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## **LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION TEACHING AND LEARNING: A PRELIMINARY STUDY IN THE VIETNAMESE CONTEXT**

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In a context where many L2 teachers follow their intuition in making decisions related to pronunciation teaching (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Levis, 2005), an insight into the learner's view of what is happening in the classroom might help teachers become better informed so as to make better choices. The study aims to find out what Vietnamese adult learners think about the current teaching and learning of English pronunciation. 38 learners participated in semi-structured interviews which centered around issues related to their learning targets, learning difficulties as well as their expectations for and evaluations of the pronunciation instruction available to them. Findings reveal that learners aimed at achieving a native like accent, which was considered a proof of success in learning. They also tended to have similar problems in acquiring the phonological features of English. Although almost all of them highly valued the role of instruction, many were not satisfied with the current teaching practices and called for more effective instruction with regards to focus, type of classroom activities and availability of feedback. The study's findings and implications are expected to help curriculum designers and teachers determine what to teach and how to teach it for better outcomes.

### **INTRODUCTION**

English teaching in Vietnam has undergone great changes since September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008 when the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project was approved by the Ministry of Education and Training. A budget of 9,400 billion VND would be spent on reforming language teaching and learning. Authorities declared that this project would help Vietnamese young citizens to gain the ability to use a foreign language independently and confidently for communication, work or study in a multilingual and multicultural environment ("National Foreign Languages 2020 Project," n.d.).

Since the launch of the project, English teaching has experienced massive reforms in all aspects (curriculum design, teacher training and re-training, textbook writing), at all levels and in all types of educational institution (Hoang, 2010). New policies derived from the project require Vietnamese teachers of English to prove that they are linguistically qualified for the job, otherwise they will have to be retrained, and Vietnamese students to demonstrate that they can use English satisfactorily in order to obtain their degrees. Standardized tests such as IELTS, FCE and CAE are commonly used for those two purposes. Because the international testing systems assess language users in four skills, including speaking and listening, pronunciation is no longer a "neglected aspect" (Alghazo, 2015) in English language teaching.

Disappointingly, such huge investments have not produced expected outcomes. At the end of 2016, Minister of Education and Training Phung Xuan Nha admitted that Project 2020 had not achieved its targets (Vo & Hoai, 2016). Long-lasting problems related to teacher quality and learning

outcomes remain unsolved. Specifically in the field of pronunciation, Vietnamese accented English is still considered unintelligible for native English speaking listeners and even for Vietnamese listeners (Cunningham, 2009, 2013). The current study aims to examine the current teaching of English pronunciation in Vietnam in the hope to understand why little improvement has been made after eight years under reformation.

Recently, greater research interest has been shown in L2 pronunciation teaching and learning; however, little has been done from the learner's perspective. Alghazo (2015) claims that "one dimension of pronunciation teaching which has received hardly any attention to date is that of learner cognitions or beliefs about the way teachers of L2 pronunciation should approach this sub-skill" (p.63). The present study aims to address this gap, looking at the current teaching practices from the point of view of the learners.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Learning goals**

When the goals of English teaching and learning are taken into account, teachers, and probably learners have to make a choice between two paradigms: nativeness or intelligibility. The nativeness principle holds that learners should aim and are able to achieve native-like pronunciation (Levis, 2005). However, this approach to the selection of a model is intuitive rather than empirical, and can be based on sociocultural, political or market-driven choices (Setter, 2008). Therefore, it has been considered unrealistic, unnecessary, and undesirable to both teachers and learners (Ketabi & Saeb, 2015; Moghaddam, Nasiri, Zarea, & Sepehrinia, 2012; Murphy, 2014).

Since the 1990s, the emergence of English as an international language has commanded that the goals of pronunciation teaching and learning be reconsidered; therefore, the intelligibility principle has received more attention. This principle postulates that L2 speakers just need to be understandable, communication can be successful when their accents are noticeable or even strong, and there is no clear correlation between accent and understanding (Munro & Derwing, 1995).

