

## Common Errors in Pronouncing Minimal Pairs Made by English-Majored Freshmen at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University, Vietnam



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**ABSTRACT:** In the current globalization era, English increasingly becomes the most desirable language to be mastered. The act of producing correct pronunciation is considered as the crucial aspect contributing to the communication competence in English since mispronunciation will certainly lead to misunderstanding in communication. However, in fact, there is a significant difference in the sound system of English and Vietnamese language, which makes many Vietnamese learners encounter problems of pronouncing some sounds in English, especially the minimal pairs. In order to achieve the aim of discovering pronunciation errors of minimal pairs in English, 58 freshmen of English department at Ba Ria-Vung Tau University participated in this investigation by completing the questionnaire and recording the pronunciation of seven common pairs of word containing minimal pairs including /tʃ/ - /dʒ/; /s/ - /ʃ/; /s/ - /z/; /b/ - /p/; - /dʒ/; /t/ - /θ/ and /z/ - /ð/. The result shows the students are unable to differentiate the sounds of those minimal pairs; and the primary causes for this problem are the learners' mother tongue interference, and their limited exposure of English language. In addition, some recommendations in the light of findings are presented in this paper.

**KEYWORDS:** English-majored freshmen, minimal pairs, pronunciation errors.

### INTRODUCTION

Language is obviously a powerful communication tool of human beings since it enables people to express their opinion and feeling clearly, transfer the messages or exchange the ideas effectively. In the modern world, English is known as an international language and widely used in many different fields. Hence, proficiency in English is the desire of all learners of English as Foreign Language (EFL learners). According to Nunan (1991), among language skills, speaking is the most important aspect of learning a foreign language, and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in that language. In order to be good at English speaking skills, EFL learners need to pay attention to five components concerned with comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency as Harris (1974) suggested. Also, Derwing and Munro (2005) claimed that having “good pronunciation of the language can help in normal communication, particularly intelligibility” (as cited in Nation & Newton (2009)). In addition, Nation (2009) stated “When some teachers and students complain about difficulties in speaking, they are often talking about pronunciation”. Many other researchers such as Barlow, J. A., & Gierut J. A. (2002), Giang, T. T. T., (2003), Tuan, T. L. (2010) and Hassan, E. M. I. (2014) argued that EFL learners have difficulty recognizing the differences between some sounds of English. This problem also occurs at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University (BVU) that a large number of freshmen admit that they frequently make pronunciation errors, especially in pronouncing some certain minimal pairs of consonants, which prevents them from developing their speaking skills. During many years of teaching English as a foreign language at BVU, the researcher realizes that common minimal pairs that are incorrectly pronounced by many freshmen are /tʃ/ - /dʒ/; /s/ - /ʃ/; /s/ - /z/; /b/ - /p/; - /dʒ/; /t/ - /θ/ and /z/ - /ð/.

For the above reasons, the study was carried out to discover common errors in pronouncing those minimal pairs made by 58 freshmen of English department at BVU, find out the main factors resulting in this problem and suggest some solutions to the teaching and learning pronunciation in EFL classes.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Pronunciation

Hornby (1995) defined pronunciation as “the way in which a language is spoken; the way in which a word is pronounced; the way a person speaks the words of a language”. Similarly, Ur (1996) argued pronunciation is “to say the sounds right, to use the words to express the appropriate meanings, or construct their sentences in a way that sounds acceptable”.

Thus, it can be concluded that pronunciation is the way that people utter a word or a language in communication.

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## Pronunciation error

According to Corder (1974), errors are typically “produced by people who do not yet fully command some institutionalized language system”. Moreover, Erdogan (2005) defined pronunciation errors as the linguistic items in the way of pronunciation by non-native speaker as showing faulty or incomplete learning.

It is assumed that pronunciation error refers to the failure in producing the sound system of language correctly, which is caused by the lack of the learners’ competence, knowledge and comprehension.

## Cause of pronunciation error

Sharing with the point of view of Avery and Herlich (1992), Ur (1996) proposed two main reasons why EFL learners encounter pronunciation errors: (i) a particular sound may not exist in the mother tongue; (ii) a sound does exist in the mother tongue, but not as a separate phoneme. Furthermore, Harmer (2007) claimed “some students have great difficulty hearing pronunciation features which I want them to reproduce”. He also explained that EFL learners often have problems with sounds that have not the same in their first language’s sound system. In this case, the main cause is the students lack knowledge of English sounds, so they might make pronunciation errors when they reproduce different sounds between English and their first language.

In short, pronunciation errors are caused by the different sounds between English and the EFL learners’ mother language.

