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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Students' Attitudes towards Teacher' Using Minimal Pairs to Teach English Discrete Sounds: A Survey on First-Year English Majored Students at Dong Nai University**

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**ABSTRACT**

The current study was conducted to explore English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' attitudes towards teachers' using minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds. The participants of this research were fifty students who were English majored freshmen at Dong Nai University. For data collection, a questionnaire survey was designed and administered to fifty students. The result indicates that most students have positive perceptions of using the minimal pairs technique in improving their production of English language sounds. However, some students have difficulty in pronouncing the minimal pairs such as /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, /θ/ and /ð/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. Therefore, some suggestions are proposed to help students solve these problems and produce and acquire English individual sounds more accurately.

**KEYWORDS**

Minimal pairs, English discrete sounds, students' attitudes.

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**1. Introduction**

Accurate pronunciation is crucial for effective communication in English. Proper pronunciation can be defined as a reproduction of language sounds so that the intended message is effectively passed and understood by a fluent speaker. Mispronouncing a phoneme will affect listeners' understanding of what the speaker says and interfere with communication (for example, pronouncing "this" with a long vowel, resulting in the word being understood as "these."). According to Kelly (2001), "A learner who consistently mispronounces a range of phonemes can be extremely difficult for a speaker from another language community to understand." Many Foreign Language learners encounter difficulties in pronouncing English sounds, which potentially lead to misunderstandings in oral communication. Therefore, English language teachers should make an attempt to find feasible pedagogical techniques to impart sounds of English and encourage the learners to produce English discrete sounds accurately. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) provided several techniques that could be used to teach pronunciation. Among them, the minimal pairs drill seems to be an effective technique that helps the learners pronounce English sounds correctly. The technique helps students distinguish similar and problematic sounds in the target language through listening discrimination and spoken practice. There has been research on the effectiveness of the minimal pairs technique in teaching English discrete sounds. Fara (2015) studied the effectiveness of minimal pair drills towards students' ability to pronounce similar sounds of words. The results showed teachers' employment of the minimal pairs technique helped students improve their pronunciation of similar sounds. Nur and Rahman (2019) investigated the use of the minimal pair technique in teaching pronunciation to second-year students at a university. The researchers concluded that the minimal pair technique had a significant effect on students' ability to pronounce similar sounds of consonant words.

Reviewing the previous research, the researcher finds that all the studies above share the same conclusion: that the minimal pairs technique facilitates students in pronouncing English sounds. During many years of teaching English pronunciation to first-year

English major students at Dong Nai University (DNU), the researcher has employed the minimal pairs technique and found out the impact of the technique on students' improvement of pronunciation. However, sometimes some of the students are not eager to participate in practicing minimal pairs. It is likely that they have some problems when practicing minimal pairs or they are not interested in the minimal pairs technique. Students' active engagement in language learning may exhibit students' positive attitudes towards language. According to Larasati & Simatupang (2020), students who have a positive attitude towards language produce better performance, while negative attitudes can hinder the learning process and reduce student achievement. Therefore, attitude is considered an important factor because it is very influential in language learning. Prastiwi & Suharso (2018) said, "Students who have a positive attitude seem happy in learning English and try hard to get the best score on the test. Negative attitudes reduce student motivation, and learning achievement is not successful; negative attitudes make it difficult for students to learn English; besides that, negative attitudes make students not focus on learning and often play during English learning (Kartubi, 2017). From the reasons above, the researcher finds it necessary to do a study of students' attitudes towards teacher's using minimal pairs to teach English individual sounds to figure out students' perceptions of the technique. In addition, some suggestions will be offered to foster students' positive attitudes towards the minimal pairs technique because positive attitudes will make students engage in the learning process and contribute to successful learning.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Minimal pairs**

#### **2.1.1 Definitions**

Avery and Ehrlich (1995) stated that a "minimal pair" is a pair of words with diverse meanings and different pronunciations based solely on one sound. This means that a minimal pair is viewed as a technique to distinguish English sounds in words that have quite similar sounds but, indeed, different meanings.

Yule (2005) defined minimal pairs in another way. According to him, "When two words such as *pat* and *bat* are identical in form except for contrast in one phoneme, occurring in the same position, the two words are described as a minimal pair. More accurately, they would be classified as a minimal pair in the phonology of English.

Plag et al. (2009) gave a brief definition of minimal pairs. A minimal pair is a pair of words that differ in only one sound but differ in meaning.

