

MAJOR PROBLEMS IN PRONOUNCING ENGLISH: A CASE STUDY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DALAT

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Abstract: Seeing that pronunciation is one of the most important factors influencing learners' speech intelligibility, this study investigated the sounds performed by English-majoring students at the University of Dalat. In an attempt to figure out main pronouncing errors as well as possible reasons for the students' problems, 210 English freshmen were chosen randomly to participate in the study. The data collected from pronunciation tests and students' recordings were analyzed descriptively with the application of Wavesurfer software version 1.8.8p5, 2013. Based on the finding results, the study highlighted four major pronunciation errors: the omission of final consonants, the mispronunciation of consonant clusters, the substitution of certain sounds, and the mispronunciation of English vowels. These errors were considered to originate from the learners' lack of phonetic knowledge, the incompatibility between the two languages, and a negative transference to balance with Vietnamese learners' speech organs.

Key words: Pronunciation problems, major errors, possible reasons, English-majoring students

1. Introduction

Obviously, English pronunciation plays a vital part in mastering the international language, permitting effective communication with native speakers (Roach, 1991, p. 6). However, it is not always easy for learners to sufficiently pronounce English words as well as avoid common mistakes. With a great number of books written by famous linguists such as O'Connor (1980), Kenworthy (1987), Catford (1988), Gimson (1989), Roach (1991), Gilbert (1993), and Baker (2006), English learners can gain general knowledge about phonetics and phonology, but many students still struggle with pronouncing English intelligibly. To solve this issue, Ruellot (2011) as well as Pearson and Da Silva (2011) discuss effective pedagogical methods and teaching techniques to improve learners' pronunciation. On the other hand, Zhang and Yin (2009), Centerman and Krausz (2011), and Hassan (2014), in their recent articles, have paid more attention to major difficulties in the learning of English pronunciation.

In Vietnam, there have been significant studies on English pronunciation pronounced by Vietnamese students. These pronunciation features involved vowels, consonants, consonant clusters, word stress, sentence stress, rhythm and intonation. Some studies analyze contrastively the differences between English pronunciation and Vietnamese pronunciation while the other ones highlight common errors made by Vietnamese students. For example, Nguyen Trong Anh Tu (1991) makes a clear contrast between English and Vietnamese monophthongs; Huynh Thi Ngoc Hoa and Le Minh Phu (1999) investigate common pronunciation mistakes in stress, linking sounds, strong and weak forms; Bui Thi Thanh Thuy (2004) discusses difficulties in diphthong performances of students in Quang Ngai province. Related to English consonants, Nguyen Thi Thanh Thanh (2006) investigates the students' pronunciation of inflectional endings; Nguyen Thi Tich Hien (2006) studies final consonant sounds in Quang Nam's high school, and Nguyen Thi An (2007) does a study at Tuy Hoa Industrial College about English stops. Particularly, Tran

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Thi Mong Dao (2009) conducts a study at the Pedagogical College of Dalat, analyzing the pronunciation errors of English vowels. Tran Thao Uyen (2017) also carries out another study to find out major problems related to the pronunciation of English consonant clusters performed by students majoring in English at the Pedagogical College of Dalat. Seeing that pronunciation is one of the most important factors influencing learners' speech intelligibility, this study investigated the sounds performed by English-majoring students at the University of Dalat. In other words, the paper is an attempt to figure out major errors as well as possible reasons for the students' problems in pronouncing English. The two research questions, therefore, were:

1. What are the major pronunciation errors made by English-majoring students at Dalat University?
2. What are the possible causes of these pronunciation errors?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Mistakes and errors

According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics by Richards et al. (1993), an error is made by a learner who has incomplete knowledge. A mistake, on a contrary, is made by a learner when writing or speaking and which is caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or some other aspects of performance. According to Brown (2007, p. 257), "a mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a "slip", in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. Mistakes, when attention is called to them, can be self-corrected." However, "an error, a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflects the competence of the learner" (2007, p. 258). The author also notes: "The fact that learners do make errors and these errors can be observed, analyzed, and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner, led to a surge of study of learners' errors, called **error analysis**". Error analysis became distinguished from contrastive analysis by its examination of errors attributable to *all* possible sources, not just those resulting from negative transfer of the native language (2007, p. 259).

