

Phonological Analysis of Thai Passenger Service Agents' English Consonants Pronunciation

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Abstract

Aviation personnel, particularly Passenger Service Agents (PSA), essentially use English as a medium for working communication in their everyday lives. In Thailand, although the job normally requires a score of standardized English proficiency test such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) at 450 or above as one of the qualifications, such score is rather impossible to refer to the English-speaking ability since the test only focuses on English listening and reading skills. To effectively convey information at work, pronunciation is crucial for comprehension; therefore, deviation from standard pronunciation may hinder intelligibility between interlocutors which can subsequently cause errors and damage.

This descriptive qualitative study aims to 1) find the variations of pronunciation of English consonants produced by Thai passenger service agents and 2) examine the factors affecting the pronunciation of English consonants. Using qualitative research methods: ethnographic observation and semi-structure interview, 20 passenger service agents were voluntarily recruited as research participants. To collect the data, they were asked to (1) be observed during their working routines, (2) be audio recorded of their performance in making boarding announcement (BA), reading minimal pairs of English consonant sounds wordlist, and (3) answer the interview questions. For data analysis, the recorded data were transcribed into phonemic transcription based on standard pronunciation of English and phonetic transcription was made and analyzed by the researcher and two qualified inter-raters. The result revealed that there were problematic variations of English consonants sounds found in three different positions: initial, medial, and final position. Moreover, the participants mispronounced the minimal pairs of /t/ and /d/ the most, followed by /r/ and /l/, and /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ respectively. Ending sounds omission were also found. Discussion and implications for the teaching of English pronunciation for Thai students were finally provided.

Keywords: Phonological Analysis, Passenger Service Agents, English Consonant Pronunciation

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(ICHiSS-046)

Introduction

English is considered as the global language which people speak internationally. It is broadly accepted as the necessary tool in the international context since people from every corner in the world use English to direct their objectives, namely communication, study, business, and keeping up with career advancements. Moreover, the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) designated English as a medium for international cooperation and networking within the ASEAN community (Foley, 2007). One of the most important industries in Thailand which attracts ASEAN and non-ASEAN members is tourism. This industry has been a source of the country's income (Therapat, 2017), and the aviation industry plays a major role in supporting such industry.

According to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), English has been a required language for aviation personnel since 1951 (Uraipan, 2011). In comparison to other industries, staff must be able to employ English in their workplace. Airline business personnel, specifically passenger service agents, essentially use English as their everyday work-related language. When communicating to non-native travelers, correct pronunciation is crucial for comprehension. Due to the mispronunciation at a segmental level i.e., consonants and vowels produced by nonnative speakers, the intelligibility is delayed (Munro, 2008).

In Thailand, although the airline-business jobs normally require a certain score of standardized English proficiency test such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) for employment, it is rather impossible to refer to the pronunciation ability. The test tends to focus on English listening and reading skills, but for daily conversation the key to good speaking is good pronunciation (Ellis, 1997). Most importantly, deviation from standard pronunciation may hinder intelligibility between interlocutors which can result in errors and damages.

Since L2 speakers do not have to master the full set of English sounds if they are to use English in an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) context, taking this ELF setting for English speaking into consideration, Jenkins (2000) proposed a Lingua Franca Core or LFC which is a simplified set of pronunciation rules on what needs to be taught to learners of English to ensure "international intelligibility" in her book *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Jenkins indicated the "core" features, including segmental features: (1) most consonant sounds, (2) the distinction between long and short vowels, and (3) appropriate consonant cluster simplification and suprasegmental feature: nuclear stress. Taking Jenkins' LFC into consideration, it should be interesting to explore pronunciation of these features by L2 speakers. This study, therefore, chose to address the pronunciation of English consonants by Thai speakers.

Lado's Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957) pointed out that one of the factors causing English speaking difficulty is the interference of speakers' native language. As in Suksiripakonchai (2014)'s study, Thai speakers of English tended to transfer Thai phonological system by imitating or substituting Thai speech sounds into

(ICHiSS-046)

English pronunciation. Additionally, findings from a number of studies have suggested that Thai learners of English as a second language have difficulty when they produce the sounds of English that do not exist in Thai's phonological system (Chakma, 2014; Kalra, 2010; Winaitham & Suppasetsee, 2012). Moreover, Thai pronunciation of English consonants have been studied by a number of researchers to tackle the problems of L2 learners (Phintuyothin, 2011, Soonghangwa, 2013; Sridhanyarat, 2017; Suwanajote, 2017). However, not many studies were found to be conducted to explore the pronunciation of English consonants by Thai speakers within working contexts and little was done to investigate the factors that affect their pronunciation. As a result, this study attempts to investigate the pronunciation of English consonants in words which frequently appeared in airline announcement context by Thai passenger service agents and examine the factors affecting their pronunciation of English. Accordingly, research objectives and questions are stated as follow.

