

SOME COMMON PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS FOR JAPANESE LEARNERS OF THE VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE - CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS

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MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

SOME COMMON PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS FOR JAPANESE LEARNERS OF THE VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE - CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS

Tran Trong Giang

Abstract:

Vietnamese is a tonal language (i.e., with accent marks/diacritics) with some vowels and consonants that don't appear in the Japanese alphabet (e.g., ã, ơ, ê, r, v). As such, getting the hang of Vietnamese pronunciation is understandably not easy for Japanese students. The key to tackling this difficulty, however, is still the same as that of acquiring any difficult skill: understand the basics to get started, then keep listening until you become familiar with the sounds. While Standard Japanese has a distinctive pitch accent system - a word can have one of its moras bearing an accent or not; an accented mora is pronounced with a relatively high tone and is followed by a drop in pitch - the various Japanese dialects have different accent patterns, and some exhibit more complex tonic systems.

In the Vietnamese language, an initial consonant does not emit a significant sound by itself: it needs to combine with a vowel to make a clear sound. When saying the consonants, the airstream must pass through a particular obstruction made by the coordination of the tongue and lips, and then pass out orally. To say consonants correctly, we must structure the sound properly by creating an airstream barrier with the lips or

tongue, and obstruct the air-flow by closing or opening the mouth according to the final consonant.

In this paper, we focus on the pronunciation of the vowels $\text{ã/ â/ ê/ i/ o/ ô/ σ/ u/ ʉ}$; the diphthongs ia/ua/ua and their derivatives iê/ uô/ uσ ; and the medial glides u/o . Also there are some initial consonants which give Japanese students trouble, such as b/l/r/v ; or are hard to distinguish like $\text{c/ch, nh/n/ng, c (k)/kh, đ/t/th}$; and some tricky final consonants such as $\text{m/n, t/p, c/ch, n/ng, c/t}$ and so on. Each observation is based on a comparison of the pronunciation of the Vietnamese and Japanese languages through the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) to discover and resolve students' pronunciation problems.

Pronunciation is the least interesting part for both teachers and students involved in the Vietnamese language. In this paper we would like to give some suggestions to solve these matters in simple yet practical ways that will help students find learning the pronunciation of the Vietnamese language easier and more fun.

I. Introduction:

Vietnamese is a tonal language and the most important part of pronunciation is how to pronounce the vowels. We could say that the sound of the vowel is the sound of the words (nuclear sound), and they change their sound according to the final elements (mostly consonants), and also with tones (accents).

The phonology of Japanese has about 15 consonant phonemes, the cross-linguistically typical five-vowel system of /a, e, i, o, u/ , and a relatively simple phonotactic distribution of phonemes allowing few consonant clusters. It is traditionally described as having the mora as the unit of timing, with each mora taking about the same length of time, so that the disyllabic [nip.pon] (“Japan”) may be analyzed as /niQpoN/ and dissected into four

MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

moras, /ni/, /Q/, /po/, and /N/.¹

Standard Japanese is a pitch-accent language, wherein the position or absence of a pitch drop may determine the meaning of a word: /ha⁺siɡa/ “chopsticks”, /hasi⁺ɡa/ “bridge”, /hasiɡa/ “edge”² Not only these issues, but also habits of mouth action, cause mistakes when Japanese people speak the Vietnamese language. Because of course, different languages use different positions of the tongue and shapes of the mouth in order to make their sounds. This leads to problems, the primary one being that the native language’s sounds leak into the foreign language that we are trying to speak. For example, in Vietnamese, when we pronounce words which end in a final consonant like /n/, /t/, /c/, /ch/, we need to keep our mouth open, and we close our mouth for words ending in final consonants like /m/ and /p/. With the final consonant /t/, the tongue is behind the teeth; while for the final consonant /c/, the tongue is shorter. Finally, one more issue of great importance is how to pronounce Vietnamese vowels, diphthongs and semi-vowels correctly.