2.2. Factors affecting pronunciation

Al-Saidat (2010) clarifies three factors that affect learners' pronunciation: age, mother tongue influence, and personality. "The role of age is found to be more prominent in pronunciation than in other areas" (2010, p. 122). According to Lenneberg, as cited in Al-Saidat (2010, p. 122), there is a period of time when language learning is more successful than any other time in one's life. Consequently, the author strongly believes that children can acquire the target language much easier than adults. Mentioning the impact of mother tongue, the author confirms the powerful influence of L1 on L2 pronunciation. Specifically, students usually find it difficult to imitate the sounds that do not exist in their own language. Finally, an individual's personality somehow affects their development of pronunciation skill. It is claimed that confident and outgoing learners are likely more sufficient in pronunciation than those who are afraid to join conversations with native speakers.

Unlike Al-Saidat, Altamimi (2015, p. 13) points out that English pronunciation is affected by learners' attitude, exposure to the target language, and teaching instruction. In terms of attitude, the author explains that students tend to pronounce English better if they are well aware of the English pronunciation and vice versa. Moreover, the more students expose to English input, the better their pronunciation will be. About instruction, the author believes that English teachers should give a higher priority on English pronunciation during classroom time.

2.3. A contrastive analysis of English and Vietnamese sounds

According to Avery and Ehrlich, as cited in Altamimi (2015), mother tongue directly influences on learners' abilities to pronounce English words. It means that English students have a tendency to mispronounce the sounds which do not exist in their original language. Kenworthy (1987, p. 4) argues that "the more differences there are, the more difficulties the learner will have in pronouncing English". Hassan (2014, p. 32) also states that the differences in the sound systems of the two languages - L1 and L2 - have a profound impact on learners' pronunciation. Zhang and Yin (2009, p. 142) comment:

A particular sound which does not exist in the native language can therefore pose a difficulty for the second language learners to produce or sometimes to try to substitute those sounds with similar ones in their mother tongue. These sounds include both vowels and consonants.

Certainly, Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language and each letter represents only one sound. Even though Vietnamese lexicon may consist of one or more syllables, it is easy to read any word from a written text based on its isolating syllable. English, on the other hand, is polysyllabic with many features of sound combinations, assimilation, rhythm, stress, and intonation. According to Avery and Ehrlich, as cited in Nguyen Thi Thanh Thanh (2006), the sound system of Vietnamese is absolutely different from that of English due to the little resemblance in sounds. More specifically, there are no consonant clusters and final consonants articulated in Vietnamese. Tran Thao Uyen (2017, p. 674) summarizes basic differences in terms of vowels and consonants between the two languages.

Table 1. Differences in the sound systems between English and Vietnamese

	English	Vietnamese
Vowels	12 monophthongs (/ɪ/, /i:/, /ʊ/, /u:/, /ɒ/, /ɔ:/, /ə/, /ɜ:/, /ʌ/, /e/, /æ/, /ɑ:/, /ɔ:/, /ɜ:/, /ʌ/, /e/, /æ/, /ɑ:/) 8 diphthongs (/eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /aʊ/, /əʊ/, /Iə/, /eə/, /ʊə/) 5 triphthongs (/eɪə/, /aɪə/, /ɔɪə/, /aʊə/, /əʊə/)	13 monophthongs (/i/, /e/, /ɛ/, /ɤ/, /a/, /ɐ/, /u/, /o/, /ɔ/, /ɤ̃/, /ä/, /ɔ̃/, /ɛ̃/) 3 diphthongs (ie, ɯə, uo)
Consonants	24 consonants (/p/, /b/, /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /t/, /d/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /k/, /g/, /h/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /r/, /w/, /j/)	22 consonants (b, c/k/q, d/gi, đ, g/gh, h, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, x, ph, th, kh, tr, ch, nh, ng/ngh)

3. Methods

3.1. Population, participants and sample size

As counted by the department of training management, there are 325 freshmen majoring in English at Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dalat University, in the academic year 2019-2020, 97 of whom are male, accounting for 29.8%. These students come from different cities and provinces throughout Vietnam.

In accordance with the study's objectives, the sampling of the study was chosen randomly in order for each sample to be relatively fair. Due to the time constraint, 210 English-major freshmen were asked to participate in the study. All of the participants, who were between the ages of eighteen and nineteen, already completed 30 periods of the course named English Pronunciation Practice. With a sample size of 210 students and 95% at confidence level, the confidence interval was 4.03. (The figures were calculated based on the guide in the website of <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm#one>).

