Using Homophone Games To Improve Pronunciation Performance For Non-English Majors

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Abstract - Improving English pronunciation is a crucial issue for any learners of English, including Vietnamese students. However, developing students' pronunciation, especially non-English majors in a non-native country like Vietnam, faces many difficulties, one of which is insufficient time devoted to in-class pronunciation activities due to the neglect of pronunciation aspects in English teaching and examination systems. The study aims to improve non-English majors' pronunciation performance in a regional teacher education university in Vietnam through the use of homophone games as well as to assess the impact of homophone games on the pronunciation performance of non-English majors. 40 students from the Faculty of Mathematics in the university were invited to participate in this two-month experimental research. An English pronunciation test before and after the intervention was given to collect data about students' initial and final level of pronunciation performance. A questionnaire was distributed to the 20 students in the experimental group as a subordinate research instrument for the investigation of students' attitudes towards homophone games. The findings show that the application of homophone games has greatly supported the process of improving students' pronunciation skills and students' feedback regarding the use of homophone games is relatively positive. These results may encourage instructors of English as a foreign/ second language to make greater efforts to design and introduce homophone games as well as other pronunciation activities for the improvement of this fundamental aspect.

Index Terms - homophone games, pronunciation performance, pronunciation activities

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English is widely regarded as a global language with the largest number of users thanks to its coverage in many fields such as health, business, technology, communication, and education. In recent years there has been a revolutionary change in English language education in Vietnam in that the language has been made a compulsory subject in schools. More critically, teaching focus has also been shifted from language knowledge emphasis to practical use and authentic communication in the workplace and the community. Therefore, the "neglected aspect" in language teaching and learning in Vietnam, pronunciation, has gained more attention in English education in school.

Pronunciation has a complex process and a lot of students struggle with pronunciation performance. Those who have good pronunciation will have an advantage in learning English, whereas students who strain with pronunciation will have a harder time learning this second language (Gilakjani, 2016, p.1). Moreover, numerous teachers think that teaching pronunciation is complicated and pedestrian for students (Harmer, 2001); additionally, speaking skills are sometimes not a required part of basic exams. The current way of teaching and learning foreign languages is still in the direction of studying for exams, not for learning to use, so it is difficult to achieve the desired effect.

It is well-recognized that many students who learn English as a second language, Vietnamese learners included, have trouble pronouncing words. Performing pronunciation might be challenging for certain learners. Ramelan (1977) affirmed that the degree of resemblance between the two languages influences the degree of difficulty in learning the second language. Regarding the English lexicon, there are several words that are differently written but they are pronounced similarly. As a consequence, there are students who may mispronounce those homophones due to their difference in spellings or may misunderstand the meaning of the words owing to their similar pronunciation.

The present study aims to improve non-English majors' pronunciation performance by introducing a range of homophone games in a pronunciation course within 8 weeks in the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022. Furthermore, it has investigated the effectiveness of the games on students' pronunciation performance as well as the participants' attitudes towards the application of such activities in English instruction.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The concept of pronunciation

Pronunciation is one of the important aspects of English language instruction. In oral communication, every sound, stress, and intonation may convey a meaning or meanings. Therefore, it is significant that second language (L2) learners should be mindful of pronouncing words as when they are mispronounced, they can be misinterpreted and more seriously can distort communication.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005, p. 1164), pronunciation is "the way in which the language of a particular word or sound is pronounced". Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning. It includes attention to the particular sounds of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual sound, such as intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm (suprasegmental aspects), how the voice is projected (voice quality) and, in its broadest definition, attention to gestures and expressions that are closely related to the way we speak a language. Absolutely, pronunciation is one essential element in English learning, which requires learners to master in order to become competent speakers of the language.

Nevertheless, acquiring eligible pronunciation is a complex task in L2 learning for not only students but also the teacher since the both are non-native speakers, who have to remember all pronunciation rules as well as practice the system in a non-native community, which obviously presents a lot of obstacles to the learning process. Accordingly, it is indispensable that the teacher adopts a critical role in improving their L2 students' pronunciation by employing various activities for pronunciation practice.

