

Suprasegmental Errors, Pronunciation Instruction and Communication

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on findings from an investigation into the reason why 50 Vietnamese adult EFL learners have made so many pronunciation errors, particularly suprasegmental errors. The data of this qualitative research study provides evidence that pronunciation instruction was focused on individual sounds (segmentals) and tended to overlook suprasegmentals. Additionally, the study shows that lack of exposure to foreigners, both inside and outside the classroom, is one of the main factors in determining the participants' pronunciation errors.

INTRODUCTION

There is agreement among current proponents of the teachability of L2 pronunciation that suprasegmentals need to be explicitly taught (Anderson-Hsieh, Riney, & Koehler, 1994;

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Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson, and Koehler, 1992; Celce-Murcia, et al., 1996; Gilbert, 1995; McNerney and Mendelsohn, 1992; Morley, 1994 as cited in Robertson, 2003, p.7). Wong (1993) highlighted the importance of suprasegmental features of pronunciation and suggested, that “[t]he most relevant features of pronunciation—stress, rhythm, adjustments/reductions, logical stress, and intonation—play a greater role in English communication than the individual sounds themselves” (p.7). This was also recognized by Nakashima (2006), who claimed that suprasegmental errors have a stronger impact on the intelligibility of language output of Japanese English speakers than segmental errors. Anderson-Hsieh et al. (1992) also believed “[s]uprasegmental errors have a more serious effect on intelligibility than segmental errors,” and state that this is because “prosody provides the framework for utterances and directs the listener’s attention to information the speaker regards as important” (p. 531). Additionally, Wong (1993) emphasized:

Teaching speech from the perspective of suprasegmentals seems indispensable for the purpose of achieving real communication. Learning pronunciation should not be limited to comparing individual vowel and consonant sounds in a given word, as has often been the case with pronunciation learning in the past. Focusing on individual vowel and consonant sounds is only the first step in learning to speak and understand English. (p.19)

This view is also widely held among teachers and textbook writers (Burgess and Spencer, 2000).

However, recently in Vietnamese educational institutions, if pronunciation is taught, it is usually only taught at the segmental level. This can be found in the past studies as conducted by (Bui 2006, Ha 2005, and Nguyen, 2007). Ha (2005) recommended in her study’s conclusion to all her colleagues that university teachers in English departments should pay attention to teaching segments, as the findings from her study show that an investigated cohort of final-year students majoring in English for teachers had a serious English problem with

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pronunciation of English individual sounds. Such an emphasis on teaching segmental features is also pointed out by Bui (2006), who stated “[w]hen dealing with pronunciation, teachers simply turn on the tape to let students listen and repeat. Few teachers stop to explain to students the mechanism of producing sounds. Consequently, students easily forget the correct pronunciation of words” (p. 10). This problem is often compounded by the students' own lack of awareness of their communication and pronunciation problems, particularly related to suprasegmental features, which play a crucial role in English pronunciation instruction.

After leaving high school and moving on to university, many students have very low communicative competence because at high schools, grammar and reading are still the first priorities since the assessment practices have not been changed and the learners' English competence is measured by grammar-based tests (Dang, 2006). Even in tertiary education, developing students' oral competence is paid little attention in the second language curriculum. The neglect in training Vietnamese university students' English speaking and listening skills is partly identified by Bui's (2006) study conducted at Hanoi College of Science, Vietnam National University. She claimed:

The textbooks cover four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, at the end of each semester, students are assessed based on a written test on reading and writing skills only. As a result, many students and even teachers are examination-oriented. (p. 3)

Bui (2006) further suggested “[t]eachers spend time developing reading and writing skills while ignoring listening and speaking skills. This is likely to happen not at a single university in Vietnam, but across the whole spectrum” (p. 3).

An assumption arising from this is whether or not the lack of understanding of suprasegmental features in English pronunciation instruction (combined with insufficient usage of English in communication) could be major causes of pronunciation errors, particularly syllable-structure errors and rhythm errors (Dang, 2013) made by Vietnamese

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adult EFL learners. This assumption is verified by Dang (2013) on a cohort of 50 Vietnamese adult EFL learners from Vietnam via a qualitative study on why Vietnamese adult EFL learners made a great number of pronunciation errors.

