An Investigation Into English Pronunciation Mistakes By Students At A Secondary School In Thai Nguyen City, Viet Nam

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ABSTRACT

English has emerged as a global lingua franca and is regarded as a vital subject in the educational system of Vietnam at all levels. Mastery of the English language has become increasingly significant for students to secure employment opportunities in their future careers. Despite this, the standard of English pronunciation in many schools in Vietnam, including Phuc Xuan Secondary School, remains a challenge. Poor pronunciation skills can negatively impact listening comprehension, confusing teachers and other students. The present study aims to identify the common mistakes made by students at Phuc Xuan School, analyze the underlying causes, and propose solutions to improve their pronunciation skills. The research methodology involved two primary data collection instruments: questionnaires to investigate the causes of pronunciation errors and recordings of selected words, utterances, and sentences to identify common mistakes in English sounds. The data analysis revealed that students tend to omit or deviate from affricative and fricative sounds in both syllable-middle and final positions. Additionally, their native phonemic habits carry over into English pronunciation, making it difficult to emulate correct pronunciation.

Keywords: *pronunciation, pronunciation mistakes, secondary students, Thainguyen*

I. INTRODUCTION

English has recently become a very popular language throughout the world, including in Vietnam. In many schools, English is considered an important subject and four English skills are required for all English learners of all ages. However, students appear to prioritize reading and writing over speaking. They do not spend enough time in class practicing speaking, which is why they have difficulty in speaking. Furthermore, many students struggle with grammar, lack vocabulary, and are self-conscious when communicating inEnglish. In fact, many other factors influence English speaking, such as grammar, linking, rhythm, context, and so on... and pronunciation is regarded as the most important. Therefore, if students want to speak English correctly and fluently, they need to pay attention to pronunciation.

After two years of teaching English at Phuc Xuan Secondary School, the author has noticed that students are very hesitant to raise their hands to make constructive statements in English class for fear of saying the wrong thing and especially pronouncing it wrong. Being aware of this will greatly affect their listening comprehension. In fact, in the listening tests, the scores are not high because most of the children mispronounce the words, which leads to the inability to hear the words. These set the foundation for the research to conduct a research paper entitled *"An Investigation into the English pronunciation mistakes by Students at a Secondary School in English Pronunciation in Thai NguyenCity"*.In other words, the research contributes to finding out the answers to research questions:

1. What common mistakes do students have in pronouncing Englishsounds?
2. What are the causes of those mistakes?
3. What are the teachers' perceptions of the causes of thosemistakes?

The study's findings provided the author with invaluable experience in identifying students' pronunciation errors and developing effective strategies to enhance their listening and speaking abilities. Moreover, the researcher could deepen their understanding of the phonetic structure, leading to transformative changes in teaching methods and enriching pronunciation lessons. This research represented a significant advancement in addressing a long-standing issue, aiming to enhance English language learning at Phuc Xuan School. Furthermore, it established a solid foundation for students to approach and master pronunciation in a more systematic and accessible manner.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW
Factors Influencing the Learning ofPronunciation
Nativelanguage

The native language plays a vital role in learning to speak English because the sound features of one's original language can influence their foreign accent. It is possible to distinguish between native and non-native speakers, both trained and untrained, based on their native language. Recognizing the significance of the native language, extensive research has been conducted to explore the differences between the sound systems of English and other languages, as well as the challenges and difficulties faced by English learners.

Ability to pronounce and recognizesounds

There is a commonly held belief that certain individuals have a natural aptitude or a "better ear" for learning foreign languages. Research has demonstrated that some people are more skilled at distinguishing between sounds and accurately reproducing them. However, it is important to recognize that every human being possesses the fundamental capacity to acquire the sounds of their native language. This raises an intriguing question: Do different types of learners, such as those who struggle with sound discrimination and those who excel at it, benefit from different instructional approaches?

