

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the Study

Pronunciation is definitely the biggest thing that is easily noticeable, particularly when someone is speaking a foreign language. If the pronunciation is poor, native speakers will immediately think about the speaker as the one who speaks bad English. To the listener, pronunciation reflects who the speaker is. The pronunciation creates the first impression the speaker makes. (Why you should study English pronunciation, 2007. Online).

From the previous literature, e.g. Task-Based Pronunciation Teaching: A State-of-the-art Perspective, it would seem that pronunciation teachers in many Asian contexts have been using what some would epitomize as a conventional methodology for teaching English pronunciation rooted in drilling and automatic exercises. The outcome of this reveals that many learners retain some critical deviant phonological forms which prove highly harmful to successful communication in English.

A complication of this type may entail a need to effect a change in the methodology used whereby tasks function as a central focus in a supportive and natural environment for language study. Under this new approach which combines meaning-with form-focused tasks, learners are expected to develop their communication skills and, in so doing, modify those deviant phonological forms with the intention of preserving phonological intelligibility.

During the last ten years, there has been a steady growth in the attention to the importance of pronunciation teaching, as the general goals of teaching have primed the effective use of the spoken language to establish successful communication. This fact, however, has brought about an emergent debate about the models, goals and, particularly, the methodology used for pronunciation skill teaching. For this reason, such changes and the uncertainty of debate are puzzling, so a study to resolve some aspects

of the debate is a valuable contribution to the English language teaching profession (Luchini, 2005).

In the more distant past, conventional approaches to teaching pronunciation emphasized the study of phonemes and their meaningful contrasts, along with some structurally based interest in stress, rhythm, and intonation. From the pedagogic perspective, instruction mainly consisted in articulatory descriptions, imitation, and memorization of patterns through drills and set scripts, with overall attention to correction, all this, in the hope that learners would eventually pronounce the English sounds like an English native speaker. This concern for perfect pronunciation, derived from native models, aimed at enabling learners to come as close as possible to the native-like performance of a single prestige accent - Received Pronunciation (RP) (Luchini, 2005).

Later, under the notional – functional approach, nevertheless, came the need to get learners to use the language freely for communicative purposes. Along these lines, drillings and other types of mechanical exercises were considered outdated whereby the focus was placed mostly on meaning and not on form. In this context, pronunciation teaching was downgraded pedagogically as a result of difficulties in aligning it with and incorporating it into more communicative approaches to language teaching since work on phonology, it was believed, could impede communicative practice and thus threaten learners' self-confidence (Jenner, 1996).

Nonetheless, in recent years, and with the renewed professional support to enable students to become effective and efficient speakers of English, there has been an incessant progress to bring pronunciation back on stage since, as many prominent theorists and researchers point out, it is a vital element of communicative competence and, as such, it should be given preferential treatment (see, for example, Morley, 1991; Taylor, 1991; among others). At present, and possibly as a result of this new trend, many more people are again keen on pronunciation, but the truth is, as was said above, that we are not completely convinced of which models, goals and methodology are more helpful for students and teachers alike.

In accordance with the different approaches to teaching pronunciation, the bottom-up approach begins with the articulation of individual sounds and works up towards intonation, stress and rhythm. On the other hand, the top-down approach begins with patterns of intonation and brings separate sounds into sharper focus as and when required. In the bottom-up approach, the central idea is that if you teach the segmentals first, the suprasegmental features will be subsequently acquired without the need of formal instruction. In the top-down approach, however, the assumption is that once the prosodic features are in place, the necessary segmental discriminations will follow accordingly (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994).

This study involves the use of consonant segmental to resolve mispronunciation of English consonant sounds that are problematic to younger learners. Therefore, minimal pair technique will be used by concentrating at the beginners level (Grade 2). As seen, although some teachers might find communicative approaches appropriate for teaching in Thailand, they are still in debate in its efficiency.

English learning has been largely promoted to students at Phichit Inter School in the communicative ways. They are likely to speak in English with their teachers, but it is found that the way they speak or pronounce English consonant sounds seems strange and even sometimes leads to other misunderstanding since they substitute English consonants with Thai consonants that are not compatible with the English ones. The researchers, therefore, want to improve their pronunciation so they will be trained and received better perception of how to pronounce these sounds more correctly from beginner level.

State of the Problem

Almost all English learners say "I don't need to study pronunciation. I just want to communicate in English". Many of them think that they can communicate in English because they can communicate with their teacher and other students. The important notions that learners should remember in order to avoid mistakes are:

1. Teachers have been listening to bad English for years. They can understand it

much more easily than the average person.

2. Other students are usually from the same country as the speakers. Therefore, they speak English like in the same way and make the same mistakes. So it is easy for them to understand each other.

