Problematic Initial Consonant Clusters Of Vietnamese Non-English Major Students At Ton Duc Thang University

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Abstract

This paper reported the improvement of teaching English Pronunciation. As a teacher of English, the researcher of the present investigation wanted to learn more about aspects that may influence language learners when they learn to speak English. In this respect, the consonant clusters are not very common in the Vietnamese language. As a result, some common difficulties that Vietnamese students encounter when they learn to pronounce English sounds need to be investigated. This may enable the researcher to teach effectively and help them communicate more effectively. To be precise, the problems of pronunciation of English initial consonant clusters performed by first-year non-English major students at Ton Duc Thang University have been investigated. The subjects of the study were students majoring in electrical engineering and business administration at Ton Duc Thang University. These students have studied English for seven years at the high school level. The paper only focused on initial clusters such as: /pr/, /θr/, /fr/, /spr/ in isolated words and sentences. The results showed two common mistakes: 1) omitting one or two consonants in the cluster and 2) changing one consonant to another one. Based on the analysis results, some suggestions were proposed for teaching and practicing methods of the problematic initial consonant clusters pronunciation.

Keywords: problematic initial consonant clusters, Vietnamese, non- English major students

1. Introduction

Learners of English often expect to be able to speak that language like English, American and Australian. However, they encounter many problems to fulfill their desire. One of the common factors that they find difficult is the pronunciation of another sound system. Learners find that their mother tongue influences their pronunciation of English. Indeed, pronunciation plays an important role in communication. In some cases, errors in pronunciation lead to a misunderstanding between the two communicators. Like other languages, Vietnamese and English have some different phonetic features which make it difficult for Vietnamese learners to speak English like native speakers.

After teaching English at Ton Duc Thang University for twelve years, the researcher has found that first-year non-English major students have many problems

with pronunciation. Among those, cluster sounds have been reported the most difficult. The long and complicated clusters in both initial and final positions make students so confused. In this paper, we concentrate on students' pronunciation of clusters in the initial position. Rewrite this to make it consistent with the paper.

2. Research Objectives

The study focuses on three two objectives:

2.1.1 Analyze the difficulties for first-year students at Ton Duc Thang University in pronouncing English initial consonant clusters by comparing Vietnamese to English syllable structure.

2.1.2 Investigate and classify the errors which students made in articulating some concrete English initial clusters and give some suggestions to help the students pronounce the clusters properly and get communicative fluency so far.

3. Background of The Study

3.1 Vietnamese syllable structure:

Syllabic structure in Vietnamese, according to Nguyen (1987), is (C) (V) V (V) (C). It appears to be relatively simple, permitting only simple consonants in onset and coda positions and a single vowel or a diphthong in the nucleus. However, there is one apparent complication the so-called "medial", a [w] that may be between an onset and a nucleus, as exemplified (*)

(*) Example of "medial" [w]
(i) soài   [swai]   'mango'
(ii) loài   [lwai]   'species'

Another presentation of Vietnamese syllable structure according to Ngo (2005) is as below:

| Tone			
Initial consonant	Labialization	Nuclear vowel	Final consonant/ Semi-vowel

(Ngo, 2005:7)

According to Ngo (2005), the Vietnamese syllables consist of two mandatory components: a tone and a nuclear vowel. The syllable may contain two optional components: an initial consonant and a final consonant or semivowel. The initial consonant may or may not be accompanied by secondary labial articulation.
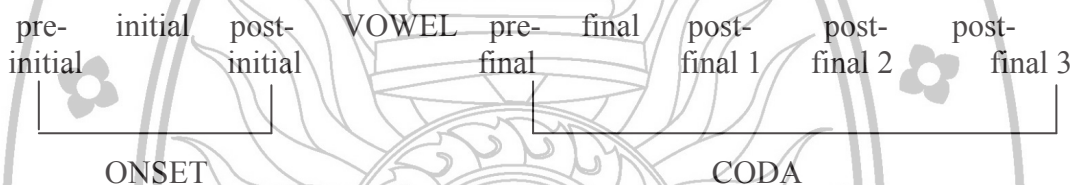
It is concluded that the structure of each syllable is (C) (V) V (V) (C) (Thompson, 1965). However, Vietnamese words are normally in the shape of CV or CVC.