Motivation and awareness for properpronunciation

Motivation plays an undeniable and crucial role in encouraging individuals to engage in activities, especially when it comes to learning foreign languages. It is a decisive factor in determining one's success in acquiring a foreign language. According to Gardner (1985:10), motivation involves a combination of effort, a desire to achieve learning goals, and positive attitudes toward language acquisition in the learning environment. Gardner's motivation theory emphasizes the connection between motivation and orientation, defining motivation as an internal "engine" or "energy center" that encompasses effort, desire, and enjoyment of the learning process.

Both internal and external factors influence motivation, and it is considered the most complex and challenging issue for teachers, as stated by Scheidecker & Freeman (1999:116). Some students demonstrate a particular concern about their pronunciation, expressing dissatisfaction and frequently requesting corrections or pausing during speaking to seek feedback on pronunciation accuracy. This worry may even manifest as a reluctance to speak. On the other hand, the drive to succeed can be seen as a form of "achievement motivation." Conversely, if a learner lacks interest in a task or fails to see its value, their motivation to perform it properly will be diminished. Learners may also be indifferent if they are unaware that their manner of speaking causes difficulties, annoyance, or confusion for the listeners.

English pronunciationmistakes

Making mistakes in pronunciation is unavoidable while learning any language. According to Pham Cam Chi's research, "pronunciation errors are variants of pronunciation that prevent one communicator from understanding the propositional content of the other's utterances," as defined by Jenkins (2006:36) "pronunciation errors are variants of pronunciation that prevent one communicator from understanding the propositional content of the other's utterances." Dulay, Burt, and Krashen describe mistakes as "the flawed side of learner speech or writing" that "deviates from some set standard of adult language performance" (1982:138). Richards (1971) distinguishes between two types of mistakes: performance errors, which are produced by factors such as exhaustion and inattention, and competence errors, which are caused by a lack of knowledge of the language's norms. According to another study, mistakes show gaps in a student's knowledge; they arise because the learner is unsure of the properanswer.

On the other hand, mistakes show rare failures in performance; they occur when a learner is unable to accomplish what she or he understands (Ellis, 1997).

In her article, Ha Cam Tam (2005) asserts that Vietnamese learners' primary pronunciation issues are sound omission, sound confusion, and sound redundancy. She claims those are the most typical mistakes made by Vietnamese students. The classifications made by Ha Cam Tam (2005) are by far the most suitable in the author's opinion for her research. According to her, nearly all Vietnamese learners of English make the following categories of pronunciation errors:

- Sound omission: when learners omit the middle or lastsounds.

- Sound confusion: Learners do not clearly understand the difference between sounds and mispronounce one sound intoanother.

- Sound redundancy: Learners have a habit of reading too many lastsyllables.

Previousstudies

Extensive research conducted by linguists and researchers worldwide has demonstrated that errors made by English speakers follow systematic patterns rather than occurring randomly. Moosa (1972) and Homedan (1984) found that Arab students who speak English encounter challenges in pronouncing unfamiliar sounds such as /v/, /p/, and /. Consequently, they concluded that the main issue for English speakers lies in sound substitution. In other words, they replace sounds that do not exist in their native language with similar sounds in terms of articulation. For instance, they may substitute /p/ with /b/ or / with /s/, among other examples.

Likewise, various studies conducted by Vietnamese researchers have revealed that Vietnamese learners face multiple difficulties in mastering English pronunciation, including common mispronunciations. According to Dung (2014), Vietnamese speakers encounter significant challenges with voiced versus voiceless stops in word-final positions, such as /b/, /p/, /d/, /g/ versus /p/, /t/, /k/, as well as final fricative consonants like /f/, /v/, //, /s/, /z/. Since fricatives do not occur in word-final positions in their native language, the omission of fricatives at the end of words is a common occurrence when speaking English. Avery and Ehrlich (1992, p. 155) further noted that Vietnamese students tend to omit one or more consonants from complex consonant clusters.

