UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS TO PRONUNCIATION PROFICIENCY: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH MAJORS' EXPERIENCES WITH PRONUNCIATION

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Abstract: *The final target of language learning is the full acquisition of the language, including the high level of pronunciation proficiency. Even though everyone realizes its importance, there are many freshmen English majors who still find it difficult to achieve English pronunciation proficiency which is described as a fundamental component of effective communication. To scrutinize the learning experiences of freshman English majors with their pronunciation in tertiary education, this study employed a mixed-methods approach, collecting data from both surveys and interviews. There are three elements that the study aimed to explore (1) the obstacles that freshmen English majors encounter in trying to master English pronunciation, (2) learners' engagement with teaching methods in the classroom, and (3) learners' perceptions of their learning barriers. The study contended that there must have existed a range of internal and external barriers to learners' pronunciation acquisition as it had shown in the results of qualitative and quantitative data. A strong preference for more interactive and practice-oriented instructions was recommended by the participants. The findings highlight a need for more targeted pedagogical approaches that cater to the specific needs of the students. The findings may contribute to improving English pronunciation instruction, boosting students' confidence in spoken English, and creating a more supportive learning environment.*

Keywords*: English pronunciation, English language learner, ELT, EFL, English majors*

INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam, English has been taught as a compulsory subject from primary school to high school. After finishing high school, students must study English in universities, especially students who are majoring in English; they must learn English in a precise way. English pronunciation is in alignment with other courses, such as English grammar, general linguistics, reading, etc., which students will learn in the following semesters. A pronunciation course is very important for English majors because it not only provides learners with information about how to distinguish basic vowels and consonants but also helps learners identify stress in words and sentences. Therefore, pronunciation is essential for students to acquire a language. Derwing and Munro (2005, p. 379) emphasized that "having good pronunciation of the language can help in normal communication, particularly intelligibility." Besides that, mastering the sounds and pronunciation, which are the students' priority goals, would aid the communication process (Jahan, 2011).

However, most freshmen majoring in English struggle with their pronunciation as they frequently make mistakes of pronunciation relating to accent, intonation, missing the final syllables of English words (Tang, 2007; Phan & Nguyen, 2023), and accurate articulation of individual sounds (Dang et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2011). This challenge is often attributed to an overemphasis on grammar or vocabulary at the expense of pronunciation practice. In addition, students encounter some difficulties in trying to communicate with correct English pronunciation (Vy, 2023), as it is known that challenges in pronunciation remain significant for many second-language learners. Binturki (2008) observed that most learners perceive pronunciation as the greatest difficulty in speaking English. Similarly, pronunciation has remained an unsolved issue that are widespread among English learners (Phi & Mai, 2024).

For the reasons mentioned above, the study titled "Understanding the Barriers to Pronunciation Proficiency: A Mixed-Methods Study of Freshman English Majors' Experiences with Pronunciation" was conducted in a Vietnamese context. This study explored how students encounter their pronunciation difficulties, what kind of teaching method attracts them, and what learning obstacles they perceive in their learning process. By analyzing qualitative and quantitative data, this study also finds key themes that have an impact on pronunciation acquisition. These important findings and recommendations in the study will be employed to form targeted pedagogical approaches that support freshmen English majors' needs in the future. Besides, this study aims to enhance pronunciation instructions, gain confidence in spoken English, and create a more supportive learning environment in the classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English pronunciation is a fundamental aspect of language acquisition and communication. It involves the accurate production of sounds, the use of stress and intonation patterns, and the understanding of connected speech features. Effective pronunciation enhances intelligibility and is crucial for learners' confidence and fluency. This literature review explores key components of English pronunciation, challenges in its acquisition, teaching strategies, and implications for pedagogy.

Key Components of English Pronunciation

Pronunciation is a significant component of language acquisition that directly influences learners' communication ability. English pronunciation involves segmental features (individual sounds) and suprasegmental features (stress, rhythm, and intonation), which contribute to speech comprehensibility and fluency in second language acquisition (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996).
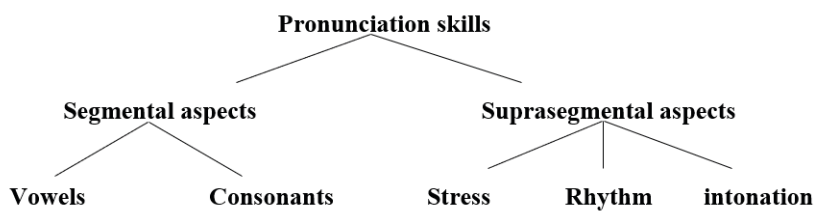
Figure 1: English Pronunciation Skills according to the Definition of Celce-Murcia et al. (1996)

Segmental features of English pronunciation

Undoubtedly, mastering segmental sounds is essential for learners to produce comprehensible speech. In English, these features refer to discrete sounds of a language, namely vowels and consonants (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). Vowel sounds or phonemes, including monophthongs and diphthongs, form the basic building blocks of spoken English, which are rather sophisticated and often pose challenges for learners whose first language has a simpler or different system. For example, the monophthong /ɪ/ in *bit* and the diphthong /aɪ/ in *time* often present difficulties for learners whose first language (L1) lacks a comparable vowel system (Jenkins, 2000). Consonantal sounds also vary in place and manner of articulation, such as plosives, fricatives, and nasals. According to Ladefoged and Johnson (2014), consonant sounds, for instance, /θ/ in *think* or /ð/ in *this* pose specific challenges for learners to master.

