



Does Pronunciation Issue Matter?: A Survey of Thai Teachers

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Abstract

The issues of native-like pronunciation in English vary from one teacher to another as well as from one level to another. This research aimed to know the importance of native-like pronunciation and its practice in teaching among public school teachers from primary to university levels. It also intended to gather information on these teachers' opinion towards native-like pronunciation in connection with some specified demographic factors. A set of questionnaire was given to teachers with results being analyzed using one-way ANOVA to test the relationships between teachers' opinion and their educational level and the level of their teaching. Other descriptive statistical approaches were also used to appropriately explain the results and findings of the study. Among the teachers who participated in the research, it was found that native-like pronunciation mattered and should be observed inside the classroom during teaching. For teachers who have been in public school for more accumulated years, the more they believed that native-like pronunciation was important. As expected, native English speaking teachers have high concern on native-like pronunciation as well as their accent. It seems that native-like pronunciation is considered necessary in public school teaching.

Keywords: English pronunciation, native-like pronunciation, opinion

1.1 Research Rationale

Language is a crucial subject in everyday life, particularly English. English is regarded as a global language, as seen in many cases, allowing individuals to enter new world, and seeing different cultures by using English as a method of communication. In order to use the language confidently, practitioners must consider not only the meanings of new words but also the ways to pronounce those words correctly. Stressing or pronouncing incorrectly may cause communication more difficult or even result in misunderstanding between and among learners and teachers. Previous studies on accent and pronunciation have shown that these are the factors that are vital for making oneself understood in a second language (L2) communication situation (Munro & Derwing, 2011). While accent is accepted as natural variation in World Englishes, there is still the need to achieve *intelligibility*, which requires some attention to pronunciation that cannot be ignored (Munro & Derwing, 2011). Thus, the development of strong pronunciation skills is a significant factor in the development of effective communication skills in English.

The majority of English teachers who are native speakers, as revealed by Breitzkreutz et al., (2009)'s study, also agreed that pronunciation is greatly important when teaching at every level but many non-native speaking teachers do not have specific pronunciation skills. This then could be a potential reason that explains why a number of English language learner still lack ability to pronounce correctly, causing less confidentiality to initiate the



conversation with foreigners. In Thailand, the main causes of failure in teaching English come from two sources: teachers and students (Biyaem, 1997). For teachers, there are several difficulties that they have been facing. These obstacles include overload teaching hours, too many students in a class, deficient English language skills and lack of knowledge about native speaker culture (Biyaem, 1997). For students, interference from the mother tongue and lack of chance to speak and practice English are the main problems (Biyaem, 1997). However, research specifically about pronunciation is limited and does not have an extensive range (Barker, Post, Schmidt, & McCarthy, 2011). Most research about pronunciation focuses on particular vowels or consonants in isolation, and does not address the intelligibility of the whole word, interaction with the L1 language, or the relative importance of pronunciation in the learning classroom compared to other areas. This means that even though pronunciation is very important, it is under-researched.

Therefore, this study replicates the research by Sifakis and Sougari (2005) which examined English teachers' beliefs about the importance of native accents and their role in pronunciation norms. The reasons of replicating this research are that Greek students and Thai students do not use English as a main language (in the expanding circle area presented in figure 2.1) which may face similar problems (Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). Another reason is that there is lack of research on examining the importance of English pronunciation in Thailand. The study, for this reason, investigates opinion of pronunciation among Thai teachers who are currently teaching English as a means to shed light on this subject in Thai classroom environment.

1.2 Research Objectives

Research objective 1: To identify teachers' opinions about the importance of native like pronunciation and their pronunciation teaching practice.

Research objective 2: To explore the relationship between the teachers' opinion about the importance of native-like pronunciation and their educational level, age, gender and level of their teaching.

Research objective 3: To identify the teachers' perspective in the particular area on pronunciation that they need to improve.

1.3 Research Questions

Several research questions are developed in order to use as a guideline for the investigation. These questions are;

- What are teachers' opinions about importance of native like pronunciation in teaching English? and how?
- Is there any relationship between teachers' opinion about the importance of native-like pronunciation and their demographic factors?
- From the teachers' perspective, what areas in the pronunciation do they need to improve?

1.4 Scope of the Research

This research emphasizes on the investigation of the teacher's opinion about the native-like pronunciation. The main target population of this investigation is English teachers in Thai public schools and universities in Muang District, Phitsanuloke province.

