

## Problems of Pronunciation in Speaking English with reference Thai Students in Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University

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### **Abstract:**

*English has emerged as a virtual international language. Statistics show that 75 % of the world mail, faces and email use English. The majority of the internet is in English. 805 of the information stored in computer worldwide are in English. More than 140 countries receive news reports from the American-based CNN and British-based BBC. English play a dominant role both as a first and also as a second or foreign language for hundreds of millions of people around the world. here in Thailand, especially, English plays a majors role as possibly the most important foreign language.*

*The paper focusses on the problems of Thai students in speaking English with exact pronunciation. Thai students face certain specific problems, like the string influence of the mother tongue, lack of opportunities for practicing English, comparatively less proficient teachers in English and lack of information. The curriculum also needs to be made more learner-friendly. In fact, Thai education system is well planned and adequately supported by the Government. Language laboratories and other technological aids are available on a large scale despite, the required proficiency in English.*

**Key Words: Pronunciation – speaking English – Thai students.**

### **Introduction:**

English has emerged as a virtual international language. Statistics show that 75 % of the world mail, faces and email use English. The majority of the internet is in English. 805 of the information stored in computer worldwide are in English. More than 140 countries receive news reports from the American-based CNN and British-based BBC. English play a dominant role both as a first and also as a second or foreign language for hundreds of millions of people around the world here in Thailand, especially, English plays a majors role as possibly the most important foreign language.

In Thailand, English is considered a foreign language and is used for the purposes of academic advancement, career advancement and mobility abroad. to cope with the growing local and international demand, a number of efforts from all parties involved have been made to boost the Thai educational system and help Thai learner to improve their English performance. However, the National survey conducted by the office of Education Testing of the Department of curriculum and instruction, the Ministry of Education during the years of 1997 and 1998 showed that Thai learners, being assessed against standardized benchmarks of achievement, had unsatisfactory proficiency in the four skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking.

The significance of this study could be expressed through the emergence and education of various second language in Thailand over the past century. This refers specifically to English, subordinated by other western languages like French or German, and Japan has made the study and education in these language important for Thai citizens. In the current century, as well as in the last one, business and tourism have both induced contact with and awareness of all of these languages, while English remains the main international language or lingua franca.

### **Problems of Acquiring Pronunciation Skills**

The difference between first language and second language is a problem in learning pronunciation (Bell, 1996; Lambacher, 1996; and Fanshi, 1998). Accordingly, one of the obstacles to overcome achieving acceptable English pronunciation for most of the Thai students knows the differences between the sound structures of English and Thai. Language teachers often investigate the differences between the two languages based on the contrastive analysis hypothesis. A well-known scholar in the hypothesis of contrastive analysis includes Lado (1957). He postulated the belief that first language or native language can strongly influence second or foreign language learning. Lado (1957) also proposed that the problems people confront when learning L2 could be predicted by comparing L2 system with that of L1. L1 transfer, according to this hypothesis, is the root of all the difficulties when

learning a new language. This hypothesis is ultimately due to its inability to account for many exceptions; that is what should have been difficult L2 patterns were, in fact, easily acquired. It can be noted that the factor causing difficulties in foreign language pronunciation is the interference of L1, as Lado stated:

.....We have ample evidence that when learning a foreign language, we tend to transfer our entire native language system in the process. We tend to transfer to that language our phonemes and their variants, our stress and rhythm pattern, our transitions, our intonation patterns and their interaction with others phonemes. (1957:11)

From Lado's statement, foreign learners speak the target language with the characteristics of their own L1. In their words, L2 pronunciation is easily interfered with by L1 pronunciation system.

To summarise, the essence of contrastive analysis hypothesis suggests that differences, such as phonological system between L1 and L2 can cause difficulties for learners. By knowing those differences, teachers will be able to recognise some of the problems that students always encounter, and will be able to enhance their language skills. In relation to this study, the teacher's knowledge of phonology should not be confined to English phonology alone; it should extend to that of the student's mother too. If the teacher gives a list of English phonemes and provide students with more chances to practice their pronunciation, the students will be able to improve their competence.

### **The problems of Pronunciation in English Sounds**

English supposedly is a phonetic language; they are, the letters of its alphabet should stand for sounds and the way words are spoken or pronounced should correspond to the way they are spelled. English has a difficult sound system. According to T.R.Kansakar (1998) stated in his work that the problem is much more serious in the case of English which is spoken as a first language and as a second language by a large number of people in many countries of the world. But the variety of English spoken in the United Kingdom is different from the one spoken in America or other countries where people speak it as a first language. In the British Island too there are several varieties of English. The English spoken in England is quite different from the spoken English in Scotland or Ireland. There are a number of regional varieties or dialects of English within England. The same is true for the language spoken in Nepal and India. The Nepali spoken in the hills is different from the Nepali spoken in the Kathmandu valley which also

differs from Nepali spoken in the Terai region. The Hindi spoken Bihar differs from the Hindi spoken in Maharashtra. In other words, there are several dialects of the same language. The English spoken in countries like came under the colonial rule of the British roughly follow the dialect known as the educated southern British English also called Received Pronunciation (RP). The term 'received' means a widely accepted variety and not a region dialect. Although this variety of English is spoken by a very small percentage of people in the UK and other countries, it is generally recognised as a standard form of English in international communication

