Pronunciation Problems and Factors Affecting English Pronunciation of EFL Students

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Abstract: A good pronunciation is the foundation of effective spoken communication. If the speakers have unacceptable pronunciation, their utterances will not be comprehensible to listeners and as a result they will not be successful in their communication. The purposes of this study were to investigate the EFL students' English pronunciation problems and to find out the factors affecting their English pronunciation. The participants were 208 students that use English as a foreign language in the Faculty of Education, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. The research instruments applied for data collection were an English pronunciation test, a questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview. The data obtained was analyzed by the applications of percentage, mean, standard deviation and content analysis. The finding revealed that English phonemes at the initial syllable position that create trouble to students included the /ð/, /θ/, /dʒ/, /ʒ/, /v/ and /z/ sound respectively and the /ð/, /θ/, /v/, /f/, /s/, and /l/ sound at the final syllable position. According to this study, the strongest factor that contributes to this problem was the students' basic knowledge of English pronunciation. Next were the instruction of teachers, and the frequency of English pronunciation, respectively. However, the differences between Thai sound system and English sound system was another important cause of their pronunciation problems. However, these findings are beneficial for educators and administrators in expansion of results through the development of teaching and training EFL students' English pronunciation.

Keywords: Pronunciation problem, Factors affecting English pronunciation, Undergraduate students

1. Introduction

English is an international language used as medium in sharing information, trading, education, and many others across the world. Learning English, therefore, becomes a must for students all around the world, specifically the students that study English as a Foreign Language (hereafter EFL students). For the importance of learning English mentioned above, this led to all students including EFL students in many countries to learn English from the kindergarten level to tertiary level. However, learning English especially speaking skill causes various problems for EFL students. As Kirkpatrick (2014) mentioned, EFL students use the language only on a certain occasion and for specific purposes. Moreover, the lack of English roles in society causes learning English for EFL students to be more challenged (Akbari, 2015). As a result of the limited role of using English by EFL students, they have bigger learning problems than other learners who use English in their daily life. Additionally, pronunciation is the basic of communication and it is essential when it comes to distinguishing meanings or to produce comprehensible utterances (Adams-Goertel, 2013), especially for EFL students. As Al Yaqoobi, Ali & Sulan (2016) mentioned that one cannot speak without pronouncing the language. However, learners consider pronunciation as the main cause for their communication problems (Ababneh, 2018). Learners with good English pronunciation are likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners with bad pronunciation will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect (Poursohein, 2012). From the above-mentioned functions of pronunciation, it is very vital for communication and it is the most important issue for EFL students to recognize.

Many countries including China, Denmark, Sweden, Iran, Japan, Korea, Indonesia and among many others treat English as a foreign language (Nordquist, 2013). In Thailand, EFL students have to study English which is a fundamental subject in curriculum from kindergarten level to the highest educational levels. However, it has been stated that the teaching of English has not been successful (Kwandee and Sawaddikun, 2012). EFL students in schools learn English for more than ten years, but most of them cannot use English to communicate or convey their ideas effectively. One reason that causes this problem is pronunciation. Most students lack adequate pronunciation practice opportunity which is also one of the primary causes of their English pronunciation problems. Abigail (2015) claimed that Thai students have inadequate practicing time in English pronunciation and they need more speaking opportunity in real situations both in and outside the school environment. Furthermore, the linguistic differences can be another factor that caused the problem; for instance, the difference of phonology, word order, and verbal system (Tappendorf, 2014). Similarly, Ohata's (2004) study observed that many pronunciation errors are caused by the phonological transfer of aspects of their first language (L1). This correspond to many research studies which suggested that Thai students are very prone to pronounce English sounds by using Thai consonant sounds instead. As Wei & Zhou (2002) stated,   Thai students usually make use of Thai sense in English pronunciation; for example, neglecting to pronounce the final

sounds, words with /r/ pronounced as /l/, words with /ð/ and /z/ pronounced as /s/. This illustrated that the differences in phonological patterns of Thai and English make it difficult for Thai students to imitate English

pronunciation accurately. The final consonant clusters, for instance, widely occur in English, but do not appear