In addition to previous research, Duong Thi Nu (2009, pp. 41-50) conducted a study on pronunciation issues and the impact of the mother tongue. She highlighted that one of the most common pronunciation errors among Vietnamese learners is confusion between consonant sounds. Various sounds such as /s/ and //, /z/ and //, /d/ and / /, /t/ and the Vietnamese //, are frequently interchanged. For example, words like "she" and "sea," "measure" and "pleasure," and "change" are pronounced as /teind/ instead of /tein/. Additionally, Vietnamese learners incorrectly pronounce the English / in "chair" as the Vietnamese / in "che" for the /t/ sound.

Ha Cam Tam's (2005:7) article, titled "Common pronunciation problems of Vietnamese learners of English," also identified significant issues in Vietnamese learners' pronunciation, including sound omission, sound confusion, and sound redundancy. However, many previous studies found in books, linguistic magazines, or on the internet only cover general pronunciation problems without focusing on specific consonants that pose the greatest obstacles to Vietnamese learners' communication and common mistakes in English pronunciation. Therefore, the present research aims to determine the most common errors made by students at Bac Ninh Specialized High School in pronouncing certain English consonants and to enhance their pronunciation skills.

In separate studies conducted by Tuan (2010) and Tuan (2011), titled "Teaching English discrete sounds through minimal pairs" (2010) and "Vietnamese EFL learners' difficulties with English consonants" (2011), they examined pronunciation challenges. The survey data on English consonants revealed that students encountered the most difficulty producing English fricatives /&/ and affricatives /t/ - /d/. Vietnamese sounds were frequently substituted for English sounds by the students.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Research Design
Research Approach

For this study, the researcher employed the survey research method to observe and survey participants in order to identify common pronunciation mistakes among students. This method facilitated the collection of data from participants. Throughout the survey study, the researcher made careful decisions regarding the study's execution. These decisions involved various steps such as determining the research purpose, formulating research questions, identifying the target population, selecting the sample within the population, deciding on the method of data collection, developing tools, training data collectors, collecting data, analyzing the data, and addressing unresponsiveness. The author utilized a quantitative research method by analyzing data from questionnaires and audio recordings.

Participants

Phuc Xuan Secondary School is located in the western cluster of schools in Thai Nguyen City. Due to limited facilities, there is a lack of learning resources and equipment. In recent years, there has been an increase in student interest in English, although most students still receive inadequate attention in this subject. The study included 157 students randomly selected from grades 7 to 9 at Phuc Xuan Middle School. The majority of these students have studied English for a considerable period and follow the Ministry of Education and Training's textbook program. All five teachers who participated in the survey possess teaching experience and are well-trained university graduates with expertise in teaching English.

Research Procedures

The study was conducted during the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022, lasting for three weeks. The researcher carried out the survey, recorded responses, and evaluated the results. The research was conducted within the teaching period at the school, where the researcher noticed that students performed poorly in listening assessments. Many students reported being unable to hear anything during listening tests. Further investigation revealed that students misheard or struggled to comprehend words due to incorrect pronunciation. Similarly, during speaking exercises in class, teachers and classmates faced difficulties understanding the content of conversations due to mispronunciations. Recognizing the benefits of standard pronunciation, such as facilitating comprehension and understanding, the researcher acknowledged the importance of pronunciation in listening and comprehension skills. Accurate pronunciation enables easier comprehension of audiovisual materials such as videos and radio broadcasts. Incorrect pronunciation hinders the recognition of meanings by listeners. Consequently, the researcher decided to conduct this study to improve students' pronunciation, enhance their academic achievements, and foster greater interest in the subject.

Data collectioninstruments
Recording students' pronunciation

To record student pronunciation, a task was designed involving 157 participants. The author developed three pronunciation exercises for the students. The first exercise focused on reading individual words, while the second involved reading short sentences. In the third exercise, students listened to the audio and then wrote a short passage, assessing their ability to accurately perceive and reproduce words and sentences.

Questionnaire

In addition to tape recording, a questionnaire was employed as another data collection instrument. Questionnaires have proven to be productive and time-saving, yielding a wide range of data from various respondents in different contexts. This study utilized a variety of question types, including frequency, list, category, and ranking questions, following the classifications by Youngman (1986, as cited in Nunan, 1992: 144).

