

# SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE PRONUNCIATION FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS AT HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY

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***Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to find out pronunciation mistakes made by non-English majors at Hanoi Open university, thereby proposing solutions to help students improve their pronunciation. The study data were collected from 133 first-year students in Economy and Law department at Hanoi Open university through an online questionnaire. The study used quantitative method in combination with statistical and analytical techniques. The results showed that students recognized the crucial role of pronunciation in the learning process. However, the study also provided information on students' mistakes when learning pronunciation. Students' mistakes mainly related to mispronouncing plural noun endings, stress, linking sounds and intonation. Some suggested solutions for teachers and students have been proposed such as: taking advantages of technology, using free applications, diversifying classroom activities.*

***Key words:** mistakes, solution, improve, pronunciation.*

## **I. Rationale**

Nowadays, English is considered the international language and is spoken by many people all over the world. Actually, being good at English is a real advantage for anyone who is eager to open new doors to knowledge horizon. English is used widely not only in politics, science, technology, economy, trade but also in education. In fact, there are a variety of English: American-English, British-English, Australian-English and so on, differences are bound to emerge.

At Hanoi Open University, English is taught as one of compulsory subjects for both English majors and non-English majors. Students learn four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing during their learning process at the university. However, students in general, non-English majors in particular are not so confident when communicating in English. They seem to be afraid of making mistakes when speaking or giving speeches due to lack of speaking and listening practice when they were at high school. As a result, they found it hard to

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learn these skills as well as pronunciation at the university. In fact, weak pronunciation is actually an obstacle that prevents them from speaking or communicating in English effectively and fluently. The article is in search of pronunciation mistakes made by non-English majors at Hanoi Open university and suggests solutions to improve their pronunciation.

## II. Literature Review

### 2.1. Overview of previous studies

There have been many studies investigating students' pronunciation mistakes. Masfa Maiza from Pamane Talino College of Education, Landak Indonesia analysed mistakes made by first-year students at Pamane Talino College of Education, Landak Regency, West Kalimantan. From the study, the writer found that students' pronunciation errors mainly related to pronouncing English consonants such as: /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. Similarly, Shery Adila's study also revealed that pronunciation errors made by high school students were consonant mispronouncing. Shely Adila also tried to figure out factors causing high school students' pronunciation errors.

In order to understand Indonesian students' pronunciation difficulties, Fadillah focused on three main aspects: English vowels and consonants shift by EFL learners, factors influencing Indonesian EFL learners' pronunciation, and the instruments and media used by Indonesian researchers to monitor the pronunciation.

In general, these studies were centered on finding out pronunciation mistakes, mainly vowel and consonant mispronouncing and their causes. Moreover, there have not been any studies

conducted to research other aspects of pronunciation such as intonation, stress of words, so this present study fills this gap by analyzing pronunciation mistakes made by non-English majors at Hanoi Open university and suggesting ways to improve pronunciation for them.

### 2.2. Definitions of pronunciation

There are many different definitions of pronunciation.

In *Cambridge dictionary*, pronunciation is defined the act, or a way, of saying a word, etc. [3]

In line with the above opinion, Paulston & Burder (1976) defined: "Pronunciation is the production of a sound system which doesn't interfere with communication either from the speakers' or the listeners' viewpoint." [8]

In *Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* (2003), pronunciation of a word or language is the way in which it is pronounced. [2]

The definitions above have same idea when defining pronunciation as production of sounds. However, Novarita (2017) considered pronunciation to be the most important factor in process of language learning including language skills, differences in pronunciation will affect meaning of words or even cause misunderstanding. [6]

### 2.3. Consonants and their classification

#### 2.3.1. What is a consonant?

According to Peter Roach (1982): "A consonant is a sound in producing it the airstream coming from the lungs is stopped, impeded, constricted or otherwise interfered with in its passage to the outside air." [9]

Webster's New World College dictionary defined: "consonant is any speech sound in the production of which the speaker completely stops and then releases the air stream." [10]

### 2.3.2. Consonant classification

Consonants are classified according to these four standards:

#### ❖ Places of articulation

According to places of articulation, consonants are classified into: Bilabial, Labio-dental, Dental or Interdental, Alveolar, Palato-alveolar, Velar, Palatal and Glottal.

