***What are some effective ways to help the first year students of International Studies Department, College of Foreign Languages, Hue University improve their pronunciation in Speaking class?***

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**Abstract**

Today, Vietnamese EFL students, especially the first year students still have many problems in using English as a foreign language and teachers also have difficulties in teaching them. As in International Studies department, we offer the major of American Studies which includes Speaking as a compulsory subject. Based on the experiences in teaching pronunciation in Speaking classes at present, we can find out that my first year students of American Studies have many problems in pronouncing English accurately, and imitating the native accent. This study is conducted to discover effective ways that can be used to help the first year students of International Studies learn pronunciation better. We focused on three main ways, including: video watching, peer correction and delayed correction in order to if these are the best ones to teach pronunciation to our students. The result of the study has approved that most of the methods we have been carrying out are good and helpful in showing students the ways how to practice and have right pronunciation. However, there are still some limitations in these ways, which need to be addressed in further research. Hopefully, these experiences from this research will improve our teaching and help our students have better pronunciation in speaking.

**Introduction**

Learning English as a foreign language is becoming more popular and more Vietnamese students are choosing English as their major in college today. However, EFL students, especially first year students still have many problems in using/learning English and teachers also have difficulties in teaching them. At the department of International Studies, College of Foreign Languages, we offer the major of American Studies which includes Speaking as a compulsory subject. During the time of co-teaching with foreign teachers in the past and basing on the experiences in teaching pronunciation to students in Speaking classes at present, we can find out that many first year students of American Studies have problems in pronouncing English accurately, and imitating the native accent.

In fact, the teaching of pronunciation and speaking is not the focus in high schools in Vietnam, which results in first-year students’ lack of awareness as well as weak performance in speaking and pronunciation. Moreover, students entered our department with low level of proficiency in English and they had limited usage of English in communication and study. Therefore, they lack confidence in speaking English and they cannot have good ability and skills in pronouncing English words. Furthermore, they hardly had a chance to communicate with foreigners, particularly native speakers. As a result, they cannot know exactly how to have good accent. As teachers of International Studies Department, we really wanted to find out appropriate teaching methods to solve the problems of our students. That is why we wanted to conduct this study to discover effective strategies that can be used to help the first year students of International Studies improve their pronunciation. It leads to our research question for this study as follows:

*What are some effective ways to help the first year students of International Studies Department, College of Foreign Languages, Hue University improve their pronunciation in Speaking class?*

**Literature Review**

Teaching pronunciation has been important in teaching English to EFL students and has been an interest for many teachers. Dr Michael Wei (2006) contended that pronunciation was an integrated and integral part of language learning that supported the communicative process and anyone who wanted to gain communicative competence would have to study pronunciation.[[1]](#footnote-1) There are different methods of and approaches to teaching pronunciation. The purpose of these methods is to help students perceive the native sounds and imitate those new sounds thanks to the teachers’ instructions.[[2]](#footnote-2) One useful way of improving students’ pronunciation among those techniques is video watching because “[t]he setting, action, emotions, gestures, etc., that our students can observe in a video clip, provide an important visual stimulus for language production and practice.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Particularly, as Mark McKinnon once suggested “movies provide a good source of authentic listening material for the practice of pronunciation…. The use of video is an advantage here as it is an emotional scene with lots of gestures, adding weight to the situation.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Besides, among many methods of and approaches to teaching pronunciation, providing feedback is an important way to help students make progress in their speaking. It is essential for teachers to give comments on students’ performance as learners themselves hardly realize if they are having correct pronunciation or not.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to Lyster and Ranta (1997), there are six main types of feedback including *recast, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, explicit correction and repetition*.[[6]](#footnote-6) As the authors defined:

1. Recast involves the teacher’s reformulation of all or part of a student’s utterance minus the error.
2. Clarification request refers to the fact that a repetition or reformulation is required as the learner’s utterance has been misunderstood or has had some mistakes.
3. Metalinguistic feedback contains either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student’s utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form.
4. Elicitation is a technique that teachers use to prompt the learners to self-correct by pausing to allow the students to finish their speaking, using questions to elicit correct forms or asking students to reformulate their utterance.
5. Explicit correction refers to the explicit provision of the correct form.
6. Repetition refers to the teacher’s repetition, in isolation, of the student’s erro-neous utterance.[[7]](#footnote-7)

They also indicated that error treatment provided helpful and consistent feedback from peers and teachers so that students could have better results in learning.[[8]](#footnote-8) Therefore, error correction based on peer correction or delayed correction is popular and important in showing what problems students are dealing with.

