

**USING WEEKLY GROUP POLITICAL PRESENTATIONS TO ENHANCE
PHONOLOGICAL LEARNING OF SECOND-YEAR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS
AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM**

ABSTRACT

Studies about the advantages of the application of presentations and group presentations in ESL and EFL are increasingly common in recent literature. However, few to date have explored the positive impacts of group presentations on students' intelligible pronunciation. At the same time, recent changes in teaching and learning strategies set by the Vietnamese government have shifted attention to the students' ability to communicate effectively in today's integrated and increasingly globalized environment. In the struggle to seek for appropriate methods to improve Vietnamese students' speaking skills in general and pronunciation in particular, group presentations appear to be one rational answer.

In order to apply an innovative idea and evaluate it in this space, an action research study was conducted involving 17 second-year students majoring in English for Political Discipline at the Institute of International Studies over the course of one semester. Three sets of data gathered from observational transcripts of group presentations, interviews and feedback questionnaires were triangulated to investigate the impacts of group presentations on political topics on the participants' pronunciation of sounds and word stress together with their attitude towards this method. The results revealed that the students acknowledged the positive benefits of group presentations and experienced improvements in pronunciation, confidence and range of political vocabulary. These changes, however, were diverse depending on each participant's attitude and potential. The article concludes with reflective evaluations of the lessons and an exploration of pedagogical implications for future projects on implementing research into presentations among Vietnamese students of foreign languages.

1. Introduction

In tandem with the unprecedented pace of integration is the inevitable trend of acquiring English in Vietnam (London, 2011). Foreseeing the need for bilingual personnel, Government Decision 1400 (2008) stated that ‘by 2020 most Vietnamese students...will be able to use a foreign language confidently in their daily communication, their study and work in an integrated, multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment’. The ‘foreign language’ in this legislation is, of course, understood to be English.

However, the actual pace of progress made in English training and learning in Vietnam is way behind the shift in ideology. Obstacles such as overcrowded classes with traditional grammar-translation teaching methods get the country’s language education nowhere near its goal. Such researchers within the ASEAN area as Jonathan London (2011) have suggested that Vietnamese language education, with traditionally fewer opportunities for students to participate in productive skills with fluent speakers of English, is still marked by a need for more emphasis on the spoken word, in particular the comprehensible spoken word.

In this research context, one of the first author’s students’ greatest weaknesses is their ability to speak intelligibly. They are government officials working in international relations fields which require them to express themselves clearly and accurately. Our interest in conducting this research is to examine whether repetitive presentations on political topics in English can improve their pronunciation skills, especially articulating sounds and stress.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Benefits of Students Presentations

Student presentations have been valued as a powerful language teaching tool by researchers all over the world. For example, presentations can enhance students’ communication skills (Girard, Pinar & Trapp, 2011), narrow the gap between classroom and real-life language, encourage students’ team-work spirit and assertiveness (King, 2002), increase students’ autonomy and equip them with new vocabulary and knowledge (Lee & Park, 2008). Additionally, presentations in classroom context are also associated with the improvement of level of attention (Baranowski & Weir, 2011), self-efficacy and anxiety (Brown & Morrissey, 2004) and speaking rates and information content (Hincks, 2010). Nevertheless, the undoubted benefits of presentations in literature still leave the question of whether they can

help improve students' pronunciation. This, again, identifies the gap that this present research is trying to fill.

2.2. The Importance of Intelligible Pronunciation and Vietnamese Pronunciation of English

Cakir and Baytar (2014) claimed that 'pronunciation is one of the most important aspects of a language', therefore 'foreign language learners should be exposed to the target language not only in written but also orally in order to acquire to sound systems correctly' (p. 106). There are few recent studies of Vietnamese pronunciation of English, so we rely here on two older studies. When examining Vietnamese pronunciation of English, Center for Applied Linguistic Study #7 (1977) stated that:

a sentence can be pretty badly mangled grammatically and still be understandable if it is pronounced well enough, and, conversely, the most flawlessly constructed sentence won't do its speaker a bit of good if his pronunciation can't be understood.

However, it is the fact that Vietnamese students are likely to struggle with English pronunciation. The reasons could be explained by the fact that the two sound systems share little similarity. Although, not many contrastive analysis studies between English and Vietnamese could be found, experts agreed that the two most serious areas of errors of Vietnamese pronunciation are sounds and stress.

In terms of sounds, Vietnamese students have problems with the pronunciation of 'final /p/, /b/, /g/ sounds'. Noticeably, some are unable to combine certain muscles and mouth-parts 'to articulate some sounds like /θ/ as in *think* and /ð/ as in *that*' (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1977, p. 2). Santry (1992) also added consonant clusters to the elements that hinder English pronunciation. Vietnamese speakers tend to omit or alter some consonants in difficult clusters. Take consonants with /p/ as an example; as with /ps/ as in *capsicum*, where /p/ is omitted before /s/; as for /pl/ like in *please* and *applaud*, /p/ is replaced with /f/; /l/ is omitted in medial position (p. 137). The same problems of omitting, replacing and even reversing sounds happen with /b/ clusters (/bd/, /bdʒ/, /bz/, /bl/ and /br/) (p. 141), /t/ clusters /ts/, /tʃt/, /tl/, tr/ and /tw/) (p. 146), /k/ clusters (/ktʃ/, /ks/, /kl/, /kr/ and /kw/) (p. 152), /g/ clusters like /gl/ or /gr/ (p.154). The most serious error was witness was /dʒd/ as in *dodged* or *trudged* (p. 156).

In terms of stress and rhythm, while ‘Vietnamese ... is a tone language: every word has associated with it a particular tone of voice’ (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1977, p. 3), English’s tones are associated with whole sentences. Hence, it is difficult for Vietnamese students to produce English accurately. Moreover, Vietnamese generally is a monosyllabic language (Thompson, 1965 cited in Hwa-Froelich, 2002) while English can be either monosyllabic or polysyllabic. Therefore, multisyllabic words pose great challenges to Vietnamese speakers. Firstly, they struggle to learn the complex system of stress. Secondly, articulating a combination of multiple, long sounds and phonemes is unfamiliar with what they already know with the mother tongue.

2.3. The Possibility of Using Presentations to Enhance the English Pronunciation of Vietnamese students of English

As noted earlier, the advantages of applying student presentations to language classrooms are exemplified in the literature but there has still been hitherto a lack of research linking the effects of presentations to pronunciation (Schenettle, 2013).

