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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates problems with English pronunciation among Thai students, identifying key reasons for the pronunciation problems and recommending solutions. It begins by discussing the value of intelligible pronunciation and reviewing the relevant literature. Next, it focuses on Thai students' pronunciation problems with consonants and vowels (e.g., words with transcriptions ended with a consonant; consonant clusters; words with /ei/, usually pronounced as /e/; words with /r/, usually pronounced as /l/; words with /v/, usually pronounced as /f/; and words with /z/, usually pronounced at /s/ or voiceless); intonation problems (yes-no questions and wh-questions); and stress problems. Finally, it examines the causes of these problems (e.g., words directly borrowed from English into the Thai language are pronounced in Thai ways; the Romanization of the Thai language influences English pronunciation; Thai intonations are applied into English pronunciations; speakers may be shy to speak in a native speaker's way; and Thai final consonants are always unaspirated and unvoiced). Suggested solutions include the following: provide pronunciation training courses to language teachers, have teachers lecture in English, and provide students with articulatory descriptions of the mother tongue and target language. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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Insights into English Pronunciation Problems of Thai Students

Youfu Wei & Yalun Zhou*

ED 476 746

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate some important English pronunciation problems of Thai students. The authors explored relevant research in this area and demonstrated the advantages of speaking English with intelligible pronunciation. The authors also identified some key reasons for Thai students' problems with English pronunciation. Finally, the authors recommended solutions to these problems and provided implications for future research.

Introduction

Generally speaking, ESL/EFL learners' native languages, more or less, influence their English pronunciations and these types of special pronunciations make special versions of English, for example, Chinese English, Thai English, Filipino English, Indian English, Burmese English, Lao English, etc.

The type of English that we speak doesn't matter very much as far as we speak in an intelligible way. If you live in a country where there is no traditional use of English and no people who speak it for general communication purposes, the English pronunciation you are going to speak may reflect the distinction between your native language and English. Furthermore, the English pronunciation that can be understood in your home country may not be the case in another.

Though English is not the media for communication in Thailand, sometimes Thai people use borrowed English words, but pronounced in Thai ways, for example, Topland (without /d/), supermarket (without /t/), Lotus (without /s/ and /t/ as /d/), etc. If you really speak in the standard way, the "person on the street" will not understand.

Recently as language teaching has moved to communicative competence, more and more teachers have shown their close attention to pronunciation instruction (Celce-Murcia, 1987; Morley, 1994; Gilbert, 1994). Scarcella and Oxford (1994) stated

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that "pronunciation should be taught in all second language classes through a variety of activities. But it seems the attention is not as close as it should be in Thailand. Many of our students have a lot of pronunciation problems.

This article is trying to address some typical pronunciation problems of Thai students during the authors' six years of Oral English teaching in Thailand. The authors identified some key reasons for these pronunciation problems and recommended some solutions to these pronunciation problems with the expectation that it will provide the readers with some insights into the ways of teaching pronunciation. This paper is by no means comprehensive, it is an opportunity for sharing what we experienced and what we thought about pronunciation instruction.

The Value of Intelligible Pronunciation

There are a lot of advantages to speak in an intelligible pronunciation. Here are some of them.

A number of other studies of both children and adults have reported that individuals with heavily accented English are often thought of as "lower class", and what they say is discounted by others (Giles, 1970; Wenner, 1967)

The ability to speak in a standard way might be considered advantageous by some of those whose home language is a distinctly local form of speech; if their vocations require them to work in districts remote from their home locality, they would not be hampered by speaking in a manner differing considerably from the speech of those around them. A standard pronunciation would also be useful to foreign learner of English (Jones, 1988).