The researcher chose survey questionnaires due to their effectiveness in gathering information about the affective dimensions of teaching and learning, such as beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and preferences (Richards and Lockhart, 1994:10). They also enable the collection of a substantial amount of data within a short timeframe.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' common mistakes in English pronunciation
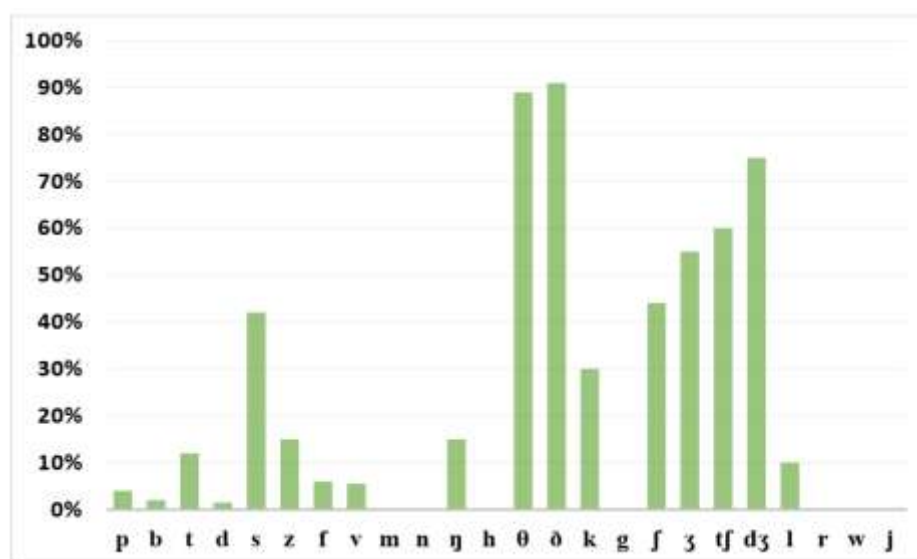**Mispronouncing consonantsounds**

Figure 1. Students' consonant mispronunciation

As can be seen in Figure 1, it is evident that there were some mispronunciations of certain consonant

sounds. The bilabial plosives /p/ and /b/ had an approximate mispronunciation rate of 4% and 2% respectively. The alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/ exhibited mispronunciations at rates of 12% and 1.5%. Additionally, the velar nasal /ŋ/ was mispronounced 15% of the time. Among the labio-dental fricatives, /f/ and /v/ had mispronunciations of only 6% and 5.5% respectively. Notably, the dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/ had a high mispronunciation rate, accounting for 89% and 91% respectively. Furthermore, the post-alveolar affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ were pronounced correctly in 60% and 75% of cases. It is worth mentioning that students tend to struggle the most with the sounds /s/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, and /dʒ/ due to their limited exposure to these sounds.
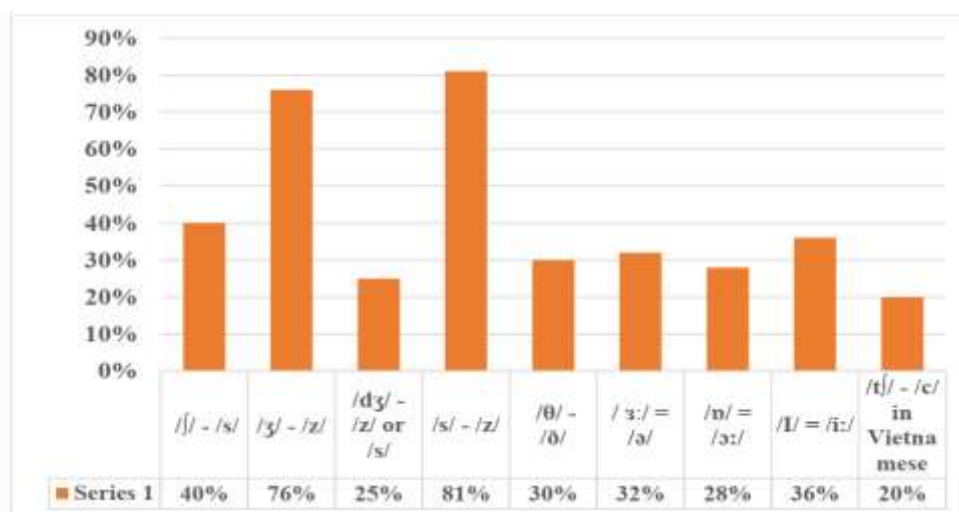
Sound confusion

