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Thai Elementary School Teachers' English Pronunciation and Effects of Teacher Variables: Professional Development

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Abstract

The objectives of this study are to describe 147 Thai elementary school teachers' English pronunciation competence and to identify a teacher variable that has an impact on their pronunciation. The instrument used to collect data consisted of two parts: a questionnaire to elicit Thai teachers' personal information (i.e., seven variables in all), and a stress identification test consisting of 50 multisyllabic words. The test scores were used to help describe Thai teachers' pronunciation competence, whereas the test scores in conjunction with the personal information were quantitatively analyzed by ANOVAs or sample t-tests to identify the extent to which each variable contributed to the teachers' test scores. The results show that Thai teachers have difficulty identifying stressed syllables in English. In addition, among the seven variables explored, the teachers' major of study was found to be the potential factor which significantly impacted the test scores. Findings from this study are important for informing the professional development of English teachers in Thailand.

Keywords: pronunciation, teacher, competence, factor, professional development

Introduction

With the advent of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), a number of measures related to the use of the English language have been taken. For instance, the Charter of ASEAN was officially adopted in February 2009. According to Article 34 of the Charter, English has been designated the working language of the ASEAN community to promote mutual understanding among ASEAN members (Kirkpatrick, 2008).

Because of Thailand's commitment to participate in the ASEAN community in the near future, a number of social, economic, and educational developments need to be made. Educators who are involved in English language teaching at all instructional levels need to be more conscious of the increasingly important role of English and prepare English

language learners to compete with other ASEAN countries both in the short and in the long term. However, according to a number of studies investigating the success of English language learning in Thailand (Kanoksilapatham, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2013; Noom-ura, 2008; Prapphal, 2003; Watson Todd & Keyuravong, 2004), Thai learners' performance in English is not yet satisfactory. This conclusion has led scholars to cast doubt upon the effectiveness of English language learning and teaching in Thailand.

A number of possible factors have been identified as being responsible for this dissatisfaction, including interference from learners' native language, age, attitude, dispositions, the teaching and the learning environment, textbooks, limited support systems, and insufficient knowledge of the phonetics of the English language. As far as dispositions are concerned, Thai learners, similar to Korean and Japanese learners (Zhenhui, 2001), are in general reserved, shy, and reticent in language classrooms (Bray, 2009). These characteristics might not contribute positively to the language development. Additionally, a large number of Thai schools, especially in rural areas, do not have computers available for students' use, nor do they have supporting instructional materials such as CDs and reading materials (Viriyapong & Harfield, 2013) to reinforce what is learned in class. Although educators aspire to enhance English language teaching and learning among all educational levels, elementary education is considered the most important because it lays a basic foundation for individual subject areas and for advanced English skills. In this regard, the Ministry of Education of Thailand has endeavoured to revise the English curriculum to improve English language teaching and learning in the country, produce audio visual aids, create positive learning environments, and provide updated learning materials and modern equipment. However, what the Ministry of Education seems to overlook is teachers' sustainable and lifelong professional development.

The role of teachers is prominent in Thai educational contexts because it is recognized that education in Thailand in general has been traditionally teacher-fronted (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana & Chinnawongs, 2002). The English language teaching context is not an exception, as teachers play a more vital role in determining students' learning outcomes and success. Thus, it is essential that Thai teachers of English have a solid understanding of the English language. This study investigates the English pronunciation competence of Thai elementary teachers in public schools by asking them to identify stressed syllables of multisyllabic words. The study also examines what teacher variables are related to their pronunciation skills.

