

# Some students' common mistakes in pronouncing englishfinal consonants and tips to overcome them

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**Abstract:** It is undeniable that English has become the most popular foreign language in Vietnam nowadays. Among the millions of people speaking English in Vietnam, there are many people who make mistakes in pronunciation. This creates some typical features of so-called “Vietnamese English”. It is argued that the mistakes can be explained in terms of inadequate knowledge of the articulation of the sounds and, more importantly, the interference of the mother tongue.

**Keywords:** Pronouncing, final consonants, articulation, analysis

## 1. Introduction

The English language has become the international language for communication, and is used widely in many countries in the world. In Vietnam, English is the most popular foreign language to be used as a means of communication. English is spoken by many Vietnamese and is considered a necessity for those who are studying or doing research and for those who are working in places. Over many years of teaching English to Vietnamese learners, the writer of this paper has observed that there are quite a number of Vietnamese learners and users of English who make such pronunciation mistakes. Being fully aware of the necessity of correcting mistakes for Vietnamese learners of English, the writer of this paper has presented in this paper findings concerning the reasons for those mistakes and how they might be avoided.

## 2. Contents

### 2.1. Some distinctive similarities and differences:

The distinctive similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese consonants under study are as follows:

**NASAL:** sounds made with the airstream directed through the nasal cavity; made with an open velopharyngeal port; include the phonemes /m/, /n/, /ŋ/

**VOICE:** vocal fold vibration during the production of a speech sound

**LABIAL:** refers to place of production, made with one or both lips; include bilabials and labio-dentals; /r/ is also considered to have a lip component;

phonemes include /m/, /w/, /p/, /b/, /f/, /v/, /r/

**BACK:** refers to place of production in the velar area that has the tongue body retracted; phonemes include /k/, /g/, /ŋ/, /w/

**Place:** point in the vocal tract where the most closure or constriction occurs: bilabial, labio-dental, interdental, alveolar, palatal, velar, glottal

**Manner** the way the airstream is modified in the production of speech sounds

### 2.2. Some common mistakes:

There are three common types of mistakes no matter what purpose you learn English for; communication is always the first and most crucial skill that every learner must try to obtain. So as for better English communication, nothing is as important as a proper pronunciation. To get people understand you or to speak naturally like a native speaker, you must at least have a proper pronunciation. However, it is the fact that pronunciation is not *a piece of cake* that you can eat with just one bite. It would be a long list to write down all the pronunciation mistakes.

#### a. Pronouncing all words according to their spellings:

In English, spelling is not phonetic. That means we don't pronounce the letter in a word like the way we read it. In contrast, the alphabet of many languages in the world is more or less phonetic. That means every letter has a consistent value (or several values, depending on its environment), and we can easily read out that word through its spelling. Therefore sometimes we pronounce the word

following exactly its spelling and it doesn't make sense in English.

For instance, "chocolate" which sounds like /'tʃɔ:kələt/ not /'tʃɔ:kəʊlət/ as numerous non-native learners may pronounce.

### **b. Mixing up the ending sounds**

Consonants play a significant role in English, even more important than vowels. We must pronounce all consonants of a word including the consonants ending the word. This feature of English pronunciation is a huge difference compared with many other languages such as Vietnamese. Ending sounds are really important to make English words make sense and understandable to the others. However, many non-native learners usually forget to pronounce those sounds clearly, which can result in a lot of hilarious situations.

For example, if you want to say "white hair" but without the ending sound "t", it may be understood as "why hair"...

### **c. Pronouncing the silent vowel "e" when it is unnecessary**

English pronunciation of what is usually a silent vowel (silent e). This tends to happen when the plural /s/ is added to the end of a word. A good example is the unpronounced e in **clothes** /kləʊðz/. Some learners forget that this is a silent vowel. What cause the confusion is that the same e is pronounced in words like roses /rəʊzɪz/, in which the silent "e" is pronounced. In fact, there is a rule for that occasional pronunciation of the otherwise silent e. The pronounced e is to separate two identical or very similar sounds such as 2 letters s in roses.

### **2.3. Perceptions of mistakes:**

It is mentioned in the introduction that pronunciation mistakes are not treated as seriously as grammar mistakes by many Vietnamese learners of English. It is undeniable that sentence "She don't like coffee" is grammatically incorrect although its meaning is understandable. This mistake is immediately recognized (and sometimes corrected at once). But such a pronunciation mistake as /ʃ/ in "She should shut the door" is often ignored. The reasons for this ignorance are partially because the mistake is believed not to cause any communication breakdown, and partially it can be culturally accepted by Vietnamese users of English and more importantly, native speakers of English can understand what the speaker wants to say.

### **a. Problems with consonants**

To examine the problems that Vietnamese speakers meet when they learn to speak English, I will explain general problems based on the work of several linguists. I shall also point out specific problems based on my own learning and teaching experiences.

According to Honey, "the Vietnamese consonant system is very different from that of the English, and there is considerable variation between dialects. Vietnamese learners of English can be expected to come across particular difficulty with some or all of the following sounds: /f/, /θ/, /ð/, /z/, (p. 240).

