

## Rationale: Pronunciation Poems

The materials were produced in response to the perceived needs of Vietnamese Pre-Intermediate learners. The sources of information for these perceived needs were;

- Research already published by authors in the field of EFL/ESL for Vietnamese adult learners
- An information-gathering session during an INSETT session with teachers in Ho Chi Minh City
- Questionnaires of students in three Pre-Intermediate Speaking and Pronunciation courses in Ho Chi Minh City
- My own observations as a teacher of adult Vietnamese learners

## Identified needs

- **‘Rear-end elision’**

It is a striking feature of Vietnamese speakers of English that the entire final sound of a word is omitted. For example, I was confused in one of my early encounters here by the statement that appeared to be, ‘Ha you goh a bri ee ba bor’, intended in the mind of the speaker as, ‘Have you got a British passport’. (This, incidentally, from one of the employees of an organisation who all have a high level of English as part of their job specification).

This feature of the use of English extends down to the smallest words – ‘is’ is frequently pronounced as ‘i’, while ‘an’ may simply be ‘a’.

It is also the case that long words with multiple consonant forms may have more than the final sound removed. Hence, ‘Cappuccino’ in my local coffee shop is simply, ‘kabu’.

*The reason for this would appear to lie in L1 interference.*

Vietnamese is radically different to English, with six separate tones on the vowel sounds providing the key to meaning.

Words end with an open vowel sound, with no distinct consonant ending. When this carries over into the formation of English, the problems described above understandably present themselves.

(Conversely, English speakers attempting to learn Vietnamese are confronted with significant difficulties in acquiring the language – after one year of working every week with a teaching assistant called, ‘Ngan’, I still couldn’t say her name correctly. The six tonal variations on the word, ‘Ma’, for example, include the equivalents of, ‘horse’, ‘ghost’ and ‘mother’, and I find the differences to be virtually imperceptible. It is an interesting point that of the 30 teachers in my school in HCMC, only one could be said to be a speaker of Vietnamese).

- **Consonant clusters**

These present severe difficulties for many Vietnamese, due to their absence in L1. For example, ‘st’, ‘ts’, ‘ks’, ‘sk’, ‘ps’, ‘bs’ are amongst the many sounds that are challenging, especially if there are pairs, such as ‘st’ and ‘ts’, that are made of the same consonant components.

Not surprisingly, the difficulty with consonant clusters is compounded when they appear at the end of a word, for the reasons outlined above.

- **Individual consonant sounds**

Some individual sounds are problematic, especially when there is another consonant that is very similar. Like many other speakers around the world, the difference between ‘p’ and ‘b’ is hard to grasp, with ‘b’ often being used for both. ‘t’ and ‘d’ are also difficult, as are ‘f’ and ‘v’.

- **Vowel sounds**

Although Vietnamese speakers are highly attuned to the fine gradings within their own vowel system, there are frequent problems, especially with the classic ‘minimal pairs’ of English, so that the short forms of vowel sounds are used in error. Hence, ‘ship’ for ‘sheep’, ‘shot’ for ‘short’, ‘jock’ for ‘joke’, and so on.

Overall, it is the area of pronunciation that presents the most obstacles. As Ha Cam Tam has said, ‘Many Vietnamese speakers can speak English, but only a few have intelligible pronunciation so that they can be understood easily in direct communication with foreigners’ in the article, ‘Common pronunciation problems of Vietnamese learners of English’

## Underpinning rationale

### 1) Use of similar pairs and groups

All of the materials generated use sets of words that are identical in the spoken form except for the target of the pronunciation practice. For example, in the 'Cheap chip' materials, which work on /i:/ and /ɪ/, 14 pairs of words were used – examples include 'cheap-chip', 'sheep-ship', 'been-bin', 'steal-still'. For the set, 'Flies have rights / Goats that paint', (focussing on words ending with no consonant, /s/, /z/, /t/, /ts/) sets of three or four words were used, such as 'fly, flies, flight, flights' and 'rye, rice, right, rights'. Where possible, high frequency words that would also have use for the students were chosen, but the focus remained on pronunciation, rather than vocabulary development.

Perhaps the original inspiration for the nature of these materials was the use of Doctor Seuss's 'Fox in socks' poem, which I adapted for classes soon after my arrival in Vietnam two years ago. This poem, which works on words ending /ks/ provided the repeated practice of a cluster that is difficulty for Vietnamese learners. I adapted it as a gapfill, for students to complete in a group mingle format.

While it was humorous and engaging, and it did provide practice opportunities, but the limitations of focusing on one pronunciation item only soon became apparent. Students saying lines from the poem incorrectly would appear to successfully convey the correct form to their partners. For example, a student with the line 'Fox in socks on box on Knox' could easily omit the end sound being targeted, and produce something like, 'Foh in soh in boh on Knoh'. Equally, the student could attempt the tricky end form, but imperfectly – a common mistake was to use /s/ instead of /ks/, forming, 'Foss in soss on boss on Knoss'. Their receiving partner, knowing that the target sound was /ks/, and also knowing the target words from earlier drilling, would then write the correct form on their answer sheet.

