

**AN INVESTIGATION OF NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS'
DIFFICULTIES IN PRONOUNCING SOME ENGLISH FRICATIVES
AND AFFRICATIVES AT UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS - TECHNOLOGY
FOR INDUSTRIES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

**NGHIÊN CỨU NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN TRONG VIỆC PHÁT ÂM MỘT SỐ ÂM XÁT
VÀ TẮC XÁT CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC KINH TẾ -
KỸ THUẬT CÔNG NGHIỆP VÀ GIẢI PHÁP**

Trần Thị Khương Liên

Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Kinh tế - Kỹ thuật Công nghiệp

Đến Tòa soạn ngày 22/03/2020, chấp nhận đăng ngày 01/06/2020

Abstract: English learners in Vietnam in general as well as non-English major students at University of Economics - Technology for Industries (UNETI) in particular have many difficulties when pronouncing English, mainly Fricatives and Affricatives. In this article the writer focuses on students' difficulties in pronouncing the English Fricatives and Affricatives and also give some suggested possible solutions to overcome these constraints based on the theory of the phonetics and phonology especially the factors affecting pronunciation learning and the place and manner of these English sounds. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the goal of enhancing students' performance in the teaching and learning foreign language.

Keywords: Students' pronunciation, difficulty, Fricatives, Affricatives.

Tóm tắt: Người học tiếng Anh tại Việt Nam nói chung cũng như sinh viên không chuyên tại Trường Đại học Kinh tế - Kỹ thuật Công nghiệp (UNETI) nói riêng gặp nhiều khó khăn khi phát âm tiếng Anh, đặc biệt là các phụ âm. Trong bài viết này, tác giả tập trung vào phân tích những khó khăn trong việc phát âm âm xát và âm tắc xát và đề xuất các giải pháp khả thi để khắc phục những hạn chế dựa trên lý thuyết về ngữ âm và âm vị học, đặc biệt là các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc phát âm như vị trí cấu âm và phương thức cấu âm. Tác giả hy vọng những phân tích và một số gợi ý trong nghiên cứu này sẽ giúp các em sinh viên không chuyên đang theo học tại Trường Đại học Kinh tế - Kỹ thuật Công nghiệp phần nào cải thiện khả năng phát âm.

Từ khóa: Phát âm của sinh viên, khó khăn, âm xát, âm tắc xát.

1. INTRODUCTION

English is one of the most common used languages all over the world as it is used in many different situations. Thus, it is becoming more and more necessary to improve speaking skills for EFL learners. Being able to speak English like a native speaker is a big desire for anyone studying English. Pronunciation plays a significant role in real-life communication as it reflects the speaker's identities and the communities which they belong to. When

some teachers and students complain about difficulties in speaking, they are often talking about pronunciation (Nation, 2009). In fact, Vietnamese learners are thought to have not too many difficulties when pronouncing English sounds as English and Vietnamese have the same Latin alphabet. Yet, there is a big difference in the phonetic alphabets between two languages and the ways to pronounce English and Vietnamese sounds. In Vietnamese, several sounds made in speaking

English do not exist, and thus cause many difficulties for both teachers and learners. This problem may be caused by many factors including their mother tongue, their study environment and a lack of knowledge about subject. This study is aimed to investigate students' difficulties in pronouncing of two fricatives /θ/, /ð/ and two affricatives /tʃ/, /dʒ/ in English and give suggested methods of teaching and learning pronunciation for non-major students at UNETI. This research should be focused on the following issues:

- What difficulties do non- English major UNETI students have in pronouncing some English fricatives and affricatives?
- What are the causes of those difficulties?
- What are solutions to those difficulties?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. The role of pronunciation in language teaching

Pronunciation is one of the problems in the field of English language teaching as the second or foreign language. Additionally, teaching English based on communicative approach in the twenty first century is considered the core of students' successful communication in their work and their life that they really need after graduating. Despite of the fact that pronunciation plays a very important role in learning language, as Derwing and Munro (2005) stated that, "having good pronunciation of the language can help in normal communication, particularly intelligibility" (as cited in Nation & Newton, 2009.p.75), in many classes of English language, teaching pronunciation gets little attention. For the reasons mentioned above, pronunciation teaching has been paid more and more attention by all the teachers. Realizing the importance of teaching pronunciation as well as these difficulties implementing it, pronunciation has been taught along with other skills in English

lessons but at the present pronunciation courses are provided at any universities in Vietnam where English is taught as the major from different types of training. It seems that good phonetic abilities benefits from not in Non- English major students at UNETI with a specific learning environment must face with their own problems. The writer aims at finding out their difficulties in pronouncing two difficult fricatives /θ/, /ð/, and two affricatives /tʃ/, /dʒ/ that they are currently encountering.

