NHỮNG LỖI KHI PHÁT ÂM HAI PHỤ ÂM /θ/ VÀ /ð/ CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ HAI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC XÂY DỰNG MIỀN TRUNG

ERRORS IN PRONUNCIATION OF TWO CONSONANTS /θ/ AND /ð/ OF THE SECOND YEAR STUDENTS IN THE CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF CONSTRUCTION

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Abstract - Most students meet obstacles in communicating with other people in English because of mispronunciation. With the purpose of helping students to enhance their pronunciation, this article aims to find out common pronunciation errors of two consonants /θ/ and /ð/, the causes and suggestions for some solutions. The data collected from one interview and one survey questionnaire show that when pronouncing these sounds, almost all students made mistakes by replacing them with other sounds or omitting them. The non-existence of the sounds in the mother tongue, insufficient understanding, lacking teachers' assistance and improper learning methods are regarded as the four most common causes of these mistakes. Lastly, students are suggested some supportive resources for study such as softwares, books or websites and introduced some learning methods like taking a pronunciation course, working in pairs or groups and communicating with native speakers. In addition, higher frequent use of English in lectures, more instructions and practice in pronunciation lessons and different activities to attract students from English teachers are advisable.

Key words - pronunciation problems; pronunciation teaching; pronunciation learning; pronunciation errors; methods of learning pronunciation; pronunciation of consonants

Tóm tắt - Phát âm sai tạo cho sinh viên nhiều bất lợi trong giao tiếp vì vậy để giúp họ cải thiện phát âm, bài báo nhằm xác định những lỗi họ thường gặp khi phát âm hai phụ âm /θ/ và /ð/, nguyên nhân gây lỗi và gợi ý để khắc phục. Kết quả từ bài phỏng vấn và bảng điều tra cho thấy gần như tất cả sinh viên tham gia đều phát âm sai bởi khi phát âm, họ thay đổi những âm này hoặc bỏ đi. Những lỗi này được gây ra do bốn nguyên nhân chính: sự khiếm diện các âm tương đương, thiếu hiểu biết về cấu âm, thiếu sự giúp đỡ của giáo viên và phương pháp học không hợp lí. Sinh viên được gợi ý một số nguồn tài nguyên hỗ trợ học tập như phần mềm, sách hay trang web và những phương pháp học như tham gia lớp phát âm, học nhóm, giao tiếp với người nước ngoài. Hơn nữa, giáo viên được khuyến khích tăng cường sử dụng tiếng Anh để giảng dạy, dạy sinh viên phát âm và tạo ra những hoạt động gây hướng thú cho người học.

Từ khóa - vấn đề phát âm; dạy phát âm; học phát âm; lỗi phát âm; phương pháp dạy phát âm; phát âm phụ âm

1. Introduction

1.1. Aims of the Study

Although pronunciation is regarded as one of the most important factors to help communication better, Vietnamese students usually come up with faulty pronunciation, especially with strange sounds which do not exist in Vietnamese or are differently pronounced. Among them, the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ are typical examples that the Vietnamese learners have phonetic problem with.

As a teacher of English, the author has noticed that most students in her classes meet lots of difficulties in pronouncing these sounds. For this reason, the writer decided to conduct this study with the aims (1) to investigate errors in pronouncing two sounds /θ/ and /ð/ of the second year students in the Central University of Construction; (2) to find out causes of these errors; and (3) to suggest some solutions for improving students' pronunciation.

1.2. Literature Review

1.2.1. Pronunciation

Pronunciation is defined as the sounds when it is spoken and the pronunciation of words will depend on a speaker's accent and his understanding of language's rules. It is common that each language has its pronunciation rules and is spoken differently. Beech (1993) supposes that English pronunciation is unpredictable because it is a multi-syllabic language with complex features of intonation, ending sounds and stress.

1.2.2. The Role of Pronunciation in Language Learning

Pronunciation is supposed to be a key element of oral skills or the foundation of speaking in any language. English, for specific, has been accepted as a dominant means of communication for most people in the world but inappropriate pronunciation has caused some misunderstandings (Yong, 2004). Poor pronunciation can lead learners to become less social, academic and work advancement than they deserved (Fraser, 1999, 2000). Good pronunciation, on the other hand, makes communication easier and more relaxed and thus more successful (Dan, 2006). Kriedler (1989) also states that without correct pronunciation, learners may not be understood and may be poorly perceived by other English speakers. Almost all learners rate pronunciation as a priority and an area in which they need more guidance (Willing, 1993), therefore, some years ago, pronunciation began to be taught as a major subject with other skills.

1.2.3. Phonological Characteristics and Articulation Manner of /θ/ and /ð/.

The consonant /θ/ is interdental, fricative and voiceless while the /ð/ consonant is interdental, fricative and voiced according to the place, manner and force of articulation. To pronounce these sounds, the soft palate is raised and the nasal resonator shut off, the tip and rims of the tongue make a light contact with the edge and inner surface of the upper incisors and a firmer contact with the upper side teeth, so that the air escaping between the forward surface of the

tongue and the incisors causes friction. When pronouncing the consonant /θ/, speakers feel no vibration from their neck or its friction is voiceless. On the contrary, speakers should feel some vocal cord vibration when pronouncing the consonant /ð/ because of the escaping of the air through the gaps between the tongue and the teeth.