Peer correction is one of mostly-used techniques in teaching pronunciation. In this way of correction, learners can correct each other as they may feel more confident talking to their friends rather than their teachers. According to Richards, J. (2015), peer correction was understood as a technique used when learners work in pairs or groups, talking and listening to each other to help raise the awareness of their own errors by noting them down.[[9]](#footnote-9) Therefore, peer correction is often the first strategy used in teaching pronunciation. In this way of correction, learners can correct each other as they may feel more confident talking to their friends rather than their teachers. Moreover, Richards, J. (2015) emphasized the role of peer and teacher feedback in improving the learner’s pronunciation.[[10]](#footnote-10) Especially, teacher feedback is more important in guiding the students to the correct pronunciation. In addition, Lyster and Ranta (1997) indicated that through giving feedback and having interaction with students, teachers can help students make more relevant language forms or features in communication.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Another technique used is delayed correction where a teacher takes some time to correct the students after they make a pronunciation mistake. The purpose of this method is usually to help students gain fluency in producing target sounds. As Simon Mumford and Steve Dam (2005) mentioned in their work, when the aim is fluency, ‘gentle’ or delayed correction techniques are required in order not to damage either the flow of the activity or the confidence of the learners.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We have applied different techniques in teaching pronunciation to EFL students in speaking classes. In our study, we chose to examine the video-watching, peer correction and delayed correction methods to see if they are helpful in improving students’ pronunciation when they speak.

**Methods**

***Participants***

This study was conducted at International Studies Department (ISD), College of Foreign Languages, Hue University. The participants were forty-two first year students of ISD, divided into 2 groups. Those two classes took place at different times. The students did not have the same English learning background. Most of them have studied English since primary school. Meanwhile, some others only started learning English since secondary or high school. The difference in the students’ levels of English was also shown from their grades of English when they had taken the entrance examination.

***Data collection tools***

The data for the study was mainly collected through our notes from observation that we had been making during the 4 weeks we carried out the teaching methods. In particular, we let students watch the videos of native speakers Then, we applied the corrective feedback which included peer correction and delayed correction in the hope of bringing out the best in the students. After sixteen periods of implementing these techniques in two Speaking classes, we gave them a test to evaluate the effectiveness of these teaching tools in order to find the best ways to improve the students’ pronunciation. It is undeniable that both of us have carried out these techniques here and there during our time of teaching. However, we have not been well aware if they should be considered useful in most speaking classes or not. Therefore, we would like to reassess the effects of these methods, seeing if they are good enough to be used as our teaching methods to help improve students’ pronunciation in Speaking classes.

**Results and Analysis**

***Technique 1: Video watching***

The first technique that we applied is video-watching. We let the students watch the videos in which native teachers show them how to pronounce some sounds correctly. Then we could observe their attitudes and reactions as followed:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Attitudes** | **Reactions** |
| Positive | Being interested in the videos |
| Being comfortable |
| Being able to imitate while watching |
| Negative | Being impossible to catch the whole sentence |
| Some prefer the teacher in class to read each sentence again |

The first impression we got when showing them the videos was that they showed quite a huge interest in watching them. It may be due to the fact that they could see directly the movements of the teacher’s mouth. To the first year students, staring at their teacher’s mouth is not something they do every day. So they may find watching the mouth movements in the videos more comfortable than staring at the teacher’s mouth all the time. Another reason can be the clear natural voice of native teachers. The students, we believe, were attracted to the native speakers, to whom they had not had a chance to listen so often. However, we also noticed some frowning as an expression of negative attitude. The low listening skill should take the blame in this case. The students may find it hard to understand foreign native speakers at this stage of English proficiency.

***Technique 2: Peer correction***

The second technique that we implemented is peer correction. After showing videos and giving lessons on rules of pronouncing, we let the students practice in pairs and groups of three and give peer correction. From our observation, we can put their attitudes in the categories as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Attitudes** | **Reactions** |
| Positive | Speak to their partners |
| Be eager to fix their partners’ mistakes |
| Negative | Be hesitant to speak |
| Speak really softly |

On the one hand, most of the students expressed their positive attitudes towards this way of practicing the pronunciation. The students were willing and happy to practice speaking to their partners when they were asked to work in pairs. They were even eager to correct their partners’ mistakes. This could be due to the friendly environment that they were working in. As friends, they have a close relationship with their fellow students, which created little stress or pressure on them. The students felt free to speak English in their ways, and they even sought the teacher’s help in pronouncing some new words without any reluctance. Having a friend and their support can be the reason for this attitude. On the other hand, some students kept quite a negative attitude toward working in pairs. They were hesitant to practice speaking in English to their friends, or if they were not, they did speak very softly. In very few cases, some just kept silent themselves and asked their partners to speak. This might come from the students’ timidity as well as low English proficiency. As a result, peer correction might not work in this case. One weak point we particularly noticed in peer correction strategy carried out in those two classes is the fact that the whole pair or group had wrong pronunciation. This, in our opinion, was because of each student’s incorrect way of pronouncing the words. This made it harder for the students to practice as they might think that they were right, but actually, they were all wrong. It also was difficult for the teachers as we could not take good control of what was going on in each pair or group while they were speaking. The reason might be the fact that there were about eight or nine pairs and groups working at the same time. Sometimes, we could hear some wrong pronunciation, but sometimes we could not. From this aspect, we can say that peer correction does not always work well in our Speaking classes.

