

Nghiên cứu cải thiện khả năng phát âm của sinh viên chuyên ngũ năm nhất tại trường Đại học Quy Nhơn trong khóa Luyện âm

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TÓM TẮT

Phát âm là yếu tố đóng vai trò then chốt trong kỹ năng nói. Tuy nhiên các lớp học tiếng Anh chính quy ở trường phổ thông tại Việt Nam vẫn chưa dành sự chú ý đúng mức cho phương diện này cho đến khi các em học chuyên sâu hơn trong khóa học Luyện âm ở đại học cho sinh viên chuyên ngũ năm thứ nhất. Nghiên cứu này nhằm điều tra hiệu quả của việc áp dụng của hai phương pháp hỗ trợ *Shadowing* (*phương pháp nghe và lặp lại*) và *Feedback* (*phương pháp phản hồi*) ngoài chương trình chính khóa của sinh viên nhằm cải thiện khả năng phát âm của sinh viên chuyên ngũ, đặc biệt là sinh viên ngành sư phạm. Thực nghiệm kéo dài trong một học kì, tiến hành trên 67 sinh viên năm thứ nhất, khoa Ngoại ngữ, trường Đại học Quy Nhơn. Những người tham gia được chia thành 2 nhóm, nhóm thực nghiệm ($n=43$) và nhóm đối chứng ($n=24$). Dữ liệu được thu thập qua các bài kiểm tra trước và sau thực nghiệm, sau đó được phân tích thống kê. Kết quả cho thấy các sinh viên trong nhóm thực nghiệm đã có nhiều tiến bộ sau khóa học, đặc biệt trong việc thể hiện trọng âm của câu, điều này cho thấy tính hiệu quả của các phương pháp thực nghiệm. Kết quả phân tích cũng cho thấy sự tiến bộ khiêm tốn của nhóm thực nghiệm so với nhóm đối chứng trong việc khắc phục lỗi phát âm âm cuối (“ed”, “s/es”) và nối âm đã chỉ ra một thực tế là tinh thần tự học của sinh viên còn thấp.

Keywords: Phát âm, *Shadowing* (*phương pháp nghe và lặp lại*), *Feedback* (*phương pháp phản hồi*).

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A study on improving the pronunciation of first-year English majors during a speech training course at Quy Nhon University

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ABSTRACT

As far as the speaking skill is concerned, pronunciation is a key area. However, in Vietnamese formal EFL classes, much attention is paid to this aspect until the learners enter higher education, with Speech Training being introduced in the first year. This study aims at investigating the effect of using the techniques of Shadowing and Directing Effective Feedback in company with the formal course of Speech Training to upgrade the pronunciation of English majors at university, especially those who are trained to be teachers of English. An experiment was conducted, spanning one semester. It involved 67 first-year students in the Department of Foreign Languages, Quy Nhon University. The participants formed a treatment group ($n = 43$) and a control group ($n = 24$). The data were collected by means of post-test and pre-test and statistically analyzed. The results indicate an improvement in the learners' performance, especially in sentence stress, suggesting the effectiveness of the measures undertaken. The data obtained also revealed that the employment of the techniques for the treatment group did not result in vast difference from the control group as expected in bettering the students' articulation of final sounds and aspects of connected speech, which suggests the students' low level of autonomy.

Key words: *Pronunciation, Shadowing, Feedback.*

1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, English has been the foreign language that interests Vietnamese people of all ages. People learn English for business, for fun, for travelling, for international relationships, for reading foreign books, for scientific research, for overseas survival and so on. Courses of English are available nationwide, formally and informally. In universities and colleges, English departments often attract the most students who are trained in formal courses of standard English, which is especially essential for classes of teachers-to-be. Standard English is easily found through spoken English, where pronunciation including sounds, connected speech and

intonation, plays the key role. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the speaking skill in terms of fluency and naturalness and pronunciation in particular of English majors at Quy Nhon University has still been far from satisfaction.