2.2. Factors affecting pronunciation learning

There are many factors affecting the learners' pronunciation such as: the mother tongue, the age factor, their study environment, phonetic ability, motivation and concern for good pronunciation. Firstly, the constraint depends on how different their native language is from English. For example, Vietnamese letters and spelling are phonetically consistent, while English is not consistent in the same area. It is clearly seen that a foreign accent is influenced by some of the sound characteristics of the learners' mother tongue including the way the mouth, teeth and tongue are used. Your students must have difficulty articulating some sounds because they simply do not exist in their native language, sound like "th". According to Kenworthy, J (1992) "To put it very crudely, the more differences there are, the more difficulties the learners will have in pronouncing English. Secondly, as an EFL teacher you've probably noticed the difference between teaching pronunciation for young learners and adults. The younger your students are, the easier it is for them to acquire an accurate pronunciation. Another factor is the living in the right environment can help to improve our pronunciation. This means that the learners living in an English-speaking country will benefit more advantages than who is not living in an English-speaking environment. Concerning the phonetic ability,

this has been demonstrated in some researches that some EFL students are able to discriminate between two sounds better than others or are able to mimic sounds more accurately. However, poor discriminators and good discriminators benefit pronunciation drill tasks in which particular sounds especially difficult sounds not existing in mother tongue are heard and imitated again and again. A very important factor influencing the correction of pronunciation is motivation and concern for good pronunciation. It is true that, the more motivated we are the better we get than those who show no interest. This concern is often expressed in statements how bad the pronunciation is and in request for correction. In short, these above are several factors which

may affect the accuracy of pronunciation leading to common problems in process of studying English. They can open the teacher mind of understanding learners' willing to improve their pronunciation.

2.3. Phonological characteristics and Articulation manner of θ , δ , t_f , d_3

$/\theta, \delta, t_f, d_3/$ belong to consonant system – main factors of English sounds. “Consonants are formed by interrupting, restricting or diverting the airflow in a variety of ways” (Kelly, G., 2000). Consonants consists of 24 kinds and are described in three ways including the manner of articulation, the place of articulation and the force of articulation which are shown in details in Table 1 below.

Table 1. English consonant sounds

Manner of articulation	Place of articulation							
	Bilabial	Labio dental	Inter dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glotal
Plosive	+ b - p			+d - t		+g - k		
Fricative		+v - f	+ δ - θ	+z - s	+ 3 - f			- h
Affricative						+ d_3 - t_f		
Nasal	+m			+n			+ η	
Lateral				+l				
Approximant	+w				+r	+j		

Note: + is for voiced sounds
is for voiceless sounds

2.3.1. Phonological characteristics and Articulation manner of fricatives θ , δ

Fricative consonants are made by **squeezing air between a small gap as it leaves the body**. In English pronunciation, there are **9 fricative phonemes**: $/f, v, \theta, \delta, s, z, 3, h/$ made in 5 positions of the mouth. The fricative sounds $/v, \delta, z, 3/$ are voiced, they are pronounced with vibration in the vocal cords, whilst the sounds

$/f, \theta, s, 3, h/$ are voiceless; produced only with air. Two fricatives focused here $/\theta, \delta/$ both of them are interdental fricatives. The air escapes through the gap between the tongue and the teeth. The consonant $/\theta/$ is a interdental, fricative and voiceless according to the place, manner and force of articulation. In order to make the target sound $/\theta/$, put your tip of the tongue between the upper teeth and the lower teeth then blow the air out gently. The sound is

voiceless so speakers do not use their voice which means that they should feel no vibration from the neck when pronouncing it. In comparison with sound /θ/, the sound /ð/ is also an interdental, fricative and voiceless according to the place, manner and force of articulation. To produce this sound the tip of the tongue is put between the upper teeth and the lower teeth to make a voiced sound from the throat. The distribution of phonemes /θ/, /ð/ like other phonemes are in all positions (initial, medial, final). The following table 2 can illustrate this point.