Figure 2. Students' sound confusion

Based on Figure 2, a significant majority of participants (over 76%) faced difficulty distinguishing the sound /ʒ/ while reading. This challenge arises from the need to generate friction by tightly pressing the teeth together and directing airflow through a narrow channel formed along the center of the tongue. Consequently, confusion arises, often leading them to pronounce it as /z/. It comes as no surprise that a substantial proportion (81%) of participants also experienced confusion between the sounds /s/ and /z/. Specifically, when /z/ appeared in the middle or final syllable, it posed significant confusion. Additionally, there were instances of confusion between sounds such as /ʃ/ and /s/ (40%), /dʒ/ and /z/ (25%), as well as /θ/ and /ð/ (30%).

Omission of consonantcluster

Types of errors		Words	Number of subjects with errors
Consonant Clusters Consist of /ʃ/	In word-initial position: /ʃr/	Shrink	58
	In word-final position: /-ʃn/, /-ʃt/ ,	Mention Washed	140
Consonant Clusters Consist of /ʒ/	In word-final position /-ʒd/	Massaged	144
Consonant Clusters Consist of /tʃ/	In word-final position /-tʃt/	Approached	155
Consonant Clusters Consist of /dʒ/	In word- final position /-dʒd /	Changed	153

Table 1. Students' mistakes when pronouncing consonant clusters

The findings revealed that a majority of students encountered challenges in pronouncing specific sounds, including /-ʃn/, /-ʃt/, /-ʒd/, /-tʃt/, and /-dʒd/. The corresponding data obtained for mispronunciations were 140, 144, 155, and 153 respectively. It is understandable why the final sound is frequently omitted, as it is not a customary practice in Vietnamese pronunciation. Moreover, Vietnamese learners face considerable difficulty in articulating consonant clusters involving /ʒ, dʒ, ʧ/, particularly when these sounds occur at the end of words.

Omission of final sounds

Figure 3. Students' mistakes when pronouncing final sounds
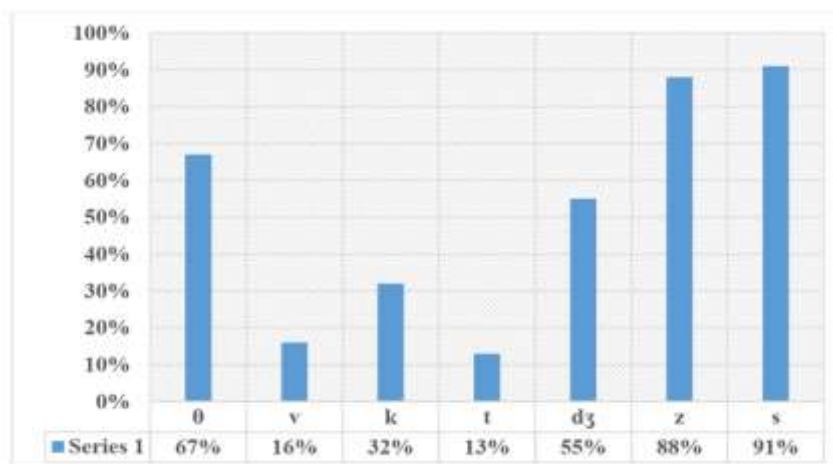
According to Figure 3, it is evident that students frequently include unnecessary ending sounds in their pronunciation. A significant majority of students (91%) omit the /s/ sound at the end of words. Similarly, the English consonant /z/ is disregarded by 88% of students, while 67% tend to neglect the English consonant /θ/ when it appears at the end. Additionally, approximately 55% of students mispronounce the /dʒ/ sound, and around 32% struggle with the /k/ sound in English. The /v/ sound at the end of English words is omitted by 16% of students, and a similar pattern is observed with the /t/ sound, which is disregarded by 13% of students.

