

Bridging the Notion of Intelligible Pronunciation in English and Positive Attitudes toward Learners' Own English Accent

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Abstract

This paper presents a part of literature review in relation to factors that affect English language learning and speaking. The review indicates research gap for a study the authors have been working on since 2017. It was found that age, native language, language exposure, and attitude are recognized by scholars, researchers, and teachers as variables that determine the level and success of foreign/second language learning. Bridging the notion of intelligible pronunciation in English and positive attitudes toward learners' own English accent may be suitable for adult learners in a Thai social context due to dichotomy between affective, linguistic and socio-cultural factors. By taking such variables into account, the authors employed the phonetics website, a technology teaching tool, to teach English sounds that do not exist in Thai to non-English major undergraduate students so as to help them focus on clear pronunciation and promote their positive attitudes toward their own English accent. The teaching tool is used as a means to help the students bridge the notion of clear pronunciation and their positive attitudes toward their own English accent.

Keywords : Intelligible Pronunciation in English, Positive Attitude, English Accent, Positive Attitude Toward One's Own English Accent

Introduction

Communication through the medium of English remains prominent among interlocutors from culturally diverse backgrounds in today's world since it is the language of globalization and internationalisation. The global status of English in turn draws some issues of communication in different varieties of English or World Englishes (Kachru, 1992) and intelligibility or the ability to recognize words and utterances (Smith & Nelson, 2006, p.429). Unsuccessful communication in such a context tends to be impeded by the ability to pronounce words intelligibly (Jenkins, 2000), and it is inevitable for interlocutors to create a sense of 'us' and 'them' or 'in-group' and 'out-group' since there are certain markers that signal group membership and individual identity (Shepard, Giles & Le Poire, 2001), English accented speech in particular. Norton (2000) views this context as symbolic relations of power and identity between native English speakers and non-native speakers as well as among non-native speakers themselves. The consequences of global use of English can concurrently render learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) insecure or unconfident (Tananuraksakul, 2009).

In Thailand, the government has required all students to learn English for several years from primary school to tertiary level, yet their English proficiency is rather low, especially in oral communication skills. The country was recently reported to have a score of 48.54, classified as low proficiency (Mala, 2018). As argued by Tananuraksakul (2017, p.52-53), Thai students' poor ability to speak English appears to be impacted by affective, linguistic and socio-cultural factors. On the one hand, they tend to have high anxiety in and negative attitudes toward speaking English and lack confidence and pride when interacting with foreigners. On the other hand, there are mother tongue interference and sound system differences between English and Thai, and only English major students are required to take linguistic courses. In addition, Thai students learn and use English as an EFL, and they personally and/or socially aspire to talk like a native because a native-like sound is attached to prestige, privilege and power. As a result, it is responsibility of EFL teachers to raise such

aforementioned awareness and dichotomy among their students and/or find teaching approaches that help enhance their pronunciation in English. This paper presents a part of literature review in relation to factors that affect English language learning and speaking in order to find teaching approaches that suit Thai undergraduate students.

Factors Affecting English Language Learning and Speaking

In foreign and second language learning, many studies revealed that non-native speakers have difficulties when studying a new language. Among those difficulties, pronunciation is considered as one of the most difficult areas. In Thailand, students learn English as a foreign language (EFL) not as a second language (ESL) and one of the reasons of learning English is to communicate with foreigners for specific purposes. Kenworthy (1987) mentioned that the sensible goal and the quality of communication should be intelligibility rather than being a native like. Varonis and Gass (1982) cited that non-native English speakers are often judged by native speakers of English as being unintelligible if the former's pronunciation is not good as it should be. Towards this point, component of communication competence in intelligible pronunciation is needed (Otlowski, 1998). Moreover, Pourhossein (2012) stated “[l]earners with good English pronunciation are likely to be understood, even if they make mistakes in other areas, whereas learners with bad pronunciation will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect”. As such, intelligibility is the most important aspect of all communication. Without intelligibility, communication is likely to fail.