### **b. Problem with voiced versus voiceless stops**

Vietnamese speakers of English have a number of problems with the voiced versus the voiceless stops in word final position, /b/, /p/, /d/, /g/ vs. /p/, /t/, /k/. Based on Avery and Ehrlich's statement, "Vietnamese has no voiced stops at the ends of words" (p. 154). Additionally, Vietnamese learners of English encounter problems with words final fricative consonants /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /s/, /z/. The word 'beef' may be pronounced like /bi:/.

### **c. Problem with grammatical ending "s"**

When words end in *s* in forms of consonant-vowel-consonant, the /s/ sound is frequently omitted. For examples, *sits* may turn to /sɪt/ and *wants* may become /wan/. Sometimes, Vietnamese speakers tend to omit both /t/ and /s/ sound in the word *wants*. As, Nguyen (2007) stated, "clusters ending with voiceless /s/ and /t/ cause a lot of problems for informants" (p. 23).

### **2.4. Tips and Suggestions for Helping a Student Say Specific Sounds:**

**a. /s/ and /z/:** Demonstrate by showing the student how your tongue (the tiger) is inside the teeth (cage) when you say /s/. Let him try using the mirror to check his tongue position. The /s/ and /z/ are 'sister sounds' made with the same tongue/mouth position. However the /s/ is 'voice off' and the /z/ is 'voice on'. Teach the students to make /s/, and then tell them to say /z/ 'make the tiger rattle the cage'. The /z/ sound is a vibration, 'voice on' sound.

**b. /th/ and /tʰ/:** "Stick your tongue out!" For both the hard /th/ and the soft /tʰ/ sound the student needs to stick their tongue out. Exaggerate sticking the tongue out to teach the sound. A mirror is particularly helpful so the student can see their tongue sticking out between the teeth. Both the /

th/ and /th/ sounds are made by sticking the tongue out. The only difference is the ‘voice on’ ‘voice off’. With the hard /th/ the student vibrates the tongue. You can feel the vibrations ‘tickle the tongue’. With the soft /th/, the ‘voice off’ makes the quiet /th/ that does not tickle the tongue.

**c. /t/ and /d/:** The /t/ sound is made by ‘tapping’ the tongue on the roof of the mouth right behind the top of the teeth. Teach /t/ as a fast ‘tapping’ sound. Demonstrate and let the student use a mirror to see the tongue tapping. The /d/ is made the same as /t/ except for it has ‘voice on’. The students can feel the difference by touching their Adam’s apple area. Also remember both of these sounds are ‘fast’ sounds that must be said quickly. If you say slowly you distort the sound. The /d/ and /t/ are difficult for some students to orally distinguish. The phonemic awareness of the ‘fast’ sounds is particularly difficult when they are blended with other consonants.

**d. /ch/ and /j/:** The /ch/ is an ‘explosive’ sound. Start in the /t/ position (tongue up touching the roof of the mouth right behind the front teeth). Also if the student has difficulty saying the /ch/ sound, start practicing with ‘nch’ blend words such as ‘lunch’, ‘pinch’, ‘ranch’ as the tongue is already raised for the /n/ sound so the /ch/ is then easier to say correctly. The /j/ is the ‘voice on’ sister sound for /ch/. The student can feel the /j/ in the Adam’s apple area.

**e. /p/ and /b/:** The /p/ is ‘popping popcorn’. The /p/ is a quick sound made by ‘popping’ the lips together just like popcorn popping. The student can also feel the air puff at each ‘pop’. Once again this is a ‘fast’ sound that must be said quickly. Demonstrate and use a mirror to help the student see how to make the /p/. The /b/ is the ‘sister sound’ made with ‘voice on’ that felt in the Adam’s apple area. Both sounds are said ‘quickly’ with the lips and puff of air.

**f. /l/:** The /l/ is a ‘lift’ sound that is made by lifting the tongue up behind the teeth. The students curl their tongue up, placing the tip behind the front teeth (in the /t/ position). Make sure they keep the tip of their tongue up behind/inside the teeth. Demonstrate and then have the student use a mirror to ‘see’ the position.

**g. /f/ and /v/:** These sounds are made by the top teeth resting on the bottom lip and blowing. The /f/ sound is the soft sound of gently blowing. The /v/ sound is the ‘voice on’ sister sound. The /v/ is the

‘vibration’ sound (/v/=vibration). The students can feel the vibrations on the lower lip as well as feel the ‘voice on’ in the Adam’s apple area.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, some Vietnamese learners and users of English make pronunciation mistakes due to lack of knowledge about the way the sounds are produced. It is also due to the influence of their mother tongue, which does not strictly require distinction between alveo-palatal consonants and alveolar consonants. Vietnamese people tend to simplify their pronunciation of their fricative consonants in terms of theory.

For Vietnamese teachers of English, mispronunciation is considered mistake that need to be corrected and improved by giving the learners more practice, mistake correction and teaching - learning procedures in which more attention should be paid to English pronunciation at the initial learning stage. For some others, it might be considered a variation of English which builds up world Englishes.

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