in Thai. Thai students usually omit the last consonant of consonant clusters such as an omitted /s/ in the word "tears" or do not pronounce /d/ in the word "find" which causes a non-severe problem but is still unintelligible for listeners (Chakma, 2015). Moreover, it can be concluded from Khirin's (2011) study that both high and low experienced English speakers noticeably produced /θ/ as /t/ in the final position. Besides, the study from Burkardt (2005) which reported that Thai speakers substituted the voiced interdental fricative /ð/ with /d, θ, and t/, respectively. From the above mentioned, it presented that several phonemes cause pronunciation problems for Thai students; therefore, when they pronounced English phoneme sounds that do not occur in Thai sound system, they tended to substitute with Thai phoneme sounds instead.

During my teaching of Phonetics and Phonology for teachers of English course in the Faculty of Education Suan Sunadha Rajabhat University, I noticed that the first-year English major students' English pronunciation problems always occurred during the class and affected their performance in the classroom activities. Besides, from the interview of other students in 6 majors: Thai, Mathematics, General Science, Social studies, Early childhood Education, and Educational Technology and computer, it was found that they also have pronunciation problems, especially on how to pronounce the phonemes correctly. This pronunciation problem affected their communicative capability because speaking English is not just releasing words or sentences. Clear pronunciation is another point which students should be aware of in making communication flow smoothly. To figure out the answers of these questions: 1) What are consonants that frequently cause students' English pronunciation problems? and 2) What are the factors that affect students' English pronunciation?, the survey has been conducted. Therefore, the main purposes of this study are to investigate the students' English pronunciation problems and to find out the factors affecting their English pronunciation. The findings lead to figure out the ways to solve pronunciation problems of EFL students. As a result, their English pronunciation will be more correct and effective which will enhance EFL students' capacity in communication.

2. Literature Review

This research is related to the analysis of English pronunciation among EFL students. Yusriati and Hasibuan (2019) studied the opinions of English education students about their English pronunciation skills; analyzed the forms of English pronunciation errors made by the students; explored strategies or efforts made by students to improve their English pronunciation skills; and identified obstacles found by the students in English pronunciation. Whereas, Achmad and Yusuf (2014) reported some phonological difficulties faced by Indonesian students on sounds, stress, rhythm and intonation and enhance their interest and competence in improving English pronunciation. Furthermore, Komariah (2019) found out the problems in pronouncing the English sounds faced by the students of SMPN 2 Halong, Banjar. In addition, Nasar and Hamzah (2018) identified the difficulties of pronunciation and conversation faced by EFL learners who undertook a Preparatory Year Program (PYP) in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Lerdpaisarnwong (2015) explained that fricative sounds have large area of differences between Thai and English. English has nine fricative phonemes both in voiced /v/, /ð/, /z/, and /ʒ/ and voiceless /f/, /θ/, /s/, /ʃ/, and /h/ while Thai has only three voiceless fricative phonemes /f/, /s/, and /h/. Eight consonant sounds (except /h/) do not exist in Thai in all position. Moreover, these three voiceless fricative phonemes only appear in the initial position.

3. Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are to:

(1) investigate the students' English pronunciation problems;

(2) find out the factors affecting their English pronunciation.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Population and Sample

The population was 432 freshmen students in 7 majors: Thai, Mathematics, General Science, English, Social studies, Early childhood Education, and Educational Technology and computer in the Faculty of Education, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. The sample was 208 freshmen students in 7 majors in the Faculty of Education, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University which were selected by simple random sampling technique.

4.2 Data Collection

This study employed a mixed methods design to collect both quantitative and qualitative data using English pronunciation tests, questionnaires and a semi-structured interview as research instruments. English pronunciation tests consisted of the words that included 23 phonemes (except /ŋ/ sound) occurred in the initial positions for testing the students' problematic consonant sounds and the words that included 22 phonemes (except /h/ and /j/ sounds) occurred in the final positions for testing the students' problematic consonant sounds. Those words were collected from the book entitled "Application of phonetics to teaching English pronunciation" (Ronnakiat, 2012). The pronunciation tests were evaluated for validity, reliability, and difficulty by three experts with the IOC result of 0.80 – 1.00. The Questionnaires were checked for validity by three experts with the IOC result of 0.80 – 1.00. The tests were conducted to investigate students' English pronunciation problems in two problematic sound features: initial consonant sounds and final consonant sounds. The questionnaire and the interview were also used to explore the factors affecting the students' pronunciation.