Thus the activity could easily back-fire and generate a 'false positive', with a student forming the sounds incorrectly being given the impression that they were successfully producing the form, thus making it more likely that the error would be reinforced and fossilised rather than corrected. For the same reasons, it didn't give the receptive partner practice in accurately distinguishing the form.

The aim of these materials was to create situations where any of the target forms could be used, and inaccuracy in production would be quickly and discernibly revealed.

## **2) De-contextualisation, semi-de-contextualisation and nonsense**

As poorly pronounced words can be deduced from context, the absence of contextual clues increases the focus on the quality of production. The effect of inaccurate use of 'rye', instead of 'rice', 'right' or 'rights' can be ameliorated when the context is clear, as in, 'Rye is grown in the Mekong Delta', 'Turn rye at the traffic lights' and 'Amnesty is a human rye organisation'. De-contextualisation removes this factor. A producing student wishing to say, 'Rice in lights on lice with rights' must be entirely accurate in pronunciation if the receiving student is going to record the exact same sentence.

The activities are designed for the students to progress onto the completion of 'semi-de-contextualised' nonsense poems. In my experience of using the poems, these do not easily lend themselves to an obvious answer from a reading of a gapped line only. Some words may be guessed, but most are not, especially if the students do not have a prolonged period of mulling the possibilities. An example would be the line from 'Cheap chip' that is gapped as, 'Is the \_\_\_\_\_ in my \_\_\_\_\_ or is \_\_\_ up my sleeve', a student would do well to anticipate 'chick', 'cheek' and 'it' as the missing words.

## **Analysis and explanation of materials components**

### **Teacher-student dictation**

This follows, or is part of, the introduction of the individual words being used. This can be done in a variety of ways – for example,

the visual images can be shown first, to elicit some or all of the words from the students; the sheet with definitions can be given out for the students to guess at, followed by the first element of teacher dictation, which is the giving of the answers; the table of words can be projected for dictation practice before meaning is considered.

Teacher-student dictation usually starts with individual words, with students writing them on paper, on individual white boards or circling the answers on the projected word table. In different phases of the lesson, this can move on to groups of words (in pairs or threes, for example) or in 'nonsense sentences' where random words are linked with prepositions, generating content like, 'Trains on cheese in trees at chicks'.

While this phase was initially conceived to be a quick phase to introduce and model the words and sounds, it grew in importance as I realised a key aspect of learner difficulty that I hadn't anticipated – many of the students are not only unable to produce the sounds, *they cannot actually hear them*, even when produced slowly and clearly by a native-speaking teacher.

The reason for this was revealed in Norman Doidge's book, 'The Brain That Changes Itself', which I was reading by chance. In reference to a condition known as, 'focal dystonia', Doidge writes, 'A similar brain trap occurs in Japanese people, who, when speaking English, can't hear the difference between *r* and *l* because the two sounds are not differentiated in their brain maps' (p.123), a point echoed by Graceffo when writing on Vietnamese learners, 'If the student's mother tongue does not contain a certain sound, they can't hear it in another language'

The theory runs like this – new learning forms neural pathways within the brain, which strengthen with increased usage, and form 'brain maps' of our acquired knowledge. This applies to the distinction of the sounds that we hear, including those associated with language. Thus, a child absorbing English as a mother tongue

develops a strong recognition for the 44 phonemes of English, but very little for the six tones of Vietnamese. This would explain why I have such little appreciation for the differences between the tones of Vietnamese, and why a Vietnamese adult may literally hear the word, 'go', when the word spoken is actually 'goes'.

While this would seem to condemn an adult learner attempting to acquire a new range of phonemes, all is not lost. While childhood may be the time when the brain is at its most plastic, and new connections are formed, it is still possible to develop pathways in adulthood with repeated use and exposure. In other words, through practice.

### **Sound formation and drilling**

Given the above, it is necessary to also look at the detailed mechanics of sound formation. A learner who cannot hear the distinction between 'goats' and 'goes' will need to also acquire an exact understanding of the mechanics of sound formation, as the precise movement of the tongue, lips and throat may be unfamiliar or poorly understood. I found that practice in gaining a sound like 'ts' required detailed board drawings and slow, repeated practice for it to be used effectively. This can be likened to the process by which a student driver slowly gains competence in changing gears – at first, it is completely alien; each part of the action has to be worked through, and there is a long period when the action is one that requires concentration and conscious effort to be achieved. In this period, the rate of error is high, and the learner may feel that the goal can never be reached, yet, a few months later, the same person will be performing the act automatically and unconsciously, while thinking of something else entirely. So it is with accurately acquiring new sounds in a language, and a similar period of error-strewn conscious effort may be necessary. Just as the crunching of gears and the stalling of the engine indicates the presence of an error, so should pronunciation practice materials give a ready 'succeed/fail' message to the learner.