#### ❖ Manner of articulation

The ways the airstream modifies the organs of speech. In term of manner

of articulation, consonants are divided into: Plosive or stop, Fricative, Affricate, Nasal, Lateral, and Gliding or semi-vowel (consonant) or approximant.

#### ❖ Voicing

There is presence or absence of the vibration of the vocal cords. There are two kinds of consonants in term of voicing: Voiced and Voiceless ones.

#### ❖ Aspiration

Aspirated and Unaspirated consonants are classified in term of aspiration.

The consonant classification is shown clearly in the chart below.

**Chart 1: Chart of English consonant phonemes**

		PLACE OF ARTICULATION							
MANNER OF ARTICULATION		Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
	Plosive	p b			t d			k g	
	Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
	Affricative					tʃ dʒ			
	Nasal	m			n			ŋ	
	Lateral				l				
	Approximant	w				r	j		

### 2.4. Vowels and their classification

#### 2.4.1. What is a vowel?

In Peter Roach's point of view (1982): "A vowel is a speech sound in which the airstream from the lungs is not blocked in any way in the mouth or throat and which is usually pronounced with vibration of the vocal cords." [9]

In *Webster's New World College dictionary*, vowels are defined any voiced speech sound characterized by generalized friction of the air passing in continuous stream through the pharynx and opened mouth but with no constriction narrow enough to produce local friction. [10]

#### 2.4.2. Vowel classification

Peter Roach classified vowel sounds according to five criteria:

#### ❖ Tongue height

Tongue height is the vertical distance between the upper surface of the tongue and the palate. On the other hand, it is degree of opening of the mouth. The tongue may be raised high, mid or low or it can be close, half close, half open, open.

#### ❖ Tongue position

This means the front, central or back of the tongue is raised or lowered.

#### ❖ Lip rounding

Different shapes and positions of the lips. They may be rounded, unrounded or neutral.

#### ❖ Muscle tension

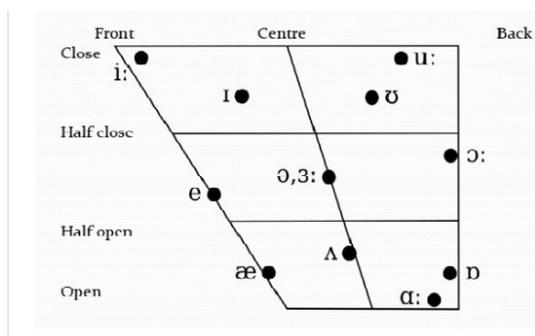
Muscle tension is tenseness in the muscles of the jaw and throat. The muscles may be lax or tense. Short vowels are often lax vowels meanwhile tense vowels are often long vowels.

#### ❖ Vowel length

There are 5 long vowels: /i:, u:, ɔ:, ə:, a:/ and 7 short vowels: /i, u, ɒ, ə, e, æ, ʌ/

Vowel classification is illustrated clearly in the chart below.

Chart 2: IPA vowel chart



### 2.5. What is stress?

According to Peter Roach (1982): “Stress is the prominence given to the syllable.” [9]

The prominence is made up of 4 factors: *clearer, longer, higher and louder*. For example: after’NOON

In Peter Roach’s point of view, there are three types of stress in English: word, phrase and sentence stress. He also mentions four degrees of stress: primary, secondary, tertiary and weak stress. All words of more than one syllable are stressed. The primary stress is put on the most important word in a phrase or sentence. And there is only one primary stress in each phrase or sentence.

### 2.6. Intonation

According to Peter Roach (1982): “Intonation is the rise and fall of the pitch of sound in speaking.”

In Webster’s New World College dictionary “Pronunciation is the type of pitch used at the end of a spoken sentence or phrase.” [9] The function of intonation is to express attitude, feeling or emotion.