For collecting the data, the students were assigned to pronounce the given words individually from a test sheet, using an audio recording software program in a computer for recording. After the pronunciation tests, the questionnaires were assigned to them. Finally, the semi-structure interview with 10 students from each major was conducted to elicit further and in-depth information.

4.3 Data Analysis

The word sounds from the students' pronunciation tests were checked by two native English teachers at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. After that, the scores were calculated as percentage to see the students' rates of pronunciation accuracy. For the questionnaire, descriptive statistics was used to analyze the personal information and the factors affecting the students' pronunciation. A semi-structured interview was analyzed by content analysis.

5. Research Results

The result illustrated that most students' pronunciation problem both in the initial position and the final position were in the manner of fricative. Furthermore, the strongest factor that contributes to this problem was the basic knowledge of English pronunciation. Moreover, the instruction of teachers and the frequency of English pronunciation were the other factors that needed to be considered. The details were illustrated in the form of descriptive statistics via percentage of students' pronunciation problems in table 1, 2 and 3.

5.1 English pronunciation problems

Table 1. English pronunciation problems at the initial position

Manners	Phonemes	Initial Position	
		Number of students' pronunciation problems	Percent
Plosives	p	0	0
	b	0	0
	t	0	0
	d	0	0
	k	0	0
	g	0	0
Nasals	m	0	0
	n	0	0
Fricatives	f	0	0
	v	166	79.81
	θ	182	87.50
	ð	197	94.71
	s	0	0
	z	152	73.08
	ʃ	100	48.08
	ʒ	170	81.73
	h	0	0
Affricates	tʃ	51	24.52
	ʤ	175	84.13
Lateral	l	0	0
Approximant	r	150	72.12
	j	46	22.16

Manners	Phonemes	Initial Position	
		Number of students' pronunciation problems	Percent
	w	0	0

From table 1, most students' pronunciation problem in the initial position was in the manner of fricative that consisted of the /ð/ ($\bar{x}$ = 94.71), /θ/ ($\bar{x}$ = 87.50), /ʒ/ ($\bar{x}$ = 81.73), /v/ ($\bar{x}$ = 79.81), and /z/ ($\bar{x}$ = 73.08) sounds, and in the manner of affricate that is the /dʒ/ ($\bar{x}$ = 84.13) sound.

Table 2. English pronunciation problems in the final position

Manners	Phonemes	Final Position	
		Number of students' pronunciation errors	Percent
Plosives	p	63	30.29
	b	66	31.73
	t	130	62.50
	d	73	35.10
	k	120	57.69
	g	54	25.96
Nasals	m	89	42.79
	n	126	60.58
	ŋ	0	0
Fricatives	f	155	74.52
	v	183	87.98
	θ	198	95.19
	ð	201	96.63
	s	134	64.42
	z	112	53.85
	ʃ	89	42.79
	ʒ	101	48.56
Affricates	tʃ	35	16.83
	dʒ	90	43.27
Lateral	l	125	60.10
Approximant	r	139	66.83
	w	0	0

Table 2 illustrated that most students' pronunciation problem in the final position was in the manner of fricative that consisted of the /ð/ ($\bar{x}$ = 96.63), /θ/ ($\bar{x}$ = 95.19), /v/ ($\bar{x}$ = 87.98), /f/ ($\bar{x}$ = 74.52), /s/ ($\bar{x}$ = 64.42) sounds and in the manner of lateral that is /l/ ($\bar{x}$ = 60.10) sound.