At Quy Nhon University, as regards the Department of Foreign Languages, although the students, like elsewhere, started to learn English at the 6th form when they entered the junior high school, some even started at primary school, they have not had a formal course of pronunciation until they become students of the English department. The Speech Training course lasts 30 periods (or 2 credits); students take an oral examination on pronunciation at the end of

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the course. Like other Vietnamese ESL students, English majors at Quy Nhon University share many of the same pronunciation errors that ESL students from elsewhere do, as reported in some previous studies (Nguyen Thi Thu Thao, 2007; Nguyen Thi Hang; 2014; Ha Cam Tam, 2005). The most common mistake relates to ending sounds. This is probably because Vietnamese has no inflectional endings like -ed and -s/es and the ending consonants in Vietnamese are not pronounced, so Vietnamese learners easily make mistakes in pronouncing English final consonants. They may be confused about /t/ and /d/ for the past form -ed or /s/ and /z/ for the inflectional ending -s. They even sometimes do not enunciate those ending sounds at all.

This article reports a study aimed at improving the students' spoken English through promoting their autonomy. The study was aimed to explore how effective some extra measures are in improving students' pronunciation in the Speech Training course at Quy Nhon University. The research questions are:

1. To what extent can the application of Shadowing and Directing Effective Feedback help improve the English majors' pronunciation?

2. What implications can be drawn from the experiment?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. The Speech Shadowing Technique

The *Speech Shadowing* Technique (also *Shadowing*) is a language learning method developed by Alexander Arguelles, an American Professor, who defines Shadowing as “*an advanced learning technique where you listen to a text in your target language, and then speak it aloud at the same time as the native speaker*” (Argüelles, 2009a). Tamai (2002, p. 181) sees Shadowing as “*an act or task of listening in which the learner tracks the heard speech and repeats it as exactly as possible while listening attentively to the incoming information*”. Generally, Shadowing is learning by imitating an auditory source as model.

In his “*Shadowing Discussed*”, Arguelles (2009b) states that this technique is very effective

to learn new languages because: it helps in better pronunciation; it improves vocabulary; it gains fluency of the language; and it creates an impression of the sentence structures in mind.

Murphey (2004, p. 21) suggests three kinds of Shadowing:

- *Complete Shadowing*: Using this Shadowing, learners are to imitate every single word spoken by the model.
- *Selective Shadowing*: Here, there is a selection of what the model says to shadow. Usually, only key inputs are chosen to imitate.
- *Interactive Shadowing*: With this type, practitioners are allowed to add their own comments into the original conversation to make it more natural.

2.2. Directing Feedback Technique

Hattie (1999, p. 9) describes Feedback as “*the most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement*”. Similarly, Gibbs & Simpson (2004, p. 2) state that Effective Feedback is “*more strongly and consistently related to achievement than any other teaching behavior [...] this relationship is consistent regardless of grade, socioeconomic status, race, or school setting. Feedback can improve a student's confidence, self-awareness and enthusiasm for learning*” and finally, they add that “*feedback is something that every student can benefit from, whether it is offered digitally, verbally, or through the traditional written annotations on an assignment*”.

According to Winstone and Boud (2019, p.9), to be effective, feedback should be educative, be timely, consider the individual needs of the student, and be aimed at a specific skill or knowledge.

2.3. Phonetics and Phonology: Relevant aspects

The presentation of the following basic issues in English phonetics and phonology is heavily based on the widely-circulated coursebook ‘*English Phonetics and Phonology*’ by Peter Roach (2004).

2.3.1. Stress

Stress, as defined in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2018), is “*an extra force used when pronouncing a particular word or syllable*”. The stress placed on syllables within words is called word stress or lexical stress, as in *'holiday, a'lone, admi'ration, confi'dential*. There is no rule about which syllable is stressed in a word with more than one syllable. Learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) will need to learn the stress of words by heart.

The stress placed on words within sentences is called *Sentence stress* or *prosodic stress*. In spoken language, grammatical words (auxiliary verbs, prepositions, pronouns, articles,...) usually do not receive any stress. Lexical words, however, (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs,...) must have at least one stressed syllable. For example, *The 'children are 'waiting for their 'teacher*.

2.3.2. Final consonants

Roach (2004, p. 35) states that “*Consonant is a basic speech sound in which the breath is at least partly obstructed and which can be combined with a vowel to form a syllable*”. Consonants may occur at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a word. Final consonants include -ed-ending and -s/es-endings, which are usually referred to as ‘inflectional endings’.