Some words containing the consonant /θ/ are: *thank you, author, thought, nothing, worth, something, Smith*. And other examples of the consonant /ð/ are: *that, this, leather, rather, father, brother.* (Baker, A. 2007)

1.3. Methodology

Quantitative approach is applied in two main instruments namely *Interview* and *Questionnaire* to collect data for this study. The interview was conducted in a room with 30 second-year students (15 males and 15 females) from 18 to 21 years old and chosen randomly from different departments of the University. In the interview, students were asked to read words containing these sounds and were recorded and treated as the main data for pronunciation's errors. In the questionnaire survey, all of them had to answer 10 questions related to causes of their errors in pronouncing these consonants.

The analyzed figures and data become much more valid and reliable thanks to the help of two American teachers who used to teach English in the University.

2. Results and Discussions

2.1. Findings from the Recorded Tape

Thirty students were asked to take part in the interview and each of them had to read aloud 20 words containing the consonant /θ/ and /ð in isolation and 10 words in sentences. In all, there are 900 turns of pronunciation (30 students x 30 words). The results show that most of the students could not pronounce these consonants correctly. In 900 turns of pronunciation, students made 816 errors which account for 91%. Especially, none of the students could pronounce all the words containing the consonant /θ/ correctly and only one student could pronounce the consonant /ð/ correctly in every word. This proves that the pronunciation of these two consonants is extremely problematic to students in the Central University of Construction. In the process of analyzing the collected data, the author realized that when pronouncing these consonants, students either substituted them with other consonants or omitted them.

2.1.1. Errors with Substitution

According to the data, most of the times, students substituted these consonants by other ones. Among 816 turns of incorrect pronunciation, 678 turns (83%), students took advantage of the substitution.

The consonant /θ/ was found to be usually pronounced as "thờ" in Vietnamese when it is word initial. For example, the word "thank" was actually pronounced as "thanhk". When the consonant is word final, participants often mistook /θ/ for the articulation of /s/. They pressed their tongue against the upper gums. As a result, the friction made for /θ/ was so great that the sound pronounced came to be /s/. For example, "thing" pronounced correctly /θɪŋ/

became similar to "sing" /sɪŋ/. Lastly, some students pronounced the consonant /θ/ as /t/ because they raised their tongue too high. In this case, the word "author" sounds like /ˈɔːtə/ in stead of /ˈɔːθə/.

The consonant /ð/ was often replaced by *d, r, gi* or *đ* in Vietnamese to make it more familiar and easier to produce. For instance, the word "that" was pronounced like the sound *"rát"* or *"dát"*; "there" was read *"re"* or *"de"*. Especially, the words related to family such as *father, mother, brother* were pronounced strangely as "pha đơ", "ma đơ", "bờ ra đơ" instead of /ˈfɑː ðə/, /ˈmʌðə/, /ˈbrʌðə/.

2.1.2. Errors with Omission

When these consonants are word final, most of students omitted them. Some students did not realize the mistakes and read aloud naturally, others were aware of the mistakes and tried not to omit the sounds but this made their speech slower, less coherent and natural. The reason for this omission is because Vietnamese do not have the habit of pronouncing the ending sounds in their mother tongue and this leads to the unfamiliarity when they deal with these sounds in English.

2.2. Causes of Mispronunciation Found from the Survey Questionnaire

There are five questions designed in order to find out causes of students' mispronunciation. The four first questions are to discover the general levels of students taking part in the study while the last question lists several causes of mispronunciation and students can tick more than one option which describes the reasons for their mistakes.

The first and the second questions are to find out the number of years learning English and the level of participants. Among 30 participants interviewed, only 5 students have learnt English for 8 years, the others for 9 or 10 years. This suggests that all participants have enough English background. Especially, the level of participants in speaking skill is rather high with only 6 students getting 5 and 6 marks, 20 students getting 7 and 8 marks and 4 ones getting 9 marks in the speaking test of the previous semester. It can be concluded that most of the students have rather good speaking skill.

The third and the fourth questions are to seek information about students' awareness of pronunciation's role and the ways they apply to improve it. Only one student (3%) claimed that pronunciation is "not important" in learning English, half of them (50%) contended "important" and the others (47%) stated "very important". Through the statistics, students seem to be highly aware of the pronunciation's role in learning English. However, in reality, they did not apply adequate and appropriate methods to practice pronunciation. 10 students (33%) tried to imitate their teachers' pronunciation, 7 of them (23%) imitated their friends and characters in films, only 4 of them (14%) listened to the tape and repeated, and especially, 9 of them (30%) admitted that they applied no methods in learning pronunciation.