The most immediately relevant work was ‘Integrating Pronunciation for Fluency in Presentation Skills’ by Hall (1997). Hall illustrated the necessity of using presentations as meaningful context to practice pronunciation by a convincing comparison: the sole receiving process of hearing and imitating sounds is like ‘learning to ride a bicycle on a road with no traffic’ (1997, p. 4) so there was a need of context to which pronunciation skills can transfer. The author firmly stated that ‘for many ESL and EFL learners, skillful pronunciation is linked with effective presentation in an international context of developing globalization.’ (p. 2). The idea that practising presentations is a higher stage of traditional method of pronunciation training indeed provides inspiration for this present research.

Moreover, ‘The Pronunciation Component in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages’ by Morley (1991) shed light on the researcher-teacher’s belief that group presentations could fulfill the principles steering current pedagogical directions. Using presentations to enhance phonological learning can satisfy most of the Morley’s programming principles. To name as a few, the use of presentations do not isolate pronunciation practice but stick with the communicative approach, emphasize speech awareness and self-monitoring, and develop communication styles in real-life situation.

Following in the wake of the above studies, this research only looks into sounds (including vowel, consonant sounds and consonant clusters) and word stress which were considered to be fundamental elements in the aforementioned studies. Other aspects such as intonation, pausing and even accent should be filled by future research. It is also important to note that this present research focuses on the possible effectiveness of group presentations about political topics. Nevertheless, to our knowledge, there are no published articles focusing on the pronunciation of political terminology in a Southeast Asia context.

With these clear emphases, we present the following research questions as spurs to the enquiry:

1. To what extent do weekly group presentations on political topics impact on second-year students' pronunciation, especially sounds and word stress?

2. What are students' attitudes towards using group presentations to improve their pronunciation of sounds and word stress?

3. Methodology and Methods

3.1 Methodology

Digging into research articles focusing on similar interests, it can be seen that researchers' approaches have ranged from qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. Depending on the subject of each investigation, different methods of data collection were applied. However, the present research is inspired by the use of pure qualitative methods as in many other previous studies such as Andrew (2006) and Lee and Park (2008). Along the process of investigating, especially when presenting the research results, some numbers and figures will appear in order to illustrate the qualitative findings.

3.2. Participants and Procedures

The participants in this research were 17 in number (including 16 male and one female from an intact class, aged 25 to 35). They were divided into four mixed proficiency groups. The project was implemented over a course of one semester with eight presentations sessions. The participants were encouraged to find topics that they were interested in to give presentations about.

In order to help students devote their attention fully on pronunciation rather than other linguistic aspects of their presentations, they were allowed to use information available on the Internet as long as they gave them credits. The participants worked together to decide presentation topics and script, then uploaded their scripts onto a forum on www.edmodo.com. After that, the teacher-researcher proof-read each group's scripts and left comments about the accuracy of word choice or grammar. Since the students' English level was mixed, they still made mistakes with grammar and word choice, this was a necessary step to assist them to entirely concentrate on pronunciation.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

In order to keep records of students' presenting performance, all of the presentations were audio-recorded and transcribed. Recorded pronunciation mistakes were scrutinized and then categorized into sounds (i.e. vowel or ending sounds, consonant clusters) and word stress. In the last session, the participants were asked to represent their first presentation so that clear comparison can be made. At the final stage of the project, profile of strengths and weaknesses of each participant were illustrated to demonstrate the possible improvement.

The method of interviews was employed to investigate students' attitude towards the effects of group presentation on their pronunciation. After each of the two presentation sessions, one to three volunteer participants took part in one-to-one interviews. To avoid any conflict of interest possibly inherent in the teacher-researcher relationship and to encourage more idea-sharing, one of the first author's colleagues who had previous experience in conducting educational research and had no teaching and assessment interest in the participants was chosen to be the interviewer. The interview focused on the participants' feelings towards speaking aloud ideas and changes in the way they present in English as well as their pronunciation or any possible constraints.

The last method, feedback questionnaire, was applied at the end. By this time, it was easy for the participants to reflect on their own progress. The purpose of this method was to reveal their overall assessments of the project and to gain their authentic insights. This method was carried out when the teacher-researcher was not with the participants so that they knew anonymity was secured. The feedback, therefore, showed candid judgments.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Existing Problems and Noticeable Impacts of Group Presentations

4.1.1. The Pronunciation of Vowel Sounds

The audio records of the presentations revealed quite a large variety of vowel difficulties. Some were quite consistent and related to other mistakes; some had strong links with word stress.

The most common mistake was found in some buzz words in the project such as *control* /kən'trəʊl/ and *protect* /prə'tekt/; most of the students pronounced it as /kontrô/ and /prôtekt/. They did not have the awareness of unstressed sound or schwa and the English sound /o/ or /əʊ/ were replaced by the Vietnamese sound 'ô' /ow/. The sound 'ô' /ow/ was described to have several allophones which does not really sound like any English sound (Nguyen, 1970; Le, 1973, cited in Santry, 1992, p. 92). When this mistake was pointed out, and even when the participants tried hard to avoid it in the following presentations, some still faced difficulty to get out of the habit. This type of chronic mistake lies in the boundary of vowel sounds and word stress which make it more difficult to fix. Other examples were *foreign* /'fɔːr.ən/, *perspective* /pə'spek.tɪv/, *ultimately* /'ʌl.tɪ.mət.li/ and *consensus* /kən'sent.səs/ which turned to /fɔːr.eɪn/, /pəː spek.tɪv/ and /kɔn.sent.səs/ respectively. Similar patterns will be discussed below under the sub-heading of 'word stress'. When the project moved towards the end, there was a decrease in this problem. The last group presentations' topics and scripts were totally identical to the first ones but none of the students mispronounced word *control* again. As witnessed in some students, there had been some pause moments before they pronounced this word. The first researcher's observation of this phenomenon suggests that the students could 'notice a gap between what they *want* to say and what they *can* say' (Swain, 1995 cited in Izumi & Bigelow, 2000, p. 244) and apply their meta-linguistic knowledge to articulate the sound.

