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# The Employment of Phonetic Exercises to Improve English Major Students' Pronunciation

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Sutamat Kotcharat <sup>1</sup> / Puttachart Limsiruangrai <sup>2</sup>

Lecturer of English Program <sup>1</sup> and Business English Program <sup>2</sup>,

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Buriram Rajabhat University, Buriram, Thailand.

Email : Sutamat1957@gmail.com

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## Abstract

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Pronunciation plays a very crucial role in communication. You may not understand others as well as you may not be understood if you cannot produce correct pronunciation. Mispronunciation may lead to miscommunication. This research aimed at investigating and comparing learning achievement of the English major students between before and after the employment of phonetic exercises to improve their English pronunciation, and studying their satisfaction towards the use of phonetic exercises. Thirty-five English major students, studying in the first year at the time of study, were randomly selected to participate in this study. The instruments used consisted of English phonetic exercises, lesson plans, an achievement test, a questionnaire for satisfaction and group interview. The collected data were analyzed for frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The hypothesis was tested by dependent sample t-test.

The results of the research revealed that after studying with the employment of phonetic exercises, the students' learning achievement was at a high level at the statistical significance.01 and their satisfaction towards the use of phonetic exercises was at a high level.

**Keywords :** Phonetic Exercises, English pronunciation, English major students

### บทคัดย่อ

การออกเสียงมีบทบาทสำคัญยิ่งในการสื่อสาร หากผู้พูดออกเสียงไม่ถูกต้องผู้ฟังก็อาจไม่เข้าใจว่าผู้พูดต้องการสื่อสารอะไรออกมา การออกเสียงไม่ถูกต้องนำมาซึ่งการสื่อสารที่ผิดพลาด การวิจัยเรื่องการพัฒนาทักษะการออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษโดยใช้แบบฝึกสัทอักษรภาษาอังกฤษนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาและเปรียบเทียบผลสัมฤทธิ์ทางการเรียนก่อนเรียนและหลังเรียนและศึกษาความพึงพอใจของนักศึกษาต่อการพัฒนาทักษะการออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษโดยใช้แบบฝึกสัทอักษรภาษาอังกฤษกลุ่มตัวอย่างเป็นนักศึกษาคณะศึกษาศาสตร์ภาษาอังกฤษชั้นปีที่ 1 จำนวน 35 คน ที่ได้มาโดยการสุ่มอย่างง่าย เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลประกอบด้วยแบบฝึกสัทอักษรภาษาอังกฤษ แผนการจัดการเรียนรู้ แบบทดสอบวัดผลสัมฤทธิ์ทางการเรียน และแบบสอบถามความพึงพอใจของนักศึกษาต่อการใช้แบบฝึกสัทอักษรภาษาอังกฤษ สถิติที่ใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลได้แก่ ค่าร้อยละ ค่าเฉลี่ย และค่าส่วนเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน ทดสอบสมมติฐานโดยใช้ Dependent Sample t-test

ผลการวิจัยพบว่าผลสัมฤทธิ์ทางการเรียนของนักศึกษาหลังเรียนโดยใช้แบบฝึกสัทอักษรภาษาอังกฤษ สูงขึ้นกว่าก่อนเรียนอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติที่ระดับ .01 นักศึกษามีความพึงพอใจต่อการพัฒนาทักษะการออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษโดยใช้แบบฝึกสัทอักษรภาษาอังกฤษอยู่ในระดับมาก

**คำสำคัญ :** แบบฝึกสัทอักษรภาษาอังกฤษ การออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษ นักศึกษาคณะศึกษาศาสตร์ภาษาอังกฤษ

## 1. Introduction

It is undoubtedly accepted that English is very important in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world. In the role of an international language as well as a lingua franca, English is used in a great number of areas, as a medium of communication, such as in education, international business, science and technology, foreign affairs, political, economy, academic conference and diplomacy. Realizing the importance of English, many countries including Thailand, make many attempts to help their people become better equipped with English performance. In response to the demands for English skills, the Thai government has made constant efforts to improve Thai learners' English performance throughout the history of English language teaching in Thailand in order to improve Thai learners' competence in English, enabling them to obtain job opportunities, promotions or career advancement (Kanoksilapatham, 2007; Khamkhien, 2010).

Thailand is a member of ASEAN community so Thai people have to follow the ASEAN rules. There is a statement written in the Article 34, on page 29 of the ASEAN Charter that "The working language of ASEAN shall be English". This means that the people of the 10 country members of ASEAN Community should be able to use English in communication with each other in order to understand and be understood, especially in the workforce.

