A New Trend in Pronunciation Teaching

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Abstract

English pronunciation training helps learners speak more clearly and communicate more smoothly. Online pronunciation learning, which helps connect teachers and students from all parts of the world, has been well-supported by the rapid development of technology. However, teachers need to apply appropriate pedagogical methods to ensure the effectiveness of online pronunciation instruction. This paper overviews specific strategies which could be employed for teaching English pronunciation in a video-based virtual classroom.

Introduction

Recent research has shown that pronunciation training plays an important role in enhancing L2 learners' speech as pronunciation difficulties might prevent them from communicating effectively (Brekelmans, 2017; Lee, Yang, & Plonsky, 2014; Saito, 2007; Setter & Jenkins, 2005). Due to the rapid development of distance learning in the context of globalization and borderless education, online pronunciation training might become a trend in the future (Salmon, Drennan, Kennedy, & Pisarski, 2008; Wang, 2006; Levis & Hegelheimer, 2021). Additionally, the covid-19 outbreak in 2020 might spark an online boom for education as a way to cope with the emergent situation (Perrota, 2020; Hollingsworth, 2020)

Also, online pronunciation instruction might develop in the coming decade as a response to the fact that pronunciation is overlooked in traditional classrooms (Macdonald, 2002; O'Brien, 2004; Rubrecht, 2016). As a consequence, L2 learners might choose to either purchase some online pronunciation training programs and applications (Kang, Thomson, & Murphy, 2017) or turn to private human instructors. The problem is that pronunciation apps or programs might not be reliable as it is difficult to know whether a human listener would perceive the same utterance the way a computer or software analyzes. For that reason, language learners might turn to seek paid help from professional pronunciation instructors.

However, a qualified pronunciation teacher might not always be accessible (Kang, Thomson, & Murphy, 2017). This problem could be solved as the advancement of technology has paved the way for distance learning, which helps connect students and teachers from different parts of the world. In short, following the trend of distance learning in the context of globalization, learners who need to learn how to speak English more clearly could sign up for online pronunciation classes (Wang, 2006). In these classes, teachers use synchronous video

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conversations where they are able to view images of their learners' faces in real time, providing both visual and audio feedback as needed. To maximize the effectiveness of an online course, it is essential that teachers apply appropriate pedagogical methods.

Over the past five years, I have had worked virtually with hundreds of Vietnamese learners (both EFL and ESL) to help them with their English pronunciation. They all have the need to enhance their speech clarity in order to successfully communicate with other English speakers all over the world, including both native and non-native English speakers. This article aims at introducing instructional methods that teachers could employ in online pronunciation teaching focusing on the application of video-based Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC).

Background

CALL and pronunciation teaching

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) offers a study environment using various types of technological applications (Lear, 2013). Computer-Assisted Pronunciation Training (CAPT) is one type of CALL which has aided the process of pronunciation teaching. CAPT offers a variety of benefits to learners. Particularly, it provides fast feedback using different types of illustrations and encourages autonomous learning (Martins, Levis, & Borges, 2016). Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR), one feature of CAPT, is designed to detect learners' mispronunciation (Lear, 2013). ASR provides learners with native-speaker pronunciation models and notifies them when their speech is not intelligible. However, it fails to tell users what is wrong with their pronunciation (Thompson, 2011). ASR is often perceived as inaccurate, with the accuracy rate of 95% for native speakers but of only 70% for non-native speakers (Martins, Levis, & Borges, 2016). Although CAPT seems useful in supporting students' learning

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processes, it often does not meet educational requirements with too many mechanical drills (Martins, Levis, & Borges, 2016) and is often perceived as a mere replication of classroom instruction using a computer mode (Thompson, 2011). Learners using CAPT develop a sense of autonomy; however, they are not provided with opportunities for interactive communication.

