DIFFICULTY IN PRONUNCIATION OF CERTAIN ENGLISH CONSONANT SOUNDS

Sukarna Chakma*

ABSTRACT
This research was a survey research design which focused on the difficulty in pronunciation of certain English consonant sounds by Matthayom 1 students of Bangpakong Borvornwittayayon School in Chachoengsao Province, Thailand.

There were 11 problematic consonant sounds with 2 words for each sound. Each initial consonant sound had 16 occurrences from 16 students and each final sound had also 16 occurrences from the same number of students. There were 22 words and 16 students. So in total there were 22 X 16 = 352 occurrences of words. Participants had been given the list of words with targeted sounds beforehand and asked to pronounce each word only once. Each student was given 22 words to read having 11 different consonant sounds with 2 words for each sound – initial and final. The consonant sounds of the words were listened and checked by the expert to tick correct and incorrect pronunciation in the boxes while students had pronounced the sounds in the targeted words.

The result was based on the number of occurrences of correctly and incorrectly pronounced consonant sounds that were analyzed and then presented by descriptive statistics of frequency and percentage, and also the remarks from the English teacher-expert. It was found that individual English consonant sounds were not problematic for Thai students however, whenever the sounds occurred in the beginning and end of the words the students had difficulties in pronouncing them and they substituted them with other likely sounds.

Keywords: mother tongue, consonants, phoneme, correct pronunciation, incorrect pronunciation.

INTRODUCTION
Nowadays, all regions of the world are coming closer to each other and the world is globalizing. For example, many countries have business agreements among themselves and as a result they are dependent on each other in business, many countries have mutual understanding in the field of education, and exchange of students and educational experts take place at large than earlier times. Also, because of the development of telecommunication and internet people from different parts of the world can easily communicate with each other and it has made us possible to feel close with each other socially. Obviously in all these cases English language plays an important role. Naturally, all the masses and people are getting more familiar and nearer to each other. This way, they collectively affect each other in all aspects of life. Specially, it is the language, which is effected more. As it is said that English is local language of the world so, it has immense number of people around the globe to speak it up. Every one of them has its own way to

*Lecturer: English for Business Communication Department, School of Liberal Arts, Sripatum University Chonburi Campus
deal with it but it's quite sure that Language is not that kind of abstract art which be dealt in one's own way like any abstract painting. Language is humankind's distinctive feature. Whether we think of rationality or sociability, we are thinking of languages. It is language that makes us different from other species. And especially when one talk about speaking of English or learning to speak English, he/she must replace the saying: "Seeing is believing" with "Hearing is believing" because speech is therefore the basic form of language. This leads to the conclusion that speech should be emphasized accurately. It is confirmed that without some degree of accuracy, speaker could end up producing unrecognizable or incomprehensible language.

The role of English in Thailand is quite important as it is in many other Asian countries. New technology and the adoption of the Internet have resulted in a major transition in terms of business, education, science, and technological progress, all of which demand high proficiency in English. For example, these days many companies do business and reach their customers through internet, quite a lot of distance education programs and other courses are provided by many universities and other educational institutes through internet. We can get almost all kinds of information from the internet and English is widely used in all these cases.

Among the four skills of language (i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking), speaking skill seems to attract a lot of English learners’ attention. For English learners, the speaking skill is very important; especially, the accuracy of English pronunciation. Many times, native speakers confuse or misunderstand word meaning. Among many factors are the errors in English pronunciation. Generally, people do not know and cannot explain what a foreign accent is but are fully aware of its presence or its absence when foreigners speak their languages.

Moreover, it is found that Thai students have difficulties in pronouncing certain English letters mostly consonants. It is because Thai language doesn’t have final consonant clusters. The major problem for Thai learners is the difference of sounds. Many sounds do not occur in Thai and Thai speakers substitute those sounds with the closest voicing. Most Thai speakers decide English pronunciation based on the phonological pattern in first language or mother tongue. Usually, when new languages are encountered, the existing representations of first language are applied and reshape target language incoming information. In language transfer, complex factors interact, including language distance, cognitive load, attention, sociolinguistic factors, etc. Language transfer is a phenomenon that exists in second language learning.