3.2. Data collection instrument

The research data were collected through a pronunciation speaking test with 140 English words containing different vowels and consonants in English. This test was considered appropriate because it covered most of the sounds that the students have learned in their pronunciation course. All of 210 participants took turns to read through 140 prepared words and their performances were recorded for later analysis. In order to figure out significant pronunciation errors of the participants, the software “Wavesurfer” (version 1.8.8p5, 2013) was used to visualize the sounds made by each participant in comparison with the sounds pronounced by an American native speaker who has been teaching English pronunciation for 11 years in Dalat city.

4. Findings

The English sounds pronounced by the participants were extracted from their recordings of the pronunciation speaking test. The software “Wavesurfer” (version 1.8.8p5, 2013) significantly contributed to provide visual data for this study. After 210 participants had had their English pronunciation recorded, the sounds were visualized and compared with the standard sounds pronounced by Paul Olivier (Ph.D.), an American teacher who has been teaching English pronunciation for 11 years in Dalat city. Based on the differences in the visualized sounds, English-major students' errors of pronouncing English could be recognized and analyzed in details. Here is an example with the word “was”.

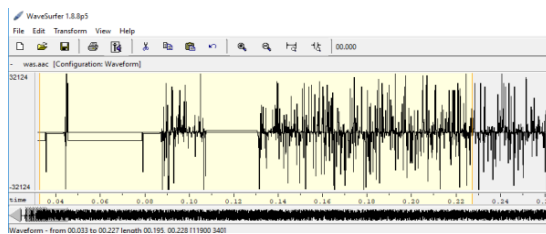


Figure 1. Native speaker's pronunciation of “was”

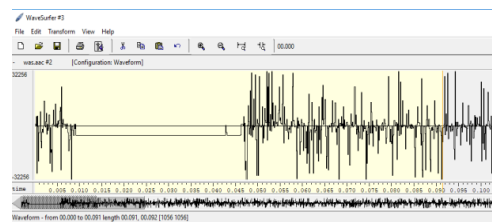


Figure 2. Students' pronunciation of “was” (no final consonant)

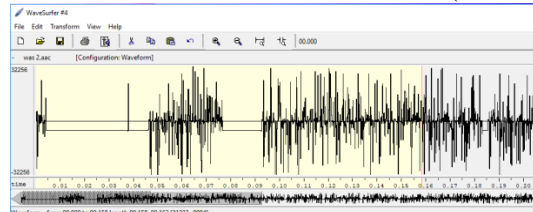


Figure 3. Students' pronunciation of “was” (/ɒ/ instead of /ə/)

(Output extracted from Wavesurfer 1.8.8p5)

After having visualized all tested sounds, the participants' pronunciation errors were finally synchronized into four different categories as follow:

4.1. The omission of final consonants

Among 210 participants, 179 freshmen making up 85.2% of the total participants had to encounter the challenges of final consonant which never existed in Vietnamese. /f/ as in “deaf”, /s/ as in “happiness” and /dʒ/ as in “age” are typical examples of this error type.

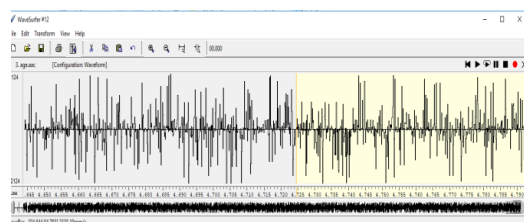


Figure 4. Native speaker's pronunciation of /dʒ/ as in “age”

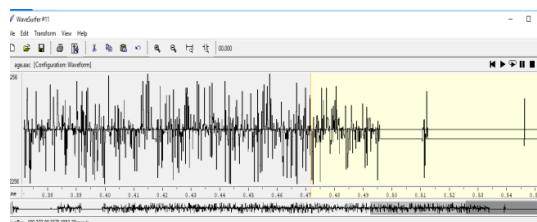


Figure 5. Students' pronunciation of /dʒ/ as in “age” (no final consonant /dʒ/)

(Output extracted from Wavesurfer 1.8.8p5)

Noticeably, the word “moved” seemed to be easy but it was not pronounced correctly in the test because many participants omitted the final sound /d/ as illustrated in Figure 7.