However, English competency of Thai people is still at a very low level even those who are studying at a university level and have been studying English for many years. Based on English Proficiency Index (EPI) Thailand's English Proficiency was at a very low level, at the EF EPI Score 45.35, which was ranked no. 62 out of 70 countries that did the test. Comparing to the ten member countries of ASEAN Community, Thailand has got lower scores than Indonesia, Myanmar, and Vietnam and be the second last ranking country. (The world's largest ranking of countries by English skills, n.d., n.p.).

Pronunciation is a fundamental skill the students should primarily acquire as it can affect accuracy and comprehension (Celce-Murcia et al., 2000; Derwing et al., 2006; Hahn, 2004). It is the important aspect that the teachers of English should focus on to enable learners to have good communication, understand and be understood by others. Improper and incorrect pronunciation can lead to misunderstanding and negative

impression. Though you are able to use correct grammar and advanced vocabulary, people may not understand you if you have improper pronunciation. Unfortunately, many learners don't realize the importance of pronunciation and they ignore it. Even in English classroom, pronunciation is not attentively focused. As English teachers who have observed such problems for many years, the researchers want to improve the students' pronunciation in order to strengthen their pronunciation so that they can communicate with English language comprehensively and efficiently.

### Importance of Pronunciation

Pronunciation is a very important aspect for clear communication. As stated before that if you cannot pronounce words correctly, it may lead you or your conversational parties to misunderstanding. Language learners, especially those who learn English as their major subject, should learn how to pronounce words accurately and properly in order to be successful in learning language and communication. Nowadays, even though learning English focuses on communicative approach, importance of pronunciation which is a crucial aspect is obviously ignored. "Pronunciation has been called the Cinderella of ELT, being locked away and out of sight (Miyake, 2004)."

### Common Problematic Sounds for Thai learners

As a foreign language for Thai learners, no one denies that it is hard to pronounce some English sounds. Thai learners speak different dialects and this may be barriers of good pronunciation. However, some common problematic sounds for Thai learners are /g/, /v/, /z/, /θ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ʒ/, /ð/, /ŋ/, /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /aʊ/, /əʊ/, /ɪə/, /eə/, /ʊə/ (Thanthanis, 2013).

### Phonetics in Pronunciation Teaching

In teaching English pronunciation for EFL learners at a university level, phonetics is usually applied because it provides the scientific basis for the description of standard accents, the production of reference works and teaching materials, the training of EFL teachers, anticipating and improving learners' errors. According to Ashby (nd.) "Pronunciation" covers both production and perception of speech: ability to hear a sound distinction must generally precede ability to produce it."

## **Stressing and Its Importance**

Word stress is not used in all languages. In English, it is not an option, but a part of the language. Syllables in English words are pronounced differently with more or less importance. In some languages such as Japanese or French, word syllables are pronounced with equal emphasis. Thai language also emphasizes every syllable equally. So word stress is very important and is considered one big problem for Thai learners in learning English language. Stressing the wrong syllable in a word can make the word very difficult to understand. Moreover, wrong stress can change the meaning of words and leads to misunderstanding. In order to help learners to become more proficient and be confident users of English, some approaches are engaged.

## **Linking**

Linking is the combination of words together until they sound as if they are only one word. English-native speakers can do words linking naturally as English is a stress-timed language. It is an advanced aspect, very difficult for Thai learners who are non-native speakers because Thai is a syllable-timed language. Failing to have natural linking in speaking English has resulted in speaking with awkward pauses, extra, and unnecessary sounds which will sound very foreign to native speakers of English.

## **Learning Activity**

Ulate (2011) stated that “Teachers are now more aware of the need to offer a variety of activities in the classroom to fulfill students’ needs”. In this study various teaching activities were employed to motivate learners such as minimal pairs, tongue twister, etc.

## **Law of Exercise**

In Thorndike’s Connected Theory, he specified three conditions that maximized learning: Law of readiness, Law of exercise, and Law of Effect. This study based on the notion of Law of Exercise which included Law of Use and Law of Disuse. The connections between a stimulus and a response are strengthened as they are used through repetition. On the contrary, the connections are weakened when practice is not continued.

## 2. Research Objectives

1. To investigate and to compare the students' learning achievement before and after using phonetic exercises to improve students' pronunciation.
2. To study the students' satisfaction towards the employment of phonetic exercises to improve students' pronunciation.

## 3. Research Hypothesis

The posttest score of the subjects was higher than those of the pretest at the statistical significance .01.

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1 Population

The population was 111 first year English major students studying in English program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Buriram Rajabhat University in the academic year 2014.

### 4.2 Participants

The participants were 35 first year English major students studying in English program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Buriram Rajabhat University in the academic year 2014, selected by simple random sampling.

### 4.3 Research Instruments

The instruments employed in this study were phonetic exercises, lesson plans, an achievement test, a questionnaire, and group interview.