It doesn’t need to try to turn people into sounding like native speakers, but it does need to get them to be capable of being understood by a variety of listeners, which involves a degree of approximation to the core sounds. So, it is quite important to teach the right pronunciation of English to the learners, so that they may communicate exactly what and how they want to communicate.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
The current debate about the phonology of English as an international language should encourage teachers and learners to think about the aims in teaching and learning of English pronunciation in the context of English for speakers of other languages. The objectives of this survey research are:

1. to identify the difficulty of pronouncing certain English consonant sounds by M 1 students and to encourage them to improve their pronunciation
2. to compare the pronunciation of correct and incorrect sounds
RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The followings were the research hypothesis of this study:

1. Individual English consonant sounds /ch/, /d/, /g/, /l/, /r/, /sh/, /s/, /th/, /v/, /w/, /x/ were not problematic for Matthayom 1 students of Bangpakong Borvornwittayayon School.

2. However, whenever these consonant sounds /ch/, /g/, /l/, /r/, /sh/, /th/, /v/, /w/, /x/ occurred in the beginning and end of a word the students had difficulties pronouncing them and substituted them with other sounds /s/, /sh/, /k/, /n/, /l/, /s/, /ch/, /t/, /w/, /v/, /c/. The sounds of /d/ and /s/ were usually left unpronounced in the end of a word such as ‘find’ was pronounced as ‘fine’ and ‘tears’ was pronounced as ‘tear’.

SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The study aimed at identifying the difficulties of pronouncing certain consonant sounds in words by Matthayom 1 students of Bangpakong Borvornwittayayon School who had more or less learned English in primary schools. Each participant had pronounced all the 22 words consisting of 11 different consonant sounds /ch/, /d/, /g/, /l/, /r/, /sh/, /s/, /th/, /v/, /w/, /x/. Students’ pronunciations were listened and checked by one English-teacher expert. The results were analyzed from the variations that the students pronounced.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter described the procedure of the study containing research methodology, participants, variables, instruments and pronunciation test with data collection and data analysis in the end.

Population: The population was consisted of 16 students from the six rooms of Matthayom Suksa 1, who were studying listening and speaking English in semester 1/2010 at Bangpakong Borvornwittayayon School in Chachoengsao Province. The population had more or less studied English in primary school. The researcher had assumed that Thai learners could read the given words.

Sample: By using simple random sampling, the 16 participants were selected from six rooms of Matthayom 1. These were 7 students from M1/1, 2 from M1/2, 3 from M1/3, 1 from 1/4, 2 from 1/5 and 1 from 1/6. While selecting for the pronunciation test - the students had been asked to pick up numbers from a box. For example, while selecting 7 students from M1/1 all students of this room had been asked to pick up a number from a box one by one and in the end students who had picked up numbers 1-7 had been selected for the test. The same procedure had been followed for selecting students from other rooms of Matthayom 1. Students were given the list of words with targeted sounds beforehand and asked to pronounce each word only once. Each student was given 22 words to read having 11 different consonant sounds with 2 words for each sound initial and final. The researcher had assumed that Thai learners could read the given words.

The pronunciation survey of the participants was done in an English classroom of the school from August 16-20, 2010.

Variables: The independent variable was the list of 22 words with 11 consonant sounds. The dependent variables were the students’ pronunciation of consonant sounds in the given words.

DATA COLLECTION

There were 11 problematic consonant sounds with 2 words for each sound. Each initial consonant sound had 16 occurrences from 16 students and each final sound had also 16 occurrences from the same number of students. There were 22 words and 16 students. So in total there were 22 X 16 = 352
occurrences of words. Participants were given the list of words with targeted sounds beforehand and asked to pronounce each word only once. Each student was given 22 words to read having 11 different consonant sounds with 2 words for each sound – initial and final.

The consonant sounds of the words were listened and checked by the expert to tick correct and incorrect pronunciation in the boxes while students had pronounced the sounds in the targeted words. It was found that individual consonant sound was not a problem for the learners however, wherever the consonant sounds /ch/, /d/, /g/, /l/, /r/, /sh/, /s/, /th/, /v/, /w/ and /x/ occurred in the initial and final position, the learners substituted them with the sounds /s/sh/, /k/, /n/, /l/, /s/ch/, /t/, /w/ and /c/ respectively. The sounds of /d/ and /s/ were usually left unpronounced in the end of a word such as ‘find’ was pronounced as ‘fine’ and ‘tears’ was pronounced as ‘tear’.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The result based on the percentage of correctly and incorrectly pronounced words, and the remarks from the English teacher-expert. For having more in detail the researcher also talked to the English teacher-expert about her opinion on Thai learners’ pronunciation and something that she observed while Thai learners produced each consonant sound.

