



A SURVEY INTO NON-ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON SPECIFIC STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE FINAL SOUND PRONUNCIATION AT LAC HONG UNIVERSITY

KHẢO SÁT QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH VỀ CÁC CHIẾN LUỢC CỤ THỂ ĐỂ CẢI THIỆN KHẢ NĂNG PHÁT ÂM ÂM CUỐI TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC LẠC HỒNG

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ABSTRACT. The purposes of this small-scale survey were to elucidate opinions of and strategies towards strengthening the final sound pronunciation of non-English majored students at Lac Hong University. The subjects of this study were 80 sophomores of four different faculties and had been learning English for at least six years. A questionnaire and structured interviews were utilized to gather research data. The results showed that the participants were aware of the significance and difficulties of final sound pronunciation in learning English. Moreover, singing along English songs, watching English channels or movies, joining e-learning courses and imitating English accent in TV programs or movies were the strategies which the students believed to be the most efficient in advancing their final sound pronunciation. This survey made a substantial contribution to raising the consciousness of learners in English pronunciation learning and affording perceptive insights into teaching English pronunciation.

KEYWORDS. final sound pronunciation, pronunciation strategies, beliefs

TÓM TẮT. Mục đích của bài khảo sát quy mô nhỏ này là làm sáng tỏ quan điểm và chiến lược để tăng cường kỹ năng phát âm âm cuối của sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Lạc Hồng. Đối tượng của bài nghiên cứu gồm 80 sinh viên năm hai của 4 khoa khác nhau và đã học tiếng Anh ít nhất 6 năm. Bảng câu hỏi khảo sát và phỏng vấn trực tiếp đã được sử dụng để thu thập dữ liệu nghiên cứu. Kết quả khảo sát cho thấy những người tham gia đã nhận thức được tầm quan trọng và khó khăn của việc phát âm âm cuối trong việc học tiếng Anh. Bên cạnh đó, những chiến lược mà đối tượng nghiên cứu tin là có hiệu quả nhất trong việc nâng cao kỹ năng phát âm âm cuối bao gồm: hát theo các bài hát tiếng Anh, xem các kênh hoặc phim tiếng Anh, tham gia các khóa học trực tuyến và bắt chước theo giọng Anh trên các chương trình truyền hình hoặc phim ảnh. Khảo sát này đã đóng góp đáng kể vào việc nâng cao ý thức của người học trong phát âm tiếng Anh và mang lại cho giáo viên những chiến lược hiệu quả và hiểu biết sâu sắc hơn trong việc dạy phát âm tiếng Anh.

TÙ KHOÁ. phát âm âm cuối, chiến lược phát âm, nhận thức

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language nowadays tends to shift its focus from structure competence to communicative competence, teaching pronunciation is drawing the attention of teachers, educators and educational researchers. Roberson [11] supposes that ‘without adequate pronunciation skills, the learners’ ability to communicate is severely limited’. Furthermore, Gilakjani [6] stresses that comprehensible pronunciation is a crucial constituent of communicative competence. Teachers should, therefore, come up with strategies both practical and feasible to meet learners’ demands on effective communication.

In Vietnamese context, teaching and learning pronunciation is an urgent and significant problem because of the existence of some common pronunciation problems of Vietnamese learners of English such as sound omission, sound mispronunciation, and sound redundancy (Tam [12]). According to the findings of Tam’s study, the most common errors were the omission of final sounds. The main reason for this problem is that in Vietnamese, speakers do not pronounce final sounds and cluster of consonants. In fact, this problem of pronunciation results in obstacles for improvement of not only speaking but also English listening skills. A prominent hindrance is that learners’ inaccurate

pronunciation makes it difficult for their listeners to comprehend (Ur [14]) or some learners tend to over-pronounce final sounds by adding /s/ or /z/ at the end of any word, commonly leading to communication breakdown (Tam [12]). Another difficulty results from the fact that when speaking, native or competent speakers of English usually employ such connected speech as ‘What **do you think of soap opera?**’.

In fact, when teaching and assessing students in oral examinations, the researchers found that one of the most common pronunciation errors students made was the lack of final sound pronunciation. Despite the urgency and importance of the final pronunciation problems in English of Vietnamese students in general and Lac Hong students in particular, few studies have been conducted to offer strategies to improve and raise learners’ awareness of the final sound pronunciation. Consequently, this survey was carried out to answer the following two questions:

- ❖ Are non-English majored students at Lac Hong University aware of the final sounds when speaking?

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- ❖ What are beliefs and strategies that non-English majored students at Lac Hong University draw on to improve their final sound pronunciation?

2. CONTENT

2.1 Research Methods

- Participants

Participants aged between 18 and 25 were randomly selected among 80 sophomores majoring in Information Technology, Civil Engineering, Pharmacy, Finance and Banking, and Food Engineering at Lac Hong University. Of the questionnaire respondents, eight interviewees consented to be interviewed.