The recommendation that intelligibility be the target of L2 pronunciation teaching and learning does not necessarily mean that a native-like accent should never be the goal of learners. First, what accent to aim at should be the choice of the individual learners, not the teachers, the school or the government (Setter, 2008). Second, there is nothing wrong if learners themselves aim to achieve native-like pronunciation, as this goal may lead to greater learning motivation. Third, learners' needs may differ depending on the contexts in which they communicate, so teaching goals should also vary accordingly (Rogerson-Revell, 2011). The current study attempts to identify what Vietnamese learners want to achieve in learning English pronunciation as this information will help teachers determine their approach to teaching.

### **Potential learning difficulties**

Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) realize that many second language learners have major difficulties with pronunciation even after a long time of learning the language. Researchers have attempted to predict and analyse areas of difficulty by means of contrastive analysis or error analysis. Several studies have been conducted on common problems Vietnamese learners of English face in learning pronunciation. Ha (2005)'s error analysis reveals that Vietnamese learners often omit *l*, *dʒ*, *r*, *s*, *i*, *ei*, and *k* in medial positions and *z*, *s*, *t*, *v*, *ks*, and *dʒ* in final positions but tend to add *s* and *z* at the end of a syllable or a word. Moreover, they find it difficult to produce some English sounds and

thus replace them with existing Vietnamese sounds. Some typical examples of this phenomenon are the English *f* and the Vietnamese *t* or *tr*, the English *ð* and *θ* and the corresponding Vietnamese *z* or *d* and *s* or *t*. Some other works specifically focus on how Vietnamese learners deal with final consonants and final consonant clusters (N. Nguyen, 2002; T. H. Nguyen, 2002; Osburne, 1996). In addition, Nguyen (1998) attempted to validate the claim that English sounds made by Vietnamese learners are too short, investigating learners' omission of final sounds and distinction of long and short vowels.

It is noticeable that researchers have analysed data obtained from their own knowledge of the L1 and from their observations of learners' performance; very few empirical studies have been conducted from learners' perspectives to identify the struggles they actually undergo. Only when we are informed by both the researchers / teachers and the learners about potential difficulties will we be able to plan for more effective learning.

### **Teaching English pronunciation in the classroom**

Even when L2 teachers are well aware of the importance of integrating pronunciation into the language classroom, they still find it formidable to teach it as "there is no agreed upon system of deciding what to teach, and when and how to do it" (Darcy, Ewert, & Lidster, 2012). The integrative approach imposes high demands on the design of pronunciation syllabi and lessons, which may also intimidate the teachers. Celce-Murcia et al. (2010)'s propose a communicative framework in which attention is gradually shifted from an initial focus on form towards incorporating more meaning in a sequence of activities, with the provision of corrective feedback. In addition, in a communicative classroom, the teacher should work as a pronunciation coach who assists learners by supplying information, giving models from time to time, offering suggestions and constructive feedback about performance, and providing practice opportunities and encouragement (Morley, 1991).

In the new era of language teaching when pronunciation has become an integral part of not only the whole curriculum but also every single lesson, modern techniques and activities have been devised in the hope to bring more success in teaching and learning L2 pronunciation. However, Lear (2011) admits that "there is a significant disparity between learner and teacher beliefs about the use of language learning activities" (p.131). While a large body of research has been done from the point of view of teachers, learners have rarely been asked for their opinions about what activities should be used or what they find useful. The present study, hence, will be focusing on this issue.

## **THE PRESENT STUDY**

### **Research questions**

1. What do Vietnamese learners aim to achieve in learning English pronunciation?
2. What difficulties do they encounter in learning pronunciation?
3. What are their perceptions of the current pronunciation teaching?

