

PRONUNCIATIONS OF CONSONANTS /ð/ AND /θ/ BY ADULT VIETNAMESE EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study examined the pronunciation of consonants /ð/ & /θ/ by adult Vietnamese learners of English. Ten adult Vietnamese learners of English were selected to be the sample for the audiotape observation, which aimed at identifying the participants' mistakes in pronouncing /ð/ and /θ/. Secondly, 115 learners of English in Vietnam were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding the causes of their pronunciation errors. The findings indicated that substitution phenomenon was a dominant problem in the students' pronunciation of /θ/ and /ð/. The most outstanding problem in pronouncing the consonant /θ/ was replacing this sound by Vietnamese /t'/. With regards to /ð/ sound, it was most frequently mispronounced as /z/. Besides, there was a new kind of mistake found: it was the tendency to pronounce /dʒ/ instead of /ð/, which has not been reported ever. Apart from that, participants also confirmed some causes of their erroneous pronunciation. As perceived by the learners themselves, the most popular causes of their problems were the lack of English exposure and practice, which implicated that an effective environment for using English was highly necessary.

Key words: dental fricative sounds, consonant pronunciation, Vietnamese EFL learners

In Vietnamese context, learners' ability to enunciate English correctly has drawn more attention in English education, and achieving intelligible or even native-like English pronunciation has been set as a desirable goal among various Vietnamese learners and teachers. To obtain this goal, understanding about the learners' problems and caused of these problems is necessary.

According to Munro (2008), the intelligibility in pronunciation was often hindered because of the nonnative speakers' mispronunciation at the segmental level. That is, English sounds or phones (consonants and vowels) were not produced properly. As claimed by Zampini (2008), this might be attributed to the nonexistence of a target sound does in the learners' mother. Concerning two consonant systems of English and Vietnamese, seemingly, there are some similar characteristics; "however, they internally differ from each other a lot" (Luu, 2011). Exemplars of sounds foreign to Vietnamese learners are two fricatives /ð/ and /θ/. Although this contrast (/ð/ and /θ/) does not carry a high functional load, i.e., the number of time that the phonemic contrast occurs per thousand words or text, is low (Catford, 1987, cited in Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010), these consonants are considered noticeably challenging and the most problematic to a lot of L2 students (Derwing, 2008). Regarding Vietnamese learners, it has been noted that a number of students at some high schools or universities, even those who major in English, produce these two target sounds erroneously (Dao,

2007; Ha, 2005; Le, 2011; Luu, 2011). However, little has been known about adult learners.

Thus, this study attempted to make some contribution to the field by examining the pronunciation of consonants /ð/ & /θ/ by adult Vietnamese learners of English.

English and Vietnamese consonants

No matter what language it is, there is a prevailing consensus among phoneticians around the world, to name but just a few Roach (1991), Crystal (2003), Celce-Murcia et al. (2010), Doan, Nguyen and Pham (2006) that consonants are classified basing on three main dimensions: voicing, place of articulation and manner of articulation.

A comparison between two inventories of Vietnamese and English consonants by IPA (1999) and Doan et al. (2006) respectively shows that these two languages share some phonemes; however, Vietnamese does not consist of some of the consonants existing in English and vice versa. English sounds /θ/ and /ð/ are two among exemplars of the difference for the former. Concerning the articulatory features, /ð/ and /θ/ are characterized as a voiced dental fricative sound and a voiceless dental fricative one respectively. They could be found in pronouncing a number of words such as *think, the, bath, bathe, mathematics, father*. It can be easily seen that both sounds belong to the same categories of fricatives and dentals; only their voicing is different. For the voiced /ð/ the vocal cords vibrate, in contrast, there is no such

vibration but a voiceless friction for /θ/ sound. Fricative feature could be explained clearly:

In many cases, the air moves through a narrow passageway created when the articulatory organs approach but do not touch each other. The air being forced through this passage causes friction. We call the resulting sound a fricative.

(Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, p.58)

In terms of the place of articulation, /ð/ and /θ/ are the only speech sounds that constitute the dental group of English consonants. How to pronounce them is described in detailed by Kelly (2000), Ha (2005): The tip of the tongue touches lightly the back of the upper teeth. For some other speakers, the tongue tip also protrudes quickly and slightly between the upper and lower teeth. The former is often called dental; the latter is interdental of which description is supposed to be helpful in teaching pronunciation to learners whose mother tongue does not have these sounds (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Moreover, during the production the soft palate is raised, so that “the nasal resonator shut off” (Ha, 2005), i.e. the nasal passageway is blocked off.