1.5 Research Significances

There are three expected benefits of this research. The first benefit is to provide comprehensive information about whether the teachers' believe that native-like pronunciation is necessary for teaching English and to further



curriculum development. Then, this information can be used as suggestions to enhance in courses about pronunciation. Secondly, this study should be valuable for other students and researchers who seek to gain genuine understanding of teachers' attitude regarding pronunciation as well as the demographic factors influencing their attitude and uses the outcome of this study to further develop their researches. Lastly, this study should be a valuable source for particular area on pronunciation that teachers need to improve and would further develop their teaching practices.

3.1 Population and Sampling

The main target population of this research is a group of English teachers in Thai public schools, college and universities in Muang District, Phitsanuloke province. There are approximately 29 education institutes in the area which are 3 secondary schools, 18 high schools, 3 colleges and 5 universities (the list of education institute is in the Appendix). However, because of time and budget constraints, the data will be gathered from 12 education institutes; 3 secondary schools, 3 high schools, 3 colleges and 3 universities which is about 50% of the total education institutes in the area. Moreover, because the exact number of English teachers is unknown, the researcher then intends to gather at least 100 samples as McGivern (2003) mentioned that the sample size of the study should be at least 100 for ensuring the effective of data. The sampling technique used in this research is convenience sampling technique which means that the sample that is available and convenience will be gathered.

3.2. Research Instrument

A mixed-method research design is employed in this study in order to provide a deeper understanding of the importance of pronunciation. Accordingly, it includes an empirical survey followed by semi-structured and focused group interviews. The questionnaire was used as the main research instrument as well as the semi structure interview. The questionnaire contains two sections. This first section intends to gather respondent demographic information while the second section aims to collect respondents' opinion about the importance of the importance of pronunciation. The items of questionnaire used in this study are adapted from previous studies, including Sifakis and Sougari (2005), Liu (2011) and Delatorre (2006).

3.3 Data Collection

This research used both primary and secondary data. Secondary data were collected from books, journal and internet, as a part of literature review. The area of secondary data involves pronunciation in English Language Learning (ELL), The Concentric Circle Model of World English and teachers' attitudes about the importance of pronunciation. The primary data used in this study were gathered by using questionnaire survey as mentioned earlier.

3.4 Data Analysis

This research relies on the use of statistical software package in order to analyze the data using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Moreover, the data from the interview is a commonly used in language studies as well as many other social sciences. One-way ANOVA is used for testing the relationship between the teachers' opinion about the importance of native-like pronunciation and their educational level and the level of their teaching. Additional tests will be used as appropriate to explain and describe specific research issues and population



requirements. A full set of descriptive statistics (such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation) will also be generated in order to fully describe the response to individual questions.

Questionnaire

This questionnaire is conducted in order to fulfill graduate dissertation under the topic, “Does pronunciation issue matter for teaching English?: A survey of Thai teacher”. Notably, all information provided by the respondents will be kept confidential and will only be used for academic purposes. The questionnaire is divided into 2 parts: 1) general information and 2) the importance of English pronunciation.

Results

Table 1

	Primary Level n=30 mean±SD	Secondary Level n=30 mean±SD	University Level n=30 mean±SD	p-value
Teachers’ attitude	3.88±0.11	4.15±0.44	4.10±0.40	0.203

Table 2

Primary Level	Correlation	p-value
Teachers’ opinion and Age	0.494	0.006*
Teachers’ opinion and Gender	0.032	0.866
Teachers’ opinion and the level of teaching	0.518	0.003*
Teachers’ opinion and educational level	-0.214	0.256
Teachers’ opinion and native speaker	-0.279	0.135
Teachers’ opinion and proud of English accent	0.088	0.643
Teachers’ opinion and faced with any difficulties in English speaking activities	-0.156	0.411

Table 3

Secondary level	Correlation	p-value
Teachers’ opinion and Age	-0.144	0.458
Teachers’ opinion and Gender	-0.258	0.168
Teachers’ opinion and the level of teaching	0.166	0.380
Teachers’ opinion and educational level	-0.171	0.366
Teachers’ opinion and native speaker	-0.417	0.022**
Teachers’ opinion and proud of English accent	-0.525	0.003*
Teachers’ opinion and faced with any difficulties in English speaking activities	0.311	0.094



Analysis

Table 1 shows the average attitude of teachers towards native-like pronunciation and their pronunciation teaching practice in primary which is 3.88 (SD=0.81), secondary which is 4.15 (SD=0.44), and university which is 4.10 (SD=0.40). It could be understood that the three groups of teachers perceived the necessity of pronunciation even in their practice inside their classrooms when teaching. Secondary English teachers ranked highest while primary English teachers have the lowest average in the group. It was also revealed that pronunciation is an important aspect of teaching in English. Apparently, teachers agreed that their feedback should be given to learners when the latter commit mistakes. Overall, teachers have high regards towards native-like pronunciation not only for themselves but also for the benefit of the learners inside their classrooms.