## III. Methodology

### 3.1. Target subjects and study methods

The target subjects of the study are 133 freshmen from two departments: Economy and Law at Hanoi Open University in school year 2024-2025. They have one English lesson a week and have just finished their first term at the university. The author chose the target subjects because of several reasons. First, many students felt not so confident in speaking due to pronunciation mistakes. Second, majority of the target students were not really happy with their speaking score in the first term.

Quantitative method is the main research method used in this study. In addition, statistical, analysis, synthesis and evaluation methods were also used by the research team to find out the problems and difficulties that the non-English majors of the Economy and Law Department encounter when learning English through an online questionnaire including 19 questions. From the results obtained, the group proposed some solutions to help the students improve their pronunciation.

### 3.2. Research questionnaire

The research questionnaire consists of 19 questions divided into 4 groups which aim at visualizing the students’ attitude towards role of pronunciation,

their difficulties as well as their mistakes or errors in the process of learning English in general and learning pronunciation in particular. Questions centering on pronouncing plural nouns, regular verbs of English as well as stress and intonation are designed to help the author get a real picture of problems or difficulties in pronunciation faced by the non-English majors of the Economy and Law Department. Subsequently, the study will suggest solutions to help the freshmen improve their pronunciation.

#### IV. Findings and discussion

Survey results obtained from 133 freshmen in Economy and Law department at Hanoi Open University were divided into 4 main groups by the research team.

##### *Group 1: Students' background information*

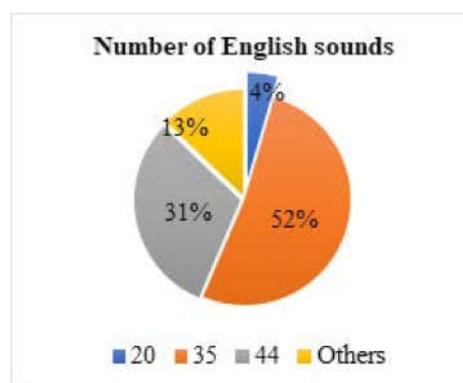
65.5% students taking part in the survey were female, 34.5% were male. Among them, 57.3% came from big cities while 42.7% originated from country side. Coming from different places could affect students' English learning process due to different focuses of each area in language learning and teaching.

##### *Group 2: Role of pronunciation*

Opimistically, 96% of the students recognized the important role of pronunciation in their English learning process due to its close connection with other skills especially speaking and listening skills. They said their English pronunciation was not really good, so they were afraid of making mistakes or lack of confidence when speaking in English. Besides, they also found listening skills really challenging owing to weak pronunciation.

##### *Group 3: Students' background knowledge of pronunciation*

Chart 3 provided the information about students' background knowledge of English sounds. Specifically, 4% of students participating in the survey said there were only 20 English sounds, 13% said there were more than 44 sounds in English. The number of students thinking that there were 35 sounds in English accounted for 52%, which was roughly twice as much as the number of students thinking that there were 44 sounds in English. In fact, the number of students giving correct number of English sounds accounted for only one-third of the survey participants.



*Chart 3: Students' background knowledge of English sounds*

In order to understand more clearly about students' ability in recognizing English sounds, let's look at table 1. Optimistically, majority of students (99.7%) taking part in the survey could recognize diphthongs correctly. However, the percentage of survey participants could not recognize triphthongs, voiced and voiceless sounds correctly was 71.4%, 60.9% and 66.2% respectively.

In brief, the data in group 3 showed that the first-year students in Economy and Law department at Hanoi Open university were still lack of basic background knowledge of pronunciation, which might cause them some obstacles in English learning process.