2.3.3. Consonant clusters

Structurally, an English syllable consists of an onset, a center, and a coda, with the onset and the coda being optional. Whereas the center is always realized by a pure vowel or a diphthong, the onset and the coda is realized by one or more consonants, referred to as *consonant clusters*. For example, *spy, stay, sky, sphere, small, snow, sleep, swear, suit; 'split', 'stream', 'square'; bump, bent, bank, belt, ask; bets, beds, backed, bagged, eighth* etc.

2.3.4. Connected Speech

Connected speech is spoken language used in a continuous sequence, commonly used in casual, informal conversations.

There is often a significant difference between the way words are pronounced in isolation and the way they are pronounced in the context of connected speech. Roach (12:35) introduces four aspects of connected speech: *Elision, Assimilation, Linking, and Intrusion*.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

In order to address the aim and objectives, an *experimental* design was used to measure the extent of effectiveness of the chosen techniques. This is also a mixed-methods study, in which the data were collected both qualitatively and quantitatively.

After considering various ways to upgrade the students' English pronunciation, we decided to employ the Speech Shadowing technique in combination with the Directing Effective Feedback technique as the measures to enhance students' pronunciation.

3.2. Participants

The experiment was carried out on two pedagogical classes of 67 first-year English majors (Course 41th) at Quy Nhon University. Forty-three students in the treatment group (Class A) had an extra pronunciation exercise to record and got the teacher's feedback on their performances weekly while 24 students in the control group (Class B) did not. A Welch's t-test (Welch's Test for Unequal Variances) revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of the three pronunciation skills investigated prior to the experiment ($p > 0.05$).

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Pre/ Post-Test

In order to assess the participants' pronunciation, a pre-test was given to the two groups right before the Speech Training course started, in which the students were required to read aloud a printed short dialogue after a preparation of 10 minutes.

For the sake of the test's reliability, the same dialogue was subsequently used as the post-test in the last week of the course. All of the participants' performances during the Pre/Post-test were recorded with a mobile phone for later analysis.

Both the pre-test and post-test were accessed by the instructor of the course, according to the same rubrics.

Although all the phonetic and phonological features in the dialogue produced by the English-majors of the groups are examined, only the following aspects were taken into consideration in the survey: the pronunciation of *Ending Consonants, Connected Speech; Sentence Stress*.

The participants' performances were all recorded with mobile phones. The audio files were then labeled as A_n.Pre or B_n.Pre (for those of the pre-test) and A_n.Post or B_n.Post (for those of the post-test). These were analyzed afterwards in terms of the sentence stress, connected speech and the pronunciation of final consonants. A represents *experimental group*; B represents *control group*, and n indicates the ordinal number of the participants.

3.3.2. Materials

During the course of ten weeks, ten short texts or dialogues were chosen as the extra weekly pronunciation task for the students in the treatment group to shadow. The five first texts ranges from 50-88 and the last five are of 97-139 words, all of which were taken from the course books of *Speech Training* and *Language Skills 1.1-1.2* (Handcock, 2003; Falla & Davies, 2012a; Falla & Davies, 2012b) since they are appropriate to the participants' level in terms of vocabulary and the audio files are all high quality recordings by native English speakers with enough clarity and medium speed.

3.4. The Experiment

During the course of the experiment, a mixed utilization of informal, formative and constructive feedback is mainly used in chats on

Facebook messengers to grasp areas of weakness or strengths, and to encourage a focus on future improvement. Formative feedback helps students to improve and prevent them from making the same mistakes again. The experiment spanned through one semester.

3.5. Data analysis

Although all features of phonetics and phonology in the texts that the treatment group performed were examined and fed back, only mistakes relating to Sentence Stress, Final Consonants, and Connected Speech that both groups revealed in the two tests by both groups were analyzed and reported. In case of Connected Speech, the items in the sub-group Natural, are in fact, not exactly mistakes, but refer to the fact that the students could connect words naturally as native speakers.

