

**ĐẶC ĐIỂM TIẾNG VIỆT DƯỚI GÓC ĐỘ DẠY
TIẾNG
(VIETNAMESE CHARACTERISTICS
FROM THE ASPECT OF LANGUAGE TEACHING)**

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Abstract

This article presents the characteristics of Vietnamese in terms of phonetics, lexicon and grammar from the standpoint of language teaching. In order to teach effectively, teachers need to have a thorough and systematic understanding of the characteristics of Vietnamese in these aspects, as well as appropriate teaching strategies and methods for specific cases; in connection with which, the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) from a learner-centered perspective is also discussed here.

Keywords: *Vietnamese language teaching, Vietnamese phonetic features, Vietnamese lexicon features, Vietnamese grammar features.*

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1. Vietnamese phonetic characteristics from the view of language teaching

In terms of phonetics, the most significant feature of Vietnamese is tones. Every Vietnamese syllable has a certain tone. Students whose native language is not a tonal language often have difficulty in pronouncing or listening to Vietnamese. Incorrect pronunciation of tones will affect the intonation of the sentence. In addition, it is necessary to pay attention to the phonemes that are present in the Vietnamese phonetic system but not in the phonetic system of the student's mother tongue, because with these phonemes, the student often encounters trouble due to the effect of so-called 'negative transfer' in language learning.

Vietnamese dialect is also an issue to keep in mind when teaching pronunciation. Many foreign students want to know both the standard accent (based on the Hanoi accent) as well as the Saigon accent. The ideal is to teach pronunciation according to standard Vietnamese, at least at the beginning, then introduce students to other local dialects.

For most students, the purpose of learning pronunciation is to understand native Vietnamese interlocutors, rather than to try to attain a 'native-like' accent. In addition, it should be noted that a 'foreign' voice and/or accent is considered a signal for native speakers/listeners to recognize and adjust their perception to avoid misunderstanding.

1.1. Tones

Pronouncing the six Vietnamese tones correctly is very difficult for students: the tones must be delivered at the correct pitch and be distinct enough from the others. In Vietnamese, intonation is strictly regulated by tone. A narrative sentence which has a final word with *thanh sắc* ('acute-angry' tone), must raise the pitch of the voice at the end of the sentence: *Cô ấy đẹp lắm* (She is very beautiful). In contrast, a question with a final word with *thanh huyền* ('grave-lowering' tone) must lower the pitch at the end of

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the sentence, as in: *Cô ấy đẹp lắm à?* (Is she beautiful?) This can be difficult for native English speakers, whose natural tendency is to raise their pitch at the end of a yes/no question.

Teachers should give some examples such as: *Vớ anh hôi lắm / Vớ anh hôi lắm* (Your socks are so smelly / Your wife is so smelly), *Cô ấy đang ăn tôi / Cô ấy đang ăn tôi* (She is having dinner / She is eating me), *Tôi thích ăn cá / Tôi thích ăn cà* (I like to eat fish / I like to eat egg-plant), and emphasize to students that these differences in tones create different meanings. The tones, on the other hand, must be held at the same pitch at each of the different positions in the speech sequence. For example, with the sentence *Tôi đi sân bay* (I go to the airport), student must pronounce the words at the same pitch, with no rise or fall throughout the sentence. Many students may mispronounce this as *Tôi đi sân bày*, or *Tôi đi sân bay*. Or the sentence *Ông ấy ăn sáng* (He ate breakfast) might be pronounced as *Ông ấy ăn sang* (He ate expensive food); *Ông ấy đi tu* (He went into a pagoda (to become a monk)) is pronounced as *Ông ấy đi tù* (He went into prison (to become a prisoner)), and so on.

Teachers need to visually introduce the tonal contours of each tone so that students can understand clearly.

1.2. Sound system

Because students often do not have much knowledge of phonetics, when teaching pronunciation, teachers can choose visual illustrations, such as direct “performance” of the way of pronunciation, drawing pictures, and so on, to indicate the method and the place, or point, of articulation, thus helping students to identify and distinguish sounds, and pronounce the words more accurately.

1.2.1. Initial consonants

Certain initial consonants can be difficult for some students, depending on their own mother tongue. Let us consider, for example, n [n], nh [J] and ng [N]; t [t] and th [th]; ṭ [ṭ] and đ [d]; r [r] and l [l]; c, k, q [k] and g [G]; kh [x] and h [h]; b [b], ph [f] and v [v]:

- Consonants [n], [J] and [N]: the consonant [N] in Vietnamese can appear both at the beginning and the end of a syllable, as in *ngàn* (thousand) and *nàng* (she/her). In English, it only appears at the end of a syllable, as in *sing* or *song*. Therefore, English-native students often tend to replace the [N] sound at the beginning of the syllable with [n] or [J]. For example, the word *ngai* (throne) may become *nai* (deer) or *nhai* (chew). Therefore it is necessary for students to distinguish how to pronounce [n], [J], [N]: when pronouncing the dental consonant [n], the tip (apex) of the tongue is raised to contact the upper teeth; for the hard palatal consonant [J], the lower part of the tongue blade is raised in contact with the hard palate; for the soft palatal consonant [N] the tongue is pushed backward and the base of the tongue is in contact with the soft palate/velar. Teachers can use a picture or their hand to describe the position of the tongue for these consonants.