Another common feature was the confusion when pronouncing the sound /æ/. Since /æ/ is not available in Vietnamese, the presenters, without careful preparation for their speech easily switched it into other sounds. To listeners trained in English phonology, /æ/ pronounced by Vietnamese speakers sounds like /a/ or /ɜ/ (Hwa-Freolich et al., 2001, p. 267). In this presentation project, most of the participants also mistook /æ/ for /a/ or /e/. They had problems pronouncing words like *sanction* /'sæŋk.ʃən/, *demand* /dɪ'mæ:nd/, *mainland* (China) /'meɪn.lænd/; these words would turn into /'sɑŋk.ʃən/, /dɪ'men/, /'meɪn.len/ (the

participants did not pronounce the final consonants of the words). Admittedly, there are observable tendencies to pronounce /æ/ either towards an /ɑ/ or /e/ sound. However, the participants' trend to articulate this sound was inconsistent. That is why it was more like a mistake than a move towards a British or American accent. Fortunately, this particular problem seemed to be eradicated at the end. Nam, one of the group leaders, mentioned this:

Even I tried my best, I could not pronounce some sounds like native speakers do, like the /æ/ sound in 'bank' or 'cat'... I knew that I had these weaknesses before. But until now, when participating in this project, I have opportunity to practise speaking so that I can fix my mistakes. (Nam, interview)

The participants, even the strong ones, had problems mixing up the two sounds /e/ and /i/. For example, the words like *response* /rɪ'spɒnts/ and *evaluate* /ɪ'væl.ju.eɪt/ would be pronounced as /re'spɒnts/ and /e'væl.ju.eɪt/, and vice versa, *threat* /θreɪt/ will be pronounced as /θrɪt/. One of the students reported that:

Before I took part in the project, I used to pronounce words in the wrong way but I did not recognize it..., like the word 'interest', I usually pronounced it as /'intrɛst/, but it is /'intrɪst/, and I often pronounced the word 'respect' as /re'spekt/ instead of /rɪ'spekt/... (Hung, interview)

The frequency of making this mistake dropped significantly throughout the project. Among the several last sessions, there were only some mix-ups. Interestingly, Minh, the last presenter in the very last presentation, slipped out 'EU' /i:'ju:/ totally into the Vietnamese version /e.u:/. The stressful pressure clearly pushed him back to Vietnamese, his 'language of thought' (Pavlenko 2011). He spoke and listened to the /e.u:/ (wrong) much more frequently than the /i:'ju:/ (correct). The English alphabet and Vietnamese alphabet are broadly similar but sound differently. While 'e' sounds /i:/ in English, it sounds /e/ in Vietnamese; while 'i' sounds /ai/ in English, it sounds /i:/ in Vietnamese (Cheng, 1991; Thompson, 1965; Thuy, 1975 cited in Hwa-Froelich et al., 2002, p. 267).

In addition to the above noticeable mistakes, the students also encountered other problems with vowel sounds. One of them was between long and short vowels, for example, *seek* and *cheap* with long /i:/ was pronounced as /sɪk/ or /tʃɪp/. The reason for this system can be explained by the fact that 'as opposed to English, Vietnamese language does not have the

tense-lax contrasts of /i, ɪ/ and /u, ʊ/ (Hwa-Froelich et al., 2002, p. 267). Besides, there was the confusion between /ie/ and /eə/, when a presenter was supposed to say *railway*/'reɪl.weɪ/, he said /reə.r.weɪ/ (/l/ in the middle was omitted and replaced by /r/).

4.1.2. The Pronunciation of Consonants and Consonant Clusters

Looking from a contrastive view, the differences in terms of consonants between English and Vietnamese are quite phenomenal. First of all, Hwa-Froelich (2002, p. 271) stated that ‘most Vietnamese syllables do not end in consonants’ and ‘the Vietnamese language only allows voiceless stop consonants and nasals in the code... it is usually difficult for the Vietnamese speakers to pronounce English final consonant’. Besides, the distinction also lies in whether the consonant sound is aspirated and unaspirated. Hwa-Froelich (2002, p. 266) established that English speakers produce both aspirated and unaspirated stops, ‘for example /p/ in ‘pan’ is aspirated, but /p/ in span is not’ and that final consonants in Vietnamese, in contrast, are all unaspirated or implosive. Therefore, Vietnamese speakers tend not to pronounce the final consonants (Cheng, 1991; Center for Applied Linguistics, 1977; Flipsen, 1992 cited in Hwa-Froelich 2002, p. 266). The phonemes /t/ and /k/ in Vietnamese are also unaspirated in initial position while they are never so in English. That makes English speakers perceive them as /d/ or /f/. The last important factor differing Vietnamese from English is that ‘the Vietnamese language does not have consonant clusters or blends’ (Cheng, 1991, Thompson, 1965, cited in Hwa-Froelich, 2002, p. 265). All of the information plays a crucial role as both foundation and explanation for the findings about consonants in this research.

Throughout the project, the presenters faced great difficulty pronouncing consonant /s/ whether it is the English morphological -s- endings or medial /s/ sounds. First of all, they tended to omit all types of -s- endings whether it is plural countable nouns, possessive or third person singular verbs. For those who were aware of the existence of -s- endings, it was unlikely that they could master of three ways of pronouncing -s- endings including /s/, /z/ and extra syllable for sibilant sounds. The root problems can be tracked back to the lack of understanding about voiced and voiceless sounds in English. This was analyzed by *Speak English like a Native* (2015) that ‘In English, frequent shifts between voiced and voiceless consonants are required to distinguish between certain words. Such mechanism does not exist and is not required in Vietnamese, thus, constitutes a complex problem.’ Besides, the medial production of ‘s’ sounds also challenged the participants. Those words included, to name a few, *risk, against, boost, most, transaction* or *satisfaction*. The aforementioned finding that

Vietnamese does not have consonant clusters or blends explained to a great extent why these participants could not pronounce the words accurately.

Other problems with this sound were noticed throughout the project. First was the mix-up between /s/ and /ʃ/ or /s/ and /z/, for example, *shame* /ʃeɪm/ or *unshakable* /ʌnʃeɪ.kə.bəl/ turned to /seɪm/, /ʌnseɪ.kə.bəl/, and *basic* /ˈbeɪ.sɪk/ became /ˈbeɪ.zɪk/. Also, the participants failed in producing words having ‘-s’, ‘-ce’ or ‘-se’ at the end, for example *always*, *peace*, *release*, *cause*, *grievance*, *the United States* or *human rights*. In terms of communicative freight, the most severe kind of mistake, however, was not the omission of the /s/ sounds but the careless addition of the sound. Three out of 17 participants frequently added the ‘s’ sounds irresponsibly at the end of all types of words. This particular problem hindered understanding to a great extent.