Next, the data were processed with the software IBM SPSS Statistics 20, of which the Welch's t-test determined whether the two groups were statistically different after the treatment, while The Wilcoxon Sign Rank test showed whether there was any significant difference in the mean scores within the group under the experiment itself.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results of the Treatment and Control Groups in the Post-test

The study is aimed to explore whether the two techniques applied affect the performance of the treatment group in terms of Sentence Stress, Connected Speech and Final-word Consonants as compared with that of the control group. To this end, the Welch's t-test was conducted with independent variables being the conditions (treatment versus control) and dependent variables being *Sentence Stress, Wrong Connected Speech, Unnatural Connected Speech, Natural Connected Speech, -ed-Ending, s/es-Ending and Redundant -s-Ending* of the post-test. Table 4.1 below presents students' scores on all measures in the post-test.

Table 1. Results of the Post-test of the Treatment and Control Groups

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<i>Sentence Stress</i>	Between group	15.195	1	15.195	5.467	.022
	Within groups	180.656	65	2.779		
	Total	195.851	65			
<i>Wrong Connected Speech</i>	Between group	.596	1	.596	1.507	.224
	Within groups	25.703	65	.395		
	Total	26.299	65			
<i>Unnatural Connected Speech</i>	Between group	.904	1	.904	.580	.449
	Within groups	101.275	65	1.558		
	Total	102.179	65			
<i>Natural Connected Speech</i>	Between group	11.767	1	11.767	3.341	.072
	Within groups	228.950	65	3.522		
	Total	240.716	65			
<i>ED Ending</i>	Between group	.153	1	.153	.485	.489
	Within groups	20.563	65	.316		
	Total	20.716	65			
<i>S/ES Ending</i>	Between group	11.689	1	11.689	2.936	.091
	Within groups	258.819	65	3.936		
	Total	270.507	65			
<i>Redundant-S Ending</i>	Between group	1.692	1	1.962	.866	.356
	Within groups	126.965	65	3.982		
	Total	128.657	65			

Figures in Table 1 show that after the treatment, there was a statistically significant difference between the treatment group and the control group in the scores of the Sentence

Stress ($p = 0.022 < 0.05$). The mean scores for each group in Table 2 below confirmed that the experimental group made significantly less Sentence Stress mistakes than the control group.

Table 2. Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores of Sentence Stress

		N	Pre-test		Post-test	
			Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>Sentence Stress</i>	Treatment Group	43	3.07	2.685	1.47	1.638
	Control group	24	4.33	3.749	2.46	1.719
	Total	67	3.52	3.140	1.82	1.723

To gain more insights into the mean scores of the treatment and control groups in the Post-test, let us have a look at Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics on the Post-test across Groups

Measures	Conditions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>Sentence Stress Mistakes</i>	Treatment	43	1.47	1.638
	Control	24	2.46	1.719
<i>Wrong Connected Speech Mistakes</i>	Treatment	43	.51	.703
	Control	24	.71	.464
<i>Unnatural Connected Speech Mistakes</i>	Treatment	43	.67	1.017
	Control	24	.92	1.586
<i>Natural Connected Speech cases</i>	Treatment	43	2.79	2.065
	Control	24	1.92	1.472
<i>ED Ending Mistakes</i>	Treatment	43	.56	.548
	Control	24	.46	.588
<i>S/ES Ending Mistakes</i>	Treatment	43	2.84	1.902
	Control	24	3.71	2.156
<i>Redundant-S Ending Mistakes</i>	Treatment	43	1.42	1.159
	Control	24	1.75	1.751

Figures in Table 3 show that the treatment group had a lower mean score than their comparison counterparts on six out of seven measures investigated in this study. They made quite less mistakes in Sentence Stress and -s/es Ending with lower mean scores 1.47 and 2.84 in comparison with 2.46 and 3.71, respectively. They also did better in joining words naturally with a higher mean score (2.79). Their scores on the other two aspects also have relatively low mean scores of 0.51 for Wrong Connected Speech and 0.67 for Redundant-s Ending.

Unlike the treatment group, students in the comparison group had slightly higher performance in the post-tests producing -ed endings with a slightly higher score of 0.56.

The highest mean score (3.71) was registered when the comparison students make more -s/es-ending mistakes in the post-test.

A closer look at those figures revealed that the mistakes students make the most is the final consonant mistakes with *s/es-ending* accounting for the highest mean score of the three subtypes regardless of the conditions they were assigned into.

