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The Effects of Explicit English Pronunciation Instruction on Listening Comprehension among Thai EFL Students Majoring in Airline Business

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Abstract:

Many different ways have been applied and different techniques and strategies have been used to develop listening comprehension of Thai EFL students. Over the past decade, there has been some research evidence that explicit pronunciation instruction could be beneficial in improving learners' listening abilities. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the effect, if any, of explicit pronunciation instruction on listening comprehension skills of tertiary level English as a foreign language (EFL) students. The participants of the study were 138 fourth year students who were majoring in airline business and had enrolled for the TOEIC Preparation course at a private university in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants were randomly put into two groups, an experimental group and a control group. The TOEIC Listening Test was used in the study to achieve homogeneity between the two groups and as a pre-test. In the control group, the students received a normal routine instruction as they always did while in the experimental group, in each session for one and a half hour, the teacher focused on the pronunciation practice of all the vowel and consonant sounds of the language, as well as stress, rhythm, intonation, linking, and other features of connected speech. After 10 weeks of treatment, which was 15 hours of input, the students in both groups were tested again by another version of the TOEIC Listening Test. According to the findings, the development that the experimental group has performed is significantly higher than the control group. Thus, the results suggest that explicit pronunciation instruction has an effect on the listening comprehension skills of Thai EFL students.

Keywords: *Explicit pronunciation instruction, listening comprehension, EFL students*

1. Background/ Objectives and Goals

Due to the significance of English language proficiency in airline industry, airline business students need to be equipped with sound knowledge of English. One of the most reliable measures of English proficiency used in airline industry is the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Many positions require varying TOEIC test scores. For example, a position as an airport information clerk requires a TOEIC score of 400 or more; a position as a customs agent or a customer service representative requires a TOEIC score of 550 or more; a position as a flight attendant requires a TOEIC score of 600 to 650; while the position of logistics coordinator requires a score as high as 800 or more (Puengpipattrakul, Chiramanee, & Sripetpun, 2007).

However, the English proficiency level of Thai students is still far from satisfactory even though they have studied the basic elements of English from kindergarten to university levels. Especially, their listening and speaking are still generally weak. Many non-native speakers have studied English for many years but they are unable to speak like or at least near to native speakers. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is inability in pronouncing the sounds of words properly which consequently can affect on listening comprehension. In the study of Cabrera and Bazo (2002), they stated that listening is the language skill which learners usually find the most difficult. This often is because they feel under unnecessary pressure to understand every word. Similarly, Arvariti (2009) asked the learners of English about the most difficult English language skill and most of them replied listening comprehension. There is evidence that this assumption is true in the study of Echelberger (2013). The reasons why listening is a difficult skill to acquire may be related to different features of spoken language like the use of intonation, tone of voice, rhythm, etc (e.g. Wei, 2004; Gilbert, 1995; Arvariti, 2009).

Listening comprehension is a difficult skill to develop for learners of English. According to Boonyakarn (1990), listening is a difficult skill for Thai EFL students due to scarcity of opportunity for language experience with the target language. Many Thai university students face problems in sound discrimination when listening to native spoken English because of unfamiliarity with the English sound system and the inability to differentiate English pronunciation from Thai. Similarly, in the study of Cubalit (2016), students are having difficulty mostly in understanding native speakers speaking at a normal speed as students considered it too fast to listen to, unfamiliar vocabularies, and followed by difficult grammar structure. Students are also having difficulty in understanding accents of different speakers, and difficulty in getting a general understanding from the first listening among others. Moreover, the opportunity to practice English listening skills is lacking. Students feel hard to improve their listening ability when studying English because the English language environment is limited.

Many different ways have been applied and different techniques and strategies have been used to develop listening

comprehension of Thai EFL students. Over the past decade, there has been some research evidence that explicit pronunciation instruction could be beneficial in improving learners' listening abilities (e.g., Ak 2012; Khaghaninejad & Maleki, 2015; Kissling, 2015, Mihara, 2015; Souza, 2017). Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the effect, if any, of explicit pronunciation instruction on listening comprehension skills of tertiary level English as a foreign language (EFL) students. In addition, one of the main purposes behind this study is to expand on the empirical evidence that can provide support for methodology in enhancing listening competence for Thai EFL students, thus, helping them improve scores on standardized tests.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Relationship between Pronunciation Instruction and Listening Comprehension*

For years, researchers have been interested in the relationship between pronunciation instruction and listening comprehension. Some investigations have found that the difficulty in listening comprehension might be derived from pronunciation, and raising language learners' pronunciation awareness might help to develop their listening.