- Data collection instruments

The data was collected through both questionnaires and structured interviews within May 2020. According to McDonough & McDonough [8], questionnaires for educational and ELT researches seemed to be very popular and advantageous. In addition, Chamot [4] asserts that “the most frequently used method for identifying students’ learning strategies is through questionnaires”. Therefore, a mixture of closed-response questions and open-response questions was employed in designing questionnaire to make good use of the advantages and limit the disadvantages of questionnaire (Brown [3]). The 14-item questionnaire aimed at exploring students’ awareness, beliefs and their strategies to improve their final sound pronunciation in English learning. Specific strategies to improve final sound pronunciation mentioned in the questionnaire were based on both researchers’ teaching and learning English experience and experts’ empirical studies in the related field. Particularly, according to Tse [13], songs are not only helpful aural materials, but also the most unwinding language learning strategy considered by English learners. Additionally, in the words of Almurashi [1], authentic English videos, especially those on YouTube website can effectively reduce students’ obstacles in understanding real-life English. Moreover, exploiting English movies in teaching is an undeniably popular measure to foster learners’ motivation in learning and improve their communication competence (Li [7]).

Questionnaires and interview questions were piloted before being used to increase objectiveness and reduce potential problems (Nunan [9]). 20 out of 80 participants joined the pilot survey and discussed questions in the questionnaire and interview. Some questions were revised for appropriateness after analyzing responses and feedback from the pilot questionnaire and interviews.

- Data collection procedures

First of all, the purpose of the survey, confidentiality and anonymity were stressed before distributing questionnaires and conducting interviews. The questionnaires were handed out to the participants along with clear elaboration on each item.

Next, the interviews were employed to gain in-depth information and to better explain and validate the results of questionnaires. Importantly, the face-to-face interviews were recorded with the interviewees’ permission. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted about eighty minutes (ten minutes for each interview).

The calculated data were displayed as percentages, charts and tables to report in results and discussion. For open-response questions of both questionnaires and interviews, typical answers of each question were transcribed and typed. All data were described and analyzed in categories of awareness, beliefs and strategies in improving final sound pronunciation.

2.2 Findings and Discussion

2.2.1 Learners’ Perspectives about the Importance of Final Sound Pronunciation

It was proved statistically that almost all of the participants were fully aware of the importance of pronouncing final sounds, as can be seen in Figure 1. Specifically, the adjectives “useful”, “interesting”, “necessary”, “important” were found frequently in interviews to express participants’ own ideas on final sounds in English learning.

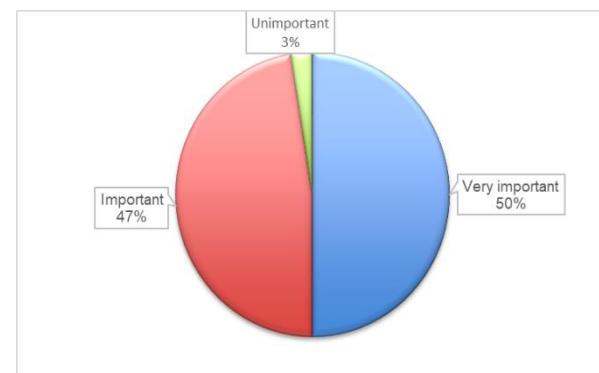


Figure 1. Learners’ perspectives about the importance of final sound pronunciation

Although a majority of learners were acutely conscious of the significance of final sound pronunciation and had been learning English for at least six years, they still encountered a myriad of difficulties in final sound pronunciation. One of the most noticeable problems they faced was not knowing how to correctly pronounce some final sounds. Transcripts from the interviews proved that most of the interviewees mispronounced final sounds. For instance, they often pronounced /s/ instead of /iz/ for plural nouns ending in ‘-s/-es’ or /id/ for all ‘-ed’ final sounds. Moreover, when asked about pronunciation practice in class, 90% of the respondents asserted that their teachers did give them activities related to pronunciation. The final sound pronunciation, however, was not emphasized in those activities. Therefore, question 13 in the questionnaire revealed that learners expected their teachers to give them more activities to practice and then evaluate their progress.

2.2.2 Learners’ attitudes towards free online pronunciation courses

In addition, almost all of the participants stated that they were interested in improving their final sound pronunciation, and they could spend from 2 to 4 hours a week to practise pronouncing final sounds. On top of that, it was immensely encouraging to learn that about 71 respondents (89%) would like to actively take part in free online courses to improve their final sound pronunciation. (Figure 2). This perspective is confirmed in the study by Chavangklang [5] who concluded that after using pronunciation E-learning package, learners’ final consonant pronunciation skills were greatly improved.