- Consonants [t] and [t^h]: in English, unaspirated [t] and aspirated [th] are two variations of the same phoneme [t]. In Vietnamese, [t] and [t^h] are two different phonemes showing a distinction in meaning. When teaching Vietnamese, it is necessary to tell students that *tơ* (silk) is different from *thơ* (poetry); *ta* (we) is different from *tha* (forgive), and so on.

- Consonants [t] and [d]: English native students often confuse the voiceless consonant [t] with the corresponding voiced consonant [d] such as *tê* (stiff)/*đê* (dyke), *to* (*big*)/*đo* (*measure*). It is conceivable that this is due to students attempting to contrast unaspirated [t] with aspirated [t^h], but failing to do so because the only contrast they know is between voiced [d] and unvoiced [t].

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- Consonants [b] and [v]: Japanese students often tend to replace [v] with [b]. It's hard for them to recognize [v].

- Consonants [r] and [l]: Korean students often tend to replace [r] with [l] because the Korean language does not have the Vietnamese sound [r]. For example, Korean students often pronounce *ra* (go out) as *la* (shout), *rên* (groan) as *lên* (go up). Japanese students find difficult to distinguish these two consonants, because in the Japanese language there is a consonant pronounced somewhere between [r] and [l]: ん[ra] / り[ri] / り[ru] / れ[re] / ろ[ro]. Unlike the English [r], it is pronounced by pressing the tongue to the top of the mouth like [l]. However, the tongue should touch a little further back in the mouth than [l], and only the very tip of the tongue touches the roof of the mouth (unlike [l], when a relatively big part of the tongue touches the top of the mouth). Adding a little flick makes it sound a little like the English [d], especially in fast speech.

To distinguish them from each other, teachers can ask students to practice pronunciation of minimal pairs such as *ngai/nai*/, *nai/nhai*/, *tơ/thơ*/, *ra/la*/, etc.

1.2.2. Vowels

Vietnamese has 11 single vowels and 3 diphthongs. Vowels can be distinguished by the opening of the mouth (corresponding to the elevation of the tongue) and the shape of the lips (rounded or unrounded). On the basis of the opening of the mouth, vowels can be divided into four types: narrow vowels *i*, *u*, *u*; medium-narrow *iê* /*ia*, *uơ/ua*, *uô/ua*; medium-wide *ê*, *ơ*, *â*, *ô*; and wide *e*, *a*, *ă*, *o*. On the basis of lip shape and tongue position, vowels can be divided into three types: front unrounded vowels: *i*, *iê* /*ia*, *ê*, *e*; central unrounded vowels: *ơ*, *ơ*, *uơ/ua*, *â*, *a*, *ă*; and back unrounded vowels: *u*, *uô/ua*, *ô*, *o*.

Teachers can apply the above distinctions to explain the vowels to students. When pronouncing the vowels *u*, *ô*, *o*, they can combine a demonstration of the mouth actions,

hand movements and drawings, to show rounded lips while increasing the width of the mouth; and when pronouncing vowels with the same narrow mouth *i*, *u*, *u*, the roundness of the mouth gradually increases, and so on. At the same time, teachers can also ask students to practice minimal pairs such as *cua/cwa* (crab/saw); *thua/thua* (lose/spare), *mua/mua* (buy/rain), etc.

Japanese students often tend to replace all the long vowel sounds with short vowel sounds. The Japanese language has only 5 vowels: あ *a*, い *i*, う *u*, え *e*, お *o*. They are terse sounds, pronounced clearly and sharply. On the other hand, there are 11 single vowels in Vietnamese, most of them pronounced clearly and with a long sound – like the double vowels in Japanese (such as おじいさん- *ojiisan*), except for the 2 short vowels /ă/; and /â/. They often mispronounce the Vietnamese vowels *o* and *e* as *ô* and *ê* respectively, because these latter sounds occur in Japanese as お *o* and え *e*, whereas the former are new and different.

1.2.3. Final consonants

The final consonant in Vietnamese has a significant element of closure, that is to say, it clearly marks the end of the word, ready for the next word to begin. This can be difficult for many students, especially those who speak languages of Indo-European languages, whose words tend to run together. Compare the connected nature of the English phrase “Not at all” with the necessarily closed features of *ô mai* → *ôm ai* ; *câm on* → *câ mon*.

Additionally, it is important to note that there is an assimilation (‘distortion’) of the main and final phonemes when they are combined: the change of the main sound always entails the change of the final sound and vice-versa.

