



Thai EFL Learners' Awareness of Units of English Speech Sounds and Their Attitudes towards English Pronunciation

การตระหนักรู้เรื่องหน่วยเสียงต่าง ๆ และทัศนคติเรื่องการออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษของผู้เรียนชาวไทย

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Abstract

Awareness of and attitudes towards speech sounds are found to be important to EFL Thai learners in order to accurately comprehend the English language. This study examined awareness and attitudes toward EFL learners as well as the most difficult areas of English pronunciation for EFL learners. The participants were 45 fourth-year students from the Faculty of Business, Economics, and Communication in the Bachelor of Arts Program in Tourism at Naresuan University. The present study employed the questionnaire to elicit data from the participants. The results show that the students were much more aware of segmental feature than suprasegmental feature. In addition, word stress was found to be the most difficult area of English pronunciation when compared to consonant sounds, vowel sounds, rhythm, and intonation. Finally, students had a positive attitude towards English pronunciation and believed that speaking with native speakers could help them improve their pronunciation.

Keywords: English pronunciation, awareness, attitude

Introduction

Language is an essential tool for expressing feelings and exchanging ideas among individuals. Increasing learners' awareness and attitudes is the first stage in teaching the languages, especially to EFL learners (Massri, 2020). Researchers generally agree on the point that English learners should be aware of English sounds, more precisely the English phoneme, in order to comprehend language effectively (Savitri & Andrianto, 2021). Moreover, attitudes play a vital role as they can be characterized as a combination of emotions towards language use, so attitudes could effectively nurture or obstruct the learning process (Ahmed, 2015).

Pronunciation involves more than correctly pronouncing individual sounds; it also encompasses supra-segmental language qualities. However, only accurate sound production is insufficient, as native speakers may be unaware of erroneous stress and intonation patterns (Hamilton, 2011). Research has shown that attitudes help EFL learners gain more confidences in communicating with native speakers (Pei & Qin, 2015; Tokumoto & Souza, 2015; Shibata, 2011). When EFL learners attempt to communicate in English, pronunciation is not only the primary element

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determining fluency, but it is also the first thing that a native speaker notices (Pikkert, McCormick, & Langford, 2005). So, enhancing awareness and attitudes towards English pronunciation is particularly important for improving EFL students' ability to use English effectively in various fields and purposes. This leads learners to better understand the student's awareness and attitudes towards English pronunciation.

Literature Review

Pronunciation is becoming crucially influential in second language education classes (Fitzpatrick 1995; Laroy 1995), but it is still viewed as a supplemental activity rather than a core component of the curriculum. In general, segments (vowels and consonants) receive more attention than suprasegmental (stress, rhythm, intonation) (Cenoz, 1999; Lecumberri, 1999).

Transfer from the first language is frequently acknowledged as a significant factor in L2 pronunciation, both segmental and suprasegmental (Ellis, 1994). It has been discovered that phonetic transfer is more easily identifiable than other levels of transfer, and that the pronunciations of second language learners who share a native language reflect certain characteristics (Loup 1984). While transfer from the first language is a frequent source of pronunciation problems in the L2, learners often employ other communication tactics such as overgeneralization or approximation (Major 1987). Recent research on language awareness, language attitudes, and views about language learning has fueled an interest in the learner as the center of the language acquisition process (Gardner 1985; James & Garrett 1991). Thus, EFL learners' perspectives on L2 acquisition not only provide information about learners, but also reflect awareness, beliefs, and attitudes which are likely to have an influence on how effectively they learn an L2.

The term "Language Awareness (LA)" has been defined in the literature. In 1985, Donmall stated that LA is a person's sensitivity to the nature of language and their significance in human existence. Later, Fairclough (1992) described LA as "conscious attention to the qualities of language and language usage as a component of language education" that is significantly influenced by the individual's experiences and perspectives. James (1999) explains that language awareness is a taught capacity for analyzing one's internalized language, whether it is one's own language or a portion of a second language acquired so far. In other words, it is about explicating implicit information. Carter (2003) defined LA as "the acquisition by learners of a more comprehensive awareness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language". Overall, language awareness could be characterized as conscious behaviors and sensitivity to pronunciation in the target languages. Additionally, languages attitude directly influence the pronunciation in L2 learner. Attitude is considered as composites of a variety of cognitive, emotional, and/or conative components (McGuire, 1969; Smit, 1994), which means attitude is about how the mental constructions formed through experience predispose a person to various feelings and behaviors in response to events, people, or objects. The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching (2010, p.314) defines language attitudes as "the expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language that reflect impressions of linguistic".