In this paper, we limit the study to students who are at beginner or elementary level, and the pronunciation is that of standard language - the official language according to the characters of the Vietnamese alphabet, rather than the Hanoi or Saigon dialect, or that of any place in Vietnam. We try to explain the issues in a practical way to help Japanese students of the Vietnamese language go through the process of awareness and then practice, to learn what kinds of mouth movements they should be using when speaking Vietnamese, so that their pronunciation can be improved.

II. Vowel Systems in the Vietnamese and Japanese Languages:

There are 11 monophthongs and 3 diphthongs in the Vietnamese language, and 5 vowels

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_phonology

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_phonology

in the Japanese language.



2.1. Single Vowels – Monophthongs

In order to make it easier, we have divided all the single vowels into three groups as below:

2.1.1. Rounded and Unrounded Vowels

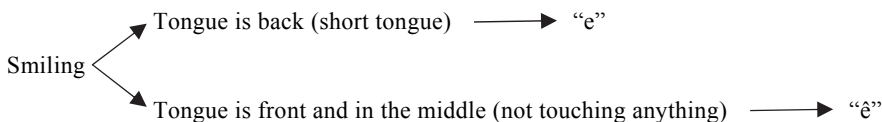
Rounded or unrounded vowels are named according to the shape of mouth when pronounced, as it must be rounded or not rounded, so that, depending on tongue lift, the mouth aperture will form different vowels.

As for the duration of vowels, in this group there are 5 long vowels and 3 short vowels.

Position of tongue \ Shape of mouth	Rounded	Unrounded
Bottom, front	O	A ←  \check{A} short vowel of A
Middle	Ô	Ô ←  \hat{A} short vowel of O
Top, back	U	U' short vowel

2.1.2. Smiling shape vowels

The “e” and “ê” are given the name “smiling vowels” because when they are pronounced, the mouth is shaped as if we are smiling, as below:



2.1.3. Final vowels- semifinal consonants

y/i and u/o are final-consonants

The vowels “i” and “y” are often final vowels and they are pronounced the same as each

MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

other. We make their sound with a high elevation of the tongue and an unrounded mouth. In writing, “y” can be found at the beginning of a word; in some nouns following a single consonant; and standing alone without a consonant. The difference in writing u and o depends on the length and the opening of the vowel goes before them.

2.1.4. Semi-vowels or glides

A semi-vowel is a vowel-like sound that acts like a consonant, in that it serves the same function in a syllable and carries the same amount of prominence as a consonant relative to a true vowel, the nucleus of the syllable³. In Vietnamese, the semi-vowels are /o/ and /u/. To pronounce them before the nuclear vowel, we merely begin with this glide but then pronounce the main vowel

Example: “oa” - get ready with “o” then say “a”

In contrast, when they are final vowel, we say the main vowel then glide forward to the semi-vowel.

Example” “ao” - say a full “a” and finish quickly with “o”.

We can see that the main sound of a word containing a semi-vowel is the sound of the nuclear vowel, and the tone will be written over the nuclear vowel.

2.2. Paired vowels – Diphthongs

Phonologically, a diphthong is generally defined as two distinct vowels which share the nucleus of a single syllable. This is why the Vietnamese /mua / <mua> is considered to contain a diphthong. However, Japanese does not have syllables at a phonological level, and thus by definition cannot have diphthongs at a phonological level. Phonetically, however, if we define a diphthong at a phonetic level as “a vowel sound in which the

³ Collin English Dictionary (dictionary/ browse/semi vowel)

tongue changes position to produce the sound of two vowels”⁴, then Japanese does indeed have diphthongs - a common example being 名前 /namae/ ‘name’, and this is just one of many examples.

A diphthong is a vowel sound created by the combination of two or more vowels together. These vowel sounds are the most difficult for Japanese people learning Vietnamese. There are 3 diphthongs in the Vietnamese language, as below:

Letter	Description
ia / iə/	The initial vowel is followed by a mid-central tongue, unrounded mouth vowel. Starts with the “i-ɨ” but moves to the “a-ă”
ua / uə/	The initial vowel is followed by a mid-central tongue, unrounded mouth vowel. Starts with the “u” but moves to the “a-ă”
ua / uə/	The initial vowel is followed by a mid-central tongue, rounded mouth vowel. Starts with the “u-ɤ” but moves to the “a-ă”

There are two ways of writing these diphthongs, depending on the presence or absence of a final consonant. They are written as ia/ua/ra when not followed by a final consonant; and as iê/uê/ưê when followed by a final consonant.