METHODOLOGY

Research Question

The study focuses on exploring major causes for so many pronunciation errors, particularly syllable errors and rhythm errors (Dang, 2013) of Vietnamese adult EFL learners, significantly reducing their intelligibility as demonstrated in the first phase of the study. Thus, the research question which needs to be examined is: why have an investigated cohort of students made many pronunciation errors?

Interviews

This study collected data from four separate interviews with four Vietnamese lecturers of English with different volunteer students from the investigated cohort of the 50 participants in Dang's previous study. The data were analyzed on the basis of subjectivist viewpoints that reality is what each person interprets it to be, that researchers interact with the subjects of study to obtain data and that inquiry changes both the researcher and the subjects (Coll & Chapman 2000; Cousins 2002). The selection of the participants (lecturers) was guided by the criterion that three of the four interviewees taught pronunciation. At Vietnamese universities it is very often the case that those who teach first year students are the best English

Department graduates who have spent three years as teaching assistants. The fourth interviewee was a team leader, who had over nine year experience in teaching English at the university where this study was conducted. These instructors taught according to a rotational system, so that they conducted tutorials in all the five classes with 300 first-year students. All these circumstances qualified the four tutors as appropriate participants for the interviews since they had potential insights into the reasons why their students have pronunciation problems, what pronunciation aspects have been taught and how they have been taught at the English Department.

Preparation of interviews

It can be said that the preparation of the interviews for this research was a crucial step because it directly affected the success of data collection. In this study, the preparation of the interviews involved selective sampling (who would participate in these interviews), decisions about what data would be prioritized (shown via an interview protocol), what types of interviews would be conducted and where the interviews were to happen in order to limit potential bias.

Interview Protocol

Designing an interview protocol is of a great significance. Creswell (2008) suggested that “[a]n interview protocol serves the purpose of reminding the researcher of the questions and it provides a means for recording notes” (p.233). The interview protocol for this research consisted of five questions. The first question served as an icebreaker, encouraging the interviewee to talk more. The second question was posed to examine what the factors are in

determining the students' pronunciation errors. The third question came from the assumption that there could have been some difficulties among teachers in enhancing pronunciation, particularly at the suprasegmental level. The fourth question was included in the hope that the researcher might be able to gain more data on the participants' experiences and problems with teaching pronunciation. The last question explored what pronunciation elements were being taught and the method for how they were taught in the classroom. The interviews were individually conducted face-to-face in a semi-structured manner and the following questions were asked:

- Could you tell me something about yourself? (E.g. Your occupation, your institution, your role)
- Why do you think university students who major in English have difficulties in oral communication with foreigners?
- What are the difficulties you have faced in teaching pronunciation?
- How did you address these problems?
- What aspects of pronunciation have you explicitly taught in the classroom to enhance the Vietnamese adult EFL learner's speech intelligibility?

Conducting the Interview

A quiet and suitable location for conducting the interviews was selected. In agreement with the literature I believe that the respondents' responses could expose their interiors' (knowledge, motives and meanings) or make valid descriptions of exteriors, as cited in Baker and Johnson, 1998 with the idea that "[r]espondents' answers represent their 'interiors' (knowledge, beliefs, motives, meanings) or give valid descriptions of 'exteriors, or can do so under ideal conditions, treats language as a transparent medium for expressing and

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exchanging ideas” (Kress, 1988; Silverman, 1993; Baker, 1997). The researcher believes together with Silverman (2004) that in an interview, an interviewer talks less and an interviewee talks more. During the interviews, probes were used to obtain additional information in case some points in the interview needed to be clarified or expanded on by the interviewees.

Tape Transcription

The interviews were taped and transcribed. Previously consent was sought from the interview subjects to record their contribution. In addition to listening to the interview with foci on the interviewees’ intonation, in this study, heavy stress (loudness), overlap and turn-taking, and long pauses were included in transcription since these features imply what the subject wanted to convey. The transcripts were sent to the interviewees for verification. Suggestions for corrections if necessary were welcomed in order to make sure that the data was exact.