5.2 Factors affecting the students' pronunciation problems

Table 3. Factors affecting the students' pronunciation problems

Factors	Mean	S.D.	Meaning
1. Basic knowledge of English pronunciation	4.62	0.58	Highest
2. Instruction of teachers	4.51	0.58	Highest
3. Attitudes and motivation	3.55	0.96	High

Factors	Mean	S.D.	Meaning
4. Anxiety about English vocabulary and stress	4.05	0.61	High
5. The frequency of using English pronunciation	4.45	0.59	High
Total	4.24	0.67	High

Table 3 revealed that the students' basic knowledge of English pronunciation reflected as factors resulting to a very serious pronunciation problem ($\bar{x}$ = 4.62, S.D. = 0.58). Next was the instruction of teachers ($\bar{x}$ = 4.51, S.D. = 0.58) and the frequency of using English pronunciation ($\bar{x}$ = 4.45, S.D. = 0.59) respectively. Whereas, anxiety about English vocabulary and stress ($\bar{x}$ = 4.05, S.D. = 0.61), and attitudes and motivation ($\bar{x}$ = 3.55, S.D. = 0.96) were the less factors for the students' pronunciation problems.

5.3 Semi-structured interview

The results of the semi-structured interview were classified into 2 categories: the students' English pronunciation problems and the factors affecting students' pronunciation. Many interested points from the students' opinions were illustrated as follows:

5.3.1 English pronunciation problems

Students expressed that the differences between Thai sound system and English sound system could be the cause of their pronunciation problems as presented in the excerpts below:

"It is very difficult for me to pronounce some English consonant sounds such as /θ/, /ð/, /dʒ/, /ʒ/, and so on because they are not in Thai sound system." (S1)

"The fricative sounds are hard for me to pronounce because they are not in Thai sound system. I do not know how to pronounce them." (S2)

"Thai and English sound systems are different so it is hard for me to pronounce some English consonant sounds." (S3)

Voicing was explained in this interview as the cause of pronunciation problems which were presented by S4, S5 and S6 as follows:

"I always neglect the voicing when I pronounced some English consonant sounds." (S4)

"I do not know how to pronounce some English consonant sounds with voicing." (S5)

"Voicing is always a big problem for me in pronouncing the words." (S6)

5.3.2 Factors affecting students' pronunciation

The students' opinions showed in-depth information about five factors that causes their pronunciation problems.

Firstly, the students' basic knowledge of English pronunciation is rather low. Most students did not recognize the differences in manners of articulation between Thai and English. Besides, the students' fields of study affect their studying as well. Their opinions were illustrated below:

"I did not learn the differences between Thai and English sounds. I always pronounced English phonemes with Thai sounds instead." (S1)

"When I pronounced some English phonemes, I do not know how the tongue, lips, and other speech organs are involved." (S2)

"It is so hard for me to pronounce some English words. I have never studied how to pronounce each English phoneme." (S3)

"I don't have the basic knowledge of English pronunciation because my study did not involve the use of English." (S4)

Next, the instruction of teachers also affects the students' pronunciation problems. Some opinions were showed below:

"I did learn reading comprehension and grammar more than pronunciation." (S5)

"I rarely practice pronunciation in class." (S6)

"English classes could not really help me improve my English pronunciation." (S7)

"I want my English teacher to give more practice to her students' pronunciation" (S8)

Besides, the students' opinions about attitudes and motivation seem different. Some opinions were presented as follows:

"Attitudes and motivation do not have much effect on English pronunciation. I love English and I try to practice pronouncing the difficult English words; however, I still could not pronounce the difficult phonemes" (S9)

"Attitudes and motivation affect my pronunciation. Motivation makes me try to practice pronouncing the difficult words." (S10)

Furthermore, the student's anxiety about English words affects the students' pronunciation as follows:

"I feel a little bit worried about word stress because the different type of content words (e.g. nouns or verbs) has different positions of stress especially in the word that has more than 3 syllables. Consequently, I always hesitate when I have to pronounce the words." (S11)

"The anxiety makes me dare not to pronounce the words." (S12)

Finally, many students believe in practicing and think that the more they practice, the better they become. Some opinions were expressed as follows:

"I think if I have more time or an opportunity to practice pronunciation, my pronunciation will be better." (S13)

"I believe that my English pronunciation could be improved with frequent communication." (S14)

Furthermore, another interesting factor that causes the students' pronunciation problem was the learning material and they also need the foreign teachers to teach them English pronunciation. Some students' opinions were showed as follows:

"I want to practice pronunciation via learning materials." (S15)

"I need to listen to the foreigners' voices more than listening to Thai teachers' voices so that I will have the correct model to practice pronunciation." (S16)

"I need to practice pronunciation with foreign teachers." (S17)

6. Discussion and Conclusion

According to this study, the results have shown that students had serious problems with English pronunciation and there are many factors affected their pronunciation problems.