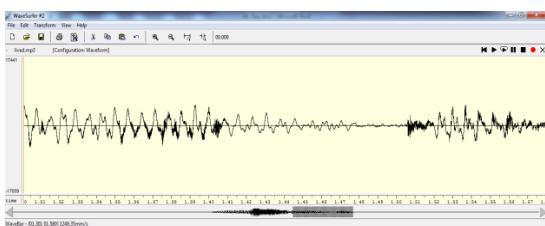


Figure 6. Native speaker's pronunciation of /d/ as in “moved”

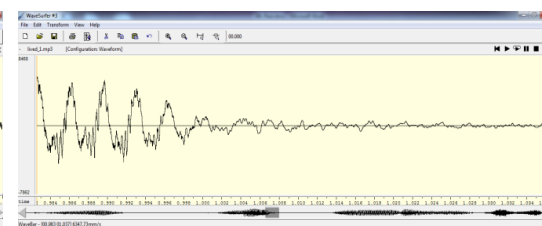


Figure 7. Students' pronunciation of /d/ as in “moved” (no final consonant /d/)

(Output extracted from Wavesurfer 1.8.8p5)

4.2. The mispronunciation of consonant clusters

In this study, 31 out of 210 freshmen (14.8% of the total participants) eliminated the first sound /g/ in the initial consonant cluster /gr/ of “great” and the same number of students wrongly made the cluster /pl/ for “player”. A great number of English-majoring students dropped the final sound of consonant clusters, e.g. there were 158 cases of omission of /t/ in “first”, “last” and “kept”; 179 students completely omitted /ts/ of the cluster /nts/ in “instruments”.

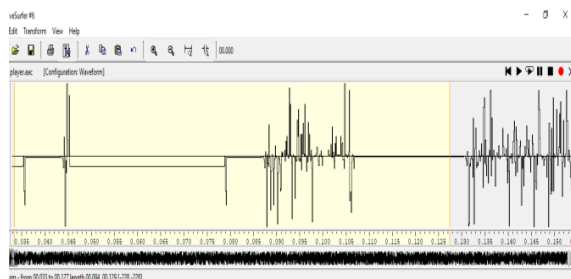


Figure 8. Native speaker's pronunciation of /pl/ as in “player”

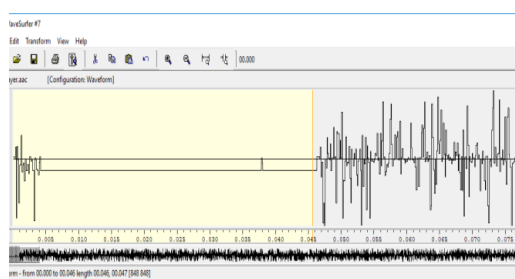


Figure 9. Students' pronunciation of /pl/ as in “player” (/f/ instead of /pl/)

(Output extracted from Wavesurfer 1.8.8p5)

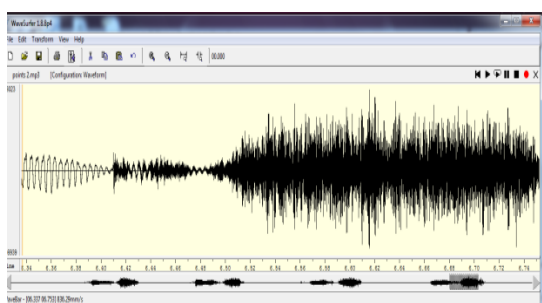


Figure 10. Native speaker's pronunciation of /ts/ as in “instruments”

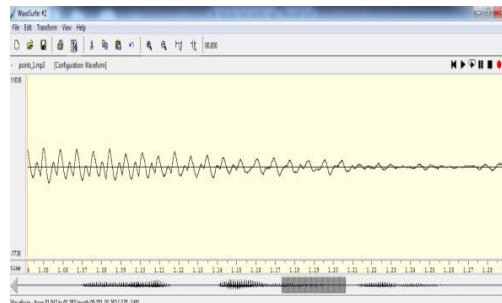


Figure 11. Students' pronunciation of /ts/ as in “instruments” (no consonant cluster /ts/)