Due to the CAPT's shortcomings, the continued Internet development since the late 20th century has paved the way for Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). One type of CMC is synchronous CMC (SCMC), which could be either text-based or video-based communication. It helps learners write and read at the same time of interaction (Lin, 2014). Audio or video conferencing, instant messaging, and chat rooms are considered different forms of SCMC. Interaction through videos between teachers and students and among students would accelerate the meaning negotiation process due to the ability to notice non-verbal cues (Yamda & Akahori, 2007; Ziegler, 2016). A recent study suggested that a combination of classroom pronunciation instruction with computer-aided software helped teenaged learners make the best improvements in their pronunciation compared to either classroom instruction or computer software alone (Gao & Hanna, 2016). From these results, it could be inferred that the involvement of human teachers with technological support in distant learning might be ideal. It accelerates interaction between teachers and students, and among students through the use of video-based SCMC, which requires learners and teachers to be present online at a specific time.

Accentedness and Intelligibility

There is empirical evidence that pronunciation training enhances speech intelligibility among L2 learners (e.g. Setter & Jenkins, 2005; Saito, 2007; Saito, 2011; Lee, Jang, & Plonsky, 2015; Levis, 2018). When learners are able to speak more clearly, they become more intelligible

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to others, thus enhancing the effectiveness of communication. There are three main approaches in pronunciation training: the intuitive-imitative, the analytic-linguistic, and the integrative approach (Chen, 2007; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010; Grant, 2014).

Before the 1960s, the goal of pronunciation teaching, based on the Nativeness Principle, was to achieve a native-like accent. At that time, people tended to adopt the intuitive-imitative approach, which highlighted that exposure to input would lead to successful L2 production (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010). This approach aims at attaining native-like production, which involves many oral repetitions, minimal drills, and read-alouds (Kang, Thomson, & Murphy, 2017). Contrary to the intuitive-imitative approach, the analytic-linguistic approach stresses the importance of phonetic instruction using visual diagrams, charts, or mirrors in teaching (Kang, Thomson, & Murphy, 2017). However, with the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1980s and globalization, researchers have proposed the Intelligibility Principle which highlights communicative competence over native-like pronunciation. According to the Intelligibility Principle, instruction should focus on features that are helpful in communication (Levis, 2005). As most communicative transactions in English do not involve native speakers (NS), the notion of "World Englishes" has emerged - English with many varieties. In 2009, Jenkins introduced the term "English as a Lingua Franca", which refers to the fact that English is used primarily among speakers of different first languages. English pronunciation, therefore, should be taught to attain maximum intelligibility in international communication. Based on the Intelligibility Principle, highly qualified nonnative teachers have an advantage due to their experience learning L2 pronunciation and considering that nativeness is not required or even preferred in teaching pronunciation (Levis, 2020).

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 Grant (2014) also pointed out that people often mistook that accent reduction and pronunciation instruction were the same. She suggested that pronunciation goals should be more achievable and realistic by promoting comprehensibility in international contexts. That leads to the introduction of the current integrative approach, which considers pronunciation as an integral component of communication rather than an isolated drill and practice sub-skill (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010). According to this approach, pronunciation is practiced within meaningful task-based activities. This approach focuses more on the suprasegmentals of stress, rhythm and intonation, which are practiced in discourse context (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2010).

 In my online pronunciation course, I adopted both the analytic-linguistic and the integrative approach. The method suggested in this article entails both phonetic instruction and the practice of English in meaningful conversations. As my students have the needs to communicate with English speakers from around the world, they don't necessarily have to adopt a native accent. The crucial part of the training is how to be intelligible in the global context. In terms of which features of pronunciation to focus on, there is no clear standard. While some studies indicate that errors of vowels and consonants impede intelligibility, others suggest that prosody causes unintelligibility (Levis, 2018). However, based on my own experience, both segmental and suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation play a role in ensuring mutual understanding. In my training, I focus on typical individual sound errors that Vietnamese often make, for example, the tendency to drop the final sounds of English words or the difficulties in making particular English sounds that do not exist in Vietnamese (Hwa, Hodson, & Edward, 2002). I also spend a lot of time helping Vietnamese learners with other suprasegmental aspects that might impair their speech clarity such as word stress or rhythm of speech.

