

INTELLIGIBLE PRONUNCIATION: TEACHING ENGLISH TO VIETNAMESE LEARNERS

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Abstract: L1 (first language) phonological transfer in L2 (second/foreign language) learning appears unavoidable; concerns are whether it is positive or negative and which strategies could help to deal with negative transfer. This paper discusses the exploitation of an innovative approach to English pronunciation teaching named the L1 point of reference (L1POR) approach, in which L1 phonological impacts on L2 pronunciation are taken into account in the teaching process. Teaching points and strategies to improve the intelligibility of Vietnamese-accented English are recommended with reference to the L1POR and literature in teaching English as an international language.

Key words: English, Vietnamese, pronunciation, vowel, consonant

1. Introduction

Unintelligible pronunciation containing native-like features of the target language does not make any sense; it is intelligible pronunciation, not native-like pronunciation, which essentially contributes to communicative competence. This is particularly true in the present-day context where non-native speakers of English have outnumbered native counterparts and this number will certainly increase in the coming years. In this context, shared non-standard features (e.g. the use of full vowels in function words and the clear bi-syllabic pronunciation of triphthongs) actually enhance intelligibility among non-native speakers (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006). This actuality is challenging the traditional nativist approach and encourages the intelligibility principle to L2 pronunciation teaching, which maximizes communicative potentials rather than attempts to reach native-like productions of the target language.

L1 negative phonological transfer in the L2 acquisition harms learners' L2 speech, whereas L2 learners tend to modify their L2 productions towards their L1 (Rogerson-Revell, 2011). The problem is worse to Vietnamese learners whose L1 sound system is greatly different from that of the English language. Traditionally, this

impediment is tackled by emphasizing descriptions of L2 sound articulations and imitation of L2 sounds, but Cunningham (2009) suggests that international intelligibility is a more useful target for teaching English pronunciation to Vietnamese L2 learners. For this reason, this paper discusses the utilisation of an alternative approach for pronunciation teaching to Vietnamese learners: the L1 point of reference (L1POR) approach, which 'acknowledges English as an international language (EIL) by making native speaker dialects optional as models' (Carey et al., 2015) and where L2 teachers could use their intelligible, comprehensible English as models for pronunciation instruction.

2. The L1 Point of Reference (L1POR) Approach

The L1POR is a non-nativist, learner-centered approach, which exploits language learners' L1 phonology as a scaffold to teach an L2, appreciates learners' becoming metalinguistic about their pronunciation needs, and involves initially developing an acceptable approximation of the target speech sounds (Carey et al., 2015). Its features include:

- (a) L1 sounds are exploited as the cognitive points of reference for L2 ones.
- (b) Speech production needs to precede perception. (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006)

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(c) Input engages multiple senses whenever possible.

Explicit instruction of phonology has significant impacts on L2 speech intelligibility (Saito, 2011), enables language learners to notice the difference between their own L2 productions and those of proficient speakers (Derwing & Munro, 2005), and develops their phonological awareness (Venkatagiri & Levis, 2007). The L1PDR furthers all these advantages by establishing a linkage between language learners' L1 and an L2, providing them with reliable and long-standing points of reference for their L2 learning, and enabling them to notice and avoid L1 negative transfer to their L2 production. Besides, it supports L2 instructors by enabling them to predict their students' phonological difficulties, reflect on their own English learning experiences as successful L2 learners, and integrate the approach with many other teaching techniques easily (Carey et al., 2015). This allows L2 instructors to notice the phonological aspects that need to be emphasized and provide their L2 learners with effective strategies to modify their L2 productions, and so L2 teachers can see themselves as multicompetent language users in their classroom.