Based on the following criteria, all 11 consonant sounds were classified into 3 groups. High level (H) was from 80% - 100%Medium level (M) was from 50% - 79%Low level (L) was from 0% - 49%

**SUGGESTIONS**

Nowadays, there are many teaching materials, which help learners to practice and improve their abilities in learning English such as CD, DVD, English news channels on TV and radio, Internet, Textbooks, etc. The researcher suggests the learners to make good use of different materials or to make good use of materials that are within the reach of the learners to improve pronunciation.

Further, the success of learning English for Thai learners largely depends on their attitude and motivation in learning. They should spend more time in practicing not only English pronunciation, but they should also spend more time in learning four important skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. In researcher’s opinion, learners’ motivation or self-motivation is a significant factor that helps learners succeed in learning target language, and also the learners should practice English outside the classroom which can help a learner become a master and in acquiring the target language.

**RESEARCH RESULTS**

The results from this study showing the occurrence of consonant sounds that Thai learners had pronounced at initial and final position are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 The occurrence of /ch/</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final position</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 16 100 Total 16 100

The result from table 1 had indicated that /ch/ sound, both at initial and final position were problematic, but the /ch/ sound at the initial position was more problematic than the /ch/ sound at final position.
Table 2 The result of the consonant /d/ had showed that the participants had produced 100% correct pronunciation at initial position and 0% incorrect pronunciation. Correct pronunciation of /d/ at final position was 56.3% and incorrect pronunciation was 43.7%.

The result had showed that the participants had no problem of pronouncing /d/ at initial position. However, the final position has indicated that the participants had difficulty in pronouncing the final position of /d/. The correct pronunciation of /d/ at initial position was satisfactory.

Table 3 Thai learners had produced 100% correct pronunciation of the consonant /g/ at initial position and 68.7% at final position. The occurrence of incorrect pronunciation was 0% at initial position and 31.3% at final position.

The percentage had showed that the participants had no problem in their production of /g/ sound at initial position, but they had problems at final position. The percentage of correct pronunciation at initial position was up to satisfaction.

Table 4 The occurrences of /l/ both at initial and final position had showed that 81.2% Thai learners had produced correct pronunciation and 18.8% had produced incorrect pronunciation.

The result of /l/ sound both at initial and final position had showed that Thai learners had fewer problems in pronouncing the sound /l/ at initial and final position.

Table 5 The result of /r/ had showed that there was 56.3% correct pronunciation and incorrect pronunciation was 43.7% at initial position. There were 81.2% correct pronunciation of at final position and 18.2% incorrect pronunciation.

From table 5 it was found that the participants had problem with the pronunciation of /r/ sound at initial position, but they had fewer problems with /r/ sound at final position.

Table 6 The participants had pronounced 62.5% correct pronunciation and 37.5% incorrect pronunciation at initial position of the sound /sh/. At final position equal percentages of Thai learners had pronounced correct and incorrect pronunciation.

Although this sound was not occurred in Thai consonant, the percentage of correct pronunciation at initial position was quite ok. However, they had to improve their production of /sh/ sound at final position.
Table 7 The result had showed that 75% of Thai learners had produced correct pronunciation and 25% had produced incorrect pronunciation of the sound /s/. The occurrence of /S/ at final position had showed that 37.2% had produced correct pronunciation and 62.5% incorrect pronunciation.

The result of /s/ at initial position was quite satisfactory. However, Thai learners had to improve the final position of /s/.

Table 8 18.8% Thai learners had pronounced correctly and 81.2% had pronounced incorrectly of the sound /th/ at final position. The occurrence of correct pronunciation was 31.3% and incorrect pronunciation was 68.7% at final position.

The percentages had showed that the participants had problems in their production of /th/ sound both at initial and final position mostly at initial position, and they had to improve the pronunciation of this sound.

Table 9 The result had showed that 37.5% participants had produced correct pronunciation and 62.5% had produced incorrect pronunciation of the sound /v/ at initial position. On the other hand 62.5% had pronounced correctly and 37.5% had produced incorrectly at the final position.