Literature Review

English Pronunciation and Stress

In an English language class, emphasis is usually placed on the four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As a consequence, pronunciation is either not emphasized or even neglected in some teaching and learning contexts. Few scholars assert that the neglect could be attributed to the belief that supra-segmental features seem to be unteachable and thus unlearnable (e.g., Greenwood, 2002; Silveria, 2002). Moreover, many teachers consider pronunciation as a sub-component of the macro skill of speaking, rather than a skill in its own right (e.g., Kanoksilapatham, 2009, 2010;

Zhang & Yin, 2009). The marginalized role of pronunciation is also reflected in language assessment, as pronunciation is not one of the constructs for the national tests or university entrance examinations in Thailand. However, with the advent of the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) integration in 2015 and the spread of English as a medium of communication around the world, the ability to communicate orally in English has become more important. Similarly, the mastery of effective and efficient English pronunciation has become a vital skill for success in the globalized community.

English pronunciation consists of two principal sub-components: segmental and supra-segmental features. Segmental features include consonant and vowel sounds, whereas supra-segmental features include stress, rhythm, pausing, and intonation. A large number of studies have stated the importance of supra-segmental features for communication, rather than segmental features because they can significantly impact the intelligibility and comprehensibility of the English language much more than the other elements of pronunciation (e.g., Morley, 1991; Anderson-Hsieh et al., 1992; Munro & Derwing, 1995; Jenkins, 1998; Levis, 1999; Derwing & Munro, 2001; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2007; Derwing & Rossiter, 2002; Hahn, 2004; Derwing, Thomson, & Munro, 2006). Therefore, to achieve intelligibility and comprehension and to minimize communication breakdown, it is important to stress words on the right syllables.

Learners' difficulty with English stress

A number of studies have focused on English language learners and how they struggle with English stress placement (e.g., Juffs, 1990; Brown, 1991; Wennerstrom, 1994; Derwing & Munro, 2001; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2007; Derwing & Rossiter, 2002; Derwing, Thomson, & Munro, 2006; Hahn, 2004; Isarankura, 2009). For instance, Juffs (1990) explored how Chinese-speaking learners of English had difficulties with the English phonological system. The 19 participants were university students in the People's Republic of China. A recording was made of each student reading a 105-word passage taken from an English textbook. The errors made in word stress were the highest. The errors were speculated to be due largely, if not entirely, to influences from the native language or so-called cross linguistic interference.

Wennerstrom's (1994) study on Thai speakers who were intermediate level learners, using three tasks of reading as well as the task of describing a picture both in Thai and English, revealed that Thai speakers did not consistently use pitch to signal meaning in many of the tasks. Similar to Brown (1991), Wennerstrom (1994) claimed that the pronunciation problems of Thai learners were due to limited exposure to English and to authentic language input, in addition to cross-linguistic interference.

Finally, Isarankura's (2009) examined first-year English majors at a university in Thailand. To select the participants of this study, the speech samples produced by 108 first-year English major students were initially rated by the researcher on four prosodic features (word stress, sentence stress and rhythm, pausing, and intonation). Based on the researcher's rating of their speech samples, 15 students with the highest rating and 15 students with the lowest rating were selected to represent the high and low groups of this study. Both groups were asked to record their speech samples of 50 isolated words and a short text before and after three weeks of instruction of English supra-

segmental features. Their speech samples were rated by three experienced native English speaking teachers. Findings reveal that both groups showed significant improvement; the high group made improvements on pausing, whereas the low group showed the greatest improvements in word stress. Also, L1 transfer decreased and intelligibility increased, suggesting that supra-segmental features are teachable and should be incorporated in classes.

Teachers as models

In the Thai context, Thai teachers of English are indispensable, as they provide language input to their learners by illustrating appropriate language use. However, teachers' English competence in English pronunciation needs to be scrutinized.

In another study, Kanoksilapatham (2010) examined 574 Thai teachers' ability to place a stress syllable on 80 multisyllabic English words. They were teachers teaching different grade levels, some teaching elementary and other middle schools. Out of 80 points of 80 vocabulary items randomly selected from a series of textbooks prescribed by the Ministry of Education, Thailand, to be used with learners of Grades 1 to 3, the mean score was 47, which was considered relatively low for English language teachers. Many factors are claimed to be responsible for this failure, including unqualified teachers, teachers' underestimation of the importance of English stress placement, inadequate instructional material, and the curriculum. The findings suggest that Thai teachers of English need professional development to achieve effective English pronunciation.

