Teaching English Pronunciation among Thai Engineering EFL Learners: Perceptions, Problems and Solutions

DUANGKAMON WINITKUN
KING MONGKUT’S UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY THONBURI
& MARK B. ULLA
WALAILAK UNIVERSITY
Why study on pronunciation problems?

- Incomprehensibility of students’ talk caused by their poor pronunciation.
- Students are too shy to speak out since they are not confident with their pronunciation.
- Problems and solutions to solve those problems
Previous studies

Teacher
Good model?

Learners
Native language/
Attitude/
Motivation/
Ego
bundaries/
Experience
According to Khamkhien (2010: 763), English teachers themselves should initially be aware of the expertise expected of teachers. That is, they should possess knowledge of instruction, knowledge of context, and expertise related to the subject matter, word stress assignment because the teachers pronunciation is the major input that the learners are exposed to.

Kanoksilapatham (2014) found that Thai teachers have difficulty identifying stressed syllables in English.
Kanokpermpoon (2007), and Wei & Zhou (2002) revealed in their findings that there are differences when it comes to consonants and vowels sounds of the native language compared with English.

Wei & Zhou's (2002) also revealed that aside from consonants and vowels as problems for Thai learners, intonation and stress are also among the difficulties of the students to deliver.
Factors affecting pronunciation features

- Age
- Motivation
- Experience
- Ego boundaries
- Attitude
- Etc.

Dornyei (2001) High or Low
Haymes (2000) and Senel (2006) Sufficient or scarce
Senel (2006) Introvert vs Extrovert

Lenneberg (1967) Puberty
Ehrman (1999) Thick vs Thin
Why is this research called upon?

While a number of the previous studies have dealt with Thai students’ pronunciation problems, none of them concentrated on looking at the reasons behind the commission of these errors, and none of them have proposed a solution to the problem.
Research Questions

- What pronunciation problems are found common among Thai engineering students of the Residential College, KMUTT?
- What can be attributed to the commission of these pronunciation problems?
- What training program can be proposed to address the problem?
Research participants

69 of 1st year engineering undergraduate students of Residential College, King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi.
Research instruments

- Survey questionnaires (perceptions)
- Pronunciation identification task (problems)
- Semi-structured individual interview (solutions)
Data analysis

- **When?**: 1st semester of the academic year of 2016.
- **Research nature**: qualitative
- **What to find out?**: interpret and categorize pronunciation problems of the learners, causes of those problems and possible training programs or supports that the university can provide to enhance students’ pronunciation skill.
Findings

The questionnaire which was adapted from Gerhiser & Wrenn (2007) and Mills et al. (2011) was employed for the preliminary survey of the participants' self-evaluation and self-awareness on their pronunciation proficiency and problems.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Percentage of response rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My voice was loud and clear enough when speaking.</td>
<td>37.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I produce clear consonants.</td>
<td>20.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I produce clear vowels.</td>
<td>48.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I have appropriate word stress.</td>
<td>3.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I have appropriate intonation.</td>
<td>24.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I make appropriate though groups/ pausing.</td>
<td>17.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I address my messages at the appropriate speed.</td>
<td>24.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My pronunciation can make audiences understand.</td>
<td>24.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The findings presented in Table 1 shows that learners cannot identify their problems clearly.
Pronunciation Identification Task

- Consonant
  - Sound omission
  - Sound modification

- Vowel
  - Wrong stress
  - Sound switching
  - Sound addition

- Over
- Cash
- Fax
- Exam
- Good
- Laptop
- Salesman
- Recommended
- Systems
- Mouse
- Computer
- Navigation
- Desktop
- embarrassed
Semi-structured interview: reflection from learners

The specific pronunciation problems were mispronunciation of vowel and consonant sounds especially /z/, /s/, /ð/, /θ/, /əd/, /v/, /h/ sounds.
They admitted that they did not have enough practice in speaking; they panic and were too nervous to read the text written in English; they did not know the correct pronunciation of some sounds, could not pronounce the long words in a series; and they were not familiar with some English words.
Semi-structured interview: reflection from learners

About the area of pronunciation they like to work on most and their goals for the pronunciation training, they disclosed that they wanted to make their audience understand the words they speak, to be confident in speaking English, to work more on vowel and consonant sounds and to sound like the native speakers.
Solutions: students’ perspective

Activities that can enhance students’ pronunciation from their perspective.

- Learning some techniques to practice pronunciation
- Reading aloud
- Listening and repeating the sounds from the video and audio clips
- Attending to training sessions
- Watching English movies
- Setting up English summer camp
- Singing a song
- Playing games
However, they admitted that they did not know the appropriate materials or strategies that would lead to effective practice in pronunciation/speaking.
Discussions

- Native language interference L2 acquisition – misinterpretation of sounds
- Lack of pronunciation rules knowledge e.g.-ed ending pronunciation
- Foreign accent somehow makes it hard to pronounce the target language
Kenworthy (1987), stated that the native language is the most influential factor that affects students’ pronunciation especially foreign accents. In fact, this was supported by Busà (2010) who found that Italian language, as a native language, interferes the learning of English vowels since the phonological systems of both languages are different.
Suggestions

- Get students exposed in English speaking contexts
- English should be made as the medium of instruction in the classroom. Teachers should encourage the students to use the language at all times whenever they are in the English class or even outside of the class.
- Phonological and articulatory system of the English sounds should be introduced to the students in order to let them have an idea of the different sounds of the English language.
Training programs

1. Speech and communication training
2. Tongue twister
3. Reading aloud
4. Readers theater
5. Excursion & Presentation