A minimal pair is a concept in linguistics that refers to a pair of words or morphemes that differ in meaning by only one sound segment, typically a single phoneme. In other words, minimal pairs are words that are identical in form except for a specific sound or phoneme, which, when changed, alters the meaning of the word (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2015).

From those definitions above, it can be concluded that the minimal pair technique is a teaching technique that provides two words that are similar in sounds but have one phonemic difference between them, such as 'sheep' and 'ship'. The contrastive phonemes in this instance are the phonemes /i:/ and /ɪ/. This technique is used to help students practice and improve their pronunciation of distinctive sounds in English because some English sounds are difficult to hear and pronounce.

#### **2.1.2 The relationship between minimal pairs and phonemic acquisition**

Coelho (2004) states, "Second language learners may have difficulty not only in producing some of the sounds of English but also in hearing the differences between the way they produce a sound and the way the sound is produced by a native speaker of English. For this reason, instruction in pronunciation begins with helping students develop their phonemic awareness: the ability to perceive sounds and subtle differences among sounds". Coelho proposed some techniques to raise learners' phonemic awareness. Among them, minimal pairs are also included as a tool to help learners perceive differences between sounds.

## **2.2 Attitudes**

### **2.2.1 Definitions**

Chaiken (1993) has stated that attitude is a psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of likes or dislikes. There is always a very close relationship between learning attitudes and motivation because motivation is considered a construct made up of certain attitudes.

According to Crystal (1997), attitudes are the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of others. Therefore, language attitude is a construct that shows linguistic behavior in particular.

Hogg and Vaughan (2005) defined attitude as "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols".

To sum up, an attitude refers to our feelings and shapes our behaviors towards learning.

### **2.2.2 The important roles of attitude in language learning**

It is stated that attitude towards language learning plays a crucial role in language learning as it influences learners' success or failure (Abidin et al., 2012; Finch, 2008). This notion stands to reason in the sense that if students have a positive attitude towards the process of learning a language, they will enjoy the lesson more and, as a result, they can catch up with more knowledge and skills of the language. On the other hand, when the students' attitude towards language learning is negative, they will be reluctant and pay less attention during the teaching-learning activity. According to Gardner (1985), attitude is considered a component of motivation in language learning. Brown (2000) describes several studies about the effects of attitude on language learning and concludes that "positive attitudes towards the self, the native language group, and the target language group enhanced proficiency". This means that when students with positive attitudes experience success, the attitudes are reinforced, whereas students with negative attitudes may fail to progress and become even more negative in their language learning. Kara (2009) stated that a positive attitude could lead to the exhibition of positive behaviors toward courses of study. In brief, attitude towards language learning plays a vital role, so teachers should understand students' attitudes clearly and try to help them to have a positive attitude to their language learning process.

### **2.3 Relevant researches**

Minimal pair drills have been widely used in teaching pronunciation for a long time (Celce-Murica et.al.1996). There are many studies on using minimal pairs in English language teaching. I found out some of them are relevant to my research.

Luu (2010) did a study with the topic: "Teaching English discrete sounds through minimal pairs". The subjects of his study are English non-majored students at Hung Vuong University. His paper aimed to examine possible problems they cope with in recognizing and producing English discrete sounds as well as in what way and to what extent minimal pairs facilitate the teaching and learning of English discrete sounds. The findings revealed pronunciation problems that all of the students face and placed emphasis on minimal pairs as an effective tool to teach or learn English discrete sounds.

Fatmawati (2014) pointed out in her research the application of minimal pair to improve the pronunciation of voiced and voiceless sounds. The eighth grade students of SMPN 13 Palu in the academic year 2013/2014 were the participants of the study. The result showed that the application of the minimal pair technique was effective in teaching English pronunciation.

Lubis, Batubara and Fathani (2023) conducted a study on understanding English Minimal Pairs of Vowel. This research explores the importance of studying English minimal pairs of vowels and their impact on language learners' pronunciation skills. The findings of this study revealed that a comprehensive understanding and application of English minimal pairs of vowels are vital for language learners striving to achieve optimal pronunciation proficiency.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Research questions**

- a. What are students' attitudes towards the use of minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds? Are their attitudes positive or negative?
- b. Did the students have any problems when their teachers used minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds? If yes, what are suggestions to deal with such problems?

### **3.2. Participants**

The survey was carried out with the participation of 50 English majored freshmen at Dong Nai University. These students completed a module named Practical English Phonetics. In their pronunciation class, the minimal pairs technique was implemented to teach English language sounds.