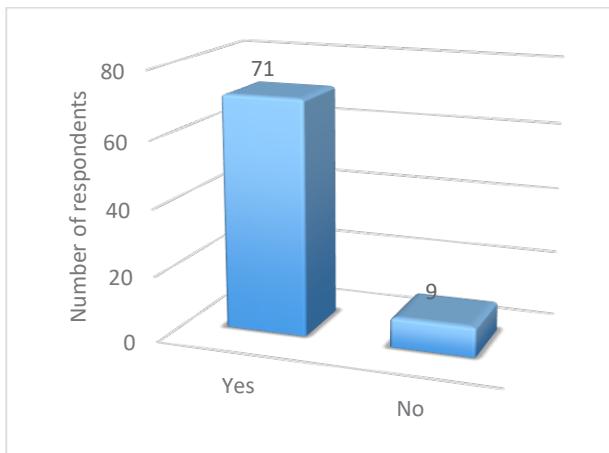


Figure 2. Learners' attitudes towards free online pronunciation courses

2.2.3 Learners' Strategies to Improve Final Sound Pronunciation

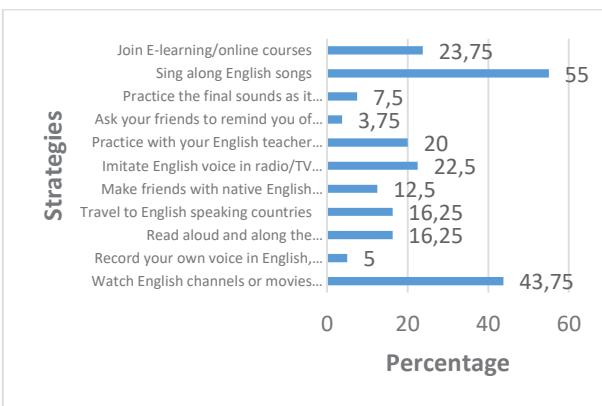


Figure 3. The most effective learning strategies

It could be seen in Figure 3 that the strategies respondents believed to be the most effective to improve their final sound pronunciation consisted of singing along English songs (55%), watching English channels or movies to practice listening to final sounds through authentic materials (43.75%), joining e-learning courses (23.75%) and imitating English accent in TV programs or movies (22.5%). The interview questions 7 and 8 then served to verify the most helpful strategies these learners used to improve their final sound pronunciation. Particularly, two interviewees who were very fluent in speaking English and good at pronouncing final sounds claimed that their fluency came from “practicing listening and singing English songs a lot” and “my sister is an English teacher. She always corrects my final sound pronunciation.” Actually, a majority of participants in Tse’s research [13] also believe that songs are both entertaining and helpful.

Coincidentally, the most common approach they would like to use to evaluate their pronunciation improvement, also their expectation of their teachers, was asking their teachers to correct their final sound pronunciation and include pronouncing final sounds in the marking criteria in oral examinations to force them always think about final sounds.

The findings briefly discussed above generated some suggestions for final sound problems. The first recommendation is that teachers need to give students activities or some necessary instructions of final sounds during class time to help them pronounce final sounds correctly and naturally. In fact, profound knowledge of final

sounds will aid students to overcome the pronunciation obstacles in English learning. Based on the effective strategies evaluated by the participants in this research, another suggestion is that teachers should give students inspiring and adequate instructed activities focusing on final sound pronunciation, including singing along English songs and watching and imitating standard English accents in TV programs and movies. Additionally, thanks to the development of information technology, teachers can fully exploit the benefits of online courses to help their students autonomously enhance their pronunciation capability. Last but not least, improving final sound pronunciation is not merely the responsibility of teachers, students themselves have to practice and adopt appropriate and effective strategies in their English learning.

3. CONCLUSION

The survey aimed at investigating whether non-English majored students at Lac Hong University were aware of the importance of and difficulties in pronouncing English final sounds. More importantly, some learning strategies which the students believed to be efficient were also identified and clarified.

The researchers made use of the questionnaire and structured interviews conducted among 80 second-year students from four different faculties at Lac Hong University to gather research data.

The survey findings disclosed that the participants were well aware of final sounds when speaking English because they believed that final sounds play a pivotal role in English listening and speaking skills. The findings indicated that there were four strategies the students claimed to be the most useful for progressing in their final sound pronunciation.

In the light of the findings, final sound instructions and activities should be constantly stressed in English teaching practice. Furthermore, the strategies that the participants chosen triggered some ideas of devising online activities integrating final sound practice with English songs and movies. Though modest, it is hoped that the survey may contribute to raising the awareness of learners in their pronunciation learning and helping some teachers have a closer look at learners’ beliefs and strategies to teach pronunciation more successfully.

However, this survey exposes some limitations about the small size of participants and the methods employed to conduct the research. Therefore, future researches related to final-sound pronunciation improvement should be conducted in a wider range of contexts and participants; and employ more methods to increase validity and reliability of strategy research such as experiment, ‘randomized controlled trial’ (Andrews [2]) to test the effectiveness of suggested strategies.

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