Below is the table that records the times students making mistakes with the ‘s’ sounds:

TABLE 1:

Comparison of ‘S’-sound Mistakes in 8 Sections

Student	Section							
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Group 1								
Hung	3	4	6	6	2	1	0	3
Hieu	2	2	8	X	3	0	0	0
Lee	1	8	6	5	1	6	6	0
Phong	1	2	3	9	X	2	2	1
Group 2								
Nam	8	7	2	5	2	2	0	2

N.Hoang	4	6	2	7	X	5	2	0
Binh	4	1	2	4	1	0	0	1
A.Hoang	6	7	4	6	4	6	2	6
Group 3								
B.Minh	5	2	5	X	2	1	1	5
Dinh	5	10	5	4	X	4	13	0
Anh	1	6	9	5	1	10	5	0
D.Minh	3	5	6	7	2	0	0	2
Group 4								
Long	5	6	0	8	3	2	0	1
Phong	2	6	5	8	4	8	2	2
Cuong	2	3	3	0	5	5	0	0
Hai	7	2	8	8	4	X	1	1
C.Minh	6	7	9	X	3	8	4	6

There was a downward trend in the frequency of making this particular mistake in the second-half of the project. Nonetheless, it was quite unconvincing comparing between students and between sessions because the numbers of words carrying the ‘s’ sounds were different across each presentation, except for the first and the last presentations because they were identical. The majority of the participants reduced the number of times they repeat the mistakes. Among them, five students did not make any mistakes. Clearly, the practice of delivering a presentation posed positive influence on the process of realizing their weakness and improving their performance.

Beside the failure in pronouncing 's' sounds, the participants in this project in particular are inclined to either delete the endings sounds or devoice them. In this research, it was noticed that the final consonants were likely to be omitted the most, besides all types of 's' sounds, including /t/, /d/, /l/, /v/, /b/, /g/, /θ/, /ð/ and affricates sounds like /tʃ/ or /dʒ/. Sometimes, for voiced sound like /b, /d/, the participants tend to either delete them complete or devoiced them to /p/ or /t/. For *-ed* morphological endings, students either totally ignored the sounds or added the extra syllable /ɪd/ no matter what sound was in front of the *-ed* ending. To illustrate, C.Minh said '*Hong Kong has strongly developed* /dɪ'vel.əpɪd/

Single final consonants were difficult, not to mention consonants clusters. Clusters like 'most', 'resurrect', 'dealt', 'human rights' were already too hard. The participants found clusters like 'world', 'protests', 'risks', 'boosts', 'unrests', 'context' or 'biggest' impossible to produce. It was especially hard for the presenters when they faced clusters composed of all voiced sounds like 'hailed', 'cancelled', 'perspectives' or 'dissolve'. In fact, 'final cluster reduction also occurs widely in English native speaker casual speech...deleting the second consonant of a sequence of three' (Selkirk, 1972; Temperley, 1983 cited in Osburne, 1996, p. 165). However, the participants in this project tend to omit two last consonants or all of three consonants. For clusters that appeared at the middle of the words, such as 'milestone', 'engagement', 'worldwide', the participants would turn them to something totally different with the origins.

Despite feedback like '*I can't do it.*', '*It was too difficult.*' being received along the process, the numbers of mistakes reduced greatly in the last three sessions. The students who improved underwent two phases. The first phases was described by B.Minh, one of the four leaders, that some students focused too much on every word or sound so that listeners could not understand the whole sentence. According to Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001) and Izumi and Bigelow (2000), the requirement of output activity triggers students' attention to form incidentally. In this particular case, the form that the participants paid attention to is individual sounds rather than other verbal or non-verbal expression factors such as fluency or confidence. Fortunately, there was also the second phase where the participants got used to harmonize individual sounds with other factors of a good speech. They could saw their own and each other's improvements. Hieu, after presentation session eight, shared:

When I first participated in this project, I feel very nervous speaking in front of people. But by practicing every week, even my classmates can see that after the fifth

session, I have showed to be more confident. I think so too. I even use more body language and eye-contact.

The two phases experienced by the participants proved that the benefits of conducting group presentations covered both non-verbal and verbal aspects.

4.1.3. Word Stress

Given that every finding about Vietnamese use of stress must take into account the nature of this language, it is worthwhile mentioning its distinguishing characteristics. As discussed in the literature review, Vietnamese is a tone language which means every word has associated with it a particular tone of voice (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1977). In contrast, tone associates with English at sentence level to ‘change the meaning from a directive, to a question, to a statement of fact, and intonation can be used to show surprise, anger, happiness, depression, or sadness.’ (Hwa-Froelich, 2002, p. 267). Furthermore, the monosyllabic character of Vietnamese language challenges Vietnamese learners of English to pronounce multisyllabic words. According to Carr (2012), learners of English are very different from native speakers, who strikingly can judge what syllable in a word receives primary stress, secondary stress or not. Thus, learners of English have no other choice to store vocabulary and their stress pattern rather than rote learning.

One of the unique features of this research is that the participants presented about political topics. Vocabulary in political themes normally contains a large amount of multisyllabic words and complex terminologies. Those can be the discipline itself like *pragmatics, state rivalry, sovereignty* or *humanitarian* to private names of VIPs like *Angela Merkel, François Hollande* or of treaties and agreements such as *Counternarcotic Letter of Agreement, Bilateral Human Rights Dialogue*. To pronounce these words intelligibly, the students needed to understand the systems of words stress as well as get used to the ways these words are pronounced on the media and remember them. However, it was not the case:

Like many other friends of mine, when I faced difficult and unfamiliar words, I often spoke it unclearly or smaller so that nobody would notice. But in fact, no one understand us if we do like that. (D.Binh, interview)

As analyzed above, at the beginning stage of the project, the participants did not recognize the unstressed sounds and tended to pronounce vowels to their strong form. As a matter of

fact, pronouncing this way did not allow any word stress because stress only happens when one of the syllable in a word is pronounced longer, louder and higher in pitch (Beckman & Edwards, 1994, p. 14). Besides, the participants were inclined not to shift stress when the word they spoke was deprived in form. The evidence for the lack of understanding about word stress derivation was like when the students spoke of *strategy* and *strategic*. In the former word, the primary stress is on the first syllable /'stræt.ə.dʒi/, but it is on the second syllable in the later one /strə'ti:.dʒɪk/. All of the participants encountered the word 'strategic' for the first time in this project would pronounced it as /'stræti.dʒɪk/, they kept both the vowel sound and the placement of stress on the first syllable intact while still pronounce the second syllable to its strong form.

