Using Language Learning Strategies in Pronunciation Training for Non-English Major Students

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Abstract. The purpose of this action research is to improve student’s pronunciation performance, especially in terms of English vowel sounds, through a pronunciation training program. There were 20 non-English majored students from Hanoi University of Science, VNU participating in this program. During 10 weeks, students were provided with explanation on English vowel production as well as the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese vowel systems before practicing these sounds with the support of Dickerson’s Covert Rehearsal Model. The data were collected from three questionnaires, two tests - the pre-test and post-test and reflective reports from students. The analysis of collected data proved that after the training program, students gained certain improvement in their pronunciation performance. The number of errors in pronouncing vowels decreased; nevertheless, some sounds remained problematic with learners. By studying the mistakes, the researcher found that the relationship between L1 and L2 exists and L1 influenced negatively on the L2 pronunciation acquisition of students in this study. Besides, the use of various pronunciation learning strategies was shown to be useful for students’ learning of pronunciation, especially the social strategy group (as classified by Oxford (1990) and Peterson (2000))

Keywords. Phương pháp giảng dạy; Tiếng Anh; Phát âm

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

This part, which is an introduction to the thesis, helps to provide the background as well as the context for the present study. The section includes the statement of the problem and rationale for the study, research questions, aims and objectives, significance, scope of the study and an overview of the rest of the paper.

1. Problem statement and rationale for the study

Whether English is learnt as a second language or a foreign language, pronunciation should be paid adequate attention by both teachers and learners since an English learner with a limited pronunciation performance may lose his self-confidence in social interactions, which “negatively affects estimations of a speaker’s credibility and abilities” (Gilakjani, 2012, p. 119). In other words, learners with good English pronunciation tend to be understood despite their frequent grammatical mistakes in the speech. On the other hand, good knowledge of English grammar is not an insurance of intelligibility, meaning “how much of the speech is actually understood by interlocutors” (Munro, 2011, p.9). As a result, these students may avoid communicating in English, experience social isolation, and have difficulties in finding jobs and limited opportunities for further study (Gilakjani, 2012). Many learners rank pronunciation one of the most difficult aspects in acquiring English. Moreover, “the process of learning English is interconnected” (Varasarin, 2007, p.11), which means that the acquirement of one language aspect might be a support for mastering other aspects. For example, according to Gilbert (1984), the improvement in English pronunciation is of great importance to enhance students’ listening and speaking skills.

Within the English as a Second Language (ESL) setting, the fact that students have to use English not only in classrooms but also in real-life communication and interaction forces them to master it. In other words, English skills become their survival skills, which makes teaching pronunciation is often considered essential in an ESL class (Varasarin, 2007). Meanwhile, in the English
as a foreign language (EFL) setting, English is no longer a means of communicating and there is hardly any other place than classrooms where it is used. As a result, English has lost its title of survival skills in this case. It would be easy for both EFL teachers and learners to neglect the significant role of pronunciation training in assisting students to gain precise command of English (Gilbert, 1984). In such cases where students have few chances to practice English, it is vital for teachers to show more of their responsibility to create greater opportunities for students to expose to the target language rather than avoid facing the difficulties.

Even though pronunciation is said to be able to acquire naturally (Krashen, 1985), pronunciation instruction has been proved to bring students chances to enhance their intelligibility and comprehensibility which are influential factors of their communicative competence (Prator, 1971, Morley, 1991 as cited in Darcy, Ewert, & Lidster, 2012). According to Harmer (2007), students can overcome difficult sounds by understanding how they are produced while teachers may support their learning of pronunciation by making them aware of their mispronunciation (Kenworthy, 1987). In short, pronunciation instruction plays an important role in helping learners acquire knowledge, raising their awareness and improving skills that support the enhancement of intelligibility.

During the pronunciation learning process, learners may be affected by various factors such as the native language, the age factor, the amount of exposure, the phonetic ability, the attitude and identity, the motivation and concern for good pronunciation (Kenworthy, 1987). Among these factors, the native language is stated to be the most influential one as the L1 sound system may affect the acquisition of a second language. For example, people with L1 accent will produce a “foreign accent” which makes them easy to be identified among speakers of English. Effects of L1 can be found in the way students cope with difficult sounds in L2 (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). They tend to use an L1 sound to substitute for an L2 one and the phonological rules of L1 may be mistakenly applied to L2. One of possible solutions for this problem might be making students aware of
the differences between L1 and L2. Studies conducted by Ohata (2004), Huthaily (2008), Tharpe (2008) indicate that the pronunciation instruction becomes more useful if it can help students understand the similarities as well as discrepancies between their native and target language.

With regards to language learning strategies, O’Malley and Chamot (1990, p.29) define them as “special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information”. The purpose of using these strategies is to “affect the learner's motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes, or interacts new knowledge” (Weinstein and Mayer, 1986, p. 315). The significance of language learning strategies is appreciated in such a way that they can enhance learners’ language proficiency and develop their communicative competence (Oxford, 1990).