3. Teaching points and strategies

3.1. Focus on length

Figure 1 shows that Vietnamese /i, u, ɔ/ and their BBC English counterparts occupy nearly the same region in the vowel space; however, they slightly differ in roundedness and closeness. Besides, they all have two English equivalents: a long vowel and a short one. Vietnamese L2 learners could use their /i/ for both English /i/ and /i:/; /u/ for /u/ and /u:/; and /ɔ/ for /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/. Rounding and tongue advancement are, in fact, virtually identical in terms of acoustic quality (Lindblom & Sundberg, 1971; Lisker & Rossi 1992); therefore, Vietnamese /i, u, ɔ/ are likely to be positively transferred to English /i, ʊ, ɒ/ respectively. For example, the Vietnamese word *hít* 'breathe' pronounced by certain speakers of the Southern Vietnam dialect may

sound the same as the English one *hit*; *phút* 'minute' sounds the same as 'foot', and *hót* 'sing' and *cót* 'a bamboo mat' sounds like 'hot' and 'cot' respectively. Similarly, Vietnamese /ɛ/ could be positively transferred to English /e/. For instance, the Vietnamese word *men* 'yeast' is pronounced exactly the same as the English one 'men'. Also, Vietnamese /æ/ and its English counterpart /æ/ can be categorised as identical thanks to their adjacency in the vowel space, and the English /æ/ may present no problems to Vietnamese learners of English. Actually, Vietnamese /æ/ only exists in some dialects such as the Binh Dinh accent, a Vietnamese accent in Central Vietnam. English /æ/ may, therefore, be perceived as Vietnamese /æ/ to some dialects but Vietnamese /a/ to the others. Vietnamese L2 learners from other regions can imitate the Binh Dinh /æ/ and produce the Vietnamese word *hang* 'cave' with the Binh Dinh accent, then articulate the word the English word 'hang'. However, it seems that English /æ/ is a bit longer than the Vietnamese dialectal /æ/. In short, Vietnamese /i, u, ɔ, ɛ, æ/ could be positively transferred into English /i, ʊ, ɒ, e, æ/, so no requirements for modifying these vowels might be needed.

In contrast, Vietnamese /i, u, ɔ/ and English /i:, u:, ɔ:/ can be negatively transferred owing to their great difference in quantity because vowel length is not linguistically significant in Vietnamese. Hence, teaching English vowel pairs /i/ and /i:/, /ʊ/ and /u:/, /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/ to Vietnamese L2 learners needs a focus on quantity rather than quality to improve the intelligibility of Vietnamese-accented English. Even an overemphasis on vowel lengthening would be better than shortening since the latter results in a much larger drop in vowel intelligibility than the former (Hillenbrand, Clark & Houde, 2000). Bilingual minimal pairs, whose examples are listed in Table 1, could be helpful for Vietnamese L2 learners to be able to distinguish the difference in length of these vowels in the two languages. Further, the pairs could be inserted into sentences such as 'I *ít mít* (eat jackfruit) every day.' and 'I *eat meat* every day.' so that students could see their difference in the sentence context.

Figure 1

English and Vietnamese Monophthongs
(Adapted from Maddieson & Sandra, 1984 and Rogerson-Revell, 2011)

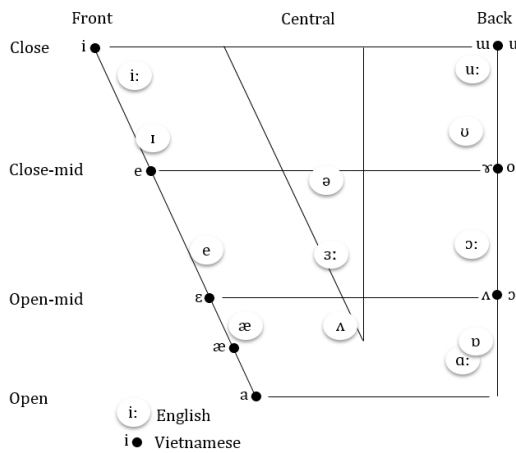


Table 1

Vowels' Bilingual Minimal Pairs

<i>/ɪ/ vs /i:/</i>	
<i>tim</i> (heart)	team
<i>ít</i> (little)	eat
<i>hít</i> (breathe)	heat
<i>mít</i> (jackfruit)	meet or meat
<i>/u/ vs /u:/</i>	
<i>Mun</i> (ebony)	moon
<i>Tu</i> (meditation)	two or too
<i>/ɔ/ vs /ɔ:/</i>	
<i>lo</i> (worried)	law
<i>co</i> (shrink)	core
<i>so</i> (compare)	saw