The two final consonants that are difficult for students to pronounce are [N] and [k]. In Vietnamese, when the final consonants [N] and [k] come after the rounded vowels *u*, *ô*,

o, the rounding of the lips does not take place at the beginning but in the middle of the articulation process. Towards the end of this process, the upper and lower lips close together (so the vowel is shortened, and the final consonant is labialized/rounded). This creates a special pattern of syllables for students, in words such as *cung* (bow), *công* (peacock), *cong* (curved), *cúc* (button), *cốc* (cup) and *cóc* (toad). And when the last consonant [N] or [k] comes after the front vowels *i*, *ê*, *e*, the vowel is shortened, and the final consonant is palatalized. The vowel sound *e* is represented by the letter *a*, and the final consonant [N] is represented by the letter *nh*, as in *anh* [EN], while the final consonant [k] is represented by *ch*, as in *lịch* [lɪk]; for example, *kinh* (canal), *kênh* (channel), *canh* (soup), *kịch* (drama), *kêch* (coarse), *cạch* (give up). Students should avoid pronouncing *canh* [kEN] as *cang* [kaN] or *cạch* [kEk] as *cac* [kak]. Teachers need to tell students that in this case, it is incorrect to base their pronunciation on the script or letters.

Finally Japanese students often tend to pronounce the final consonants *m*, *n*, *ng* and *nh* as *n* (ん) and final consonants *t* as *p* and *c* as *ch*. The key point for students to remember is which final consonants require an open mouth (-n/-nh/-t/-c/-ch) and which are closed (-m/-p).

2. Vietnamese lexical characteristics from the aspect of language teaching

Vietnamese words aren't transformed, and word boundaries aren't clear, when they combine to form new words. Since each word has the ability to combine with other words in the sentence and taking into account the phenomena of homophony and polysemy, determining the meaning of words and phrases has certain difficulties. Take the sentence *Giờ học sinh học*, for example, which can confuse even Vietnamese people when taken

out of context:

- (1) *Giờ / học / sinh học* = *Bây giờ học môn sinh học*: study biology now
học (verb), *sinh + học* (biology);
- (2) *Giờ / học sinh / học* = *Vào giờ học của học sinh*: in the pupils' school hours
học + sinh (pupils);
- (3) *Giờ học / sinh học* = *vào giờ học môn sinh học*: in the class time of biology
giờ + học (class time), *sinh + học* (biology).

When teaching Vietnamese words, teachers should not only teach the semantics of words separately, but also pay attention to the function of the words in the sentence, in that specific context. Recognizing the exact meaning of these lexical elements to understand what the speaker wants to say, and moreover, applying them in communication, are major challenges for students.

2. 1. Polysemous words, homonyms and synonyms

2.1.1. Polysemous words

Polysemous words are the result of the process of meaning transformation, when the meanings of the words are related to each other. In language learning, it is often more difficult to determine the meaning of a polysemous word than a homonym because the contexts in the sentences of these words are quite similar. For example, there is a joke based on the multiple meanings of the phrase *cắn răng* (to grit one's teeth; to endure in silence) as follows:

(1) *Mẹ chồng, nàng dâu cùng cảnh goá bụa. Mẹ chồng an ủi nàng dâu:*

- *Số mẹ con ta không may như vậy, thôi hãy cắn răng mà chịu đựng con ạ.*

Ít lâu sau, bà mẹ chồng có ông hàng xóm hay qua lại. Cô con dâu trách mẹ:

- *Sao trước đây mẹ lại nói chúng ta phải cắn răng mà chịu?*

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- *Mẹ dặn là dặn con, chứ mẹ thì còn răng đâu nữa mà cắn.*

(Truyện cười dân gian Việt Nam)

(1) A mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are both widows. The mother-in-law comforts her daughter-in-law:

- You and I are so unlucky, let's grit our teeth and endure it.

Soon after, the mother-in-law has an affair with her neighbor. The daughter-in-law reminds her:

- I thought you said that we have to grit our teeth and bear it?

- I recommend it for you, but as for me, I don't have any teeth to grit.

Cắn răng (teeth clenching or gritting) can be understood in two ways: 1. clenching your teeth together (literal meaning), or 2. trying to endure, trying to accept (figurative meaning). It is the understanding of these two different meanings that makes the listener laugh.

Obviously, in order to explain to students to understand such stories, it is necessary to help students analyzing the meanings of multi-meaning words and phrases.

2.1.2. Homonyms

Compared with polysemous words, it is easier to determine the meaning of homonyms, because of their ability to combine the meanings, as well as the syntax, of words in a sentence. In fact, homonyms are less misleading because these words are often used in different contexts, in different lexical and syntactic relationships.

The following example shows the humor created by analyzing the two different meanings of two homonyms *sâu* (deep or worm):

(2) A: Sông có sâu không hà anh?

B: Hỏi gì vớ vẫn thế! Đến đũa còn không có nữa là sâu...”

(Về làng... “phát cáu” – Thế Anh & Vũ Bình, báo Tuổi Trẻ , 15/11/2005)

(2) A: Is the river deep?

B: What a stupid question! There aren't even leeches, how can there be worms?

The example above is a response between the author and a farmer who was washing his feet by the river: *sâu* in the question is an adjective (*deep*), and *sâu* in the answer is a noun (*worm*).

The polysemy of words due to the phenomena of homophony and polysemy is often cleverly used in literature and art: authors intentionally use words with different meanings, allowing the listener/reader to understand in a vague or ambiguous way. And when the listener/reader discovers these different meanings, they feel artistic satisfaction. For foreign students to achieve this kind of pleasure, it requires a great effort by the teacher.

