Intelligibility Redefinition and Students' Confidence in English Speaking in Thai ELT

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Abstract
One of the key aspects of speech is intelligible pronunciation (Derwing and Munro, 2009). As the use of English among non-native English speakers (NNSs) in international communication has grown rapidly, the British Received Pronunciation (RP) and the General American (GA) pronunciation models are doubted by non-native English teachers. The need of changes in pronunciation pedagogy and the definition of intelligibility in English as an International Language (EIL) which focuses on some, but not all of the elements of English pronunciation (Jenkins, 2002) are worth revisited, especially in the Thai context in which the focuses are strictly on the RP or GA principle, and this is defined as intelligible. The research questions examine the possibility of EIL model in English pronunciation pedagogy. The questions do not only seek possible changes, but also the effects on students' confidence in using "imperfect English". The research is designed to measure intelligibility based on EIL. The reason behind the focus of Thai technical students is that they are a group of students who are limitedly exposed to the language in their regular classes; inevitably have to use English speaking skills in their professions after graduation and entering the workforce. The findings show that, under the EIL model, unintelligible students defined by the Native Speaker model (NS) are not all or really unintelligible. The examination of the use of EIL model in pronunciation teaching and the effect of them on students of English should be proved to be useful and practical in ELT development in Thailand. This could be applied at an international level as well

1. The situation of English in Thailand

In today's world, English is undeniably an essential means of communication. Its importance is promoted with the arrival of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by December 31, 2015. The English language will become indispensable for it will be used as the working language in both formal meetings and everyday communication among the ten member nations, according to H.E. Le Luong Minh, Secretary-General of ASEAN. He emphasized furthermore that English would strengthen the sense of ASEAN as a one community. (ASEAN Secretariat News, 2013). It is expected that the AEC will bring its member nations abundant opportunities and challenges. Certainly, Thailand will benefit from the launch of the AEC, yet inevitably face challenges in many ways, and, in this particular case, the English language. Thailand's English proficiency was ranked by Education First (EF) 55th in November 2013 and 48th in November 2014 of the total 63 countries (EF Education first Institute, 2015). Although there is a good change in the number of the ranking, it is still placed in a 'very low proficiency' category.
English is an invaluable assess, especially in terms of business. However, it seems that

low levels of proficiency in English of Thai learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) are one of the major impediments. Many employers would rather want employees with higher levels proficiency in English; however, the ranking reveals that Thai EFL learners do not meet the requirements of ASEAN. Thus, Thailand's future may not be as bright when the launch of AEC approaches. (Barbin and Nicholls, 2012; Nguyen, 2014; Zhang, 2015).

To address the problem, the Thai government initiated a project to boost communicative skills. In the past, English language education in Thailand often devoted attention to improve learners' language proficiency, emphasizing the development of grammar structure. Instead of focusing on English grammar, the project will lay emphasis upon English speaking skills, wishing to reach some 14 million students in 34,000 state schools in Thailand from pre-primary to university. According to Sasithara Pichaichanarong, Ministry of Education permanent secretary, the goal is to reach students all across Thailand by using educational tools on including TV, the radio and internet, and conversations with native speakers. (Hodal, 2014).

At face value, it seems that the project may shed light on English speaking problems among Thai students. Nevertheless, the project does not mention the integration of pronunciation teaching, but of the communicative language learning. The communicative approach, according to Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996 as cited in Levis 2005), mostly ignored pronunciation. Possibly, this will lead to later problems as speaking skills are taught, yet students are hardly provided with opportunities to fully engage in pronunciation learning which is crucial in enhancing their English speaking skills.

At the arrival of the AEC, in communicative events in which there are people from diverse cultural backgrounds communicating, mutual intelligible pronunciation is beyond any doubt required in effective communication. As a result, each and every member nation needs to prepare its workforce to be able to compete in competitive labor markets, and proficiency levels of English language is one of the major qualifications for employers to consider in offering employment. As the government-driven project focuses at boosting speaking skills, it should also include the integration of pronunciation teaching in the project and promote intelligibility. Therefore, the present study's purpose aims at presenting the importance of intelligibility by investigating the problematic areas of unintelligible pronunciation among Thai university students for stakeholders to find workable solutions to these problems.