2.3.2. Phonological characteristics and Articulation manner of affricatives

An affricate is a consonant that begins with a stop and ends with a fricative. The places of articulation of these two sounds should be close. In English, there are two affricatives, known as /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. /tʃ/ is a voiceless consonant in which /t/ glides from alveolar to post-alveolar position, both /t/ and /ʃ/ are voiceless sounds so /tʃ/ is a voiceless consonant. However, /dʒ/ is a voiced consonant with voice from the throat. Both phonemes /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ are widely distributed like other consonants in all positions (initial, medial, final). The following table 2 can illustrate this point.

2.3.3. Previous works

There have been a great deal of notable studies on EFL students' pronunciation of English and pronunciation teaching in language teaching but some of them express the writers' concern about common pronunciation problems especially the learners' difficulties in pronouncing English sounds. Avery & Ehrlich (1992) mentioned the problems Vietnamese learners may face when studying English. Duong Thi Nu (2009) investigated the mispronunciation made by Vietnamese students. The scope included both the manners and places of articulation of English fricatives and affricatives. She also suggested ways to

improve EFL students' pronunciation of English: good teacher instruction, comparisons and contrasts of English and Vietnamese phonetic features and more controlled practice and language use.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

To conduct the study the writer chose tape recording as a research technique because it is considered as a useful tool for both teachers and their students. Students may have chances to access to appropriate samples of native speaker while at the same time they are allowed to record and replay their own pronunciation or speech in order to judge the accuracy of their pronunciation. Teachers can understand how students pronounce and assess the process of students' pronunciation. Besides questionnaires were used as the first tool to collect data for this study. This kind of method has proved to be the most popular method of data collection, they are self-determined, cost-effective and time-saving. In this study, the participants are 35 first year non-English major students at UNETI, who are experiencing difficulties. They were randomly asked to complete the questionnaire. In order to reconfirm the validity of that data, the interview technique was used in this study.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Findings from the students' recorded tape

Thirty five recordings made by 35 first year non-English major students were analyzed with a focus on the student's most common difficulties when pronouncing sounds: /θ/, /ð/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/. These can be pointed out by letting them read aloud the sounds in the given short sentences which contain a number of words containing those sounds. The participants' pronunciation of these sounds were analyzed thoroughly and discussed after all the data had been selected and synthesized. Chart 1 clearly illustrates this analysis of the participants'

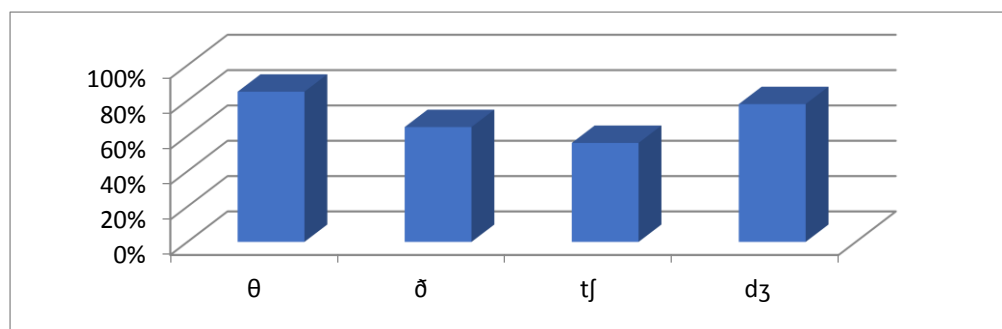
pronunciation of each word in the sentences. The figures shows the percentages of students's mispronunciation of the English sounds /θ/, /ð/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/. As can be seen from the chart 1, 30/35 students accounting for 85% mispronounced the sound /θ/ individually and in the given words. This can be explained by that in Vietnamese there is a sound which is produced similarly like this but the place and manner of articulation is quite differently. Surprisingly, 23/35 students accounting for 65% have wrong pronunciation with the sound /ð/ although it has the same place and manner of articulation of the sound /θ/. The reason for this is that in Vietnamese also have some sounds which are produced like this. Two affricatives /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ are the other common mistakes of the non – English major students at UNETI. According to the analyzed statistics,

there are most of the students (78%) mispronounced the sound /dʒ/. The sound /tʃ/ is not also an easy sound for them to pronounce accurately accounting for 56%. Most non – English major students at UNETI mispronounced both /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ as they still did not know how to pronounce words that contain these phonemes. In fact, the students made the phonemes /t/ and /d/ in these words instead. After analyzing the data, the writer found that these phonemes /θ/, /ð/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/ cause constraints for most students in all three positions when they pronouncing them but the most difficult position was final position. This can be explained by that fricatives /θ/, /ð/ and two affricatives /tʃ/, /dʒ/ do not occur in word final position in Vietnamese. For instance, the word “mouth” may be pronounced like /mou/.