Pronunciation instruction may facilitate listening comprehension ability (Ueno, 1995). Duncan (1983) stated the same idea in a different way "When, for whatever reason, the encoded speech is nonstandard or different from what the decoder is expecting or accustomed to, communication can be limited, confused, or lost completely". We can understand those English much more easily if they are the same pronunciations in our mind. We would like to give two examples here. If somebody says "verbal tim", native speakers of English would not understand what this word is. For the same reason, it will not make any sense if someone thinks "lotus" should be pronounced "loda" when he or she hears an American say "lotus".

Some studies have found that spoken language exerts a major influence on a listener's perception of the speaker's personality (Brown ,1969; Labov, 1966; Tucker and Lambert, 1969; and Ryan et al., 1977).

Intelligible pronunciation is easily understood throughout the English-speaking

world. As everyone knows, one of main aims for learning English is that we want to communicate with English natives or non-natives (foreigners). An intelligible pronunciation is for sure much easier to communicate with non-native speakers.

To be truly effective, a learner must be able to have a clear idea of the standard and be able to accurately discriminate among the various pronunciations in order for self-correction to occur (Ellis ,1994).

Intelligible pronunciation helps us understand others' English. When we listen to others' speech, we expect the pronunciation (including intonation) of the same word or of the same sentence will be the same or quite close. It is very difficult to believe Chinese English major students can understand the word "Lotus"(pronunciation without /s/and changing /t/ into /d/) because this pronunciation is different with his or hers.

Pronunciation errors account for reduced intelligibility (Basson, 1986). Unintelligible pronunciation is definitely a barrier for native speakers to understand. Removal of that barrier necessitates intelligible pronunciation.

Literature Review

Pronunciation teaching is probably the most neglected aspect of English language teaching. Lin, et al (1995) quoted two groups of ideas about pronunciation instruction. The first group argued that pronunciation was not important at all for very few tests required students show their speaking skills. The second group argued, however, found that they did not know how to teach pronunciation, even if they wanted to teach it. Foreign teachers (non-native speakers) often lack confidence to teach it methodically and English teachers (native speakers) sometimes have a complex feeling about it. As with English grammar, applied phonetics is rarely taught at school or even at university, and therefore seems an alien, abstract subject to the adult trainee teacher. Then there is the fact that many native English speakers find it difficult to hear certain features such as the fall or rise of speech, particularly; at the end of a sentence.

In a survey of 500 adult students from Cordoba, Barcelona, Paris, Turin and Rome conducted in 1973, one of the questions asked was 'What do you find most difficult in English: "Grammar", "Speaking", "Understanding", "Pronunciation", "Idiom", "Writing"?' Among these alternatives 'Pronunciation' was in a substantial majority (Haycraft, 1991). Pronunciation is difficult, so few people dare to touch it and then it becomes more difficult and fewer people touch it and on and on. Nowadays we have a technique called communicative approach. It emphasizes on the communicative efficiency but not the pronunciation, not the grammar. This method can help foreigners

learn English with fast speed at the very beginning, if these students want to improve their English, they have to go back to phonetics. Most of Thai university students have this problem, but because of the limitation of time and lacking of visible targets, most students just ignore it.

Gilbert (1984) appealed to teachers to believe in the importance of intelligible pronunciation. She based her research on an interesting study by Suter (1976) in which the belief in the importance of pronunciation was the best predictor of pronunciation success, except for the even more important mother tongue influences. In 1994, Gilbert mentioned the importance of pronunciation instruction again.

Syananondh (1983) sent his research questionnaires to three hundred Thai-speaking graduate students attending college or university throughout the United States. Two hundred and twelve respondents, representing 70.06 percent of the target population, were finally used as subjects for the study. He found (1) students have considerable difficulty in understanding spoken English in different communicative situations when they first came to the United States. On average, they could understand about half of what was said to or around them by the native Americans; (2) Different English pronunciation taught in Thailand, inadequate English vocabulary, and lack of English conversation training were perceived by the students as the major causes of their difficulty in English listening comprehension.

