

Thai Students' Pronunciation Problems as Perceived by Their English Teachers: A Case Study

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Abstract—This study investigated twenty Thai English teachers' perception of their students' pronunciation problems and challenges. Data were collected in August 2017 from twenty Thai English teachers from seven different schools in Samut Prakarn province, Thailand. The research instruments were questionnaires and group discussions. The quantitative data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. Results showed that the teachers perceived that their students had a range of pronunciation problems, ranging from initial and final sounds, stress, intonation, and rhythm. The causes of the problems included lack of opportunities to use English, lack of practice, the emphasis on grammar, reading, and writing, and role models, shyness, and lack of motivation.

Keywords—Pronunciation problems, Thai students, Thai English teachers, Perception

I. INTRODUCTION

PRONUNCIATION problems are common problems among non-native speakers of English and Thai students are no exception. Their pronunciation is far from perfect and often causes communication problems. Efforts have been made to help Thai learners speak English better (e.g. Sithikul, 2012, Isarankura, 2015).

When foreign tourists visit Thailand, one of their complaints is the English language ability of the local Thais. As Thailand aims to pull itself out of the middle-income trap through digital economy and innovation, it implies that Thai citizens are capable of using international language like English to engage in social and business activities with the rest of the world. This shortcoming, their humble English skills, is not supportive to the national strategy of the country. English teachers, hence, play an important role in preparing Thai citizens with acceptable commands of English, including their ability of speak English with certain levels of acceptable and eligible clarity. The task has never been an easy one.

Whatever the causes may be, their teachers are among the most important factors contributing to the success in helping Thai students improve their pronunciation and speak better English. Their pedagogical beliefs, perceptions, and opinions matter as they reflect their practice and salient competence (Staub and Stern, 2002). Little research has been conducted in the Thai context to investigate Thai English teachers' perception of their students' pronunciation problems as well as their pedagogical beliefs. The aim of this study thus was to investigate the perceptions of Thai English teachers of their students' pronunciation problems and challenges.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the challenges many school students in Thailand are facing is their speaking ability. As a foreign language, English has its limited use in the Thai context. Most Thai students lack opportunities to use the language. This low exposure could explain their pronunciation problems. This limited exposure has been recognized as a salient factors affecting students' language ability (Kasper, 1997). However, pronunciation problems are only parts of the whole picture. Sursattayawong, (2006) noted that Thai students' pronunciation problems occur in conjunctions with other symptoms, namely, their lack of self-confidence, grammatical errors, and limited knowledge of vocabulary.

Language teachers play a crucial role in improvising students' pronunciation. According to Scarcella and Oxford (1994), teachers should teach pronunciation through a variety of activities. Thai authorities also realize the important roles of Thai English teachers. Efforts have been made to improve Thai teachers' language skills. Wei and Zhou (2002) investigated Thai students' pronunciation problems. They also discussed the causes of the problems. They based their findings on their own experiences as language teachers in Thailand. The problems they listed included final and initial sounds, intonation, and stress. The causes of the problems were L1 influence and other attitudinal factors such as shyness.

Efforts have been made to address the issues. Isarankura (2015), for example, applied the Audio-Articulation Method (AAM) to help develop Thai EFL students' pronunciation of the /v/ sound. The results revealed that AAM had a positive effect in improving the students' pronunciation of the sound in question. Other techniques include role play. Chootharat, Veerachaisantikul, and Junnak (2016) used role play to help improve Thai students' stress and intonation. Participants were 44 of the first year bachelor's degree learners majoring in English for International Communication at Rajamanagala University of Technology Isan, Nakhon Ratchasima, in the northeastern part of Thailand. Results showed that the students had improved their English pronunciation in word stress and sentence intonation. A few years earlier, Phuephon, Chayanuvat, and Sithitikul (2012) conducted a study and found that role play was a useful method in improving Thai university students' language fluency and pronunciation.

In sum, Thai students as EFL learners, school and university students alike, have pronunciation problems. The problems range from the pronunciation of individual words, stress, intonation, and rhythm. The causes of the problems

include their attitudes, language exposure, and the instruction. Efforts have been made to address the issues with varying degrees of success.