In order to collect reliable data, I chose 25 students of English majored class A and 25 students of English majored B randomly without any criteria set before. Furthermore, investigating students from two different classes may give feasible results for my study because different teachers would employ minimal pair techniques in various ways.

### 3.3 Instruments

The questionnaire was the main tool to collect the data for my research. My questionnaire was made up of 12 questions. The first seven questions focused on students' general attitudes towards the use of minimal pairs to teach separate sounds. The rest of the questionnaire surveyed students' attitudes towards the effect of using minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds. This part of the questionnaire asked the participants to make scalar judgments on a five-point scale (5=strongly agree, 4=agree; 3=Neutral, 2= disagree; 1=strongly disagree). (See Appendix A)

### 3.4. Procedures

In order to get the data, I delivered the questionnaire to the students after class. Students in the two classes were asked to do the questionnaire on two different days. When they received the questionnaires, I helped them finish the survey well. Instructions on how to do each part of the questionnaire were given with the hope that my students would be clear about what I wanted them to do in the questionnaire. I translated some questions into Vietnamese so that it was easy for the participants to respond. The time required to complete the questionnaire is about 20 minutes. After the questionnaires were collected, I checked all of the questionnaires to make sure that they answered all of my questions. In case any respondents leave unanswered questions, they are asked to complete them.

The data was analyzed based on calculating the percentage of students who chose each answer. The findings were given through the interpretation of the results presented in the tables.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Results from students' general attitudes towards teacher's using minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds

#### Question 1: The total length of the students' exposure to English.

Class	Number of respondents	4-7 years	8-10 years	Over 10 years
English majored class A	25	72 %	16 %	12 %
English majored class B	25	24 %	60 %	16 %

Table 1

As shown in Table 1, The percentage of students in class A who have less than seven-year studying English is 72 %. In class B, only 24 % of the students studied English within 4-7 years. Furthermore, the number of students in class B who studied English within 8-10 years is higher than those who are in class A. The respondents in class B who have studied English for over ten years comprise 16 %. Meanwhile, the percentage of students in class A who have over ten years of learning English experience is 12 %. This result may help the teacher find appropriate ways to use minimal pairs to teach the two classes because the students who have less English learning experience may find difficulty when learning English sounds with minimal pairs.

#### Question 2: Student's time for being taught minimal pairs

Number of respondents	Number of respondents	High school	University	Others
English majored class A	25	8 %	84 %	8 %
English majored class B	25	20 %	80 %	0 %

Table 2

The result from Table 2 shows that most of the students in classes A and B ( more than 80%) have been taught English discrete sounds through minimal pairs when they are at university. This result proves that high school teachers rarely mention this technique when teaching pronunciation.

**Question 3: Students' opinion about the frequency of using minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds**

Class	Number of respondents	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
English majored class A	25	56%	32%	12%	0 %
English majored class B	25	52%	36%	12%	0%

**Table 3**

Observing Table 3, the writer finds that the degree of frequency of using minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds is high. This means that the teacher mainly focuses on minimal pair drills to help students acquire individual sounds better.

**Question 4: Students' opinion on sounds teacher used minimal pairs to teach**

Class	Number of respondents	vowels	consonants	both	Others
English majored class A	25	0%	0%	100%	0 %
English majored class B	25	0%	0%	100%	0%

**Table 4**

According to Table 4, the teachers of the two classes used minimal pairs to teach both vowels and consonants. This means that both of the teachers want to help their students improve their pronunciation of both vowel and consonant sounds.

**Question 5: Learning English sounds through minimal pairs**

Class	Number of respondents	Very useful	Useful	Slightly useful	Not very useful
English majored class A	25	44 %	48 %	8 %	0 %
English majored class B	25	52%	44%	4%	0%

**Table 5**

As displayed in Table 5, we can infer that the majority of the respondents of the two classes find that learning English discrete sounds through minimal pairs is useful. Only a small number of students ( from 4 % to 8 % ) think this classroom activity is slightly helpful. It is possible that the teachers of the two classes use a technique of using minimal pairs to teach English sounds effectively so that the students of the two classes find the usefulness of such a technique in their pronunciation learning.

**Question 6: Students' attitudes towards how much this technique helps them acquire English discrete sounds**

Class	Number of respondents	Very much	much	Not much
English majored class A	25	40%	52%	8 %
English majored class B	25	44%	48%	8%

**Table 6**

As Table 6 shows, the percentage of respondents in English majored class B suppose that minimal pairs don't improve their pronunciation much occupied 8 % of the total, while there are 52% of the respondents think that such technique of acquiring English discrete sounds helps them much.