### **Participants**

38 adult learners aged 17 and above were recruited on a voluntary basis from two institutions: Banking University of Ho Chi Minh City (BUH) and Vietnam-USA English Centers (VUS). Those from BUH all majored in English while their counterparts from VUS were more diverse. The

participants were categorized into three groups (BUH1, BUH2, and VUS) with background information summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participants' background*

Group	N	Educational level			English proficiency	Amount of previous pronunciation instruction
		<i>1<sup>st</sup> year</i>	<i>2<sup>nd</sup> year</i>	<i>High school</i>		
BUH1	18	18	0	0	Intermediate	None
BUH2	10	0	10	0	Upper-Intermediate	1 course of 45 hours
VUS	10	2	4	4	Intermediate	Varied

**Procedure**

Invitations to join the study were sent to BUH students and those interested contacted me to set appointments. On the other hand, VUS learners were approached individually before their class meetings or during break times. The interviews, which were conducted in Vietnamese, lasted from 4 to 10 minutes, and were recorded with the participants' approvals. The interviews were semi-structured with a couple of questions dedicated to each research problem. In addressing the last problem regarding learners' perceptions of the current pronunciation teaching, one of the questions used was adjusted to match the amount and type of previous instruction each group received. (For a complete record of the interview questions, see the Appendix.)

**RESULTS**

**Learning goals**

Unsurprisingly, when asked whether they would like to be mistaken as native speakers of English, a vast majority of participants (31 out of 38) gave a positive answer; only three responded negatively. Two learners from group BUH1 said they would say both Yes and No, one student from group BUH2 expressed indifference, and the participant from group VUS had no idea at all. The participants gave very similar explanations. Proof of great achievements, competence and hard work and pride in oneself for success in learning were the reasons why most learners would love to have native-like accents. In contrast, the remaining participants claimed that they did not feel right and just wanted to be themselves.

Regarding which accent of English should be considered the model for learning, 23 participants stated a preference for American English while 13 voted for British English. The same pattern was found across the three groups. Two learners, however, answered that it did not matter as to which model should be followed and that they preferred whatever accent that was easier to listen to. The results are illustrated in Figure 1.