Below is the table recording some of the participants' word stress mistakes in the first three sessions:

TABLE 3:

Participants' Word Stress Mistakes in the First Three Sections

Mistakes	Correct stress
CONTROL /kontrô/ (/l/ was omitted)	conTROL /kən'trəʊl/
BOOMErang (effect) /bu:.mê.ræŋ/	BOOmerang (effect) /'bu:.mə.ræŋ/
ASYMMEtically /eɪ.sɪ:met.rɪ.kli/	AsymMETrically /eɪ.sɪ'met.rɪ.kli/
FOREIGN /'fɔr.eɪn/	FOreign /'fɔr.ən/
CONSIderable /kɒn.sɪd.ər.ə.bl/	considerable /kən'sɪd.ər.ə.bl/

<p>ORTHOdox</p> <p>/ɔ:.θo.dɒs/</p> <p><i>(/k/ was omitted)</i></p>	<p>ORThodox</p> <p>/'ɔ:.θə.dɒks/</p>
<p>MANIpulate</p> <p>/manɪp.ju.leɪt/</p>	<p>maNIpulate</p> <p>/mə'nɪp.ju.leɪt/</p>
<p>RepreSENTAtive</p> <p>/,rep.rɪ'zen.teɪ.tɪ/</p> <p><i>(/v/ was omitted)</i></p>	<p>RepreSENTative</p> <p>/,rep.rɪ'zen.tə.tɪv/</p>
<p>TErriTOrY</p> <p>/ter.i.tər.i/</p>	<p>TErritory</p> <p>/'ter.i.tər.i/</p>
<p>PERSPECTive</p> <p>/pɜ:spek.tɪ/</p> <p><i>(/v/ was omitted)</i></p>	<p>perSPECTive</p> <p>/pə'spek.tɪv/</p>
<p>SEPAratist</p> <p>/sep.eɪr.ə.tɪs/</p> <p><i>(/t/ was omitted)</i></p>	<p>SEparatist</p> <p>/'sep.ər.ə.tɪst/</p>
<p>ULtiMATEly</p> <p>/'ʌl.tɪ.meɪt.li/</p>	<p>ULtimately</p> <p>/'ʌl.tɪ.mət.li/</p>
<p>FORWARD</p> <p>/'fɔ:.wɑ:k/</p> <p><i>(/d/ was omitted and changed to a sound like a /k/)</i></p>	<p>FORward</p> <p>/'fɔ:.wəd/</p>
<p>EVALuate</p> <p>/evæl.ju.eɪ/</p> <p><i>(/t/ was omitted)</i></p>	<p>eVALuate</p> <p>/ɪ'væl.ju.eɪt/</p>
<p>autoNOMous</p>	<p>auTONomous</p>

/ɔ:tə.n.o.məs/	/ɔ:'tɒn.ə.məs/
eCONOMIC	ecoNOMIC
/,i:ko'nɒm.ɪk/	/,i:kə'nɒm.ɪk/
CONSENSUS	conSENSUS
/kɒn'sen.səs/ (/t/ was omitted)	/kən'sent.səs/
ReVOLUtionary	RevoLUtionary
/,re'vɒ.lu:ʃən.ər.i/ (/o/ was changed to /ɒ/)	/,rev.ə'lu:ʃən.ər.i/
deveLOPment	deVELOPMENT
/dɪve'lɒp.mənt/ (/ə/ was changed to /ɒ/)	/dɪ'vel.əp.mənt/

These above examples indicated that the participants had serious problems with word stress. This also co-existed with other types of mistakes with vowels and consonant reduction. They did not remember the stress patterns and gave the wrong stress placement in an unpredictable way. However, there were still three common trends. Firstly, for bi-syllabic words, they put equal strength, length and pitch on both of the sounds. Consequently, it was impossible to tell where the stress syllable was just by listening to their speech. Secondly, in some cases, for words having more than three syllables, stress was likely to be placed at the third syllable. Lastly, as analyzed above, they did not notice the weak form of some syllables so it was also difficult for listeners to identify the stress.

Positive changes were made during the process. In session six, there were a mixture of wrong and correct pronunciation and stress placement. To illustrate, Lee pronounced correct stress in words like *terri'torial issues* or *diplo'matic policy* but still placed wrong stress on *deve'lopment* and *in'stability*. Phong also made the same mistake with *deve'lopment* but he pronounced *eco'homic* and *po'litical coope'ration* with correct stress. For words that they had the habit of putting the stress in a wrong position, it was much harder to change than other words. It was also observed that the participants gradually gained their confidence in word stress after the first three sessions:

Word stress is relatively easier because we can check it on the dictionary. Recently, I also revise some rules in word stress and I can apply them. (Phong, interview)

I am confident when pronounce word with suffixes like –tion or –ity. I know what syllable needs stress. (Cuong, interview)

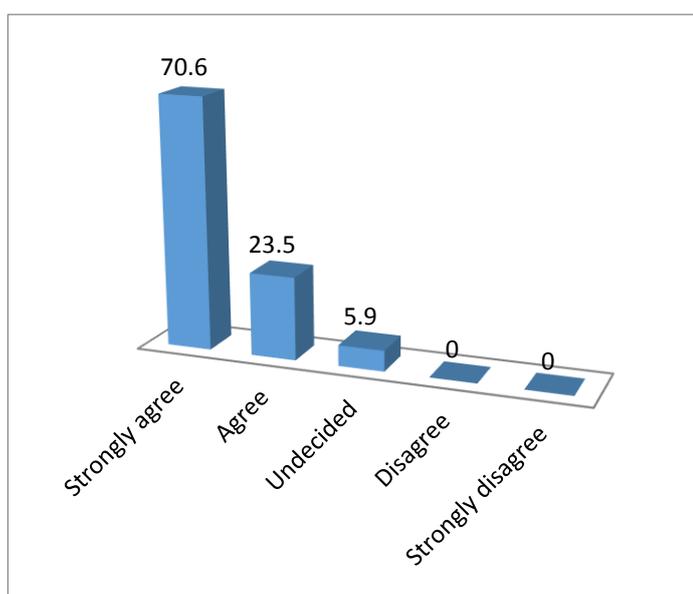
Their confidence in word stress showed in the last presentation sessions. Almost long complicated words were produced clearly and calmly such as *infrastructure, peaceful negotiation, evacuation, humanitarian crisis, administration* or *multipolar world legitimate interest, asymmetrically, phytosanitary measures, referendum* or *annexation*.

4.2. Participant Attitudes towards the Group Presentation Project

The great majority of participants appreciated the opportunity to join and showed that they were quite satisfied with this project. From the feedback questionnaires, 16 out of 17 participants in this project were totally positive about the usefulness of group presentations (See Graph 1). Most of them also thought that the amount of knowledge, not just in terms of speaking and pronunciation but about English in general, could be greater than listening to lectures (See Graph 2).