Several studies have been undertaken on the awareness and attitudes toward L2 learning. However, much research examined awareness and attitude towards English learning in isolation. There have been few studies on the awareness and attitude towards English Pronunciation among EFL learners (Bissett, Jeremy, & Ma, 2015; Cenoz &



Lecumberri, 1999; Savitri & Andrianto, 2021; Zhou, 2019). The studies confirmed that positive attitude helps students become more effective pronunciation performance. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that EFL learners are aware of their pronunciation in prosodic feature and most of them want to improve their pronunciation to sound like native speaker (Bissett, Jeremy, & Ma, 2015). In consideration of Thai studies, some of them reported that EFL learners are more conscious of English consonants and vowels than of suprasegmental features (Niamthet, 2016; Phirualee, 2013; Thepraksa, 2017). Moreover, EFL learners have positive attitudes. The results show that the participants have awareness and attitudes towards their English pronunciation.

What makes the current study different from the previous ones is that the research on non-English major students, particularly students in a business major, is rare. There is some room for more studies on this group. The present study aims to investigate the awareness and attitude towards English pronunciation at Naresuan University, which considered as Thailand's top ten universities (Times Higher Education World University Rankings, 2021). Understanding learners' awareness and attitudes towards their English pronunciation is greatly significant for EFL learners, as it could be useful information for developing curriculum design and enhancing language acquisition. Below are three main research questions.

- 1) What is the level of EFL learners' awareness towards their English pronunciation?
- 2) What is EFL learners' attitudes towards learning English pronunciation?
- 3) What are the difficult areas of English pronunciation among EFL learners?

Research Methodology

Participants

The participants were 45 students (7 males, 38 females) from Naresuan University. The participants were 21-23 years old and were fourth-year students from the Faculty of Business, Economics, and Communication in the Bachelor of Arts Program in Tourism. Simple random sampling was employed to select the participants. Overall, participants had gained an average of 20 years of experience learning English.

Research Instrument

An online survey was employed to elicit information from the participants. To be more specific, the questionnaire was adopted from Niamthet (2016) and consisted of three parts. The first part is the awareness towards English pronunciation, which covered nine questions about the awareness of segmental and six questions concerned suprasegmental features. The second part concerned attitudes towards English pronunciation (items 1-10). All the participants were asked to answer questions using a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree). The third part was a list of difficult areas in English pronunciation. The participants were asked to rate one or more than one area that they thought it was difficult for them. To avoid errors from misunderstanding, the questionnaire was translated into Thai. Furthermore, for participants who were unfamiliar with the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), the researchers provided the sound of each IPA letter that occurred in the first part of the questionnaire.



Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were employed on the survey results. The criteria for interpreting the levels of awareness and attitude are adapted from Niamthet (2016) and shown in the following range of mean scores: very high = 4.21–5.00 points, high = 3.41–4.20 points, moderate = 2.61–3.40 points, low = 1.81–2.60 points, and very low = 1.00–1.80 points. Moreover, frequencies were counted for the part of the difficult areas of English pronunciation.

Findings

I. The Awareness towards English pronunciation

The participants' awareness of English pronunciation was first investigated. The result is divided into two aspects. First, the segmental aspects cover consonant and vowel sounds; second, the suprasegmental aspects deal with stress, rhythm, and intonation. The following table provides an overview of the participants:

Table 1 The Awareness towards Segmental Aspects

Consonant sounds	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
1. You know how to pronounce /k/ and /g/ sound.	4.44	0.92	Very High
2. You know how to pronounce // and /r/ sound.	4.47	0.73	Very High
3. You know how to pronounce /s/ and /z/ sound.	4.27	0.81	Very High
4. You know how to pronounce /sh/ and /ch/ sound.	3.93	1.12	High
5. You know how to pronounce word(s) ending with /-ed/ and /-s/.]	4.22	0.97	Very High
6. You know how to pronounce initial or final /v/ sound.	4.04	1.04	High
7. You know how to pronounce initial or final /th/ sound.	4.22	0.90	Very High
Total	4.23	0.93	Very High
Vowel sounds			
1. You can produce and identify long and short vowel sounds.	4.11	1.07	Very High
2. You know that one vowel can present different sounds.	4.40	0.86	Very High
Total	4.25	0.96	Very High

The results of highest mean score on pronunciation awareness of the segmental feature was the consonant sound of // and /r/ (mean score= 4.47) and the lowest mean score was the consonant sound of /sh/ and /ch/. The finding indicated awareness of the segmental aspect with a consonant and vowel sound at a high level, with mean scores of 4.23 and 4.25, respectively



Table 2 The Awareness towards Suprasegmental Aspect

Suprasegmental	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
1. You pay attention to word stress by putting stress on the correct syllable.	4.33	0.93	Very High
2. You pay attention to placing stress on content words (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs).	4.31	0.90	Very High
3. You pay attention to placing stress on the suffixes (e.g. -ial, -ian, -ity, -ious).	3.98	1.03	High
4. You pay attention to putting stress on the compound nouns or compound verbs.	3.93	1.10	High
5. You use different intonation patterns to signify different meanings and intentions.	4.31	0.85	Very High
6. You always focus on strong and weak stress in a sentence.	4.20	0.94	High
Total	4.18	0.96	High

In suprasegmental aspect, the finding shows that the highest mean score on the participant's pronunciation awareness was the focus on putting stress on the correct syllable at the highest level of 4.33 mean score. The lowest mean score was putting stress on the compound nouns or compound verbs at 3.93 mean score. However, the overall mean score was at 4.18, which is considered a high level.