Table 2. Distribution of English fricatives and affricatives in a word

	Initial	Medial	final
/θ/	Thursday /'θɜ:zdeɪ/	something /'sʌmθɪŋ/	mouth /maʊθ/
/ð/	there /ðeə(r)/	weather /'weðə(r)/	bathe /beɪð/
/tʃ/	chat /tʃæt/	teacher /'ti:tʃə(r)/	catch /kætʃ/
	check /tʃek/	kitchen /'kɪtʃɪn/	watch /wɑ:tʃ/
/dʒ/	jeep /dʒi:p/	adjust /ə'dʒʌst/	large /lɑ:dʒ/
	joke /dʒəʊk/	project /'prɒdʒekt/	exchange /ɪks'tʃeɪndʒ/

Chart 1. Students' difficulties when pronouncing sounds



4.2. Findings and discussion from the students' questionnaire

The findings and discussion in this part focus on students' attitude towards pronunciation in English, students' perception of the difficulties

in pronouncing these phonemes and the main causes, as well as the treatments made by both students and teachers at UNETI. Fortunately, despite the students' pronunciation was weak, they all seemed to have a very positive attitude

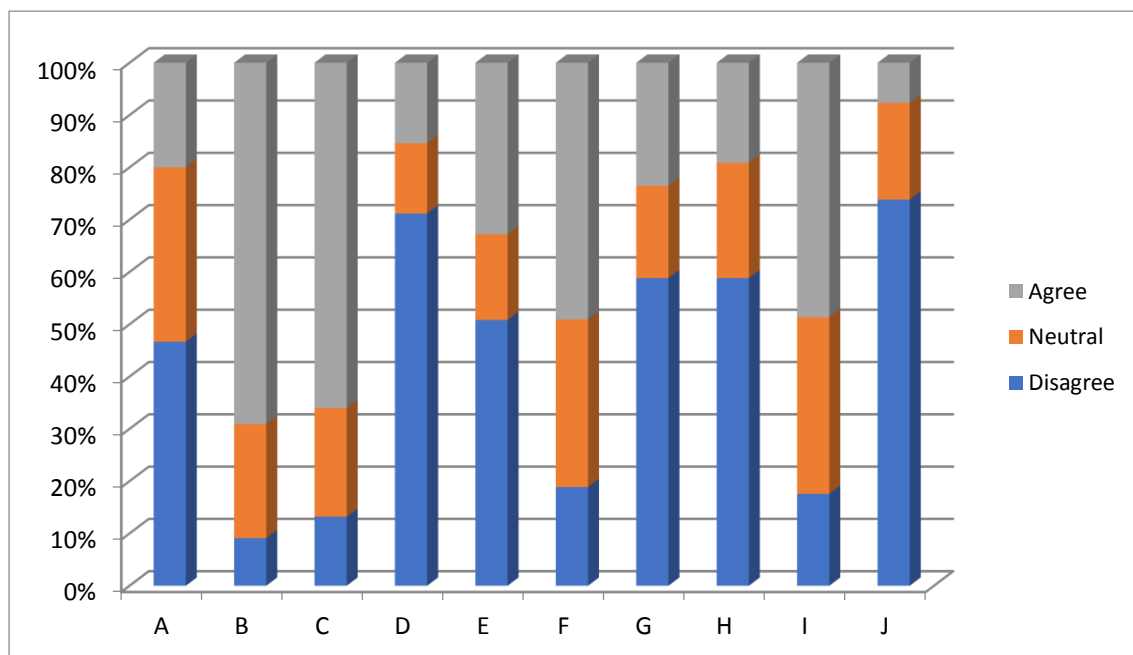
towards the mastery of English pronunciation. The importance of pronunciation is acknowledged by most of the questionnaire respondents, 78% of whom considered it to be very important. They said only by mastering a good pronunciation can bring them a great sense of satisfaction, motivation as well as confidence. Whereas, 20% of them considered important and only 2% did not know whether it is important or not. In their responses to the question being asked about their difficulties in pronouncing these English sounds, the vast majority of the participants (75%) suffered seriously from difficulties in pronouncing. There are some of them could not figure out whether they had any difficulty with English sounds or not.