Suprasegmental features of English pronunciation

Suprasegmental features or prosody encompass stress, rhythm, intonation, and connected speech. These features are considered to be essential for natural and intelligible communication.

Word stress refers to the emphasis placed on a specific syllable within a word. Incorrect stress placement can alter both meaning and word class, as seen in *record* (/ˈrekɔːd/, noun) versus *record* (/rɪˈkɔːd/, verb). Learners often benefit from explicit practice with stress patterns and listening exercises (Gilbert, 2008). In English, content words (nouns,

verbs, adjectives) typically receive stress, while function words (articles, prepositions) are unstressed. According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), the stress-timed nature of English, which creates a rhythmic pattern, differs from with syllable-timed languages, making rhythm challenging for many learners from such linguistic backgrounds.

As described by Celce-Murcia et al. (1996), intonation involves the rise and fall of pitch in speech, signaling attitudes, emotions, and grammatical structures. For instance, rising intonation is often used for a question, while falling intonation is for a statement.

In addition, connected speech refers to linking sounds, elision, and assimilation. While these features contribute to the natural flow of English, they can make spoken English difficult for learners to understand and produce (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996).

Challenges in Acquiring English Pronunciation

Pronunciation learning is affected by distinct factors like age of acquisition, first language (L1) influence, motivation and exposure, teacher training, and learners' anxiety.

According to Scovel (2000), younger learners, particularly those who begin learning a second language (L2) before the age of puberty, are more likely to develop native-like pronunciation. They easily adapt to the phonetic and prosodic features of a new language. Learners' L1 influence often transfers phonological patterns from their first language to English, resulting in persistent errors (Odlin, 1989). Flege (1995) also found that learners are familiar with the sounds of L1; therefore, when they learn another language, they often associate the sounds of L2 with the sounds of L1, which causes difficulties in mastering unfamiliar phonemes in L2. Research highlights the difficulty learners face when their first language lacks certain English phonemes. For example, Japanese learners may struggle with the /r/ and /l/ contrast, while Spanish speakers may find it challenging to produce /v/ versus /b/ (Bradlow et al., 1997).

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Additionally, motivation and exposure to a language are other factors that contribute to the success of mastering a target language. Learners with high motivation and those with extensive exposure to the target language environment are more likely to achieve better pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Besides, teacher training can be a matter. Those who have limited training in phonetics and pedagogy may feel underprepared to teach pronunciation (Murphy, 1997). Finally, learners' anxiety can cause difficulties for them in English pronunciation practice. Derwing and Munro (2005) realized that fear of making mistakes can hinder learners' willingness to practice pronunciation openly.

English Pronunciation Teaching Strategies and Activities

Various strategies have been developed for teaching English pronunciation, each addressing specific aspects of pronunciation, such as explicit instruction, communicative activities, technological tools, authentic materials, and feedback and assessment. These approaches aim to equip learners with the skills necessary to achieve intelligible pronunciation and enhance their communicative competence.

First, explicit teaching of phonetics and phonology equips learners with the tools to recognize and produce English sounds accurately. Darcy (2018) assumed that it is crucial to teach pronunciation elements explicitly. In addition, Ladefoged and Johnson (2014) mentioned that pronunciation instruction includes teaching articulation through visual aids and diagrams and introducing the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for phoneme recognition. Besides, pronunciation teaching can be made more interesting by integrating it into communicative activities.

Darcy (2018) recommended that pronunciation teaching activities should incorporate communicative features that help train learners focus on accuracy and that pronunciation practice should be linked to listening skills. Skehan (1996) also agreed that communicative activities include various tasks designed to help learners reach the purpose of

real-life communication and enhance learners' fluency and confidence in speaking. Communicative activities like role-plays enable learners to focus on prosody in dialogues and storytelling encourage them to practice natural rhythm and flow (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996).

Technological tools have changed the picture of pronunciation teaching and learning. Tools like ELSA Speak, SpeechAce, and Praat are designed to provide learners with immediate feedback and allow them to practice pronunication independently (Thomson, 2018; Derwing & Munro, 2005). Using Ipods for short dialogue shadowing practice in eight weeks, learners could ehance their pronunciation significantly (Foote & McDonough, 2017). Virtual environments are also important for pronunciation practice (Bacca et al., 2014). Field (2008) exmphasizes that authentic materials, such as songs, podcasts, and films expose learners to natural stress, intonation, and rhythm patterns, and encourage their imitation like native-speaker pronunciation. Using authentic materials in teaching pronunciation allows learners analyze lyrics for stress and intonation patterns, learners practice imitating podcast narrators to refine their fluency and expressiveness (Field, 2008). Finally, incorporating authentic materials in pronunciation instruction can motivate learners and bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-word communication (Field, 2008).