In practical terms also, there are certain homophones that come from different regions. The same word may have a different meaning in a different part of the country. This may cause confusion or mistakes for people in other localities. Therefore, when teaching Vietnamese to foreign students, teachers should point out this aspect to students. The following are examples of homonyms due to the difference in meaning between the Northern dialect (PNB or Nth) and the Southern dialect (PNN or Sth):

- *Chén* means: 1. *chén uống nước* (PNB); 2. *bát ăn cơm* (PNN);

ví dụ: Uống dầm chén rượu (PNB)//*Ăn mấy chén cơm* (PNN)

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1. drinking cup (Nth); 2. rice bowl (Sth);

e.g. Drink a few cups of wine (Nth) // Eat a few bowls of rice (Sth)

- *Bông* means: 1. *cây/sợi bông* (PNB); 2. *Hoa* (PNN);

ví dụ: Mua mấy cái chăn bông (PNB)//*Vườn xuân đã trở đầy bông* (PNN)

1. cotton plant/thread (Nth); 2. Flower (Sth);

e.g. Buy some cotton blankets (Nth) // The spring garden is full of flowers

(Sth)

- *Bận* means: 1. *ở trạng thái đang phải làm việc gì đó* (PNB); 2. *lần, lượt* (PNN);

ví dụ: Tôi đang bận việc (PNB)//*Ánh đã gặp tôi mấy bận* (PNN)

1. in the state of having to do something (Nth); 2. time, turn (Sth);

e.g. I'm busy (Nth) // He met me a few times (Sth)

- *Nôn* means: 1. *tống những gì trong dạ dày ra ngoài qua đường miệng*; 2. *nóng lòng, sốt ruột* (PNN);

ví dụ: Anh ấy say rượu, bị nôn nhiều quá. (PNB)//*Nôn quá, mãi cổ chưa về.* (PNN) [1: 31-32]

1. expelling what is in the stomach through the mouth (Nth); 2. anxious, impatient (Sth);

e.g. *He's drunk and vomiting a lot.* (Nth) // *I'm anxious, she's late home.*

(Sth) [1: 31-32]

2.1.3. Synonyms

Synonyms are very difficult to explain thoroughly to foreign students: although similar,

synonyms nearly always have some differences which may be very subtle and nuanced, and therefore difficult to explain. Often, words are synonymous just in one or some feature(s) of their meaning, and to varying degrees. Common differences between synonyms are as follows:

✓ **Differences in the expressiveness of words:**

Vietnamese has many synonyms, but they are different in cultural expressiveness. It is very difficult for students to choose words that are correct in both meaning and sentiment. Take color words, for example: even for the same color, Vietnamese has a rich array of words with a variety of expressions for each shade. For instance, to describe the color red, Vietnamese has: *đỏ au*, *đỏ bùng*, *đỏ chét*, *đỏ chọi*, *đỏ chói*, *đỏ gay*, *đỏ hoe*, *đỏ hoét*, *đỏ hồng*, *đỏ ké*, *đỏ lừ*, *đỏ lụng*, *đỏ ngẫu*, *đỏ quạch*, *đỏ rần*, *đỏ thắm*, etc. These words differ in color, tone, and in the speaker's perception: all are red, but *đỏ loét*, *đỏ lòm* are disgusting; *đỏ tươi*, *đỏ ửng* are beautiful; *đỏ rực*, *đỏ ói* evoke strong feelings, etc. [see 9:22].

Another example is expressions for death. Teachers should explain to students how to choose suitable words, according to the following criteria: manner of death: *tự tử*, *hy sinh*, *bỏ mạng* (suicide, sacrifice, perish); status or class of the deceased: *băng hà* (for a king), *viên tịch* (for a high-level Buddhist monk), *quy tiên* (for an elderly person); attitudes and feelings towards the dead: *yên giấc ngàn thu* (rest in peace); *về với tổ tiên* (return to ancestors); *khuất núi* (disappear from the mountain); *qua đời* (pass through); *mất* (pass); *chết* (die); *hầu Diêm Vương* (serve the King of Hell); *tắt thở* (stop breathing); and so on [see 11:26]. Similarly, in Japanese the word 'die' can be said many ways, depending on the situation, such as 私のお父さんはなくなりました (My father passed away / *Ba tôi đã mất*); 彼は死にました (He died / Ông ấy đã chết); 彼は犠牲になり

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ました (He has sacrificed his life for his country / Ông ấy đã hy sinh) – just as the verb たべます (eat/ ăn) can be used in a casual situation but one should use 召し上がります (partake/ dùng) in a formal situation, etc.

Through the above examples, we see that the lexical and emotional meanings of words are very important: Teachers must equip students with the various usages and meanings of such words.

For expressiveness, it is necessary to draw attention to the group of pure Vietnamese words (with common and informal, concrete, active features) and Sino-Vietnamese words (with formal, abstract, static features). A common mistake made by many students is incorrectly using pure Vietnamese or Sino-Vietnamese words in certain situations.