*Correlation coefficients were calculated by Spearman's rho (rho) analysis and correlation is significant at 0.01 level

**Correlation coefficients were calculated by Spearman's rho (rho) analysis and correlation is significant at 0.05 level

A Spearman rho's correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the opinion of teachers who have been designated to work in primary schools with regards to the importance of native like pronunciation and age, gender, level of teaching, educational level, native speaker, confidence in their accent, and their issues in English speaking activities respectively. As seen in Table 2, there was a positive correlation between teacher's opinion and age, $r = 0.494$, $n = 30$, $p = 0.006$. Furthermore, another positive correlation emerged between teacher's opinion and their level of teaching, $r = 0.518$, $n = 30$, $p = 0.003$. Overall, there were moderate to strong correlation between teacher's opinion and age and level of teaching. It could be assumed that the older the teachers are, the more they perceive that native like pronunciation is important. Moreover, as teachers become more experienced in teaching, they presume that native-like pronunciation is important in their classes. As to gender, educational level, native speakership, confidence in accent, and issues in English speaking activities, there was no correlation between each of the demographic factors and the teacher's perception on the importance of native like pronunciation as seen on the table.

* Correlation coefficients were calculated by Spearman's rho (rho) analysis and correlation is significant at 0.01 level

** Correlation coefficients were calculated by Spearman's rho (rho) analysis and correlation is significant at 0.05 level

Similar to the previous table, a Spearman rho's correlation coefficient was computed to measure the relationship between the opinion of teachers who have been designated to work in secondary schools with regards to the importance of native like pronunciation and their age, gender, level of teaching, educational level, native speakership, confidence in their accent, and their issues in English speaking activities respectively. It is indicated in Table 3 that there was a positive correlation between teacher's opinion and age, $r = -0.417$, $n = 30$, $p = 0.022$. Furthermore, another positive correlation emerged between teachers' opinion and their confidence in their accent, $r = -0.525$, $n = 30$, $p = 0.003$. Overall, there were moderate to strong correlation between opinion on native-like pronunciation and native speakership and confidence in their accent. As expected, it would be fair to say that among native speakers of English teaching in high schools, they think that pronunciation is necessary. Moreover, for those



teachers who are proud of their accent in English, they think that pronunciation is important. As to age, gender, years of teaching, educational level, and issues in English speaking activities, there was no correlation between each of these factors and the secondary teachers' perception on the importance of native-like pronunciation as seen on the table.

As for the theory relating to accent which has natural variations in World Englishes, Munro and Derwing said that pronunciation needs attention and not to be ignored. With regards to this study, it has found that native-like pronunciation mattered and should be observed in teaching. Teachers in Phitsanuloke seemed to believe that native-like pronunciation was important. Another theory from Sifakis & Sougari stating about teachers' beliefs on the importance and roles of pronunciation among Greek students somehow coincided with the results gathered in this study. Though Greek students and Thai students are different, it revealed that pronunciation is a vital part of learning another language especially English.

Conclusion

In order to address the issue of pronunciation in English learning in Thailand, a number of teachers were asked about their perception of native-like pronunciation in their teaching practice. It was found out that most of the teachers from primary to tertiary levels mostly agree that native-like pronunciation is necessary in teaching. The relationship between opinion on the native-like pronunciation among teachers and some demographic parameters revealed that age and length of experience in teaching the English language were significantly regarded by primary teachers. The longer the teachers have been in the service of teaching English, the more they see the necessity of native-like pronunciation to be employed in their classes. Predictably, most native English speakers in high schools favored the importance of native-like pronunciation to be practiced inside classes when teaching the language. Moreover, most of these teachers were proud of their accent. In contrast, university teachers did not seem to give much importance on the native-like pronunciation when they conduct their classes. Meanwhile, some of the teachers seemed to agree that by constant conversation with someone who speaks English would make them improve in their pronunciation as well as resorting to media sources in order for them practice if the accessibility of native English speaker is limited.

It is apparent that native-like pronunciation has significance in teaching English among teachers in Thailand regardless of gender, educational attainment, and other issues concerning speaking using the English language. The more these teachers have become exposed in teaching the language, the more they regard the importance of native-like pronunciation in their classes. Most teachers are proud of their pronunciation skills when they teach inside their classrooms especially those native English teachers who have been employed in public schools in Thailand.

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