Because opportunities for Thai learners to be exposed to the English language are always cited to be one of the major causes of unsatisfactory language learning and teaching, opportunities for Thai learners of English to practice their pronunciation are scarce. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education has recently launched a plan to provide young English language learners across the country with free tablets in 2012 (*Taking to tablets: Applications are big business as the market goes mobile, 2012*). With additional instructional media, it is anticipated that students will be better equipped to thrive in the use and communication of the English language.

This study focused on Thai teachers of English teaching in elementary schools only. This study's objectives were to describe the pronunciation competence of Thai teachers of English and identify the factors that might impact their performance on the test, focusing on stressed syllables of multisyllabic words. The study aims to provide additional insight into the professional development of Thai teachers of English. The study also aims to provide the Ministry of Education with input regarding effective professional development that will eventually enhance the quality of English language instruction.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study included 160 teachers who taught English in different public elementary schools of a province in the suburbs of Bangkok, Thailand. These teachers were voluntarily attending a six-hour workshop on English language teaching

organized by the Primary Educational Service Area Office of the province in July 2012. The researcher single-handedly played the role of the trainer and speaker of the workshop.

Instrument

The instrument used in this project consisted of a personal information questionnaire and a stress identification test.

Personal information of Thai elementary school teachers was elicited by a questionnaire probing into the seven teacher variables as follows: 1. age, 2. gender, 3. highest academic qualification, 4. major subject, 5. grade level(s) taught at the time of study, 6. years of teaching English, and 7. experience in an English-speaking country. In order to make sure that the words tested were appropriate and suitable for the elementary school teachers, lists of vocabulary items at the end of English elementary textbooks prescribed by the Ministry of Education were examined. An initial set of 400 words were collected. Because the purpose of this study was to determine Thai teachers' ability to identify stress in words, monosyllabic words were excluded, resulting in a pool of 286 multisyllabic words and compound nouns. Because compound nouns follow the same stress pattern, only five compound nouns were randomly selected to represent this category. In addition, based on the 15 categories of words adopted in the textbooks (i.e., days, months, seasons, weather, body parts, animals, fruits, family members, colors, jobs, foods and drinks, musical instruments, classroom items, descriptive adjectives, and frequency adverbs), three words were randomly selected to represent each of the 15 categories. Therefore, the stress identification test consisted of a list of 50 words (as shown in the appendix), with five compound nouns and 45 words representing the 15 categories). However, the list was mixed in terms of syllable numbers, ranging from two to four syllables.

Data collection

Before the workshop started, the researcher distributed the profile questionnaire and the test to 160 teachers. The researcher showed the teachers how to complete the profile questionnaire and the test. For the pronunciation identification task, the teachers were asked to identify the stressed syllable of each word by making a cross on the number (i.e., 1, 2, 3, or 4) corresponding to the stressed syllable of individual words. The test took approximately 20 minutes.

Data analysis

First, the personal information was coded, and the test was marked by the researcher. One item was worth one point, resulting in a total of 50 points. Incomplete questionnaires were excluded. Subsequently, statistical analyses including analysis of variance of ANOVA and *t*-test were conducted by using SPSS software program to provide descriptive statistics and to determine the main effect of the seven variables explored.