Interview Data Analysis

The data analysis process undertaken involved a coding-based analysis of ideas and themes in the interview transcripts using discourse analysis (DA). The use of themes is one of the common ways to analyse qualitative data, as Creswell (2008) stated “[t]hemes are similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the database, they form a core element in qualitative analysis” (p. 256). The use of themes is also one of different forms of Discourse Analysis. This view is identified by Fulcher (2012), who suggested “[t]hematic analysis is about trying to identify meaningful categories or themes in a body of data. By looking at the

text, the researcher asks whether a number of recurring themes can be abstracted about what is being said” (p. 4). In this study, first by listening to the interactions and reading the transcripts, chunking the data, categorizing it, moving it around and rearranging it, then analyzing initial data, and eliminating redundancies, major themes related to the research question, “Why an investigated cohort of Vietnamese speakers make so many pronunciation errors?” were identified. Then, in order to gain an insight into the major themes, the study tried to discover the socially constructed reality of participants through how language was used in the interview texts.

Discourse Analysis is a linguistic approach to talk and text that tries to see how the speakers’ choice of words construct “social reality”, as discourse researchers argue, “[p]eople construct their own ‘versions’ of social reality in everyday conversation” (Abell & Stokoe, 1999, p. 298). According to Halliday, the major developer of Systemic Functional Grammar in the 1960s, DA explores how language is used in social contexts to achieve particular goals such as conveying information/ideas (as cited in O’Connell 2012, p.2). Potter and Wetherell (1987) stated, “[p]eople use their language to do things” (p. 32). In this study, the interview data were analysed on the basis of DA with a focus on themes and language exposed via what the interviewee says.

INTERPRETATION OF TEACHERS’ INTERVIEWS

Introduction

This section presents the interpretation of teacher interviews through the identification of themes, using DA techniques. It aims to verify through additional research the following points: first, to establish that the teachers who were chosen for the interviews were the right

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subjects, and were able to provide trustworthy information for this study; second, to gain additional data for triangulation such as from the questionnaire data and individual interviews from ten of the 50 subjects in order to increase the validity of the findings in relation to the main research question ‘Why do the investigated cohort of 50 Vietnamese adult EFL learners have serious pronunciation problems, particularly at suprasegmental level and third, to find further rich data and reasons for the participants’ weaknesses in their English pronunciation. All these issues were investigated through four themes: social context; students’ oral and pronunciation competence; problems lecturers have in their pronunciation instruction; and pronunciation pedagogy. Table 1 below is a summary of the findings according to the themes gained from the four interview transcripts.

Theme-based Analysis and DA

Theme-based Analysis

The assumption was that some reality – knowledge, beliefs, stories and perspectives – pre-existed before the interview. This approach provides for a coding-based analysis of ideas and themes in the interview transcripts (Baker and Johnson, 1998). In other words, the use of themes is one of the ways to analyse qualitative data (Creswell, 2008, p. 256). By listening to the interaction, reading the transcripts, chunking the data, categorizing them, moving them around and rearranging them (Silverman, 2004); through initial data analyses; and through the elimination of redundancies, four major themes were recognized in these interviews. The major themes were 1) social context and interviewees; 2) students’ oral and pronunciation competence; 3) what aspects of pronunciation were taught and how they were instructed; and 4) problems teachers had faced in pronunciation instruction. DA techniques were used to

analyse the data and classify within the identified themes. The results are summarised in Table 1.

DA and Thematic Analysis

Discourse Analysis is a way of understanding social interactions. There are various forms of discourse analysis. However, this study focuses on using themes to analyse the interview texts. Therefore, the interview talk (transcripts) were read with care using skimming and scanning skills for this purpose. Four major themes were identified and classified. In DA, language plays an important role in understanding what is socially constructed. As Volosinov (1986) states, “language is an indispensable part of the subject’s self-understanding, since words are present in every act of interpretation” (as cited in Talja, 1999, p. 12). The four core themes were explored to support the investigation into why the Vietnamese adult EFL learners have made so many pronunciation errors, particularly at the suprasegmental level. This was done on the basis of analysis of each theme as a result of coding the language in the interviews which helped to identify the ways which the interviewees constructed their own version of reality about their students’ English background with a focus on their pronunciation competence and pronunciation learning and teaching issues. Additionally, qualitative researchers frequently demonstrate their findings visually by using figures or pictures that enhance the discussion. Creating a comparison table is one of the different ways to display the findings as Creswell (2008) claimed that creating a comparison table that compared groups on one of the themes helped augment the findings. Therefore, the findings are also summarised using a comparison table below.

