ANALYSIS OF MOTHER TONGUE INTERFERENCE ON VIETNAMESE ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS' ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

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ABSTRACT

English serves as a global language for communication and intercultural exchange. In Vietnam, students typically begin learning English in middle school, and the tonal-phonetic characteristics of Vietnamese often pose challenges in achieving accurate pronunciation. This study explores the impact of mother tongue on English pronunciation among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at a university in the Mekong Delta. A survey of 56 English Studies students revealed common errors, such as sound omission, confusion of similar sounds, intonation problems, and tonal interference. A comparison between first-year and fourth-year students, indicates that beginners exhibit a higher frequency of errors. Based on these findings, the study proposes practical pedagogical strategies to mitigate mother-tongue interference and enhance Vietnamese learners' communicative effectiveness in global contexts.

Từ khóa: *Mother tongue, mother tongue interference, EFL students, phonics, intonation and stress, pronunciation*

PHÂN TÍCH ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA TIẾNG MẸ ĐẺ ĐẾN PHÁT ÂM TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ NGOẠI NGỮ

TÓM TẮT

Tiếng Anh đã trở thành ngôn ngữ toàn cầu cho giao tiếp và trao đổi liên văn hóa. Tại Việt Nam, học sinh thường bắt đầu học tiếng Anh từ bậc trung học cơ sở, điều này kết hợp với đặc điểm ngữ âm và thanh điệu của tiếng Việt gây ra nhiều khó khăn trong việc phát âm tiếng Anh. Nghiên cứu này xem xét ảnh hưởng của tiếng mẹ đẻ đến phát âm tiếng Anh của sinh viên EFL tại một trường đại học ở Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long. Khảo sát 56 sinh viên chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh cho thấy các lỗi phát âm phổ biến bao gồm lược âm, nhầm lẫn âm, khó khăn về ngữ điệu và ảnh hưởng của thanh điệu tiếng Việt. Nghiên cứu cũng so sánh sinh viên năm nhất và năm tư, cho thấy sinh viên năm nhất mắc lỗi nhiều hơn. Ngoài ra, nghiên cứu đề xuất một số chiến lược thực tiễn nhằm khắc phục những hạn chế này, góp phần nâng cao hiệu quả giao tiếp cho người học tiếng Anh tại Việt Nam trong bối cảnh toàn cầu hóa.

Keywords: *Tiếng mẹ đẻ, ảnh hưởng của tiếng mẹ đẻ, sinh viên EFL, ngữ âm, ngữ điệu và trọng âm, phát âm*

1.INTRODUCTION

English has become a global lingua franca, and achieving communicative competence in English requires mastery of key components such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Among these, pronunciation plays a crucial role in ensuring intelligibility in spoken interaction, as mispronunciations frequently lead to misunderstanding. Research has shown that learners who acquire a second language after childhood often encounter greater difficulty in developing accurate pronunciation and are less likely to achieve native-like speech patterns.

In Vietnam, English is typically introduced at the secondary school level, by which time learners have already internalized the phonological system of their mother tongue. Vietnamese, as a tonal and monosyllabic language, differs substantially from English in terms of stress, rhythm, and consonant structure. As a result, Vietnamese learners commonly experience difficulties in distinguishing and producing certain English sounds, such as confusing /s/ and /ʃ/ or /θ/ and /ð/, as well as omitting final consonants. These phonological mismatches often hinder intelligibility and reduce learners' confidence in oral communication, highlighting the pervasive influence of mother tongue interference on English pronunciation.

The present study aims to identify the most influential features of the Vietnamese phonetic and

tonal system that affect English pronunciation among Vietnamese EFL learners. It also seeks to explore learners' perspectives on practical strategies to reduce the negative impact of mother tongue interference and improve pronunciation accuracy. Although previous studies have documented common pronunciation errors, limited attention has been given to determining which aspects of the Vietnamese sound system contribute most strongly to these difficulties and how learners themselves perceive potential solutions. Addressing this gap, the study provides pedagogical implications for pronunciation instruction and supports the development of more effective oral communication among Vietnamese EFL students.