**Question 7: Students' opinion about problems they encountered when their teacher used minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds**

Class	Number of respondents	YES	NO	Problems
English majored class A	25	85%	15 %	
English majored class B	25	88%	12%	

**Table 7**

As presented in Table 7, almost all of the students ( over 80%) of the two classes answered that they didn't have problems when their teacher used the minimal pairs technique in teaching English discrete sounds. Some of the students in both classes stated their troubles in practicing minimal pairs. Below are the problems they listed in their questionnaire:

- Too much minimal pairs practice made me bored.
- There are many minimal pairs, and sometimes I can't remember them.
- I have still found hard to distinguish between /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, /θ/ and /ð/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/.
- I found it difficult to say minimal pairs with /i:/ and /ɪ/

**4.2 Results from students' attitudes towards the effect of using minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds**

This part of the questionnaire investigated students' attitudes towards the effect of using minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds to their teacher. The students of the two classes were asked to give their responses for 5 items. The measurement of their attitudes is based on a Likert scale with five ordered response levels, namely:

- Strongly agree (SA); →Agree (A); →Neutral (N); →Disagree (D)  
→Strongly disagree (SD)

Statements	SA —	A —	N —	D —	SD —
1. I can differentiate between short vowel sounds and long vowel sounds when my teacher used minimal pairs to teach English vowel sounds.	52%	36%	12%	0%	0%
2. I can distinguish between voiced and voiceless consonant sounds when my teacher used minimal pairs to teach English consonant sounds.	48%	44%	8%	0%	0%
3. My teacher helped me to avoid mispronouncing strange sounds to Vietnamese people (e.g. /ʒ/, /dʒ/) when he/she used minimal pairs to teach these sounds.	44%	44%	12%	0%	0%
4. My omitting the word-final consonant might be reduced when I did minimal practice given by my teacher.	56%	36%	8%	0%	0%
5. To some extent, the minimal pair practice that my teacher asked us to do helped me improve my listening skills.	48%	40%	12%	0%	0%

**Table 8: Attitudes of students in English majored class A**

Table 8 shows the attitudes of students who are in English major class A. For statement 1, the participants responded favorably to this statement, with a strong agreement of 52 % of students and 36% agreement. Therefore, we can infer that the participants' attitudes towards the effect of helping them to differentiate between long and short vowel sounds are positive. A small number of students (12%) weren't aware of the role of minimal pairs in helping them acquire vowel sounds. Thus, I think the teacher should pay more attention to raising students' awareness of the significance of minimal pairs in pronunciation.

Students' attitudes towards statement 2 are nearly the same as the attitudes towards statement 1. This indicates that most of the respondents have positive attitudes towards the effect of using minimal pairs in teaching English vowel and consonant sounds. Furthermore, they show their agreement with statements 3, 4, 5. From the results shown in Table 8 for statements 3 and 4, we can easily find that the majority agree that the minimal pairs technique employed by their teacher, to some extent, helped them overcome mispronouncing strange sounds to Vietnamese people, such as /tʃ/, /dʒ/ and avoid omitting word-final consonant. Those are common pronunciation errors that they often have. One more statement towards which the students have positive attitudes is statement 5; 48% of the students strongly agree that the minimal pairs practice that their teacher gave them helped them improve their listening skills. The percentage of students who agree with this statement is 40%. From this result, we may infer that the minimal pairs technique, to some extent, has the effect of improving students' listening skills. It is possible to say that the teacher in this class was successful in using minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds.

Statements	SA —	A —	N —	D —	SD —
1. I can differentiate between short vowel sounds and long vowel sounds when my teacher used minimal pairs to teach English vowel sounds.	40 %	48 %	12%	0%	0%
2. I can distinguish between voiced and voiceless consonant sounds when my teacher used minimal pairs to teach English consonant sounds.	28%	56%	16 %	0%	0%
3. My teacher helped me to avoid mispronouncing strange sounds to Vietnamese people (e.g. /ʒ/, /dʒ/) when he/she used minimal pairs to teach these sounds.	52 %	40 %	8 %	0%	0%
4. My omitting the word-final consonant might be reduced when I did minimal practice given by my teacher.	60%	24%	8%	8%	0%
5. To some extent, the minimal pair practice that my teacher asked us to do helped me improve my listening skills.	72%	20%	8%	0%	0%