## Minimal Pairs

According to Trubetzkoy (1939), minimal pairs differ by one sound which the pairs used in classical phonology. Also, it is believed that the effective way of facilitating phonemic acquisition is contrasting sounds in a particular minimal pair, which is viewed as “a set of words that differ by a single phoneme, whereby that difference is enough to signal a change in meaning” by Barlow and Geirut (2002). Similarly, Pennington (1999) claimed minimal pairs, which are diverge in lexical meaning, are different with one sounds.

From the ideas above, it is concluded that minimal pairs are sets of words which are different by a single phoneme.

## Minimal pairs in teaching and learning pronunciation

Minimal pair drill is believed to help EFL learners deal with the difficulties in pronunciation, mainly for English sounds. Kelly (2007) suggested that “teachers can use minimal pairs to good advantage in the classroom as way of focusing on sounds which have been causing difficulties for students”.

For Vietnamese learners, whose mother tongue’s sound system is very different from that of English, minimal pair technique will help them distinguish the similar sounds in English to improve their fluency and accuracy in speaking skills.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The research employed qualitative design with descriptive analytic method in order to find out the common errors of pronouncing seven English minimal pairs: /tʃ/ - /dʒ/; /s/ - /ʃ/; /s/ - /z/; /b/ - /p/; - /dʒ/; /t/ - /θ/ and /z/ - /ð/.

### Data Collection and Data Analysis

The research has been carried out as follows:

(1) Doing the questionnaire: 58 BVU’s freshmen are asked to answer 4 questions prepared by the researcher: (i) Do you think pronunciation is important for learning English? (ii) Do you often practice pronunciation at school and at home? (iii) Do you get knowledge of minimal pairs in English? (iv) Have you encountered any difficulties in pronouncing minimal pairs? If yes, please tell the causes of this problem;

(2) Recording the pronunciation of 7 pairs of words containing the following minimal pairs: /tʃ/ - /dʒ/; /s/ - /ʃ/; /s/ - /z/; /b/ - /p/; - /dʒ/; /t/ - /θ/ and /z/ - /ð/ of 58 participants by “Sound Recorder” software of Speech Analyser;

(3) Synthesizing and analyzing the collected data;

(4) Drawing out conclusion.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Students’ attitude towards pronunciation learning

Through the collected questionnaires, 88% of students emphasize the importance of pronunciation in learning English. Also, many of them believe that pronunciation plays a key role in successfully communicating in English. 72% of freshmen actively learn how to correctly pronounce English words including minimal pairs through the class activities in the course “Pronunciation”, but only 26/58 students (accounting for 27%) said that they practice pronunciation at home and they just try to pronounce English words, not single sounds like in minimal pairs, and 13% of interviewees respond that they rarely practice pronunciation alone or at home.

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### Students' knowledge of minimal pairs in English

Many participants (64%) are unable to perceive minimal pairs in English. 82% of students admit that they find it difficult to distinguish some sounds in English and nearly 70% claim they are unlikely to pronounce the minimal pairs correctly since their sounds are quite identical or unfamiliar with Vietnamese sounds.

### Errors in pronouncing minimal pairs

Through collected recordings, the researcher tabulates common pronunciation errors of minimal pairs in the order of frequency as follows:

**Table 1. Common errors in pronouncing minimal pairs made by English-majored freshmen at BVU**

No	Minimal pairs	Representatives	Frequency	Percentage
1	/tʃ/ - /dʒ/	rich – ridge /rɪtʃ/ - /rɪdʒ/	51	88%
2	/s/ - /ʃ/	sell - shell /sel/ - /ʃel/	46	79%
3	/s/ - /z/	rice - rise /raɪs/ - /raɪz/	40	69%
4	/b/ - /p/	bet - pet /bet/ - /pet/	36	62%
5	/j/ - /dʒ/	yet - jet /jet/ - /dʒet/	32	55%
6	/t/ - /θ/	tree- three /tri:/ - /θri:/	25	43%
7	/z/ - /ð/	Bathe - baize /beɪð/ - /beɪz/	21	36%

As can be seen from the table, the most occurring error is found in pronunciation of minimal pair “/tʃ/ - /dʒ/”. They are type of affricative consonant that begins as a stop and releases as a fricative. The word “rich” /rɪtʃ/ and “ridge” /rɪdʒ/ are chosen as the representative of the consonant /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. Majority of the students (88%) are unable to differentiate the pronunciation of the minimal pair. They usually pronounce the word “ridge” with the ending sound “tʃ” as /rɪtʃ/. The reason for this situation is in Vietnamese’s sound system, there is a similar sound of /tʃ/, but no sound “dʒ”.

Furthermore, the percentage of students making the error of pronouncing minimal pair “/s/ - /ʃ/” is 79%. They fail to control their mouth correctly to produce /ʃ/ with a much more rounded mouth than /s/. According to the table above, 46 freshmen pronounce /ʃ/ in the word “shell” like /s/ as /sel/ (sell).