2.2. The concept of homophones games

Harmer (2001) states; "Games are a vital part of a teacher's equipment, not only for language practice but they also provide for the therapeutic effect they have. They can be used at any stage of a class to provide an amusing and challenging respite from other classroom activities and are especially useful at the end of a long day to send students away feeling cheerful about their English class"
It is believed that game is a play or competition to give the students a chance to learn, practice or review specific language material and it is beneficial in terms of activating students and helping them remember knowledge better.
Homophone is a term used in semantic analysis to refer to words that have the same pronunciation but differ in meaning. Homophone is a type of homonym. Homophony is illustrated from such pairs as threw/through and rode/rowed. When there is ambiguity on account of this identity, a homophonic clash or "conflict" is said to have occurred (Crystal, 1991).
Homophone game is a game that naturally follows homophone dictation and can be used to help the students practice and remember homophones. This game also helps to highlight some sounds that may be particularly difficult for students to hear and write.
Various homophone games have been suggested by Case (2017) and Pratiwi (2019); among those there were several games were selected to be conducted in the study, including:
- o   Slap board
- o   Homophones search races
- o   Homophone reacts
- o   Homophones same or different pair work
- o   Find the homophone
- o   Homophones are not reaction
- o   Name the homophone
- o   Choose the correct homophone
- o   Which homophone is it?
- o   Correction homophone
- o   Hidden Homophone
- o   Make your own homophone
- o   Homophone crossword puzzle

III.   METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This experimental research was conducted among 40 non-English majors at the Faculty of Mathematics in a regional teacher education university in Vietnam within 8 weeks. There was a random selection of the subjects, and the pre and post-tests were distributed to both experimental and control groups to collect information about their pronunciation performance before and after the

intervention.   At first, 40 participants were invited to take the pre-test to investigate the initial level of their pronunciation performance. Then the 20 volunteer students in the experimental group joined an 8-week pronunciation course in which homophone games were conducted in every lesson and exercises on words with similar sounds were assigned to students as homework for consolidation of in-class practice. After the experiment, the post-test was given to both groups to determine whether there were differences in students' pronunciation performance and if there existed improvements in the pronunciation ability of the experimental group. Finally, a questionnaire was distributed to the experimental group to collect information about their attitudes towards the use of homophone games.

3.2 Participants

A group of 40 Mathematics education freshmen at a local teacher training university was selected to participate in the study. At the age range of 18-20, those high school graduates are expected to hold B1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as indicated in the outcomes of the high school academic program. Yet, their current proficiency level was estimated at A1 with a lot of difficulties in English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary as well as a lack of confidence in English communication.
3.3. Data collection instruments and procedures
This study employed two research instruments of tests and questionnaires.
Tests were used to measure competence, knowledge, intelligence, and ability of talent which was possessed by individuals or groups to collect data. In the present study, a pronunciation test was conducted twice to gather quantitative data on students' pronunciation skills before and after the intervention. The pre and post-tests shared the same format: Students were required to record their pronouncing 24 selected words at A1 and A2 levels. The students' scores were collected and analyzed to compare the mean scores in the two tests and to find out how the homophone games affect students' pronunciation performance.
In addition, a questionnaire was given at the end of the 8-week treatment to examine students' attitudes towards homophone games used for practicing pronunciation skills. The questionnaire sought to investigate the feelings of the participants toward the treatment, the homophone games they preferred and their assessment of the effectiveness of the experimental course in improving pronunciation ability.

IV.   RESEARCH RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Students' pronunciation performance before and after the pronunciation course with the inclusion of homophone games

Table 1. The classification of students' scores on pre-test

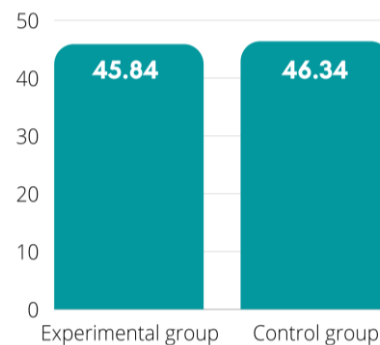| No	Classification	Score	Experimental group		Control group	
			Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
1	Excellent	85-100	1	5%	1	5%
2	Good	60-84	4	20%	3	15%
3	Fair	50-59	2	10%	3	15%
4	Poor	36-49	8	40%	9	45%
5	Very poor	0-35	5	25%	4	20%
Total			20	100%	20	100%

Participants' average initial score

Figure 1. Participants' initial average score

Students' initial pronunciation scores of the experimental and control group is displayed in Table 1 and Figure 1. It can be seen that there was not much difference in students' pronunciation performance in both groups, which was shown in the participants' average scores of 45.84 and 46.34 for the experimental and control group, respectively. It is worth noting that the percentage of students with poor and very poor pronunciation accounted for roughly one-third of both groups and there was a very small proportion of the participants who could pronounce words correctly.