Feedback and assessment are useful for learners in pronunciation learning process. Darcy (2018) emphasized that feedback should be provided explicitly to raise learners' awareness about their pronunciation mistakes and corrections. Feedback and assessment should be central to effective pronunciation learning and enable learners to refine their skills through self-awareness and collaborative efforts (Issacs & Trofimovich, 2012). Self-assessment and peer feedback foster learners' autonomy and responsibility in pronunciation development and motivate them in their active learning process. Isaacs and Trofimovich (2012) recommended that teachers should use recorded speaking tasks to provide detailed feedback or encourage peer evaluations to foster a collaborative learning environment. Finally, formative assessments, including quizzes on

phonetic transcription or oral presentations, provide learners with continuous guidance on their pronunciation learning process (Issacs & Trofimovich, 2012).

English Pronunciation in Vietnamese EFL Context

English pronunciation often implies hindering factors to Vietnamese learners because of phonetic differences between the two languages. For example, Avery and Ehrlich (1992) found that Vietnamese students often substitute the aspirated /t/ for the unaspirated /t/ leading to mispronunciation of certain words and changing its meanings. Other examples can be found with the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ sounds, in which students frequently witch these sounds to similar sound /t/ and /d/ in the Vietnamese language. Besides, Nguyen and Ingram (2005), and Tang (2007) noted that Vietnamese learners also have difficulty with the voiced fricatives /z/ and /ʒ/, which are often replaced by their voiceless counterparts /s/ and /ʃ/.

In addition, Vietnamese students often struggle with voiced and voiceless stops such as /b/ and /p/, /d/ and /t/, /g/ and /k/, and the nasals and liquids like /ŋ/, /r/, and /l/ (Tang, 2007). The study indicated that students often mispronounce the English /r/ and /l/ sounds because these sounds are not similar to /r/ and /l/ in Vietnamese sounds. In English, voiceless stops like /p/, /t/, and /k/ are aspirated at the beginning of stressed syllables, meaning they are pronounced with a burst of air. This feature does not exist in Vietnamese, where stops are generally unaspirated. As a result, Vietnamese speakers might produce these sounds without the necessary aspiration, leading to mispronunciations. Initial and final consonant clusters like /str-/ and /-sks/, which do not exist in Vietnamese, are also complex for Vietnamese speakers to pronounce correctly (Hansen, 2001).

Besides the challenges of certain consonant sounds, Tang (2007) found that Vietnamese learners often mispronounce the long vowel sounds including /iː/, /uː/, /ɑː/, /ɔː/, and /ɜː/ because these sounds do not exist

in the Vietnamese language. The study noted that Vietnamese vowel sounds are generally short and do not have the same distinction between long and short vowels as in English. Therefore, Vietnamese speakers are not accustomed to holding vowel sounds for a longer duration, which is essential for the correct pronunciation of long vowels in English.

Word stress and sentence stress are other challenges for Vietnamese students due to the differences in phonological systems. While English is 'a stress-timed language', Vietnamese is 'a tonal and syllable-timed language'. This fundamental difference makes Vietnamese students often struggle with the placement of stress in English words (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). Tang (2007), and Nguyen and Macken (2008) also assumed that Vietnamese students have difficulties in following the correct intonation patterns in English, which can result in speech that sounds unnatural and difficult for native English speakers to understand.

Table 1: Challenging Aspects of English Pronunciation for Vietnamese Students/ Speakers

No.	Challenging aspects of English pronunciation for Vietnamese Students	Authors
1	Long vowel sounds including /iː/, /uː/, /ɑː/, /ɔː/, and /ɜː/	Tang (2007)
2	Consonant sounds including /θ/, /ð/, /z/, /ʒ/	Nguyen and Ingram (2005), and Tang (2007)
3	Initial and final consonant clusters like /str-/ and /-sks/	Hansen (2001)
4	Word stress	Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin, (1996)
5	Sentence intonation	Nguyen and Macken (2008), and Tang (2007)

By addressing these contextual factors, educators in Vietnam can create more effective and engaging environments for pronunciation learning.

Tailored strategies that leverage technology, authentic materials, and learner-specific approaches can significantly improve pronunciation skills and overall communicative competence.

The literature has emphasized the importance of English pronunciation in effective communication, encompassing segmental and suprasegmental features that enhance intelligibility and fluency. Although there are hindering factors with certain consonants, long vowels, and prosodic features because of phonological system differences between English and Vietnamese, learners can benefit from explicit instruction, communicative activities, feedback and assessment, technological tools, and authentic materials.

Research Questions

This study investigates the challenges faced by freshmen English majors in pronunciation courses, with a focus on their difficulties, perceptions of classroom activities, and hindering factors. By addressing these issues, the research aims to provide insights for improving pronunciation instruction in the Vietnamese EFL context.