Summary of Main Points from the Four Transcripts

TABLE 1

Outline of findings from the teacher interviews

THEMES		LECTURER 1	LECTURER 2	LECTURER 3	LECTURER 4
Social context	Teaching experience	In charge of students' speaking skill 1.5 years' experience in teaching English	In charge of students' listening skills (turn 12) Nearly 3 years' experience in teaching English (turn 12)	In charge of students' speaking and reading skills (turn 11, 31 & 175) Several months' experience in teaching English (turn 7)	In charge of General linguistics Nine years' experience in teaching English (turn 6) In charge of speaking skills for students from another university (turn 48)
	Particulars about students	Being trained to be teachers of English Gaining very high level in entrance exams, grammar and reading multiple-choice question exam The number of students: 50 or 60 (turn 90) from different cities (turns 8 and 56)	Seven years in learning English (turn 16 & 18) The number of students: 50 (turn 82) different cities (turn 80)	Being trained to be teachers of English, interpreters, translators or for business purposes (turn 7) Age: 18-19 (turn 7) The number of students: 61 from different cities (turn 11)	Seven years' experience in learning English The number of students: 50 (turn 42) from different cities (turn 34)
Students' oral and pronunciation competence	Comments on their students' pronunciation skills and oral competence	Those who come from Ho Chi Minh City are good (turn 8)	Good (turn 18, 19 & 22)	Good for Saigonese students Not good for those who come from other provinces (turn 11)	Not good (in general) (turn 8) Saigonese students are often better than other students (turn 52)
	Exposure to foreigners	Sometimes have chance (turn 18) Shy to talk to foreigners	Little chance, very rare (turns 44, 66 & 72) They can't communicate with foreigners (turn 74)	Not much chance (turn 33 and 123) Students who study here do not have much chance to talk, communicate with foreigners. (turn 33)	No chance: for over students class for two periods seven months, only one foreign teacher from Belgium observed first-year (turn 12) A few of them are active to talk to foreigners outside university. (turn 14)
	Policy of English Department	Teaching staff: all of us are Vietnamese (turn 18) Exchange program for students: foreign teachers sometimes come and attend class (turns 18 & 32) Suggestions: we should provide more chance for foreigners coming here. (turn 36)	Teaching staff: All the classes are conducted by Vietnamese teachers and on time for foreign teachers (turn 74)	Teaching staff: We don't have a foreign teacher right now. (turn 123)	Teaching staff: Foreign teachers are teaching English at foreign school or centers. (turn 60)
Problems lecturers had faced in their pronunciation instruction	Crowded class: 50 or 60 students (turn 96) Different regional background: Shy (students from other provinces) those who come from Saigon are active Limited time: one	Big class: 50 students in my class (turn 82): we cannot care for individual students. So it is difficult to correct their pronunciation mistakes. (turn 88) Different regional background: those who come from Saigon are	Class is very big: 61 students (turn 36): noisy, cannot pay attention to all (turn 44) Different regional background: half from Saigon Half from other provinces are so shy (turn 11) Limited time: two periods	Huge class (turn 42): over 50 students (turns 44 & 48) Different regional background: they are shy and they come from other cities or other provinces (turn 34)	

	period (turn 96) Students' pronunciation is not sharpened enough (turn 56)	active and from other provinces are shy (turn 80)	(= 90 minutes) for each class every week (turn 35, 37); we do not have much time to practise speaking English. (turn 33). we don't have time (turn 153)	Limited time: To be honest, I have no time to pay attention to other pronunciation mistakes such as intonation or rhythm. (turn 68)
Aspects of pronunciation currently taught and how they were taught	Vowels, consonants and clusters (136 & 142) They are encouraged to produce unfamiliar sounds by imitating them after the recording (turns 58, 76 and 84)	Vowels, consonants, clusters, intonation and sentence stress (turns 34., 46 and 118-120): I combine the two, but I usually pay more attention to pronunciation of vowels and consonants. (turn 124) Group work: ask their friends for help. (turn 96)	Vowels, consonants with a focus on Final sounds (turn 95): I pay attention to vowels. They make a lot of mistakes of vowels, clusters, minimal pairs and stress, sentence stress and word stress Role play: game focusing in consonants and vowels and intonation (turns 147-149) Teachers move around and correct mistakes (particularly individual sounds) (turns 77-92)	Theory about sounds: vowels and consonants, basic rules on assimilation, intonation and connected sounds (turns 24-26)

Social context

Descriptions of social settings through a representational view of language are part of DA. This is a good way of investigating exteriors of an interviewee As Alasuutari (1995) stated, “the analysis concentrates on the contents of interview answers, which reveal something about phenomena or processes occurring either in participants’ inner realities or in external reality” (as cited in Talja, 1999, p. 12). The four interview transcripts were therefore read for information regarding a current social setting which the interviewees are associated with. All of the information has been outlined in Table 1 detailing who students and lecturers were and what they were doing in a specific context through the interviewees’ answers with a focus on their relevant turn-taking from the interviews. In other words, these interviewees’ turns can transport readers to the setting so that they can almost feel the situation.