Students' attitude towards pronunciation
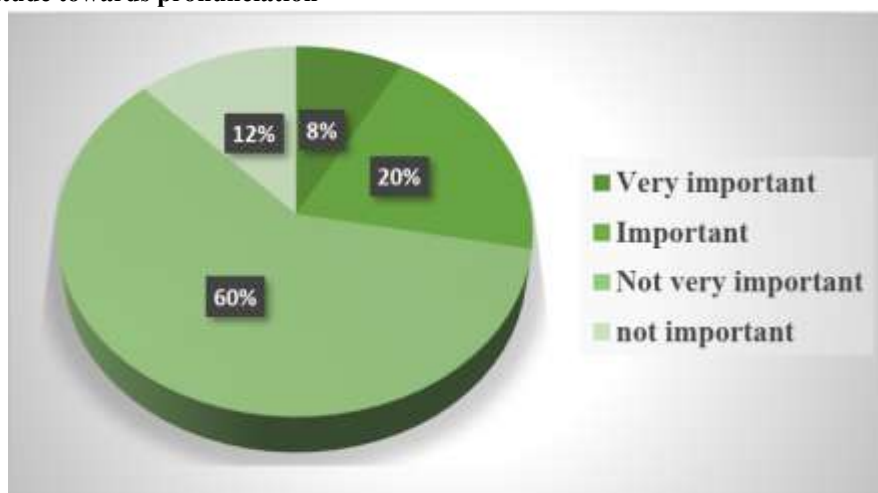
According to Figure 4, it is noteworthy that only a small fraction, comprising 8% of learners, perceive pronunciation as a highly valuable aspect. These individuals are likely diligent students who recognize the correlation between proficient pronunciation, fluent speech, and effective communication. Regrettably, a significant majority of learners, amounting to 60%, remain uncertain about the importance of pronunciation, while 12% hold the belief that it carries minimal significance. Consequently, Chart 6 sheds light on the prevailing attitude among students, indicating a comparatively low level of emphasis placed on English pronunciation. This inclination can be attributed to the predominant emphasis in middle school curricula on teaching grammar and preparing students for assessments, often relegating pronunciation to a secondary role.

Students' perceptions of their frequency of pronunciation mistakes
Figure 5. Students' perception of the frequency of pronunciation mistakes
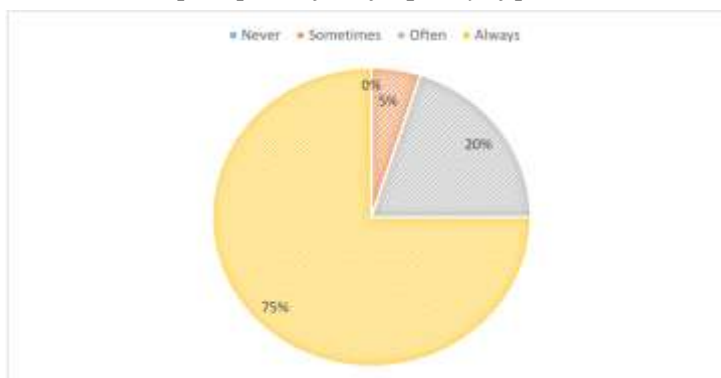
During the survey on English pronunciation mistakes, the students were inquired about the frequency of their errors. A significant majority of students admitted to consistently making pronunciation mistakes. Among them, approximately 20% acknowledged a frequent occurrence of mispronunciations, while a smaller fraction of 5% admitted to occasional mistakes. Notably, no student expressed complete confidence in never having mispronounced.