Besides, 69% and 62% of participants are unable to distinguish voiced and voiceless sounds in the minimal pairs “/s/ - /z/” and “/p/ - /b/” respectively. To be specific, the word “rice” /raɪs/ has a voiceless sound /s/; whereas, there is a voiced sound /z/ in phonetic transcription of “rise” /raɪz/. Those students mispronounce “rise” as /raɪs/ with a voiceless sound /s/ while /z/ is its correct sounds. Also, when they are asked to speak the pair of words “pet” and “bet”, they tend to substitute the voiced stop /b/ for the voiceless stop /p/ and produce incorrectly as /bet/ for the word “pet”. The reason for this phenomenon is the voiceless stop /p/ does not occur in initial places of words in Vietnamese language,

In addition, there is no sound /dʒ/ in Vietnamese’s sound system, so many students are confused between the sound /dʒ/ and /j/. There are 55% of participants replacing the sound /dʒ/ with /j/ when they are asked to pronounce the word “jet” and then make the same pronunciation of “yet” /jet/. Similarly, more than a half of the freshmen incorrectly produce sound /θ/ since there is no its equivalent in Vietnamese language. They are strongly affected by the similar sound “th” of Vietnamese’s sound system, so they tend to make a heavily aspirated voiceless stop /t/ instead of a voiceless fricative sound /θ/. As a result, the word “three” /θri:/ is pronounced totally like “tree” /tri:/.

It is also noticeable that “/z/ - /ð/” are both voiced sounds and /ð/ is pronounced with the tongue staying between the teeth, which makes Vietnamese learners difficult to produce it. Hence, 21 students (accounting for 36%) subtitle the sound /ð/ with the familiar sound “d” in Vietnamese language when pronouncing the word “bathe” (/beɪð/) as /beɪz/, which is the phonetic transcription of “baize”.

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## CONCLUSION

Through the collected recordings, it could be concluded that most of the freshmen of English department at BVU experience pronunciation errors of minimal pairs in the order of frequency as follows: /tʃ/ - /dʒ/; /s/ - /ʃ/; /z/ - /ʒ/; /b/ - /p/; - /dʒ/; /t/ - /θ/ and /z/ - /ð/. The primary cause of problem found in this study is the influence of their mother tongue, which is similar to the claim of Avery and Herlich (1992) that mostly problem in pronunciation is due to the uncommon sounds for the students' first language that exists in English. This means that the mispronunciation occurs when the learners face sounds which are unfamiliar to them or not found in Vietnamese language such as voiceless sounds /dʒ/ and /θ/ (as in the words "ridge", "jet" and "three") and voiced sound /ð/ (as in "baize"). From my personal teaching experience and the result of investigation, it is noticed that Vietnamese learners of English usually substitutes /tʃ/ or /j/ for /dʒ/, /t/ for /θ/ and /z/ for /ð/. It proves that the learners tend to transfer sounds of their source language (Vietnamese) into those of target language (English).

In addition, from the result of questionnaires, it is found that the limited exposure of English language, the lack of practicing pronunciation also result in the pronunciation errors of minimal pairs in English.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### EFL instructors are suggested to:

- (i) introduce the phonetic symbols to the students and pronounce single sounds slowly and clearly as a model to help them distinguish English phonemic sounds;
- (ii) Emphasize the differences in pronunciation of minimal pairs into teaching learning activity.  
For instance, Murcia et al (1996) suggested "one of the best ways to appreciate the difference between voiced and unvoiced is to put your hand against your Adam's apple larynx". Michael and John (2005) also stated "If the vocal folds are held gently together and air under pressure from the lungs is push between them, the folds can be made to vibrate evenly to produce the tone we call voiced"; by contrast, voiceless sounds are produced when the vocal folds do not vibrate.
- (iii) Create more opportunities for learners to practice pronunciation, especially minimal pairs in English through a variety of class activities or useful learning softwares or websites for learners to self-study at home.

### For learners, they should:

- (i) pay attention to differentiate and produce the receivable pronunciation in familiar and unfamiliar English sounds;
- (ii) Practice pronouncing minimal pairs as much as possible in and outside the classroom.  
It is hoped that these recommendations will facilitate the teaching and learning of pronunciation in general and minimal pairs in particular in EFL classrooms. As a result, the learners are able to perceive and pronounce English words correctly and develop their communication skills.

## LIMITATIONS

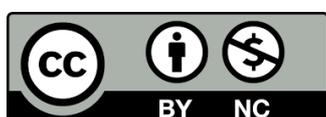
This study only focused on examining pronunciation errors of seven minimal pairs in English, all of which are consonant sounds. In addition, participants are only 58 first-year students of English department at BVU. Therefore, in order to increase the reliability, it is suggested that the further researches need investigate more students of different levels and include both English consonant and vowel sounds.

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