English /ɑ:/ and its Vietnamese counterpart /a/ differ in *frontness* and length; however, the latter can be exploited to teach the former. English /ɑ:/ can be acquired by asking students to pronounce the Vietnamese words like *ca* ‘a mug’ or *pha* ‘mingle’ with their tongue being pulled back and again with an extra length, which results in the English words ‘car’ and ‘far’.

Vietnamese has three true diphthongs (Dinh & Nguyen, 1998), including /ie/ as in *biển* ‘sea’, /uo/ as in *cuốn* ‘roll’ and /ux/ as in *ướt* ‘wet’, whereas English has six diphthongs (Rogerson-Revell, 2011): /eɪ/ as in ‘hay’, /əʊ/ as in ‘hoe’, /aɪ/ as in ‘high’, /aʊ/ as in ‘how’, /ɔɪ/ as in ‘toy’, and /ɪə/ as in ‘here’. Actually, Vietnamese 2-vowel combinations (Dinh & Nguyen, 1998) which have the *ngang* (level) tone are pronounced similar to the English

diphthongs. Samples of these pairs are provided in Table 2. The dissimilarity between these words is that English diphthongs are pronounced longer than these Vietnamese 2-vowel combinations. English diphthongs could, therefore, be achieved by articulating these Vietnamese 2-vowel combinations containing the *ngang* (level) tone with an extra length.

Table 2

Bilingual Minimal Pairs for Diphthongs

Vietnamese	English
<i>hay</i> (good)	hay
<i>lâu</i> (long)	low
<i>sai</i> (wrong)	sigh
<i>ai</i> (who)	eye
<i>hao</i> (waste)	how
<i>toi</i> (die)	toy
<i>bia</i> (target)	beer

3.2. Focus on centrality

Vietnamese has no central vowels, so familiarising L2 Vietnamese learners with this new tongue movement is vital. English central vowels /ɜ:/, /ə, /ʌ/ can, however, be negatively affected by Vietnamese back vowels /ɜ/ and /ʌ/. Vietnamese /ɜ, /ʌ/ can be exploited to teach Vietnamese L2 learners English central vowels. Articulating Vietnamese /ɜ/ with the tongue tip hung down which results in the centre of the tongue slightly rising would sound like English /ə/. This modification with an extra length would make Vietnamese /ɜ/ sound like English /ɜ:/. For example, the Vietnamese words *hót* ‘cut’ and *phót* ‘ignore’, modified as above, will sound like the English words ‘hurt’ and ‘first’. The English central vowel /ʌ/ can be also acquired in this way with bilingual minimal pairs listed in Table 3. The tongue movement for these central vowels can be visualised by using one hand as the plate with the figures being the teeth, and the other is the tongue.

Table 3

Bilingual Minimal Pairs for /ʌ/

Vietnamese	English
<i>mâm</i> (tray)	mum
<i>gân</i> (sinew)	gun
<i>sân</i> (yard) or <i>săn</i> (hunt)	son

3.3. Focus on aspiration

Table 4 shows that Vietnamese and English share /m, n, ŋ, f, v, s, z, h, l, j/. Besides, the Vietnamese alveolar flap /r/ as in *rắn* ‘snake’ could be positively transferred to the English approximant consonant /r/. For example, the two consonants as in the Vietnamese word *ria* ‘moustache’ and the English word ‘rear’ sound the same. Mispronunciations of the /r/ and /l/, in fact, have little potential for confusion in communication (Schairer, 1992). Hence, no modifications are probably required for these consonants.