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As achieving a native accent is not the goal of the course, students are not required to gain a certain prestige accent. For example, my Vietnamese students do not need to successfully produce the American "r-controlled" vowels. Levis (2020) also stated that L2 learners should be familiar with a wide variety of accents and do not need to converge to prestige accents. However, I think that learners' goals should depend on their learning purposes. The Vietnamese learners that I have been working with, for example, besides having the need to communicate with speakers with various English accents, also want to upgrade their knowledge in different fields. They spend much of their time watching Youtube videos, Ted talks or podcasts which are mostly spoken with American accents. So, in my virtual course, features of Northern American accent are introduced to aid with their listening skills.

Virtual pronunciation training strategy

Distance learning has been defined as "planned teaching that takes place whenever there is a distance between teacher and student in time and/or space" (Blake, 2009, p.824). Distance learning or online learning in this article refers to the interaction between students and teachers real time via a video-based SCMC platform. This article emphasizes the collaboration between teachers and students, which is considered potentially as one of the most effective teaching methods in the coming decade (Kang, Thomson, & Murphy, 2017). This technique is also in accordance with the sociocultural viewpoints. Regarding the Zone of Proximal Development, Vygotsky mentioned two important components for language learners to achieve their potential development: scaffolding and collaboration between teachers and learners (Brown, 2014). Similarly, Long's Interaction Hypothesis emphasized input and interaction as two key factors in second language acquisition (Brown, 2014).

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Given the importance as well as potential usefulness of online pronunciation instruction, this paper will now turn to an explanation of a CALL-based technique, which is the video-based virtual classroom. The technique suggested in this article are based on my five-years of experience teaching English pronunciation online to Vietnamese adult learners.

Video-based virtual classrooms

Challenges of managing a video-based pronunciation classroom

Virtual classrooms help enable communicative comprehension among members due to the visibility of non-verbal cues such as nodding or smiling (Yamada, 2008). Furthermore, it brings a sense of natural communication in real-time, which is similar to face-to-face communication. However, teachers should take into consideration some differences between a traditional classroom and a virtual classroom in order to plan their lessons accordingly.

First, unlike face-to-face interaction, it is harder to observe body language in a virtual classroom, except for hand movement and facial expression. That may limit students' sense of confidence in eventual real-life interaction. Based on my experience, students often feel less stressed in an online classroom compared to an offline setting. The reason could be that in a traditional classroom, people have to be more aware of their body language and eye-contact, whereas in an online format, it is easier to neglect these important features. So, students in an online class might not be fully prepared for a potential face-to-face interaction. However, on the other hand, teachers' mouth movements while delivering sound instruction could be observed more clearly than in traditional classes, given that teachers place the cameras close to their mouths. Also, as students usually use microphones in an online class, sounds could be clearer to them and teachers alike.

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Second, it is more challenging to manage an online classroom as compared to an in-person class. Even though there is interaction between students and teachers in an online class, students might find it easy to get distracted by their surrounding environment. In a traditional classroom setting, teachers could integrate more group-work or physical games, however, these activities might be restrained in an online class. So, online teaching might require teachers to pay more attention to learners' needs with careful lesson planning (Wang, 2006; Petersen, 2014).

Furthermore, the number of students in a class is a crucial component to consider in distance learning. As mentioned above, it is often more difficult to organize collaborative class activities in an online mode. If the class size is big, it is expected to be rather challenging for teachers to manage their classrooms or provide individual attention to their students.

Finally, Internet connection causes great concern in online teaching. An unstable Internet connection from either side might pose bad impacts on the teaching quality. Background noises could be another potential problem. When learning online, it is fundamental to arrange a quiet sitting corner. If teachers do not know how to control background noises from their learners, that might disrupt their lessons.

Figure 1: A screenshot of an online pronunciation classroom of Vietnamese EFL learners via Zoom platform.