4.3.1 The phonetic exercise comprised 6 chapters: Consonant Sounds, Vowels and Diphthongs, Problem Consonant Sounds, Basic Principles of Pronunciation, Syllable Stressing, and Linking. At the end of each chapter, exercises for practice are included.

4.3.2 Six lesson plans were used in cooperative with the phonetic exercises. Each plan took 3 hours, from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. on Wednesday afternoon, and only once in a week. Therefore it took 6 weeks in total, excluding pretest, posttest, doing the questionnaire and group interview. Each lesson plan included a variety of activities to

motivate the students and to meet their needs. All the lesson plans were commented by the experts for face validity and suggestions.

4.3.3 The researchers wrote an achievement test comprising 60 items, 15 items for each of the 4 aspects: consonant sounds, vowel sounds, word stressing, and linking. Then the test was checked for IOC by experts (Phattiyathane, 2546, 218-220). The items with the IOC of at least .66 were kept to make the achievement test. The result was that all items obtained the IOC of at least .66. After the improvement of the test based on the experts' suggestions, the test was tried out with 30 first year students in Business English program which were not the sample group. Forty items with the difficulty (p) 0.20-0.80 and the discrimination (r) 0.20 were selected and rearranged to be used as a pretest and a posttest with the experimental group. One point was given for correct pronunciation and 0 (zero) for the incorrect ones.

4.3.4 The questionnaire was used to investigate the students' satisfaction towards the employment of phonetic exercises to improve students' pronunciation. It consisted of 20 items in 5 aspects; teachers, content, activity, exercise, and skills. The questionnaire was separated into 3 main parts. Part 1 was for general information of the participants. Part 2 was the 5 rating scale of the students' satisfaction towards the employment of phonetic exercise. Part 3 was the open-ended section for the students' opinion and suggestions.

4.3.5 The group interview was to examine the students' opinions and suggestions about using the phonetic exercise for the improvement of their pronunciation skills. As most of the students didn't give much of their ideas and suggestions in the last part of the questionnaire so the group interview was a good technique to find out what they really thought about the study. The questions used were semi-structured so that the students didn't feel like they were interviewed, but had a discussion with the teacher and their friends.

#### 4.4 Experiment

The method designed for this study was one group pretest-posttest. See Table 1 below.

**Table 1** The method design of the study

O <sub>1</sub> (Pretest)	X (Treatment)	O <sub>2</sub> (Posttest)
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Table 1 presented the method design of the study which was one group pretest-posttest. O1 referred to the achievement test the sample took before the treatment. X was the study with the use of phonetic exercises. At the end of the study, the sample was provided with the posttest (O2) which was the same test as the pretest (O1).

To measure the degree of change occurred in the students' learning achievement after the treatment, the group of 35 participants was asked to do the pretest before having pronunciation lessons through English phonetics exercise. At the end of the treatment the participants had the posttest, using the same test as the pretest.

#### **4.5 Data Collection**

Before starting the experiment, the participants had an orientation to make sure that they understand the aims of the study, what advantages they are going to get from the study, what they have to do to gain such benefits, etc. After that they had a pretest one by one. Three researchers worked as evaluators assessing their pronunciation, giving zero for incorrect pronunciation and one for the correct ones.

The process of improving the students' pronunciation took 6 weeks, one session of 3 hours in a week. The posttest and the group interview were done in the following week.

#### **4.6 Data Analysis**

The data collected were analyzed for percentage, mean, and standard deviation. Content analysis was used to analyze the data from the open – ended part of the questionnaire and the group interview.

### **5. Research Results**

After the process of the experiment, the results of the research revealed as follows.

5.1 The subjects' scores of the posttest were higher than those of the pretest and the students' learning achievement after studying with the employment of the phonetic exercises was higher than before at the statistical significance .01. See the table below.



**Table 2** Comparison of the students' learning achievement before and after the employment of phonetic exercises

Testing	n	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	t	Sig.
Pretest	35	27.03	5.57	10.943	.000**
Posttest	35	35.03	3.65		

\*\*  $p < .0$

From Table 2, the posttest scores of the students were 35.03 whereas the pretest scores were 27.03. That means that after studying with the employment of the phonetic exercises the students got higher scores than before. This shows that the students' learning achievement after studying with the phonetic exercise was higher than before. So it can be inferred that the employment of phonetic exercises helps to improve the students' English pronunciation skill.

5.2 The students' satisfaction towards studying with the phonetic exercises to improve their pronunciation was at a high level (4.20). See table 3 below.