Objectives/Research Questions

Research objectives guiding the study are:

1. To find the variations of pronunciation of English consonants by Thai passenger service agents
2. To examine the factors affecting the pronunciation of English consonants by Thai passenger service agents

Research questions for the study include:

1. What are the variations of pronunciation of English consonants by Thai passenger service agents?
2. What are the factors affecting their pronunciation of English consonants?

Research Methodology

Participants

Twenty ground staff, seven males and thirteen females, participated in the study. They are 23-28 years of age. All of them are Bangkok-Thai native speakers with an undergraduate's degree from various institutions. Regarding the participants' English proficiency, the minimum of 450 TOEIC scores is one of the requirements for the position of ground staff. The participants have been working as ground staff for one-five years in both low-cost airlines and full-service airlines. Their duty is both at the check-in counter and the boarding gate. Particularly, they make a boarding announcement at the boarding gate in Thai and English and communicate to foreign passengers in English on a daily basis. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality of informants was maintained. The researcher did not know the participants before the recordings were made. However, the researcher had an informal conversation with the individual participants to obtain some background information such as education and prior pronunciation instruction.

(ICHiSS-046)

Instruments

The instruments used in the current study are English Language Experience Questionnaire (adapted from Modehiran, 2005) and pronunciation tasks, English minimal pairs. The questionnaire consists of three parts: 1) personal information, 2) English Language Experience in Formal Education, and 3) English Language Experience in Workplace Context. Before disseminating the questionnaire, the audiotape recording of casual interviews and airline announcements at the boarding gate were collected as a pilot study in order to find the consonantal sounds which are problematic for the Thai ground staff. Referring to the different phonological system of Thai and English, the pronunciation instrument was made from the selected words. The words selected must contain problematic sounds and occur most frequently in the airline announcement and daily conversation. Following Boonyaparakob (1997)'s basic pronunciation guide which has been used for English pronunciation practice for Thai learners, seven English minimal pairs were raised and selected. As a result, ten pairs (140 words altogether) for each pair were used to make the English minimal pairs wordlist. All instruments used in this research were validated using the Index of Item-Objective-Congruence (IOC) by two experts who held a doctoral degree of linguistics and have teaching experience in phonetics and phonology for Thai learners.

Data Collection

By the time of the pilot interview, the participants were told that they were to be observed for their working routines later within the month. Moreover, they were informed to be audio recorded of their boarding announcement performance for analysis twice. Moreover, after they have finished their duties, they were individually asked to read English minimal pairs wordlist. The recordings were to answer the first research question. For the second research question, the participants joined a semi-structured interview to share their ideas on what seemed to obstruct their English speaking, especially pronunciation. To complete those tasks, the researcher used ethnographic research strategy which allowed researchers to explore and examine the participants' real-life environment. Therefore, the passive participant observation method was used. The method was not to get involved in the group's activities but involves observing, recording, and taking notes to get hands-on experience and understand their perspectives. As a result, the presence of the researcher was not informed in advance and was seated at the back in the gate area around ten minutes before they began boarding their passengers. Two boarding announcements (identified as BA1 and BA2) with the same participants were audio recorded.

Data Analysis

The recorded BA data were transcribed into phonemic transcription based on standard pronunciation of English and phonetic transcription was made and analyzed by the researcher and two qualified inter-raters. Then the inter-rater who held a

(ICHiSS-046)

doctoral degree in linguistics and expertise in phonetics and phonology was requested to listen to BA1. However, to find agreement and ensure the result, BA2 was listened and analyzed a month apart.

Findings and Discussion.

Research Question 1: *What are the variations of pronunciation of English consonants by Thai passenger service agents?*

There were problematic consonantal sounds found in three different positions that were initial, medial, and final position. The problematic consonantal sounds found in those positions were single consonants and consonant clusters. Most of them are sounds occurred in the final position, followed by medial and initial ones respectively. Table 1 illustrates the problematic consonants in different positions and their variations.