**Table 9: Attitudes of students in English majored class B**

The result from Table 9 reveals the attitudes of students in English majored class B towards the effect of using minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds. For statement 1, 48% of the participants show their agreement on the benefits they have received from minimal pairs practice. 40 % of them strongly agree with this statement. This tells us that many of them may distinguish between short vowel and long vowel sounds when the minimal pairs technique is applied to teach English discrete sounds. For statement 2, the result shows their positive attitudes towards the effectiveness of implementing the minimal pairs technique in teaching English consonant sounds. However, the number of students in this class who strongly agreed with this statement is lower than that of students in class A. It is likely that some of the students in this class haven't acquired the differences between voiced and voiceless consonants through the use of minimal pairs. In particular, the percentage of students who strongly agreed with statements 3, 4, and 5 in this class is higher than the one in class A. This means that their attitudes towards statements 3, 4, and 5 are very positive. Thanks to the minimal pairs technique employed by their teacher, common pronunciation problems of students in English major class B were reduced. For example, errors of mispronouncing strange sounds to Vietnamese people or omitting word-final consonants. Moreover, they may improve their listening skill thanks to minimal pairs of practice given by their teacher.

**5. Recommendations and conclusion**

From all of the results above, we find that with the same technique, the two different teachers in the two classes employed different methods, but both of them brought the same benefits to their students. This is clearly proved through the degree of agreement of students for the statements in both classes. The students in both classes have positive attitudes towards the teacher's employment of minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds. However, there are some points that teachers should pay attention to when conducting this technique.

First, there is a need to pay close attention to the overuse of minimal pairs in teaching English discrete sounds, if any. The students in both classes gave their feedback on the use of minimal pairs in teaching pronunciation. This can be seen in the result of question 7. They complained that too much minimal pairs practice had made them bored. Thus, the teachers should pay attention to the amount of minimal pairs of practice that they give their students.

Second, the teachers should find various ways to help students overcome problems they had when they learned English discrete sounds. The result of question 7 showed that some students have found it hard to distinguish some English consonant sounds such as /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, /θ/ and /ð/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. Furthermore, they had difficulty to acquire vowel sound /i:/ and /ɪ/.

The problems above urge the researcher to find some solutions in order to make the pronunciation class more interesting and effective. It is possible that varying techniques in teaching pronunciation could help students be interested in the lesson and acquire the sounds better. The writer suggests some of the following techniques that could be applied to teach English individual sounds. It is hoped that the application of the teaching techniques will be an effective way not only to help learners pronounce discrete sounds correctly but also to form students' positive attitudes towards English pronunciation.

- **Brainstorming:** Choose a topic and ask learners to think of words containing the sound(s) to be practiced. Follow this with an activity using the words.
- **Mirrors:** Learners note the position of their lips and tongue in a mirror when producing a sound.
- **Tongue Twisters.**  
Use sentences that are difficult to pronounce quickly and correctly to practice target sounds (e.g., She sells seashells by the seashore)
- **Exaggeration:** Demonstrate a sound by exaggerating the actions and position of the tongue, teeth, lips, and mouth.
- **Rhyming words:** Learners create lists of rhyming words containing the sound being practiced.
- **Bingo:** Play Bingo using words or pictures that demonstrate a particular sound(s).
- **Pictures:** Learners describe a picture using words containing the target sound. Create a page containing pictures of objects that contain the sounds being practiced. Dictate instructions for learners to follow (circle the skirt, put an x on the shirt, check the stocking). (*Adapted from Taqiyuddin (2021)*)

In conclusion, the results of the study revealed that first-year English majored students at DNU had positive attitudes towards teachers' using minimal pairs to teach English discrete sounds. Having learned this information, it is suggested that the EFL teachers at DNU maintain the use of the minimal pairs technique in teaching English sounds. However, EFL teachers should pay close attention to the frequent use of the minimal pairs technique because overusing the technique could demotivate students to participate in pronunciation activities. Therefore, it is recommended that EFL teachers employ various pronunciation techniques when teaching English sounds so that learners are always willing to engage in pronunciation lessons and acquire effective ways to pronounce individual sounds accurately.

### **5.1 Limitation of the study and suggestion for future research**

The paper helps EFL teachers at DNU understand their students' attitudes towards the minimal pairs technique. In addition, the EFL teachers find it necessary to work out possible ways to exploit the minimal pairs technique effectively so that their students can gain benefits from the technique and improve their pronunciation of English individual sounds. The results of the study mainly contribute to pronunciation teaching at the university level. Due to the constraints of participants, the study can have limitations. Therefore, further research could be conducted with the participation of both students and teachers from other educational level; for example, future research could be done with the participation of both students and teachers from high school levels in both private and public schools. It is hoped that the next research will obtain the results in depth.

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