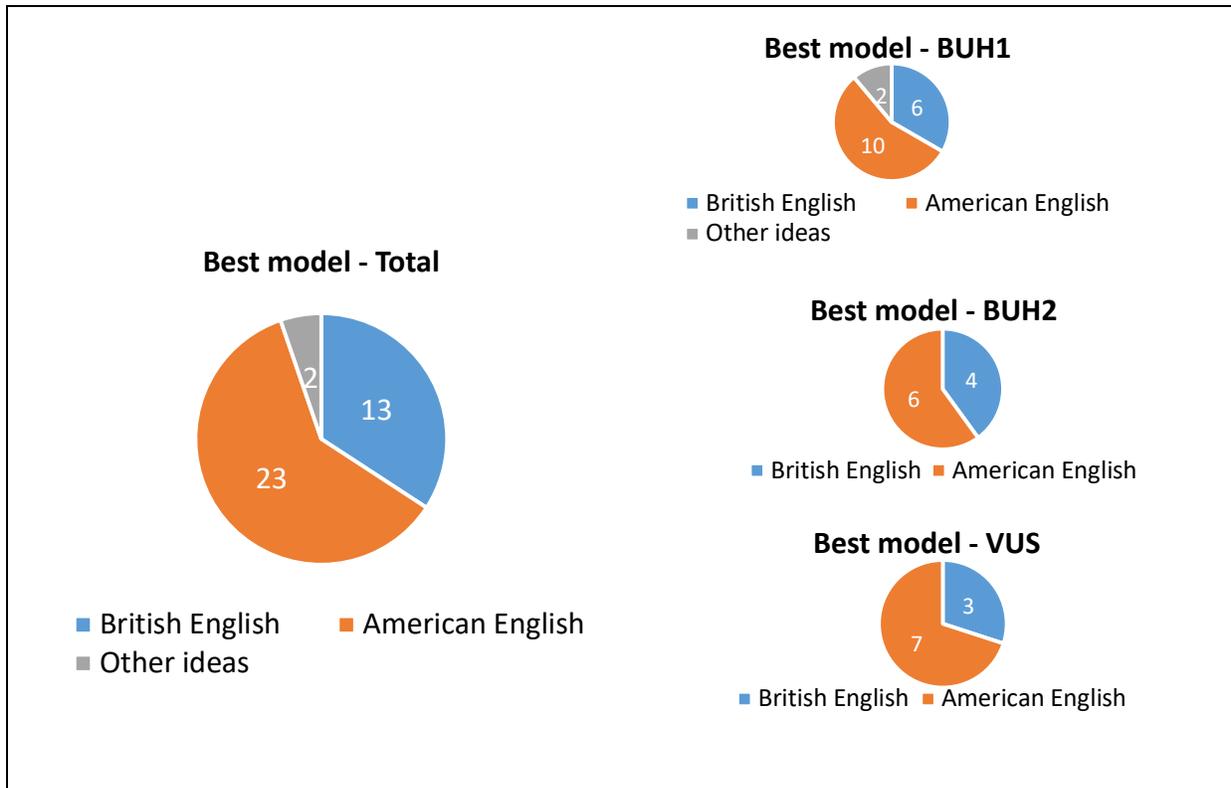


Figure 1. Best model of English

The participants provided a number of reasons for their choices, among which ease of listening and production was the most common. For those in favor of the British accent, two other important issues were also identified: it was the standard while other accents were not, and it was the origin of the English language. Interestingly, one student explained that this accent should be the model because it was more difficult and thus was worth learning. The details are shown in Figure 2.

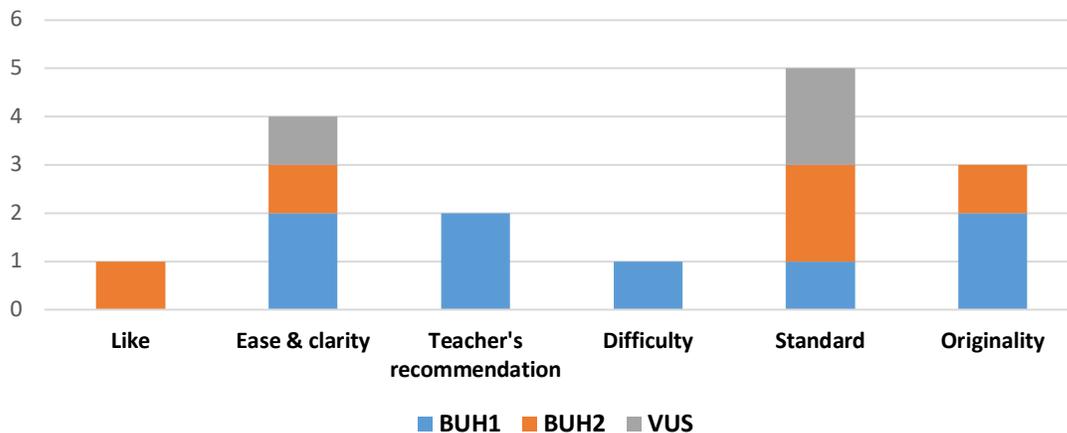


Figure 2. Reasons for choosing British English

As regard the preference for the American accent, the majority of participants explained that it was easier to learn. The second most common reason was that it was more popularly used in communication, textbooks, and movies. Two participants gave quite personal opinions, being that

the accent sounded more beautiful, and that their family lived in the US. A complete record of the data is presented in Figure 3.