The two aspects of English pronunciation are compared in terms of the level of awareness toward the segmental and suprasegmental aspects. The participants had a higher level of segmental feature (mean score= 4.24) more than suprasegmental feature (mean score= 4.18) as shown in figure 1.

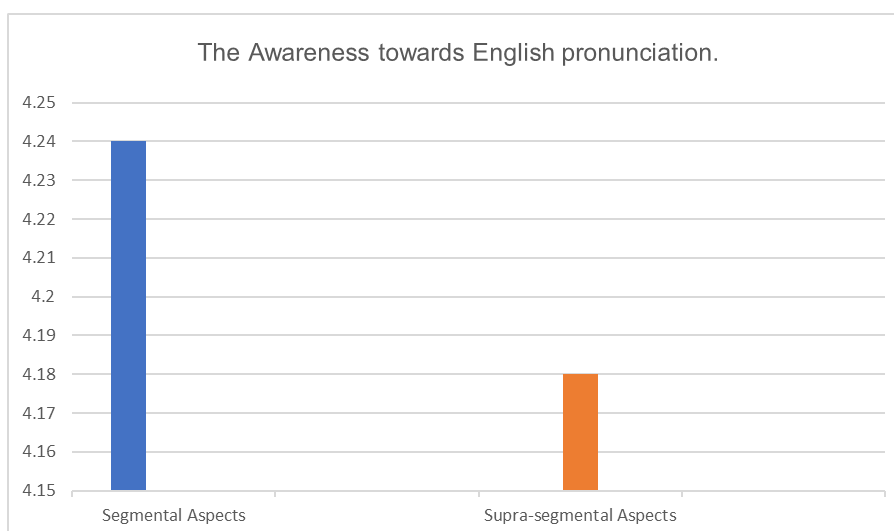


Figure 1 The awareness towards English pronunciation



II. The Attitude towards English pronunciation

Table 3 The attitude towards English pronunciation

Attitude toward learning pronunciation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
1. You want to have a good pronunciation.	4.71	0.63	Very high
2. Pronunciation is important in communication.	4.73	0.65	Very high
3. You believe that taking pronunciation courses helps you to improve your pronunciation.	4.62	0.65	Very high
4. You find that your pronunciation can be improved if you start imitating correct pronunciation first.	4.71	0.55	Very high
5. You find that reading aloud helps you to improve your pronunciation.	4.76	0.53	Very high
6. You believe that watching English movies or listening to English songs can help you to improve your pronunciation.	4.71	0.59	Very high
7. You believe that speaking with native speakers can help you to improve your pronunciation.	4.82	0.49	Very high
8. You think that listening to pronunciation from online dictionary helps you to improve your pronunciation.	4.42	0.87	Very high
9. You think that it is necessary to have a pronunciation as close to that of native speakers as possible.	4.80	0.50	Very High
10. You think that pronunciation courses should be provided at university.	4.69	0.56	Very high
Total	4.70	0.60	Very high

Table 3 contains the participants' attitudes toward English pronunciation. The result was found that the participants believed that speaking with native speakers could help them to improve the English pronunciation. (mean score= 4.82) Moreover, achieving native-like pronunciation was the second highest mean score (4.80). However, the lowest mean score was on listening to pronunciation from an online dictionary (4.42). In the overall picture, the participants' attitude towards English pronunciation was very high. (mean score= 4.70)

III. The difficult areas of English pronunciation

Table 4 The difficult areas of English pronunciation

The difficult areas of English pronunciation.	Frequency
Consonant sounds	15
Vowel sounds	17
Stress	32
Rhythm	20
Intonation	23