Furthermore, in Vietnamese, a single alphabet represents only one sound; in contrast, the same letters can represent different sounds in English. Particularly, /ð/ and /θ/ are presented by the same letters “th” in words, which also represents the sound /tʰ/ in Vietnamese. These three sounds are all dental, but the first two are fricatives while the last is a stop.

Problems in pronouncing /ð/ and /θ/

Munro (2008) and Zampini (2008) approved that even a casual listeners could detect the foreign accentedness of a nonnative speaker basing on incorrect articulation at the segmental level. In particular, these authors emphasized on sound omission/deletion, insertion, and substitution.

In reference to two consonants /ð/ and /θ/, they are often considered the most problematic pair of sounds to many learners of English (Derwing, 2003). The substitution for /θ/ has been even well documented. It was revealed that for the case of the students from Hungarians, Russian and Thai, /t/ was used instead of /θ/; whereas, there was an incline toward producing /s/ for /θ/ among Egyptian Arabic, German and Japanese learners (Lombardi, 2003). In the same fashion, both /ð/ and /θ/ were well known as one of the most difficult, confusing or frequently mispronounced sounds to Vietnamese speakers (Ha, 2005; Tang, 2007; Neumann, 2007; Le & Cunningham, 2010; Luu, 2011). It has been shown across studies that Vietnamese learners were no exception in the sound substitution trend for /ð/ and /θ/; however, the phenomenon appeared to be a little different and diverse. Additionally, /ð/ is often substituted with /z, d/ (Ha, 2005; Neumann, 2007), whilst /θ/ is often produced as Vietnamese /tʰ/ (Ha,

2005) or /s, t/ (Ha, 2005; Neumann, 2007). The sound deviation also depended on the position on the sounds in words. More specifically, It was found that /ð/ was articulated as /s/ in medial (Dao, 2007) and as /z/ (Dao, 2007) in final position, meanwhile /θ/ was mispronounced as Vietnamese /tʰ/ when standing at the beginning of the words or as /t/ or /d/ when at the ending position (Dao, 2007). Besides, it should be noted that there was little evidence of sound deletion for these two in English speech by Vietnamese students. Obviously, sound substitution has been the most dominant tendency in Vietnamese students' pronunciation of /ð/ and /θ/.

Factors affecting learners' pronunciation

The role of the native language

According to Lado (1957) and Celce-Murcia et al., (2010) the dissimilarity between the mother tongue and the target language was a profound factor causing foreign accents or incorrect pronunciation of language learners.

In the same fashion, it was posited that many language-specific sounds between Vietnamese and English and the greater number of English consonants with a wider distribution across word positions could lead to troublesome in learning to pronounce English for Vietnamese learners (Tang, 2007; Avery & Ehlich, 1992, Luu, 2011). In the light of negative transference from L1 to L2, many researchers have given an explanation for Vietnamese learners' mispronunciation of /ð/ and /θ/ (Dao, 2007; Ngo, 2009; Dao, 2011, Le, 2011). According to those authors, first of all, these two English sounds do not exist in Vietnamese, therefore, many learners found it hard to get used to the way of articulating them. Some students even felt embarrassed to show their tongue outside the mouth, between upper and lower teeth in articulating these interdental sounds, and letting the airflow out was not simple for them (Le, 2011). Secondly, compared to English, much fewer consonants could occur at the end of a Vietnamese word (Tang, 2007). Furthermore, unlike English, Vietnamese ending sounds are never fricatives, and they are never released, either (Tang, 2007; Osburne, 1996; Avery & Ehlich, 1995). As a result, pronouncing English fricatives at the word-final position is totally “new” to Vietnamese, thus, the negative transference arises, making the problems tougher. The speakers are more likely to forget to release those ending sounds or confusion may occur (Luu, 2011). What is more, /ð/ and /θ/ are represented by letters “th”, which, at the same time, is the look in words of a Vietnamese consonant, /tʰ/. Thus, the confusion is understandable.

The learner

It was conceded by many experts in the field that the learners themselves influence their own pronunciation. Such factors as learners' age,

exposure to the target language, amount and type of prior pronunciation instruction, aptitude and motivation should be taken into account in pronunciation teaching and learning.