2. Intelligibility redefinition

Levis (2005) explains that in pronunciation pedagogy, there are two major long-influenced principles: the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle. The nativeness was the dominant paradigm in pronunciation teaching before the 1960's. However, its influence began to decline as research on the critical period hypothesis (CPH) by Penfield and Roberts (1959) and in particular by Lenneberg (1967) show that a certain age (before puberty) restricts the possibility of reaching native-like levels in L2 (Hyltenstam and Abranhamsson, 2000; Levis, 2005) Lenneberg states that

Automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear [after

puberty], and foreign languages have to be taught and learned through a conscious and labored effort. Foreign accents cannot be overcome easily after puberty. However, a person can learn to communicate at the age of forty. This does not trouble our basic hypothesis   […]
(Lennenberg, 1967:176 as cited in Hyltenstam and Abranhamsson, 2000)

Thus, as Levis concludes "[it is] leading to the logical conclusion that aiming for nativeness was an unrealistic burden for both teacher and learner (p.370)". On the other hand, the intelligibility principle requires that leaners need to be comprehensible although their foreign accents are noticeable. The intelligible principle suggests that comprehensibility stems from different language features. Instruction should focus on helpful features and minimize those unhelpful. Additionally, Golombek and Jordan (2005) carried out a study attempting to answer the question of how international speakers of English assert their identities as legitimate teachers of English given privileged position of the native speaker. The participants are two Taiwanese preservice English teachers pursuing their 2-year master's degree in arts in TESOL (MATESOL). The study shows that the two cases are similar in terms of their ambivalence and contradictions in their legitimacy as English teachers. However, Shao-mei and Lydia found creative ways to resist the dominant native-speaker model. Shao-mei would not focus on pronunciation and grammar accuracy. Instead, she would encourage her students to express themselves while Lydia would use L1 to serve as a point of reference and as a means of communication in the classroom. With a growing number of English language users, it is not possible for every user to attain the same English speaking standards. The intelligible principle, then, should be employed to pronunciation pedagogy to help learners to reach a realistic goal in English speaking learning. In the realm of native and nonnative speech communication, especially at the arrival of the AEC, the issue of intelligibility cannot be neglected as it is the key component to indicate whether such speech is comprehensible. Undoubtedly, in English speaking, pronunciation is crucial in helping speaker to attain effective communication, and this fact has been affirmed not only by researchers but also students, teachers and immigrants. The findings show that when pronunciation involves, speakers who fails at a certain level of threshold will encounter communication problems albeit their proficiency in grammar and vocabulary (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996; Rajadurai, 2001; Breitkreutz et al., 2001; Lam and Halliday, 2002; Derwing, 2003 as cited in Rajadurai, 2009). This is when intelligible speech has come into play. Thus, it is indispensable to explore the definitions of intelligibility.

In spite of a number of studies examining intelligibility, defining intelligibility has remained varied. Some of the difficulties the researchers encounter are the distinguishing between intelligibility and comprehensibility. "Smith and Nelson (1985) thus attempt to define the term 'intelligibility' as 'the extent the listener being able to understand their meaning'. Nonetheless, they admitted that intelligibility and comprehensibility are interchangeable terms at certain points. Brown (1989) concludes that intelligibility is a matter of a speaker being understood fully by a particular listener on a particular occasion, as much as of a speaker making himself understood. Munro and Derwing (1995; 1997) explain that intelligibility is 'to the extent to which a listener can decode utterance and measure it by the accuracy rate of a transcription task'. They also found

that intelligibility and comprehensibility are partially correlated but independent constructs. Zielinki (2006) states that 'the intelligibility of a speaker's oral production should be decided by both the listeners' endeavors and the extent the phonological features of the speech deviate from standards of L1 speakers. She defines intelligibility as 'the extent to which the speech signal produced by the speaker can be identified by the listener as the words the speaker intended to produce" (pp. 5-6 as cited in Im, 2007). Im (2007) defines intelligibility as "the extent to which the phonological features of speech are recognizable by a listener in a communicative exchange (p.6)". Hence, intelligibility should be mutually comprehensible between speaker and listener according to these varieties of definitions. However, as mentioned before that intelligibility does not completely equate with comprehensibility. The researchers have put efforts into explaining and distinguishing intelligibility and comprehensibility. Although we concentrate on defining intelligibility, it is hard to explore its definitions without mentioning the differences between intelligibility and comprehensibility, and this will be discussed briefly below.