1.1 Research questions

1. Which features of the Vietnamese phonetic and tonal system most strongly affect Vietnamese EFL learners' English pronunciation?

2. From EFL students' perspectives, what strategies can minimize mother tongue interference in their English pronunciation?

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 Overview of mother tongue interference in first language acquisition

The mother tongue is commonly understood as the first language acquired in early childhood and naturally used in daily communication, shaping both linguistic competence and cognitive development. In second language acquisition, the mother tongue plays a crucial role by influencing learners' perception and production of the target language.

In the Vietnamese EFL context, Vietnamese functions as the mother tongue whose phonetic and tonal characteristics strongly interfere with learners' English pronunciation. This study therefore focuses on Vietnamese as the primary source of mother tongue interference affecting English phonological acquisition.

1.2.2 Review of phonetics and tones in language learning

Phonetic and tonal systems vary significantly across languages, often leading to predictable pronunciation difficulties in second language learning. When acquiring English, learners tend to transfer phonological patterns from their native language, resulting in systematic errors.

Vietnamese differs substantially from English in both phonetics and prosody. Several English phonemes, such as /θ/ and /ð/, are absent in Vietnamese and are frequently substituted with more familiar sounds. In addition, Vietnamese does not clearly distinguish aspirated and unaspirated consonants, which creates further challenges for accurate English pronunciation.

Tonal differences also contribute to interference. While Vietnamese uses tones to distinguish lexical meaning, English relies primarily on stress and intonation for grammatical and pragmatic purposes. These structural mismatches complicate Vietnamese learners' adaptation to English pronunciation patterns and often reduce communicative effectiveness.

1.2.3 Features of Vietnamese mother tongue

Vietnamese is an isolating language with simple syllable structures and little use of inflection (Ngo, 2020). Most words are monosyllabic or bisyllabic, and consonant clusters at syllable boundaries are uncommon, contrasting with English. A key feature is its six-tone system-mid-level, falling, rising, questioning, glottalized, and heavy-which distinguishes word meaning and forms morphemes. Unlike English, which relies on stress and intonation, Vietnamese uses tone as a primary marker of meaning. Tones also convey attitudes and emotions, making them central to communication in Vietnamese.

1.2.4 Interference of mother tongue on English pronunciation

Mother tongue interference significantly affects English pronunciation among Vietnamese EFL learners. Due to the absence of certain English phonemes in Vietnamese, learners frequently substitute unfamiliar sounds or omit final consonants and consonant clusters. These substitutions often lead to reduced intelligibility and communication breakdowns.

Tonal interference also poses challenges. Vietnamese learners may rely on tonal patterns from their native language when producing English speech, which interferes with the acquisition of stress and intonation. As a result, errors in word stress or sentence rhythm may alter meaning or affect comprehensibility.

Overall, mother tongue interference among Vietnamese learners manifests primarily in two forms: phonetic interference, involving sound substitution or omission, and tonal interference, related to difficulties in adapting to English stress and intonation.

1.2.5 Previous Studies

Previous studies consistently indicate that Vietnamese

EFL learners experience pronunciation difficulties arising from both phonetic and tonal interference. Phonetic errors commonly involve sound substitution, omission of final consonants, and difficulties with consonant clusters, reflecting constraints of Vietnamese phonotactics.

Research on tonal interference shows that learners often struggle with English word stress and sentence intonation, frequently transferring Vietnamese tonal patterns into English pronunciation. These difficulties hinder intelligibility and spoken communication.

While existing studies have identified common error types, most focus on classifying pronunciation errors rather than determining which specific features of the Vietnamese sound system exert the strongest influence. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to learners' perspectives on strategies to reduce mother tongue interference. Addressing these gaps, the present study examines the most influential Vietnamese phonetic and tonal features affecting English pronunciation and explores learner-driven strategies to overcome these challenges.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study involved 56 English Studies majors at Tra Vinh University (36 males, 20 females), aged 19-21, who had completed Speaking 1 and 2 courses. A descriptive research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches was employed to address the research questions.