Students' self-treatment to overcome thosemistakes
Following the investigation into the causes of students' pronunciation mistakes, their attention was directed toward exploring the strategies employed to rectify such errors. Unfortunately, the survey unveiled a striking reality—due to the limited emphasis on pronunciation, only a small number of students have actively attempted to enhance their pronunciation skills. Recognizing this gap, the researcher thoughtfully compiled a list of self-improvement methods for pronunciation. These methods provide students with an opportunity to assess whether they have previously explored and utilized them. The details and outcomes of this evaluation can be observed in Figure 6.
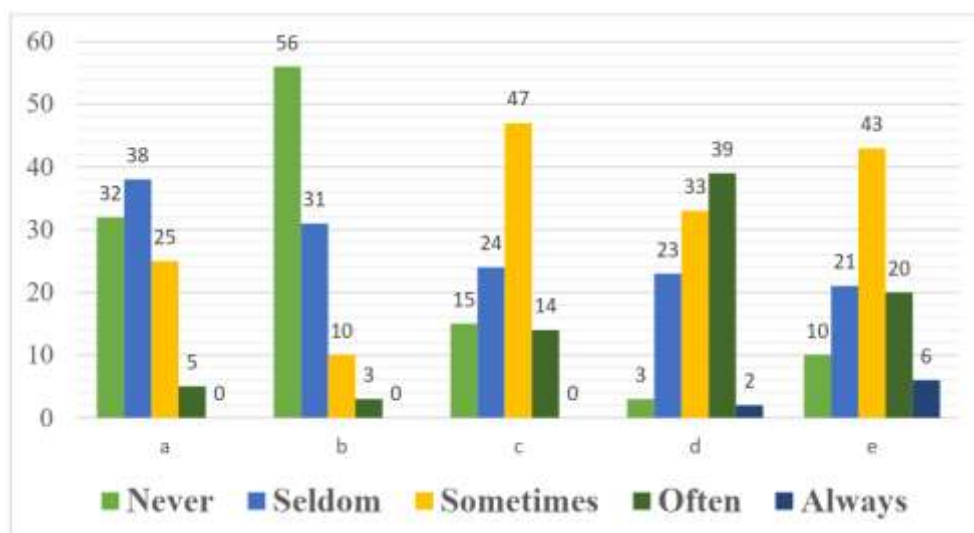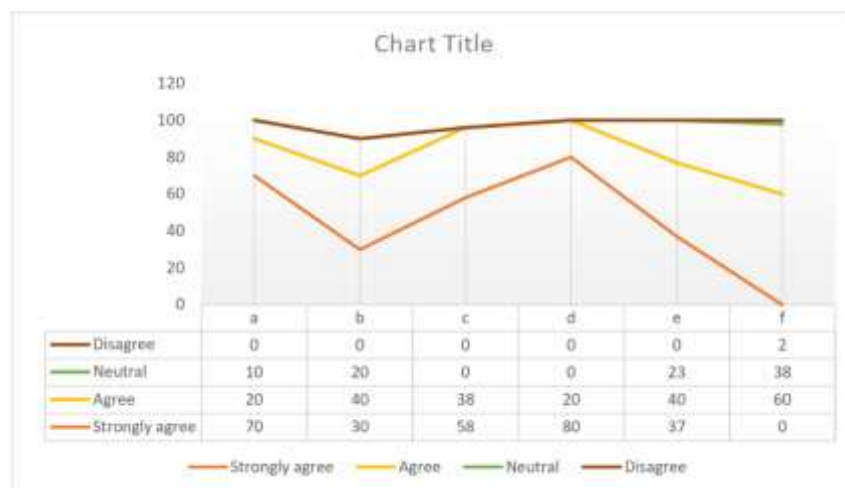