Regarding the informal vs. formal features, it is necessary to explain to students the difference in meaning of word pairs such as đàn bà (女の人) - woman / phụ nữ (女性) - female; chết (死ぬ) – to die / hy sinh (犠牲になる) – to sacrifice oneself for one’s country; nhà khách (ゲストハウス) - guest house / lữ điếm (宿) - inn; ở lại (止まる)- to stay / trú chân (滞在す) - to lodge; among many other similar pairs.

Regarding the concrete and active features vs. the abstract and static features, it is necessary to explain the differences in word pairs such as: cỏ/thảo (grass), bến xa/viễn phò (far-off shores), trẻ chăn trâu/mục tử (child cowherder), etc. Pure Vietnamese words give us something specific and clear; Sino-Vietnamese words give us something vague and fuzzy.

Similarly, Japanese also has many Sino-Japanese word associations, as seen, for example, in ひ (lửa) / 火 (hỏa) - fire; みず (nước) / 水 (thủy) - water; やま

(*núi*) / 山(*son*) - mountain; < 草 (*cỏ*) / 草 (*thảo*) - grass; and so on.

The expressiveness of the word also reflects the speaker's emotion or attitude, whether it be respect, neutral, contempt, etc. For example:

Cho (give) / *tặng* (give/present) / *biếu* (present) / *bố thí* (give alms) / *đút lót* (bribe) all have a general meaning of transferring what is one's possession to another person, but the expressive nuances are different: *Cho* has a neutral meaning; *tặng*: formal; *biếu*: polite; *bố thí*: looking down on, *đút lót*: condemning. With this group of words, the teacher needs to explain carefully so that students can choose the correct word in both significant and connotative meaning.

- ✓ **Difference in some additional features of meaning:** this could include levels of abstraction, different subjects of an action, different objects of an action, and so on. For example:

- *xây dựng* (build) differs from *xây cất* (build): *xây dựng* can be combined with a more abstract complement such as: *xây dựng tình hữu nghị* (building a friendship);

- *điều* (thing) differs from *thứ* (thing): *điều* is talking about abstract things such as *nói nhiều điều*, (saying many things), *thứ* about visible things such as *mua nhiều thứ* (buying many things) However, there are exceptions depending on the speaker's judgment: *Hắn ta làm nhiều điều/thứ coi không được tí nào cả* (He does many bad things) .

- *mang / mặc / đội / đeo* all translate into English as “wear” but are different from each other in their objects: *mang giày, dép, vớ*, v.v. (wear shoes, sandals, socks, etc); *mặc quần, áo, váy*, v.v. (wear pants, shirts, skirts, etc); *đội mũ, nón*

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v.v. (wear a hat, a cap etc); *đeo cà vạt, bông tai, nhẫn, dây chuyền, đồng hồ* v.v. (wear a tie, earrings, ring, necklace, watch, etc).

- ✓ **Differences in the use of dialectal synonyms:** there are words belonging to the Northern dialect (PNB) that are completely different in phonetic form the Southern dialect (PNN) but which have the same meaning. For example: *bát/chén* (bowl), *cốc/ly* (glass), *màn/mùng* (mosquito net), *quả/trái* (fruit), *sắn/mì* (cassava), *đắt/mắc* (expensive), *ngan/vịt xiêm* (Siamese duck), *đỗ/đậu* (bean), *ngô/bắp*, (corn), *dứa/thơm* (pineapple), *lạc/đậu phộng* (peanuts), *dọc mùng/bạc hà* (Indian taro), *nem rán/chả giò* (fried spring rolls), *tất/vớ* (socks), *bắt nạt/ăn hiếp* (bully), *hỏng/hư* (break down), *say/xỉn* (drunk), *phá phách/quậy* (devastate), *xấu hổ/mắc cỡ* (shy), *gầy/ốm* (thin), *ốm/bệnh* (sick), etc. [1: 29]

Teachers should introduce students to dialectal synonyms, and also note that there is a tendency to blend them with the national or standard language.

- ✓ **Differences in lexical meaning and/or syntactic combinations:**

For example:

- *Các* is different from *những*: formally, nouns combined with *các* don't have a modifier, while nouns combined with *những* do have a modifier.

Các + danh từ + động từ/tính từ + ... (*Các* + noun + verb/adjective + ...)

Những + danh từ + định ngữ + động từ/tính từ + ... (*Những* + noun + modifier + verb/adjective + ...)

For example:

(3) *Lớp tôi, các sinh viên đều chăm chỉ. Nhưng những sinh viên nữ chăm chỉ hơn những sinh viên nam.*

As for my class, all the students are hard-working. But the female students are more hard-working than the male students.

- *Tất cả* is different from *cả*: *tất cả* usually combines with a plural noun, and *cả* usually combines with a singular noun.

Tất cả + danh từ số nhiều (*Tất cả* + plural noun)

Cả + danh từ số ít (*Cả* + singular noun)

For example:

(4) *Cô ấy đi tất cả các siêu thị ở quận 7 nhưng không mua gì.*

She went to all the supermarkets in District 7 but didn't buy anything.

(5) *Cô ấy đi cả siêu thị Crescent nhưng không mua gì.*

She went to the (whole) Crescent supermarket but didn't buy anything.

