

Improving Students' Fluent And Natural English Speech

Phan Thi Huong

ABSTRACT

To speak the target language fluently and naturally is a big aim of any learner in a language learning course. It is of great concern for teachers as how to help students achieve this. This paper is intended at sharing some thoughts about improving fluent and natural English speech for English majors at Vinh University in Vietnam. The first part presents an introduction of fluent and natural English speech as a requirement for English-major students in Vietnam and a brief discussion of reasons why it is a challenge for them. Provided in the second part are some activities the author has used to get her first-year English majors practice word stress, sentence stress, intonation, linking sounds, short forms, weak forms so as to improve their English speech. The paper is beneficial to teachers as well as English-major students who teach and learn English at tertiary level. Also, the practical activities adapted in the paper can be of help to general EFL learners who wish to self-study to improve their English speech.

Key words : fluent and natural speech, pronunciation, word stress, sentence stress, intonation, linking sounds, short forms, weak forms

I. Introduction

1.1. A requirement for fluent and natural English speech

In the pace of globalization and integration, it has become an increasing demand for an ASEAN citizen to be able to speak a foreign language in order to take a more active part in the development of this community. In order to enhance the innovation of teaching and learning foreign languages, Vietnam has put forward the National Project "Teaching and learning of foreign languages in the national education system phase 2008 – 2020". The overall goal of the Project is "Renovating

thoroughly the tasks of teaching and learning foreign languages within the national educational system".

To fulfill the tasks of the renovation, The Ministry of Education and Training started to implement National Foreign Language 2020 Project in 2010. One of the expectations of this Project is that by 2020 a majority of young people in Vietnam will be able to use a foreign language, especially English, confidently in their study, daily communication, and work in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment. English major students graduating from university are expected to achieve the fifth-highest (C1)

level of English according to the Vietnamese Language Proficiency Framework, which is comprised of 6 levels compatible with the Common European Framework.

The fifth level of English speaking skills requires English majors to have the capacity to express themselves smoothly with no difficulty in finding words and use the language flexibly and effectively to serve social, academic and professional purposes. The specific requirements for English pronunciation of the fifth level is that the speakers can (i) vary intonation and place sentence stress correctly to express the subtle nuances of meaning; and, (ii) express themselves fluently and naturally.

Overall, correct stress, correct intonation, and fluent and natural speech are the assessment criteria for success at fifth level for English majors.

1.2 Why is it a challenge for students to speak fluent and natural English speech?

Many English learners, including university students majoring in English, encounter difficulties in speaking English fluently and naturally. In the second term of the academic year 2014-2015, the author had two Basic Speaking classes for 75 freshmen of English at Vinh University. To the author's observation, most of the students did not speak fluently and naturally. This is supported by the result of a quick survey in which 94.6% of the students judged their English speech as influent and unnatural. The first and foremost reason, according to 81.3% students, is that speaking skills do not receive enough emphasis in the

English syllabus at high schools. High schools tend to focus more on grammar practice and paragraph-level writing. Even when high-school students are assigned tasks of speaking some English, accuracy in grammar is of more concern than fluency or accuracy in stress and intonation. Since students do not have enough practice with English pronunciation at high school, a number of them mispronounce a great deal of words. The second reason, for 69 out of 75 students (accounting for 92%), is that they did not notice English of natural speech involves typical characteristics such as stresses and intonations, strong forms and weak forms of words, short forms of words, and linking sounds. Although some students may have heard of these characteristics of natural speech, these were not explicitly explained to them. Therefore it is a challenge for them to speak fluently and naturally.

2. What Can Be Done

2.1 Practice English pronunciation

In order to help students meet the requirement of fluent and natural English speech, teachers need to help them in the process of making their English sound natural. Providing students with activities for them to practice pronunciation everyday is one big thing teachers can do as practice on pronunciation helps guarantee that students are constantly practicing the goal of fluent and natural English speech.

Bearing that thought in mind, the author used a number of activities with two speaking classes for first-year English majors (75 students

in total) in their second term at Vinh University with an aim to get them practice English pronunciation so as to gradually achieve fluent and natural speech. This section presents some of these activities.

2.1.1 Practice word stress

Learning word stress is one of the necessary activities for improving pronunciation.

Word stress in English is very important. In English words of two syllables or more, there is always a syllable that receives stress. An important factor that can help better pronunciation of a single word is to count the syllables in the word. Below are examples of activities to practice word stress. (Edited from Scanlon : 76)

Example :

Listen and repeat these words. Then write the number of syllables in each word.

Alive	.....	Hurt	.....
Amazingly	.....	Happily	.....
Distance	.....	Remember	.....
Effective	.....	Suddenly	.....
Wonderful	.....	Renovation	.....

It is also significant to learn which of these syllables is pronounced longer and louder than the others.

Example :

Listen and circle the stressed syllable in each word. Then say the words

hos . pit . al	sud . den . ly
com . plete . ly	at . ti . tude
se . cret	con . troll
ef . fec . tive . ly	un . hap . py
con . ver . sa . tion	in . te . grate . ted

A list of words with the same number of syllables and the same stressed syllable can help learners practice and learn them more quickly. For example, the teacher can give the students a list of random words and ask them to identify their stress pattern and put the words in the correct groups according to their pattern, and then practice.