1. What are freshman English majors' difficulties in the pronunciation course?

2. What are freshman English majors' perspectives on classroom activities in the pronunciation course?

3. What factors hinder freshman English majors' progress in the pronunciation course?

METHODOLOGY

Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where Pronunciation is taught as a core subject for undergraduate English-majored students in the curriculum. The Pronunciation course

aims to equip learners with a comprehensive overview of English pronunciation. Specifically, it is designed to provide learners with essential knowledge about English vowels and consonants, word stress, sentence stress, intonation, linking, assimilation and elision, and common pronunciation errors. In addition, during the course, learners have opportunities to be exposed to several pronunciation models and guided through practical pronunciation exercises to reinforce their pronunciation competence.

The participants involved 69 freshmen English majors (17 males and 52 females), aged between 18 and 20, who enrolled in the English Pronunciation course during the third semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. The participants of the study were students in the Pronunciation classes of which the researcher was in charge during the semester. Accordingly, the study employed convenient sampling as the method of selecting participants.

Design of the Study

To investigate the barriers that freshman English majors encountered during the Pronunciation course, the current study employed a mixed-methods design. According to Creswell (2012), this approach involves the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, enabling a more thorough and nuanced investigation of the research topic. The rationale for implementing this mixed-method approach stems from its capacity to provide an in-depth analysis, thus ensured a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors that contribute to pronunciation challenges and provided a rich data set for analysis. By integrating the strengths of both methods, the study was better positioned to elucidate the relationship between dependent and independent variables and to validate the findings from multiple angles. Data were collected through two primary sources: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as the data collection instruments to collect necessary data. The questions in the questionnaire and interviews were designed by the researchers so as to align with the research questions. Besides, the questionnaires underwent a pilot test to identify and address any ambiguities in the item and instructions before the official administration.

As noted by Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009), questionnaires serve as a valuable tool for researchers in gathering factual, behavioral, and attitudinal data. Likewise, Mackey and Gass (2015) also highlighted the advantages of using questionnaires, noting their flexibility and convenience for researchers to administer in various forms. Consequently, a set of questionnaires was utilized to answer the research questions.

The questionnaire was designed to collect (1) some demographic data about the students, (2) their general attitudes towards English pronunciation, (3) their perceptions about challenging aspects of English pronunciation, (4) classroom activities during the course, and (5) hindering factors in their pronunciation improvements. The research questionnaire was divided into five sections with a total of 53 items. The initial part of the questionnaire was devoted to gathering respondents' demographic information, including their gender and year of study. The items in sections two and three of the questionnaires employed a Likert scale with five points, ranging from 1 to 5. The second part of the questionnaire, comprising 31 items and focusing on students' general attitudes towards English pronunciation (GA1-GA4, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) and students' perception about challenging aspects of English pronunciation, such as short vowel sounds (EP_SV1-EP_SV5), long vowel sounds (EP_LV1-EP_LV5), voiced consonants (EP_VC1-EP_VC6), voiceless consonants (EP_VLC1 and EP_VLC2), voiceless and voiced consonants (EP_C1 and EP_C2), nasal consonant (EP_NC), initial consonants clusters (EP_ICC), final

consonant clusters (EP_FCC), word stress (EP_WS), sentence stress (EP_SS), linking (EP_L), and assimilation and elision (EP_AE), these items were on a scale ranging from 1 (not challenging) to 5 (extremely challenging). The 19 items in part three further explore factors affecting learners' English pronunciation regarding classroom activities (CA1-CA12, ranging from not engaging to extremely engaging) and other hindering factors (HF1-HF6, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree). Finally, two open-ended questions were included at the end of the questionnaire to gather students' further suggestions and recommendations.

The data collection process was carried out in the last week of the Pronunciation course. Due to the fact that after the course, the participants could have personal learning experiences, perceptions, as well as an understanding of the aspects of pronunciation, they were able to express their perceptions about English pronunciation in general, aspects of English pronunciation, factors hindered their improvements, and their learning experiences.

Quantitative data derived from the survey's close-ended items, was collected, analyzed using SPSS software (version 26.0), and presented statistically. To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated, as shown in Table 1. All values exceeded 0.7, indicating that the questionnaire is a reliable tool for data collection.

Table 2: Reliability of the Questionnaire and Constructs

Constructs	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha
General attitude towards English Pronunciation	4	0.955
Challenging aspects of English pronunciation	27	0.957
Perceptions about classroom activities	12	0.962
Hindering factors in pronunciation improvement	6	0.769

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews with eight students who were selected randomly to represent the larger population of 69 participants. The data from all interviews were meticulously translated

and transcribed verbatim. The data were systematically organized into themes, which include three main categories: (1) major difficulties in English pronunciation, (2) perceptions about classroom activities, and (3) hindering factors in pronunciation courses.