Lin, et al (1995) stated that Vowel length and final consonants are commonly found difficult for most Chinese students to master in English classes. They also pointed out that in Taiwan, many students often use the Chinese rhythmic pattern when speaking English; as a result, even though they can pronounce each English sound correctly, their speech does not sound like English.

Promrat (1998) conducted a study on 39 Thai tourist police in the tourist police division 3, section 4 which covers the areas of 8 provinces. Also a number of the tourist police in the tourist police division 3 section 2 was selected randomly on the basis of their availability to participate in the pilot study of the vocabulary tests and questionnaires which let the respondents discuss their problems in using English vocabulary. Promrat found that the tourist police of the Tourist Police Division 3 Section 4 have the following problems: 1. The different accents of the tourists from different countries make it difficult for the Thai tourist police to understand. 2. The Thai tourist police have difficulty with English pronunciation.

Problems in Thai Students' English Pronunciation

When we corrected our Thai students' English, we found many of them could not produce some pronunciations close to intelligibility. For examples:

I. Pronunciation Problems with Consonants and Vowels

1. Some words with transcriptions ended with a consonant. An English rule is that all voiced consonants occurring at the end of a word are generally held and voiced. Yet, in German and Slavic languages, the opposite situation prevails: all voiced consonants occurring in final position are unvoiced (Clarey, 1963). So is Thai language.

Bob picnic David knife large book
computers (/s/ is always omitted) carts deeds
five fix student

2. Consonant clusters. Many languages do not have consonant cluster of two or even more consonant sounds without intervening a vowel. Therefore some words like street, risked, and fifth present a pronunciation problem for non-native speakers (e.g. Chinese, Thai, etc).

spade parks watched

3. Words with /ei/, usually pronounced as /e/ (this problem exits though less seriously)

tail hate

4. Words with /r/ (it is usually pronounced as /l/)

wrong strawberry Jerry grass

5.Words with /θ/ or /ð/ (pronounced as /s/ or/z/)

think thin feather

6. Words with /v/(pronounced as /f/)

five Steve stove

7. Words with /z/(pronounced as /s/ or voiceless)

buzz vase scissors

8. Words with /ʒ / (pronounced as /s/)

Television Vision Pleasure

II. Intonation Problems

The pitch of the voice with which a voiced sound is pronounced is called its intonation. In Random House Unabridged English Dictionary, intonation is defined as "the pattern or melody of pitch changes in connected speech, esp. the pitch pattern of a sentence". In connected speech the voice-pitch is continually rising and falling. These variations produce intonations that may be described as 'tunes' or 'patterns'. When the pitch of the voice rises we have a rising intonation; when it falls we have a falling intonation; when it remains on one note for an appreciable time, we have level intonation (Jones, 1988). Intonation is another significant feature in English. Gilbert (1994) pointed out that the purpose of intonation is "helping the listener to follow". It is a navigation guide for the listener. Thai language does not use intonation to differentiate questions and statements. So it's not unusual that Thai students use rising tones for both Yes-No questions and Wh-questions or the tones used in theYes-No questions or statements are not different. For example:

1. Yes-No questions

Are you going?	---	You are going.
Is he handsome?	---	He is handsome.
Do you like smoking?	---	You like smoking.

2. Wh-questions

A question beginning with 'Who', 'What', 'Where', 'Why', or 'How many?' is often heard to fall at the end; however, the students will most probably make them like what a

yes-no questions should be.

Who is the madam on the left?↗(Intonation used by Thai students)
What's your name? ↗(Intonation used by Thai students)
Why did you do that? ↗(Intonation used by Thai students)
How many books do you have? ↗(Intonation used by Thai students)

III. Stress Problems

Thai language is a tonal Language. It does not differentiate words based on stress. Stress is one of the biggest problems of Thai students. This applies to Chinese students as well since Chinese is also a tonal language. For example,

yesterday tomorrow September pretty computer
technology video dictionary
(Thai students like to put the stress on the last syllable)

The Causes of These Problems

There are many causes for these problems.