Learning English as a second language is a complicated task for all students. It is difficult to learn English successfully as there are many factors underlying success or failure. The important factors are teachers, learners, methods of teaching and the difference among language system. Besides these factors, there are also many sub-factors such as teachers' knowledge and experience as well as learners' aptitudes and attitudes towards learning. Moreover, students' native language may influence their learning English as a second/foreign language. Pronunciation is one of the sub-skills in language learning. It is an important skill for non-native speakers learning English as a second/foreign language. Most of the Thai students encounter pronunciation problems, usage, grammar and text.

An important part of learning English is pronunciation because it is closely related to other English skills. For example, after spelling a word, one may check if it is correct or not by pronouncing it. English is not a phonetic language that means there are many ways to spell words that sound alike but with different meanings. So Thai students must face the problems of pronunciation and spelling as the Thai language is a phonetic language. Most of the Thai words are spelled only in one way, following the Thai spelling rules.

It is difficult to teach Thai students to pronounce English as clearly as native speakers do. There are many factors concerning pronunciation-the position of speech organs that make sounds and the manner in which sounds are produced. The main problems in poor pronunciation of English words for Thai students may also be due their lack of knowledge on linguistic properties of English sounds.

According to Thai high schools and undergraduate universities, students are commonly taught by strategy of memorizing and imitating the sounds of consonants and vowels, the phonetic symbols of consonants and vowels are being taught by Thai teachers. The students are supposed to memorize the phonetic symbols of consonants and vowels in order pronounce the vocabulary they have learnt perfectly. This approach is still not improving Thai students' language performance especially the pronunciation aspect. Actually it has

been realized that the pronunciation is one of the most difficult areas of English for both teachers and students.

O'Connor (2002) stated that in language there are a small number of sound units that are put together in the in the box to form the words and sentences that are used every day. It is like the human head which has a certain fixed number of boxes for sound. So, when listening to the speaker's language, the accent will be heard every day. So, it is easy to use what has been heard since being a child. As a result, the main problem of English pronunciation sound is to build a new set of boxes corresponding to the sounds of English. If learners want to have good pronunciation, practice is important. Besides, a mother tongue is one of English pronunciation problems, there is another problem that is about sound and it is difficult for learners to use good pronunciation. There are a few problems regarding English vowel sounds for Thai students who learn English as a second/foreign language. The problems may be the lengthening of vowel sounds preceding voiced consonant sounds.

Articulating sounds such as /ð/ involves the configuration of certain speech organs working together-the apex and the upper teeth. Some sound articulation involves both lips and teeth working together. In addition, vocal cords are often involved in producing certain voiced sounds that do not occur in the Thai language. So there are a lot of English consonant and vowel sounds, in addition to suprasegmental factors that is different from those in Thai, which may in turn cause problems in pronunciation. Some consonants occur in English but not Thai, including /g/, /v/, /z/ and /ʒ/. Besides these consonants, dark-l and clusters are difficult to pronounce for Thai students. English consonants cluster can appear in word-initial, medial and final positions. Moreover, there are many more consonant clusters in English more than Thai. The English clusters at an initial position can consist of three letters, while the Thai language employs only clusters of two sounds at the same position. In addition, English cluster occur at the medial and final positions while there are none in Thai. Besides these, Thai students encounter problems in pronouncing the words-ending with consonants. Their incorrect pronunciation often causes problems in communication.

### Problems of Consonants

There are 24 consonant sounds and 20 vowel sounds (including combinations of vowel sounds or diphthongs), but there are only 26 letters in the alphabet. This makes speaking a real problem.

Jotikasthira (1999) has emphasized that there are some of the English sounds, which can be problem for Thai students. They are divided into three categories. First, these sounds (/v/, /θ/, /ð/, /z/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/ and /g/) do not occur in Thai. That is

why Thai students cannot pronounce these sounds because they do not exist in Thai. Second, these sounds (/l/, /f/, /s/) are different from their Thai equivalents as to their distribution. The sounds (/l/, /f/, /s/) do not occur at the final position in Thai and most Thai student rarely pronounce them right when they appear in English words. The /l/ sound is substituted by /n/ as, for example, the /l/ in final is generally replaced by /n/. The unreleased /b/ is heard instead of /f/ in such words as safe and golf. The sound /s/ in gas is usually replaced by the unreleased /d/, or /s/ may be omitted completely when it occurs after diphthongs /aʊ/ and /ɔi/ as in nice, house and rejoice. This is because in Thai there is no consonant sound following these diphthongs.