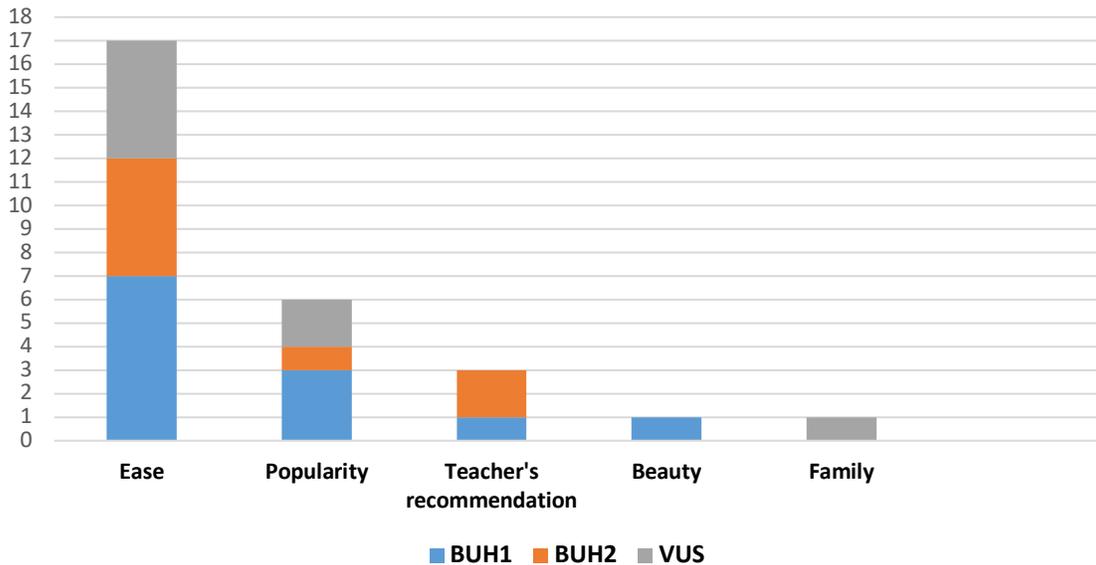


Figure 3. Reasons for choosing American English

**Learning difficulties**

The participants mentioned a variety of difficulties which were grouped into four categories: the first two consisted of issues pertaining to the types of phonological features (segmental vs suprasegmental), the third one included issues related to instruction and the last one comprised other problems. Table 2 lists the difficulties and the number of times they were mentioned by the participants. In general, more segmental problems were named than suprasegmental ones. However, when individual types of problem are considered, students seemed to have more difficulties in learning stress and intonation than in other aspects. It is notable that the majority of participants who reported having this type of problem belonged to group BUH1, who had not had any formal instruction by the time of the study. This group also showed concerns in more areas of pronunciation than the other two groups, which may be due to the same reason.

Table 2

*Learning difficulties*

<b>Problem</b>		<b>BUH1</b>	<b>BUH2</b>	<b>VUS</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Supra-segmental</b>	Stress & Intonation	7	3	1	11
	Connected speech	2	0	0	2
<b>Segmental</b>	Final sounds	3	2	2	7
	Confusing sounds	1	3	2	6
	Different inventories of sounds	2	0	1	3
	Vowels	1	1	0	2
	Silenced sounds	0	1	0	1
<b>Instruction</b>	Lack of knowledge of phonetic transcription	2	0	1	3
	Lack of corrective feedback	1	0	1	2
<b>Others</b>	Existence of many native accents	2	0	0	2
	Pronunciation of sentences	1	1	0	2
	Effects of regional Vietnamese accents	2	0	0	2
	Control of articulators	1	0	0	1

Not many participants were able to explain why they encountered the problems; however, a number of issues did come up. They are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

*Possible causes of learning difficulties*

<b>Difficulty</b>		<b>Possible cause</b>
<b>Supra-segmental</b>	Stress & Intonation	Too many patterns Differences between English and Vietnamese No understanding of stress placement Lack of feedback Bad habits Failure to use in real life despite awareness of rules
	Connected speech	Unfamiliarity
<b>Segmental</b>	Final sounds	Non-existence in Vietnamese Unnatural (exaggerated) production of final sounds Awareness of rules but lack of automaticity or habits
	Confusing sounds	Inability to perceive and produce them differently correctly
	Different inventories of sounds	Problems with sounds not existing in Vietnamese
	Vowels	Differences between English and Vietnamese vowels
	Silenced sounds (e.g. <i>hour</i> , <i>receipt</i> )	Failure to remember all cases
<b>Instruction</b>	Lack of knowledge of phonetic transcription	No instruction available in school
	Lack of corrective feedback	(No further comments)
<b>Others</b>	Existence of many native accents	Confusion
	Pronunciation of sentences	Distraction by effort to produce long utterances Difficulty in controlling articulators
	Effects of regional Vietnamese accents	Heavy impact on production of English speech
	Control of articulators	(No further comments)