Quantitative data were collected through a 28-item questionnaire examining four domains: sound omission, sound confusion, intonation, and tone-related interference. Qualitative data were obtained through structured interviews with 10 participants, focusing on learners' strategies for reducing tonal influence, distinguishing English-specific sounds, and applying pronunciation strategies in daily communication.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, including reliability testing, descriptive statistics, and one-way ANOVA to identify influential variables. Interview data were transcribed and thematically coded into key categories related to pronunciation strategies, providing complementary insights into learner-driven approaches to minimizing mother tongue interference.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The reliability of the questionnaire

Table 1. Reliability statistics of the questionnaire

Table 1. Reliability statistics of the questionnaire	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.947	28

The questionnaire was completed by 56 EFL students at Tra Vinh University, with data analyzed for frequency and reliability. Results showed a high Cronbach's Alpha (.947) across 28 items, confirming reliability. Findings indicate strong mother tongue influence on English pronunciation, discussed further in the following sections.

3.2 The primary factors of mother tongue interference affecting the pronunciation of EFL students

3.2.1 Sound Omission

Table 2. Mean scores of sound omission in English pronunciation

	Mean	S.D
I tend to skip the final sound when the final sound isn't pronounced in Vietnamese (for example: "miss," "laugh").	3.09	1.12
I find it difficult to pronounce words with consonant clusters (for example: "strength," "splendid," "thrift").	3.57	1.01
I find it hard to pronounce words ending in /t/ and /d/ sounds (for example: "want," "bed").	2.75	1.21
I often drop the middle sound of words with three or more syllables (for example: "interesting" => "intresting," skipping the middle /e/; "library" => "libry," skipping the middle /r/).	3.57	1.11
When speaking quickly, I often unconsciously omit sounds in words (for example: "temperature" becomes "tempature").	3.32	1.19
Skipping final sounds has become a hard-to-fix habit in my pronunciation since I started learning English.	3.48	1.10
Skipping final sounds affects the clarity of my communication in English.	3.88	1.06
Overall mean	3.38	.76

Table 2 shows a relatively high overall mean for sound omission (M = 3.38, SD = 0.76), reflecting persistent difficulties among Vietnamese EFL learners. The most critical issue was omitting final sounds, which significantly affected clarity in communication (M = 3.88, SD = 1.06). Learners also struggled with consonant clusters (M = 3.57) and dropping middle sounds in multisyllabic words such as interesting or library (M = 3.57). These problems stem from Vietnamese phonotactics, where final consonants are unreleased and clusters are rare. Overall, sound omission emerges as a habitual issue that reduces clarity and fluency in learners' spoken English.

3.2.2 Sound Confusion

Table 3. Mean scores of sound confusion in English pronunciation

	Mean	S.D
I struggle with accurately pronouncing voiced and voiceless sounds in words with similar sounds (for example: the /k/ sound in "back" and the /g/ sound in "bag").	3.34	1.03
I tend to pronounce the sound /ʤ/ in "judge" as /ʒ/ like in "measure."	2.63	1.27
I often confuse the sounds /f/ and /v/ when pronouncing English words (for example: "fine" and "vine").	3.38	1.20
I tend to confuse the /ŋ/ sound in "sing" with the /n/ sound in "sin."	3.16	1.07
I often confuse the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ when pronouncing English words (for example: "think" and "this").	3.23	1.37
Confusing sounds affect the clarity of my communication in English.	3.86	1.00
Confusing sounds has become a hard-to-fix habit in my pronunciation since I started learning English.	3.54	1.06
Overall mean	3.30	.80

As presented in Table 3, the overall mean score for sound confusion was moderately high (M = 3.30, SD = 0.80), indicating considerable challenges for learners. The most critical issue was that confusing sounds reduced communicative clarity (M = 3.86, SD = 1.00). Common difficulties included distinguishing /f/ and /v/ (M = 3.38), /k/ and /g/ (M = 3.34), and /θ/ and /ð/ (M = 3.23). Learners also struggled with /ŋ/ versus /n/ (M = 3.16), while substitution of /ʤ/ with /ʒ/ was less frequent (M = 2.63). These confusions arise because many of these sounds share articulation points but differ in voicing, which does not exist in Vietnamese phonology. Consequently, sound confusion emerges as a persistent source of unclear speech in Vietnamese EFL learners.