In short, depending on the specific group of synonyms, the teacher should choose an appropriate explanation. Sometimes the teacher has to analyze and explain the difference between these synonyms and then generalize, but s/he must also point out the exceptions (if any). The compilation and thorough analysis of synonym groups will help students to use them correctly and with nuance, in accordance with the psychology and habits of native speakers. This is very important for language teaching and learning, especially at the advanced level.

3. Vietnamese grammar characteristics from the view of language teaching

Vietnamese belongs to a type of isolated language in which the syntactic relationship is

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mainly expressed through word order, grammatical/function words, and stress and intonation; in which special attention should be paid to the meaning and function of the grammatical, or function, words (prepositions, conjunctions, modality words, interjections, and so on). A sentence or utterance almost always contains lexical elements with several meanings and different syntactic structures. This is one reason why students of a foreign language have difficulties when determining the meaning of words and sentences.

3.1. Word-order

Vietnamese words do not transform, so the word order in Vietnamese, in terms of syntax as well as semantics, is of great importance, especially in teaching the language. The arrangement of the words in a sentence in a certain order is the main way to show syntactic relationships. When we swap word positions, we can make sentences with different meanings:

(6) *Anh đi Đà Lạt mấy ngày? / Anh đi Đà Lạt ngày mấy?*

How many days did you go to Da Lat? / What day did you go to Da Lat?

(7) *Bao giờ anh đi? / Anh đi bao giờ?*

When will you go? / When did you go?

Word order is an effective method of restricting the possible of word and phrase combinations in a sentence, thereby narrowing down the exact meaning of a sentence:

(8a) *Cấm người điều khiển các loại xe có **mùi bia rượu*** (Nguyễn Đức Dân, 1998)

(8a) Prohibit all people from driving vehicles that **smell of alcohol**

(8b) *Cấm người có **mùi bia rượu** điều khiển các loại xe.*

(8b) Prohibiting all people that **smell of alcohol** from driving vehicles.

Sentence (8a) can have two meanings: the driver or the car smells of alcohol, but when we shift the phrase *có mùi bia rượu* (having a smell of alcohol) to follow the word *người* (people), the sentence (8b) has only one meaning.

Word order indicates a grammatical relationship, but the rules vary depending on context, which can create issues of syntactic ambiguity. For example, when Vietnamese has two elements, predicate (V) and noun (N) combined in the order of N-V, this order can represent either of two relationships: subject-object (whole sentence) or defining relation (noun phrase). For example: *Khách thăm đền* (Tourists visit the temple) is a sentence, but it may be a noun phrase as in : *Khách thăm đền đi qua một chiếc cầu gỗ nhỏ* (Temple visitors cross a small wooden bridge).

3.2. Function words

Vietnamese function words, besides their grammatical meaning, also have modal meanings to specify the attitude or mood of the speaker, which are very subtle and sometimes difficult to explain.

It should be noted that there are groups of words that, besides having some usage in common, also have their own individual usage. Take for example *nhì* and *nhé*: *nhì* is used when the speaker wants the listener to agree with him/her: *Minh đi nhì(?)* (We're going, right?), *Trời nóng nhì?* (It's hot, isn't it?); and *nhé* is often used in a similar context to *nhì*, but with the intention of inviting. So, we may translate both *Minh đi nhì(?)* and *Minh đi nhé(?)* as "Let's go," but we can't say *Trời nóng nhé(?)*. Likewise, there are words that have different modal meanings depending on the context, such as the word *mà*: in the sentence (9a) *Đã bảo mà!* (I told (you) already!), *mà* is to emphasize the statement *đã bảo* (told you), and in the sentence (9b) *Kẹt xe mà!* (Because I got stuck in a traffic jam!), *mà* is to emphasize the explanation. For this class of words, teachers should give students common usages with selected, easy-to-understand examples.

3.2. Stress/intonation (using stress or syllable segments in the utterance flow).

Vietnamese words don't transform, and the boundary of words is not clear, so it is easy to combine them with other words in spoken sentences. The segmentation of words, compound words, or phrases in utterances is very important. This segmentation can be indicated by commas in written sentences (albeit in a somewhat limited way) and by pauses in utterances. In some cases, the stress or intonation plays an important role in expressing the syntactic relationship of elements or the content of the message in the utterance or sentence.

According to Cao Xuan Hao (1998), Vietnamese utterances have contrasts between successive sounds in terms of length, strength and completeness of tonal lines. This contrast has the effect on marking the division of phrases, contributing to establishing the relationship between the sounds, and it is called 'the contrast of stress'. The author gives a series of examples of stress models (stressed sounds are denoted by [1] and unstressed sounds by [0]) to distinguish homonyms, conversion words and even intertwined syntactic structures. (It should be noted that each stress 'marks' a phrase and is placed on the final syllable of the phrase).

For example:

(10a) *Lấy tiền / cho bạn* / [0101] (Cao Xuân Hạo, 1998)

Take money / for a friend [0101]

(10b) *Lấy tiền / cho / bạn* [0111]

Take money / to give / a friend [0111]

Cho in (10a) is a preposition (for), and *cho* in (10b) is a verb (give). The utterance (10a) means *lấy tiền giùm bạn* (take money on behalf of a friend), and (10b) means *lấy tiền*

biếu bạn (take money to gift to a friend).