Brown (1977) revealed that English language learners going to study in Britain had problems understanding the professors' lectures resulting from the incompetency in pronunciation and failure to convert meaning. It was difficult for the learners to understand how the language was normally spoken, and the best way to overcome this problem was to familiarize the learners with the language spoken in a normal environment; that was by teaching pronunciation.

According to Rixon (1986), the problem areas derived from pronunciation in listening comprehension were listed as follows: (1) the difference between English sounds and spelling, (2) the sound changes in connected speech, (3) rhythm of English, and (4) different pronunciation patterns of the same sounds. She suggested that training in these problem areas can promote development of listening comprehension. A similar list of problem areas in listening comprehension was also presented by Field (2003): a) learners may not recognize a phonetic variation of a known word, b) learners may know the word in reading but not in spoken vocabulary, and c) learners may not segment the word out of connected speech. To solve these problems, he suggested that awareness raising activities and focused practice be employed.

Gilbert (1995) stated that learners failed to grasp grammatical and discourse signals because they did not receive training regarding the reduction or intonation patterns of English language speech. According to Morley (1991), listening tasks based on speech-pronunciation could foster listening comprehension by developing learners' discrimination skills. Similarly, in their book showing new ways of teaching listening, Nunan and Miller (1995) indicated that pronunciation could develop listening. They have suggested several pronunciation activities in order to improve listening skills.

2.2. *Related Research Studies*

Recent studies have shown that pronunciation training has an effect on not only perception of specific phonemes but general listening comprehension. Ghorbani (2011) examined if phonetic instruction would enhance Iranian students' listening ability. The pretest-posttest design was employed to study two classes of third grade high school students as control and experimental groups. Both groups were exposed to the same listening activities; however, only the experimental group received the treatment regarding the phonetic symbols and phonemic transcription. The results indicated that the experimental group who received phonetic instruction had a better performance than the control group who did not receive it. The findings suggested that phonetic instruction and learners' phonemic transcription could facilitate the process of listening enhancement.

Ak (2012) investigated the effects of pronunciation awareness training on listening comprehension skills of tertiary level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. 68 upper intermediate level students studying at Gazi University were divided into two experimental and four control groups. At the beginning of the study, all groups were administered a pre training test to determine their level of listening comprehension. After the pre-test, the experimental groups received the explicit pronunciation training, while the control groups continued their regular classes. At the end of the 6-week period, all groups were given a post training test to see if they have improved their listening comprehension skills. The findings revealed that the experimental group has performed a significantly higher development implying that the pronunciation awareness training has been more effective in developing listening comprehension skills than their regular English classes. This finding confirms the previous studies suggesting the relationship between pronunciation and listening comprehension.

Habibi, Jahandar, and Khodabandehlou (2013) explored the impact of teaching phonetic symbols on Iranian EFL learner's listening comprehension. 50 EFL learners were assigned into experimental and control groups. After the pre-test, the participants in the experimental group received phonetic instruction for twelve successive sessions in different listening passages, but the control group didn't receive any treatment during 12 sessions. The result indicated that teaching phonetics increased learner's ability, and the experimental group progressed more than control group from pre-test to the post test by treatment.

Khaghaninejad (2015) examined the effect of two methods of instructing English words' pronunciations on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. Pre-test and post-test were employed to analyze the possible improvements of three classes of intermediate English learners (two experimental and one control group). All groups were exposed to the same listening test as the pre and the post-test; however, only the experimental groups received the special treatment regarding the phonetic symbols and phonemic transcription, segmental features (group A) and supra-segmental features (group B). The result indicated that the experimental groups who received explicit pronunciation instruction had a better performance than the control group on the final listening test. In addition, the findings suggested that the experimental group which received segmental pronunciation instruction had a better performance than the experimental group which received supra-segmental pronunciation instruction. In general, the findings imply that pronunciation instruction can positively affect the listening comprehension ability of intermediate EFL learners.

Ahangari, Rahbar, and Maleki (2015) investigated whether pronunciation accuracy practice can improve the listening comprehension of EFL learners. 42 participants were selected out of 200 students based on their result in an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) exam. The participants were randomly put into two groups, 20 of them were assigned to an experimental group and 22 were assigned to a control group. Both groups took a pre-test exam. During 20 minutes in each treatment session, the teacher provided the experimental group with awareness about the correct form of pronunciation and then had them practice as listening and repeating from a model. By the end of 30 hours of input, both groups were tested again by a listening post test. The results proved that treatment has been successful and pronunciation practice did lead to improvement of listening comprehension ability. The group receiving pronunciation practice has achieved higher listening comprehension ability than the one without treatment.