***Technique 3: Delayed correction***

The last technique that we used is delayed correction, which brought up the attitudes and reactions below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Attitudes** | **Reactions** |
| Positive | Be able to gain correct pronunciation |
| Be voluntary to speak out loud |
| Negative | Refuse to volunteer to speak |
| Have incorrect pronunciation |

This technique was deployed in the hope of helping the students gain correct pronunciation. After letting them work in pairs, or groups of three, we asked them to pronounce words and sentences out loud for the whole class to hear and evaluate. If they had wrong pronunciation, we would correct their mistakes after they finished, then ask the whole class to practice again with them. Most of the students were willing to speak and learn from their mistakes. It is easy to understand this situation because in delayed correction, students do not feel discouraged from speaking. Moreover, like other Vietnamese teachers, we tended to have slow pace of speaking when we pronounce something and we used both English and Vietnamese. We also gave them more details on how they should have pronounced those words and sentences while speaking at the end of the lesson. As a result, the students may find it easier for them to understand more deeply. This helps us come to a conclusion that the help from teacher in class is important and necessary for students to improve their pronunciation. However, there were students refusing to speak and having wrong pronunciation, even after working with their friends. We believe that this is because of their loss of concentration when listening to their friends and teacher. Also, their low English proficiency could contribute to their inability to pronounce words and sentences in correct ways.

Among those three ways, we found that the delayed correction might be the most effective way when helping students with their pronunciation. With their English levels, students have some problems practicing accurate native accent with the help from videos and peer correction. However, the reactions of almost every student are different. For each technique, some reacted positively while others reacted negatively. It was obvious that there was no perfect way to teach the students how to pronounce correctly. From our observation, with the help of the teacher during the delayed correction, they can understand more deeply what they need to correct and how to pronounce correctly. In a nutshell, delayed correction has been proved to be the most effective way to help students better their pronunciation.

**Discussion**

By conducting the above study, we had the chance to confirm what ways can be useful in providing us with better teaching experiences to help our students improve their pronunciation. The results of the study show that most of the methods we had been using are good and helpful in showing the ways how to practice and have right pronunciation when speaking. Particularly, video watching gave the students the opportunities to listen to native people talking and then they could imitate their accent and improve their own accent. They sometimes had difficulties in catching the whole long sentences though. Moreover, peer correction enhanced the cooperation between two students and they could learn from each other, which led to their self confidence in speaking and pronouncing the words. More importantly, by delayed correction, teachers helped students to realize their pronunciation mistakes after they watched videos and imitated the accent, and after they practiced pronunciation in pairs or in small groups. From that, students could improve and have better pronunciation. These good sides are clearly revealed in the results of the study after these methods were applied in our lessons for four weeks: only 4% of the students failed in the test. This approves that most of the methods we have been carrying out are good and helpful in showing students the ways how to practice and have right pronunciation. However, the result of the test is not as good as we expected when the number of students who got good marks is low (only 4% also) and most of the students have average and low marks. This is explained by the fact that they could only have correct pronunciation for the words or phrases they had already learned in speaking class. They could not have right pronunciation for the words/phrases that they have yet to practice. Thus, it may be said that this research helped us to realize the negative side of these methods that led to this result. In fact, we only had the students practice some words or phrases under our instructions but did not ask them to have self-practice with more new words. In addition, occasionally, students did not have enough time to practice their pronunciation by themselves in class.

**Conclusion**

On the whole, from this study, we can know more clearly about our important roles as teachers in giving rules to students and instructing them to have correct pronunciation. Furthermore, we need to let students know that their understanding and self-practice are very important in improving their learning. More necessarily, teachers have to arrange time in an appropriate way to give students more time and chances to have self-practice and help students learn effectively in speaking class. As a result, we will keep applying these techniques in the order of video watching, peer correction and delayed correction so that students have more opportunities to practice themselves, interact with each other and improve their pronunciation under the teacher’s help. Hopefully, these experiences from this research will improve our teaching and help our students have better pronunciation in speaking class.

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