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**FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH INTELLIGIBILITY**

**OF NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT HUE UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM**

**FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A VIETNAMESE LECTURER OF ENGLISH**

**Abstract:** This paper will explore some definitions of *intelligibility* and try to figure out the one which is the most relevant to my context. Glancing at review of literature is to find scholars’ different viewpoints on intelligibility to offer background knowledge which may help the Vietnamese teachers and students recognize to what extent of intelligibility they are at. In terms of English as a foreign language (EFL), an overview of non-English major students’ language proficiency at Hue University, Vietnam will serve the readers a clearer picture of learners’ current status. Meanwhile, it helps them gain a tolerance in the sense of intelligibility. The final section is devoted to the insight analysis of some variables that Vietnamese students are facing to be intelligible in English. It will empower the NNES in general, the Vietnamese speakers in specific to overcome considerable barriers to totally reach mutual understanding in their communication process . And, in this, I hope my students will get some experience and lesson-learned for themselves on this subject matter to maintain and enhance their English intelligibility.

**1. Introduction**

The original motive for this paper comes from my experience and interest as a lecturer of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam where teachers and students face considerable challenges in English intelligibility. As a student majoring in English in Vietnam, I lacked opportunities to learn and practice oral skills, because I learned them mainly by repeating short conversations modeled by the teachers. I also found that my teachers used to have in-depth explanation of English lesson in Vietnamese. This led to the problem that students preferred to use Vietnamese to portray their ideas than trying to find relevant vocabulary to express themselves in English.

When I studied abroad, I also suffered from the feeling of inferior for not being able to express myself as clearly and intelligibly as I wished. As a Vietnamese lecturer of English, I wanted to avoid that problem for my students. Therefore, research into *factors affecting English* *intelligibility* of Vietnamese students has been one of my professional interests.

**2. *Intelligibility* and its Review of Literature**

The term *intelligibility* is the combination of intelligible and the suffix“-ity”. It comes from the root *intellegibilis* in Latin. It stays in literature writing and was first recorded in early Modern English (1600-1610) (1). Oxford Dictionary (2) gives a very broad and general definition of this word as “capability of being understood”.

More specifically, Smith and Nelson (1985) declared their tripartite definition of *intelligibility* as “the ability of the listener to recognize individual words or utterances; *comprehensibility*, the listener’s ability to understand the meaning of the speech or utterance in its given context, and *interpretability*, the ability of the listener to understand the speaker’s intentions behind the word or utterance”

From my perspective of Non-native English Speaker (NNES) and Vietnamese lecturer of English, *intelligibility* denotes the listeners’ language proficiency in order to understand the speaker’s message in a specific context. The term language proficiencycan be explained as individual’s ability to realize, to comprehend and to interpret the language s/he is using. If one wants to understand the spoken words or utterance of a speaker, s/he must recognize the sound first. It is not simple for audience to realize words via sounds because the Vietnamese speakers tend to ignore the last sound in English language speaking. They, for example, are accustomed to pronouncing [nai] for words as knife, nice, night, and nine. In such cases, the most relevant factor helps decode the meaning is the specific context. Besides, culture is also accounted for influencing on context. Vietnamese people usually have the habit of beating around the bush to describe their ideas. If someone wants to know my age, for instance, he may not ask me how old or how young I am, he might ask me when I finished high school or how many years I have left my high school. These questions seem not to be related to the context of inquiring my age, based on this clue; they however may infer how old I am now.

*Intelligibility,* Mc Kay (2002) also agreed, is a “complex issue” which involving tripartite matters of “*intelligibility* (recognizing an expression), *comprehensibility* (knowing the meaning of the expression), and *interpretability* (knowing what the expression signiﬁes in a particular socio-cultural context)”. For example, if a Vietnamese learner can realize that the term *“sing”* is an English word not a Vietnamese word, s/he is intelligible. Moreover, if s/he is good at vocabulary is enough to know the meaning of this term, it is s/he who is comprehensible. And above all, if s/he understands the utterance “You sing beautifully.” is a comment on her/is nice, gentle, sweet voice, it means s/he is able to interpret his foreign language.

The understanding between and among participants involving in the communication process is another issue related to *intelligibility* mentioned by Mc Kay (2002). He reports that Bamgbose (1998) points out the coding of language use was not as important as the mutual understanding between and among participants in the communication process. For instance, a young guy who wants to show his heart to the girl friend is too shy to say “I love you”, he just gives her a rose and says “I like you”. His girl friend, however can feel his love. He is said to be intelligible.

For Jaradurai (2007), she tries to point out some inadequacies in the conceptual and

empirical past researches of intelligibility. At the same time she also tries to give ways for view of “reconceptualization and context-sensitive” by proving that NNS may be highly intelligible though they have foreign accent. In her viewpoint, intelligibility has shifted from NES (Native English Speaker) to NNES (Non-Native English Speaker). She lists many researches in this field to prove that NNES in many cases may be more intelligibility than NES. Besides, she emphasizes on “what competent and effective speakers do to maintain and enhance intelligibility in their daily interactions in a range of situations with a variety of interlocutors, rather than focus on the features of an idealized native speaker variety”. It can be seen that Jaradurai has the same opinion with Smith and Nelson (1985) “intelligibility is interactional between speaker and listener”, in other words, the participants should interact to reach to mutual understanding in their communication process.