First of all, the existence of a critical period, i.e., an ideal period of learners' **age** when their language acquisition ability is at its best, had been a long-standing and dominant hypothesis in language education until the study by Flege, Munro, and MacKay (1995). Nonetheless, these authors still suggested that the younger the learner, the higher chance of precluding L1 interference in L2 production. Moyer (1999) proposed the later learners start their L2 learning, the more their pronunciation was identified as nonnative by native listeners. However, it has been proved that early age of initial L2 learning did not necessarily lead to success in acquiring a nativelike pronunciation (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

In addition, the amount of **exposure to the target language** is of pivotal importance in language learning in general, and pronunciation acquiring in particular. (Derwing, 2008; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Many studies indicated that the greater the input of target language was and the higher the rate of target language use was, the closer learners' pronunciation was to that of native speakers (Munro, 1993; Flege et al., 1997, Derwing, 2008). Besides, Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) also emphasized on the effectiveness of L2 listening discrimination and early L2 immersion.

Next, **the amount and type of prior pronunciation instruction** of the learners should be taken in consideration, so that their pronunciation problems could be recognized and solved soon (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

Moreover, Derwing (2008) asserted that **aptitude** also came into play. It was believed that some learners had innately higher ability to acquire a proper pronunciation than others (Carroll, 1962), and Derwing (2008) considered this the explanation for the case where two learners were the same in many aspects (L1, age of initial L2 learning, motivation level, condition,...) but had noticeably different ability to pronounce correctly.

Aside from those above factors, **motivation** was notified to have a remarkable bearing on pronunciation acquisition (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Evidence for this was reported in Moyer (1999). The specialist found that high motivation for achieving a set goal in learning L2 pronunciation can account for learners' success in gaining a good pronunciation or a native-like accent.

In Vietnamese context, although the pronunciation problems of Vietnamese EFL learners have been investigated to some extent, there was not much literature on the adult learners and the causes of their problems. These gaps in research have become the rationale for the present study.

The study

To provide information on the issue, first of all, this work aimed at identifying the participants' mistakes in pronouncing /ð/ and /θ/. Secondly, the causes of these errors perceived by the learners were found out. In short, the paper sought to solve two following research questions: (1) What mistakes do adult Vietnamese learners make in their pronunciation of two English consonants /ð/ and /θ/ if any? And (2) In the learners' opinion, what are the causes of these mistakes?

METHODS

Participants

Ten adult Vietnamese learners of English were selected to be the sample for the audiotape observation. This sample consisted of two males and eight females who were chosen randomly from a private language institute in Vietnam. Their mean age was 21.5, and their mother tongue was Vietnamese.

For the questionnaire, 115 Vietnamese EFL learners including ten mentioned above students were the sample. They were also chosen randomly. In this sample, there were 27 males and 88 females. The age range were from 18 to 29, and the mean age was 19.67 (SD = 3.3). These participants also had Vietnamese as their first language.

Among these 115 participants, 80 reported that they had problems in dealing with the two sounds, so only the 80 learners were the respondents to the questionnaire part pertaining to causes of the problems. The mean age of these 80 answerers was 19.44 (SD = 3.24). By gender, there were 18 males and 62 females.

Data collection instruments

Audiotape observation and online questionnaire were exploited as the methods collecting the answers to the research questions.

The method of audiotape observation was employed to enlighten the researcher about the problems in the informants' pronunciation of /ð/ and /θ/. Accordingly, the first data instrument was the collection of audiotapes that recorded the learners' reading out loud a list of words and a passage containing target sounds /ð/ and /θ/. The wordlist was composed of ten words with four and six words for /θ/ and /ð/ respectively. Each consonant occurred at all three positions, that is, the initial, medial and final positions. Regarding the passage, it was a short text of twelve sentences in which /ð/ and /θ/ appeared 23 and 8 times respectively. These sounds also dispersed at all kinds of sentence positions, that is, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the sentences. This passage was taken from the website speakmethod.com.

The second data collection instrument was a questionnaire including twelve closed – ended items concerning the causes of the learners'

mispronunciation of two target sounds. In more details, the first three items asked the students whether they saw themselves had problems with /ð/ and /θ/. If the respondents reported that they had no problems, the form would be submitted directly. If they rated that there existed some problems, they would be directed to do the next nine questions. These nine items listed nine possible causes based on the factors affecting learners' pronunciation discussed in the literature review. That is, the influence of the learners' mother tongue, i.e., Vietnamese, starting age of learning pronunciation, exposure to English, language aptitude, and motivation for learning English pronunciation. They were also asked to report other causes in their own case. Each of these questions had five Likert-scale response options ranging from (1) *strongly disagree*, (2) *disagree*, (3) *neutral*, (4) *agree* to (5) *strongly agree*. The Cronbach alpha reliability index was .843.