III. METHOD

Twenty primary school teachers in Samut Prakarn province (south of Bangkok) from seven different schools answered the questionnaires of five sections: (1) general information, (2) Perceived pronunciation problems (Likert-type scale), (3) Causes of the problems (Likert-type scale), (4) Problem-solving (Likert-type scale), (5) Beliefs of teachers (Likert-type scale). The teachers were the participants of the English Language Development Workshop. In addition to answering the questionnaires, they were also asked to work in four small groups discussing their students' pronunciation problems, the causes of the problems, and their ways to solve those problems. The data were both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics; their discussions were analyzed using content analysis. The data collection was done in August 2017.

IV. RESULTS

In terms of gender, it was found that the majority of the teachers were female (18 or 90%). Only two of them were male (10%). As for their educational background, the majority of them were the teachers with B.A. (16 or 80%). Three of them (15%) had graduated with M.A. One teacher did not disclose their educational background. In terms of their age, nine (45%) were between 20-30 years old. 10 of them (50%) were older than 30 years old. One did not disclose his age. As for their teaching experience, it was found that eleven of them (55%) had 0-5 years of teaching experience. Six (30%) had more than 5 years of experience. Three of them (15%) did not disclose their teaching experience.

On average, the final /-l/ was perceived to be the moderate-level problem (mean = 3.00, SD = 1.12). For fricative (such as /-s/) and final /-th/, the problems were perceived to be at the high level (Mean = 4.40). The students' pronunciation of final /-ed/, /-t/, and /-d/ was perceived by their teachers as being the problem at the high level (Mean = 4.25). The rising intonation, falling intonation, word stress, and rhythm were the high-level problems.

TABLE I
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

	Factor	Number	Percent
Gender	Male	2	10
	Female	18	90
Education	BA	16	80
	MA	3	15
	Doctoral	0	0
	Missing Data	1	5
Age	20-30 years old	9	45
	> 30 years old	10	50
	Missing Data	1	5
Teaching Experience	0-5 years	11	55
	> 5 years	6	30
	Missing Data	3	15

TABLE II
TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR STUDENTS' PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS

Area	Highest	High	Moderate	Low	Lowest	Average Mean (SD)
Final /-l/	-	9 (45.0%)	5 (25.0%)	15.0%	3 (15.0%)	3.00 (1.12)
Fricative	12 (60.0%)	6 (30.0%)	1 (5.0%)	1 (5.0%)		4.40 (0.99)
Final /th/	11 (55.0%)	6 (30.0%)	3 (15.0%)	-	-	4.40 (0.75)
Final -ed -t and -d	9 (45.0%)	8 (40.0%)	2 (10%)	1 (5.0%)		4.25 (0.85)
Rising	4 (20.0%)	8 (40.0%)	8 (40.0%)	-	-	3.80 (0.76)
Falling	4 (20.0%)	8 (40.0%)	8 (40.0%)			3.80 (0.76)
Stress	2 (10.0%)	15 (75.0%)	2 (10.0%)	1 (5.0%)		3.90 (0.64)
Rhythm	7 (35%)	8 (40%)	3 (15.0%)	1 (10.0%)		4.00 (0.97)

TABLE III
CAUSES OF THE STUDENTS' PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS

Causes	Mean (SD)	SA (%)	A (%)	U (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
Shyness	4.30 (.80)	9 (45)	9 (45)	1 (5)	1 (5)	
Lack motivation.	3.75 (.71)	3 (15)	9 (45)	8 (40)		
Peer pressure.	3.35 (.81)		11 (55)	5 (25)	4 (20)	
Lack of role models	2.80 (.89)	1 (5)	3 (15)	7 (35)	9 (45)	
L1 Interference	3.30 (1.03)	3 (15)	5 (25)	7 (35)	5 (25)	
Lack of practice	3.50 (1.10)	3 (15)	10 (50)	1 (5)	6 (30)	
Lack of opportunities to use the language	3.90 (1.44)	11 (55)	3 (15)		5 (25)	1 (5)
Focusing too much on writing and grammar	3.65 (1.03)	5 (25)	6 (30)	6 (30)	3 (15)	
Lack of teachers	3.85 (1.18)	8 (40)	5 (25)	3 (15)	4 (20)	
Lack of instructional material	3.40 (.99)	1 (5)	12 (60)	1 (5)	6 (30)	
Lack of media / technologies	3.50 (1.10)	2 (10)	12 (60)	1 (5)	4 (20)	1 (5)

On average, the teachers agreed that the students were shy to speak English with good pronunciation (Mean = 4.30). They also agreed that the lack of opportunities to use English was another cause of their students' pronunciation problems (Mean = 3.90). The teachers also agreed that the following were the causes: the lack of motivation, lack of teachers.