**3. An overview of Non-English major students at Hue University:**

My Non-English major students come from the College of Foreign Languages- Hue University, Hue City, Vietnam. They are at least as young as 18 years old or a little bit older. They usually start to learn English at grade 6 which means they begin to study English at the age 11 or 12 (Nunan. 2003: 594). Although they have 6 years of English studying during their secondary and high schools, they are still at low English proficiency due to such facts they are not English major, the qualities of teaching and studying, environments for students practicing what they have studied, the attitude of their parents toward their foreign language studying.

The university provides 105 periods of Basic English within the first three semesters of the Bachelor program. The schedule is one class meeting per week and each meeting is two periods which consists of 100 minutes. The class’ size is dependent on some variables as the number of students who enroll in the class, the schedule of each class and the teacher who teaches the subject. Each class, however, is under a limitation of 40 students

**4. Variables affecting English Intelligibility of Vietnamese students:**

From the perspective of Vietnamese lecturer of English, I think language proficiency, speaker factor, listener factor, mother tongue, context and culture are considerable variables accounted for *intelligibility*.

**Language proficiency factor**

Traditionally, English teaching in Vietnam has focused on writing, reading and grammar. Consequently, as Schafer (1974: 40) observes, Vietnamese students “have a fairly large passive vocabulary, a good knowledge of grammatical rules, and can read English fairly well, but they have problems in oral communication”. Furthermore, the prevailing model of teaching and learning is ‘teachers teach and students learn’, in other words, ‘teachers dictate and students copy’. This model leads to a general weakness in students’ oral skills. In other words, students cannot express themselves as they wish. In fact, for good oral communication, students have actually to learn to listen, as well as to learn to speak. (Byrne. 1984)

**Speaker factor**

There have been many researches pointing out that accentedness is the one of the essential variables for comprehensibility and intelligibility for NNS- NS and NNS-NNS. Among Vietnamese speakers, accentedness is not a serious problem because it is not so difficult for them to recognize the words spoken by their interlocutor. On the contrary, accentedness becomes serious between Vietnamese and foreigner in their communication act. To explain this situation, foreign accentedness is accounted for the one of the reasons. I think there should be further research on this field to find out some other reasons.

In addition, I agree with the suggestion by Derwing and Munro (1997: 15) that improvement in NNS comprehensibility “is more likely to occur with improvement in grammatical and prosodic proficiency than with a sole focus on correction of phonemic errors”. The most common error which Vietnamese learners have committed is using the verb “to be” in most of their utterances. The students, for example, usually say “She *is* go to school.” Instead of “She goes to school” or “I *am* swim well*”* instead of “I can swim or I am good at swimming”. In terms of grammar, using the simple present to describe the past actions is another mistake they have made. For instance, one of my old students used to tell me that “I *see* you at the shopping mall last Sunday.” Or they may ask “Where *do* you go yesterday?” I used to try my best to help my students correct these kinds of mistakes but it seemed that my efforts did not work well. I finally found that we do not shift the verb form from simple present tense to simple past tense to illustrate a certain past action in our home language in the terms of in speaking. We simply just add an adverb of time to identify the time happening of the action whereas in English language using, the speaker has to shift the verb form to have an agreement with the time which the action happened. The following sentences can be used as an illustration for this issue:

“I see her today.” (Toi gap co ay hom nay) (Hom nay means today)

“I saw her yesterday.” (Toi da o gap co ay hom qua.) (Hom qua means yesterday)

In order to be intelligible, furthermore, the speaker should not feel nervous, confused or stress in his/er communication act because this kind of feeling will make the language user tongue-tied or not to be able to find the proper words to express him or herself. This situation can be found in the conversations between student and teacher, the student is rather nervous or less confident to state his or her idea personally to the teacher. In the same manner, the staff cannot well describe his/er idea to the boss, or superior. It leads to communication’s breaking down.

**Listener factor**

My listening teaching experience shows me that Vietnamese students prefer NNES than NES. Students used to request their teacher to repeat what had been said in the audio tape which they had listened. It can be inferred that the Vietnamese listeners are familiar with the Vietnamese accented English than the native one. In other words, Vietnamese Speakers of English are more intelligible for Vietnamese learners.

Another listener factor associated with intelligibility of my students is the feeling of inferior. In an interview with my listening students, I am reported that they “feel tense and nervous” when they listen to a native speaker because they think that NSs are great at speaking in comparision with NNSs. This issue will influence their listeneing skill in their social conversations. The less-confident feeling, thus will also affect their listening ability.