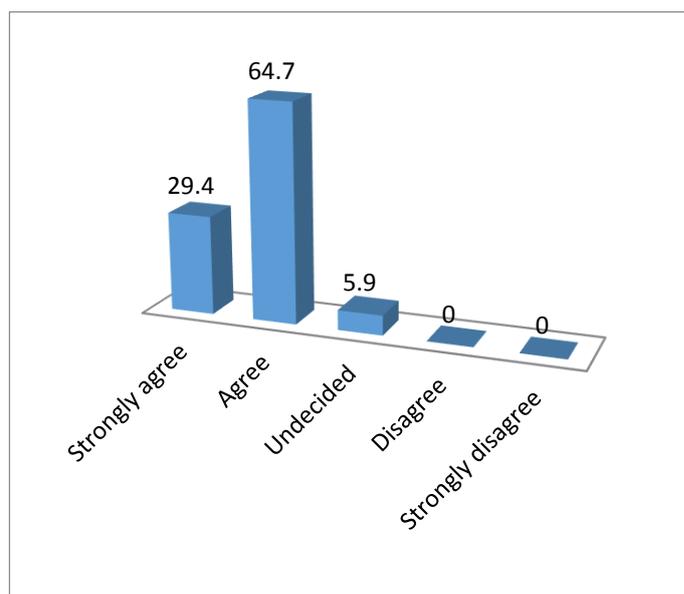
GRAPH 1:

Usefulness of Group Presentations



GRAPH 2:

Group Presentations More Useful Than Lecture-only Class



The reasons stated by participants were mainly that they had time to practice. They became aware of both their strengths and weaknesses and developed suitable learning strategy to overcome what hindered them.

Vietnamese students often focus and spend most of their time on grammar or writing, but we do not spend enough time practicing speaking. So, when we talk to foreigners, we often feel nervous and inconvenient about ourselves. Presenting in English gives us opportunity to practice speaking. (D.Binh, interview)

For most the participants, the merit of presentation lied in the fact that they could prepare for what they would speak in advance:

Presenting in English creates a suitable environment to train our speaking skills. Some of us find it hard to explain our points. Presenting is a way we can organize our ideas in advance. With careful preparation, we feel more confident speaking English. (Nam, interview)

For others, their effort of speaking correct was brought about by the pressure of successfully delivering the message across:

I think presenting in English is a good way to improve speaking skills. Normally, when we speak English, we can't really control our accuracy. But when we stand in front of people, we need to be more responsible and even more confident. (Hieu, interview)

The data of the questionnaires and interviews suggest that the success of this project was not mainly because of the guidance of the teacher-research but the awakening of the participants. This is shown in the student feedback questionnaires as well as the interviews. The following snatches of data illustrate this awareness:

In the past, I didn't focus on both word stress and intonation. After this project, I pay more attention on word stress. My intonation is still a problem. (feedback questionnaire 5)

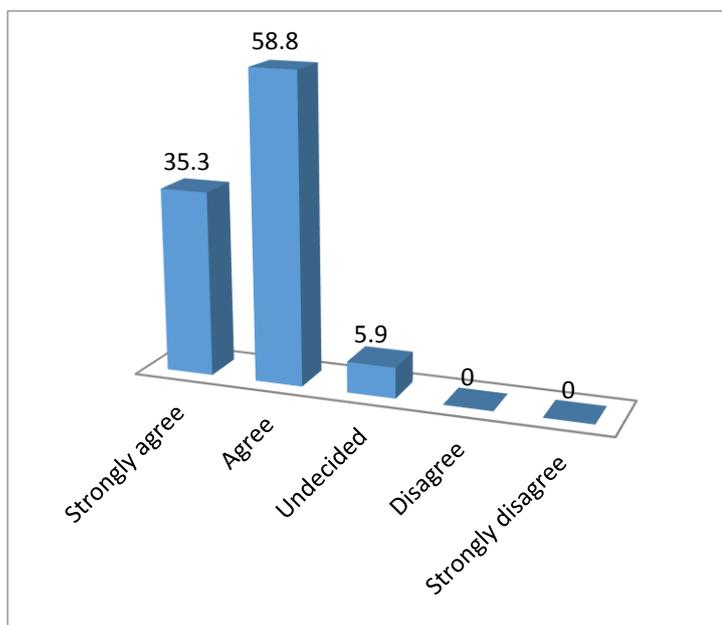
Before this project, I did not really care about the word stress, I pronounced words by habit. Now, if I don't know how to pronounce a word, I check the dictionary. I also find out some pronunciation rules. (feedback questionnaire 9)

Pronunciation is difficult. So, I made a plan. Each time, I tried to focus on one area. For example, last week, I focused on –s endings, this week, I focused on –ed endings. I tried my best not to make mistakes with each of the area. (D.Binh, interview)

Considering the content of the abovementioned comments, we can see the participants’ thoughts about the importance of pronunciation changed due to the project. They had chances to explore their own speaking and pronunciation ability. The evidence presented here suggests some of them started to recognize their weakness; others made plans to overcome the difficulty. The reasoning given by students supports the high percentage in confirming that practicing presentations helps them to speak with clearer English sounds and stress. These findings are presented as descriptive statistics in the following graphics:

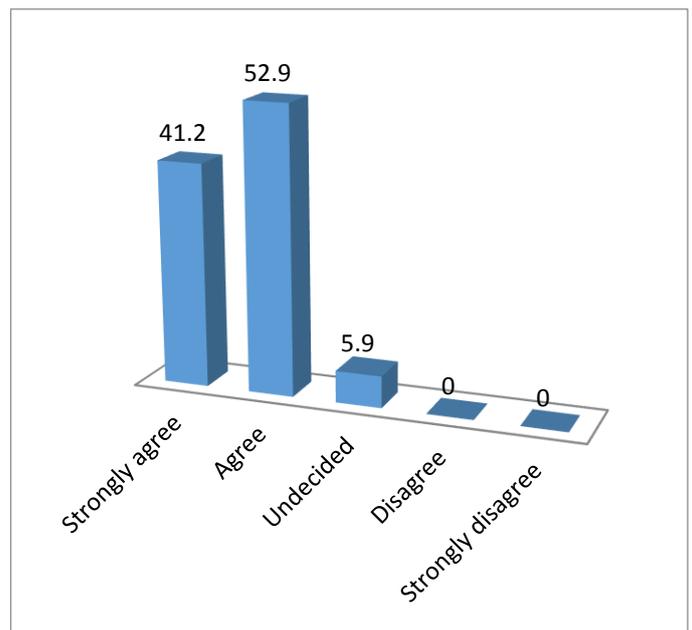
GRAPH 3:

Group Presentations Assist in Articulating Clearer Vowel and Consonant Sounds



GRAPH 4:

Group Presentations Assist in Speaking with More Accurate Word and Sentence Stress