These themes were deductively categorized based on the research questions, which allowed the analysis to focus on areas relevant to pronunciation challenges and learning experiences. Thus, the qualitative data were triangulated with the survey data to reinforce the overall findings and interpretations, and contribute to the study's final conclusions.

Besides, the qualitative data analysis was conducted manually using Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel programs to categorize and organize the data according to predefined themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings of the study, in response to the research questions, which investigated the pronunciation challenges faced by freshman English majors, their perspectives on classroom practices, and the factors that may hinder their progress. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the results offer a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the issues.

Students' Perceptions of Difficulties on English Pronunciation

This section investigates the challenges that freshman English majors encounter during the English Pronunciation course. It examines their overall attitudes towards English pronunciation and identifies the specific features they find most difficult to master. The analyzed data from the questionnaire and interviews offers a nuanced understanding of the students' perceived difficulties, subsequently shed light on their experiences and highlight areas that require greater teacher's support and intervention.

General attitude towards English pronunciation

The first four items on the questionnaire (GA1-GA4), ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), examined students' general attitudes towards English pronunciation. Table 3 below presents a summary of the participants' responses. Overall, the findings indicate most students had positive perception of the role and importance of pronunciation in English language learning.

Among the four items, the highest mean score was recorded for the item "Good English pronunciation makes me confident in communication" (GA3, M = 4.51, SD = 1.04), indicating a strong association between students' pronunciation proficiency and their communicative confidence. This suggests when students believed their pronunciation proficiency was good, they tend to feel confident when communicating in English. Similarly, most of the students strongly agreed that pronunciation plays a vital role in effective communication (GA1, M = 4.46, SD = 1.08), suggesting their awareness of the significance of pronunciation in their language proficiency.

Despite this recognition, a substantial number of students also acknowledged the challenges they face in acquiring accurate pronunciation (GA2, M = 4.09, SD = 1.04). Nevertheless, the students demonstrated a positive attitude towards the effectiveness of practicing in improving their pronunciation proficiency, as evidenced by the high mean score for the item GA4 (M = 4.43, SD = 1.10). This indicates that most of the students had better pronunciation through practicing, which might lead to the fact that they became more confident when communicating in English.

These findings suggest that students are generally motivated to improve their pronunciation skills and believe that consistent practice is crucial for achieving this goal.

Table 3: Students' General Attitudes towards English Pronunciation

Code	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
GA1	Pronunciation is important in learning English.	4.46	1.08
GA2	English pronunciation is challenging.	4.09	1.04
GA3	Good English pronunciation makes me feel confident in communication.	4.51	1.04
GA4	Practicing helps me improve my pronunciation.	4.43	1.10

Specific challenging aspects of English pronunciation

The subsequent 31 items of the questionnaire, ranging from 1 (not challenging) to 5 (extremely challenging), explore the specific pronunciation features that English-majored freshmen find difficult. Table 4 provides an overview of the results, which illustrate a wide range of pronunciation aspects, across both segmental and suprasegmental features of English pronunciation, as perceived difficulty.

In terms of segmental features, the findings reveal that students perceived several aspects of English pronunciation as challenging. Short vowel sounds (EP_SV1-EP_SV5) and long vowel sounds (EP_LV1-EP_LV5) received relatively low mean scores (M<2.5), suggesting that these sounds pose insignificant difficulties for most learners. Nevertheless, within the short vowel sounds, the three short vowels /ɒ/ (EP_SV3, M=2.30), /ʌ/ (EP_SV2, M=2.26), and /ə/ (EP_SV5, M=2.17) were reported as challenging by a minority of students. Meanwhile, all long vowel sounds investigated (EP_LV1-EP_LV5) and the two short vowels /ɪ/ (EP_SV1, M=1.08) and /ʊ/ (EP_SC4, M=2.04) were not considered challenging by most of the participants.

Similarly, the consonants were perceived as not very challenging by most of the students. While some consonants, such as /ʒ/ (EP_VC2,

M=2.59), /dʒ/ (EP_VC3, M=2.55), /ŋ/ (EP_NC, M=2.49) /ð/ (EP_VC5, M=2.38) and /θ/ (EP_VC4, M=2.25), received higher mean scores, indicating that's these sounds posed greater difficulty compared to the two other sounds, such as/z/, /r/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /v/, /w/. Additionally, final consonant clusters (EP_FCC, M=2.59) were identified as challenging by more students compared to initial ones (EP_ICC. M=2.09).

Regarding suprasegmental features, sentence stress (EP_SS, M=2.83), assimilation and elision (EP_AE, M=2.75) were reported as challenging aspects by more students than other aspects , such as linking (EP_L, M=2.45) and word stress (EP_WS, M=2.48).