Data collection procedure

Firstly, ten participants were allowed to hear a recorded tape of a native speaker reading aloud the wordlist and the passage, then, they had a little time to prepare on their own. After that, the respondents were required to read out loud the wordlist and the passage. For the words, they had to read them in a carrier phrase: "I say bathing" or "I say thick", for example. Their performance was recorded and the audio files were sent to the researcher.

Concerning the questionnaire, after revised basing on the peers and instructor's comments, the online version was delivered to as many respondents as possible. This was completed with the function of Google Drive-Forms. On receiving, the respondents were helped to understand the purpose of the questionnaire with the overall guide written at the beginning of the form. Instructions for each question were also given to help participants complete the questionnaire. As a result of lacking direct contact with questionnaire participants, the researcher had no chance to explain orally the questions; therefore, all the questions were in Vietnamese, being as clear and unambiguous as possible. The respondents were guided to click on the link provided, and answer all the questions in the questionnaire. After a participant clicked "submit", the researchers immediately received the answer. Finally, the completed questionnaires were used for data analysis.

Data analysis

The students' tapes recorded were listened to by the researcher, the teacher of the class, and a casual native listener from the United States. The mistakes in pronouncing target sounds were listed, counted and categorized into different kinds of problems. The American speaker was told to note anything she

supposed to be problematic. Results were then compared and synthesized among the three listeners.

For the questionnaire, the data was converted into numerical form. The reliability was computed first with the help of SPSS 16. After that, the frequency of each choice or option were calculated and then converted into percentage. The mean scores and standard deviations of the participants' self-ratings were given well. All these information was also illustrated in tables and charts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Problems in the learners' pronunciation of /ð/ and /θ/

For /θ/ sound, four out of ten students often pronounced as Vietnamese /t'/ when this sound occurs at all three positions in words (initial, medial and final). Student 1 and 10 replaced all or nearly all /θ/ sounds in the wordlist and the passage by /t'/.

This substitution phenomenon also happened in the pronunciation of students 2 and 7, but with a little lower frequency. Student 2 made this mistake more frequently when reading the passage than reading words in isolation. Probably, this student knew how the sound was supposed to be articulated and tried to control her pronunciation; however, when it came to the discourse level, maintaining the accurate pronunciation was not an easy task, but quite a challenging one. Unlike student 2 who could, at least, get the sound correct a few times, students 7 had this type of error whenever the sound was at the beginning of a syllable, and for other positions of /θ/, other mistakes were made.

Additionally, there was one more student having this error, but just once for the word "three" in the passage. That was student 5 who often pronounced this sound correctly. It was possible that he made the mistake because this /θ/ occurred in a different environment compared to other words. In "three", the target sound was in a cluster, more exactly, the initial cluster /θr/. It seems that pronouncing the sound in cluster potentially posed a little more difficulty.

As discussed above, ð/ and /θ/ are represented by letters "th", which, at the same time, is the written form of the Vietnamese consonant /t'/. Thus, it was likely that the confusion was caused by the way these sounds were represented in letters.

Apart from being substituted with /t'/, the consonant /θ/ was sometimes mispronounced as /t/ sound by student 7 with the word "teeth", "bath" and "three" and student 8 with "thin". Student 7 often replaced the sound with /t'/ at the syllable-initial position, but in "three", the substitute was /t/. Possibly, this inconsistency in her mistakes also stemmed from the special environment in which the sound occurred, i.e., in an initial cluster. For two words "teeth" and "bath", the target consonant occurred at the ending position, and this student also

produced /t/ instead. However, this substitute /t/ was not released at all. It sounded like this /t/ and the vowel were combined and pronounced at the same time. As a result, the word sounded very short, which made it quite confusing with the phenomena of omitting. One thing should be noted, it was not the habit of Vietnamese people to release coda consonants. Hence, this could be seen as evidence for the influence of Vietnamese – the mother tongue on this speaker's pronunciation.

What is more, this voiceless dental fricative was once mistaken as its dental counterpart /ð/. It was the mistake by students 5 with the second word "thin" in the passage. For the first "thin", this speaker substituted /θ/ with /z/. It was likely that this student thought the letter "th" here represented /ð/, and he had problems with /ð/ at the same time, so the result was the production of /z/ at last.

