



How Important Is It for Learners of English to Have an Accent Like Native Speakers?

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Abstract

Many Thai learners prioritize learning English with native speakers to achieve native-like pronunciation. This study examines the importance of native accents for English learners, discussing linguistic factors, pronunciation challenges, and second-language learning theories. When a language is widely spoken within a community, multiple dialects emerge. Each dialect has its own characteristics, which are distinct from others. However, people generally think about British and American accents when talking about English accents. The British accent is spoken in the United Kingdom while the American accent is spoken in the United States. Some factors affecting second language learning are intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation and attitudes, learning styles and age of acquisition. Thai people found that it was quite difficult for them to speak English correctly or have acceptable English pronunciation. This is because a lot of English sounds are not found in the Thai language. The problems of English pronunciation of Thai students are caused by two main factors, the differences between Thai and English sound systems, and the method of instruction for English pronunciation. An accent is the way a person sounds when he or she speaks. In general, there are two different kinds of accents, foreign and native accents.

Keywords: Learners of English, Accents, Native Speakers

1. Background

At present, Thai people have far more opportunities to interact with foreigners. This is due to the significant rise in import-export and tourism. The Thai government has been promoting foreign investments in Thailand in various types of businesses. Due to the economic crisis in Thailand, Thai university students have been very concerned about the problem of unemployment. They therefore must prepare to encounter extreme competition for jobs after they graduate. For this reason, international or foreign organizations are becoming better options for them. To have the chance to be employed in a foreign company, a graduate is first required to have a good command of English, (considered the international business language). As a result, there has been a significant increase in language related businesses in Bangkok and other big both public and private educational institutions. There has also been very serious competition among language-related businesses. Therefore, different approaches are used to attract customers, especially new graduates and third or fourth-year university students. One of the approaches that is becoming popular is to employ a native speaker of English to teach English conversation, though the person may or may not have background knowledge in teaching English as a foreign language. Many Thai learners believe that learning English from native speakers enhances their ability to speak with a native-like accent. They therefore spend

a lot of money to learn English with a native speaker in many popular language centers or they may even go to the United States, England, or Australia. Moreover, some Thai English teachers put a lot of effort into having a native accent to be credible and more confident in teaching English to Thai students.

2. English Dialects and Accents

According to Crystal (1985), each language has its own style or system of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Whenever the language is widely spoken by a great number of people in a community, many dialects originate. Each dialect has its own characteristics, which are distinct from others. However, all dialects which have components of the language still have some characteristics in common, depending on nature of the language. There are two main factors influencing the creation of all dialects, region and society (such as social status, occupation, sex, and age). Among all dialects occurring in the language, there is only one eminent dialect which is considered a standard form of the language. Accordingly, the written or formal language is based on the standard form. British English spoken in the United Kingdom for example, is composed of many dialects. However, standard English is one of the dialects spoken by educated people and is also used as a medium of instruction in schools, radio or television. Each dialect differs in many aspects from the standard language including vocabulary, grammatical structure and pronunciation. Crystal (1985) mentioned that unlike dialect, an accent pertains only to a pronunciation system but not to vocabulary or sentence structure. An accent, also called pronunciation, can be used to identify where a speaker is from, as for example, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa or Singapore. The accent can also identify part of the country where the speaker is from. This is called a regional accent. Unlike the regional accent, the social accent indicates the speaker in terms of level of education, occupation, financial and social status, age, or sex of the speaker.

3. Causes of Different Accents of English

Ronakiet (2013) said that different accents of a language are caused by the change of pronunciation of spoken language. In general, a language changes all the time in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar. It has been found that vocabulary changes much more quickly than grammar or pronunciation. Like lexical changes, pronunciation changes whenever a new accent is widely spoken in each region or society. According to the principle of least effort, the changes in a language are caused by the laziness of human beings to pronounce words. Based on this principle, people prefer simple or easy pronunciation. American English, for example, pronounces the “t” sound in the word “atom” or “better” by using the “tap sound”. Unlike the “t” sound, the “tap sound” does not need effort or energy to pronounce.

4. Types of English Accents

According to Crystal (1991), English is considered an international or global language at present, and therefore, no country owns it. However, people generally think about British and American accents when talking about English accents. The British accent is spoken in the United Kingdom while the American accent is spoken in the United States. Both English

accents are popular because the two nations are globally accepted for their steady social and economic status. Nevertheless, there are still many different dialects spoken in the two countries. In Great Britain, there are several spoken dialects including the London accent, the Cockney accent, the Northern accent, the Southern accent (or Standard English, or Received English, or Received Standard, or Public-School Pronunciation), the Welsh and the Scottish accent. In the United States there are many accents of English spoken like the Western (or Midwestern, or Northern, or General American) accent, the New England or the Eastern accent (used in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut), the Southern accent (used in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Oklahoma) and African-American People's accent. Crystal suggested that the accent of the standard form of English should be used as a medium of instruction in schools or be used in mass media or be taught to foreigners. The RP accent (Received Pronunciation) is considered a standard form of English spoken in the United Kingdom, whereas the "General American" accent is widely used in the United States. In fact, a standard form of English is set up by its community. To cite a similar example, Canadians who speak French may think that French spoken in Canada is different from French spoken in France. They sound the same when non-native speakers of French hear it.

