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English pronunciation challenges for English major university students in Battambang province, Cambodia

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Abstract

English pronunciation is a challenging skill for non-native English speakers across the globe. Cambodian English students are no exception. This article presents findings from a study that employed mixed method research design to collect data from second-year and third-year university students majoring in English. Online questionnaires were administered through Google Forms to 70 students, while in-depth interviews were later conducted with 10 of the questionnaire respondents. The findings indicated that Cambodian university students based in provincial Cambodia encountered several challenges in developing their English pronunciation. The challenges were mainly influenced by Khmer language interference and the impact of the learning environment. The study suggested using an imitative or analytic-linguistic approach as well as pronunciation drillings to teach English pronunciation to Cambodian students, particularly those in provincial areas.

Keywords: English pronunciation; challenges; English major students; Cambodian students; Cambodia

Introduction

Pronunciation is an important skill for communication between people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. However, it is considered to be one of the key challenges to many people, especially students who learn a foreign or second language such as English. The challenges of pronunciation in communication are considerable among students who live in provincial areas where they have extremely limited opportunities to develop this skill by exposing themselves to English-speaking environments. In light of this, the present article provides evidence about the challenges of English pronunciation among university students in Battambang province, Cambodia. The indication of these challenges was generated from an undergraduate research thesis, conducted by the first author, that explored university students' perspectives. This article also discusses different approaches to teaching and learning pronunciation. It addresses why English pronunciation is challenging to Cambodian students and what different phonetic systems between English and Khmer languages cause the challenges. The final part of this article highlights some key issues and proposes pedagogical solutions for teaching and learning English pronunciation in the Cambodian context.

Approaches to teaching and learning pronunciation

Pronunciation encompasses complex language features that require sophisticated approaches to teaching and learning to master it. Although various approaches have been proposed, they are applied in different ways and may not work in all contexts. Some approaches, such as the top-down and bottom-up approaches, are regarded as traditional teaching methods, although they exert positive effects on teaching pronunciation. Other teaching approaches discussed by Aydin (2017) and Roohani (2013) were conceptualized as an "intuitive-imitative approach" and "analytic-linguistic approach." According to Roohani (2013), the intuitive-imitative approach refers to a technique to teach pronunciation through listening and drilling the sound systems by using videos, computer-aided programs, audiotapes, and other technological tools, while the analytic-linguistic approach focuses on using visual aids such as phonetic symbols, vowel system diagrams, and other supplement tools to assist students in developing pronunciation competence. It was suggested that the intuitive-imitative approach is more effective in helping

students to develop pronunciation through acquiring sound combinations called diphthongs, while the analytic-linguistic approach allows students to improve pronunciation by learning every single sound in English (Alaye & Tegegne, 2019).

Another important approach referred to as an integrative technique is used to teach pronunciation based on language discourses such as sentence stresses, rhythms, and intonations (Alaye & Tegegne, 2019). This technique was applied, for example, to teach English pronunciation to the Indonesian students, while research from this context indicated that this approach helped students to correctly pronounce English words with the sounds /æ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, or / θ/ and other consonant clusters such as /-sps, -kst, -lpt, -mpts, -mpst, -ksts/ (Pardede, 2018).

Due to the diverse approaches utilized for teaching and learning pronunciation, researchers tend to employ different methods and designs to research this phenomenon. For example, Jahan (2011) used dictionaries, direct pronunciation emendation, and audio and tapes as research instruments to examine the underlying issues of teaching and learning pronunciation. In another case, Hayati (2010) applied the imitative technique in his research and claimed its effectiveness in improving students' pronunciation skills. Similarly, Omar and Umehara (2010) showed that the imitative teaching technique effectively improved pronunciation among Japanese students. However, other researchers such as Ercan and Kunt (2019) argued that students should be exposed to the real-world environment to learn pronunciation rather than sound imitations. This means that students need to internalize phonetic systems through authentic listening. This suggestion is strongly supported by Ilmu (2015), who claimed that students could improve their pronunciation skills by engaging with active learning activities, for example, games or pronunciation contests that expose them to authentic listening and pronunciation practices.

Teaching and learning English pronunciation in the Cambodian context

The issue of teaching and learning pronunciation in Cambodia concerns a combination of sound systems in Khmer and English which are quite contrastive and challenging for Cambodian students to mispronounce English words and phrases. For instance, the Khmer language does not share some

consonant sounds with English. In Khmer, for instance, the /v/ and /r/ consonants are adjacent but not identical to the /w/, and /r/ in English. Another different feature is that English has the / v, θ, ð, z, ʃ, ʒ/ sounds that are absent in Khmer phonemes. The vowel sounds /a, e, i, o, u/ are found in both Khmer and English, but English vowels may be pronounced differently in words (Donley, 2020). Moreover, Avery and Ehrlich (1992) asserted that the spelling systems of language do not always represent the sounds of letters in words, either in the mother tongue or English. In many cases, the /s/ has three various sounds in English, for example, in words "see, pleasure, and resign." Similarly, the /ŋ/ sound sometimes does not stand for its own sound in Khmer words; for example, [leːŋ] means "to play," sounds [leːɲ] (Donley, 2020).