Table 4: Challenging Aspects of English Pronunciation

Code	Aspects of English pronunciation	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
EP_SV1	Short vowel sounds	/ɪ/	1.80	1.00
EP_SV2		/ʌ/	2.26	1.15
EP_SV3		/ɒ/	2.30	1.15
EP_SV4		/ʊ/	2.04	1.16
EP_SV5		/ə/	2.17	1.21
EP_LV1	Long vowel sounds	/iː/	1.72	1.06
EP_LV2		/ɑː/	1.75	1.01
EP_LV3		/ɔː/	2.03	1.07
EP_LV4		/uː/	1.87	1.08
EP_LV5		/ɜː/	2.04	1.06
EP_VC1	Voiced consonants	/z/	1.75	1.09
EP_VC2		/ʒ/	2.59	1.17
EP_VC3		/dʒ/	2.55	1.32
EP_VC4		/θ/	2.25	1.19
EP_VC5		/ð/	2.38	1.23
EP_VC6		/r/	1.68	1.00
EP_VLC1	Voiceless Consonants	/ʃ/	1.83	1.00
EP_VLC2		/tʃ/	2.13	1.21

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EP_C1	Voiceless and Voiced	/v/	1.96	1.13
EP_C2	Consonants	/w/	1.94	1.12
EP_NC	Nasal Consonants	/ŋ/	2.49	1.02
EP_ICC	Initial consonant clusters	/bl/, /gr/, /str/	2.09	1.03
EP_FCC	Final consonant clusters	/mp/, /nd/, /sks/	2.59	1.10
EP_WS	Word stress: two-syllable words, compounds, suffixes	Word stress	2.48	1.13
EP_SS	Sentence stress: short imperatives, unstressed words, weak forms	Sentence stress	2.83	1.18
EP_L	Linking consonant to vowel/ vowel to vowel	Linking	2.45	1.09
EP_AE	Assimilation and elision	Assimilation and elision	2.75	1.21

Besides, there were several challenging aspects reported by the students in the open-ended questions and the semi-structured interviews, including final sounds, and the pronunciation of -s/es ending and -ed ending words. Furthermore, most participants in the interviews admitted that the most difficult aspects of pronunciation were consonants, particularly /r/ and /θ/. Notably, the consonant /θ/ was acknowledged as difficult in both questionnaires and interviews. Additionally, intonation was also challenging for them. The reason for the encountered challenges may stem from their native language which does not share similar pronunciation features with English pronunciation. As respondents S2 and S8 shared that:

> S2: *"I often mispronounce the sounds /θ/ and /r/ because there are no similar sounds in Vietnamese. For example, I tend to pronounce /θ/ as /t/ or /d/ and /r/ as /l/ or /z/."*

> S8: *"/ed/, /s/, /z/ final consonants (are difficult aspects), due to the habit of not pronouncing final consonants even though I am aware that I have mispronounced."*

Overall, the findings indicate that students encountered difficulties across a broad spectrum of pronunciation features, including both segmental (such as short vowels, voiced consonants, and nasal consonants) and suprasegmental (sentence stress, assimilation, and elision). Despite having received both theoretical and practical instructions, a significant number of students still experienced challenges in mastering several aspects of pronunciation. As reported by the interviewees, these perceived challenging aspects were due to unclear presentations, English language instructions without Vietnamese translations, lack of direct practice of English pronunciation in class, and lack of English dialogue practice. Two of them stated that they could have learned better if someone had helped to translate the lessons into their mother tongue. One student claimed that they wanted to improve their English pronunciation skills, but they could not find any appropriate or effective methods to follow. Another student stated that some of the group presentations could not help them understand the lessons clearly, so they were confused. Besides, a student also expected more direct practice of English during the lessons.

These results are consistent with previous studies, such as Hansen (2001), Nguyen and Ingram (2005), and Tang (2007) which highlighted the mispronunciation of several consonants (/ʒ/, /ð/, and /θ/), final consonant clusters, and sentence intonation among EFL learners, and the absence of similar sounds in learners' first language. Interestingly, while studies by Tang (2007) and Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) indicated long vowel sounds and word stress were perceived challenging aspects, this current study revealed disparities. In particular, the results showed that short vowel sounds, assimilation and elision, as well as sentence stress were difficult for the students to master. The consistencies highlighting the importance of suprasegmental features in English pronunciation and underscore the need for focused instruction and practice on the specific pronunciation features that students perceive as challenging. Besides, the inconsistencies indicate the context-specific features to be considered in teaching and learning English pronunciation.

Students' Perspectives on Classroom Activities

The next 12 items of the questionnaire, ranging from 1 (not engaging) to 5 (extremely engaging), examined students' perceptions of classroom activities designed to support pronunciation improvement. These items (CA1–CA12) explored how freshman English majors evaluated the effectiveness and appeal of instructional practices in the classroom. The data collected from surveys and interviews offers insights into students' attitudes towards these activities, highlighting their preferences and perceived challenges.

As shown in Table 4, the findings indicate a clear preference for certain classroom activities, particularly those that engagingly combine repetition and practice. Choral repetition (CA9, M = 3.78), shadowing exercises (CA2, M = 3.71), and listening activities (CA3, M = 3.69) were perceived as the most engaging by most of the participants, highlighting their appeal to the students and their perceived effectiveness in enhancing students' pronunciation competence.