Vietnamese and English also share /p, t, k/, but they are unaspirated in Vietnamese. It is, therefore, of significance to teach Vietnamese L2 learners the rules of aspiration of English /p, t, k/ and show them how to aspirate these sounds. The aspiration can be visualised by putting an A4-sized paper in front of the mouth when such a word like ‘people’ is pronounced. After the successful acquisition of English /p, t, k/, their voiced counterparts /b/, /d/, and /g/, can be gained by adding voicedness to the English /p/, /t/, /k/, that is, by attempting to make vocal cords vibrate when producing these consonants, which could be checked by putting fingertips on the Adam’s apple.

Table 4

Vietnamese and BBC English Consonants

		Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	V	p			t			k	
	E	p b			t d			k g	
Nasal	V	m			n			ŋ	
	E	m			n			ŋ	
Fricative	V		f v		s z				h
	E		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
Affricative	V					tʃ dʒ			
	E					tʃ dʒ			
Approximant	V						j		
	E				r		j		
Lateral	V				l				
Approximant	E				l				

Notes: Where symbols appear in pairs, the one on the right represents a voiced consonant.

Adapted from Maddieson and Sandra (1984) and Rogerson-Revell (2011).

3.4. Start with /ʃ/ and /θ/

English /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/, /tʃ/ do not exist in Vietnamese, so they are potentials for communication breakdowns resulting from negative phonological transfer. For the postalveolar consonants, the /ʃ/ should be dealt with prior to any others and can be taught through the Vietnamese fricative /s/. First, teachers should enable students to notice their tongue position when they articulate their /s/ by asking them to say a Vietnamese word containing the /s/ like *sáng* ‘morning’ slowly. Then show them the manner of articulation of the English /ʃ/. Finally insert the /ʃ/ into a Vietnamese word like ‘/ʃ/áng’ to help students recognise the auditory difference between the phonemes. Students, producing the /ʃ/ successfully, could work with the manners of articulation of /tʃ/, /ʒ/, and /dʒ/ with the same

tongue position. It is noteworthy that Vietnamese learners of English could mispronounce their retroflex /r/, as in *trâu*, to the English /ʃ/ (Hwa-Froelich, Hodson & Harold, 2002). This could be prevented by inserting the /tʃ/ into a Vietnamese word like *trâu* as in ‘/tʃ/âu’ so that learners can notice the auditory differences. The movement of the tongue and its position for the English postalveolar consonants can be visualised by using one hand as the plate with the fingers being the teeth, and the other is the tongue.

Several studies found that Vietnamese L2 learners tend to substitute English /θ/ and /ð/ for /s, z, t, d/ owing to their adjacency. My teaching experience, however, witnesses a common practice that Vietnamese learners of English mispronounce the /θ/ to their Vietnamese aspirated dental /tʰ/ and the English /ð/ to their voiced alveolar implosive /d/; many even add

the schwa /ə/ after these consonants, which makes them produced as t^həɪ *thò* ‘worship’ and /dəɪ/ *dò* ‘motionless’. Vietnamese /t^h/ can be exploited to teach English /θ/. Firstly show students the place of articulation for English /θ/. Then, ask them to pronounce the Vietnamese word *thò* /t^hɤɪ/ using that teeth and tongue position. Next, clarify the manner of articulation for the /θ/. Finally, put an A4-sized paper in front of the mouth and pronounce the Vietnamese word /t^hɤɪ/ without the /ɤ/ blowing the paper without any aspiration and noise causing by friction. The /ð/ could be achieved by adding voicedness to the /θ/ and can be checked as done with the previous voiced consonants.

3.5. Focus on consonant endings and clusters

Vietnamese and English share six syllable-final consonants: /p/, /t/, /k/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/ (see

Table 5), but Vietnamese syllable-final consonants are produced unreleased (Hwa-Froelich, Hodson & Edwards, 2002). Hence, ending sounds are problematic to Vietnamese L2 learners, and so they tend to substitute their L1 existing sounds for the L2 ending sounds or completely omit them (Flipsen, 1992). As a result, teaching rules of pronouncing English consonants in a sentence is helpful so that Vietnamese learners know when a final ending sound is needed to be pronounced. Also, it is crucial to teach Vietnamese learners the rules of pronouncing the final consonant and endings, e.g. native English speakers also frequently use strategies of consonant deletion to simplify rapid, natural speech when the central consonant in a three consonant cluster (Rogerson-Revell, 2011) so that learners know that when it is and it is not appropriate to make such deletions. This can also help prevent the overgeneralisation of the rules of pronunciation of ending sounds in English.