According to the data collected from the last question, some causes of students' mispronunciation can be realized and classified. Although there are various reasons listed,

only some significant ones are examined in details in this article. Firstly, the most common cause given by 73% students is the non-existence of these sounds in the mother tongue. Students find two consonants /θ/ and /ð/ strangle and difficult to deal with because there are no Vietnamese equivalent sounds. The second cause listed by 56% students is the insufficient understanding of these sounds. Due to the non-existence in the mother tongue, students do not know the way to make the sounds so they just imitate others' pronunciation. This also leads to the improper methods of practicing pronunciation, which is the cause of 47% students. Most of the students learn pronunciation through imitating others' pronunciation; no one takes part in any pronunciation courses or learns from reliable sources such as books, video or internet. The lack of teachers' assistance is supposed to be the last reason for students' mispronunciation. Most teachers provide little or no guidance for students to pronounce these sounds; others tend to ignore students' mistakes. Furthermore, different teachers often have various ways of pronouncing these consonants or some teachers have improper pronunciation. This matter influences badly to students' mispronunciation since most of them regard their teachers as the models to follow.

3. Suggestions for Students and Teachers to Improve the Pronunciation of Two Consonants /θ/ and /ð/

3.1. Suggestions for Students

From all these causes listed above, some suggestions to help students to improve their pronunciation are drawn out. In the first place, some reliable sources for study are recommended. Websites, software and books are valuable suggestions because of their convenience, usefulness and easy usage. Thanks to the Internet, it has become much easier to get access to inexhaustible sources of information. Students are advised to make use of online websites to practice pronunciation. They can try ones designed only for pronunciation practice with videos, diagrams and native teachers. Especially, these websites are so easy to use that users just move a mouse to a word and check its pronunciation. For more practice, students may enjoy listening low speech and reading headlines at the same time by accessing websites of listening. All suggested websites are listed at the Reference part in this article for students and teachers to consult. Furthermore, listening to podcast is also an effective tool for students to improve language ability because podcasts are easy to be created, edited, published and listened to. In addition, software becomes more and more popular for students to enhance their pronunciation. Among the best software, "Home4English" and "Pronunciation Power" are regarded as perfect tools for anyone. For the last one, books are always an enormous source of knowledge. It is undeniable that lots of people have trained their pronunciation thanks to self-study books such as "Sheep or Ship" or "Pronunciation in Use".

In the second place, learning methods are certain to have great influence on students' pronunciation. Most students learn pronunciation through imitating their teachers' or friends'; however, these sources may be unreliable, various or difficult to follow. Hence, they should try some other methods to train their pronunciation. Firstly, a pronunciation course is extremely useful because it helps students to know the ways to make all sounds in English, to practice them and to correct mistakes if necessary. Especially, in some regions where people have special accent, the course is much more essential to check and correct their mistakes in pronunciation. Secondly, learning speaking in pairs or in groups is also an advisable way since when studying together, students have chance to test and adjust their pronunciation and also realize their own mistakes basing on others'. Lastly, it is better for students to take advantage any chances to communicate with native speakers. Those people may be tourists, businessmen, professors in surrounding Universities or friends in the Internet. When communicating with them, students can not only learn from their pronunciation but also be corrected by them.

3.2. Suggestions for English Teachers

First and foremost, it appears essential for English teachers to perfect their own pronunciation because they are models for students to follow. Furthermore, teachers' pronunciation is advisable to be tested and trained if necessary.

Secondly, for the convenience of students, most teachers use much more Vietnamese than English in class, but this is undesirable for learning pronunciation. Hence, teachers are encouraged to speak much more English and less or none of Vietnamese in class. This will create the habit of listening to English and train students' pronunciation through imitation.

Thirdly, English teachers had better provide students with detailed description of the sounds such as manner and place of articulation, the variants of each phoneme. Besides, the features to distinguish with Vietnamese phonemic sounds should also be given to help students to avoid mistakes. When explaining the sounds' features, teachers should ask students to read words or sentences aloud then give valuable feedbacks and correct possible mistakes.

Last but not least, since learning pronunciation is usually tiring and boring, it is advisable for English teachers to conduct some attracting activities such as games, role-plays, songs or news to train their students' pronunciation. Besides these activities, teachers should also give students pronunciation assignments or homework and request them to work in pairs or in groups. By this way, students become much more familiar with learning pronunciation and learning in pairs or in groups then improve it step by step.

4. Conclusions

This study has analyzed the errors made by students in pronouncing two sounds /θ/ and /ð/, then found out the causes and drawn some suggestions for both English teachers and students. In terms of errors, most students mispronounced these two sounds by replacing them with more similar sounds in the mother tongue or omit them. Although, there are various causes for their mispronunciation, the non-existence of the sounds in the

mother tongue, insufficient understanding, lacking teachers' assistance and improper learning methods are regarded as the four most common causes analyzed in this study. Lastly, some solutions are suggested for both teachers and students to follow. For students, firstly, some valuable and reliable resources for practicing pronunciation such as software, books, websites are introduced, then students are encouraged to try a few learning methods. For English teachers, it is better for them to perform a perfect pronunciation, increase English speaking time in lectures, describe these sounds in details and create many interesting activities for students to enjoy. In short, the study is really beneficial for students to enhance their pronunciation and for English teachers to discover the appropriate approaches to teach their students.

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