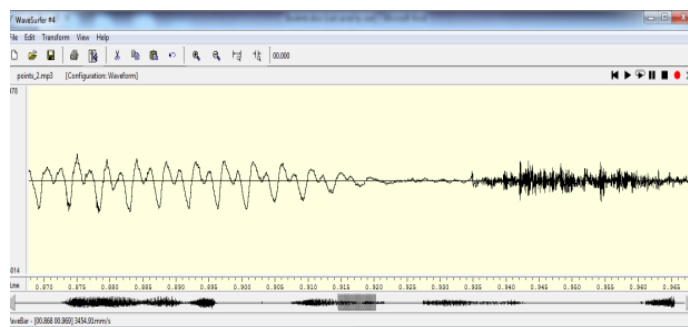


Figure 12. Students' pronunciation of /ts/ as in “instruments” (no final consonant /s/)

(Output extracted from Wavesurfer 1.8.8p5)

4.3. The substitution of certain sounds

Again, the word “moved” was pronounced incorrectly because there were 43 out of 210 participants substituting the consonant cluster /fd/ for /vd/ as illustrated in Figure 13.

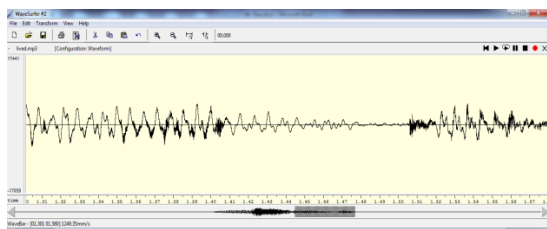


Figure 6. Native speaker's pronunciation of /d/ as in "moved"

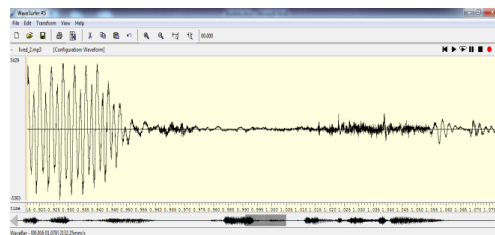


Figure 13. Students' pronunciation of /d/ as in "moved" (/f/ instead of /vd/)

(Output extracted from Wavesurfer 1.8.8p5)

The sound /dʒ/ as in "Germany", for instance, was changed into /g/ and /tʃ/ by 83 and 191 participants respectively. Similarly, 58 out of 210 participants replaced the sounds /ð/ as in "other", becoming /d/ instead; 135 out of 210 participants substituted /tw/ for /tʃ/ when pronouncing the word "twelve". Besides, the palatal /j/ as in "shall" was replaced with the alveolar /s/ by 144 participants.

4.5. The mispronunciation of English vowels

In terms of vowel pronunciation, the vowel /u:/ as in "soon" was mispronounced as /sʊn/ by 46 out of 210 participants. The word "opera" was also mispronounced as /ɔ:perɑ:/ instead of /'ɒprə/. The two figures below showed a difference between native pronunciation and Vietnamese pronunciation for the word "opera".

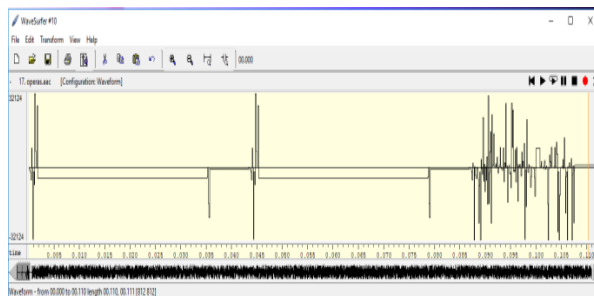


Figure 14. Native speaker's pronunciation of "opera"

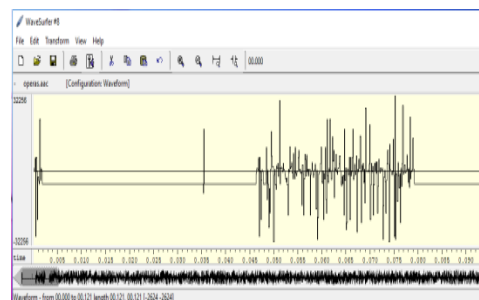


Figure 15. Students' pronunciation of "opera" (wrong vowels)

(Output extracted from Wavesurfer 1.8.8p5)

5. Discussion and implications

With the descriptive analysis in this qualitative study, it could then come up to the conclusion about possible reasons for learners' pronunciation errors. Firstly, the above errors originated from learners' lack of phonetic knowledge. Because all of the participants were freshmen who hardly studied English Phonetics and Phonology at high schools, they had no idea of the speech organs with articulators, air stream, vocal vibration, and aspiration. As Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2007) state in their book, English vowels are classified according to four criteria: tongue position, tongue height, lip rounding, and tenseness (pp. 236-240). However, freshmen were unfamiliar with these linguistic terms. Subsequently, there were vowels that seemed undoubtedly tough for them to pronounce, leading to cases of vowel mispronunciation in this study.