3.2. English syllable structure:

The structure of English syllable is proposed by Roach (2005:73) as followed:

Syllable

rhyme

onset   peak   coda
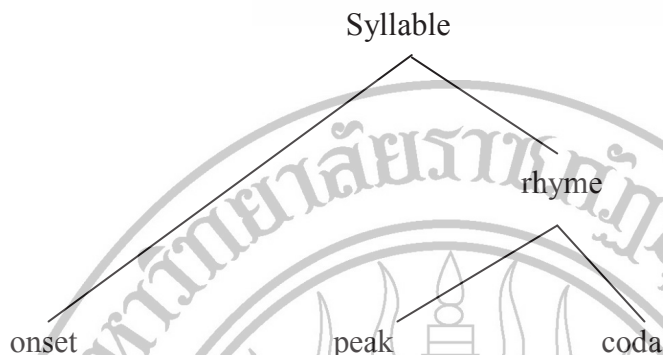
The onset contains consonants in the initial position, and coda includes consonants in the final position. According to Roach (1991), we may describe the English syllable as having the maximum phonological structure:

| pre-initial | initial | post-initial | VOWEL | pre-final | final | post-final 1 | post-final 2 | post-final 3 |

ONSET   CODA

Roach (1991) explains that there must be a vowel in the centre of the syllable and the onset can include three consonants while the coda may have five ones. Hence, the syllabic structure of English can be presented as: (C) (C) (C) V (C) (C) (C) (C) (C). In fact, no English word has five consonants in coda; therefore, it is widely agreed that the syllabic structure of an English word is (C) (C) (C) V (C) (C) (C) (C).

After analyzing Vietnamese and English syllable structures, it is recognized that there is a big difference between Vietnamese and English. The Vietnamese syllable structure may consist of one consonant in the initial position while the English syllable structure may include two or three ones.

3.3. English Initial consonant clusters and how they are difficult for learners:

3.3.1. English initial consonant clusters:

O'Connor (1967) shows all the possible kinds of consonant clusters: With sequences of two consonants initially, there are two main kinds:

1) /s/ followed by one of /p, t, k, f, m, n, l, w, j/. The /s/ in this case is called the pre-initial consonant and the other consonant is initial consonant.

For example: *spy, stay, sky, sphere, small, snow, swear, suit*.

2) One of /p, t, k, b, d, g, f, θ, ʃ, v, m, n, h/ followed by one of /l, r, w, j/. Not all of these sequences are found (e.g. /pw, dl/ do not occur). We call the first consonant the initial consonant and the second the post-initial.

For example: /p/ followed by /l, r, j/ play, pray, pure

/t/ followed by /r, w, j/ try, twice, tune

3)With the sequences of three consonants initially, there are /spr/, /str/, /skr/, /spj/, /stj/, skj/, /spl/, /skw/. When looking at the three-consonant clusters, we can recognise a clear relationship between them and the two sorts of two-consonant clusters

described above. For instance, the cluster /spr/ is the combination of the consonant /s/ and the cluster /pr/.

3.3.2. How are initial consonant clusters difficult for learners:

Students will meet many problems in saying the English clusters in initial position: The first obstacle is that the Vietnamese syllable structure is so different from the English syllable structure (as mentioned in 3.1 and 3.2). Hence, learners employ two general strategies in dealing with consonant clusters which they find difficult to pronounce. One is to insert vowels between the consonants and the other is to delete one of the consonants. For example, with the word "*spray*", instead of pronouncing /sprei/, learners pronounce it as /səprei/ or /prei/.

The second obstacle is that some English initial consonants do not have in Vietnamese, like /θ/, /p/ or /ʃ/. When these sounds are put in clusters, students tend to change them into the other sounds. For example, with the word "*shrift*", students tend to say /srɪft/ rather than /ʃrɪft/.

Two obstacles above seem to be the most serious problems facing students when pronouncing clusters. To check whether students can cover the English clusters in the initial position or not, it is necessary to have an investigation into students' pronunciation.

4. Method

The participants of the main study are 46 freshmen of electrical engineering and business administration at Ton Duc Thang University. All of them have already learned English for seven years at high school. The students are required to record their pronunciation for four initial consonant clusters: /pr/, /θr/, /fr/, /spr/. The researchers also need help from a foreign language teacher at the university by recording her pronunciation for these clusters.

5. Results

5.1. Pronouncing initial clusters in individual words:

The result shows that thirty-eight students pronounce the cluster /pr/ correctly; fifteen students make errors in saying the cluster /spr/; and all of forty-six students make errors in articulating two clusters /θr/ and /fr/.

When pronouncing the four initial consonant clusters in individual words, students make some of the following errors:1) With the cluster /pr/, one student deletes a consonant in the cluster; instead of pronouncing *practise* /præktɪs /, he says /ræktɪs/, leaving off the first consonant. This omission leads to the misunderstanding of the word *practise* to another *ractise*.2) With the cluster /θr/, none of the students have correct articulation. They change the sound /θ/ in /θr/ into /t/; instead of saying *thank* /θæŋk/, they simply say *tank* /tæŋk/. As mentioned in 3.3.2, the sound /θ/ is difficult to pronounce in isolation, and it is more difficult when combining with another consonant. 3) With the cluster /fr/, students do the same mistake as pronouncing /pr/. They tend to omit one consonant /f/ or /r/ in the cluster; for example, saying /rɪdʒ/ or /fɪdʒ/ instead of /frɪdʒ/. 4) With the cluster /spr/, seven students can pronounce it correctly, and three cannot. The three students show a tendency to delete one or two consonants in a consonant cluster: *spring* can be articulated as /srɪŋ/ or /prɪŋ/.