Another issue of teaching and learning English pronunciation in Cambodia concerns a scarcity of resources and opportunities to engage Khmer students in English-speaking environments. This issue is more recognizable among Cambodian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in provincial contexts such as in Battambang, where they encounter several hurdles such as the lack of access to learning materials and opportunities to study English with experienced teachers. Previous studies have highlighted that teachers in resource-deficient contexts used very little teaching time, about 10%, to improve students' pronunciation (Vančová, 2019). This issue has occurred due to the fact that some teachers may not have enough experience in teaching pronunciation, or they have never been trained well in this area. This assumption may be partly true, as indicated by Keuk's (2009) study on the intelligibility of the Cambodian English variety from the perspective of foreigners. Keuk found that some Cambodians' verbal communication in English was less intelligible to the expatriates due to poor pronunciation skills. He emphasized that the contrasting phonetic features between Khmer and English are challenging for most Cambodians, preventing them from producing a natural-sounding accent. English speaking skills remain a challenge to many Cambodian English learners, especially those in provincial settings such as Battambang.

The challenges of English pronunciation to Cambodian students in a provincial setting

Findings presented in this article were drawn on a study that applied mixed

methods research to collect data from a small number of participants who were university students. According to McKim (2017), the mixed methods research provides more depth and breadth of findings than other methods when the study is conducted with small sample size. A total of 70 students majoring in English responded to a questionnaire survey administered through Google Forms. Following the survey results, 10 of the total participants were purposively selected for in-depth interviews.

The interviews were conducted in different time frames according to the availability of each participant. The survey responses were designed with closed-ended forms using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1. pronunciation was not completely understood by natives, 2. pronunciation was least understood by natives, 3. pronunciation was able to be understood by natives, 4. pronunciation was clear and easily understood by natives, and 5. pronunciation was native-like or close to native-like). The questionnaire survey took two weeks to reach the target number, while the interviews were conducted within three days; each interview lasted about 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Team.

Overall, the findings from the study indicated that most participants (74.1%) expressed their concerns about learning pronunciation. For instance, they strongly asserted that their pronunciation was not always understood when they talked to native speakers of English. When invited to do a self-assessment on their pronunciation skills, nine out of 10 students rated their pronunciation skills as "less confident." This means that the students may encounter difficulties and feel less confident to pronounce English words.

During the interviews, some participants said, "To make the listeners understand, they had to repeat the words or phrases twice or even more times, and they also used body language to get the message across to the listeners during the conversation." The participants also attributed their difficulty in pronouncing English words correctly to the influence of the Khmer language, which does not have intonation, stress, and final consonant sounds. Specifically, the survey results showed that 70% of the respondents agreed that their pronunciations of the "th, sh, s and z" sounds are strongly influenced by Khmer sounds.

Furthermore, 62.9% of the respondents expressed their concerns over the lack of opportunities to learn and practice pronunciation because they spent most of their studying time with non-native English teachers. They echoed that most teachers did not focus on the accurate pronunciation of English words or phrases. One student commented, "I did not feel I had learned correct pronunciation when I was studying with non-native teachers (of English)." This may concern teachers' teaching pedagogy, experience, and qualification to teaching pronunciation in provincial schools.

The final challenge is strongly related to the lack of teaching materials for pronunciation practice. For example, the findings revealed that there was no language lab for students to practice pronunciations and listening skills, while traditional teaching was widely practiced using textbooks as the key sources. Moreover, the students who joined the interviews said that most of their teachers did not have clear guides or tools for teaching pronunciation. Their teachers generally introduced the pronunciation lessons briefly without meaningful practices. This means that the teachers spent little time on the pronunciation section in classes. The findings from the study indicated that teachers of English in Cambodia need more professional training and teaching materials to improve teaching and learning activities to maximize students' learning outcomes, a finding that is in line with Hum (2018).

Studies from other contexts (e.g., Jacquelline, 2020) showed that teachers who utilized sufficient teaching resources and spent longer times for drilling exercises could help students correctly learn intonation and stress in words, phrases, and sentences because the development of pronunciation skill needs a meaningful practice with repetitive processes. Basuki (2018) also found that the drilling technique was advantageous for students, as it could help them to develop their pronunciation skills.

Pedagogical solutions to English pronunciation challenges

To reduce the barriers for Cambodian students in the provincial context to develop their English pronunciation skills, some pedagogical implications should be considered. Based on the literature, the analytic-linguistic approach would make the best fit for adult ESL/EFL learners, as this teaching technique focuses specifically on individual sounds of English. This approach could

significantly improve students' pronunciation regardless of American English or British English. Therefore, it may be effortless for adult learners, as they will find imitation less challenging.

The study's findings indicate that provincial Cambodian students need imitation learning techniques, for example, repetition drills and expansion drills, to develop their pronunciation skills. As Jacquelline (2020) suggested, the imitative teaching technique effectively improves students' ability to pronounce English words correctly.

The study also suggests that native English teachers seem to pay more attention to pronunciation lessons, as they can better guide students through each lesson's steps to pronounce English words correctly and accurately. Thus, native English teachers are needed in this context. Meanwhile, non-native English teachers are also needed, yet they should be better trained and provided with sufficient teaching materials so that they can teach pronunciation more effectively.

Conclusion

Overall, based on the study reported in this article, it is suggested that Cambodian undergraduate students majoring in English who are based in provincial areas of Cambodia encounter many challenges in developing their English pronunciation. The challenges are mainly caused by Khmer language interference and the impact of the learning environment. With these challenges, it is hard for them to achieve a high level of English speaking proficiency. The study also reveals that Cambodian English teachers tend to pay less attention to teaching pronunciation, while native English teachers seem to do far more and better.

The study also suggests that some techniques, such as the imitative approach, the analytic-linguistic approach, and pronunciation drillings, can help Cambodian learners to reach their goal of developing better English pronunciation. Thus, we call for action research or experimental research using the pronunciation teaching techniques discussed above as experiment tools. Such research would provide more insights into English pronunciation teaching and learning and other teaching and learning issues in Cambodia.

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