Besides, activities integrating technology, such as technology-based exercises (CA5, M = 3.64), and communicative practices like role-playing dialogues (CA7, M = 3.62), were also considered engaging. These results underscore the potential of implementing digital tools and interactive classroom activities to foster students' engagement and learning outcomes.

In contrast, minimal pairs practice (CA1, M = 3.35) and dictation (CA11, M = 3.38) received relatively lower engagement ratings. This indicates that while students acknowledge their value, these activities may be perceived as less engaging or impactful. Even so, the mean scores suggest that students still view them as contributing to their pronunciation development.

Table 5: Students' Perspectives on Classroom Activities

Code	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
CA1	Minimal pairs practice	3.35	1.17
CA2	Shadowing exercises	3.71	1.09
CA3	Listening activities (identifying and practicing sounds)	3.70	1.17
CA4	Tongue twisters	3.58	1.13
CA5	Technology-based activities	3.64	1.16
CA6	Sound Discrimination Exercises	3.39	1.17
CA7	Role-Playing Dialogues	3.62	1.20
CA8	Recording and Playback	3.45	1.27
CA9	Choral Repetition	3.78	1.15
CA10	Stress and Intonation Practice	3.70	1.18
CA11	Dictation	3.38	1.26
CA12	Using Visual Aids	3.29	1.27

Most participants also shared in the interviews that group work, presentations, and reading aloud were the most engaging classroom activities. Additionally, the role-play activity greatly encouraged them in pronunciation practice.

Respondent S1 acknowledged:

"*I was really into the activity of role-playing I could play the role of the speaker and convey the meaning of a passage. It can help me to comprehend the lesson easier.*"

Respondent S8 also shared:

"*(I think the engaging activities were) working in groups, having presentations, and discussing with our group members. Because we could discuss how to use 'words' and 'syllables', and we exchanged experiences about learning pronunciation through practical practice.*"

The findings reveal that students prefer interactive and engaging activities such as choral repetition, shadowing exercises, and role-playing dialogues, which they perceive as highly effective for improving pronunciation. Technology-based activities and listening exercises were also reported as engaging classroom activities, underscoring the value of integrating digital tools and auditory practice into instructions. In contrast, minimal pair practice and dictation were seen as less engaging but still beneficial. The results highlight the necessity of designing classroom activities that align with not only the need to maximize engagement and learning outcomes but also learners' preferences.

Hence, teachers are encouraged to prioritize methods that students find most beneficial, such as choral repetition and shadowing exercises. At the same time, less-preferred activities can be modified in more engaging ways to better meet their needs and expectations. This varied approach may contribute to greater student engagement and, ultimately, more noticeable pronunciation progress.

Major Hindering Factors in Pronunciation Improvement

The last six items (HF1-HF6), ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), were utilized to explore factors hindering freshman English majors from improving their pronunciation skills. Using results gathered from the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the analysis highlights the barriers that students face, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the factors affecting pronunciation development and offering guidance for enhancing instructional practices.

Among the factors examined, the most significant obstacle was students' fear of making mistakes in front of others (HF6, M = 3.64). This emphasizes the critical impact of anxiety and emotional factors on pronunciation learning. This finding aligns with prior research highlighting the role of affective barriers in language acquisition, particularly in oral skills. Other notable challenges include the lack of practice (HF4, M = 3.26) and the lack of motivation (HF5, M =

3.22). As a result, the findings underscore the importance of fostering a supportive learning environment which encourages regular practice and sustains student motivation.

Teacher-related factors, such as the teacher's pronunciation (HF1, M = 3.25), were also perceived as influencing students' progress. This suggests that students value accurate pronunciation modeling from their instructors and perceive it as influential in their own learning. This highlights the need for teachers to prioritize clarity and accuracy in their instruction.

Two additional factors of course length (HF2, M = 3.19) and native language interference (HF3, M = 3.04,) were rated as potential barriers, although to a lesser extent with comparatively lower mean scores. These findings suggest that students may consider the course duration as insufficient to make progress in pronunciation. Additionally, their native language might also impede their English pronunciation acquisition, which could be attributed to the differences in the phonological systems between the two languages.

Table 6: Hindering Factors in Pronunciation Improvement

Code	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
HF1	Teacher's pronunciation	3.25	1.39
HF2	Course length	3.19	1.22
HF3	Native language	3.04	1.22
HF4	Lack of practice	3.26	1.36
HF5	Lack of motivation	3.22	1.22
HF6	Fear of making mistakes in front of others	3.64	1.25

Surprisingly, in response to the open-ended question, the students acknowledged several new factors that influence their English pronunciation. Particularly, the additional factors were the distinction between British and American English, the lack of exposure to

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English vocabulary, and English pronunciation practice environment with native speakers. In addition, a few students pointed out that varied online pronunciation sources, such as different English accents and pronunciation styles by YouTubers or streamers from different countries/regions, were also obstacles to their improvement. Other students also reported their difficulties in staying focused on the lessons and understanding the lectures. These issues, in turn, made it harder for them to learn and improve their English pronunciation skills. One student expressed a preference for one-on-one instructions, as such kind of activity could help improve one's English pronunciation skills by receiving more targeted support and clearer feedback from the teacher.