6.1 English pronunciation problems

Most pronunciation problem of the students was in the manner of fricative both in the initial position (ð/, /θ/, /ʒ/, /v/ and /z/) and in the final position (/ð/, /θ/, /v/, /f/, /s/). Another manner in the initial position was an affricate (/dʒ/) and in the final position was a lateral (/l/). This result revealed that most students faced the problems in pronouncing some non-existing English sounds. For some EFL countries such as Indonesia, the students had problems in pronouncing the English sounds of consonants such as /t/, /θ/, /ʃ/, /f, /ʒ/ (Komariah, 2019). In Singapore, Jukpim (2009) revealed that the students performed poor pronunciation particularly in the consonant sounds of /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /dʒ/ which is in the fricative manner. Additionally, the data from the interview revealed that the differences between Thai sound system and English sound system causes their pronunciation problems. In some EFL countries, some English phonemes do not occur in their sound systems or the students' mother tongue can cause students' pronunciation problem. As Dost (2017) stated that the phonetic differences between the learners' own pronunciation and English need to be recognized. Furthermore, in Saudi Arabia, there were the English sounds such as /p/ and /tʃ/ that were influenced by Saudi Arabian students' mother tongue when they speak English (Nasar and Hamzah, 2018). Moreover, the error can be caused by the absence of the sound in students' mother tongue (Komariah, 2019).

6.2 Factors affecting students' pronunciation

The students' basic knowledge of English pronunciation reflected as factors resulting in a very serious pronunciation problem. Next was the instruction of teachers, the frequency of using English pronunciation, respectively. Additionally, it showed that the English sounds that do not exist in the mother tongue which were considered difficult for study is important in presenting some important difficulties of pronunciation that affect conversation process. According to Vairojanavong (2000); Winaitham and Suppasetseree (2012) studies, English

learning background is a very important factor which makes students face the difficulty in their pronunciation. Therefore, students' lack of basic knowledge of English pronunciation is another vital issue to be considered. Furthermore, a study among Saudi learners by Al Fallaj (2013) indicated that English teachers who have linguistic background knowledge could help the students' pronunciation problems. From the interview,   it was found that the learning material and teaching method were important factors that cause the EFL students' pronunciation problem. According to Phon-ngam (2008), he found that learning materials as well as an instructional design were important factors to the pronunciation of another language. Thus, EFL teachers who teach English must pay attention to teaching methods while teaching (Rababah, 2002). Moreover, from the interview, EFL students also requested for the foreign teachers in pronunciation classes. Regarding to the EFL teachers, if it is not possible to have the foreign teachers, English instructors should obtain adequate knowledge of English pronunciation so that the students can learn how to produce English sounds correctly. Pronunciation learners would be successful in pronunciation class with the instructor's help, good preparation, wide variety of listening, speaking and pronunciation drills (Winaitham and Suppasetseree, 2012). Furthermore, using games is another way that teachers can use to improve the students' listening and speaking skills and to enhance their communicative competence (Ngiwline and Haruansong, 2020). Therefore, the teacher should be recognized to the ways to improve students' pronunciation and they are as the model of pronunciation for the language learners. The EFL teacher is supposed to possess at least, a native-like pronunciation capability and try to get a pronunciation that is acceptable and intelligible. Thus, EFL teachers' pronunciation, materials and teaching method play a vital role in the success of EFL students to learn accurate, intelligible and acceptable pronunciation.

In conclusion, there are a number of problems in English pronunciation for EFL students or non-native speakers of the English language. The findings of this study may allow EFL students to obtain an awareness of the phonetic differences between their own pronunciations and English. Besides, the factors affecting EFL students' pronunciation such as the basic knowledge of English pronunciation, the instruction of teachers, and the frequency of using English pronunciation need to be recognized. Although it is not easy for EFL students to pronounce the words exactly as they are pronounced by a native speaker, it is not too difficult for them if they are aware of these problems and try to practice to improve their pronunciation. More importantly, the findings are also beneficial to educators and administrators to recognize and set up the curriculum, prepare the teachers, find the materials, and provide the environment to support EFL students' effective pronunciation capability

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