The result had showed that the participants had less problem of /v/ at final position. However, they had problem at initial position, and needed to improve of this sound at initial position.

Table 10 75% Thai learners had produced the sound of /w/ correctly and 81.2% had pronounced incorrectly at final position. The occurrence of correct pronunciation was 18.8% and incorrect pronunciation was 68.7% at final position.

The percentages had showed that the participants had problems in their production of /w/ sound at final position, and they had to improve the pronunciation of this sound. However, they had less problem at initial position.

Table 11 The result had showed that 18.8% of Thai learners had produced correct pronunciation and 81% had produced incorrect pronunciation of the sound /x/. The occurrence of /x/ at final position had showed that 93.8% have produced correct pronunciation and only 6.2% had pronounced incorrectly.

The result of /x/ at final position was quite satisfactory. However, Thai learners had to improve the initial position of /x/.
Table 12 The result had showed the arrangement of percentages of correct pronunciation of the consonant sounds of Thai learners from highest percentage to lowest percentage.

At initial position the sounds of /d/ and /g/ had the highest percentage, that is, 100% correct pronunciation for both the sounds. At final position the sound of /x/ had the highest percentage, that is, 93.8% correct pronunciation.

The participants had no problem with the sounds of /d/ and /g/ and fewer problems with the sounds of /l/, /s/ and /w/ at initial position. They had fewer problems with the sounds of /x/, /l/ and /R/ at final position.

The learners had the most problems with the sounds of /v/ and /x/ at initial position and with the sounds of /s/, /th/ and /w/ at final position.

Grouping and Ranking

Based on the following criteria, all 11 consonant sounds are classified into 3 groups and also ranked according to the percent. High level (H) is from 80% - 100%. Medium level (M) is from 50% - 79%. Low level (L) is from 0% - 49%.

From table 12, the ranked data showed the following data:
1. Initial position, correct pronunciation were 3 consonant sounds /d/, /g/, /l/ at the High level, 6 consonant sounds /s/, /w/, /ch/, /sh/, /th/, /r/ at the Medium level and 2 consonant sounds /v/ and /x/ at the Low level respectively.

2. Final position, correct pronunciations were 3 consonant sounds /x/, /l/, /R/ at the High level, 4 consonant sounds /g/, /v/, /ch/ and /sh/ at the Medium level and 4 consonant sounds /d/, /s/, /th/, and /w/ at the Low level respectively.

Table 13 Some examples of pronunciation problem for Thai learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English word</th>
<th>Phonetic alphabet</th>
<th>Substitution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>frog</td>
<td>/fog/</td>
<td>k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with</td>
<td>/w/</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wash</td>
<td>/w/</td>
<td>s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The examples from the above table showed that Thai learners pronounce /k/, /t/ and /ch/ instead /g/, /l/ and /sh/ because Thai language doesn’t have voiced velar stop and fricatives. As it is very difficult to pronounce the accurate sounds so, quite often Thai learners use closest /k/, /t/ and /s/ in Thai language to pronounce.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. This survey research is to investigate the Thai learners’ difficulty in pronouncing certain consonant sounds. Although this study has not focused the pronunciation of problematic consonant sounds deeply however, the result can still be used by the English teachers to find out the weaknesses of the students in pronouncing English words and accordingly preparing lessons to short out the difficulties and also by showing students different techniques as to how to improve their pronunciation.

Further, it can help the English teachers to be aware of their own weaknesses in pronunciation as a result they can try to overcome it by attending in-service training programs and English seminars.
The teachers and students can also try to overcome their weaknesses themselves through internet, CD, DVD, English news channels, radio, etc.

2. The result of this study had indicated that Thai learners had more or less problem in pronunciation. However, there are certain weak points that the researcher has to improve as well which are as follows:

The participants were aware of their problem when pronounced each English consonant. Therefore, they had produced less natural speech for each consonant. Other studies should create complex test by using sentences or reading text not pronouncing sound by sound or word by word. In addition, this study was focused on the occurrence at initial and final position of consonant. The occurrence in minimal pair, vowel, and stress should be included.

This study was just a survey on Thai learners’ pronunciation. There should be a comparative study of the interference from English to Thai language or an experimental study by having pretest and posttest to compare two groups of students. Other researchers might get further information if they have a questionnaire to conduct learners’ attitude and levels of learners’ thinking.

REFERENCES