In fact, all the respondents made the same points in the semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, there were a few respondents who reported that they encountered struggling situations ranging from the fear of mispronunciation, examination, and ochlophobia. As respondents S5 and S7 shared that:

> S5: *"When taking exams, I have difficulties with the /r/ sound, I haven't spent much time on it and haven't practiced much."*

> S7: *"Feeling nervous in front of a group, struggling with pronunciation, and using the wrong words."*

Overall, the findings reveal a broad spectrum of challenges that the students encountered during the Pronunciation course. Therefore, overcoming these barriers may require addressing both internal factors (such as learners' anxiety and motivation) and external influences (such as teacher modeling and course design). Besides, implementing a holistic approach that integrates emotional support, effective teaching practices, and an engaging curriculum may also enable students to achieve greater pronunciation proficiency.

In addition, participants also made several practical suggestions for enhancing pronunciation lessons. In particular, most of the students emphasized the need for more in-class English pronunciation practice with a variety of activities, such as dialogue practice, listening exercises,

reading aloud, and real-life conversational practice. Collaborative classroom activities, such as pair work and group activities, were also regarded as effective ways to improve their English pronunciation. Notably, many of them expressed a strong preference for opportunities to practice with English native speakers because they believed that such kind of activity could help them understand authentic pronunciation patterns better, improve their fluency, and overcome pronunciation challenges. These recommendations highlight the importance of a student-centered approach which integrates diverse and interactive activities into the curriculum to address students' needs and enhance their pronunciation proficiency.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

By employing a mixed-methods methodology and various research tools in the study, the conducted research had already explored three main factors that had crucial impacts on freshman English majors' pronunciation: (1) the difficulties that they had encountered in the course, (2) their learning interest with the teaching methods in the classroom, and (3) the challenges that they themselves perceived in their learning progress.

In terms of the difficulties that the students encountered in the pronunciation course, the results were consistent with previous studies (Hansen, 2001; Nguyen and Ingram, 2005; Tang, 2007) revealed that not only segmental aspects such as vowels ($/\Lambda/$, $/\text{ɒ}/$, $/\text{ə}/$) and consonants ($/\eth/$ and $/\theta/$), but also suprasegmental aspects such as stress, intonation, assimilation, and elision were challenging for the students. These obstacles, which were attributed to unclear group presentations, inadequate Vietnamese translations, and insufficient dialogue practice, were identified and explained by the students in both questionnaire and interview data. Therefore, there is a need to create more room for students to have more dialogue practice as well as increase the amount of translanguaging in classrooms as it is used as an effective pedagogical tool (Canagarajah, 2013).

Regarding the students' learning interest in the teaching methods in the classroom, the study showed that the students' favorite engaging activities in class are group work, presentations, reading aloud, and role-play through choral repetition, shadowing exercises, and role-playing dialogues. As a result, the teachers are suggested to design these activities from authentic material (magazines, newspapers, articles, etc.) that are suitable for learners' levels and then assign them as supplement exercises in class.

In respect of major hindering factors in pronunciation improvement, there were external and internal factors to overcome to improve students' pronunciation proficiency. Particularly, in questionnaire data, the element such as fear of making mistakes in front of others is the major obstacle that is identified by the students, while the rest (teacher's pronunciation, course length, native language, lack of motivation, and lack of practice) are found to have a lower level of influence on their pronunciation improvement. In addition, other astonishing factors, such as the distinction between British and American English accents, the insufficient practice with native speakers, the abundance of online resources with different accents and pronunciation styles, and learners' ability to maintain attention during lessons.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations aim to enhance students' pronunciation proficiency. To address the challenges, learners should consider using AI tools or online exchanges to deal with the limited access to native speakers. This is also a way to practice in order to decrease the fear of making mistakes in front of others as well as increase learners' motivation in learning progress. Besides, pronunciation teachers should create tailored classroom activities, and offer more effective learning environments with AI tools, synchronous practices, presentations, and discussions in the classroom to promote students' engagement, thereby improving their pronunciation proficiency.

Despite significant insights into barriers to freshman English majors' pronunciation proficiency, this current study has several limitations

that can be addressed in future research. First, despite the students' demographics were investigated, this study has not examined whether the genders and the extent of practice beyond in-class lessons impacted students' perceptions of challenging factors in English pronunciation. Second, the sample size of 69 English-majored freshmen may pose a limitation to the applicability of the results to wider contexts. Future researchers should consider a more comprehensive analysis of students' demographics to identify potential links or disparities. In addition, to solve the limitations of generalizability, future studies should involve a larger sample of English majors. Moreover, data from pronunciation proficiency tests could provide more detailed insights into students' persistent challenges.

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