**Table 3** Students' satisfaction towards studying with the employment of phonetic exercise to improve their pronunciation

Aspects evaluated	n	Min	Max	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
1. Teachers	35	2	5	4.24	.57
2. Content	35	3	5	4.16	.57
3. Activities	35	2	5	4.17	.68
4. Exercises	35	3	5	4.30	.56
5. Skills	35	3	5	4.21	.69
Total	35	3.11	4.89	4.20	.54

From Table 3, the students' satisfaction towards studying with the employment of phonetic exercise to improve their pronunciation was at a high level (4.20). Among all of the 5 aspects evaluated, the aspect of exercises got the highest level of satisfaction (4.30), followed by the aspects of teachers (4.24), and skills (4.21) respectively. The aspect that got the lowest level of satisfaction was the content (4.16).

## 6. Discussions

The results of the research obviously showed that the students' learning achievement after studying with the phonetic exercises was higher than before. This may be because the students had chances to practice words, phrases and sentences that have problematic consonant and vowel sounds, stressing and linking based on the phonetic system. The more they learn and understand the system of phonetics, the more they have better pronunciation. This is in accordance with Sirinapha Promkam (2007) who did the research on Improvements of Learners in English Word Stress Resulting from Learning Phonetics and found that the experimental group who practiced English pronunciation with learning Phonetics had improved their pronunciation more obviously than the controlled group. In addition, according to Aporn Sriphet (2009) who studied on the development of English reading skills by using phonetics exercises for Prathomsuksa 6 students, and Piboon Sooksai (2007) who did the research on the development of English reading skills by using phonetics exercises for the students in Matthayomsuksa 6, the results of these two researches were the same in that the achievement of the students after the study was higher than before the use of the phonetic exercises.

Moreover, the fact that the students had plenty of chances to practice the problematic sounds again and again made them feel familiar with the sounds and encouraged them to produce correct and better pronunciation. According to Thorndike's 'Law of Exercise', Taylor (1995), Gerald (2004), practice repeatedly helped in increasing efficiency and durability of learning. At this point, the teachers themselves should be good models for learners by producing correct pronunciation and let them repeat individually or in groups until they can do it accurately and fluently.

Furthermore, the characteristics of the phonetic exercises prepared for this study completely agreed with what Rojana Saengrungrawee (1988) and Gusaya Saengdej (2002) in that the content was well organized from simplicity to difficulty. Accuracy and clarity of the content helped learners understand the lessons easily. The content was appropriate for the students' proficiency level, starting from the very basic of pronunciation guidelines of consonant sounds, pure vowel sounds and diphthongs, and how to make correct stressing and linking. This resulted in clear understanding that enabled them to produce correct pronunciation and reduced their pressure.

Learning with various activities such as minimal pairs, chaining, and tongue twister encouraged the students to practice pronunciation repeatedly and eagerly. Some activities which were employed as competitive activities motivated them to learn happily and enjoyably. Therefore, students were mostly satisfied with the item that various exercises could be applied for their daily life and met their interest, aptitude and capability. In the students' opinions, English phonetics exercises were interesting instructional material, providing good knowledge which can be used in their study and in real life situations. Moreover, learning without being graded released the students' anxiety and pressure which helped them learn more comfortably and enjoyably than learning in normal classroom. This resulted in their higher learning achievement as well as their satisfaction at a high level. This is in accordance with Aporn Sriphet (2009) and Piboon Sooksai (2007) who found that the learners were satisfied with the use of phonetic exercises for the development of English reading skills at a high level.

Some important suggestions collected from the questionnaire and the group interview are some more time of about 10 - 15 minutes break should be given because each session took a long time so they felt very tired. More fun, encouragement and interesting activities should be applied to increasingly motivate students. Furthermore, they suggested that the content of each lesson should be reduced so that they can have more time for relaxation.

## 7. Conclusion

Realization of the importance of pronunciation in English communication, the researchers tried to find ways to strengthen the learners' pronunciation proficiency. And as the learners are English major students at a university level, they have to be able to understand and produce correct English pronunciation. All attempts were made through literature reviews to find the best way that works. Finally, the employment of phonetic exercise was selected to improve the learners' pronunciation. In order to know whether it works or not, the objectives of this study were to investigate and compare the learners' learning achievement between after and before studying with the employment of the phonetic exercises. The learners' satisfaction towards studying with the employment of the phonetic exercises was to find out also. After a long process of experiment, the results of the research revealed that the English phonetics

exercise can help improving the students' pronunciation skill and they are satisfied with the use of phonetic exercises at a high level.

## 8. Recommendations

1. In order to improve the students' pronunciation skill for good and comprehensive communication, researches on teaching pronunciation to EFL learners should be done more with another aspect, i.e. different teaching techniques, learning activities, etc.

2. Other types of media such as textbooks, audio-recording, online materials, etc. should be used as instructional materials in further studies to examine whether the results of the studies are beneficial or similar to the use of phonetic exercise.

3. Suggestions from participants show that the time of 3 hours provided for each session was too long for them to concentrate on the lessons. So duration of sessions is important that the researchers should take into consideration.

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