With profound influence of the development of English as an international language, Vietnamese schools are providing students with English as one of the core subjects at school. In big cities, children even can learn English before they start their primary school (Ha, 2005). However, it is problematic that “many Vietnamese speakers can speak English, but only a few have intelligible English pronunciation” (Ha, 2005, p.1). As observed, students in Hanoi University of Science (HUS) share the same problem. They long to speak English accurately and fluently but for some reasons, English becomes too challenging for them and they are too shy to speak English. The biggest reason might be the differences in English and Vietnamese sound systems (Ha, 2005) and results in some typical pronunciation errors. As for teachers, it is worth noting that not every English teacher in this university provides frequent pronunciation training for their students even though it is required in the curriculum. Therefore, students lack orientation in learning and practicing as well as exposure to pronunciation of English language and often ignore it while their focus is mainly on listening, reading, speaking and writing skills. Hardly ever do they realize that there is always an obvious relationship of listening and speaking with pronunciation (Gilbert, 1984) and their poor
performance in listening and speaking tests partially results from bad pronunciation. A further consequence is that students might lose their confidence in speaking English as they are afraid of making mistakes and feel inferior. With the desire to help my students first improve their pronunciation skills and then consolidate their self-confidence in using English so that the fear of making mistakes or being blamed will no longer be their obsession, I decide to conduct an action search in which I will provide my HUS students with **frequent pronunciation training combining with pronunciation learning strategies**. It is believed that with regular practice, learners will improve their performance and feel confident (Avery and Ehrlich, 1992).

2. **Aims and objectives of the study**

The study aims to improve the pronunciation of non-English majored students in HUS through the pronunciation training process. In this training, students were given detailed instructions in terms of English vowels as well the similarities and differences between Vietnamese and English vowels. Moreover, the training gave students chances to practice English with the use of various pronunciation learning strategies attached to steps of Dickerson’s Covert Rehearsal Model. All of activities in this course were to help students develop their acquisition of English vowels. However, before that, to make it more helpful, the study identified problems that learners may have while producing English vowels. After all, the researcher expects to receive students’ evaluation of the whole training process and to find out which parts of this process show to be useful for their learning of pronunciation and which learning strategies that students found more effective.

3. **Research questions**

The study is expected to find answers for the following research questions:

1. Are there any problems of learners when producing English vowel sounds?
   If yes, what are they?
2. To what extent does pronunciation training enhance students’ pronunciation performance?

3. What are students’ perceptions of the effectiveness and usefulness of the training?

4. Scope of the study

The study was conducted with the pronunciation training program which included two main parts. The first one was the instruction on English vowel sound production and explanation of differences between Vietnamese and English vowel systems. The second was the practice of English vowels with Dickerson’s Covert Rehearsal Model under the instructions of the teacher-researcher. Learners were instructed and encouraged to use a variety of learning strategies during some steps of the Covert Rehearsal to improve their pronunciation. Suggested pronunciation learning strategies in this study belong to Peterson’s (2000) and Oxford’s (1990) strategies taxonomies which include five group: (1) Memory strategies, (2) Cognitive strategies, (3) Metacognitive strategies, (4) Affective strategies, (5) Social strategies. However, the real use of language learning tactics would depend on students themselves during the pronunciation training process. Accordingly, students’ target was the production of vowel sounds only. There were 20 HUS students participating in this ten-week training course with 100 minutes of interacting with the teacher per week. The two parts of the program were conducted simultaneously during those weeks. The teacher provided instructions on essential knowledge of pronunciation in class while students practiced sounds that they learnt at home with the Dickerson’s Covert Rehearsal Model.

5. Methods of the study

The research design applied in this study is action research with the use of some research instruments, namely, questionnaires, pre-test and post-test and reflective reports. The combination of these instruments helped the researcher gain reliable data and accurate understanding of learners’ problems and the nature of the
training process. Rationale for the choice of this design and research tools is presented in the Methodology chapter.

6. Importance of the study

First and foremost, with the pronunciation training program, the researcher expects to bring positive changes in students’ pronunciation performance, especially the production of English vowels. Hence, those who benefit directly from this study are students participating in the research. After this training, students do not only gain essential knowledge about English pronunciation but also build up useful learning strategies for themselves to improve their skills. Moreover, it is hoped that students’ confidence and autonomy will be developed.

Secondly, the findings from this research can be valuable evidence about the relationship of pronunciation learning strategies and learners’ outcomes, besides showing contribution of explicit instruction on pronunciation to the improvement of learners. Hopefully, the successful application of this approach will open one more practical way in pronunciation learning for English learners as well as useful way of teaching pronunciation for teachers. The results of this study might also be a significant reference for other teachers and researchers that share the same concerned field in their practice of teaching English.

7. Design of the study

The following parts of the study were divided into five chapters:

PART 2: Development

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the current theories in pronunciation teaching and learning, the classifications of language learning strategies and models of pronunciation learning strategy training.
Chapter 2: Methodology

The Methodology chapter explains why action research was chosen as the research method, shows the steps of how the research was conducted, and justifies data collection instruments and data analysis methods.

Chapter 3: Findings and Discussion

In chapter 3, the actions, findings and analysis of the findings of the research are provided in response to the research questions.

Chapter 4: Implications

This chapter attempts to link the research results and discussed issues in the previous chapter to the real-life teaching and learning of pronunciation.

PART 3: Conclusion

This part summarizes the findings of the action research, acknowledges the limitations and offers suggestions for further research.
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