3.2.3 Intonation

Table 4. Mean scores of intonation-related pronunciation difficulties

	Mean	S.D
I find it difficult to adjust my intonation for questions and statements in English.	3.52	1.01
Vietnamese influences my intonation.	3.86	1.03
I feel unnatural when changing intonation in English conversations.	3.52	1.06
I find it difficult to change my intonation for different sentence types like tag questions or negations.	3.61	1.02
My intonation is often inconsistent within the same conversation, making it hard for listeners to understand me.	3.48	1.03
Incorrect intonation affects the clarity of my communication in English.	3.86	.86
Incorrect intonation has become a hard-to-fix habit in my pronunciation since I started learning English.	3.48	1.10
Overall mean	3.62	.71

As shown in Table 4, intonation-related issues received a relatively high overall mean (M = 3.62, SD = 0.71), indicating that learners struggle to adjust English intonation. The highest scores were "Vietnamese influences my intonation" (M = 3.86) and "Incorrect intonation affects clarity" (M = 3.86), showing that mother tongue interference is widely recognized as a major barrier. Participants also reported difficulty applying intonation to different sentence types such as tag questions and negations (M = 3.61), as well as maintaining consistency within conversations (M = 3.48). These challenges likely stem from structural differences: Vietnamese uses tone to distinguish word meaning, whereas English intonation primarily conveys emotion, emphasis, and sentence structure. This mismatch results in unnatural and inconsistent intonation patterns, reducing the overall comprehensibility of Vietnamese learners' English communication.

3.2.4 Tones

Table 5. Mean scores of tone-related pronunciation difficulties

	Mean	S.D
Vietnamese tones make it difficult for me to pronounce English words with two or more syllables (for example: "considerate" and "profit").	3.10	1.16
Vietnamese tones often cause me to misplace stress when pronouncing multi-syllable English words.	3.36	1.14
I find it hard to adjust my tone when pronouncing English words with consonant clusters (for example: "strength" or "scramble").	3.38	1.10
Vietnamese tones sometimes cause me to mispronounce multi-syllable words (for example: "opportunity" and "independent").	3.10	1.16
I often have difficulty adjusting my tone to avoid confusing similar-sounding English words (for example: "record" (noun) and "record" (verb)).	3.86	.89
Incorrect tone affects the clarity of my communication in English.	4.04	.79
Incorrect tone has become a hard-to-fix habit in my pronunciation since I started learning English.	3.64	1.05
Overall mean	3.49	.80

Table 5 shows that tone-related difficulties had a relatively high mean (M = 3.49, SD = 0.80), confirming that Vietnamese tones interfere with English pronunciation. The most serious issue was "incorrect tone affects clarity," rated highest (M = 4.04, SD = 0.79). Learners also struggled to adjust tone for distinguishing similar-sounding words such as record (noun/verb) (M = 3.86), and many reported tone misuse had become a persistent habit (M = 3.64). These challenges stem from structural differences: Vietnamese relies on six lexical tones, while English uses stress and intonation for meaning and emphasis. This mismatch reduces clarity and makes accurate English pronunciation particularly demanding for Vietnamese EFL learners.

3.2.5 The extent of interference across the primary factors

Table 6. Mean scores of mother tongue interference factors

VAR00001				
	N	Mean	S.D	Std. Error
Sound Omission	56	3.38	.76	.10
Sound Confusion	56	3.30	.78	.10
Intonation	56	3.62	.71	.10
Tones	56	3.50	.80	.11
Total	224	3.44	.77	.05

Descriptive statistics show the overall mean across four factors (M = 3.44, SD = 0.77). Among them, intonation recorded the highest mean (M = 3.62, SD = 0.71), indicating that learners struggle most with adjusting intonation in English. This difficulty likely stems from the structural mismatch: Vietnamese relies on lexical tones for meaning, while English employs intonation to mark sentence type, emphasis, and emotion. Such differences make intonation one of the most persistent challenges in learners' pronunciation.