The syllable segmentation in the utterance flow allows to distinguish the syntactic relationships in the two-syllable combinations and the intertwined syntactic structures, and thus the meaning of the whole utterance can be determined.

For example:

(11a) *Sinh viên mới / học ngữ học / [001001]* (Cao Xuân Hạo, 1998)

New students / learn linguistics /

(11b) *Sinh viên / mới / học / ngữ học / [011101]*

Students / just / learned / linguistics /

(11c) *Sinh viên / mới học / ngữ học / [010101]*

Only students / learn / linguistics /

The utterance (11a) has the first stress on the word *mới*: it is an adjective (*new*) indicating that this word ends a noun phrase (*Sinh viên mới*) as a subject, and *học ngữ học* as a predicate. The utterance (11b), with first stress on the element *viên*, indicates that the subject (*Sinh viên*) ends there, and the combination *mới học* has a stress pattern [1 1], showing the relationship between a modal predicate (*mới học*) and its complement (*ngữ học*). As for the utterance (11c), the unstressed word *mới* is a modal word, indicating the uniqueness of the subject, that is, *chỉ có sinh viên học ngữ học mà thôi* (it is only students who learn linguistics).

4. About the Vietnamese teaching method

4.1. Communicative Language Teaching method (CLT)

In the process of integration and expansion of cooperative relations between Vietnam and other countries, more and more foreign individuals and organizations are interested in learning Vietnamese as well as exploring and learning about Vietnam. With diverse learners and curricula, the perspectives and methods of teaching Vietnamese for foreigners have also become various and plentiful. Effectively teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language requires the use of linguistic knowledge, especially applied linguistics, for language comparison. It is clear that the current method of teaching Vietnamese is mainly based on CLT combined with a learner-centered perspective. These days, teaching Vietnamese to foreigners must focus on the cultural-linguistic aspects of Vietnamese while also taking into account the students' mother tongue. The 'discovery' of cultural factors in language teaching has affected teaching methods and content: from focusing only on factors within the language to directing attention to factors outside the language as well, from linguistic competence to sociolinguistic competence, and from the communicative approach to the intercultural communicative approach, among other changes.

CLT, which emerged in the 1980s, marked the beginning of a major shift in the language teaching model of the 20th-century, and its impact continues to this day. Contemporary language teaching methods mostly follow the philosophy and perspectives of CLT, and are applied to various teaching practices, all of which claim to 'embody' the basic principles of CLT. CLT has become popular in many languages teaching programs around the world, and for many reasons. One of the important reasons is that CLT covers all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). However, the outstanding advantage of CLT is that it requires students to create meaningful

communication, in order to achieve fluency in a real-life situation. That is, CLT contributes positively to the student's fluency and communicative abilities. Furthermore, in some instances, CLT has enabled students to develop comprehension abilities that parallel those of native speakers (see Genesee, 1987)

4.2. Notes on teaching vocabulary by CLT

Vietnamese words don't change their form, and the boundary between lexical and grammatical phenomena is not clear, so teaching vocabulary should be carried out in parallel with teaching grammar. There are many methods of expanding and developing vocabulary in teaching language, of which CLT is just one notable example. Along with this method is the 'student-centered' perspectives: it enhances the energy and initiative in the learning activities of students. The teacher's duty is to enrich students' vocabulary and develop their ability to use words and make sentences (to create statements as well as to absorb texts), specifically:

- ✓ Regarding the meaning of words: teachers can help students develop skills and methods of defining the meanings of words as well as knowing the polysemy and meaning transfer of words; thereby forming the ability to detect new words in the text, work out how to determine their meaning, find out new meanings of known words, and clarify different meanings of words in different contexts.
- ✓ Regarding systematization of vocabulary: teachers can help students learn how to arrange words in a systematic way so that they can accumulate lexicon quickly, and how to activate and use words accurately in communication activities. It is possible to expand students' vocabulary by arranging words in associative systems of particular topics and lexical fields, in lexical classes such as vocabulary of standard language and local languages or dialects, or in groups of polysemous words, homonyms, synonyms and antonyms.

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- ✓ Regarding expansion of active vocabulary: teachers can help students develop their skills of using words appropriately in sentences (written language) and utterances (spoken language); teach students how to make sentence types correctly based on communication purposes and situations; focus on practical exercises for students through hypothetical but quasi-realistic and authentic real life situations.
- ✓ Regarding practical exercises: teachers can give students exercises that focus on the context of word, paying attention to socio-cultural factors. Exercises must help students develop controlled active vocabulary; students can practice common communication etiquette such as greeting, thanking, apologizing, sharing happiness or condolences, and so on. The exercises, while also enriching students' vocabulary, can be deployed in groups: teaching word meanings, systematizing vocabulary, etc.