Concerning the problems in pronouncing /ð/ sound, mistakes were made by five in ten participants. The most dominant phenomenon was the substitution of /z/ for /ð/. Respondent 1 produced /z/ almost whenever /ð/ sound appeared in the passage. Student 6 showed this kind of error in reading the passage as well, but in just about half of the times she encountered the sound. Meanwhile, student 5 and 8 only made the mistake twice (with "their" and "then") and three times (in "the", "weather", and "then") in the passage. It appeared that a number of students had a propensity to make the first consonant in "the" become /z/. Unlike these above students having this problem mainly in reading the passage, student 10 made the mistake with both the wordlist and the passage. However, the frequency of this substitution was not so high as for students 1 and 6 because other mistakes were made as well.

Interestingly, /ð/ was mispronounced as /dʒ/, which was mostly by student 10 ("this" in the wordlist; "they", "these", "then",...in the passage). Possibly, the student intended to replace by /z/, but she overarticulated and it became so strong. Moreover, there was a likelihood that this speaker was under the considerable influence of her local dialect when producing /dʒ/. She might usually substitute /dʒ/ for /z/ even when speaking Vietnamese, a phenomenon could be observed in the accent of people from some provinces in Vietnam. The student seemed to manage to control her voice at some words, but she still made this error in eight times she encountered /ð/ at the beginning of the words. Additionally, student 6 also produced /dʒ/ as the initial consonant of "these" and "they". Nonetheless, he only had this problem only twice, much less seriously than student 6. Mispronouncing merely once, student 9's mistake was with the first "their", which might not be her habit, but just a minor mistake when mixing words in discourse.

Another substitution came from student 1 when she pronounced /ð/ like /d/ when coming across two words "although" and "this" in isolation.

Sometimes this target sound was produced as Vietnamese /t'/ as well. Students 1 and 10 who had the habit of replacing /θ/ with /t'/ made the substitution for /ð/ in the medial position of "worthy", "bathing", and in final position of "breathe".

The last to mention is the confusion between this voiced dental fricative and its voiceless counterpart /θ/. This happened for the words "bathing" and "breathe" mostly by student 2 and 6. Especially, when /ð/ was in the middle of the word "worthy", six over ten students (2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8) mispronounced it as /θ/. Besides, as mentioned previously, two students had /t'/ as the substitute for the case of worthy. This was probably the result of mistaking /ð/ for /θ/, and simultaneously having problems with /θ/ (replaced by /t'/). This means, /ð/ in "worthy" was only articulated precisely merely by two students (3 and 9) who often show no problems with both target sounds.

In summary, only substitution phenomenon was found in problems of the pronunciation of /θ/ and /ð/. There was no evidence for the tendency of omission. Probably, if there had been more participants, more phenomena might have been discovered as in previous studies by Nguyen (2007), Ha (2005). The most dominant problem in pronouncing the consonant /θ/ found in the present study was replacing this sound by Vietnamese /t'/. Besides, the sound was also produced like /t/, /z/ and /ð/. With regards to /ð/ sound, it was most frequently mispronounced as /z/. There were a few times, this voiced consonant was articulated as /dʒ/, /d/, /t'/, and /θ/. There appeared to be more problems with the voiced dental fricative /ð/ than its voiceless counterpart. Furthermore, there was confusion between these two target sounds to some extent, too. Additionally, it was indicated that the problems were different a little across the environment in which the sounds occurred. What is more, reading words in discourse was seemingly more challenging and problematic than dealing with words in isolation. In the total of ten respondents, five had more obvious problems and made much more mistakes than the rest. They are students 1, 2, 6, 7 and 10.

Compared to results of previous studies, most of the mistakes named above were in agreement with the findings by Ha (2005), Neumann (2007), Dao (2007). This study could not discover the trend of replacing /θ/ by /s/ as revealed in the works by Ha (2005), Neumann (2007), and Dao (2007). That this study did not discover these phenomena might be due to the small number of participants, especially the tiny number of participants having problems in pronunciation with two target sounds. However, there was a new kind of mistake found in this study: it was the tendency to pronounce /dʒ/ instead of /ð/.