Figure 6: Students' self-treatment to overcome those mistakes

Teacher's perceptions of the causes of those mistakes

Figure 7. Teachers' perceptions on causes of students' pronunciation mistakes

Based on the presented chart, a clear pattern emerges regarding the perspectives of teachers on students' pronunciation of consonants. A significant majority of teachers, comprising 70% who strongly agreed and 20% who agreed, expressed the belief that students lack knowledge of proper tongue, lip, and mouth positioning when pronouncing consonant sounds. Additionally, 40% of teachers agreed that English consonants pose a challenge due to their unfamiliarity with students. In terms of pronunciation, the majority of teachers (58% strongly agreed and 34% agreed) acknowledged that their students tend to pronounce English consonants similarly to Vietnamese consonants. When asked about the reasons behind these mistakes, the notion that students do not practice English consonants frequently resonated strongly with the teachers. A notable 80% strongly agreed with this cause, while 20% agreed, with no individuals denying or expressing no opinion. Furthermore, a significant proportion of teachers (40%) agreed that students experience a lack of confidence when pronouncing consonants, and half of the teachers (50%) strongly agreed that the influence of the English dialect affects students' pronunciation. Only a minority of teachers (13%) refrained from commenting on this particular reason.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

In addition to teaching the four essential language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—pronunciation holds a crucial place in English language learning. Proficient pronunciation not only aids learners in improving their listening and reading abilities but also enhances overall language acquisition. Hence, the primary objective of this study is to identify common English pronunciation errors among secondary school students while determining the underlying causes and proposing effective solutions. Collaborating with teachers in this research provides an opportunity to raise awareness of students' pronunciation difficulties and explore diverse teaching methodologies that promote an enjoyable learning experience for English, specifically focusing on pronunciation.

The data collected from audio recordings and questionnaires reveal two types of deviations: mid and late position negative deviations, as well as negative deviations in general. Students frequently struggle with the sounds /θ/, /ð/, /dʒ/, /ʒ/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, and /tʃ/. Analysis of the gathered information has identified several prominent factors contributing to these pronunciation issues:

- Inadequate understanding of how to articulate sounds using the mouth, tongue, and lips. Students exhibit unfamiliarity with the specific techniques and positions required for articulating English consonants.
- Lack of confidence in enunciating English sounds. Students often experience anxiety when it comes to pronunciation, fearing mistakes and resulting in diminished self-assurance.
- Insufficient practice devoted to pronunciation. Students do not engage in regular pronunciation exercises, hindering their progress in this aspect of language learning.

In general, learning a foreign language is a gradual process demanding substantial effort from learners to achieve accurate pronunciation. Both teachers and students must acknowledge the significance of pronunciation and seek innovative approaches to overcome challenges and acquire proficiency.

Pedagogicalimplication

Teaching a foreign language is widely recognized as a challenging endeavor, placing significant demands on educators. Among the various aspects of English language learning, pronunciation stands out as one of the most formidable due to the dissimilar sound systems between English and Vietnamese. Consequently, the importance of English pronunciation has surged, prompting the need for dedicated attention to this area.

This study serves as a valuable resource for teachers within the researcher's school who prioritize their students' pronunciation development. Firstly, it serves as supplementary material by providing foundational knowledge about pronunciation, its significance in language education, and the key factors influencing the learning process. Secondly, the study presents a comprehensive examination of students' common pronunciation mistakes in English, along with an analysis of their underlying causes and potential solutions to address these issues. This comprehensive overview equips teachers with a deeper understanding of their learners' challenges. By reading and applying suitable methods tailored to their students and classroom settings, teachers can effectively guide pronunciation improvement.

Furthermore, this study serves as a primary reference source for English teachers across schools. It enables teachers to gain a heightened awareness of their students' specific pronunciation errors and empowers them to develop appropriate instructional strategies. By better understanding the diverse challenges faced by students, teachers can devise targeted interventions to enhance pronunciation skills. This study not only aids in rectifying pronunciation issues but also sheds light on other areas of concern among students, facilitating a comprehensive approach to address their needs and fostering overall improvement in pronunciation proficiency.

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