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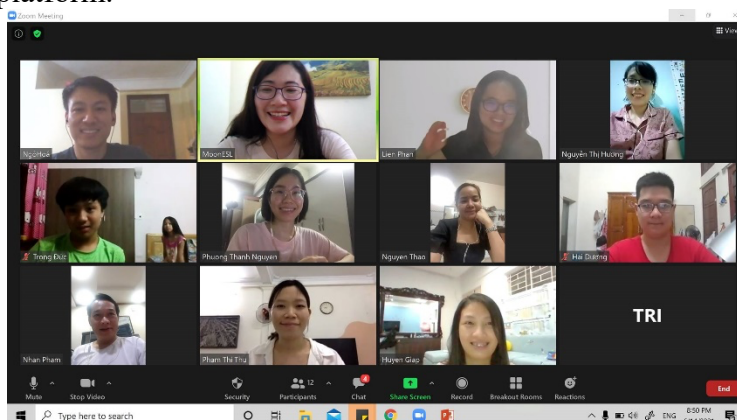
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An overview of my Vietnamese EFL adult learners

While many of them are living in Vietnam, others reside in different countries such as Germany, the United States, Singapore, Japan, Canada, etc. Most of them have strong educational backgrounds and have been learning English for more than ten years. Even when they could be of different English levels, the English pronunciation course is essential to all of them. No matter who they are—whether they are limited to talking about familiar topics, or if they are already fluent speakers, they all wish to speak English more clearly and confidently.

The pronunciation course consists of 30 classes which cover all aspects of pronunciation: sounds, word stress, rhythm, connected speech, reduction, and intonation. As mentioned above, I employ the analytic-linguistic combined with the integrative approach. In other words, I emphasize phonetic instructions together with the use of pronunciation into meaningful contexts. Each class lasts around 90 minutes, with maximum ten participants. As I am also a native Vietnamese speaker, I could understand my students' potential problems better than other native teachers. Overall, it would be much easier to instruct my students in Vietnamese, our common language, especially in phonetic instruction. However, the approaches outlined below could be employed for heterogenous groups of students as well.

How to prepare for teaching an online pronunciation class

There are many available platforms for video-based classrooms such as Skype and Zoom (Dharma, Asmarani, & Dewi, 2017). I have tried Google Hangout, Skype, Facebook call, and Zoom. Of these four platforms, Zoom is the best as it provides clearer images with steadier connection (Sutterlin, 2018). As learners might not be familiar with how to use an online platform to join a virtual class, they will likely need some prior instruction. Before the course starts, it is best that teachers could give learners some guidance on how to download the software

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onto their electronic devices (either tablet, smart phone, or laptop). Also, they need to test their audio devices and cameras beforehand to ensure that nothing goes wrong in the first class. Students should also be instructed on how to perform basic functions in an online platform such as muting their audio, sharing their screens or typing in the chat box.

As the Internet connection might break down sometimes, it is crucial that students are given necessary materials before class. One of the biggest concerns about online pronunciation teaching is that learners cannot see the mouth movement of their instructors very clearly due to sudden image break-up. For that reason, sending instructional videos prior to each class could be of great help. That way, students have a better chance to understand the instruction. This could also be a wonderful way for them review what they have learned. Moreover, supplemental materials (including audio files, videos, or worksheets) should be sent to students in advance so that they could either have them printed out or downloaded. That minimizes troubles related to internet connection that might occur sometimes in a virtual classroom.

For my course, I offer a wide variety of my Youtube instructional videos that students could have access to. They are required to watch the videos and complete quizzes before coming to class. That way, I could make sure that they watch the videos carefully. Also, Rachel's English Youtube channel offers great instructional content on American English Pronunciation.

Figure 2: A screenshot of my Youtube instructional video.


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How to manage an online classroom

Most video-based platforms allow users to perform a great variety of activities. For example, Zoom integrates all of the features needed for effective classroom instruction, such as video sharing, audio, text-based communication, breakout rooms, whiteboard and file-sharing. During class time, teachers could basically function as in a traditional classroom. For example, they could give instructions on the target pronunciation features by taking notes on the e-Whiteboard and sharing their videos at the same time. Teachers could also share their computer screens or any related files to their students. Likewise, students could take notes on the e-Whiteboard, and share their screens and other related files if they need to.

In order to manage an online classroom successfully, teachers need to deal with some problems that might arise. For example, background noise could be a potential problem. This could be tackled if teachers know how to mute their students' audio when necessary. Likewise, learners should also be asked to mute themselves whenever they encounter any distractions to avoid bothering the whole class. Another problem is that in online learning, learners mostly see teachers' upper body parts (above the neck), so they could get distracted easily if teachers stay still in front of the camera. In order to keep their lessons engaging, it is important that teachers vary their voice tones more often, and frequently use facial expressions or hand movements. Besides, it could be a good idea if teachers apply more visual illustrations to get their students' attention. For example, in the lesson teaching the sound 'schwa' in English, I introduce several words containing the target sound, supported with visual illustrations in a PowerPoint format.

