Vowels in English and Vietnamese: A Contrastive Analysis

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Abstract

Pronunciation is a problem which usually occurs to Vietnamese learners of English. Many learners have difficulty pronouncing English sounds, therefore; they have difficulty in listening and speaking English. While these two skills are very important for students when they begin to work in an environment using English, students need to be aware of the errors in their pronunciation. This paper aims to contrast vowels in Vietnamese and in English. From this analysis, some similarities and differences can be drawn between the two languages. Then some teaching implications will be presented. The teaching implications will help learners to correct their pronunciation and also help them improve other skills. I will divide my paper into three parts. Firstly, I will describe vowels in Vietnamese and then in English. Secondly, I will contrast these two systems through two aspects: positions and manners of articulation of vowels to find out similarities and differences between them. And lastly, I will discuss some implications for teaching language.
Vowels in English and Vietnamese

What is a vowel? We will find that it is not easy to define exactly what it means. According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s dictionary, a vowel is a speech sound in which the mouth is open and the tongue is not touching the top of the mouth, the teeth, etc., (Hornby, 2005, p.1648). The most common view is that “vowels are sounds in which there is no obstruction to the flow of air as it passes from the larynx to the lips” (Roach, 1991, p.18). Another answer is that vowels are the core or “peak” of the syllable. This definition is more scientific. In fact, a syllable can consist of one vowel only, as in the word *eye*. Alternatively, the vowel can be surrounded on either or both sides by consonants, as in the words *may, ants* and *faith*. These descriptions can help us to differentiate vowels from consonants because in consonants there is obstruction of the airflow when the sound is produced. To distinguish vowel sounds from each other, we base on which part of the tongue is involved (front, central, back) and how high the tongue is when the sound is produced (high, mid, low).

**Vowels in English**

Vowels in English are described in term of four factors: (i) the length of the vowel, (ii) the level of the tongue, (iii) the part of the tongue and (iv) the degree of lip rounding.

There are 11 single vowels in English, including 5 long vowels and 6 short vowels (Roach, 1991, pp.27-36).

The length of the vowel:
Vowels are classified as long and short, depending on the length of the vowels. Long vowels include /aː/, /ɔː/, /ɔː/, /uː/, /iː/. Short vowels include /i/, /e/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /oʊ/, /ʊ/.

The level of the tongue:

Vowels in English can be classified as high, mid and low, referring to the level of the tongue. Therefore, we have high vowels: /iː/, /i/, /uː/, /u/; mid vowels /e/, /ə/, /ɜː/, /ʌ/, /ɔː/; low vowels /æ/, /ɑː/, /oʊ/.

The part of the tongue:

Vowels are also classified as front, central, and back, depending on how far forward or back the tongue is positioned and which part of the tongue is involved. With this classification, we have front vowels /iː/, /i/, /e/, /æ/; central vowels /ə/, /ɜː/, /ʌ/; back vowels /ɑː/, /ɔː/, /oʊ/, /uː/, /u/.

The degree of lip rounding:

In addition, vowels are characterized by the degree of lip rounding or spreading that occurs during their articulation. They include spread vowels /iː/, /i/, /e/, /æ/; neutral vowels /ə/, /ɜː/, /ʌ/ and rounded vowels /ɑː/, /ɔː/, /oʊ/, /uː/, /u/.

To make the description clearer, a chart of English vowels is given below:
Chart 1. English Vowels

English vowels can be summarized as following (including four factors):

- **i**: long high/ close front spread vowel  
  e.g.: see /si:/
- **ɪ**: short high/ close front spread vowel  
  e.g.: happy /ˈhæpi/
- **e**: short mid front spread vowel  
  e.g.: ten /ten/
- **æ**: short low/ open front spread vowel  
  e.g.: cat /kæt/
- **u**: long high/ close back rounded vowel  
  e.g.: too /tuː/
- **ʊ**: short high/ close back rounded vowel  
  e.g.: put /pʊt/
- **ɔ**: long mid back rounded vowel  
  e.g.: saw /sɔː/
- **ɒ**: short low/ open back rounded vowel  
  e.g.: got /ɡɒt/
- **ɑ**: long low/ open back rounded vowel  
  e.g.: father /ˈfɑːðər/
- **ɔː**: long mid central neutral vowel  
  e.g.: fur /fɔːr/
- **ə**: short mid central neutral vowel  
  e.g.: about /əˈbaʊt/
- **ʌ**: short low/ open central neutral vowel  
  e.g.: cup /kʌp/
In addition to single vowels, English has a large number of diphthongs—sounds which consist of a movement from one vowel to another. A vowel which remains constant and does not move is called a pure vowel, or single vowel. In English, there are eight diphthongs as they are showed below:

- **Centring**
  - ending in ə
    - iə, ee, un

- **Closing**
  - ending in i
    - ei, ai, ic
  - ending in u
    - eə, au

English vowel also has the kind of vowel called triphthong. A triphthong is a movement from one vowel to another and then to a third. All produced rapidly and without interruption. The triphthongs can be composed of the five closing diphthongs described in the last section, with ə added on the end. Therefore we have five triphthongs:

- ei + ə = eiə  
  *mayor*, *player*
- ai + ə = aiə  
  *liar*, *fire*
- ɔi + ə = ɔiə  
  *loyal*, *royal*
- aʊ + ə = aʊə  
  *lower*, *mower*
- au + ə = auə  
  *power*, *hour*

**Vowels in Vietnamese**
Vietnamese has three types of vowels, including acute (front): i, e, ɛ, light grave: ɯ, ɔ, ạ, á, grave (back): u, o, ɔ, ỹ. These vowels can be presented in chart 2:

![Vietnamese Vowels Chart]

*Chart 2. Vietnamese Vowels*

According to Đoàn Thiện Thuật, Vietnamese has 13 single vowels, including 10 long vowels and 3 short vowels (1977). Long vowels are i, e, ɛ, a, ā, ĝ, o, ɔ, u, ɯ; short vowels are ɛ́ (anh ách), ɔ́ (ong óc), ỹ́ (tân, thân). In addition to single vowels, Vietnamese has three diphthongs. They are ie, uo and uo.

About timbre change, Vietnamese vowels as well as English vowels have some fixed timbre vowels, some vowels change their timbre. The chart below shows the fixed timbre vowels in both languages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i ɯ u</td>
<td>i u u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e ə a c</td>
<td>e ʌ ɔ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both Vietnamese and English, diphthongs are the vowels which change their timbre.
About diphthong distribution, diphthongs in Vietnamese are mostly centering, e.g:

\(/\text{iء}/ - \text{iè}, \text{yè}, \text{ia}, \text{ya} \) (hiện, miền, tiền), \(/\text{ɯɤ}/ - \text{ươ}, \text{ưa} \) (hươu, thưa, thương), \(/\text{uo}/ - \text{uô}, \text{ua} \) (uống thuốc, lúa úa).

### Similarities and Differences

From the description above, I will draw some similarities and differences about vowels in Vietnamese and in English. Vietnamese has more long vowels and less short vowels than English. However, the total number of vowels, including single vowels, diphthongs and triphthongs English is far more than those in Vietnamese. English has 24 vowels, while Vietnamese has only sixteen. Both Vietnamese and English share three single vowels: \(/\text{i}/ as in “sit”, \(/\text{e}/ as in “egg” and \(/\text{u}/ as in “would.” In addition to these shared sounds, Vietnamese contains four additional single vowels, \(/\text{e}/ as in tên “name,” \(/\text{u}/ as in mùng “happy,” \(/\text{ɿ}/ as in lớn “big,” \(/\text{ɿ}/ as in tàn “new” and three diphthongs \(/\text{ie}/ as in miền “region” \(/\text{uo}/ as in uông “drink” and \(/\text{ɯɤ}/ as in hướng “direction”.

The second difference is that English has triphthongs while Vietnamese does not have this kind of vowel. Triphthongs cause difficulty for learners of English because they are pronounced quickly so learners can not distinguish them easily.
About diphthong distribution, diphthongs in Vietnamese are mostly centering, while in English diphthongs are distributed centering (iə, eə, uə) or closing (ei, ai, ɔi, əu, au).