Intelligibility and comprehensibility are correlated, yet different constructs (Derwing and Munro, 1997) Derwing and Munro (1997) conducted a research study to examine the relationship among intelligibility, perceived comprehensibility and accentedness. In their study, 26 native English speakers were asked to 1) rate and transcribe accented speech from Cantonese, Japanese, Polish and Spanish and 2) identify the first language backgrounds of the speakers to prove their familiarity with the four accents used in the study. The findings suggested that there was a correlation between familiarity and intelligibility scores and that familiarity facilitates comprehension. Field (2003) and Sewell (2010) suggest that an utterance may be intelligible but not comprehensible (see Smith n.d. cited in Nelson 2008: 301); however, it is not possible that comprehensibility will happen without intelligibility in general spoken communication. In Pickering's study (2006), it is found that, in World Englishes (WE), a prevalent conceptualization is of Smith and Nelson's (1985) three parts of definition of intelligibility which is "the ability of the listener to recognize individual words or utterances; comprehensibility, the listener's ability to understand the meaning of the word or utterance in its given context" (p.2). To conclude, Jung (2010) suggests that establishing intelligibility focuses on words while comprehensibility on meaning. There is a belief that accent also plays an important role in interfering intelligibility; however, it is clear from Munro and Derwing's study (1995) that "although a nonnative accent can sometimes interfere with this goal, prior to the publication of this study, second language researchers and teachers alike were aware that an accent itself does not necessarily act as a communicative barrier" (p.1).

Apart from distinguishing intelligibility and comprehensibility and accent interference, there is another problematic area in defining 'intelligibility' which has arisen after the rapid growth of English as an International Language (EIL). In 1988, Kachru (1988:3) mentioned that "the diversity and variation in English are indicators of linguistic decay; restriction of decay is the reasonability of native scholars and of ESL programs". He argued further that "…has resulted in the position that 'deviation' at any level from the native norm is 'an error' (p.119 as cited in Jenkins, 1998). However, the decades of growth in EIL have posed significant challenges in the acquisition of a native-like accent. Thus, the definition of intelligibility may need to be further clarified.

From Kachru's classification of English as a World Language as consisting of three circles (Kachru, 1982, 1988): 1) The Inner Circle includes the traditional English of the USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The varieties of English used here are, in Kachru's term, 'norm providing'. 2) The Outer or Expanding circle refers to the spread of English to the non-native environment, where the language has become officially the second language in the nations which includes Singapore, India, Malawi and more than fifty other territories are also included in this circle. Kachru calls 'norm-developing' for the varieties found in this circle. 3) The Expanding Circle involves the countries where English is taught as a foreign language. It is called 'norm-dependent' varieties (see Figure 1 as cited in White, 1997), it seems that the NS models or 'norm providing' as Kachru puts it are no longer the realistic goals for L2 learners as English is not the property of its native speakers any further. (Widdowson, 1994; Jenkins, 1998; Golombek and Jordan, 2005; Pickering, 2006; Derwing and Munro, 2009).

3. Confidence in English speaking

Gluszek and Donvido (2010) comments that a non-native accent is one of the most crucial thing for people from other nations who came to dwell in an English speaking countries as their identities might stigmatizes them as not being native born (as cited in Derwing & Munro, 2009). It is difficult not to confuse pronunciation with accent as the two intrinsically linked. However, it's important for an interviewer to explain the differences of the two to their interviewees. As Jenkins (1998) asserts that since English in an international language a native-like accent is no longer an objective of the pronunciation norms. The interviews were set up for the unintelligible participants to probe into their confidence when their English is labelled "imperfect" from native speakers' perspective. The findings vary. Roughly, it can be divided into two major groups: one that were concerned about making mistakes and attached to the native-like norms in English speaking while the other one were indifferent. Holistically, the conservation ones were worried that they would not be able to make a conversation with native speakers. However, they reported that it was different with non-native speakers. They felt that the English language levels of the non-native speakers were not different from theirs, so this fact lowered their shyness. Conversely, a confident group showed that they were careless if they made mistakes as they assumed that both native and non-native interlocutors understood that they were not native speakers. Hence, mistakes made were common. Additionally, they found that they could use non-verbal language in case their interlocutor did not understand what they were trying to express verbally. Thus, language barriers did not seem to be a serious problem. In terms of pronunciation, the first group seemed to be confuse between pronunciation and accent, even though was explained. They explain that if their accent and pronunciation (they thought the two were alike) were not good, English speaking people would not understand them. This problem happened to the other group as well.

Conclusion and suggestions

In conclusion, it seems that although intelligibility has been redefitioned by

many scholars, the nativeness of pronunciation has still been drilled in many nations in both the Outer and the Expanding Circles with a belief that speaking like native speakers is a privilege while in fact, it is not always true. As the world has changed rapidly, we could not stick to the old school of thought, especially in the lingua franca, in this case, English. English is more than a communication tool; it also carries a history that is no longer adaptable in today's world. The world we dwell in combines diversity and cultural differences; it would be easier to reach an attainable goal by just adjusting an attitude. To make in sustainable, the educational part should be relentless driven by awareness of environmental changes. The EIL model can be gradually add to the English speaking classroom beginning with pronunciation to encourage students to have confidence to speak their "own" English and still "intelligible". Intelligibility redefition and boosting confidence in students outside the Inner space are two of the missions of the educational sustainability to work hard on.

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