### **Student-student dictation**

This is designed to give practice in production and reception. I found that it worked best in groups – with pairs of students working together, there is a danger that the production error of one student could dove-tail with the reception error of their partner, producing what could be called a ‘double-false’ reading, i.e., a student attempting to produce, ‘cheap’ could well produce ‘chip’, while their partner might well hear ‘cheap’ and write that down as the answer, so that both parties would believe that their error was, in fact, correct.

Working in groups of four to six students, with paper or individual white-boards, students start by dictating one word at a time. Generally, there is enough mixed opinion the pronunciation of a word to indicate that there is a problem. With a class size of 12-16 students, it is fairly easy for the teacher to monitor 2-4 groups, and step in to assess if the error is one of production or reception. This activity normally becomes self-monitoring fairly quickly, as students producing words correctly tend to get confirmation of this from the majority of their peers.

This activity is then stepped up from one word at a time, to groups of three and then to false, nonsense sentences, in a similar way to the Teacher-Student Dictation phase. Again, students end up producing nonsense sentences of target vocabulary with random prepositions, such as, ‘Bin on seen in each at sheep’. This gives the producing students valuable practice in producing the target sounds as part of a flowing chunk of speech, and receiving students the practice in discerning them out of isolation.

### **Gap-filled stories and poems, with pictures**

This is mostly done as a student-student interchange (in pairs, in mingles or as a running dictation), but could also be as a teacher-student activity. I found that Vietnamese adults were very willing to do running dictations, something that I had previously considered to be a children’s activity. In some ways, it is the best way of completing a gap-fill, since it is impossible for a struggling student to simply show the text to another.

While this phase is more contextualised, and may give students an opportunity to guess from context, I didn’t find that many did so.

The advantage of this phase is that it puts the target words into real chunks of language (such as 'Trains and trucks burst through the night'), so is closer to real usage than the earlier phases of practice.

It also provides a more meaningful, lengthy task for the students to accomplish. Although the earlier phases of drilling and student-student practice may well be the most valuable elements, I think that there is still a need to 'tie it together' with an extended activity that has a definable aim.

This phase also reinforces the connection between the words and their meaning. While vocabulary acquisition is not the prime aim of these materials, it is still of relevance, and the connection of pronunciation and meaning may be helpful. A mental association between 'sheep' as a woolly animal and 'ship' as a large floating object might help to underline the importance of clear pronunciation.

The pictures are then used to provide a further speaking activity, in which students connect the words to an image. Through this, the students should be better able to comprehend the meaning of the lines that they completed in the gap-fill.

Aside from helping to form a link between words and objects, and providing an extra speaking activity related to the text (as the students discuss which lines or chunks of words match a picture), the use of images should be of assistance to students favouring a visual-spatial learning style (as described in Howard Gardner's work on Multiple Intelligences).

The poems and stories were meant to be light-hearted and frivolous. The student feedback obtained indicated that they were found to be engaging and entertaining. There is some evidence that language learning is made more effective when students are in a positive mind-frame. For example, Bryan, Mathur and Sullivan did research in which randomly assigned students were placed in a 'positive or neutral mood induction condition' before receiving instruction in elementary Hindi. Re-testing after two weeks indicated that 'students in the positive mood condition performed better than those in the neutral condition'.

Hopefully, the answer to Tomlinson's question, 'Is the text likely to engage most of the target learners cognitively and affectively' is in the affirmative.

### **Student-generated extended writing**

In this final phase, students are encouraged to write an extended piece featuring a given number of the target words used in the set of materials. By its nature, it tends to be rambling and nonsensical, an example of which is, 'The nit and the chick don't eat peach pizza, so they put it in a bin. They played football on the pitch and the chick beat the nit. A ball hit the chick on the cheek, and he didn't like it.....' The writing student then reads to a group, who have to write the target words as they appear, which they then check against the written text. Sometimes it is more efficient if the writer also writes a list of the words under the text. For the above, such a list would read,

- 1) nit
- 2) chick
- 3) eat
- 4) peach
- 5) pizza
- 6) it
- 7) bin
- 8) pitch
- 9) chick
- 10)nit
- 11)hit
- 12)chick
- 13)cheek
- 14)it

This final activity is more practice of production and reception, but in a longer form than the previous student-generated material. Again, it does seem to be enjoyable for the students, and is intended to give 'ownership' and engagement. Also, it may serve to stimulate autonomy and creativity, which are not traditionally encouraged in Confucian rote-learning systems of education such as that in Vietnam.

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