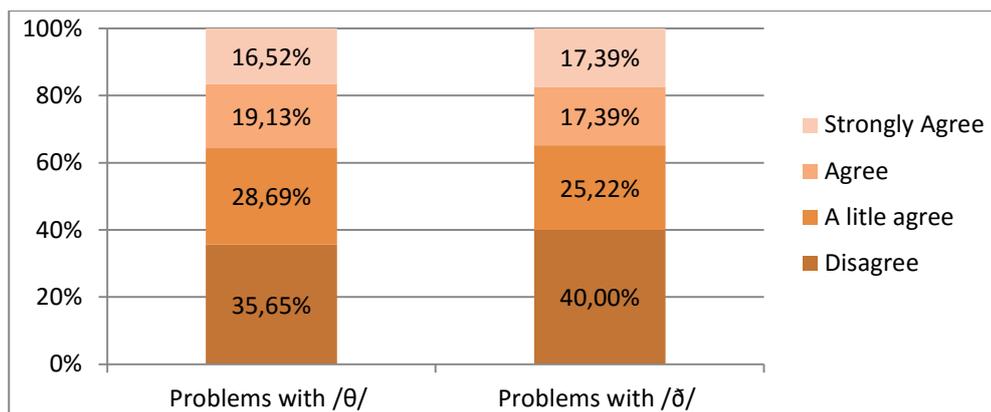


Figure 1. Self rating on problems with two sounds (N=115)

For the questionnaire result, 80 out of 115 respondents (69.6%) admitted that they had problems with either of the two target sounds. This proportion was larger than the proportion of students having errors in the audio observation (six out of ten). More specifically, out of 80 respondents who reported on their imperfect pronunciation, 74 affirmed their problems with the /θ/ sound, and the number was 69 learners for the /ð/ sound. This means, in the total of 115 respondents, 64.3% and 60.0% perceived that their pronunciation of sounds /θ/ and /ð/ respectively was not correct. In other words, the trouble in pronouncing /θ/ and /ð/ existed for nearly two thirds of the learners, which means it was quite popular. Figure 1 shows that for each sound, about 17% of the participants even thought it was highly problematic. Compared with each other, seemingly, /θ/ was difficult for a few more learners than /ð/. This is quite contrary to the result of the audiotape observation which revealed that more students articulated /θ/ sound inaccurately. Besides, one can infer from the presented figures that the both sounds were challenging for the majority of the learners; however, in some cases, the problem only

occurred with one of the two sounds. This was confirmed in the students' answers: eleven of them claimed the imperfect pronunciation for only /θ/, and six of them reported the opposite pattern.

Causes of the problems in pronouncing two sounds /ð/ and /θ/

Only 80 participants who admitted they did not pronounce correctly the two sounds were asked about the causes of their problems. Figure 2 and 3 presented the percentage of the respondents' agreement, and Table 1 summarized the mean scores of the respondents' self-rating on the given causes.

Regarding the role of the native language, the questionnaire result shows that the majority of the respondents found the articulation of the two sounds strange and difficult (See Figure 2). Around a third admitted it was difficult and extremely difficult to pronounce them. Besides, more than 80% of participants a little agreed, agreed and strongly agreed that their inaccurate pronunciation partially resulted from the influence of the mother tongue, that is, Vietnamese (See Figure 2).