Table 5

Vietnamese and English Syllable Structure

	Pre-initial (C)	Initial (C)	Post-initial (C)	Vowel V	Pre-final (C)	Final (C)	Post-final 1 (C)	Post-final 2 (C)
E	/s/	/p/, /t/, /k/	/l/, /r/, /w/, /j/	V	/m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /s/	Any (except /h/, /j/, /r/, /w/)	/s/, /z/, /t/, /d/, /θ/	/s/, /z/, /t/, /d/
V	-	Any (except /p/, Hanoian /j/)	-	V	-	/p/, /t/, /k/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/	-	-

Notes: 1. “-” means “impossible”

2. Adapted from Maddieson and Sandra (1984) and Rogerson-Revell (2011).

Vietnamese does not have any pre- and post-initial and final consonants. Thus, both initial and final consonant clusters, including those formed by the closeness between words, are new categories to Vietnamese L2 learners. They tend to add a schwa between the two consonants (Flipsen, 1992) and omission of final consonants or endings together (Hwa-Froelich, Hodson & Edwards, 2002). Therefore, Vietnamese L2 learners should be informed that both adding vowels and deleting consonants impede intelligibility and sometimes sound ridiculous. For instance, mispronouncing /stri:m/ to /sətri:m/ sounds quite impolite in

their L1. Vowel insertion can be avoided by dividing clusters into smaller units to practise like /s...s...s...stri:m/ for ‘stream’.

3.6. Focus on consonant-to-vowel linking

Language instructors might avoid teaching this feature of connected speech since it might make English pronunciation become more complicated to their students. However, teaching appropriate linking of word-final consonants and vowels is particularly helpful to Vietnamese learners of English since this can be considered as a good strategy for restricting their habits of omitting final endings. Moreover, teaching this feature of connected

speech facilitates comprehensibility (Schairer, 1992).

4. Conclusion

In case L2 pronunciation instruction targets the approximation of L2 sounds, not imitation, then learning L2 pronunciation is L2 learners' effort to modify their personalised L2 speech in the manner in which it is understandable to other L2 speakers. Thus, teaching L2 pronunciation should develop students' capacity to modify their L2 productions. To this end, the LIPOR approach for pronunciation instruction can help L2 instructors do their job well. Nevertheless, empirical data on how effective the LIPOR approach is for pronunciation teaching or how the approach could be modified to be better applied in an actual classroom is recommended.

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PHÁT ÂM DỄ HIỂU: DẠY TIẾNG ANH CHO NGƯỜI HỌC VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt: Sự chuyển di âm vị từ ngôn ngữ thứ nhất (L1) khi học ngôn ngữ thứ hai hoặc ngoại ngữ (L2) là đương nhiên không thể tránh khỏi; mối quan tâm là liệu các âm được chuyển di mang tính tích cực hay tiêu cực và các chiến lược sư phạm nào có thể giúp người học điều chỉnh các âm chuyển di tiêu cực. Bài báo này thảo luận việc khai thác một cách tiếp cận mới trong dạy phát âm tiếng Anh, trong đó các âm ở L1 được dùng làm tham chiếu (L1POR) và các ảnh hưởng âm vị học của L1 đến phát âm L2 được tính đến trong quá trình giảng dạy. Khuyến nghị về các điểm cần lưu ý trong giảng dạy và các chiến lược giảng dạy nhằm cải thiện mức độ hiểu tiếng Anh của người Việt được đề xuất dựa trên L1POR và các tài liệu về dạy tiếng Anh như một ngôn ngữ quốc tế.

Từ khóa: tiếng Anh, tiếng Việt, phát âm, nguyên âm, phụ âm