**Mother tongue factor**

Mother tongue, according to Singhal (2010:1), can be referred as “the language an infant learns as part of growing up”. In other words, it is the first language acquisition of their native language. He also warns that “to create a fluency in a new language, it becomes important to avoid the mother tongue for interaction at later stages of second language learning.” Vietnamese language, therefore, has an influence on Vietnamese students in their foreign language acquisition as well as language competence. As far as I can observe from my professional experience, Vietnamese learners tend to translate their idea from mother tongue into English. It may cause some troubles for the foreigners or interlocutors to understand as the translation does not sometimes make sense in English. In an interview to apply for a part-time job, for example, my student as an interviewee said to the interviewer that “Consider the company’s money as mine; I will try to earn more”. This utterance will cause a misinterpretation that she might want to have corruption from the company’s interest and the job might not be offered to her because of not being intelligible. She, in this situation, was deeply influenced by Vietnamese language. What she did mean was “I promise I will try my best to work for the company’s interest.”

In terms of mother tongue, another factor influencing *intelligibility* is that we do not pronounce the final sound of Vietnamese words. Vietnamese students, thus, usually miss the final sounds in English pronunciation. The interlocutor therefore cannot recognize the words spoken by the source like Vietnamese speakers often pronounce [hau] for the two words house and how. Similarly to this case, they may say [ten] for ten, tend, tense, tenth or [si:] for see and cease.

**Context factor**

As what I mentioned earlier above, students are used to being taught to build new sentences by imitating the models offered in the textbooks or by their teachers. These sentences do not have any contexts, when the learners put their sentences into practice, their idea cannot be intelligible. For instance, one may call his friend and say “I have emailed you already. I am looking forward to your *answer*.” This will confuse the interlocutor because he does not know what kind of answer he must give to the speaker. The speaker actually has to use the word “reply” instead of “*answer”*.

The other example for this case is that students are taught to build the sentences with the verb “drink” as:

I drink beer.

I drink juice.

I drink water.

Then, they come up with a new application “I drink *medicine*.” The students do not know that medicine cannot be used with the verb “drink”; they have to use the verbal phrase “to take medicine”.

Another issue related to context is the students mechanically put in use what they studied without any concerns about formal, informal or polite situations. It sometimes makes the interlocutor feel uncomfortable or even confused for what has been heard.When a teacher first time comes to teach in a class, for instance, Vietnamese students usually ask for his or her introduction by such questions as “What is your name? How old are you? Where do you come from? Are you single or married?” These questions make the teacher feel uncomfortable as if s/he were questioned by the police. If the teacher is a Vietnamese one, s/he will be easier to sympathize for the students than the teacher who is a foreigner. You may feel surprised and want to explore the reason for it. It is simple because the Vietnamese teacher knows that the students do not want to hurt the teacher or are impolite to her/im; they just simply apply what they have been taught in their oral conversation mechanically without concerning about the relevant contexts. In other words, it is the impact of the prevailing method of teaching English in Vietnam as mentioned above.

**Culture factor**



Figure 1: Cultural thought pattern by Kaplan. T (1972) cited by Reid (1993.60)

Kaplan’s (1972) diagram above shows that direct expression is preferred in Anglo- American culture, whereas, Oriental people including Vietnamese are likely to prefer indirect patterns. In my culture, we are accustomed to beating around the bush, hesitating or not getting to the main point at once because it considered being rude to go straight towards the main point. This cultural trait easily leads to the problem that the audience or listeners get confused and might miss the focussing point of the speaker. If a Vietnamese student wants to borrow some cash from one of his classmates, for example, he will not personally tell his friend that “I am short of money. Would you mind lending me some?” He may begin by “I have to spend so much this month. My monthly allowance is not enough.” The interlocutor might think this guy wants to request the college for a higher allowance due to the currency falling down. The speaker, then, will continue the conversation by “I phoned my mom already and she promised to send me money within 3 days”. The listener may infer this guy is waiting for the help from his family. In such case if the listener is not a Vietnamese, he might misinterpret the focused point of the conversation because he does not know the speaker wants to borrow some cash from him but the speaker does want to. It is one of the typical ways that Vietnamese people usually reveal their ideas. Culture, thus, does have an influence on Vietnamese speakers’ English intelligibility.

**5. Conclusion**

In short, this paper shows the different definitions of the term *intelligibility* and suggests the one which is most relevant to the context of Vietnam. Some scholars’ viewpoint on the field are presented to offer Vietnamese teachers and students a background knowledge of *intelligibility* which I hope it can help them recognize to what extent of *intelligibility* they are at.

In terms of English as an international language (EIL), an overview of the students’ English language proficiency might help them gain a tolerance for *intelligibility.* An in-depth analysis of variables affecting *intelligibility* will empower the NNES in general, the Vietnamese teachers and students in specific to overcome considerable barriers to totally reach mutual understanding or *intelligibility* in their communication process *.*

And, in this, I hope:

There should have some further research to be done in this field in the future;

My colleagues and Non-English major Vietnamese students will get some experience and lesson-learned for themselves on this subject matter to maintain and enhance their English intelligibility.

**Notes**

(1) <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/intelligibility>

(2) http://oxforddictionaries.com

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