Example :

Put the following words in the correct groups according to their stress pattern. Practice saying the words.

souvenir	festival	Visa	excursion	pollution	career	heritage
polymer	holiday	bookstore	comedy	motorbike	bicycle	waiter
resort	restaurant	backpack	delicious	wonderful	potato	beautiful
money	jacket	attractive	educate	expensive	brochure	pagoda
talkative	tradition	solution	quality	divorce	sunrise	cooker

o0	0o	o0o	0oo
resort	money	solution	quality
...

2.1.2 Practice sentence stress

Learning and practicing sentence stress assist with improving natural speech as it can help learners say the sentence with natural rhythm, which contributes to fluent and natural speech. In an English sentence, certain words are pronounced louder and longer than other words. These louder and longer words are called sentence stresses. It is necessary to teach the students that "vocabulary words" or "content words" that give the most information about the thing being talked about are usually stressed. They are mainly nouns, main verbs, adverbs, and adjectives. Practice on sentence stress can be done in class. The teacher can give students some sentences with content words underlined and ask them to say the sentences.

Example :

Say the sentences, stressing the underlined words.

1. He bought a cup and some nuts.
2. He bought a cup, some nuts, some honey and a brush.
3. Did your uncle buy a bus company and a newspaper?
4. What a marvelous photograph!
5. What a fantastic guitar!
6. Life is what you make of it.
7. Be the change you want to see in the world.
8. That zoo was amazing.
9. She's got a lovely dress.

10. Thank you for lending me your car.

For students of higher levels, the teacher can ask students to decide and underlie the words that should receive stress. The teacher then can play a tape or read for the students to listen, check and repeat.

Example : (Taken from Scanlon:173)

Circle the content word in these proverbs.

Then listen and check the stress. Listen again and practice the proverbs.

1. To learn is to change.

2. A change is as good as a rest.

3. Change your thoughts, and you change the world.

4. To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.

5. When the music changes, so does the dance.

6. You change your life by changing your heart.

Using limericks is also a great activity to practice sentence stress. A limerick is a short poem with five lines, which are often funny or nonsensical. All that the teacher needs to do is to provide the students with a limerick, which can be easily taken from the Internet, and have them discuss which words need to be stressed before getting them practice reading the limerick. To the author's observation, the students found it very interesting reading a limerick like the one by Edward Lear in the example below.

Example : I KNEW a MAN whose NAME was SHAW.

He ATE a ROCK and BROKE his JAW.

WHAT do you THINK?

He SAID, with a WINK.

PerHAPS it's BAD to EAT them RAW.

2.1.3 Practice saying short forms and weak forms of words

To get used to natural speech, in addition to word stress and sentence stress, students also need to practice short forms and weak forms of words. In spoken English, full forms of phrases such as "I am", "I have done", "You had better" or "she would" are rarely heard. Instead, short forms like "I'm", "I've done", "You'd better" or "she'd" are frequently used. As mentioned above, in fast natural speech "vocabulary words" are usually pronounced more loudly and clearly, while grammar words between them such as prepositions, conjunctions or auxiliary verbs are often pronounced in lower voice as they do not often give much information. For example, in most cases "at" is not stressed in a sentence, and it sounds more like "ert". Below are examples of weak forms of words.

- but is pronounced in weak form /bət/ (My friend is very pretty, but is not enough intelligent)

- for is often pronounced in weak form /fə/ when it does not appear at the end of the sentence (She's looking for a job)

- the is pronounced in weak form /ðə/ it stands before a consonant (The police arrested the man yesterday)

- does is pronounced in weak form /

dəz/ except for emphasis (Does he work as an engineer?)

- that is pronounced in weak form /ðət/ in that clauses (I think that we should practice more) Learning short forms and weak forms and practicing saying them in sentences can help make sure that students are speaking English more fluently and naturally.

2.1.4 Practice linking sounds

As connected words are common in natural speech, students should learn and practice linking sounds to achieve faster and more fluent speech. In English, the pronunciation of two words can run together like one word when a consonant (b, c, d, f, etc.) at the end of one word joins with a vowel (a, e, i, o, etc.) at the beginning of another word that follows. For example, the words "between us" when spoken at natural speed can sound like "be-twee-nus", "isn't it" when spoken at natural speed can sound like "isn tit", "she lives in" like "she live sin", etc. An activity teachers can use to teach linking sounds is to ask students to listen and mark the links on a script of single sentences or short dialogue/talk, then repeat.

Example :

Listen to the sentences. Show the linked consonant and vowel sounds. Practice linking sounds. (Taken from Scanlon:153)

1. I think a lot of people lie about their age.
2. Is it OK to keep money that you find in the street?

3. About a quarter of the students in the class cheated on the test.

4. Because of the Internet, musicians and bands don't make as much money.

5. In our English class, it's not OK to use an article from the Internet without giving credit.

Sometimes, to make a change, teachers can have students listen to an easy English song, learn the words and practice singing the song. Songs are great material for students to practice linking sounds, and also to change the atmosphere in the classroom.