For Thai students, speaking English intelligibly is a great burden even though they have learned English for more than 10 years. Previous research studies confirmed that Thai students always make mistakes in pronunciation because of many factors including native language, age, language exposure, and attitude (Brown, 1994; Celce-Murcia et al, 2000). For example, there was research done in the areas of second language (L2) acquisition, by using Contrastive Analysis method to compare similarities and differences between first language (L1) and L2. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) predicts that where there are similarities between the first and the second languages, the learner will acquire second language structures with ease; where there are differences, the learner will have difficulty. The differences between L1 and L2 can be viewed as language interference including systemic differences, structural differences, and differences in phonetic realization (Luksaneeyanawin, 2005). Swan and Smith (1987) mentioned that the significant differences of the phonological systems of Thai and English are one of the causes in pronunciation problems of Thai learners. Nakin and Inpin (2017) also found that some English consonants such as /g/, /z/, and /l/ cause difficulty for Thai students when these sounds occur at the final position.

Ariyapitipun (2003) classified Thai and English consonant sounds into three terms: 1) voicing - the vibration of the vocal cords; 2) place of articulation - where the constriction occurs; and 3) manner of articulation - how the airstream flow out. In Thai, there are 21 consonant phonemes. They are / p t k c ? ph kh th ch b d m n ŋ f s h l r w j/. The consonant phonemes can be classified into initial consonants and final consonants whereas there are 24 consonant phonemes in English. They are / p b t d k g f v θ ð s z ʃ ʒ h tʃ dʒ m n ŋ l r w j/. The comparison of the Thai sound system with English reveals some of the main problems a learner of either language face when attempting to learn the other. For example, Thai does not have /g/, /v /, /θ/, /ð/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, and /dʒ/. When Thai students pronounce those sounds, they tend to substitute some English sounds with the closed Thai sounds.

In addition, Wei and Zhou (2002) studied about the problems of English pronunciation among Thai students. They found that some students usually pronounce the English borrowed words in Thai way. They usually substitute /v/ with /f/ or /z/ with /s/. It is

similar to Thep-Ackrapong (2005) and Abramson and Tingsabadh (1999), who found that Thai students usually omitted pronouncing final voiced consonants because they do not occur in Thai. Although Thai phonology has the sounds /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, and /k/, it is still a problem for Thai students to pronounce them because final sounds in English can be both aspirated or unaspirated, but the final sounds in Thai is unaspirated (Supanamoke, 2015).

Nakin and Inpin (2017) investigated English consonant pronunciation problems of EFL students: a survey of EFL students at Mae Fah Luang University. They found that 92 percent of students had problems with the sounds /ð/ and /z/ and students did not have problems with sounds including /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /f/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /w/ and /j/ when occurring at the initial position. Furthermore, 88 percent of students had problems with these three sounds /d/, /g/, and /ð/ when occurring at the final position. However, not only do the differences between the two language systems affect students' pronunciation, but other factors also influence students in the process of second language learning. Previous studies showed that age, native language, language exposure, and attitude are the important factors affecting students' pronunciation.

In terms of language learners' L1 influence, Lado (1957, 1961) stated that L2 students usually transfer their L1 system into the process of producing L2. He posited that:

Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture - both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives.

In line with Kenworthy (1987), the native language is the most influential factor in accounting for students' pronunciation especially foreign accents. Senel (2006) noted that interference or negative transfer from L1 is likely to cause errors in aspiration, intonation, rhythm, and melody in the target language.

A great number of research studies support "Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)" proposed by Lenneberg (1967). According to the hypothesis, learners whose age is below 12, a critical period of language learning, are likely to perform better in L2 pronunciation than those who are older. This means if a foreign language is not learned before a certain age, it has a tendency that learners may not be able to gain a better pronunciation, compared to those learning at an appropriate age. Likewise, Krashen (1988) mentioned acquirers who begin exposure to a second language during their childhood generally achieve higher second language proficiency than those beginning as adults.

Many previous studies claimed that the success of learning English also depends on language exposure. The more frequent learners are exposed to the target language, the better they pick up language skills. Siriwisut (1994) and Sertikul (2005) indicated that language experience had positive effects on pronunciation ability. It was found that students with poor pronunciation, who were regarded as less experienced, had more language transfer problem than the students with good pronunciation. The findings were supported by Haymes (2000) and Senel (2006) pointing out that learners living in an English-speaking country or community where English is the second language would have many opportunities to listen to and use the target language.