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Figure 3: An example of visual illustration in a video-based pronunciation class.
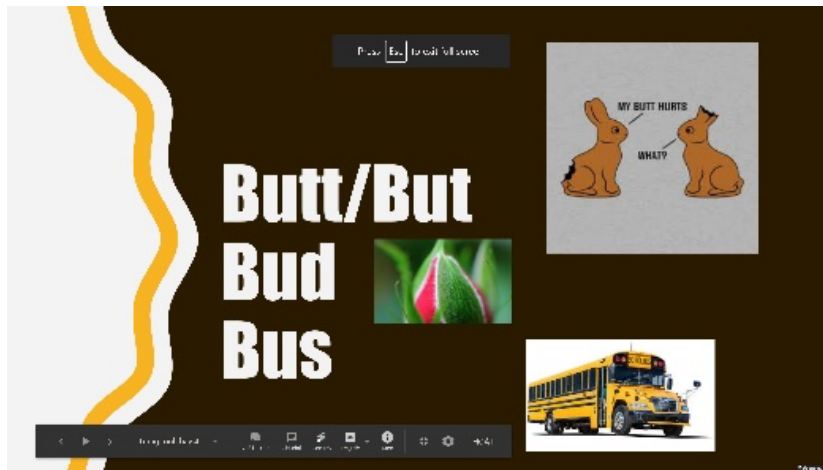
What kind of activities should be used?

As online learning might limit some physical games, teachers need to incorporate appropriate activities into the lesson plans. In order to have an effective virtual pronunciation course, it is important that teachers keep students involved in the lessons, and at the same time, promote maximum interaction among class members.

Recommended activities include whole-class instruction, group-work and individual corrective feedback. In an online pronunciation class, it is fundamental that teachers give explicit instruction on the pronunciation features to the whole class. Research has shown that explicit instruction is more effective in enhancing speech intelligibility than implicit instruction (Saito, 2007; Magro, 2011; Saito, 2013). However, as mentioned above, it is important to keep students engaged in an online classroom setting. Organizing group-work gets students to interact with each other in smaller groups, thus helping them stay more focused.

In group-work activities, teachers could make use of the "break-out rooms" function offered by Zoom video-based platform. They could choose to join each room at different times to observe their students' group discussions. This is also a great opportunity for teachers to give

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individual corrective feedback to group members. Individual corrective feedback in pronunciation is important as it helps improve L2 comprehensibility (Dlaska & Krekeler, 2013). After group-work, it is important that teachers return to the main session to review the assignment with the whole class to enhance their understanding of the lesson. Specific group-work activities are described in more detail under the sections "Guided practice" and "Communicative practice" below. Group-work offers a great chance for students to listen and give each other corrective feedback. Peer feedback is considered beneficial for students' improvement in attaining better speaking skills as they could be able to pinpoint their own errors through observing other's performance (Martin & Sippel, 2021).

The goal of pronunciation teaching, according to the integrative approach, is to achieve comprehensibility in international contexts. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin (2010) mentioned a communicative framework for teaching English pronunciation, including description and analysis, listening discrimination, controlled practice, guided practice, and communicative practice.

First, description and analysis are understood as "oral and written illustrations of how the feature is produced and when it occurs within spoken discourse" (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010, p.45). It is fundamental that teachers provide explicit instruction of both segmental and supra-segmental aspects (Saiko & Akiyama, 2017). Teachers should sit in a well-lit place so that students could see their mouth movements clearly. Teachers could also make their own instructional videos which could be sent to their students to watch before class or to review after class.

Second, in listening discrimination, learners need to listen to and discriminate pronunciation features correctly. There has been scientific evidence that the ability to listen and

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tell the difference between sounds might better enhance L2 speech production (Aliaga-Garcia & Mora, 2009; Linebaugh and Roche, 2013). This is normally done through minimal pair exercises, in which teachers ask students to listen to and discriminate two similar or confusing sounds. For example, in order to help my Vietnamese students distinguish between two sounds, the lax /ɪ/ and the tense /i/, I have them listen to the word pair "it - eat", and then repeat one of them. Learners have to identify which word is repeated. In this case, after listening, learners could hold one or two fingers in front of the screen to indicate which word is being said. They could also choose to type their answers into the chat box.