Giving feedback to the whole class was cited by the teachers as the most frequently used measure to improve the students' pronunciation (mean = 4.10), followed by giving feedback to individual students (Mean = 3.95). Many teachers reported that they often used films, songs, and role play to address the problem. They sometimes sought help from native speakers (mean = 3.30) and used CAI (Mean = 3.35).

Table V shows the general perceptions and beliefs of the teachers. Eighty percent (18) of the teachers said that they like teaching pronunciation. Fourteen teachers (70%) believed that teaching pronunciation was challenging. Nineteen teachers (95%) said that most Thai students had pronunciation problems. All of them (100%) agreed and strongly agreed that they wanted to have good pronunciation and also believed that reading aloud and ICT helped improve one's pronunciation. Besides, the majority of the teachers

(80%) agreed and strongly agreed that the teachers' language skills influence students' learning progress. Thirty-five percent of them (7) disagreed that the students did not want to learn pronunciation. All of them (20) agreed and strongly agreed that teaching pronunciation was fun.

TABLE IV
MEASURES TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEMS

Measures	Mean (SD)	Always (%)	O (%)	S (%)	OC (%)	Rarely (%)
Computer-assisted instruction (CAI)	3.35 (.67)	1 (5)	6 (30)	12 (60)	1 (5)	
Feedback to the whole class	4.10 (.78)	7 (35)	8 (4)	5 (25)		
Role play, drama, or skits	3.55 (1.14)	5 (25)	5 (25)	7 (35)	2 (10)	1 (5)
Feedback to individual students	3.95 (.82)	6 (30)	7 (35)	7 (35)		
Film	3.80 (.95)	5 (25)	8 (40)	5 (25)	2 (10)	
Seeking help from native speakers	3.30 (1.26)	5 (25)	3 (15)	6 (30)	5 (25)	1 (5)
Songs	3.85 (.98)	7 (35)	4 (20)	8 (40)	1 (5)	

TABLE V
TEACHERS' GENERAL BELIEFS AND OPINIONS

Belief / Opinion	Mean (SD)	SA (%)	Agree (%)	U (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
I like teaching pronunciation.	4.25 (.63)	7 (35)	11 (55)	2 (10)		
Teaching pronunciation is challenging.	3.75 (.55)	1 (5)	13 (65)	6 (30)		
Most Thai students have pronunciation problems.	4.30 (.57)	7 (35)	12 (60)	1 (5)		
I want to have good pronunciation.	4.65 (.48)	13 (65)	7 (35)			
Reading aloud helps improve one's pronunciation.	4.60 (.50)	12 (60)	8 (40)			
ICT can help improve students' pronunciation.	4.80 (.41)	16 (80)	4 (20)			
Teachers' language skills influence students' learning progress.	4.50 (.68)	12 (60)	6 (40)	2 (10)		
Most students don't want to learn pronunciation.	2.85 (.74)		4 (20)	9 (45)	7 (35)	
Teaching pronunciation is fun.	4.30 (.47)	6 (30)	14 (70)			

TABLE VI
TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTION OF THE STUDENTS' PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS

Final /-l/	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
0-5 years	11	2.36	1.12	-2.66	0.01*
> 5 years	6	3.66	.51		

It was found that the teachers with different teaching experience perceived the final /-l/ problem of the students differently. The teachers with more than five years of teaching experience agreed that final /-l/ was their students' problem; whereas those with less teaching experience were unsure if the final /-l/ was the problem. Their perceptions

were significantly different at 0.05.

TABLE VII
TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND THE CAUSES OF THEIR PROBLEMS

Lack of role models	N	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
0-5 years	11	3.36	.80	3.36	0.00**
> 5 years	6	2.10	.40		

It was found that the teachers with different teaching experience perceived the lack of role models differently. The teachers with more teaching experience disagreed that the lack of role models was the cause of the students' poor pronunciation.

TABLE VIII
AGE AND BELIEF

ICT helps improve pronunciation.	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
30 and below	9	5.00	.00	2.31	0.03*
> 30 years old	10	4.60	.51		
Challenges of teaching pronunciation	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
30 and below	9	3.44	.52	-2.41	0.03*
> 30 years old	10	4.00	.47		

Age also played a significant role in the teachers' belief in pronunciation instruction. Those 30-and-below teachers strongly agreed that the ICT could help develop the students' pronunciation. The more-than-30 teachers agreed that ICT played an instructional role. The difference was significant at 0.05. The older teacher also believed that teaching pronunciation was a challenge (Mean = 4.00, SD = .14), which was significantly different from those younger teachers.