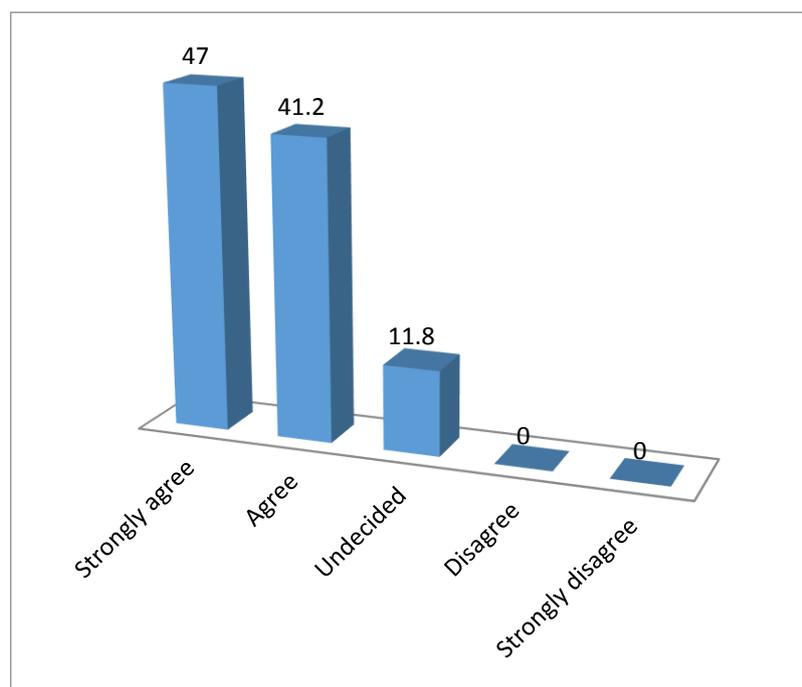


Other benefits reported from the project include the participants’ incidental vocabulary acquisitions. A great deal of vocabulary was learned and consolidated through eight weeks of practising presentations. Among these lexical items were items of political terminologies such as *Eastern Orthodox*, *pragmatism*, or *civil disobedience* most of which were incidentally multisyllabic. Hence, students did not only accumulate these words through the process of preparing the scripts but also perfected their sounds by checking them on the Internet or

dictionaries, and repeating them when they rehearsed their presentations. This process enhances their awareness both of the target pronunciation and of the gap between their own initial pronunciation and the L1 models. Since every week, they chose a new topic, they varied their amount of knowledge of private names relating to the international breaking news, such as *Petro Poroshenko* – President of Ukraine, *Francois Hollande* – French President, *Angela Merkel* – German Prime Minister and *Debaltsevo, Kiev, Crimean referendum* (when talking about the crises in Ukraine). It is easy to see that many of these above mentioned words are non-English in origin. In order to pronounce these words correctly, the participants had to be exposed many times to the way they are pronounced in official media in order to remember them, for example, the hard (correct) and soft (Anglicized) ‘g’ as in ‘*Angela*’ in German. The evidence for the accumulation of knowledge was also reflected in data derived from the feedback questionnaire:

GRAPH 5:

Group Presentations Help Acquire New Vocabularies and Pronunciation



The participants had different reasons for their gain in vocabulary:

I wrote my own presentation scripts...I learned a lot about grammar and my vocabulary range is wider. I think all my English skills are getting better. (D.Binh, interview)

When I speak a loud I can remember words. Before I took part in this project, I normally wrote down words to remember them but I found out that speak them loudly can help me to remember them even better. (Hung, interview)

The accidental or serendipitous acquisitions of vocabulary and grammar, in turn, encouraged students to try harder in preparing and making presentation.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1. Overall Evaluation of the Project

Evidently, the participants took advantage of this group presentation project to practice and improve their pronunciation skills. Their levels of improvement, however, were highly diverse. The first group of students, high-competence group, who were already good at English in general and speaking in particular found that their pronunciation underwent positive changes but not dramatically. They fixed minor sound mistakes and strengthened their correct placement of stress. The main beneficiary was the medium-competence group. They learned a great deal from exchanging ideas and peer editing with other members as well as observing the stronger presenters. They could notice their improvements overtime and consolidate their sense of confidence by receiving positive feedback from their classmates. Interestingly, the more progress they made, the more excited they felt about the project. There was the last group of students, lower-competence group, who did not make much progress in pronunciation. Most of them made excuse that they did not have enough time to prepare for their presentations and relied too much on their notes when presenting. Also, they could not give clear answers about their strengths and weaknesses when being interviewed. The one thing in common about the students who stepped up in this project was that they developed their sense of responsibility to deliver the messages across and genuinely wished that their audience could understand what they presented. Seemingly, the elements were missing in the last group.

Although the intended purpose of this present project was to heighten the participants' pronunciation, its results confirmed the other benefits of presentations mentioned in the literature including substantial gain in vocabularies, grammar structures and self-assurance. Some vocabulary, especially political terminology and multisyllabic words as well as complex grammar structures, were accumulated through the process of preparing for presentations. Self-confidence, on the other hand, was boosted through the procedure of

frequently performing in public. The students also reported that they could build more background knowledge about international affairs and political disciplines.

5.2. Reflections and Pedagogical Implications

Within the researcher's observation, pronunciation errors had been made mainly because the participants had not been aware of the problems in their spoken language. Most of the participants in this project yielded positive results in pronunciation because they developed accurate awareness about both their strengths and weaknesses in articulating sounds and stress. I firmly believe that learners should be able to recognize their mistakes so that they could narrow the gap between their versions of English with the target ones. As this research results have proven, noticing why and how something is wrong surely benefited the participants' phonological learning.

The act of addressing the participants' pronunciation errors explicitly was not the only cause for their improvements; it was also because of the constructive efforts of the instructor. This project was conducted in such a way that grammar and vocabulary mistakes had been limited or eliminated in advance so that the students could pay their full attention to pronunciation. Some of the significant ramifications were that the students actually '*learned a lot about grammar*' (D. Binh, interview) and they gained more insight into political terminology. Secondly, each presentation session was managed so that there was enough room for pedagogical instructions. Theory about sounds including minimal pair sounds, voiced and unvoiced, sounds that are not available in Vietnamese language and stress patterns were reintroduced. Again, the role of teachers or instructors in such a project like this is of paramount importance.

Taking these above issues into consideration, there are several suggestions for future group presentations projects to maximize benefits in language teaching in general and in teaching speaking in particular. Firstly, the students should be grouped into mixed-ability group and led by a strong and responsible leader. The idea was suggested in earlier research of Truong and Noemy (2008) and confirmed by this present research. Three out of the four leaders were the role models for their own group members although their working styles were very different. Secondly, teachers/ instructors should give detailed feedback on each presentation. In our experience, for a Vietnamese classroom, teachers' comments and feedback have been always valued; nevertheless, teachers should also be sensitive with individual's trait. Thus,

positive feedback should be raised in public and negative feedback should be given in person. Finally, students should be judged by a consistent benchmarks or criteria. These criteria should be introduced in advance so that everybody can follow and use them as own guideline.