Example :

Listen to this song and mark the linked sounds. Then listen again and sing the song together.

The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round. The wheels on the bus go round and round, all through the town. The wipers on the bus go swish, swish, swish. The wipers on the bus go swish, swish, swish, all through the town. The door on the bus goes open and shut, open and shut, open and shut. The door on the bus goes open and shut, all through the town. The babies on the bus go "wah wah wah, wah wah wah". The mommies on the bus say "I love you, I love you, I love you". The daddies on the bus say "I love you, too", all through the town.

2.1.5 Practice intonation

English intonation plays an important role in oral communication. Arnold, E. (1978:46)

states that “incorrect intonation may seriously hamper communication at any levels”. Students of English therefore need to learn and practice intonation.

English is said to be a musical language. That is, English sentences are not spoken at the same pitch. Rather, they are spoken by native speakers with rising or falling tone. The teacher can start by providing students with basic knowledge of intonation such as : (1) statement, exclamations, imperative statements, requests and orders have a falling tone at the end; (2) WH-questions beginning with who, what, why have a falling tone at the end; (3) yes-no questions usually have a raising tone; (4) exclamations have a falling tone; (5) and tag questions seeking or expecting confirmation have a falling tone. It is important that students understand that practicing intonation patterns again and again is necessary to improve students’ speaking fluency and to make their speech sound natural. The following is an activity for practicing intonation.

Example :

Work in pairs. Practice the following dialogue with appropriate intonation.

A : Waiter! Waiter! There's a fly in my soup!

B : A fly in your soup? What's it doing there?

A : I have no idea.

B : Well, what do you want me to do about it?

A : I want you to come and get it out.

B : All right. Calm down. I'll be there in a few minutes.

By the end of the semester, the author conducted a quick survey to see how the students reacted to these activities. The activities proved to have positive effects on the students’ pronunciation improvement when 77.33% of the students said that their pronunciation had improved and 61.3% judged their English speech as fairly fluent and natural. Many of them (78.6%) also gave encouraging feedbacks saying that the teacher should continue to use these activities in the next term.

2.2 What else can students do?

2.2.1 Create English language environment for natural language learning

A good environment for learners of English to practice the target language is one of the factors contributing to their learning process. As Vietnamese students of English in the North Central provinces of Vietnam learn English as a foreign language, they do not have a natural language environment, teachers and students alike need to create one. It is necessary that the students make good use of their time in the classroom to speak to their friends and teachers in the target language. Rules for speaking in the target language need to be set and maintained during class hours.

Also, outside classroom activities such as English Speaking Zone or English speaking picnics are wonderful tools for setting up an English language environment. The Foreign Languages Department of Vinh University has an English Speaking Zone for all the students to come and speak English, sharing matters of their interests and exchanging learning

experiences. To our observation, this is a place where the students can speak English in a natural, unstructured manner. Students can benefit a lot from the type of learning that takes place “without explanation or grading, and without correction of errors” (Cook, 2003:35).

2.2.2 Self-study

Practicing speaking skills in class, however, is insufficient due to time limits. In order to improve speaking fluency and natural speech, students need to practice speaking on their own at home or outside classroom with friends and any foreigner they had a chance to meet.

In addition to practicing speaking, students should also study listening skills. The more they listen, the more chances they have at becoming familiar with different voices and natural speech of spoken English. Also, students can listen, imitate and record their own voice, for imitation is considered the key to pronunciation improvement. Students are encouraged to listen and imitate single sentences with stressed words and intonation as many times as necessary until they are satisfied with their voice. The students can also periodically record their own voice reading a passage or role-playing a conversation with their friend(s). A cassette recorder, a computer and microphone or a mobile phone can help them record their voice, so that they can listen again and check whether they can naturally produce sentences with stress and intonation like a native speaker.

Additionally, students need to practice reading skills. By reading extensively in the target language, they are exposed to a wider range of vocabulary and structures, and are more likely to acquire vocabulary and structures, which later can be reproduced in their speech.

2.2.3 Buy a good dictionary

A good dictionary is beneficial in the study of a foreign language. A dictionary is of great help to students when they need to check the pronunciation of words of which they are not sure. An electronic dictionary that speaks is ideal as they can listen to the pronunciation and repeat it.

3. Conclusion

It is not an easy task to achieve fluent and natural English speech when learning it as a foreign language in a non-native language environment, yet it is not an impossible mission for English majors. To meet the requirements of the fifth level of English in terms of speaking ability when graduating from university, English majors are required to have extensive practice to improve speaking skill. The activities and suggestions presented in this paper can be used by teachers to assist in this task.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to send her special thanks to the first-year English majors in two Basic Speaking classes that she taught in the academic year 2014-2015 at Vinh University

for helping the author identify problems concerning their English speech, and for giving feedbacks on the activities the author used in their speaking classes. Also, the author is grateful to Amy Jammeh, U.S. Department of State Senior English Language Fellow who was teaching at The Foreign Languages Department, Vinh University during the academic year 2014-2015, for proofreading the first draft of this paper.

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