It is also crucial that in the context of World Englishes, learners need to familiarize themselves with different English accents. Having students listen to the same word spoken not only from the teachers (or the dictionary) but also from different English speakers around the world is very important. To do so, I recommend using the website wwww.youglish.com and www.naturalreaders.com. Youglish.com, which belongs to Youtube, is considered a video dictionary as it provides users with a great number of Youtube videos containing the searched word or phrase spoken by different native English speakers. While Youglish presents videos by mostly English native speakers from the UK, the U.S, and Australia, Natural Readers (https://www.naturalreaders.com/online/) provides a more diversified sample of speakers from Italy, France, Germany, Portugal, etc.

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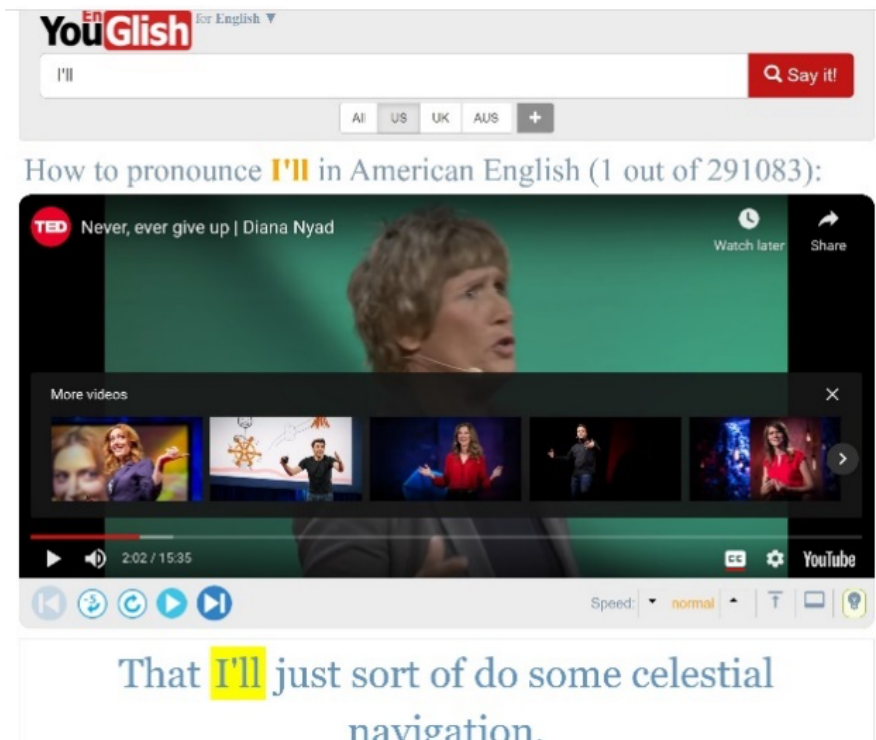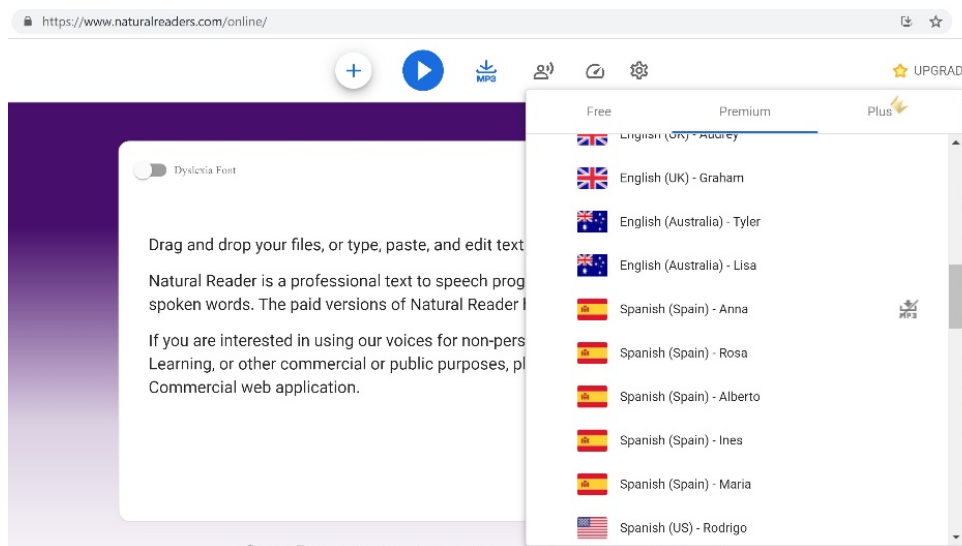*Figure 4*: A screen shot of Youglish search results for "*I'll*"