5. Factors Affecting Second Language Learning

5.1 Intelligence

According to Genesee (1976), a connection between intelligence and second language learning has been reported by several researchers. Through a variety of IQ tests and different methods to evaluate language learning, many research have found that intelligence levels were a good indicator to predict the language learning success of a learner. Moreover, some recent studies have shown that intelligence may be more related to some skills of second language learning. For example, a study of French immersion children in Canada found that intelligence was related to only three skills of French language acquisition, reading, grammar, and vocabulary, but not to oral skills.

5.2 Aptitude

Obler (1989) reported that a man named CJ has a specialized ability. CJ is a native speaker of English who grew up in an English home. At the age of 15, he formally studied French. He also studied German, Spanish, and Latin while he was in high school. At age 20, he had a short trip to Germany. He said that after he heard people speaking German for a short time, he was able to recover the German he had learned in school. After that, CJ worked in Morocco where he learned Moroccan Arabic through both formal instruction and informal immersion. He also spent some time in Spain and Italy, and he could learn the two languages in just a few weeks. There may be few learners like CJ, but research does show that human beings show a wide range of aptitude for learning a second language.

5.3 Personality

Guiora et al. (1972) suggested that inhibition discourages risk-taking which is necessary for progress in language learning. This is often considered to be a particular problem for adolescents who are more self-conscious than younger learners. In a series of studies, Alexander Guiora and his colleagues have found support for the claim that inhibition is a

negative force in language learning. One study involved an analysis of the effects of small dose of alcohol on pronunciation. It was found that subjects who received a small dose of alcohol did better on pronunciation tests than those who did not drink any alcohol.

5.4 Motivation and Attitudes

Gardner (1985) said that there has been a great deal of research on the role of attitudes and motivation in second language learning. The overall findings show that positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in second language learning. Unfortunately, the research cannot indicate precisely how much motivation affects learning. Motivation in second language learning is a complex phenomenon which can be defined in terms of two factors: learners' communicative needs, and their attitudes towards the second language community. If learners need to speak the second language in a wide range of social situations or to fulfill professional ambitions, they will perceive the communicative value of the second language and will therefore be motivated to acquire proficiency in it. One factor which often affects motivation is the social dynamic or power relationship between the languages. That is, members of a minority group may have different attitudes and motivation when learning the language of a majority group than those of majority group members learning a minority language.

5.5 Learning Styles

According to Oxford (1990), there is very little research on the interaction between different learning styles and success in second language acquisition. However, the research which has been carried out, on second language acquisition and in other fields, shows that when learners prefer to see something written, or want to memorize material in a less formal way, their ways of learning are not wrong. We should encourage them to use all methods available to them to learn other languages.

5.6 Age of Acquisition

Patkowski (1980) found that the age of acquisition is a very important factor on the development of native-like mastery of a second language. Experience and research have shown that native-like mastery of the spoken language is difficult to attain by older learners. Even the ability to distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences in a second language is affected by age.

Johnson and Newport (1989) found that there was a strong relationship between an early start to language learning and performance in the second language. Johnson and Newport noted that before the age of fifteen, and especially before the age of ten, there are few individual differences in second language ability. Older learners will not have native-like language skills and are more likely to differ greatly from one another in ultimate attainment.

6. Problems with English Pronunciation for Thai People

According to Ronakiet (2002), Thai people found that it was quite difficult for them to speak English correctly or have acceptable English pronunciation. This is because a lot of English sounds are not found in the Thai language. In fact, all human beings have the same speech organs unless he or she is defective in it. The speech organs are ready to function when they are used. A child learns how to pronounce by imitating what he regularly hears. However, when the child lives in the environment where he just hears Thai language, he will learn how

to pronounce only Thai sounds. As a result, he learns how to use specific speech organs that help him to produce Thai sounds. The rest of his speech organs are not used or practiced or moved, and thus the child may find it hard to use the organs to produce non-Thai sounds. However, the abandoned speech organs, in fact, can ultimately function again if the child puts in enough effort. To succeed in using the speech organs to produce unfamiliar English sounds, the most important factor is the age of the person. The sooner he starts practicing how to use these organs, the more successfully he can naturally pronounce the unfamiliar English sounds. Thai and English sound systems are different in terms of consonant sounds, vowel sounds, rhythm, and intonation. Thai people usually replace some Thai sounds that are similar to unfamiliar English sounds whenever they want to pronounce those sounds. For example, when they want to pronounce the sound of the word “van”, they use the sound of [f] instead. This is because the sound [v] is not found in Thai language. However, when they do so, Thai people encounter problems in certain cases, since the English words “fan” and “van” or “fine” and “vine”, for example, have different meanings.