Table 7. One-way ANOVA of pronunciation interference factors

VAR00001					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.130	3	1.043	1.787	.150
Within Groups	128.421	220	.584		
Total	131.551	223			

The ANOVA results (sig. = .150) indicate no significant difference among the four factors-sound omission, sound confusion, intonation, and tone. Mean scores (3.30-3.62) suggest that all factors exert a relatively equal influence on Vietnamese EFL learners' English pronunciation, highlighting their combined impact on oral proficiency.

Table 8. Multiple comparisons of pronunciation interference factors

Dependent Variable: VAR00001						
Tukey HSD						
(I) TotalFactors	(J) TotalFactors	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Sound Omission	Sound Confusion	.07653	.14439	.952	-.2973	.4503
	Intonation	-.23724	.14439	.357	-.6110	.1365
	Tones	-.10969	.14439	.872	-.4835	.2641
Sound Confusion	Sound Omission	-.07653	.14439	.952	-.4503	.2973
	Intonation	-.31378	.14439	.134	-.6876	.0600
	Tones	-.18622	.14439	.570	-.5600	.1876
Intonation	Sound Omission	.23724	.14439	.357	-.1365	.6110
	Sound Confusion	.31378	.14439	.134	-.0600	.6876
	Tones	.12755	.14439	.813	-.2462	.5013
Tones	Sound Omission	.10969	.14439	.872	-.2641	.4835
	Sound Confusion	.18622	.14439	.570	-.1876	.5600
	Intonation	-.12755	.14439	.813	-.5013	.2462

Post hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD reveal no significant differences among the four factors, suggesting they influence learners' pronunciation almost equally. Intonation difficulties showed the highest impact (M = 3.62, SD = 0.71), followed by tones (M = 3.50, SD = 0.80), while sound omission (M = 3.38) and sound confusion (M = 3.30) were moderately high. These results confirm that Vietnamese EFL students struggle with all aspects of pronunciation, particularly in adapting intonation and tone, reflecting structural contrasts between Vietnamese and English. The findings highlight the need for pedagogical interventions to address both phonetic and prosodic challenges in improving learners' communicative clarity.

3.3 Qualitative statistics

3.3.1 Techniques for reducing Vietnamese tone influence

Most participants reported using listening and imitation (shadowing) to reduce the influence of Vietnamese tones when speaking English. By imitating native speakers through movies, podcasts, and songs, learners became more familiar with English stress and intonation patterns. Several students also emphasized practicing clear pronunciation of words and short sentences, focusing on overall intonation rather than tones.

Self-recording and playback were frequently mentioned as effective self-monitoring techniques, enabling learners to identify errors and adjust their pronunciation. Overall, strategies such as shadowing, focused pronunciation practice, and self-monitoring helped participants reduce mother tongue interference and speak more naturally and confidently.

3.3.2. Strategies for distinguishing English sounds absent in Vietnamese

All participants reported using specific strategies to

practice English sounds absent in Vietnamese. Common approaches included watching video tutorials to observe mouth and tongue movements, practicing repeatedly, and comparing production with native models.

Many learners emphasized the use of minimal pairs and repetition to distinguish similar sounds, while others relied on pronunciation tools or mirrors to monitor articulatory movements. Overall, participants agreed that consistent practice supported by visual aids and self-monitoring significantly improved their ability to produce unfamiliar English sounds, enhancing pronunciation accuracy and confidence.

3.3.3. Application of pronunciation strategies in daily communication

All participants reported regularly applying pronunciation strategies in daily English communication. Frequent use was associated with improved accuracy, increased confidence, and clearer speech. Learners emphasized that consistent application helped reduce misunderstandings and made their spoken English more natural and comprehensible.

4. CONCLUSION

This study identified four major areas of mother tongue interference in Vietnamese EFL learners' English pronunciation: sound omission, sound confusion, intonation, and tone-related influence. The findings confirm that these difficulties stem from structural differences between Vietnamese and English, while also highlighting learners' effective strategies such as shadowing, minimal pair practice, and self-monitoring to improve pronunciation accuracy and confidence.

Despite limitations related to sample size and research scope, the study provides pedagogical implications for pronunciation instruction that addresses both phonetic and prosodic interference. Future research should involve more diverse participants and examine additional contextual and psychological factors influencing pronunciation learning.

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