Figure 5: A screenshot of www.naturalreaders.com.

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Third, controlled practice is defined as "repetition practice and oral reading –

especially of minimal pair words or sentences and short dialogues. Other forms of controlled

practice include tongue twisters, Jazz Chants, and short poems or children's rhymes (Celce-

Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010, p.47). For this type of exercise, it would be helpful if

learners have a sample reading with audio script so that they could imitate.

An example of a controlled exercise: Read these sentences, focusing on connecting the
underlined words.
1. <u>Did you</u> go out for dinner?
2. Where <u>did you</u> go?
3. What <u>did you</u> order?
4. <u>Didn't you</u> like the food?
5. <u>Did you</u> eat your vegetables?
6. Why <u>didn't you</u> call me?

Next, in Guided Practice, the idea is that "the context is given with much of the

language already provided" (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010, p.47). Some activities

include cued dialogues, simple information-gap exercises, and sequencing tasks such as strip

stories.

An Example of a guide practice:
Kim is an office worker. Work in pairs to arranging Kim's schedule, using the
suggested key words:
    Drink milk
    Meet friends
    Have dinner
    Visit the doctor to check her feet
    Brush teeth
    Clean the kitchen
    Go to her office

This exercise is design to help learners practice the pronunciation of the lax sound /ɪ/ and the

tense sound /i/.

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Finally, in communicative practice, "learners encounter tasks that require them to use the newly acquired phonological feature in genuine exchanges of information, including storytelling, role play, interviews, debates, [and] problem solving" (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010, p.48). For example, students could be asked to make a two-minute presentation to respond to the topic "Talk about a person that you love". For this exercise, teachers should have students pay attention to a specific feature of pronunciation. For instance, learners could focus on applying rhythm of speech into their presentation.

While sound instruction and listening discrimination could be done as a whole-class activity, other activities (controlled practice, guided practice, and communicative practice) could be performed in groups. Group-work helps promote further collaboration and interaction among learners, thus helping them acquire the language more effectively.

Students' opinions on online pronunciation instruction.

As mentioned above, my students are Vietnamese adults who either live in big cities in Vietnam or in other countries around the world. After the online pronunciation course, most students reported that they were satisfied with the course and they felt more confident speaking English.

Based on the students' evaluations of the course, most of them agree that online pronunciation learning brings convenience and saves them a great deal of time on traveling. They also show positive attitude towards individual corrective feedback, which is one of the factors to keep them engaged during the lesson. Additionally, group-work helps them feel more comfortable to practice the targeted pronunciation feature in smaller groups. Some students note that "It is intimidating when I think about speaking in front of many other students. Working with smaller groups of one or two students makes me feel much better". Overall, if lessons are

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designed to promote maximum interaction among class members, online learning will be more effective.

Conclusion

Following the developments of online education in the 21st century, distance pronunciation teaching is a very promising way to connect teachers and learners from different parts of the world. Although it entails technological problems and might require additional work for both teachers and students, online pronunciation instruction is quite convenient and saves a great deal of time. As for teachers, it could be a great way for them to continue working after retirement or spend more time with their children while working from home. This article focuses on how to implement a successful online pronunciation classroom using video-based platforms. Overall, if teachers invest time into planning their lessons accordingly, their students will surely stay engaged and make progress during the online course.

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