**Evaluations and expectations of the current teaching**

When asked whether taking a pronunciation course at school was beneficial, 37 participants responded positively and identified various benefits of receiving instruction. The three groups shared some opinions of the values of pronunciation training, especially its effect on improving understanding and communication. More importantly, group BUH2 insisted that they had made a

lot of improvements after taking the course. Table 4 lists all the benefits that the participants mentioned and indicates by which group each benefit was perceived.

Table 4

*Benefits of taking a pronunciation course*

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>BUH1</b>	<b>BUH2</b>	<b>VUS</b>
Lack of practice during high school; the need for more practice	X		X
More focus on pronunciation		X	X
Improvements in speaking skills			X
Improvements in pronunciation skills	X		
Improvements in comprehension and communication	X	X	X
Difficulty in self-study	X		
Biggest weakness of Vietnamese learners	X		

Finally, the participants were asked for their views of the teaching practices they were experiencing or were about to do so. For group BUH1, who had not taken the compulsory pronunciation training course, the question was: *What do you expect the teachers to teach and how do you expect them to teach it?* They seemed to have high expectations of the teachers when looking for their standard pronunciation, use of a variety of activities and exercises and provision of corrective feedback. They would like to learn about the IPA, the contrast between Vietnamese and English sounds and different accents of English. They also expected their teachers to motivate them to learn and help them get rid of their Vietnamese regional accents.

For group BUH2, who had already taken the course, the question was: *“What recommendations would you make to the course you have taken?”* Their responses, to some extent, reveal the problems they encountered during the course. First, despite an intensive focus on pronunciation, instruction delivered over a relatively short period of time (nine weeks) and only once a week was not enough for them to make significant improvements. In fact, they reported that there were too many things to learn in such a short course. Second, they suggested that more practice be given outside class. Finally, they expected to be inspired more by the teachers and to have contact with native speakers.

The conversations with the participants in group VUS brought even more diverse responses when I encouraged them to talk about what was happening in their classes as regards pronunciation teaching. Some common issues arose from their comments. First, they shared with the other two groups the same concern about their non-native teachers' accents. Second, pronunciation seemed to receive little attention from the teachers, several of whom were reported to skip the pronunciation activities in the textbook. As a result, some learners claimed that they did not have any activities either in class or at home for practice and many others were even confused between learning speaking and learning pronunciation.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Learning goals**

Findings show that Vietnamese learners of English still aim at achieving native-like accents. In this case, the nativeness principle seems to dominate the current English teaching and learning in Vietnam. More importantly, in a context where learners still consider native-like pronunciation a proof of language competence and success in learning, this goal may become a burden for both the teachers and learners. In addition, identity appears to have no effect on learning as only two students expressed the fear of losing their identity.

It is interesting to find that, in aiming for nativeness, these learners preferred an American accent to a British accent as a model for learning. However, a closer look at the reasons for such a selection will confirm Setter (2008)'s assumption that it is a result of sociocultural, political and market-driven choices. Some participants did explain that at the present time, an American accent is needed to get a job, that many textbooks available are in American English, and that there are a lot of American movies on TV and the Internet.

### **Learning difficulties**

Findings reveal that learners' problems range from issues related to the subject itself and learners' background to external factors such as instruction. The long-existing debate over what aspect to teach, segmentals or suprasegmentals, seems to remain inconclusive in this context, as the participants reported having difficulties in both areas. Moreover, instruction seemed to have certain effects on their learning as groups BUH2 and VUS altogether raised fewer issues than group BUH1. Especially, group BUH2, who had already received formal training in pronunciation, did not face the instruction-related issues as did the other two groups.