Due to English and Vietnamese have the same Latin alphabet, the students seem not to face with many English sounds. However, it is easy to recognize the mispronunciation when they were asked to rank English consonants according to the degree of difficulty. Not surprisingly, 49% of asked students thought /θ/

as the most challenge for them, next 35% of them considered /ð/ the difficult consonant. It was also observed that non –major students at UNETI also faced pronunciation challenges related to English palato-alveolar affricatives /dʒ/ with 45% and /tʃ/ with 38%. A minority of the students mispronounced the other English sounds.

Finding out the causes of the students' difficulties with these English sounds can be considered as a key to solve the problems so that the question 5 in the questionnaire is carefully designed in which possible causes were provided and students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with them. The following chart 2 presents the students' perception about causes of those difficulties. As we can see from the chart that students had different points of view about the causes of their difficulties. There are more than 60% agreed that they mispronounced these sounds is because they imitated the teachers' and friends' pronunciation and also by pronouncing the sounds as the way they hear while a few of them disagreed with the cause.

Chart 2. Students' perceptions about causes of those difficulties



Causes of difficulties

A. I do not know how to pronounce these sounds
B. I imitate my teachers and friends' pronunciation
C. I pronounce these sounds as the way I hear
D. I think English sounds and Vietnamese are the same
E. I think I cannot pronounce English accurately
F. I am afraid of my teacher's feedback
G. I do not practice much
H. I do not ask my teachers or friends for help
I. I do not know whether my pronunciation is good or not
J. I do not pay attention to my pronunciation

Further more, most of them did not suppose that some sounds which are the same in English and Vietnamese could cause them difficulties. Interestingly, 78% of students strongly disagreed that they did not pay much attention to their pronunciation. However, nearly half of students did not know whether they had difficulty which is led by a reason that they did not know how to pronounce these sounds or not.

Being aware of the importance of correct pronunciation in speaking English so it can be seen that 30/35 (85%) of the participants have ever tried any methods to improve their own pronunciation such as listening and recording, practicing more at home after lesson, asking teachers and friends for help even very a few of students attending pronunciation courses. Some of them had some other methods such as learning pronunciation through their English favourite songs. Despite of the fact that they considered practicing pronunciation as important thing, the frequency as well as the time they spent is not much which is led to the poor effectiveness and their poor progress.

With response to the the reflection on the teachers' methods used to help students in pronouncing these sounds, not all the students thought that their teachers did something to help them improve their pronunciation. That is a fact because pronunciation is not considered as a skill. In Vietnam, pronunciation courses are provided at any universities in Vietnam where English is as a major subject not for non-major it has been taught along with other skills in the textbook. At UNETI, LIFE text book (Elementary and Pre-intermediate) currently used for non-major students is an interactive four skills in which pronunciation is micro skill in speaking. In speaking lessons, it is difficult for the teachers to devote much time for the teaching of pronunciation due to big class model. The teachers can't pay attention and correct to the pronunciation of every student. Listening and imitating is a very commonly used activity in any English lessons. However, this can not always motivate students and the students do not know whether they have made progressed or not.

To supplement the findings of the study, an interview was conducted to examine the students' attitude about pronouncing in fricatives and affricatives sounds. When, interviewed, most of the participants (95%) said that they knew very little about English consonants and they also did not know how to pronounce them. When they study English they just tried to pronounce the sounds correctly followed by the teachers' corrections or imitated like native speakers. They tried to memorize the correct pronunciation by imitating and repeating. In fact for some non-major students at UNETI the main purpose of learning English is to pass the examination so learning new words and grammatical rules is the major part with very little time devoting to speaking English especially to practicing pronunciation. Therefore, even the teachers of English should

devoted some of their lesson time in class to this that is not adequate so it is necessary that students are to provide proper pronunciation training course.

5. SUGESSTION AND CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it can be pointed out that most of non-major students at UNETI have difficulty in pronouncing some English fricatives and affricatives namely /θ/, /ð/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/ because of the following reasons. All of the students lack of knowledge of the manner and place of articulation of two English fricatives /θ/, /ð/ and two English affricatives /tʃ/, /dʒ/. As mentioned in the introduction, English and Vietnamese have the same Latin alphabet but different pronouncing. Unlike English, Vietnamese consonants does not include any affricatives. The negative influence of mother tongue can cause difficulty for the learners because they tend to pronounce English sounds in Vietnamese way. For example, all the /θ/, /ð/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/ sound in the final position in a word may be never heard when they pronounce these words containing these phonemes. Despite of the fact that, most of the teachers and students are aware of the importance, they have insufficient drills and practice especially for non-major subject. Therefore, having difficulties is unavoidable in addition to the teaching and learning English as the foreign language not as the second language. In fact the students do not have a real English speaking environment so they have not any chances to experience themselves in English and they try to speak English as the way they hear. To overcome these difficulties, both teachers and students have to try hard. It may take a long time for students to learn more about the way these sounds are produced and become better aware of the mistakes they make. Firstly, self-practice is a good advice for the students. Teachers required students to spend more time at home to practise English