Secondly, unavoidable errors happened due to the incompatibleness between the two languages. Because some of the English sounds such as /θ/, /ð/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/ have no exact equivalents in Vietnamese, they were really difficult for the participants to make the correct sounds. Hence, many participants tended to replace the difficult sounds with what they were much more accustomed to. Moreover, in Vietnamese, there rarely exist two or three consonants combining together to create a cluster, resulting in a fact that the English-major freshmen at Dalat University hardly used to pronounce complex consonant clusters. Finally, the errors were caused by a negative transference to balance with Vietnamese learners' speech organs. As commented by Ehrlich and Avery (1992), the mispronunciations of words by non-native speakers reflect the influence of the sounds, rules, stress, and intonation of their native language. Although Vietnamese and English share similarities in sound segments and spelling, the way native speakers pronounce English sounds is completely different from the Vietnamese way. Consequently, language learners usually had problems with the movements of their tongue towards the articulators due to the deeply rooted way of pronouncing Vietnamese words. Therefore, a great number of participants would prefer to ignore some difficult sounds rather than try to pronounce them in a correct manner.

No matter how generalized the study tried to be, there were some certain limitations. First, the study samples should have been more various in terms of ages and language levels as the study participants were only freshmen. Second, when the participants got their pronunciation tests recorded, they just approached the pronunciation course for only 30 periods, which was considered rather limited. Third, the pronunciation tests were still at word level and the words were out of real contexts of applying the language into oral communication. Finally, it was not enough satisfactory to pose the errors of pronunciation without suggesting any solutions to improve students' pronunciation of English. Thus, it is necessary to conduct another study in this area for the purpose of recommending useful programs and strategies for English-majoring students at Dalat University to enhance their English pronunciation.

6. Conclusion

English pronunciation is clearly a challenge for students majoring in English at the University of Dalat. On average, over two thirds of the participants taking part in the study were not successful in correctly pronouncing words containing English vowels and consonants. Four remarkable errors were the omission of final consonants, the mispronunciation of consonant clusters, the substitution of certain sounds, and the mispronunciation of English vowels. Significantly, the errors were considered to originate from the learners' lack of phonetic knowledge, the incompatibleness between the two languages and a negative transference to balance with Vietnamese learners' speech organs. Although the research topic is not new-fangled, this study could systematically and clearly point out important errors in the pronunciation of English-majoring students. Therefore, this research paper could give reliable foundation for the following studies focusing on effective methods to improve students' pronunciation.

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NHỮNG VẤN ĐỀ NGHIÊM TRỌNG TRONG PHÁT ÂM TIẾNG ANH: NGHIÊN CỨU THỰC TẾ TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐÀ LẠT

Tóm tắt: Nhận thức được rằng ngữ âm chính là một trong những yếu tố quan trọng ảnh hưởng đến khả năng giao tiếp của người học, nghiên cứu này tập trung phân tích các lỗi phát âm của sinh viên Ngôn ngữ Anh và tìm ra các lý do có thể khiến sinh viên phát âm sai. Khách thể nghiên cứu là 210 sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh năm thứ nhất tại Trường Đại học Đà Lạt. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ các bài kiểm tra ngữ âm và bản ghi âm giọng đọc của sinh viên được phân tích và mô tả với phần mềm Wavesurfer. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy bốn lỗi phát âm cơ bản của sinh viên là không phát âm các phụ âm cuối, phát âm sai các cụm phụ âm, thay thế một số âm bằng những âm không chính xác và phát âm sai các nguyên âm. Những lỗi sai kể trên một phần là do người học thiếu kiến thức về ngữ âm tiếng Anh, một phần là do sự không tương thích về hệ thống âm thanh giữa hai ngôn ngữ và một phần là do ảnh hưởng của phương thức cấu tạo từ trong tiếng Việt đã tác động đến cách phát âm tiếng Anh.

Từ khóa: Vấn đề về ngữ âm, sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh, lỗi phát âm sai