Results

Out of the 160 questionnaires collected, 13 questionnaires were not completely filled out and thus were excluded, resulting in a set of 147 questionnaires for further

statistical analysis. Out of 50 points for the stress identification test, the minimum score was 1, and the maximum was 46, with a mean score of 31.52, and an *SD* value of 9.499, suggesting a wide range of test scores among 147 teachers. Moreover, given the fact that the words tested were taken directly from the national textbooks for elementary schools, the mean score of 32 (out of 50) seemed to be quite low. In order to explore further what factors related to the teachers potentially contributed to the teachers' general unsatisfactory test scores, the questionnaire data and the identification test scores were quantitatively analyzed, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Questionnaire Results and Test Scores

Variable	Sub-group	N (percent)	Mean Score	SD	p value
Age	1. 21-30 yrs	55 (37.41%)	28.76	10.639	.016
	2. 31-40 yrs	36 (24.48%)	34.97	06.793	
	3. 41-50 yrs	25 (17.01%)	30.88	10.084	
	4. 51-60 yrs	31 (21.09%)	32.94	08.338	
Gender	1. Male	24 (16.33%)	33.33	08.334	.309
	2. Female	123 (83.7%)	31.17	09.701	
Academic qualification	1. < Bachelor's	6 (4.08%)	39.50	04.278	.091
	2. Bachelor's	128 (87.07%)	31.24	09.103	
	3. > Bachelor's	13 (8.84%)	29.77	13.223	
Major subject	1. English	69 (46.94%)	34.16	08.071	.001*
	2. Non-English	78 (53.06%)	29.19	10.091	
Grade level	1. Grades 1-3	44 (29.93%)	30.70	10.197	.563
	2. Grades 4-6	64 (43.54%)	31.27	09.376	
	3. Grades 1-6	39 (26.53%)	32.87	08.971	
Teaching years	1. < 1 year	34 (23.13%)	28.71	09.691	.079
	2. 1-10 yrs	81 (55.10%)	31.20	09.998	
	3. 11-20 yrs	19 (12.93%)	35.32	07.008	
	4. 21-30 yrs	10 (6.80%)	35.70	06.865	
	5. 31-40 yrs	3 (20.41%)	34.33	03.055	
Experience abroad	1. With	6 (4.08%)	36.36	05.574	.177
	2. Without	141 (95.92%)	31.30	09.581	

The table above presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted on the test scores in relation to the seven variables (their sub-groups and corresponding numbers of the teachers). The table also highlights both the mean test scores in relation to individual teacher variables elicited through the profile questionnaire and the magnitude of the effects of the variables on the test scores. The following sections present the analysis of the test scores by each variable.

Age

Age is the one of the seven variables related to the participants of this study. It should be noted that the age of the respondents elicited in the questionnaire simply indicates the age of the teachers at the time of study. The participants' ages represented a wide range from 24 to 60 years old, with an average of 38 years old. The teachers' ages were grouped into four categories, each with 10 increments. At this juncture, it cannot be assumed that participants who belong to the 51-60 sub-group had more English teaching experience than those in the other three sub-groups, nor does it indicate that the age specified suggests that particular teachers have been in service for an uninterrupted period of time. The analysis revealed that most of the teachers were in the 21-30 age sub-group (about 37%), but the highest mean score belonged to the 31-40 age sub-group. Based on the mean scores of the four age sub-groups, an analysis of variance or ANOVA was conducted and showed that the effect of age on the test scores was insignificant, $F(3,143) = 3.576, p = 0.016$.

Gender

English language teaching in this province was dominated by female teachers (84% of the 147 participants). However, as shown in the table, the male teachers (roughly 16%) seemed to perform slightly better (with a mean score of 33) than the female counterparts (with a mean score of 31) on this pronunciation test. However, an independent sample t-test comparing the test scores obtained by the male and female teachers found no significant difference. That is, gender did not seem to have a substantial impact on the test scores: $t(145) = 1.020, p = .309$.