Generally, the ten students do two kinds of mistakes in articulating four initial consonant clusters /pr/, /θr/, /fr/, /spr/: omitting one or two consonants in the cluster, or changing one consonant to another. This situation leads to the mispronunciation of initial clusters in words.

5.2. Pronouncing initial clusters in sentences:

The students make the same errors when articulating clusters in sentences like in the individual words. More seriously, some students cannot pronounce some clusters in sentences even though they can pronounce them correctly in isolated words.

In short, the investigation shows that first-year students at Ton Duc Thang University who are non-major in English make a lot of mistakes in pronouncing English initial consonant clusters. These mistakes are barriers in communication, preventing the students from getting communicative fluency.

6. Solutions

6.1. Suggested activities to help students master English consonant clusters:

Before finding out some ways to help our students improve their pronunciation, we have to consider that they are non-English major freshmen and most of them are not good at articulation; hence, the exercises and activities should not be too complicated. We can apply some exercises and activities suggested by *M. Celce-Murcia et al.* (1996) to teach our students.

Activity 1: Teachers introduce some basic information about English syllable structure and how they are different from the Vietnamese. Examples should be given from easy to complex ones.

V	ear /ɪə /
CV	guy /gaɪ/
CVC	lit /lɪt/
CCVC	great /greɪt/
CCCVC	spring /sprɪŋ/

When getting familiar with consonant clusters, students themselves can analyse a number of English words. However, students may be confused with two sounds /tʃ/ in *teacher* /tiːtʃə/ and /dʒ/ in *geography* /dʒɪɒgrəfi/. Therefore, teachers have to explain that /tʃ/ or /dʒ/ is only one consonant and different from others like *train* containing two consonants in initial position or *spring*, three consonants. Another sound we must pay attention to is /juː/ in *music* /mjuːzik/. Students could analyse this word incorrectly as /muːsik/ with only one consonant initially.

Activity 2: The first practice stage should focus on getting students to articulate individual words with two or three consonants in the initial cluster. Teachers have students begin by building up the initial cluster gradually. For example, with the word *sport,* have them pronounce *port* several times, then putting a long /s/ before *port*. If students substitute a voiced /z/ sound for an initial /s/, teachers have them concentrate on lengthening the /s/ without voicing it, then pronouncing it rapidly. With difficult sounds like /θr/ or /ʃr/, teacher should help students pronounce the consonant /θ/ or /ʃ/ first and then say the whole cluster /θr/ or /ʃr/.

Activity 3: The second practice stage is to let students recognize the words by listening to the tape.

For example: Identify which word you hear:

☐ cheap ☐ jeep	☐ cash ☐ catch	☐ tree ☐ three	☐ mouse ☐ mouth

The effect of this exercise is helping students see the differences in pronouncing between words containing clusters and words not having ones. Then they can imitate by repeating these words several times.

Activity 4: Students can be given opportunities to practice clusters themselves in the short and long dialogues. In some cases, students pronounce clusters correctly in isolated words, but they make mistakes in conversations. In addition, pronouncing the clusters in isolated words may in fact be quite different from in the real speech. Consequently, to have coherent discourse, it takes students a lot of time to practice.

6.2. Some advices for teachers and learners in improving pronunciation skills:

6.2.1. To teachers:

Teachers should take a lot of time in designing interesting and useful activities which appeal students to learn and practice their pronunciation. Teachers encourage students not only to take part in tasks in class, but also to practice frequently at home. Furthermore, teachers can stimulate students by giving high mark in the evaluation of pronunciation in the speaking tests. This assessment is the dynamics and also the tension for students to improve their communicative ability.

6.2.2. To students:

There are some techniques to treat students' errors in articulating English initial clusters: teacher-treatment, self-treatment, and peer-treatment. 1) Teacher-treatment: Students can make many mistakes at the first time, so they need the teacher's help by instructing them pronouncing correctly. 2) Self-treatment: Students follow the teacher's instruction and do the exercise. When getting familiar with clusters, students may treat his/her own errors without the teacher's help. Students can recognize their mistakes themselves and then practice several times. 3) Peer-treatment: If students are not able to self-treat, they may need their friends' help. With peer-treatment method, students may get good result rather than using teacher-treatment method.

Moreover, students themselves should practice English everyday. They can listen to the conversations, English songs on the tape, watch news on BBC program, or take part in English clubs. These activities are good ways to improve their English.

8. Conclusion

In brief, the study showed many problems facing the first-year students when pronouncing initial consonant clusters. After identifying students' problems, we also suggested some activities and gave advices for both teachers and students in teaching

and learning these clusters. We hope that with the great effort, students can improve their pronunciation through their teachers' instruction and their frequent practice.

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