Table 1
Problematic consonants and their variations

Consonants	Words	Positions	Variations
/s/	Passport	Medial	[s], [ʃ]
	Plus	Final	[s], [z]
/z/	Zero	Initial	[z], [s]
	Reason	Medial	[z], [s]
	Is	Final	[z], [s]
/r/	Row	Initial	[r], [l]
	Arrival	Medial	[r], [l]
/l/	Normal	Final	[l], [w], [n]
/d/	Proceed	Final	[d], [t], [s], [t ^h]
/t/	Enter	Medial	[t], [t ^h]
	Depart	Final	[t], [t ^h], [d]
/g/	Good	Initial	[g], [k]
	Begin	Medial	[g], [k]
/v/	Have	Final	[v], [f], [p]
/f/	Afternoon	Medial	[f], [p]
/θ/	Thank	Initial	[θ], [t], [t ^h]
	North	Final	[θ], [t], [t ^h], [s]
/ð/	This	Initial	[ð], [θ], [d], [t ^h]
	Weather	Medial	[ð], [θ], [d], [t], [t ^h]
	Smooth	Final	[ð], [θ], [d], [t], [t ^h], [s]
/tʃ/	Changed	Initial	[tʃ], [ʃ], [tʃ ^h]
	Departure	Medial	[tʃ], [ʃ], [tʃ], [tʃ ^h]
	Catch	Final	[tʃ], [ʃ], [t]

(ICHiSS-046)

In Table 2, for the consonant clusters at the initial position, it was found that the problematic consonant clusters were those occurred together with /r/ or /l/ which were [pr], [pl], [fr], [fl], [dr], [kr], and [θr]. The variations of the pronunciation of the consonant clusters were with the standard pronunciation and the non-standard pronunciation in which the participants dropped the /r/ or /l/ or replaced the /r/ with /l/.

Table 2

Problematic consonant clusters and their variations

Consonants	Words	Variations
/pr/	Process	[p ^h], [p ^h r], [p ^h l], [p]
/pl/	Plus	[p ^h], [p ^h r], [p ^h l]
/fr/	From	[fr], [fl], [f]
/fl/	Floor	[fl], [f]
/dr/	Drop	[dr], [d]
/kr/	Across	[kr], [kl], [k ^h]
/θr/	Three	[θr], [t ^h]

Table 3 shows the analysis of Thai passenger service agents' pronunciation of the problematic English minimal pairs of consonant sounds. Of seven pairs, they were ranked in accordance with the mispronounced frequencies of occurrence among the 10 participants.

Table 3

Problematic English minimal pairs of consonant sounds

Minimal Pairs	Sample Words	Mispronounced Frequencies
/t/ and /d/	Write, Ride	58
/r/ and /l/	Fry, Fly	46
/tʃ/ and /ʃ/	Catch, Cash	32
/ð/ and [θ]	Thick, This	30
/f/ and /v/	Safe, Save	26
/v/ and /w/	Vest, West	24
/s/ and /z/	Race, Raise	16

From the tables above, the findings revealed a variety of English pronunciation as produced by Thai passenger service agents. They were heavily influenced by Thai phonological system. This is due to the non-existence of some consonants in Thai phonology. Though some consonants are close to Thai phonology, voicing and their articulation are not in the same manner as they are in the Thai phonological system.

(ICHiSS-046)

Therefore, the pronunciation variations of such consonants were found to be in the processes of substitution, deletion, and insertion.

Originally, the pronunciation problem might have been classified as native language interference (Lado, 1957), however, more recent studies of English as an International Language (Jenkins, 2000) would consider it as part of EIL. In terms of pronunciation, even where some EIL learners seemed to have successfully acquired a British/American accent and as such the influence of the L1 may appear to be negligible in a person's speech, their pronunciation is probably still being filtered through an overlay of local segmental features and syllable-timed prosody (Crystal, 2012).

The emergence of the problematic consonantal sounds was not only in the word-initial position, but also word-medial and word-final positions. The results indicated the variations of the pronunciation and Thai passenger service agents' pronunciation of English consonants was found to have characteristics, possibly as a natural occurrence in L1 transfer to English as an International Language. These findings were similar to the earlier studies namely Chunsuvimol and Ronakiat, 2000, 2001; Kanokpermpoon, 2007; Mano-im, 1999; Soonghangwa, 2013; Sridhanyarat, 2017; Suwanajote, 2017. It is also shown that the problem of the pronunciation was due to the differences in the sound systems of English and Thai which was supported by Lado's Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957).