1. The directly borrowed words from English into Thai language are pronounced in Thai ways. For example, computer, technology, cream, etc. All of these words are borrowed directly into Thai language without noticing that they are actually not Thai vocabulary. So when Thai people meet these words, they tell themselves that they know them already and refuse to learn their intelligible pronunciations again and just because of this reason, when they use them they use the pronunciations they knew before. They are saying that they have a lot of borrowed English words applied with Thai pronunciations. Those Thai pronunciations are not intelligible pronunciations. If out of Thailand, these pronunciations cannot be easily understood. One of my English major students read the word Bangladesh in Thai pronunciation in my Grammar and Writing class that shocked me really for a while.

2. The Romanization of Thai language influences the pronunciation of English. It is very normal to read the word Kitima into Gidima, pum into bom, Pranee into Branee, and on and on. Thai students read all th into t, ph into p, kh into k, p into b, t

into d, k into g. This kind of articulation definitely has a strong influence on the students who have no chance to study English Phonics. Such phenomena are due to the phonemic inventory of the Thai language. Different languages distinguish different sets of phonemes as the minimum sound units that distinguish meaning among words. Thus for Japanese, for example, since they do not distinguish between the sound [r] and [l] , they tend to have the problem distinguishing these two sounds when learning English. In a similar vein, native speakers of English also have problem distinguishing between "mother" and "horse" when learning Chinese, for native speakers of English do not make differences among the four tones in Chinese.

3. Thai intonations are applied into English pronunciations.
   Thai language can borrow English words and use them directly in their daily life without feeling anything awkward, at least to Thai language itself. For example, if Thai people borrow the word 'computer' from English and pronounce it like that (applying only a little Thai intonation), it's quite comfortable. This characteristic helps common Thai people learn English. It is quite normal to meet some uneducated people who can speak some English to you. But it also impedes their further improving of their English pronunciations.

4. Some teachers' Thai style English pronunciation is another cause of students' unintelligible English pronunciation. On the one hand, a language teacher's pronunciation is served as a model for the students. The students have to imitate his or her pronunciation otherwise the teacher will correct the students' pronunciation or they have to cover their ears. Since the teacher's pronunciation is Thai style, the students' pronunciation will be the same.

5. Shy to speak in a native speaker's way.
   The authors were told that Thai students were to be considered "show-offish" by their classmates if they speak in a native speaker's tone. So, usually students would not spend time on imitating native speaker's pronunciations and intonations.

6. Thai final consonants are always unaspirated and unvoiced so it is difficult for Thai students to pronounce aspirated /p/ and /k/or voiced /m/ and /n/ in English words.

Suggested Solutions

Despite its acknowledged importance, pronunciation is an aspect of language teaching that has been given little attention, and it has not been taught effectively in second/foreign language programs (Ueno, 1995). We have the following suggestions:

1. Provide pronunciation training-courses to the teachers.

   Ma (1995) agreed that universities should prepare ESL teachers in English phonology and the teaching of pronunciation. If the teachers can produce intelligible English pronunciations, the students' pronunciation should be intelligible, too.

2. Teachers should keep on lecturing in English

   Thai students like to negotiate with teachers that they want to be taught in Thai language so that they can understand the class easier. Sometimes the teachers compromise and lecture in Thai and keep on lecturing in Thai. We understand this group of teachers and sometimes we did the same. But it is very harmful to English teaching.

   Students can learn a lot if teachers keep on lecturing in English. At least the teacher's pronunciations can help them check whether their pronunciations are intelligible or not.

3. We have already shown some loanwords from English to Thai are pronounced in Thai ways. If researchers can conduct a survey study and make a dictionary-like comparison, it must be easier to overcome this problem.

4. One of the ways of countering this mother tongue interference in the pronunciation of foreign languages is to provide students with articulatory descriptions of the mother tongue and of the target language so that they may realize what they are doing and how they can rectify it (Kalackal, 1985).

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