REFERENCES

- Andrew, M. (2006). Speaking about film and learning about speaking: Teaching speaking through film study. *The TESOLANZ Journal*, 14, 16-31.
- Baranowski, M., & Weir, K. (2011). Peer evaluation in the political science classroom. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(04), 805-811.
- Beckman, M. E., & Edwards, J. (1994). Articulatory evidence for differentiating stress categories. *Papers in laboratory phonology III: Phonological structure and phonetic form*, 7-33.
- Brown*, T., & Morrissey, L. (2004). The effectiveness of verbal self-guidance as a transfer of training intervention: its impact on presentation performance, self efficacy and anxiety 1. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 41(3), 255-271.
- Çakır, İ., & Baytar, B. (2014). Foreign language learners' views on the importance of learning the target language pronunciation. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 10(1), 99-110
- Carr, P. (2012). *English phonetics and phonology: an introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Center for Applied Linguistics (n.d.). *Indochinese refugee education guides #7. Adult education series: English Pronunciation exercises for speakers of Vietnamese*. Washington, DC: National Indochinese Clearinghouse.
- Chou, M. H. (2011). The influence of learner strategies on oral presentations: A comparison between group and individual performance. *English for Specific Purposes*, 30(4), 272-285.
- Dang, T. K. A., Nguyen, H. T. M., & Le, T. T. T. (2013). The impacts of globalisation on EFL teacher education through English as a medium of instruction: An example from Vietnam. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 14(1), 52-72
- Ellis, R., Basturkmen, H., & Loewen, S. (2001). Learner uptake in communicative ESL lessons. *Language learning*, 51(2), 281-318.

- Girard, T., Pinar, M., & Trapp, P. (2011). An Exploratory Study of Class Presentations and Peer Evaluations: Do Students Perceive the Benefits?. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, 15(1), 77.
- Hincks, R. (2010). Speaking rate and information content in English lingua franca oral presentations. *English for specific purposes*, 29(1), 4-18.
- Hwa-Froelich, D., Hodson, B. W., & Edwards, H. T. (2002). Characteristics of Vietnamese phonology. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 11(3), 264-273.
- Hall, S. (1997). Integrating Pronunciation for Fluency in Presentation Skills.
- Izumi, S., & Bigelow, M. (2000). Does output promote noticing and second language acquisition?. *Tesol Quarterly*, 34(2), 239-278.
- King, J. (2002). Preparing EFL learners for oral presentations. *Dong Hwa Journal of Humanistic Studies*, 4, 401-418.
- Lee, E., & Park, M. (2008). Student Presentation as a Means of Learning English for Upper Intermediate to Advanced Level Students. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 12(1), 47-60.
- London, J. D. (Ed.). (2011). *Education in Vietnam*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Morley, J. (1991). The pronunciation component in teaching English to speakers of other languages. *Tesol Quarterly*, 25(3), 481-520.
- Osburne, A. G. (1996). Final cluster reduction in English L2 speech: A case study of a Vietnamese speaker. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(2), 164-181.
- Pavlenko, A. (Ed.). (2011). *Thinking and speaking in two languages* (Vol. 77). Multilingual matters.
- Thanh Pham, T. H., & Renshaw, P. (2015). Formative assessment in Confucian heritage culture classrooms: activity theory analysis of tensions, contradictions and hybrid practices. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 40(1), 45-59
- Prichard, C., & Ferreira, D. (2014). The Effects of Poster Presentations and Class Presentations on Low-Proficiency Learners. *TESOL Journal*, 5(1), 172-185.

Santry, P. A. (1992). *The way South Vietnamese pronounce English* (Doctoral dissertation, Victoria University).

Schnettler, B. (2006). Orchestrating bullet lists and commentaries. A video performance analysis of computer supported presentations. *Video Analysis, Frankfurt am Main: Lang*, 155-168.

Tuan, T. A., & Neomy, S. (2007). Investigating group planning in preparation for oral presentations in an EFL class in Vietnam. *RELC journal*, 38(1), 104-124.

Vietnamese Pronunciation Problems – Speak English Like A Native (2015). Retrieved from <http://englishspeaklikenative.com/resources/common-pronunciation-problems/vietnamese-pronunciation-problems/>

APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Question 1: Do you think presenting in English is a good way to practice speaking? Why or why not?

Question 2: Do you think speaking ideas aloud is an effective way to practice pronunciation? Why or why not?

Question 3: What are your problems with group presentations?

Question 4: Think of the pronunciation issues you face when giving a group presentation. What aspects of pronunciation do you find easy?

Question 5: What aspects of pronunciation do you find difficult/ challenging?

Question 6: Has your pronunciation improved in the last 2/4/6/8 weeks?

- (If the answer is “yes”,) how do you think your pronunciation has improved?
- (If the answer is “no”,) why do you think that is?

Question 7: In your own judgment, what were the strengths of your pronunciation before this program?

Question 8: What were the weaknesses of your pronunciation before this program?

Question 9: What are the strengths of your pronunciation now?

Question 10: What are the weaknesses of your pronunciation now?

Other optional questions:

1. What do you think about your vocabulary range after taking part in group presentations in the last 2/4/6/8 weeks?
2. Are you more confident now than you were before taking part in this project? (If yes, in what ways?)
3. How has taking part in this project influenced your attitude towards delivering group presentations?
4. Is there any other way of practicing pronunciation you prefer?
5. What sort of feedback would help you? What form of feedback would you like to be given? (For example individual feedback from teachers or peer feedback)

APPENDIX B:

STUDENT FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRE

1. This group presentation project is useful for me.

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Undecided d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

2. For studying speaking in general and pronunciation in particular, presentation class is more effective than the lecture-only class.

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Undecided d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

3. Preparing for delivering presentations is helpful for acquiring new vocabulary of politics and international affairs as well as how to pronounce them correctly.

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Undecided d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

4. Practicing presenting in English helps me to speak with clearer English sounds (both vowels and consonants).

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Undecided d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

5. Practicing presenting helps me to speak with clearer English stress (at both word and sentence levels).

- a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Undecided d. Disagree e. Strongly disagree

6. If your answer for question 4 is (a) or (b), please answer the following question: Can you give some examples of the words that you now realize you pronounced incorrectly

.....
.....

7. If your answer for question 5 is (a) or (b), please answer the following question: Can you clarify some stress patterns you learned to handle after this project? What problems with stress do you feel you solved?

.....
.....

8. Offer any suggestions about learning pronunciation by presentations.

.....
.....

(adapted from Lee and Park 2008)