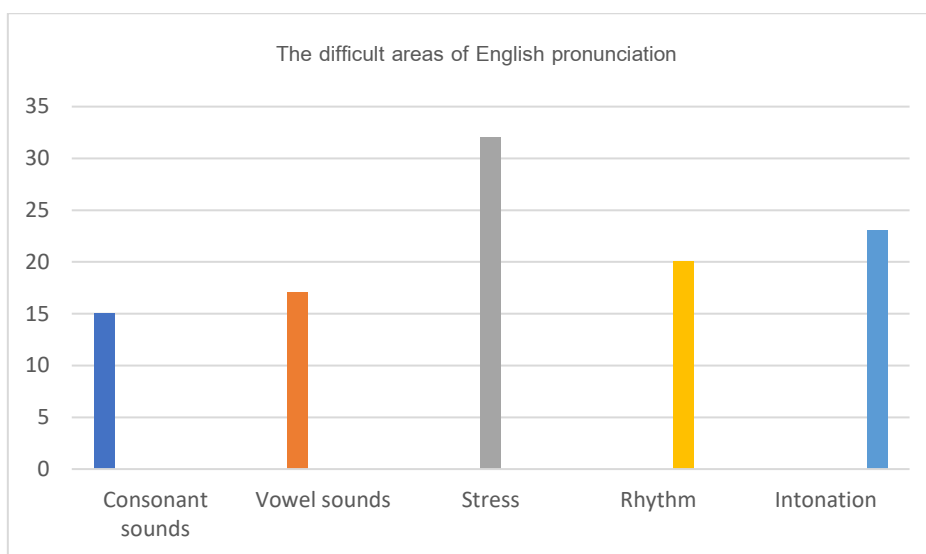


Figure 2 The difficult areas of English pronunciation

Figure 2 presents the difficult areas of pronunciation. The results reveal that word stress in suprasegmental aspect was found to be the most difficult area with 32 respondents out of 45 participants. Intonation and rhythm followed with a frequency of 23 and 20 respondents, Additionally, vowel and consonant sounds do not pose much difficulty with a frequency of 15 and 17, respectively.

Discussion

The study investigated EFL learners' awareness and attitudes towards English pronunciation. The findings reveal that the participants had awareness in their English pronunciation. In general, based on the interpretation of the levels of awareness, the participants' awareness of their English pronunciation was high. To be more specific, the participant's awareness in segmental feature was higher than that of the suprasegmental feature. The findings are consistent with other studies investigating the awareness of EFL learners towards English pronunciation. (Niamthet, 2016; Phirualee, 2013; Thepraksa, 2017). Cenoz and Lecumberri (1999) suggested that L2 learners had more awareness on the difficulty and importance on segmental than those of the counterpart or suprasegmental features. We assume that in segmental feature, when they pronounce one consonant or vowel sounds wrong, it affects the meaning. For example, the term "rip" and "hip" have a different initial consonant sound, mispronouncing just single sound could impact the meanings of the entire sentence. However, the suprasegmental element was essential too, but it had fewer impact on the meanings since the discourse context could help to convey the meaning across.

The current studies also reflect the attitude towards EFL learners' pronunciations. The participants demonstrate a positive attitude toward their pronunciation learning. That is, they believed that communicating with native speakers can help them improve their English pronunciation. The present findings are compatible with Bohn and Munro's (2007) findings in that high-quality input from native speakers is essential for second language pronunciation. Additionally, Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) posited that Asian students desire for their English pronunciation to be similar to that of native language users. Moreover, the participants want to improve their pronunciation to sound like native speaker (Bissett & Ma, 2015).



Consistent with previous studies (Niamthet, 2016; Thepraksa, 2017), the current findings indicate that word stress becomes the most difficult area of English pronunciation in EFL learners. Additionally, the result relates to Khamkhien's (2010) study, which indicated that word stress is one of the probable causes affecting the competency of Thai learners. It is very possible that some English words have different stress placement. It depends on whether that term is a noun or a verb. For instance, the term "result" has a stress in the first syllable as a noun, but the stress placement is in the second syllable as a verb. Others can be the terms "economy" and "economic"; the stress placement is in the second syllable as a noun and the third syllable as an adjective. The list goes on. Thus, incorrect stress placement on English words can influence sentence patterns, obstructing comprehension, and communication. As a result, stress become an uphill task for EFL learners.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Studies

The current study investigated EFL learners' awareness and attitudes towards their English pronunciation as well as the difficult areas of English pronunciation among EFL learners. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire show that Thai EFL learners has awareness in English pronunciation. According to respondents, Awareness of pronunciation is crucial for effective their L2 learning. Moreover, EFL learners have a positive attitude towards English pronunciation; they believed that communicating with native English speakers can assist them in enhancing their English pronunciation. Altogether, the result also reveal that the most difficult aspect of English pronunciation for EFL learners is stress placement. It also indicates that awareness and attitude can be attributed EFL learners' pronunciation.

For future studies, having an interview brings a qualitative dataset to the studies. The reason why one area is much more different than the other area will be explored. For example, why is a stress placement difficult for EFL learner? When does suprasegmental segment play a role in their speaking? How do teachers help learners to better their pronunciation? This in-depth information is needed to make the study interesting and create a new body of knowledge. The future studies can be carried out with students from English major students to see how the findings different from non-English major students.

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