Table 1: Students' ability in recognizing English sounds

English sounds Number		Correct		Wrong	
		Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)	Number
Consonant sounds	Voiced	52	39.1%	81	60.9%
	Voiceless	45	33.8%	88	66.2%
Vowel sounds	diphthong	130	99.7%	3	2.3%
	triphthong	38	28.6%	95	71.4%

*Group 4: Students' common pronunciation mistakes*

Table 2 provided the information about common mistakes of pronunciation made by the freshmen in Economy and Law department at Hanoi Open university. The number of students making mistakes when linking English sounds were the highest with 72 students, accounted for 54.1%. More than a third of the first-year students made mistakes when they pronounced plural noun ending sounds in English. They had tendency of dropping the last syllables of plural noun ending sounds, especially words ending with /ʃ, s, dʒ, tʃ/ as in *fishes, kisses, bridges, watches*. Third on the rank were word stress mistakes which accounted for 13.5%. The other mistakes such as regional mistakes (e.g. /'nitl/was mispronounced /'nitl/ made up 2.3%.

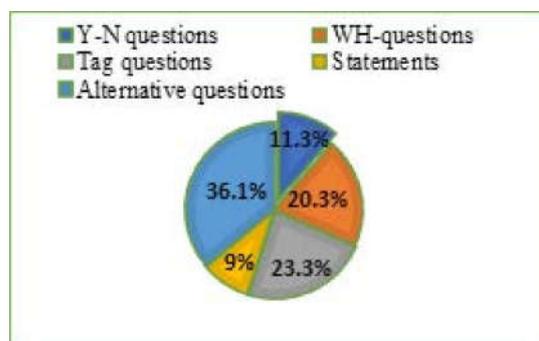
*Table 2: Students' common pronunciation mistakes*

Types of mistakes	The number of students	Percentage (%)
Plural noun ending sounds	40	30.1%
Linking sounds	72	54.1%
Word stress	18	13.5%
Others	3	2.3%
Total	133	100%

Other pronunciation mistakes made by the survey participants related to intonation.

As can be seen from chart 4, the number of students made intonation mistakes

when asking alternative questions were by far the highest with 36.1%. Followed by the number of students who made mistakes in asking tag questions and WH-questions with 23.3% and 20.3% respectively. The percentage of freshmen who made mistakes in Yes-No questions was much lowerer, with 11.3%. Very small percentage of students (9%) made intonation mistakes in statements. In short, the students making intonation mistakes were really confused with certain types of intonation in English. As a consequence, it caused difficulties or misunderstanding in their communication.



*Chart 4: Students' mistakes in intonation*

For instance, when being asked about the intonation for the tag questions below, roughly a quarter of students gave wrong answers.

(1) It's raining now, isn't it?  
(Expecting the answer "YES")

(2) It's raining now, isn't it? (*It's a question.*)

Many of them used rising tone for both (1) and (2), whereas others chose the rising tone for (1) and falling tone for (2).

## V. Suggested solutions

### 5.1. For teachers

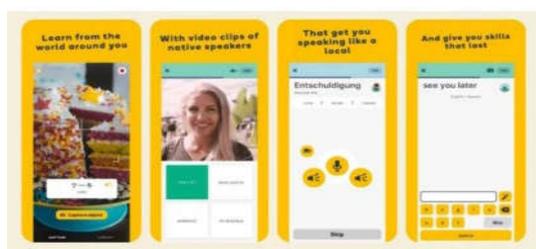
There are a lot of useful suggestions for EFL (*English as foreign language*) teachers to help students improve their English pronunciation. First, EFL teachers should speak clearly in their pronunciation classes and they should convince their students that their language is understandable. This can help their students improve their pronunciation by listening to them

Words	American English	British English	Note
writer	/raɪdə/	/raɪtə/	Between 2 vowels, /t/ /d/ in American English.
newspaper	/'nu:speɪpə/	/'nju:speɪpə/	In American, /j/ is dropped.
car	/ka:r/	/ka:/	In British English, /r/ is only pronounced if it is followed by a vowel sounds.
hot	/ha:t/	/hɒt/	

Second, teachers can encourage their students to watch videos in English, learn to sing English songs, watch films in English. These should be ranged from lower to higher levels. The students should be required to watch the videos or movies in English, immitate the intonation, stress and so on, then record their voice themselves. However, this should be done under the guidance and supervision of the teachers.