Having positive attitudes toward the target language and language learning is important. One of the reasons is that it is an affective determinant in foreign/second language learning that deals with feelings and opinions (Tananuraksakul, 2015) and bridges between opinion and behaviour (Obiols, 2002). Attitude is a set of belief toward the target language culture, their own culture and, in case of classroom learning, of their teachers and the learning

task they are given (Ellis, 1985), classified into three types: 1) attitude toward the community and people who speak L2, 2) attitude toward learning and language concerned, and 3) attitude toward language and language learning in general (Stern, 1983).

As such, learners with positive attitudes toward people who speak the target language (Brown, 1992), the target language itself, the target culture and learning the target language (Celce-Murcia et al., 2000) could all support pronunciation skills development. Positive attitudes can influence a sense of security, which boosts self-esteem and self-confidence when talking in English with foreigners (Tananuraksakul, 2009, p.49). Take Imamesup's (2011) research study into the effectiveness of Audio-articulation Model to improve Thai learners' pronunciation of English fricative sounds an example. It was found that Thai students significantly improved the pronunciation of fricative sounds at .05 level, correlated with their positive attitudes toward the use of the Model. It can imply that Thai students enjoy learning English through Audio-articulation Model.

In light of helping adult students develop their positive attitude toward their own English accent, it has been suggested that speaking English fluently and intelligibly is more important than speaking like a native tongue (Smith & Nelson, 2006) and that non-native English accented speech should be promoted and treated as acceptable varieties since a larger number of non-native speakers frequently adopt English as a medium of international communication (Jenkins, 2005). It is also suggested that Thai students need to be aware of the sound system differences between Thai and English as well as practice pronouncing the English sounds that do not exist in Thai (Kanokpermpoon, 2007) and of the importance of developing good English pronunciation (Moffatt, 2006). Such awareness will allow them to speak English with more confidence (Kanokpermpoon, 2007). Therefore, speaking English with a Thai accent and clear English pronunciation should be promoted among Thai adult learners because they have a tendency to speak the language less like a native and intelligible pronunciation can lead to more effective international communication.

Tananuraksakul (2017, p.54) argued that in Thailand there was no investigation into promoting EFL learners' positive attitudes toward their own non-native English accented speech. Many have studied learners' attitudes toward a variety of English accents. It is therefore worth finding a useful teaching tool to promote Thai adult students' positive attitudes toward their Thai English accented speech with intelligibility. The University of Iowa's *Sounds of American English* is popular among language teachers as a teaching tool to enhance learners' English literacy (Eller, 2015) and perhaps positive attitudes towards their own accent because it is considered a learning technology new generations can relate themselves with (Tananuraksakul, 2014, 2015). EFL teachers can use the phonetics website as a language model for pronouncing English consonant sounds systems in their classroom while learners can further self-practice in their leisure time. It gives a comprehensive understanding of how American English speech sounds are formed, including videos, audio samples and animations describing the essential features of the consonants and vowels. Access to the phonetics website is at <https://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/main/english>.

Conclusion

The literature review in relation to factor affecting English language learning and speaking partly reveals that age, native language or L1, language exposure, and attitude are recognized by scholars, researchers, and teachers as variables that determine the level and success of foreign/second language learning (Brown, 1994; Celce-Murcia et al, 2000). Teachers of EFL should take into account so that they can find suitable teaching methods to help their students learn or speak the target language successfully. Bridging the notion of intelligible pronunciation in English and positive attitudes toward learners' own English accent may suit Thai adult learners of EFL.

Since the authors' undergraduate students are non-English major and they are hardly exposed to English in daily life, the University of Iowa Sounds of American English, viewed as a teaching tool to enhance learners' English literacy can be used to teach English sounds that do not exist in Thai to them. The phonetics website may help them focus on clear pronunciation and promote their positive attitudes toward their own English accent. On the one hand, EFL/ESL teachers can use the phonetics website as a means to help their students bridge the notion of clear pronunciation and their positive attitudes toward their own English accent. On the other hand, learners can further self-practice in their leisure time.

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