4.2. Results of the Treatment Group in the Pre-test and Post-test

Table 4 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the treatment group's performance on all measures of the pre-test and post-test.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics on the Pre-test and Post-test of the Treatment Group

	N	Pre-test		Post-test	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>Sentence Stress Mistakes</i>	43	3.07	2.685	1.47	1.638
<i>Wrong Connected Speech Mistakes</i>	43	.23	.427	.51	.703
<i>Unnatural Connected Speech Mistakes</i>	43	.51	.798	.67	1.017
<i>Natural Connected Speech cases</i>	43	.98	1.300	2.79	2.065
<i>ED Ending Mistakes</i>	43	1.07	.669	.56	.548
<i>S/ES Ending Mistakes</i>	43	4.60	1.904	2.84	1.902
<i>Redundant-S Ending Mistakes</i>	43	2.84	2.214	1.42	1.159

The figures above show that performance of treatment students on the post-test was better after treatment. Specifically, they make dramatically less Sentence Stress Mistakes, -ed-ending Mistakes, s/es-ending Mistakes and Redundant -s-ending Mistakes with much lower mean scores.

A quick look at the significant values in Table 4.1 proves that Speech Shadowing Feedback techniques did have a large, positive effect on the students' performance on Sentence Stress ($p=0.022$).

The fact that the employment of the techniques of Shadowing and Directing Effective.

Feedback hand-in-hand with the formal course of Speech Training did not make much difference as expected in bettering the students' articulation may be explained as follows:

- *On the students' side:*

Although they attended the course and did well in class,

- At home they were not well aware of their self-study and the importance of shadowing in learning foreign languages in general and pronunciation in particular, hence did not make

proper efforts to listen to the native speakers and imitate them.

- At home they did not pay much attention to the trainer's feedback, not strictly realizing what they were advised to do or not to do.

- *On the trainer's side:*

Although she performed well in class, resulting in the progress of both classes, she should have followed and checked the experimented students' shadowing the model audio file and self-correcting the mistakes she had pointed out in her feedback.

5. CONCLUSION

From the demand for a better pronunciation of English for Vietnamese learners of English, efforts have been made to search for ways to reach the goal.

The study is aimed at improving the students' spoken English through promoting their autonomy. The study is aimed to (1) to explore how effective two extra measures are in improving students' pronunciation in the Speech Training course at Quy Nhon University; and (2) to offer some suggestions to learning and teaching pronunciation to first-year students.

Of multiple areas in English phonetics and phonology, this investigation focused on only sentence stress, pronunciation of ending consonant sounds, and aspects of connected speech. The techniques of Shadowing and Feedback were resorted to as measures to promote autonomy in addition to the formal classes of the course of Speech Training. The experiment lasted one semester of the first-year students of Course 41, Department of Foreign Languages, Quy Nhon University. The data were collected via pre-test, post-test.

The result shows that both classes made encouraging progress in upgrading their pronunciation after the course and the treatment group performed a little better, proving the effectiveness of the experiment. However, there the employment of the techniques of Shadowing and Directing Effective Feedback for the treatment group did not result in vast difference from the control group as expected in bettering the students' articulation. This unexpected result may be attributed to the students' low level of autonomy after the formal classes, in both carrying out tasks and taking into account the instructor's feedback. Another reason may lie with the instructor herself. She should have followed and checked the students' more closely.

The practical significance of the study is apparent. The results reported do indicate progress in pronunciation on the part of the students. The experiment can also be replicated in other classes in order to improve EFL learners' pronunciation, with the same materials and procedure or with some modification depending on the different contexts.

Although the present study has some practical contributions, it has its limitations. Firstly, after the data of the pre-test and post-test were processed, two among the students making the most impressive progress and two among those with the least progress could have been interviewed to have a deeper insight into their results. Particularly, the interview questions

were expected to clarify how much Shadowing and Feedback techniques work in some specific cases as well as in order to exclude any possible external variables (improvement due to learning speaking, private tutoring, etc.) that may have affected the results of the experiment.

This study certainly does not include all the applications of Shadowing and Feedback in relation to pronunciation. If possible, further research should be done on other features of phonetics and phonology like consonant clusters, intonation or other aspects of connected speech like elision, intrusion, and/or assimilation.

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