The role of pronunciation in different schools of language teaching has varied widely from having virtually no role in the grammar-translation method to being the main focus in the audio-lingual method where emphasis is on the traditional notions of pronunciation, minimal pairs, drills and short conversations. (Castillo, 1990. p. 3) Situational language teaching, developed in Britain, also mirrored the audio-lingual view of the pronunciation class (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Morley (1991. p. 484) states, 'The pronunciation class was one that gave primary attention to phonemes and their meaningful contrasts, environmental allophonic variations, and combinatory phonotactic rules, along with attention to stress, rhythm, and intonation.' During the late 1960's and the 1970's questions were asked about the role of pronunciation in the ESL/EFL curriculum, whether or not the focus of the programs and the instructional methods were effective. Pronunciation programs until then were viewed as meaningless noncommunicative drill and exercise gambits (Morley, 1991. p. 485-6). In many language programs the teaching of pronunciation was pushed aside, as many studies concluded 'that little relationship exists between teaching pronunciation in the classroom and attained proficiency in pronunciation; the strongest factors found to affect pronunciation (i.e. native language and motivation) seem to have little to do with classroom activities (Suter, 1976. p. 233-53; Purcell & Suter, 1980. p. 271-87).

Those of us who teach English as a second language might be tempted to avoid teaching pronunciation since the Critical Period Hypothesis suggests that learners will not be able to achieve native – like fluency. This is reinforced by the current language learning methodology, namely Communicative Language Teaching, failing to know what to do with the teaching of pronunciation (Krashen & Terrell, 1983. p. 89-91; Terrell, 1989. p. 197). What, then, is to be gained by pursuing pronunciation instruction in our classes? The answer is varies drastically spoken English.

While EFL learners may never be able to pass as native speakers, improving pronunciation can build their confidence and motivation. There is a tendency for us to focus on production as the main problem affecting our learners. Most research shows clearly that the problem is more likely to be receptive –you can not say correctly what you do not hear. Moreover, if the “English” sound is not clearly received, the brain of the learner converts it into the closest sound in their own language. Thus, the dental English fricative /θ/ in “those”, becomes converted by Spanish speakers into the dentalised Spanish /d/, producing “dose” as this is what the speaker hears. Given this is reality, it would seem logical to place a heavy emphasis on listening (receptive) as a way into releasing appropriate pronunciation (productive).

Whereas some other teachers might find the communicative approach useful and effective in the modern trends but it is such difficult to teach Thai students to learn the language in that way since there are some limitations in acquiring it, and also it has brought some another problems; for example, those students do not know how to speak correctly and at the same time they could bring misconception which led to miscommunication among foreigners. Moreover, there are no segmental sounds in Thai like English, so Thai learners can not pronounce the segmental sounds correctly. Since there was not much research about pronunciation in English, the researchers found it is important to our students to provide this minimal pairs technique for improving their perception and reception abilities.

Purpose of the Study

The current study was designed to improve pronunciation of English consonant sounds that are problematic to Grade 2 students of Phichit Inter School by using minimal pairs. The instruments used were eight sets of minimal pairs and a test. The findings would be used to lead and guide English teachers to plan and develop minimal pairs treatment programs that aim to introduce contrasts in a child's phonological system.

Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent has the use of minimal pairs compared to the traditional technique effected on learners abilities to pronounce English consonant sounds correctly?
2. Which English consonants are more problematic to pronounce than others?

Significance of the Study

This research intended to study the importance and the need of minimal pairs in teaching pronunciation in EFL classrooms in primary schools in Phichit Inter School. The results of this study can provide input for English teachers to design teaching approaches to improve pronunciation of English consonant sounds that are problematic, and provide techniques for teaching pronunciation to beginners, particularly young learners.

Limitation of the Study

This study was limited to study the productive ability of two groups (control group and experimental group) of 40 Grade 2 students at Phichit Inter School who had studied the English course for Grade 2 in the second semester of the academic year 2006. The students' proficiency are selected from their English grade from previous English course in the first semester of academic year 2006, so this study is not aimed to show the improvement in pronunciation of the students.

The variables in the study are:

1. The independent variable is the technique for teaching pronunciation.
2. The dependent variable is the learners' development in receptive and productive ability.

Definitions of Terms

To clarify particular terms that were used in this study, the following definitions are provided:

1. Minimal pair is a pair of words which differ in lexical meaning based on a difference in one sound. Some examples are the pairs 'three' and 'tree', for the distinctive sounds /θ/ and /t/; 'right' and 'light' for /r/ and /l/; 'van' and 'fan' for /v/ and /f/; sip and zip for /s/ and /z/; 'chop' and 'shop' for /tʃ/ and /ʃ/; 'day' and 'they' for /d/ and /ð/; sick and 'thick' for /s/ and /θ/; 'tank' and 'thank' for /t/ and /θ/.
2. Receptive ability includes reading and listening skill.
3. Productive ability includes writing and speaking skill.
4. Analytic-linguistic approach is the way that recognizes the importance of an explicit description of pronunciation in language acquisition.
5. Traditional technique is the way of teaching that teacher follows the manual of the core course namely 'Target Student Course' (Holt, R. 2005. Thaiwattanapanich, Bangkok) which does not have minimal pairs technique.