Table 2. The classification of students' scores on post-test

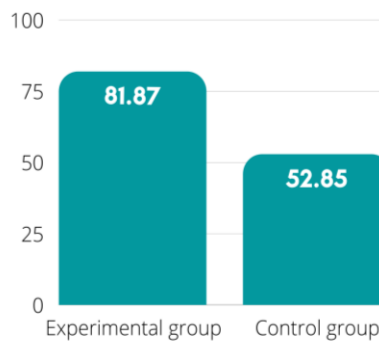| No	Classification	Score	Experimental group		Control group	
			Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
1	Excellent	85-100	7	35%	3	15%
2	Good	60-84	10	50%	2	10%
3	Fair	50-59	3	25%	5	25%
4	Poor	36-49	0	0%	9	45%
5	Very poor	0-35	0	0%	1	5%
Total			20	100%	20	100%

Figure 2. Participants' average scores after the research period

Table 2 and Figure 2 illustrate students' pronunciation scores after the research period. As seen in the table and the figure, there was a significant difference in the mean scores between the experimental and control groups. Specifically, the average score of the participants in the 8-week pronunciation course was almost one and a half times that of the control group (81.87 compared to 52.85). It is also noticeable that the number of students in the experimental group who achieved "Good" and "Excellent" pronunciation grades tripled those in the control group. Moreover, there were no more students in the experimental group to be classified as "Poor" and "Very Poor" but the figure for the control group kept basically unchanged.
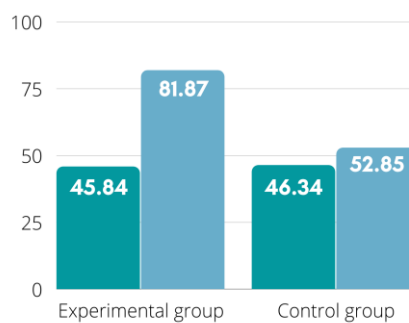

Figure 3. Participants' average score before and after the research period

The bar chart showed that there were distinct differences between pre-test and post-test scores of students' pronunciation tests in both groups. It is obvious that there was a remarkable change in the experimental group's post-test results with a growth of 36.03 out of 100 while the test scores of the control group remained steady with a minor increase of 6.51. It could be inferred that students' participating in the pronunciation course with the application of homophone games have gained some fundamental benefits in their pronunciation improvement.

4.2. Students' feedback on homophone games

Table 3. Students' feedback on Homophone games

Categories	Questions	Mean	Level of agreement
Participants' feelings about the Homophone games	1. Did you find interest in improving your pronunciation ability through playing homophone games	4.65	Strongly agree
	2. Did you find playing homophone games is an easy way to improve your pronunciation ability	4.50	Strongly agree
Participants' assessment of the effectiveness of homophone games in improving pronunciation ability	3. Do you find the homophone games effective in improving your pronunciation ability?	4.45	Agree
	4. Do you improve your pronunciation ability after the experimental course?	4.35	Agree
Participants' expectations for the experimental course	5. Did the experimental course cover the content you were expecting?	4.15	Agree

Table 3 depicts students' feedback on homophone games in terms of their feelings, their assessment of the effectiveness and the expectations for the experimental course. As shown in the table, overall, the participants gave positive feedback about homophone games. Starting with learners' feelings about homophone games, the mean score for the first question was 4.65, indicating that students strongly agreed that homophone games were an interesting pronunciation learning activity. Furthermore, a similar rating was given to statement 2 with a mean score of 4.50, showing that students strongly agreed that playing homophone games was an easy way for them to improve their pronunciation skills. In regard to participants' assessment of the effectiveness of homophone games in improving pronunciation ability, the mean score of statements 3 and 4 were 4.45 and 4.30 respectively, which meant the participants agreed that homophone games were effective in improving their pronunciation ability and they also found their pronunciation performance improved after the experimental course. Concerning participants' expectations for the experimental course, the mean score given was 4.15, which suggested students agreed that the experimental course covered the content they were expecting.