When the diphthongs “iê” or “ia” are placed after the semi-vowel “u”, the “i” is written as “y”, so we get “uyê” or “uya”.

2.3. Difficult vowels in Vietnamese language for Japanese learners – Overcoming the difficulties

The Japanese language has only 5 vowels: a, i, u, e, o. They are terse vowels, pronounced clearly and sharply. If one pronounces the vowels in the following sentence one will have their approximate sounds, although the “u” is pronounced with no forward movement of the lips: “Anh (a) thích (i) uống (u) chè (e) bột (o).” On the other hand, there are 11 single

⁴ dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/diphthong

MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM
TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

vowels in Vietnamese, most of them pronounced clearly and with a long sound – like the double vowels in Japanese (おじいさん- ojiiisan), except for the 3 short vowels /ă/: /â/ and /u/.

In order to comprehend the vowels’ pronunciation easily, we use the IPA of Japanese⁵, English and Vietnamese for comparison, so that we can have a rough image to improve our pronunciation.

Compare Vietnamese vowels to the IPA of the Japanese vowels, as below:

IPA	Kana example	Transliteration	English approx	Vietnamese approx	Equivalent vowel in Vietnamese
a	ある	aru	cup	âm áp	A/a
e	えき	eki	bet	bê bết	Ê/ê
i	いる	iru	see	xi măng	I/I; Y/y
o	おに	oni	story	cái ô	Ô/ô
u	うなぎ	unagi	roughly like shoot	mùa thu	U/u

Vietnamese “a” is pronounced with the mouth unrounded, the tongue in front and throat open, then we can feel the airstream blowing out, and the sound is longer. It is similar to “あ” in Japanese. With “ă”, the shape is similar to that of “a” but the throat is closed so we can feel the airstream stuck inside, and the sound is shorter.

“o” is pronounced with the mouth unrounded, the tongue raised up in the middle (between teeth) and the throat open so that we can feel the air stream blowing out, and the sound is longer. With “ô”, we make a similar sound to when we say ‘o’ but the throat is closed, so we can feel the airstream stuck inside, and the sound is shorter.

⁵ The pronunciation for IPA transcription of Japanese (wikipedia.org/wiki/help:IPA/Japanese#lite-note-u)

“u” is pronounced like “u- う” but the throat is closed, the length of sound is shorter, and the airstream is stuck inside.

“e” is pronounced like “ê- え” but the tongue is shorter and at the bottom of the mouth.

“o” is pronounced like “ô- お” in Japanese but the tongue is at the bottom, and the mouth and throat are open wider.

“i” and “y” are pronounced like “い” in Japanese. In words, “i” comes after a long vowel, and “y” comes after a short vowel. In other words, we can say that “y” makes the preceding vowel shorter.

In order to overcome problems in pronunciation of the diphthongs, we must be careful to control the shape of mouth (to differentiate the rounded sounds **ua/uô** and the unrounded sounds **ura/uro**); and the position of tongue, so that the sound produced combines that of both vowels.

In teaching the pronunciation of the Vietnamese vowels, the key points are making sure the learners pay attention to the shape of mouth (rounded/unrounded); the position of the tongue; and the mouth aperture, when saying words.

III. System of consonants in Vietnamese language

The nature of Vietnamese consonants is such that they do not emit much sound by themselves: they need to go together with a vowel to make a clear sound. When saying the consonants, the airstream must pass through a particular obstruction coordinated by the tongue and lips, and then pass out orally. To say the consonants correctly, we must structure the sound by creating the correct airstream barrier with the lips or tongue. There are 23 initial consonants and 8 final consonants.

MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM
TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

3.1. Initial consonants

The initial consonants in Vietnamese language are: B, C, CH, D, Đ, G (GH), GI, H, K, KH, L, M, N, NH, NG (NGH), PH, Q (U), R, S, T, TH, TR, V, X.

Compare these to the Japanese initial consonants by IPA as in the chart below

IPA	Consonant	English equivalent	Vietnamese equivalent	Japanese equivalent	Description
/b/	b	book	ba - father	ば	
/k/	c/k/q	can	ca- sing	か	“k” only goes with the vowels “i,e,ê”; “q” pairs with “u” to become the consonant “qu”.
/c/	ch	chance	cha- father	ちゃ	
/j/	d	yellow	da- skin	じゃ	
/z/	gi	zoo	giá- price	ぎ	
/ð/	đ	đim	đá- ice/stone	だ	
/y/	g/gh	good	ga- station/ ghi- write	が/ぎ	“gh” only goes with vowel “i”; “e”; and “ê”.
/h/	h	handsome	Hà (name)	は	
/x/	kh	loch	rather- khá	きゃ	
/l/	l	look	singing sound-la	ら	“l”: top of tongue is placed behind upper teeth and then strongly dropped down, airstream travels alongside of the tongue, between the front of the tongue and the side teeth.
/m/	m	ma’am	ghost -ma	ま	
/n/	n	no	custard apple-na	な	
/ŋ/	ng/ngħ	sing	Ngân (name)	ガン	“ngħ” only goes with “i”, “e”, “ê”
/p/	nh		Nhân (name)	ニャン	
/f/	ph	Finland	Phú (name)	ふ	
/kw/	qu	queen	come over- qua	わ	

/ɹ/	r	orange	go out- ra	ら	“r”: the tip of the tongue is raised and curled back behind the tooth ridge while the back of the tongue stays low when speaking.
/ʃ/	s	she	fall down- sa	しゃ	
/t/	t	banter	me-ta	た/ タ	“t” and “th” are similar in pronunciation, but while “t” is unaspirated, “th” is aspirated.
/tʰ/	th	tandem	Thái- Thailand	タイ	
/tʃ/	tr	trick	Trinh (name)	チン	“tr” and “ch” are similar in pronunciation, but for “ch” the tongue is in the front, while for “tr” the tongue is at the back.
/v/	v	van	Văn (name)	ヴァン	To create the /v/, the jaw is held nearly closed. The upper back side of the bottom lip touches very lightly the bottom of the top teeth. Air is pushed out from the mouth between the top teeth and the upper back side of the bottom lip. This sound is a continuous consonant, meaning that it should be capable of being produced for a few seconds with even and smooth pronunciation for the entire duration.
/s/	x	say	far- xa	さ	

3.2. Final consonants

There are 8 final consonants in Vietnamese language: P, T, C, CH, M, N, NG, NH.

Unlike those of English, all Vietnamese final consonants are silent sounds. Their significance lies in the fact that the sound of the nuclear vowel is changed by them.

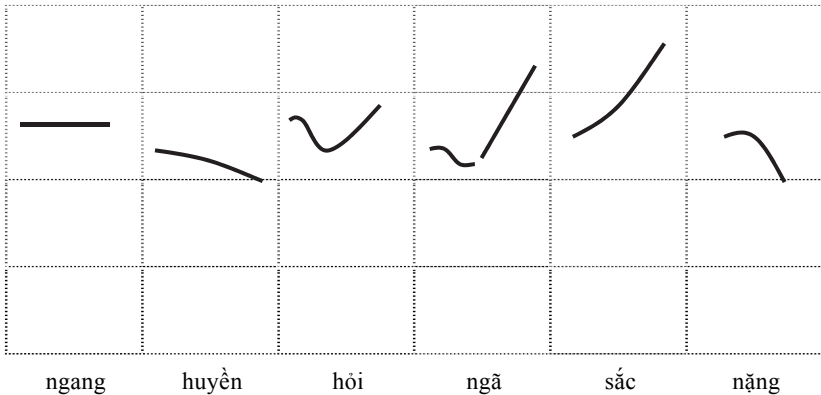
IPA	Final consonant	English equivalent	Vietnamese equivalent	Japanese equivalent	Description
/k/	-c	Jack	different khác	none	open mouth, tongue in middle
/k/	-ch	Jack	customer khách	none	open mouth, tongue in middle and moving up behind upper teeth

MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM
TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

/m/	-m	farm	orange -cam	-ん ⁽¹⁾	⁽¹⁾ when it goes before ば、ぼ、ま
/n/	-n	can	interrupt can	-ん ⁽²⁾	⁽²⁾ as same as -ん in せんせい
/ɲ/	-nh	downhill	fishy -tanh	-ん ⁽³⁾	⁽³⁾ is read like ん ⁽²⁾ but tongue is moved up behind upper teeth.
/ŋ/	-ng	sing	no -không	-ん ⁽⁴⁾	⁽⁴⁾ when it goes before かな、かゝ
/p/	-p	hip	tweezers nhíp		close mouth and keep air in
/t/	-t	fat	thirsty- khát		open mouth but close the throat

IV. Tonal system

There are 6 tones in Standard Vietnamese. In the Southern dialect, the two tones “hỏi” and “ngã” are pronounced similarly, but this peculiarity is not a big obstacle in communication between Northern and Southern Dialects.



V. Some suggestions for teaching pronunciation

According to our analysis above, the main reasons for students' difficulties stem from habits of the mother tongue. Firstly, students find it hard to recreate the difference in sounds which are similar but not the same, and the phonemes of target language are often

switched into the phonemes of the mother tongue. In this case, students do not recognize their mistake. Teachers need to help them correct it immediately. Secondly, even when the students clearly understand the sound, they do not necessarily know how to control the tongue, the shape of mouth, the airstream and so on, and the role of the teacher in this case is to guide the student as to where the tongue goes, whether the mouth is open or closed, or rounded or unrounded, and whether the airstream is kept in or blown out.

Tones in the Vietnamese language are one of the most difficult issues for the students. Especially when speaking full sentences, students often mispronounce the words because of an assimilation trend (in which the tone of a syllable is pronounced the same as the tone of the previous or following syllable) and/or a dissimilation trend (in which the tone of one syllable in a string of similar syllables is pronounced in a different tone).

Japanese is a mora-timed language. Japanese pedagogy has traditionally claimed that moras are consistent in duration. Comparing Japanese to Vietnamese, we can see that the sound of a consonant-vowel combination (は-ha, に-ni...) is similar to the short vowel sound in Vietnamese language (ă, â, u). And it is easy for students to realise that the length of the sound of the long vowels in Vietnamese is similar to the two mora-syllables in Japanese (し-しい- shii; a-ああ).

The textbook we use for pronunciation is “Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ Kanda, Tiếng Việt Cơ Sở 1- Trần Trọng Giảng (Chủ biên) – Kanda University of International Studies, Elementary Vietnamese 1- Tran Trong Giang (Ed)”. It is used for teaching first year students, and we focus on giving the students ways to pronounce correctly sounds which contain nuclear vowels or consonants (both initial and final) which do not exist in the Japanese language. The 11 monophthongs and 3 diphthongs, combined with 23 initial consonants and 8 final consonants, together with 6 tones, are divided into 8 groups. Each group contains some of the sounds that students find confusing, so that they can learn to


MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM
TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

recognize and say them correctly; the sounds are then combined with tones, for the students to practice speaking syllable strings with different or the same tones.

4.1. Grouping for teaching pronunciation (Kanda University of International Studies, Elementary Vietnamese 1)

4.1.1 Group 1


Consonant	Description	Vowel	Description
b	Voiced, bilabial, preglottalized stop	i	High, front, unrounded
m	Voiced, bilabial, nasal	ê	Middle, front, unrounded
v	Voiced, labio- dental fricative	e	Low, front, unrounded

	Tones	Diacritic	Description
	Ngang	None	Flat
	Huyền	—	Going down

This helps the students understand how the lips work and where the airstream goes when teaching these three consonants; while these three vowels are “unrounded vowels” so the shape of mouth must be unrounded when pronouncing them. The tone ‘huyền” must be started at the same pitch as the tone “ngang” and go down from there.