Third, taking advantages of technology, especially free applications on the internet to help students improve English in general and their pronunciation in particular. Here are some free applications that teachers can recommend to their students:

#### Memrise



carefully. Ideally, teachers should teach their students that slow speech with correct pronunciation is much better than fast speech with wrong pronunciation. Teachers should familiarize their students to both American and British English and they should be able to understand both varieties of pronunciation. It is of necessity to show students the major differences between American and British English. For example, teachers can distinguish how American English differs from British English as illustrated in the table below.

Memrise is an effective English speaking practice application, helping students develop linguistic thinking. The *Memrise* interface is user-friendly, providing a fun learning experience through exciting mini games. Besides, *Memrise* content is diverse and close to true-to-life communication. Students can practise speaking through conversations in English. Additionally, *Memrise* provides a huge resouce of English vocabulary and it is suitable for people at different ages.

#### English Conversation Practice



*English Conversation Practice* is an English- speaking practice application

with a variety of topics, helping students to apply it immediately in everyday life. The lesson system is organized in the form of quizzes, games, and interactive conversations to create excitement for students or users, helping them absorb knowledge more easily.

### HelloTalk



*HelloTalk* is a software to practise English speaking with foreigners. It is a popular English speaking practice application that helps students connect with friends around the world to improve their communication skills, listening skills and pronunciation as well. Besides, students can also improve their English writing skills thanks to a huge vocabulary provided by the application.

Last but not least, teachers should keep diversifying teaching methods. They can increase their students' motivation in learning pronunciation by role play in certain situations. This helps the students to improve their pronunciation and speaking skills as well.

### 5.2. For students

Students must practise English everyday. Let enjoy English by listening to favourite songs or watch movies in English. Try to hum while listening to English songs or immitate intonation while watching movies or read movie subtitles to improve pronunciation as well as increase vocabulary. Don't worry if at first they can not understand deeply content of songs or films. Besides, students should follow teachers' guidance strictly and complete all assignments or homework assigned by the teachers. Finally, take

advantages of applications to make their learning more enjoyable. Don't forget: "*Practice makes perfect.*"

### VI. Conclusion

The study found some common pronunciation mistakes made by freshmen in Economy and Law department at Hanoi Open university. They were mainly mispronouncing plural noun ending sounds, stress, linking sound and intonation mistakes. Besides, the study also revealed that students had poor background knowledge of pronunciation. Consequently, it caused many difficulties for them in the English learning process. However, the freshmen recognized the essential role of pronunciation which would be a great stimulant for their learning. The research also suggested some solutions for both teachers and students. In fact, technology is an inevitable factor for the success of both teaching and learning process. Teachers should make use of technology in their lessons as well as change their teaching methods to make their lessons more vivid and effective.

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## GIẢI PHÁP CẢI THIỆN PHÁT ÂM CHO SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH Ở TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC MỞ HÀ NỘI

*Ngô Thị Thanh Thảo<sup>†</sup>*

**Tóm tắt:** Mục đích của nghiên cứu này là tìm ra những lỗi phát âm của sinh viên không chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội, từ đó đề xuất các giải pháp giúp sinh viên cải thiện khả năng phát âm của mình. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập từ 133 sinh viên năm thứ nhất khoa Kinh tế và Luật trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội thông qua bảng câu hỏi trực tuyến. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp định lượng kết hợp với các kỹ thuật thống kê và phân tích. Kết quả cho thấy học sinh nhận thức được vai trò quan trọng của phát âm trong quá trình học tập. Tuy nhiên, nghiên cứu cũng cung cấp thông tin về những lỗi sai của học sinh khi học phát âm. Lỗi của học sinh chủ yếu liên quan đến việc phát âm sai đuôi danh từ số nhiều, trọng âm, âm nối và ngữ điệu. Một số giải pháp gợi ý cho giáo viên và học sinh đã được đề xuất như: tận dụng công nghệ, sử dụng ứng dụng miễn phí, đa dạng hóa hoạt động trên lớp.

**Từ khóa:** lỗi, giải pháp, cải thiện, phát âm.

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