

Problems of Pronunciation in English Consonant Clusters with reference to Thai Students in Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University

M Suresh Kumar¹ And Phramaha Pattarawit Supannamoke²

¹Research Director, English Department, Acharya Nagarjuna University, NagarjunaNagar, Guntur. AP522510

²Ph.d Research Scholar, English Department, Acharya Nagarjuna University, NagarjunaNagar, Guntur. AP522510

Abstract:

Pronunciation is recognised as a fundamental skills students should acquire. Many learner want to sound native-like, or at least more authentic (Brown, 1992). Most ELF teacher face problems with students' pronunciation and want to find the answer to the question of how to help them improve their pronunciation successfully. Although English sounds are quite complicated, most of them are, somehow, universal, and therefore do not need to be taught. The important point is that teachers should find out which sounds cause difficulties and need to be taught

There are many factors affecting students' pronunciation. According to Celce-Murcia Ai (1996), some factors appearing to affect teaching pronunciation are students' ages, length of exposure to the target language; the difference between L 1 and L2 pronunciation systems, types of prior pronunciation; the students' attitude towards the target language and their motivation to achieve intelligible speech in the second language. Although some factors are hard to control e.g., students' age, exposure to the target language and types of prior language pronunciation, the teacher should be aware of these factors in teaching pronunciation to each group of students.

Key Words: Pronunciation – cluster– Thai students.

Introduction:

Learning English as a second language is a complicated task for all student. 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 Thai students encounter pronunciation problems, usage, grammar and text. (Brown, 1987; cited in TipaThep-Ackrapong, 2008)

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. **Other serious problems for Thai students are cluster sounds** (KosumWanadilok, 1982). The difference of phonetic ordering leads to problems. (UdomWirotesiksdi, 1978)

According to Sirikunya&Mathrou (1985) had mentioned in their works that most English and Thai vowel sounds are pronounced alike. So there are not many problems for Thai students regarding the pronunciation of vowel sounds. On the other hand, Thai students encounter the problems of pronunciation of English consonants because they have different ways of articulating and **there are a lot of cluster in English. English clusters can appear in various positions in the world-initial, medial and final positions.**

Problems of Consonant Clusters

The consonant cluster arising from the joining of two morphemes, two or more consonant sometimes come together at the beginning or the end of an English syllable (R.K.Banal and J.B.Harrison,1972, 2008). Here is a list of common English consonant clusters:

Table 1: Showing Initial Clusters (2 or 3 consonants)

Consonant Phonemes	Cluster Phonemes	Example Words
/p/ as first member	/pl-/ /pr-/ /pj-/	play, please, plenty pray, press, price pupil, pure
/b/as first member	/bl-/ /br-/ /bj-/	black, blood, blue brave, bring, brush beauty
/t /as first member	/tr-/ /tj-/ /tw-/	train, treasure, true tube, tune, Tuesday twist, twelve, twice
/d/ as first member	/dr-/ /dj-/ /dw-/	draw, dream, drop due, during, duty dwell
/k/ as first member	/kl-/ /kr-/ /kj-/ /kw-/	class, clean, cloth cry, crush, crowd cure, curious quality, queen, quick
/g/ as first member	/gl-/ /gr-/	glad, glass, glory grass, great, green
/f/ as first member	/fl-/ /fr-/ /fj-/	flag, float, fly free, fresh, from few, funeral, future
/v/ as first member	/vj-/	view
/θ/ as first member	/θr/ /θw-/	three, though, throw thwart
/s/ as first members 2 consonant 3 consonant	/sp-/ /st-/ /sk-/ /sf-/ /sm-/ /sn/ /sl/ /sj/ /sw-/ /spl-/ /spr-/ /spj-/ /str-/ /stj-/ /skr-/ /skw-/	speak, special, spent stamp, stay, sticks school, scare, scold sphere small, smoke, smooth snow, snake sleep, slope, slow suit swear, sweet, swim spilt, splendid spread, spring spurious straight, stream, strike stupid, student screen, screw, scratch square

/h/ as first member	/hj-/	human
/m/ as first member	/mj-/	music
/n/ as first member	/nj-/	new, nuisance

Table 2. Showing Final Clusters (2, 3 or 4 consonant)

Consonant phonemes	Cluster phonemes	Example
/p/ as final element	/-mp/ /-lp/	camp, damp, jump help
/t/ as final element 2 consonants 3 consonant	/-pt/ /-kt/ /-ft/ /-st/ /-nt/ /-lt/ /-ft̪/ /-ft̪/ /-dst/ /-kst/ /-skt/ /-mpt/ /-nft̪/ /-nst/ /lpt/ /-lst/ /-lkt/	adopt, except, interrupt act, collect, district laughed, soft almost, beast, chest absent, content belt, difficult, fault reached, searched pushed, rushed, washed midst fixed, mixed, next asked attempt, prompt, tempt lunched advanced, against, danced help whilst milked
/b/ as final element	/-lb/	bulb
/d/ as final element	/-bd/ /-gd/ /-dʒd/ /-vd/ /-zd/ /-ðd/ /-md/ /-nd/ /-ld/	robbed, rubbed begged judged loved, proved, saved confused, raised breathed Ashamed band, command, depend bold, child, field, fold
/k/ as final element	/-sk/ /-ŋk/ /-lk/	ask, desk bank, drink, pink milk, silk