Academic qualification

The academic qualification of the participants refers to the highest degree earned. In Thailand, elementary school teachers are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree. However, as revealed in this study, the 147 participants, although teaching in elementary schools, are quite diverse in their educational backgrounds. Most of the teachers (about 87% of the 147 participants), had completed their bachelor's degree, whereas a few had earned a master's degree (about 9%), and very few did not complete a bachelor's degree (about 4%). In this regard, the comparison of the three mean scores of the three sub-groups as defined by the academic qualifications, based on ANOVA, showed that the effect of the academic qualification was insignificant: $F(2,143) = 2.439, p = .091$. In fact, as shown in Table 1, the higher the education level the teacher had, the lower their test scores were. In fact, the teachers with higher education seemed to perform the worst on this test. This finding possibly suggests that the higher degree (higher than bachelor's degree) obtained by the teachers might not be in the field of English or related to English.

Major of study

Participants were required to answer whether, for their highest degree earned, their major was English. The number of teachers who completed their degree with a major in English and those who did not were not vastly different. The non-English major teachers (53%) slightly outnumber those with English major (47%). Nevertheless, the English majors (mean score of 34) scored higher than the non-English majors (mean score of 29). An independent sample t-test comparing test scores obtained by these two groups revealed a significant difference: $t(145)=3.267, p = .001$.

Grade level taught

In Thailand, elementary education (grades 1-6) lasts six academic years. Based on their answers the 147 teachers were classified into three groups: those teaching grade levels 1-3, 4-6, and 1-6. Most of the participants belong to the grade levels 4-6 (about 44% of the participants). The teachers who taught grade levels 1-6 performed the best (with a mean score of 33), followed by those in the grade levels 4-6, and grade levels 1-3 (with mean scores of 31.27 and 30.70, respectively). However, ANOVA results showed that the effect of the current grade level the teachers were teaching was insignificant: $F(2,144) = .577, p = .563$.

Number of years spent teaching

This variable was included to determine whether the increased number of teaching years resulted in a higher score in the pronunciation test. Based on their reported teaching years, the participants were categorized into five sub-groups, each with 10 increments similar to the age variable. Some of them were novices, with less than a year of teaching experience (23% of the participants), and their mean score was the lowest (28.71). The majority of the participants (55%) have taught for one to ten years. ANOVA conducted on the test mean scores obtained by the teachers in each of the five sub-groups showed no significant effect of the teaching years on the test scores: $F(3,142) = 2.143, p = 0.079$.

Experience abroad

Experience abroad refers to the teachers' exposure to the target language in an English speaking country. This variable was intentionally included in this study because it was reported in previous studies to exert a certain impact on language teaching (e.g., Wennerstrom, 1994; Kanoksilapatham, 2010). Few teachers had received this type of exposure (only 6 teachers or 4%). An independent sample t-test showed no significant difference in the scores between these two teacher groups: $t(145)=1.358, p = .177$.

In summary, the analysis of the test scores in relation to the seven teachers' variables was quite revealing. Six variables were found to be not significant in exerting an influence on the teachers' pronunciation test scores. However, one variable of English major was identified as crucial, contributing to the teachers' test scores.

Discussion

This study aims to shed light onto the consequence of 147 Thai teachers of English with regard to the placement of stress in multisyllabic English words. In general, the teachers'

performance of the stress identification test was not satisfactory, with a mean score of 32 out of a total of 50 points.

Among the several variables related to the teachers and investigated in this study, six variables did not seem to contribute to the mastery of stress placement in English words. Only the variable of teacher's major of study (i.e., English) was found to have a significant impact on their test scores. This study confirms findings from Morley (1998) and Zhang and Yin (2009), namely, that limited pronunciation skills can undermine learners' self-confidence, and sufficient knowledge of phonetics can be beneficial for learners. That is, as English majors, the teachers were likely to have had knowledge of English phonology and phonetics from English language courses, and explicit instruction on different aspects of pronunciation is likely to have strengthened learners' self-confidence and contributed to higher scores pronunciation scores. Similarly, the teachers who did not have their degree(s) in English were probably compelled to acquire pronunciation knowledge from the linguistic input available around them. Because English is a foreign language in Thailand, and the English language input, is not only minimal in quantity but also low in quality. This finding contradicts the belief and practice of neglecting supra-segmental features in language instruction (Greenwood, 2002; Silveria, 2002), but supports Isarankura's (2009) findings, which concluded that weeks of explicit instruction did have a positive and significant impact on learners' English pronunciation of supra-segmental features.