These turns associated with this theme (social context) evidence that the English program aims at training the students to be teachers of English with a focus on improving the four macro skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and that the four lecturers are currently teaching speaking, listening and general linguistics related to pronunciation instruction in a classroom of 50-60 first-year students who come from diverse regional

backgrounds. In addition, it can be realized that all the students have experienced seven years in learning English. One more detail needs to be noted, namely that the students gained a very high level in the entrance multiple-choice grammar-reading-based exam, indicating that their English is at a high level in grammar and reading skills. These details are evidence that both the lecturers and students are the right subjects for this research. Therefore, it can be postulated that they have provided essential and trustworthy information for the study.

Students' Oral and Pronunciation Competence

The findings from the pronunciation data analysis show that the cohort of the 50 EFL students perceived themselves to be weak in pronunciation. This might be realised by the most experienced teacher's comment that their pronunciation is not good in general, as displayed via his turn 8 in Table 1. The reason for this is partially revealed by the data from Table 1: that they had very few opportunities to communicate with foreign teachers and they were shy about talking to foreigners. This is true for two reasons. Firstly, all the four interviewees stated that their English instruction had been conducted by Vietnamese teachers only, indicating that there were no foreign teachers of English who were part of English instruction. In other words, the data suggest that the English department leaders or university leaders have no policy for appointing foreign teachers in their English teacher-training program. This is ascertained by lecturer 2, who claimed, "*There is no time for foreign teachers*" (turn 74). It is also supported by the statement made by lecturer 3, "*We don't have a foreign teacher right now*" (turn 33). Interestingly, the detail in turns 18 and 32 of the interview transcript of lecturer 1 seems to indicate that there is an exchange program for students in which foreigners came in and joined his class. However, the 'sometimes' is vague in its meaning. Therefore, the researcher applied probes to obtain additional information about it demonstrated in turns 25-28 as follows:

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25 R: *[What] do you mean by sometimes. I want you to clarify sometimes.*

26 I: *= Sometimes? as I told you before it's up to the program. For example, the Fulbright program for American style come(s) in here. Sometimes, the students from Belgium come here...*

27 R: *Every year?*

28 I: *Uh, I'm not sure about that. Ah it's up to ...in this university. I think every year, we have a chance.*

It is evident that the lecturer was not sure about this, indicating that the policy for foreign teachers as part of the English department's English teachers-training program was not widely known. This situation is backed up in turn 12 of the interview transcript of lecturer 4, the most experienced teacher, in which they acknowledge that there had been only one foreign teacher from Belgium who did not teach English but observed his class. Therefore, it would seem that there is very limited interaction with foreign teacher-trainers. Secondly, although there were other opportunities for students to engage in verbal communications with foreigners outside class, few of them actually talked to foreigners as stated by the most experienced lecturer in turn 14. This is reinforced by lecturer 2 who said in turn 74 that students cannot communicate with foreigners. Therefore, a lack of practice and exposure to authentic language (no foreign teachers nor foreigners outside class) appears to be one of the causes in determining the participants' low speech intelligibility at suprasegmental level. There is a perception that students' pronunciation could not be improved through communication in English with their Vietnamese teachers and their classmates alone in the classroom. As Dang (2004) suggested "[b]adly trained and badly paid teachers result in poor teaching methods, improper pronunciation and a lack in teacher motivation." (p. 68), especially as their classmates' pronunciation competence was not considered as a good model.