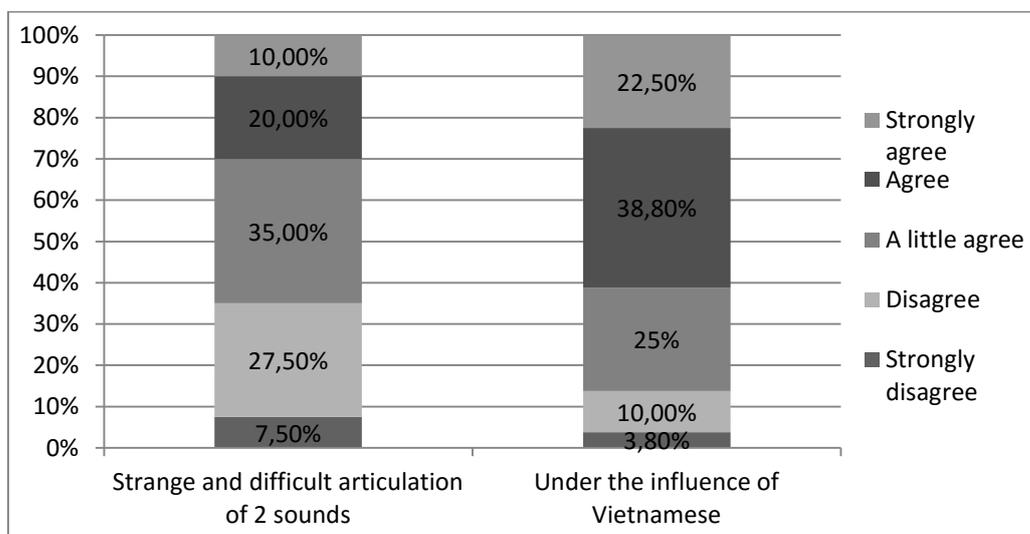


Figure 2. Causes from L1

Obviously, this finding along with the findings from audio listening lends support to the perspective that the dissimilarities between two languages can cause difficulty for learners. The two English sounds /θ/ and /ð/ do not exist in Vietnamese, therefore, understandably, a lot of learners found it troublesome to get used to the way of articulating them. It is possible that a number of learners naturally used the features of Vietnamese sounds to characterize these new ones as suggested by Zampini (2008). As a result, instead of pronouncing the target English sounds, many of Vietnamese learners produce the Vietnamese sounds that seem the most similar to these foreign consonants. For example, the most outstanding mistakes were the substitution of /tʰ/ for /θ/. Both sounds are dental sounds with tongue tip and upper teeth as articulators, that is, the same place of articulation. /z/, which is present in both language

and often the substitute for /ð/, even has same features concerning voicing and manner of articulation (both are voiced and fricative sounds). What is more, Vietnamese /z/ even has same place of articulation as /ð/ (refer to the consonant inventory by Doan, Nguyen, and Pham (2006)). Moreover, in contrary to English final consonants, Vietnamese ending sounds are never fricatives, and they are never released (Tang, 2007; Osburne, 1996; Avery & Ehlich, 1995). In other words, pronouncing English fricatives at the word-final position is totally “new” to Vietnamese, thus, the negative transference arises, contributing to the confusion (Luu, 2011). On top of that, /ð/ and /θ/ are represented by letters “th”, which is simultaneously the letters for a Vietnamese consonant, /tʰ/. Possibly, the confusion stems from the same look of the written letters representing the sounds.

Table 1. Mean scores of the students’ self-rating on the causes of their problems

No.	Items	Mean	SD
4	The way to pronounce either /ð/ or /θ/ is strange and difficult to me.	2.98	1.09
5	My pronunciation is influenced by Vietnamese.	3.66	1.05
6	I feel embarrassed when my tongue sticks out of the teeth in making the sounds	2.77	1.22
7	I was not young enough when starting to learn the pronunciation of the sounds.	3.40	1.37
8	I have not had enough exposure to native input (English).	3.84	1.13
9	I have not used English regularly.	3.86	1.04
10	I haven’t received adequate instruction on how to pronounce the sounds	3.52	1.26
11	My ability to learn English is not good enough.	2.54	1.19
12	My motivation for learning English pronunciation is low.	2.84	1.32

Next, six more causes related to the learners themselves were given and they were all agreed by from more than half to an enormous percentage of participants.

Table 1 and Figure 3 indicated that among six learner-related causes, the most popular ones were that the students did not have enough native input exposure, and they did not use English regularly. These two factors received around 90% of respondents’ agreement, in which the figures for agreement and absolute agreement were around two thirds for the first two above causes and more than 40% for the last mentioned. Understandably, English is a foreign language in Vietnamese, not a second language, and learners do not often speak English in daily life or listen to English broadcast frequently. It seems the teachers should pay more attention to bring English world to the classrooms and put more weight on teaching pronunciation to their students.

The two causes were followed by the ideas that the imperfect pronunciation was the result of the late starting age of English learning and the incomprehensive prior instruction on the sounds.

These were considered the reasons by more than half of the participants who admitted the problems in their pronunciation.

Next, much fewer students thought their problems could be attributed to the low level of motivation for learning. Around a third agreed or definitely agreed on this. This implied that the learners wanted to learn English pronunciation, but possibly, they might not know how to start, and the previous instruction on pronunciation they received might not be adequate or might not even proper.

Concerning the embarrassment when pronouncing the sounds, one in every four students reported that they often felt embarrassed or very embarrassed to show their tongue outside the mouth, between upper and lower teeth in articulating these interdental sounds. One can notice that the number of the students into this idea was not high, which seemed in keeping with high motivation for learning English. However, it existed as discovered by Le (2011), and the embarrassment in some students should be definitely paid attention. Probably, teachers could help the students by instruct them to pronounce in the way that the tongue only touches

the back of the upper teeth. More importantly, the teachers should always encourage the learners to use

English with confidence.