At this point, this study does not intend to claim that being an English major is the only sole contributor to the high scores of the pronunciation test, nor does this study claim that exposure to authentic English language input (which is limited) automatically lead to stress acquisition, and, in turn, improved pronunciation. This is probably because, when exposed to English, learners were busy trying to understand the input, and thus little or no attention was paid to the supra-segmental features. To empower teachers and learners alike, teachers should be aware that supra-segmental features play an essential role in communication, comprehension, and intelligibility. Thus, instruction on these features should be integrated into English language instruction whenever possible. For example, pedagogical priorities for the students to practice supra-segmental features should be recognized, and more informed methods of teaching pronunciation in EFL contexts for intelligible pronunciation should be developed.

Based on the findings of this study, direct implications for professional recruitment and development can be offered. As far as professional recruitment is concerned, a good candidate for a position as an English teacher should be a person majoring in English, if possible. However, as shown in this study, non-English majors outnumbered English majors. Usually the case in Thailand is that graduates majoring in English are not interested in becoming English teachers because of the relatively low salary and limited incentives. Therefore, the government should create new strategies to provide incentives to attract graduates majoring in English to become qualified English teachers.

Professional development is a valuable way to empower teachers and keep them up-to-date with the newest trends and research developments in pronunciation. With a mastery of pronunciation and a better understanding of how it is taught to students, teachers will feel empowered and motivated in their language classrooms. In addition,

professional development is valuable for bringing teachers together to share ideas and build a sense of community. Teachers with both similar and varying experiences and interests can come together to learn from each other.

Limitations

First, this study does not claim that successful and effective pronunciation lies in accurate stress placement only. Other pronunciation elements including accurate production of consonant and vowel sounds and intonation are also important. Second, the study focuses only on Thai teachers' pronunciation competence and actual performance in speaking or in the use of supra-segmental features. Moreover, certain teacher variables were not investigated in depth. For instance, the variable of language exposure possibly includes a wide range of activities, not limited to the teachers' experience abroad as focused in this study, ranging from listening to English songs, watching movies, to engaging in social media activities in English. Therefore, the findings related to this variable might not be accurate. Finally, the participants were teachers from one province, and generalizations of the findings must be carefully made.

Conclusions

This study provides insight into Thai teachers' English pronunciation competence and highlights a crucial factor contributing to empowering Thai teachers of English. The findings are significant for a number of reasons. First, elementary school teachers of English are the first models of English pronunciation. If teachers mispronounce certain words from the very beginning, it is likely that these words are not going to be correctly pronounced by the learners. Moreover, without corrections, these young learners, based on their prior pronunciation instruction which is flawed, will become accustomed to their own version of pronunciation. Next, this study provides language planners and administrators with guidelines on how to prepare teachers of English, taking into consideration the teachers' needs, proficiency level, and educational background. With these factors taken into account, quality teachers in English for elementary school students can be attained, potentially implicating a more successful preparation of Thai students for ASEAN participation and international communication. Consequently, Thai learners will have better communicative skills to help them to be responsible in the Thai workforce for the AEC and global citizens in an international market.

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Appendix

Word list for the stress identification task: Friday, Saturday, Wednesday, February, January, September, autumn, summer, winter, hurricane, temperature, tornado, bottom, moustache, stomach, buffalo, elephant, octopus, banana, orange, papaya, cousin, husband, uncle, purple, silver, yellow, journalist, musician, secretary, macaroni, soda, tuna, guitar, piano, trumpet, eraser, paper, teacher, convenient, dangerous, intelligent, always, general, often, peacock, thunderstorm, pineapple, keyboard, and homework.

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