Communication plays an important role in the enhancement of L2 learners' pronunciation skills. As Cohen (1977) argued, pronunciation instruction goes far beyond the teaching of phonemes, and should have an emphasis on meaningful communication along with Morley's premise (1991) that, "[i]ntelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communication competence" (as cited in Robertson, 2003, p.7). Otlowski (1998) also supported this view by saying that pronunciation must be seen as a crucial part of communication and that without adequate pronunciation skills, the learners' competence to communicate is severely limited

A new finding from the data in Table 1 is that all the four lecturers agree that students who came from Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) had better pronunciation than those from other cities or provinces. Whether or not such a difference can give rise to a significant difference in the pronunciation competence between HCMC students and the others is not known because it was not explicitly investigated and it also may not be true because learner's English competence in pronunciation or communication is based on any number of other factors, such as attitude, motivation, instruction, inferiority complex about students from English-speaking countries and so forth.

What Pronunciation Aspects Are Taught and How They Are Currently Taught

It was argued that students have pronunciation problems due to their own lack of awareness of pronunciation problems, particularly relating to suprasegmental features since instruction was concentrated on the mastery of the segmental (Dang, 2013). This assumption is confirmed by the data displayed in Table 1 that the current instruction conducted by the lecturers mostly focused on segmental elements only. The data below show that the pronunciation pedagogy as generally applied in Vietnam centred on the improvement of the students' pronunciation at the segmental level, while consideration of suprasegmental features was not sufficiently shown in instruction. This can be realized in turns 136 and 142 of lecturer

1's interview transcription where he indicates that consonants, vowels and clusters were the main foci of his lectures. He further stated in turns 58, 76 and 84 that his students were encouraged to produce unfamiliar sounds by imitating them after the recordings. This emphasis on the segmental features is also identified by lecturer 2 in turn 124: "*I combine the two (segmental and suprasegmental features), but I usually pay more attention to the pronunciation of vowels and consonants.*" Lecturer 3, in turn 95 indicated that she focused on final sounds and vowels although she also paid attention to stress and sentence stress in her pronunciation instruction. Lecturer 4 provided the students with theory about sounds, vowels, consonants and suprasegmental elements.

A similar situation appears to occur during English speaking practice, too. For instance, lecturer 3 used language games such as role play to encourage her students to improve their segmental aspects rather than suprasegmental aspects in spite of intonation also being part of their practice activities, as reflected in the following comments.

145 I: *because I, we meet only two periods. During the periods, we have a lot of things for pronunciation we learnsometimes I let them play games. In some games, it lasts about 20 minutes, half an hour or even 40 minutes. So, pronunciation games. I'd love to, I'd love to let them listen to sounds English because they talk less....*

146 R: *yeah, return to pronunciation game. What aspects of pronunciation do you focus on in the pronunciation games?*

147 I: *so far, I let them play pronunciation games focusing on consonants and [vowels]*

148 R: *[vowels]*

149 I: *intonation for tag questions*

Additionally, the focus on the segmental features and insufficient attention to suprasegmental features during the practice section is clearly displayed in the approach to correction of the students' pronunciation mistakes. Turn 77 from transcript 3 shows that the teacher moved around and corrected her students' mistakes, particularly the individual sounds. This is supported in interview transcript 2 in that the lecturer used group work from which the students' pronunciation was improved by peers in their group by asking their friends for help (shown in turn 96), indicating that he did not recognize many of his students' pronunciation mistakes. This could give rise to the restriction in the improvement of his students' pronunciation, possibly brought about by the lack of his students' knowledge and skills in pronunciation, regardless of the idea that producing output is a way to practice their pronunciation without a teacher's involvement. In other words, their pronunciation could not be improved in this way.

One more detail needs to be noted from the current data: lecturers' reporting that the suprasegmental features that were taught did not include syllable structures, one of the main factors in determining the informants' low speech intelligibility, as shown in Dang's study (2013). However, further studies such as classroom observations on this need to be undertaken to determine whether or not it would be true.

It is safe to claim, therefore, that teachers perceived their instruction to center on the individual sounds (segmental elements), which, if true, could be a reason that students have difficulty improving their overall intelligibility. This strongly supports the findings revealed by those of the questionnaire data analysis undertaken by Dang (2013).

Problems Teachers Have Faced in Improving Their Students' Pronunciation

In addition to the lack of exposure to foreigners or foreign teachers and insufficient attention to suprasegmental features, a large class size, limited time for English instruction

and regional background are considered as the other three main reasons for limitations in the improvement of the participants' pronunciation possibly leading to the students' pronunciation errors particularly at the suprasegmental level. These are the additional findings as summarized in Table 1.