Students' preferences for the homophone games were described in Figure 4 as illustrated below.
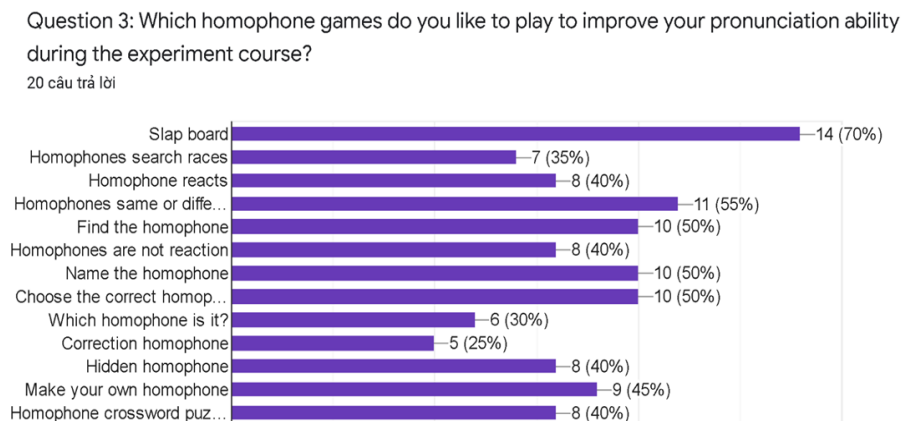

Question 3: Which homophone games do you like to play to improve your pronunciation ability during the experiment course?
20 câu trả lời

Slap board — 14 (70%)
Homophones search races — 7 (35%)
Homophone reacts — 8 (40%)
Homophones same or diffe... — 11 (55%)
Find the homophone — 10 (50%)
Homophones are not reaction — 8 (40%)
Name the homophone — 10 (50%)
Choose the correct homop... — 10 (50%)
Which homophone is it? — 6 (30%)
Correction homophone — 5 (25%)
Hidden homophone — 8 (40%)
Make your own homophone — 9 (45%)
Homophone crossword puz... — 8 (40%)

Figure 4. Participants' report of their favorite homophone games

Generally, participants in the experimental course showed some degree of their liking for the homophone games organized during the course. To be more specific, *slap board,* was the most favorite game with the majority of the rates. This was followed by *homophones same or different pair work*, *find the homophone*, *name the homophone*, and *choose the correct homophone* with the proportion being in the vicinity of 50%. By contrast, the figure for correction homophone was just 25%, making it the least popular game.

4.2. Discussion

That the proportion of non-English majors' low scores in the pronunciation pre-test greatly outweighed that of the high scores could potentially reflect unsolved long-lasting problems related to English teaching and learning in Vietnam in general and in that mentioned university in particular. It seems that the teaching of pronunciation, despite a more emphasis in four language skills in English language education in Vietnam (which accordingly drives more focus on pronunciation), still does not achieve desirable learning outcomes. Vietnamese accented English, as Cunningham (2009, 2013) claimed, is still considered unintelligible for native English-speaking listeners and even for Vietnamese listeners, which to some extent produces some challenges for Vietnamese learners of English in effective and authentic communication.

The findings of the present research are congruent with those of previous studies by Alim (2014) and Kiswindari (2018), in that homophone games could significantly improve students' pronunciation. Students' pronunciation post-test scores in these researches gain a noticeable increase in comparison with their pre-test scores, proving that homophone games employed in the experimental course or action project have positive effects on students' pronunciation performance.

Furthermore, this study has attempted to explore students' attitudes towards the use of homophone games, which has not been the focus of much research in the field. Students' appreciation and positive feedback of those activities for the development of pronunciation performance indicate comprehensive benefits of homophone games on students' pronunciation ability. The results have again clarified the shared belief in a large body of research in language education that motivation and attitude have great roles in raising the proficiency and efficiency of the students in language learning (Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011; Naiman et al., 1978). On that account, it is crucial that L2 teachers should apply efficient strategies and techniques in language classes in order to promote positive motivation and attitude among the students to learn languages and raise the proficiency of students. Additionally, students' encouraging feedback towards the effectiveness of the employment of homophone games on the improvement of students' pronunciation could suggest the application of homophone games as a critical learning tool in a language class and further conducts of such activities in the teaching of pronunciation.

V.   CONCLUSION

This experimental research was undertaken at a regional teacher training university in Vietnam and has illustrated the effectiveness of homophone games in improving non-English majors' pronunciation. Results of the study suggest that students' pronunciation has considerably improved after an 8-week course of pronunciation training where homophone games were employed for students' practice of words with similar sounds. Analysis of participants' feedback indicates that using homophone games in pronunciation instruction helps increase students' interest in learning as well as their ability to pronounce words correctly. Those findings would encourage L2 teachers to apply and promote more initiatives in their language teaching for better achievement of students' learning outcomes as well as for stimulation of their interests in language learning.

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