Consonant phonemes	Cluster phonemes	Example
/tʃ/ as final element	/-ntʃ/	Branch, lunch, pinch
/dʒ/ as final element	/-ndʒ/	Arrange, change, orange
/f/ as final element	/-lf/ /-mf/	self triumph
/v/ as final element	/-lv/	solve
/θ/ as final element 2 consonants	/-pθ/ /-tθ/ /-fθ/ /-mθ/ /-nθ/ /-lθ/	depth eighth fifth warmth month, ninth, tenth health, strength
3 consonants	/-ksθ/ /-lfθ/	sixth twelfth
/s/ as final element 2 consonants 3 consonants	/-ps/ /-ts/ /-ks/ /-fs/ /-sθ/ /-ns/ /-ls / /-tθs/ /-pts/ /-pθs/ /-kts/ /-sps/ /-sts/ /-sks/ /-mps/ /-nts/ /-nθs/ /-lps/ /-lts/ /-lks/	caps, hopes, maps eat, hates, roots axe, box, fix, socks laughs, proofs fourth absence, balance, dance else, false eights adopts depths acts, directs, elects wasps beasts, requests, test asks, desks lamps, stamps aunts, parents, tents months, tenths helps belts, faults, melts silks
4 consonants	/-ksts/ /-ksθs/	texts sixths
/z/ as final element	/-bz/	clubs, robs

Consonant phonemes	Cluster phonemes	Example	
2 consonants	/-dz/	heads, leads, outwards	
	/-gz/	bags, dogs, eggs	
	/-vz/	lives, knives, saves	
	/-ðz/	breathes	
	/-mz/	names, steams, times	
	/-nz/	beans, fans, inns	
	/-ŋz/	hangs, rings	
	/-lz/	balls, mills, sells	
	3 consonants	/-ndz/	hands, islands, sends
		/-lbz/	bulbs
/-ldz/		builds, Folds, holds	
/-lvz/		solves	
/-lmz/		films	
/m/ as final element	/-lm/	Film	

In the above chart of the consonant cluster pronunciation problems of Thai students, the sounds such as /sp-/, /pr-/, /pl-/, /bl-/, /br-/, /tr-/, /tw-/, /dr-/, /kl-/, /kr-/, /kw-/, /gr-/, /gl-/, /fr-/, /fl-/, /sk-/, /sl-/, /sm-/, /sn-/, /st-/ and /sw-/ in the initial position had problems at the lowest level. However, the two consonant cluster sound /-ʃr/ and /θr-/ in the initial had problems at the highest level. The students wrong pronunciations were caused by the lack of phonetics pronunciation principals. The importance was that there were no /-ʃr/ and /θr-/ in Thai language. (cited in JukpimChalad, 2008) Chalad stated again in his research work that the pronunciation of two constant cluster sounds in the final position which had problems at high level include /-st/, /-nd/, /-gz/, /-bz/, /-lz/, /-mz/, /-nz/, /-fs/, /-lm/, /-pt/, /-nd/ and /-ʃt/. The pronunciation of the constant cluster sounds in the final position which had problems at the highest level included /-zd/, /-vd/, /-θs/, /-θs/, /-lθ/, /-nθ/, /-ŋθ/, /-ðd/, /-ðz/, /-dz/, /-tʃt/ and /-dʒd/ because they had same previous reason, there were no like these sounds in Thai language. Consequently, the sounds could not pronounce not pronounce the words properly. For three constant cluster sounds, the sound of /skw-/ they had problems at the highest level, but other sounds they had problems at very low level because there were some Thai words with three consonant cluster sounds This sound /skw-/ was not in Thai words so they had problems at the highest level, it was difficult for students to pronunciation appropriately. Lastly, the pronunciation of all the three consonants cluster sounds in the final position such as /-lps/, /-lpt/, /-ldz/, /-fts/, /-sks/, /-sps/ and /-sts/ they had problems at the highest level. The students could not pronounce these sounds correctly because there were no Thai language sounds.

The Thai language contains relatively few consonant clusters (consonants which are grouped together without vowels between them): /pl-/, /p^h-/, /pr/, /p^hr-/, /tl-/, /t^hl-/, /tr-/, /t^hr-/, /kl-/, /k^hl-/, /kr-/, /k^hr-/, /kw-/ and /k^hw-/. These clusters are pronounced only in initial position in both English and Thai language. They will therefore not cause any particular problem to Thai students of English of English after they have mastered the /r/ and /l/ sounds (KanitthananWilaivan, 1994).

All other consonant clusters will have to be considered as possible problems to the Thai students. One important difficulty which is likely to be encountered is the intrusion of a vowel which will break up the consonant group and make it more nearly coincide with the consonant-vowel pattern of the syllables of the Thai language. For example the word 'stay' may become /sətey/ rather than English pronunciation /stey/. Or 'splash' may become /səplæf/ rather than the English pronunciation /splæf/. The word 'aimed' may be pronounced /eyməd/ rather than /eymd/.

Another common difficulty of Thai students in pronouncing certain consonant clusters is that they omit one or more of the consonants in the clusters. For example, they may pronounce the word 'masts' as /mæt/ rather than /mæsts/. A third problem, the Thai students sometimes have a tendency to omit one of the consonant of a consonant cluster and then change the remaining one to fit the Thai phonological pattern. Thus, 'bold' may become /bown/ (like in English 'bone') or 'bowt' (like in English 'boat') rather than /bowld/.

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