Research Question 2: *What are the factors affecting their pronunciation of English consonants?*

Regarding the factors affecting the pronunciation of English consonants, the researcher found from the interview and the reading task that the participants had high level of "anxiety" to be more careful when reading both the given wordlist and the long text when making boarding announcement as the following participants (names in pseudonym) reported:

Somchai (Low-cost airline, 3 years of experience): *Although I was trained by my supervisors, I always make mistakes in speaking. When making announcement, I pay very much attention words by words which sometimes resulting in bad pronunciations. Every time, I am really afraid of not making it smoothly and embarrassing the passengers.*

Pitsamai (Full-service airline, 3 years of experience): *I think passengers could miss their flights due to the fact that I don't speak clearly, so I always feel concerned when making boarding announcement, especially the Final Call which I had to use a different tone of voice to call their attention.*

It is undeniable that anxiety plays a big role in speaking English, specifically with L2 speakers (Hadi, Izzah & Masae, 2021; Akkason, 2016; Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013). Not only in a daily conversation, it also shows in a one-way communication,

(ICHiSS-046)

interfering with the speaking performance. To ease the speaking anxiety, it is very important to stay conscious in speaking both between the interlocutors and in public. Exposure and experience may lead speakers to realize how to control themselves more effectively and have a higher level of confidence in speaking.

Moreover, one of the main factors revealed by Thai passenger service agents is Thai-English (Tinglish) accent as demonstrated during the interview:

Sunee (Full-service airline, 2 years of experience): *I always speak English with the strong Thai accent. I think the foreign passengers totally understand what I meant, although they frequently asked me to repeat. Eventually, they have no problems communicating with me.*

Butsaba (Low-cost airline, 4 years of experience): *I have rarely spoken with ending sounds like -sh -t or -s. It is very different from our Thai language. It sounds so Thai when I talk to passengers or even to myself alone when I practice. I think we should have more training in pronunciation.*

As the majority of visitors to Thailand can speak little or no Thai, most communication at the airport between them and the Thai passenger service agents takes place in English. Many of the staffs are using Thai accent in speaking English since they have limited experience studying with native English speakers and adequate English exposure during their early years of study which agrees with Thienthong & Uthai Korn (2023) and Sasum & Weeks (2018)'s study. In order to reduce L1 interference, they, Thai learners, should have more access to the international environment where English language is used as a medium of communication.

Last but not least, the lack of training is raised as the Thai passenger service agents agreed that they need to be well-trained.

Kornsiri (Low-cost airline, 2 years of experience): *In my opinion, I want to learn more with the proper training from a language institute or from the senior staff who have experience working at the airport. Though I am talking to foreigners every day, I only speak and use the pronunciation from what I know since high school and university. I don't really know how to speak with the correct pronunciation.*

Supong (Full-service airline, 1 year of experience): *From day one till today, I have been speaking with moderate level of confidence when talking to international passengers. They are very kind to be calm down when I explain which sometimes ended up using Google Translate. I think I have enough vocabulary and basic English at the workplace, but I think if the company provide some courses, it would be beneficial for us as their employees.*

(ICHiSS-046)

Professional development helps boost employees' job performance, but English language training is seldom conducted at workplace. Particularly in jobs the aviation industry, personnel need to be able to communicate in English proficiently. It is necessary to establish some projects of English courses such as basic English pronunciation or require a speaking test as part of the requirement together with the standardized TOEIC score.

Conclusion

To interact with one another in a multilingual world, people from different language backgrounds need a common language for their communication. When no common language is shared, English as a lingua franca is required to allow mutual understanding and proper pronunciation, which is vital for daily usages such as working, studying, and living. According to the English language experience questionnaire's result, the research participants used the language based on their limited prior knowledge to speak and communicate daily, and the prior English pronunciation learning was not much emphasized in school and university levels. Besides, the participants commented that the curriculum content was mostly focused on grammar. The findings should offer pedagogical recommendations for English pronunciation teaching in school and university levels in order to prepare L2 learners for the working context.

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(ICHiSS-046)

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(ICHiSS-046)

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