In the next part, I will contrast some specific vowels in both Vietnamese and English. Students should not mistake the sound /u/ in Vietnamese with the sound /ʊ/ in English. The sound /ʊ/ in English is more rounded and pronounced more backwards than the sound /u/ in Vietnamese. Some students do not know this difference so they pronounce the sound /ʊ/ in English like /u/ in Vietnamese. In English and Vietnamese, there is the sound /i/. Although they look similar, the sound /i/ in English is shorter, close front than the sound /i/ in Vietnamese. Therefore, there are some differences when pronouncing them. Another sound students may confuse is /e/. The sound /e/ in English is the mid vowel, while the sound /ɛ/ in Vietnamese is the high vowel. Both are the front vowels but the sound /ɛ/ in English is pronounced more forward. Therefore when pronouncing the sound /e/ in English, learners should put the tongue lower and more forward than when they pronounce the sound /ɛ/ in Vietnamese. Another sound students may pronounce incorrectly is /ɔ/ in Vietnamese and /ɒ/ in English. The sound /ɒ/ in English is a low rounded vowel, while the sound /ɔ/ in Vietnamese is a mid rounded vowel. However, the sound /ɒ/ is pronounced more roundly and more backward than the sound /ɔ/. Therefore, they are slightly different when they are pronounced. And lastly is the sound /a/ in Vietnamese and /aː/ in English. When the
sound /a:/ is pronounced, it is more rounded and lower and longer and more backwards than the sound /a/ in Vietnamese.

So far, I have contrasted Vietnamese and English vowels according to the number of vowels, positions and manners of articulation of the sounds and some specific sounds that may cause confusion to the Vietnamese learners of English. In the last part of this paper, I will discuss some teaching implications for Vietnamese and English teaching in high school.

Teaching Implications

Firstly, teacher should introduce the sounds before they let their students see the characters. Students should listen to the sounds first to familiarize with them and then they should practice pronouncing the sounds many times in words and in sentences.

Secondly, the "long" and "short" features of vowels may cause some difficulty in both English and Vietnamese. Teacher should use minimal pairs when teaching pronunciation to make their students distinguishing the differences between two sounds. For example, /i:/ and /ɪ/, /u:/ and /ʊ/, /ɔ/ and /ɔː/ should be put in pronunciation exercises for students to practice. Then teacher should distinguish some sounds students usually confuse with Vietnamese sounds as I have presented above to make students be aware of the differences between the sounds.

Thirdly, when pronouncing diphthongs in English, Vietnamese learners tend to emphasize on the first vowel which will cause “foreign accent” (Lê, 2004, p.88) or they just pronounce the first vowel in the diphthongs and do not pronounce the second vowel in the diphthongs. For this mistake, teacher should show their students how to pronounce the diphthongs and single vowels. Teacher should distinguish for their
students that diphthongs consist of two vowels. With triphthongs, teacher should give students a lot of listening exercises for them to practice and also emphasize how to pronounce them and how they are different from diphthongs and single vowels.

A picture of the organs of speech will be of great use, especially for those students who rely on visual information. The vowel chart of Vietnamese and English is very helpful in explaining the differences between the vowels. From the vowel chart, students can see the position of the vowels and with the explanation of the teacher they know how to pronounce them correctly.

It is necessary for a teacher to be patient with the accuracy of learners' pronunciation, even if students make slow progress at the beginning. Teacher should pay attention to the accuracy of pronunciation at more advanced levels of English when a learner has gained more knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, or he/she may lose the phonetic skills she/he learned at the beginning.

Teacher should design some interesting activities or games to make their pronunciation lessons more interesting. Students will learn more if they learn the sounds with high motivation and with ease.

Last but not least, students should know some knowledge about the sounds in both Vietnamese and English to be aware about their differences so when they pronounce them they will pronounce them correctly. Teacher is the person who has the responsibility to inform for their students through the pronunciation lessons.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, pronunciation is very important. When students pronounce a sound correctly, they will be understood more and their communication in English will improve.
Therefore, teachers and students should pay more attention to the teaching and learning the sounds. Vietnamese and English have its own sound system so Vietnamese students of English will have difficulty when pronouncing the sounds in English. This contrastive analysis is necessary for both teachers and students. In this analysis, some differences about the positions and manners of articulation and some difficult sounds have been presented and it will help students with their pronunciation. In this paper, I have also mentioned some teaching implications in teaching language in English and Vietnamese, mostly in English. I hope that this research will provide useful information for those who are concerned about the phonetics and phonology in both languages.
References