Further discussion on the causes of learning difficulties has brought in several interesting insights. First, L1 transfer plays some role in the acquisition of L2 and influences learners' performance (Navehebrahim, 2012; Thomas, 2013). In this case, it is a source of learning difficulties. Second, these learners appeared to be lacking in necessary skills such as listening (Barreiro, 2002; Couper, 2011; Rogerson-Revell, 2011), discrimination (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Kissling, 2014), and even motor skills (Hockett, 1950). Finally, the fact that learners could not remember to pronounce final sounds or use intonation appropriately in spontaneous speech contexts despite an awareness of the rules may indicate that there was conscious learning (Krashen, 1982) but not automaticity.

### **Evaluations and expectations of the current teaching**

It is remarkable that the contexts in which the three groups perceived the value of instruction were different due to the availability of instruction as well as the manner in which it was conducted. Group BUH1 had not had any training, so the benefits that were named were mostly assumed while those recognized by group BUH2 were ones they actually received after completing the course. In another context, learners from VUS had received little instruction due to the approach their teachers used to integrate pronunciation into their classrooms. Interestingly, despite the different contexts, these learners highly valued and thus requested for more instruction.

Shared beliefs can also be seen from the results of the last questions. First, teachers were expected to have very good pronunciation and native speakers were still considered good models. Second, there seemed to be not enough time for them to learn and practice in class. Finally, teachers needed to motivate learners through a variety of tasks and activities as well as provide corrective feedback.

The biggest difference is in the area of teaching contents, which, once again, may be due to the amount of and the way in which instruction was given.

## CONCLUSION

The present study has shown that Vietnamese adult learners of English desire to obtain native-like pronunciation. In learning the new phonological system, they often encounter problems with stress and intonation as well as final sounds. Instruction is perceived to be highly useful, but current teaching practices have not met their expectations in terms of the teacher's accent, length and focus of instruction, types of activities used and provision of feedback.

In addition, this research also has a number of implications for future improvements in the current teaching and learning of English pronunciation in Vietnam. First, it is vital that teachers themselves be cognizant of the intelligibility principle, consider it the new target for teaching and then adjust their teaching approach to suit it. Murphy (2014) claims that it is unfair and unethical for teacher to make their learners believe that they will ever be able to achieve native-like pronunciation. So, teachers also need to make learners aware of a more realistic and achievable goal for learning: being intelligible. This awareness will help lessen the burden and pressure placed on both teachers and learners and foster learners' confidence so that they can get better outcomes.

Second, learners have a variety of difficulties in learning pronunciation, one of which is the failure to perform effectively in spontaneous or real life situations despite their knowledge of the forms and success performance in classroom activities. What else is needed to bridge the gap between conscious learning and automaticity? This question remains an ever-important mission for L2 researchers and teachers.

Third, from learners' perspectives, pronunciation instruction is important not only because it helps to improve their pronunciation. "Students may ... see a pronunciation course as valuable for various reasons, including increased awareness, improved listening skills, motivation, and perceived improvement" (Henrichsen & Stephens, 2015, p. 202). L2 teachers, therefore, need to be aware of the many benefits of instruction in order to gain more confidence and stop neglecting it in their classrooms.

Fourth, learners' needs are important as they will define their learning targets, shape their motivation and determine whether or not learning will sustain outside class. Teachers, therefore, ought to be aware of their needs and provide support accordingly for successful learning to happen.

Finally, findings show that learners, without any knowledge of language learning or teaching methodology, know quite clearly what problems they are facing and what they need for improvement. Therefore, it is worth involving students in planning, delivering and evaluating pronunciation lessons.

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### APPENDIX – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Would you like to be mistaken for a native speaker? Why?
2. What do you think is the best English speaker pronunciation model? Why?
3. Do you have any difficulties in learning English pronunciation? If yes, what are they?
4. What may be the cause of those problems?
5. Do you think taking a pronunciation course is beneficial?
6.
  - a. What do you expect the teachers to teach and how do you expect them to teach it?
  - b. What recommendations would you make to the course you have taken?
  - c. What do you think about the way pronunciation is being taught in class?