Moreover, these sounds /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, and /k/ can also be problem sounds even though we have these sounds in Thai. This is because those sounds can be either released or unreleased when they occur finally in English. So, you have to be aware when these sounds occur finally in Thai only the unreleased sounds exist. Besides, their released counter parts do not appear at the final position in Thai. Third, these sounds (/r/, /i/, /e/, /u/, and /o/) are also phonetically different from their Thai equivalents. Their production is not the same. The English /r/ sound can be formed in various ways depending upon different speakers and dialects. However, one formation which is called retroflex and bent back is common throughout the Midland area. This retroflex /r/ is made by moving the sides of the tongue against the back teeth. The front of the tongue is lowered but the tip is turned upward and withdrawn towards the back of the mouth, whereas the Thai /r/ sound is trilled /r/.(Jotilasthira,1999).

Jones (1972) mentioned about the difficulties of pronunciation. There must be difficulties in speaking other languages like English language. First, learners must recognise readily and with certainty the various speech-sounds occurring in the language. Second, learners have to make the foreign sounds with their own speech organs. Third, learners need to use those sounds in proper places to connect speech. Fourth, learners must learn to connect sounds to join each sound of a sequence and pronounce the sequence completely. Fifth, it's the matter of gymnastics of the vocal organs. In order to learn to form the speech-sounds of a foreign language, the student has to put his tongue, lips, and other parts of the organs of speech into certain definite positions, or to perform with them certain actions. Sixth the result of such inconsistencies is that the foreign learner who depends only on ordinary orthography is in innumerable cases at a loss to know what sounds should be used, and is continually mispronouncing words. Such mispronunciations may, however, be avoided by the use of phonetic Transcription. The last one is that learners have to learn conventional

letters and the relations between the conventional orthography and the pronunciation.

The other factors causing the problems of pronunciation are stress, intonations, assimilation, dissimilation, words accent, and vowel change. There are also exceptional words or borrowed words in English, the pronunciation of which are unpredictable. These often result in problems for Thai students. The correlation of spelling and pronunciation is one of the main problems confusing foreign students who learn English as a foreign language. Some letters have more than one sound. The letter ‘c’ and ‘g’ for example, have two sounds, the former sounding like /k/ in ‘cat’ and like /s/ in ‘excite’ while the letter sounding like /g/ in ‘game’ and like /j/ in, giant. Some English words can be pronounced in two ways. For instance, ‘blow’ can be pronounced as /bau/ and /bou/, ‘lead’ can be read /li:d/ and /led/ and ‘tear’ can be either /tɛr/ or /tɛə/ (hornby&parmwel/1987) some pairs of words are spelled alike but some sound differently. Some examples are ‘tone’ and ‘done’ which are read /toun/ and /dʌn/ respectively. (Rosenburg, 1988)

One of the main problems for non-native speakers learning English is lacking the conception of pronunciation. Besides, the system of the first language may influence the target language when students learn a second language. If the first language is much different from that of the second, it may cause the problem in learning. Besides, the problems mentioned previous, other serious problems for Thai students are cluster sounds

Foreign students often find certain English consonant sounds difficult to pronounce. This may point to the fact that such problem sounds do not occur in their native language. Many Thai students, for instance, encounter the difficulty in pronouncing such words as ‘shout’, ‘zoo’ and ‘judge’ as the sounds /ʃ/, /z/ and /j/ are not included

in the consonant inventory of Thai. Despite their fluency in speaking English, many foreign students have strong accent resulting from substituting an English consonant sound with a sound in their mother tongue which shares some similarity in phonetic property with the target sound.

### Difficulties Peculiar to Thai learners of English

As some sounds in English just simply do not exist in Thai language, this affects the way native Thai speakers pronounce English words. Thai speakers usually omit the consonant clusters. Final consonant are often omitted or converted according to the rules of Thai pronunciation: /l/ and /r/ become /n/, while /s/ becomes /t/ and /r/ becomes a/l/.

Other limits between Thai and English pronunciation are in details:

1. /tʃ/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ can be indistinguishable and pronounced as [c<sup>h</sup>]
2. /dʒ/ may be pronounced as [j] or [c]
3. /g/ may be devoiced to [k] (devoiced)
4. /z/ may be devoiced to [s] (devoiced)
5. /v/ may be pronounced as [w] word-initially and [p] word-finally.
6. Thai has no dental fricatives and usually substitutes apical stops for them.

Finally I identified some of the peculiar difficulties related to Thai learners of English. This paper may enhance the willingness of students to study English because they might discover the causes of their English problem and be able to manage those problems. It can contribute to the confidence of readers that they could receive the information from the same kind of problems when using English.

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