4.1.2. Group 2


Consonant	Description	Vowel	Description
c/k/q	Voicless, non-aspirated, dorso-velar stop	u	High, back, rounded
h	Voiceless, glottal fricative	ô	Middle, back, rounded
kh	Voice, dorso-velar fricative	o	Low, back, rounded

	Tones	Diacritic	Description
	Sắc	/	High- rising up
Nặng	.	Low- falling down, stopping air	

The sound /k/ is written as the letter k when it is followed by the vowel i/y, ê, e; by the letter q when it is followed by the on-glide u; and by the letter c when it goes before the rest of the vowels. These three vowels are “rounded vowels” so the shape of mouth must be rounded when pronouncing them. The tone “sắc” rises up from the tone “ngang”, and the tone “nặng” starts lower than the tone “ngang”, then drops down quickly and stops the airstream.

4.1.3. Group 3

Letter	Description	Vowel	Description
nh	Voice, lamino-alveolar nasal	u	High, back, unrounded
g/gh	Voice, dorso-velar fricative	σ	Middle, back, unrounded
ng/ngħ	Voice, dorso-velar nasal	a	Low, back, unrounded

	Tones	Diacritic	Description
	Ngã		High- a little down then rising up
Hỏi		Low- a little down and rising up	

The consonant ‘g’ is written as ‘gh’ when it is followed by the vowels i/e/ê, just as the consonant ‘ng’ is written as ‘ngħ’ when it is followed by those same vowels. These three vowels are “unrounded vowels”, so the shape of mouth must be unrounded when pronouncing them.

The tone “ngã” starts higher than the tone “ngang”, drops down a little and then rises up, while the tone “hỏi” starts lower than the tone “ngang”, drops down a little and then rises

MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM
TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

up. In the Southern dialect the tone “ngã” is pronounced the same as the tone “hỏi”.

4.1.4. Group 4

Consonant	Description	Vowel	Description
l	Voiced, apico-dental fricative	ia	The initial vowel is followed by a mid-central tongue and unrounded mouth vowel.
r	Voiced, apico-alveola, retroflex, oral continuant	ưa	
ph	Voiceless, labio-dental fricative	ua	

“l” vs. “r” is difficult for Japanese students, so the teacher must make sure the students know about the position of tongue, where the airstream goes, and so on, when teaching pronunciation of these consonants. These three variant diphthongs are placed at the end of the syllable, and their sound is the combined sound of two vowels.

4.1.5. Group 5

Consonant	Description	Semi-vowel	Description
ch	Voiceless, unaspirated, lamino-alveolar stop	u	High, back, rounded
th	Voiceless, aspirated, dental stop	o	Low, back, rounded
t	Voiceless, unaspirated, dental stop		
tr	Voiceless, apico-alveolar, retroflex stop		

The teacher must make sure students know how to combine the length of tongue with the lips when pronouncing these consonants.

When the vowels ‘u’ or ‘o’ pair with another vowel, they become semi-vowels. It means we merely begin with the ‘u’ or ‘o’ and pronounce fully the second vowel (nuclear vowel).

4.1.6. Group 6 – Focusing on teaching the semi-final consonants

Consonant	Description	Semi-final consonant	Description
x	Voiceless, apico-alveolar fricative	i (y)	High, front, unrounded semivowel
s	Voiceless, apico-alveolar, retroflex spirant	u (o)	High, back, rounded semivowel
d/gi	Voiced, apico-alveolar fricative		
đ	Voiced, apico-alveolar, preglottalized		

The opening or closing of the mouth is determined by the final consonants, and the amount of opening is based on the nuclear vowel. Students should note that ‘i’ comes after a long vowel, and ‘y’ comes after a short vowel.