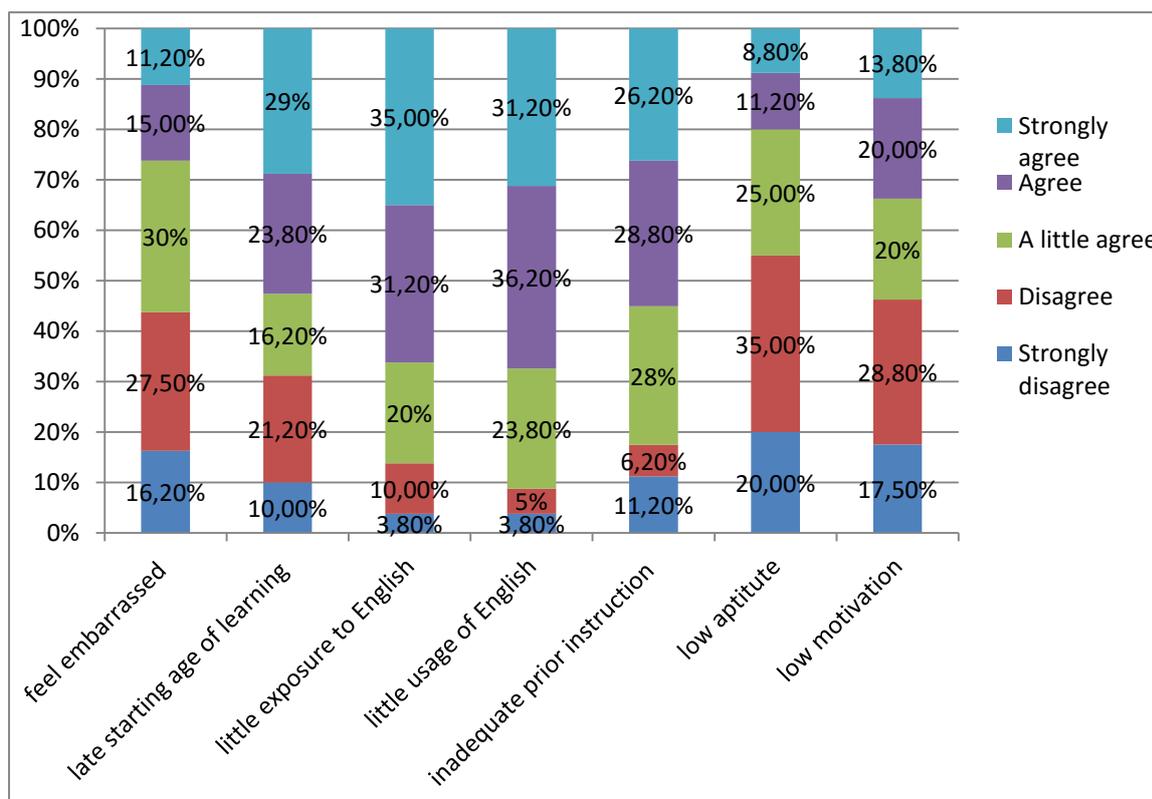


Figure 3. Causes deriving from the learners

Lastly, the majority (55%) of the student did not think that they had low aptitude for learning pronunciation. Just about one fifth supposed they do not have much ability to deal with English sounds, which made this reason the least popular one. This also infers that the students' self-esteem was high, which was a good signal of a good learner as well.

It can be concluded that, in learners' perspective, the most serious causes was attributed to the lack of English exposure and practice on a regular basis, their late start of learning English, and the incomprehensive guide on English pronunciation. According to the surveyed learners, the affective factors and aptitude were not the main causes.

CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, the study found some problems in the students' pronunciation of /θ/ and /ð/. The most dominant problem in pronouncing the consonant /θ/ was replacing this sound by Vietnamese /tʰ/. Besides, the sound was also produced like /t/, /z/ and /ð/. With regards to /ð/ sound, it was most frequently mispronounced as /z/. There were a few times, this voiced consonant was articulated as /dʒ/, /d/, /tʰ/ and /θ/. There appeared to be more problems with the voiced dental fricative /ð/ than its voiceless counterpart. There was a new

kind of mistake found in this study: it is the tendency to pronounce /dʒ/ instead of /ð/.

The participants also reported on the influence of Vietnamese on their pronunciation. Besides, for the causes deriving from the learners themselves, the most popular causes were that the students do not have enough native input exposure, they did not use English regularly and the prior instruction on the sounds was not comprehensive.

Conspicuously, the EFL learners' problems in pronouncing /θ/ and /ð/ need attention from the teachers. Along with giving proper instruction, the teachers can acknowledge the students about the possible mistakes they might make. Moreover, it is significant to create an environment in which the students can feel confident and motivated to make use of their English on a regular basis.

Concerning the limitation, the sample size for the production test was only at the lowest acceptable level. This should be improved in further studies. Besides, other English sounds and other aspects of English pronunciation should be investigated to build up a more thorough research background for the case of Vietnamese EFL learners.

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