4.3 Notes on teaching Vietnamese grammar by CLT

Some teachers and applied linguists believe that grammar teaching should be minimized, for the reason that knowledge of language cannot be conveyed totally by rules but can only be acquired unconsciously through language practices; or that teaching grammar is impossible because knowledge of grammar in a language is too complex (see Thompson, 1996). Such statements seem to be incorrect: CLT doesn't undermine the importance of teaching grammar, on the contrary it facilitates students to learn about grammar rather than it being presented by the teacher. However, the issue here is how to learn grammar. Widdowson (1978) points out that an overemphasis on grammar would prevent the learners from developing their communicative competence. In grammar-translation classes teachers' detailed explanations and exercises of grammar might be a waste of time. In these classes there is little chance for students to communicate with language

[see 15:11]. Understood correctly, CLT has created a transition from the teacher providing the grammar to the students discovering the grammar on their own.

In other words, grammar teaching has changed from the deductive method to an inductive one: From a situation in which students are presented with grammar rules, have them explained, and are given the opportunity to practice and use them, students are now given sentences that ‘contain’ grammar rules, and they can figure out these rules on their own or discuss them with each other. This may have evolved because teaching grammar explicitly and out of context is probably an unhelpful endeavor, especially in cases where students are not able to connect what they have learned to real-life situations that they meet outside of class.

Language is a means of communication, so teaching and analyzing grammatical theories should not be the main feature of learning Vietnamese. They are merely used to identify and understand the function of grammatical units, which can then be utilized in spoken and written communication. Vietnamese grammar includes all the rules of word formation, functional change, combining words into phrases and phrases into sentences, as well as the rules for linking sentences into paragraphs and texts. When teaching grammar, it is necessary to begin from the structure of sentences, because when a word stands alone (even a content word), it is difficult to determine its meaning [see 11:90]. Therefore, when explaining grammar, it is necessary to provide a clear, appropriate and specific context, and avoiding any ‘marked’ or special and implausible ones.

Teaching grammar normally consists of two parts: teaching grammar knowledge and practicing grammar. The cognitive learning by students comes from memorizing and understanding it and applying it to communication in Vietnamese. Grammar teaching, even knowledge teaching, must be done by a system of appropriate exercises. The point of teaching Vietnamese is to create activities that use the language to communicate, so

the exercise system can shift from identification and analysis to synthesis and application to communicative situations [see 11:91]. Grammar exercises should follow three different types of practices: mechanical, meaningful, and especially, communicative ones. These exercises need to be practical, typical, and easy to understand; and be aimed at helping students understand and use Vietnamese fluently and precisely.

5. Conclusion

This article presents the characteristics of Vietnamese in terms of phonetics, lexicon, and grammar from the perspective of language teaching. In order to teach effectively, teachers need to have a thorough and systematic understanding of the characteristics of Vietnamese in these aspects.

Regarding phonetic characteristics: The first point to note is tones, because correct pronunciation of tones is very difficult for most foreign students. In addition, it is necessary to pay attention to the phonemes that are present in the Vietnamese phonetic system but are absent in the phonetic system of students' mother tongue: For these phonemes the student often encounters trouble due to the effects of so-called 'negative transfer' in language learning. Vietnamese dialect is also an issue to keep in mind when teaching pronunciation.

Regarding lexical features: Vietnamese words do not transform, and word boundaries are not clear. Each word has the ability to combine with various other words in a sentence or utterance, and with homophony and polysemy being quite common, determining the meaning of a word has certain difficulties. Additionally, polysemic words, homonyms and synonyms are difficult to explain accurately to foreign students because they always have differences in meaning that are sometimes very subtle and difficult to identify. In addition, special attention should be paid to the meaning and function of the grammatical

or functional words (prepositions, conjunctions, modality words, interjections, etc) because the usage of these words (especially modality words) can be very difficult and diverse.

Regarding grammatical features: In Vietnamese, the boundary between lexical and grammatical phenomena is not clear. Syntactic relationships are mainly expressed through means of word order, function words and intonation. Therefore, teaching vocabulary is often carried out in parallel with teaching grammar. The semantics of words should be not only taught individually, but in conjunction with the position of the words in sentences, in clear and specific contexts.

In terms of teaching methods, the most notable is CLT, whose characteristic feature is emphasizing the use of language rather than knowledge of the language, stressing the fluency and appropriateness in using of language rather than the correctness of grammatical structure (that is, limiting error correction to maintain dialogues, as well as limiting explicit instruction of grammar rules). CLT has made a shift: “the move from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction” [12: 24]. To perform this method well, the use of pair work and group work activities is one of the most effective techniques. Learning by this technique will help students acquire understanding voluntarily and actively and help them be more active. ‘Brainstorming’ during the learning process makes students more excited and interested, requiring students to take responsibility for learning and to support each other as well as creating a cooperative and friendly atmosphere in the class.

In fact, the primary aim in learning a foreign language is to acquire the ability to use the language fluently and accurately, not to understand linguistic theories. It is ‘learning the language’ rather than ‘learning about the language’. Teaching Vietnamese means helping students to express the language fluently and appropriately as well as to acquire

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Vietnamese culture [11: 93]. Just as Nunan (1991) remarks: “Success (in language learning) is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the target language” [10: 39].

On the part of teachers, in order to find an effective solution to apply to each student, each specific class requires teachers to have high pedagogical ability as well as both linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge.

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