4.1.7. Group 7. Focusing on teaching pronunciation of short vowels and final consonants

Vowel	Description	Final consonant	Description
ă	Low, back, unrounded, short	m	High, front, unrounded semivowel
â	Middle, back, unrounded, short	n	High, back, rounded semivowel
u	High,, back, unrounded, short	nh	Voiced, lamino-alveolar nasal
		ng	Voiced, dorso-velar nasal

In the Vietnamese language, the final consonants are often silent sounds. The teacher must make sure the students know whether the syllable’s final consonant requires the mouth to be open or closed, as well as the final position of tongue.

MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM
TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

4.1.8. Group 8. Teaching final consonant and diphthong pronunciation

Letter	Description	Diphthong	Description
p	Voiceless, bilabial stop	iê	These diphthongs never end the syllable: they are always followed by consonants.
t	Voiceless, dental stop	ươ	
ch	Voiced, lamino-alveolar nasal	uô	
c	Voiced, dorso-veolar stop		

4.2. Suggestions for teaching pronunciation

4.2.1. Recognize and pronounce the syllable

“Listen and repeat” is used by most teachers who teach pronunciation. Students can listen to and repeat exactly the syllables that map directly onto Japanese sounds. Thus, for familiar syllables that also exist in Japanese, it is easy for students to receive, generalize, and then put into practice their knowledge of pronunciation.

For unfamiliar syllables, sound recognition is not so easy. In this case, the teacher needs to read slowly, giving clear instructions as to how to set the tongue, lips and mouth. The teacher also needs to give pairs of syllables that students confuse easily (using familiar words that have a simple syllable structure), such as:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| (1) i mi bi vi | (1) i phi li ri a pha la ra ia phia lia ria |
| ê mê bê vê | u phu lu ru ua phua lua rua |
| e me be ve | ư phư lư rư ua phưa lưa rưa |

(Unit 1 – Elementary Vietnamese 1- Kanda University of International Studies) *(Unit 4 – Elementary Vietnamese 1- Kanda University of International Studies)*

The teacher should explain the rules as well as the vocal position, then pronounce the pairs, so that the students can identify the sounds and compare them again. After that, the

teacher can say one syllable and ask the students which it is. Students can also practice saying Vietnamese numbers during this session: the teacher says one syllable, and the student says the coordinates for the target, as follows:

Teacher: mi bi vi mê bê vê me be ve

Student: (1:1) (1:2) (1:3) (2:1) (2:2) (2:3) (3:1) (3:2) (3:3)

At first, the teacher repeats the syllable until most of the students can recognize it, then says it only once and faster. Finally, the teacher can say all the syllables in the line and ask students which line it is, to see if they can identify the vowels.

The pairs of confusing syllables which we need to double-check with our students are:

Initial consonants: l-r; b-v; n-ng; k/c- kh; t-th

Vowels: ê-e; o-ô; u-ư; u-uô; â-ơ; ă-a

Final consonants: we need to remind the students when to keep the mouth open or closed, according to the final consonants.

4.2.2. How to improve pronunciation skills

Once the students have mastered the sounds of the unit, the teacher needs to improve the students' reflexes by having them read as instructed by the teacher. The teacher points to any word on the board for students to read aloud. The teacher switches between words with different tones for students to practice tones. The pace of reading the words can increase. The teacher also needs to go back to old words to reinforce the difference between two sounds, as students may pronounce a word wrongly due to the influence of the tone that has been pronounced before. This is a pronunciation error in the syllable sequence. For example, practice pronunciation of the words below:

MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM
TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

- | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------|------|------|-----|------|--------|------|------|------|------|------|
| (1) oa | choa | thoa | toa | troa | (2) ia | chia | thia | tia | tria | lia |
| oe | choe | thoe | toe | troe | ưa | chưa | thưa | tưa | trưa | lưa |
| uê | chê | thê | tê | trê | ua | chua | thua | tua | trua | lua |
| uy | chuy | thuy | tuy | truy | mia | mưa | mua | phia | phưa | phua |

(Unit 5 – Elementary Vietnamese I- Kanda University of International Studies)

The teacher can read the column from top to bottom, then across from left to right, while the students listen carefully and repeat correctly. Next, the teacher can ask students to choose any word in (1) or (2), and listens to check if they are right. Often, students pronounce the word incorrectly, so the teacher should find a word which is close to what they said, and guide the student in how to pronounce it correctly.