7. Problems in the Instruction of English Pronunciation of Thai Students

Ronakiet (2013) said that the problems of English pronunciation of Thai students are caused by two main factors, the differences between Thai and English sound systems, and the method of instruction for English pronunciation. In fact, the Thai government is concerned about this problem and very much encourages Thai learners of English to improve their English pronunciation. Even so, Thai learners of English still have problems with pronunciation. There are many factors influencing the method of instruction for English pronunciation in Thailand including the English curricula, the English learners themselves, the English teachers themselves, and the learning environment (classroom and teaching materials). Like other skills of English learning, speaking needs regular practice. However, the English learning curricula at any level of educational institution in Thailand does not encourage or provide adequate speaking practice to Thai students. This is because there are too many students in one class (about 40-60 students) and it is therefore very difficult for each student to have enough individual speaking practice with the teacher. Moreover, the course objectives and evaluation of English for all levels of instruction focus on three main parts; grammar, reading comprehension, and writing, although the English method of instruction policy set by the government encourages Thai students to be competent in all four skills. Thai students, therefore, are not motivated to practice or improve their speaking or pronunciation. They pay more attention to parts of vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension which are the main components of the university entrance exam. English teachers are also considered as one of the essential factors influencing the quality of English instruction in Thailand. At present, it has been found that Thailand lacks English teachers who are competent in teaching English pronunciation. English teachers, especially Thais, need to have good background knowledge about pronunciation. They also need to have a good English pronunciation themselves to be a good model for their students. To have a good pronunciation of English, learners need enough practice with a teacher whose English pronunciation is acceptable. Thai students need to have a chance to speak to a native speaker of English who has enough knowledge in Phonetics and Phonology. The native English teacher needs to be familiar with the system of English pronunciation so that he or she can give good advice to solve pronunciation problems for Thai students. It is not always easy to find native English teachers who have enough background knowledge of English pronunciation. Most Thai English teachers are very good in grammar, reading, and writing. Thai teachers are not motivated or have less chance to improve their speaking skills and pronunciation since the method of

instruction in Thailand does not stress the skills of speaking.

8. “How Important Is It for Learners of English to Have an Accent Like Native Speakers?”

Bimer (1999), an editor of The Linguistic Society of America, mentioned in the article titled, “Why Do Some People Have an Accent” that an accent is the way a person sounds when he or she speaks. In general, there are two different kinds of accents, foreign and native accents. The foreign accent occurs when a person speaks a second language using the rules or sounds of his first language; he may substitute similar sounds occurring in his language when he has trouble pronouncing sounds of the second language. This sounds wrong, or “foreign” to the native speaker of the language. The native accent, on the other hand, is the way a group of people speak their native language, which is determined by where they live and what their social status is.

Smith (1983) mentioned in the article titled, “Readings in English as an International Language” that at present, it has been found that non-native speakers are using English more and more often with other non-native speakers in international situations. English is considered an international language. A Thai, for example, does not need to sound like an American in order to use English well with a Filipino at an A.S.E.A.N. meeting, and a Japanese person does not need an appreciation of a British lifestyle in order to use English in his business with a Malaysian. In fact, English is just the means of expression of the speaker’s culture, but not an imitation of the culture of Great Britain, the United States, or any other native English-speaking country.

Martin (2000), a publishing editor of The American Language Review, mentioned in the article titled, “Language Travel: Who Owns the English Language?” that English is now considered an International Language; therefore, no one owns it. It has its own individual characteristics by the nation and language community that use it. English as an international language belongs to its users but not to the countries whose national language is English. Native speakers like British, American, etc, on the other hand, are considered only partners in the international language. In the United States, Spanish-accented English is now widely accepted. The Spanish-accented English can be accepted at the same level as a Boston, Biloxi, London, or Toronto accent.

Weeks (1996) stated in the article titled, “Embracing English” that English now has more non-native speakers than native ones at the estimate ratio of four to one. Malaysia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya and the Philippines often mention that they have their own forms of English used within their countries called “Malaysian English”, “Nigerian English,” and so on. Peter Streven, a professor at Cambridge University in the UK, predicted that the English language will be taught mostly by non-native speakers to non-native speakers to communicate mainly with non-native speakers. Moreover, CNN International has shown that reporters with foreign accents can be well accepted.

Skapinker (2000) stated in The Financial Times that although Australia or South African English are generally understood by English speakers, thousands of their words are not. It is also found that the population of second-language countries is growing much faster than those of first-language countries; consequently, the English language becomes more international. The second-language speakers often speak several distinctive forms of English. Many Singaporeans, for example, speak Singlish—a mixture of English and Chinese—while many Filipinos speak Taglish—a mixture of English and Tagalog.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, an accent is the way a person sounds when he or she speaks. There are two different kinds of accents, native and foreign. It is now found that non-native speakers are using the English language more and more often with other non-native speakers in international situations. When the English language becomes international, it cannot be bound to any one culture. Instead, it will have its own individual characteristics by the nation or community that uses it. In fact, the English language is simply a means of expression of the speaker's culture, business policy, government position, of political affairs, and so on. Each country using English in everyday life will usually have a slightly different accent. The second-language speakers often speak several forms of English depending on the situation. Furthermore, it is predicted that the English language will mostly be taught by non-native speakers to non-native speakers to communicate mainly with non-native speakers.

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