sounds. Every week a wordlist or a passage containing difficult sounds will be given to the students read at home. They are to record it and bring to the class the next week. The teacher will pick up students at random and let the whole class justify how well those students had done it, and how to improve the reading. Secondly, it is suggested that they should be provided with more intensive training of pronunciation, so they could be gradually improved. Through the intensive training, students can have basic knowledge of pronunciation, so they can recognize different places of articulation of sounds. They are taught to make sounds taking into account voice, manner and place of articulation not merely learning by listening and imitating. For the teachers, they should be provided with more training in pronunciation teaching, so that they are ready for their teaching work. The teachers should exploit the various pronunciation exercises or games to motivate students to practice both inside and outside the classroom. There have been a number of pronunciation exercises given in phonetics books like Pronunciation in Use, Ship or Sheep, Three or Tree etc. As they say, practice makes perfect so they give the students lots of opportunities to work on those trouble sounds. Furthermore the amount of feedback to the students should be increased. It's also true that your students need feedback on their pronunciation. Teachers could correct it in the moment, or they could make note of what sounds students are struggling with and begin incorporating it into classroom activities or set aside some time and resources to give individual students some extra pronunciation help.

In today's technological age, the best solutions to any of our problems are usually found online or in apps. Fix your pronunciation with free online tools that is the simplest method. And here some pronunciation tools or apps the teachers can recommend to their EFL students.

- **Sound: The pronunciation app**

Published by Macmillan Publishers, it is probably the most popular pronunciation app in the market. The app features an interactive phonemic .art in both American and British English, a “How do you say...” option that allows students to not only listen to how a word is pronounced but also record and playback their own voice, and even the possibility to buy additional wordlists once they have mastered the ones included in the app. Available for iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch and Android devices.

- **Pronunciation: Clear speech**

Developed by Cambridge University Press and provides a little more fun in pronunciation practice. It includes four games students can choose from for intermediate English pronunciation. Available for iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch

- **BBC Learning English**

Within its Learning English site, the BBC offers excellent pronunciation tips and opportunities for British English

pronunciation practice, featuring the sounds and features of English pronunciation as well as interactive quizzes and three radio programs.

Last but not least, students should have an opportunity to communicate with native speakers so that they feel more confident that they are actually learning from authentic resources.

In conclusion, despite the important role of pronunciation in English speaking, pronunciation seems not to be considered as a skill in teaching and learning language. Too many people fail to realise that pronouncing a foreign language is a skill that needs careful training for the learners. Non-major students at UNETI have many difficulties in pronouncing two fricatives /θ/, /ð/, and two English affricatives /tʃ/, /dʒ/ due to lack of knowledge of the way the sounds are produced as well as the influence of mother tongue. Hopefully, recommended solutions in this study will be a contribution for teachers and students in improving effectiveness of teaching and learning pronunciation at UNETI.

REFERENCES

- [1] Duong. T.N (2009), “*Mistake or Vietnamese English*”, VNU Journal of Science Foreign Languages, 25, 41-50.
- [2] Avery, P & Susan, E (1992), “*Teaching American English Pronunciation*”, Oxford UP.
- [3] Baker, A. (1997), “*Ship or sheep*”, Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Kelly, G. (2000), “*How to teach pronunciation*”, Longman.
- [5] Kenworthy. J. (1987), “*Teaching English pronunciation*”, Longman.
- [6] Nation, I.S.P, & Newton, J. (2009), “*Teaching ESL/EFL listening and speaking*”, New York.
- [7] P. Roach (1991), “*English Phonetics and Phonology*”, 2nd edition, Cambridge UP.

Thông tin liên hệ: **Trần Thị Khương Liên**

Điện thoại: 0912559279 - Email: tklien@uneti.edu.vn

Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Kinh tế - Kỹ thuật Công nghiệp.