In order to practice pronunciation of a syllable sequence, the teacher can say a word with its tone, and asks the students to say this word again but with a different tone. This step helps students to know how to control their pitch when speaking Vietnamese tones, as below:

- | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| ư | hư | hử | hữ | gư | gử | gữ | như | nhử | nhữ | ngư | ngử | ngữ |
| ơ | hơ | hở | hữ | gơ | gở | gữ | nhơ | nhở | nhữ | ngơ | ngử | ngữ |
| a | ha | há | hã | ga | gá | gã | nha | nhá | nhã | nga | ngá | ngã |

(Unit 3 – Elementary Vietnamese I- Kanda University of International Studies)

Next, the teacher says any word on the board and asks the student which word was said. Then, the teacher asks a student to say aloud any word, and the teacher points out the word they heard. If it is wrong, the teacher will show the student how to pronounce that word correctly again.

In our class, we often use funny sentences with similar syllables to practice tones and final consonants, such as:

(1) Bạn tôi bán bàn và bảng, bận lắm. – My friend sells tables and boards, very busy.

In this sentence, we can identify differences in the final consonants –n and –ng; the vowels /a/; /ã/;/â/; and tones.

(2) Các khách khác khát lắm. – The other customers are very thirsty.

In this sentence, we can identify differences between the initial consonants c and kh; and the final consonants –c; -t; -ch.

V. Conclusion

It is possible to say that in the Vietnamese language, the sound of the vowels is the main sound of the words. Comparing Vietnamese vowels to the five vowels in the Japanese language, we can see some similarities in pronunciation, but the length of sound in Vietnamese vowels is longer. Secondly, because there are no diphthongs in Japanese (comparable with the diphthongs and semi-vowels of Vietnamese), it is more difficult for students to combine the sounds of two vowels into one new sound. As mentioned above, the 11 vowels of Vietnamese are divided into three groups based on the shapes of mouth (rounded – unrounded - smiling), so we should make sure that the students pay attention to that from the very beginning.

Teaching pronunciation of the Vietnamese language is not only one of the more difficult parts, but also a boring task for both teacher and student, and many students study the grammar and vocabulary without paying much attention to the phonetics. Therefore, in this paper, covering some basic issues of phonetics, we are focused on practical strategies of teaching with games to inspire students' interest in learning pronunciation.

MỘT SỐ LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG PHÁT ÂM TIẾNG VIỆT CỦA NGƯỜI NHẬT

Japanese students often confuse the initial consonants b and v; r and l; t, th and đ, but when they know how to control their tongue, mouth and airstream, these are no longer a problem for them. It is worth pointing out the pronunciation of the final consonants in the Vietnamese language to the students. As most of the students have learnt English, we may mention that while the final consonants in English are pronounced aloud, in Vietnamese they are pronounced silently. The key point for students to remember is which final consonants require an open mouth (-n/-nh/-t/-c/-ch) and which are closed (-m/-p).

In terms of pedagogical psychology, the difficulties when students first become acquainted with a foreign language, in having to adjust to the structure of the sounds by operating the mouth in completely different ways compared to their mother tongue, can easily cause depression and decrease their motivation to study. Therefore, helping students master the Vietnamese pronunciation system and method in the simplest, most easily understood ways, and helping students actively practice to create good habits and a sense of correct pronunciation, are important things that teachers need to do.

In this paper, we identify the research subjects only as first-year students who are beginning to learn Vietnamese, and who are limited to getting familiarized with each group of sounds in the Vietnamese phonetic structure according to the basic Vietnamese textbook 1, Kanda University of International Studies, but who are not yet getting into the rhythm of sentences.

Correct pronunciation in a foreign language is an ideal, but this is difficult to achieve perfectly. It is also difficult to see any teaching method as perfect. Its effectiveness depends on many other factors, such as the student's language ability. However, we are trying to find a method that aims to help students take basic steps in the beginning stages of learning Vietnamese, creating the basis for further advanced steps.

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