TABLE IX
BELIEFS AND TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teaching pronunciation is challenging.	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
0-5 years	11	3.45	.52	-2.52	0.02*
> 5 years	6	4.00	.00		
Most students don't want to learn pronunciation.	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
0-5 years	11	3.18	.40	2.90	0.01*
> 5 years	6	2.33	.81		
Teaching pronunciation is fun.	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
0-5 years	11	4.09	.30	-2.92	0.01*
> 5 years	6	4.66	.51		

The teaching experience of the teachers also affected their general beliefs about pronunciation instruction. More experienced teachers perceived the challenge of pronunciation instruction differently from the less experienced teachers. The difference was significant at 0.05. More and less experience teachers also differed in their opinions on their perception of their students wanting to learn pronunciation. Even though both groups said that teaching pronunciation was fun, the strength of their opinion was significantly different at 0.05.

Table X shows that the teachers with two different age groups differed significantly in their beliefs about pronunciation instruction. Younger teachers seemed to trust the benefits of ICT, that is, ICT helps improve pronunciation (Mean = 5.00); whereas, 30-year old-plus teachers seemed to

believe less in the power of ICT. More-than-30-year-old teachers strongly believed that teaching pronunciation was challenging, but the younger teachers were still undecided about this task.

TABLE X
BELIEFS AND TEACHING EXPERIENCE

ICT helps improve pronunciation.	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
30 years and below	9	5.00	.00	2.31	0.03*
> 30 years old	10	4.60	.51		
Teaching pronunciation is challenging.	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
30 years and below	9	3.44	.52	-2.42	0.02*
> 30 years old	10	4.00	.47		

V. DISCUSSIONS

Based on the data analysis presented above, it appears that the two factors, the teachers' age and their teaching experience, play a significant role in their perceptions, opinions, and beliefs regarding their students' pronunciation problems, the causes of the problems, and the teaching of English pronunciation. The findings were partly supported by a study conducted by Teo (2008) who revealed that age of the teachers and experience affected their behavior and confidence of ICT use. Our data show that younger teachers are keener to engage their students in the use of new technology to develop their students' English pronunciation, and they also perceived the teaching of pronunciation to be less challenging.

Based on the group discussions, the majority of teachers were in common agreement on the motivation of the students. For them, most of the students were lowly motivated, as English was not relevant to their daily use at home. Some teachers said that the English pronunciation was not relevant for their daily activities; it only mattered in the classroom and within the school context. This finding is in line with what Kasper (1997) has explained, that is, language competence requires exposure and use. Most teachers believed in the importance of having good and correct pronunciation, as it is one of the aims stipulated in the national curriculum.

Opportunities to speak the language were also discussed as

one of the causes of poor English pronunciation. As English is a foreign language, all of the teachers used Thai as the medium of instruction. Moreover, the focus is often on grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing.

Most teachers believe that reading aloud helps make pronunciation better. This realization is supported by research findings conducted by Seo (2014). The study showed that reading aloud activity improved the students' pronunciation of the target language. Moreover, they believe that ICT can help improve students' pronunciation. They also believe that the teachers' language skills influence students' learning progress. And they thought that their students wanted to learn pronunciation.

Even though they said that they like teaching pronunciation, they, especially older teachers, also recognized that teaching it is a real challenge to teach pronunciation successfully. They have indirectly expressed their wish to improve their pronunciation. In a previous study, Noom-ura (2013) found that Thai school teachers would like to develop their teaching strategies that would enable their students to communicate in English as well as to develop their own English proficiency development, especially in listening-speaking skills.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study investigated a group of twenty Thai English teachers' perceptions of their students' pronunciation problems, the causes, and the measures taken to address those challenges. The majority of them recognized that the students had pronunciation problems. The problems ranged from individual sounds to prosodic features. The majority of the teachers believed that their students wanted to improve their pronunciation. They themselves also want to learn how to teach pronunciation and improve their English pronunciation. Most teachers believe that ICT play a crucial role in developing their learners' pronunciation. Two variables significantly affected the teachers' beliefs and opinion regarding English pronunciation instruction: their age and teaching experience.

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