Firstly, a class which consists of 50 or 60 students is too overcrowded for teachers to pay close attention to their students, limiting the improvement in individual students' pronunciation. This is shown in turn 96 in the interview transcript of lecturer 1, "*We have a big problem because I cannot stretch my attention to all of them.*" This is also reinforced by lecturer 2 and lecturer 3 in turn 82 and turn 44 respectively, as displayed in Table 1.

Secondly, the data from Table 1 show that two periods of 90 minutes for each class per week are too limited for 50 or 60 students to practice their English speaking. Such limited time per week for each subject is really a problem, which is confirmed by lecturer 3, who said, "*We do not have much time to practice speaking English. We don't have time.*" (turns 33 and 153). Lecturer 1 shared this problem, which is revealed by the following turn in the interview transcript of lecturer 1, (in charge of speaking subject) "*I just pick up a maximum about 30 students at one period. I mean, at one class.*"

Both large class size and time limit are considered as factors in limiting the students' pronunciation improvement in terms of recognition and correction of their mistakes. This is reflected by the following turns from the transcript 3:

42 R: *about or over?*

43 I: *actually, 61 he he*

44 R: *yes, exactly number. And do you think the crowded class is a problem for you in your lecture in order to take care of all the members in the class?*

45 I: *Uh I cannot take care of all, I cannot control all. Sometimes, they- they move*

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around and talk. I cannot control them because it's too big, they talk at the same time. So very noisy. Some of them speak Vietnamese instead. I cannot pay attention to all of them. I cannot check. So, I move around and give a warning when I heard some Vietnamese. I also, when we practice role play and I want to ask some pairs to come to the front of the class and ...out...it's very difficult because I cannot ask a lot of pairs, just some pairs in the class big like this. A lot of students do not have a chance to come to the front and they have to listen to their friends most of the time.

87 I *[I] let the whole class pay attention to the mistakes and correct together with other students.*

Like lecturer 3, lecturer 1 also utilized peer correction of pronunciation mistakes during English practice, if undertaken in a mixed group between students from HCMC who had better pronunciation as stated above and those from other provinces, potentially leading to the improvement of the pronunciation of the latter (less-proficient students). However, the former's knowledge and experience in pronunciation is a question, limiting the enhancement of their pronunciation. In turn 98 the interview subject stated his resignation and doubts whether this is a good solution for a large class: *'yeah, I think. I come up with a solution that a pairwork, teamwork, they can correct with each other about, I mean, the sounds. However, I'm not sure whether it can be effective or not. I think, it is the best way we can, I can do in solution of a big classroom like that'*.

Finally, it can be said that diverse regional background of students is another problem, particularly when they come from other cities or provinces outside Ho Chi Minh City. It may be that there is a big gap between HCMC students and those who come from other cities or provinces: that HCMC students were active and their pronunciation was better according to the lecturers' comments (see Table 1) while the other students were shy and their

pronunciation was weaker. The fourth theme in Table 1 shows that all the lecturers had trouble in supporting the pronunciation of those who came from other cities or provinces because they were shy about speaking English. This can be seen in turns 52 and 53 from the interview transcript of lecturer 1: *"Some of them are shy...so, ah problem sometimes you see. They, they, some of them I mean quite not confident about that they can speak with teachers. Some of them especially, who come from the rural area(s)."* This is also confirmed in turn 88, turn 11 and turn 34 of transcript 2, transcript 3 and transcript 4 respectively displayed in Table 1. All in all, students from other cities appear to have fewer opportunities to use their English and interact in English with their teachers than those who came from Ho Chi Minh City. This suggests that their pronunciation improvement is more restricted because their pronunciation mistakes have little chance of being corrected by their teachers. On the other hand, it could also be because they are shy as indicated by lecture 1. This could account for all the lecturers' comments that HCMC students' pronunciation is better than the pronunciation of those who came from other cities. This is an assumption to emerge from this research, which needs to be further investigated.

CONCLUSION

The research paper shows the following findings: The first is that the pronunciation instruction was concentrated on the individual sounds (segmental elements) more than suprasegmental features, which may indicate why students make pronunciation errors at the suprasegmental level. The second is that lack of exposure to foreigners both inside and outside class might be one of the potential factors in determining the participants' low speech intelligibility.

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In addition, a huge class size and limited class time for the teaching of English results in a restriction in the improvement of the participant's pronunciation because they have little chance to apply their English in practice and little chance for their mistakes to be corrected by their teachers.

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