There have been growing proofs in literature demonstrating that explicit pronunciation training has certain positive effects on listening comprehension. Therefore, the current study aimed to examine the effect, if any, of explicit pronunciation instruction on listening comprehension skills of Thai EFL students majoring in airline business.

To be more specific, the current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- Is there a difference between the pre and post-test results of the experimental group after explicit pronunciation instruction?
- Is there a difference between the pre and post-test results of the control group after regular TOEIC Preparation classes?
- Is there a difference between the experimental group and the control group in terms of their development in listening comprehension at the end of the 10-week period?

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 138 fourth year students who were majoring in airline business and had enrolled for the TOEIC Preparation course at a private university in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants were selected out of a pool of 229 based on their result in TOEIC Listening Test, less than 250. Therefore, the participants' proficiency level of English was at beginner to elementary level of English. The participants were randomly put into two groups, an experimental group and a control group. Their ages ranged between 21 to 23 years. The beginning level students were useful in this study because the goal of the study was to improve the students' listening comprehension.

3.2. Instruments

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is an English language test designed specifically to measure the everyday English skills of people working in an international environment.

The TOEIC Listening & Reading Test is a two-hour multiple-choice test consisting of 200 questions evenly divided into listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Each candidate receives independent scores for listening and reading comprehension on a scale from 5 to 495 points. The total score adds up to a scale from 10 to 990 points.

The TOEIC Listening Test was used in the study to achieve homogeneity between the two groups and as a pre-test. After the treatment, again another version of the TOEIC Listening Test was administered in order to check the effectiveness of explicit pronunciation instruction in improving the students' listening comprehension.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

The pre-test and post-test were employed for the study's accomplishment. There were two groups: the experimental and the control groups.

As this course was a TOEIC Preparation course in an institute in which teachers had been trained to use the same method and the same procedures in all classes, in both classes all methods were the same with the exception of focus on pronunciation practice in the experimental group. In the control group the students received a normal routine instruction as they always did. When it came to listening activities, teacher followed the procedures in the book. On the other hand, in the experimental group, in each session for one and a half hour, the teacher focused on the pronunciation practice of all the vowel and consonant sounds of the language, as well as stress, rhythm, intonation, linking, and other features of connected speech. After 10 weeks of treatment, which was 15 hours of input, the students in both groups were tested again by another version of the TOEIC Listening Test.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data Analysis was done quantitatively via Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). In order to answer the research questions, both the pre and the post-tests of the experimental and the control groups were scored and all test results were entered into SPSS to analyze the data, and Paired Samples T-Test was used to examine if there was a statistically significant difference between the pre and post-test results of the groups. In addition, an Independent Samples T-Test was administered to see if there is a statistically significant difference between two groups in terms of their development in listening comprehension.

4. Results and Discussion

The results were presented in accordance with the research questions of the study.

4.1. Research Question 1

Is there a difference between the pre and post-test results of the experimental group after explicit pronunciation instruction? In order to examine the difference between the experimental group's pre and post-test results, Paired Samples T Test analysis was run on SPSS.

Scores			T-Test		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	P
Pre-test	128.62	21.090	-6.001	68	.000*
Post-test	155.36	34.845			

Table 1: The Mean Difference between Pre and Post-Test of the Experimental Group

*P< .01 Level

As shown in Table 1, there was a statistically significant increase in the experimental group after the pronunciation instruction. According to Paired Samples T Test results, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-test (\bar{x} =128.62, SD = 21.09) and the post-test results (\bar{x} = 155.36, SD = 34.85) of the experimental group at p< .01 level (\bar{x} difference = -26.74, p< .01). From these results, it can be concluded that the explicit pronunciation instruction was effective in improving the experimental group's listening comprehension skills.

4.2. Research Question 2

Is there a difference between the pre and post-test results of the control group after regular TOEIC Preparation classes? In order to examine the difference between the control group's pre and post-test results, Paired Samples T Test analysis was conducted. Table 2 shows the Paired Samples T Test result for the mean difference in pre and post-test results for this group.

Scores			T-Test		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	P
Pre-test	173.26	22.797	-1.073	68	.287
Post-test	178.48	36.985			

Table 2: The Mean Difference between Pre and Post-Test of the Control Group

According to Paired Samples T Test results, the difference between the pre-test ($\bar{x} = 16.33$, $SD = 3.90$) and post-test results ($\bar{x} = 17.78$, $SD = 3.88$) of the control group is not statistically significant. As these results suggest, since the control group did not receive any particular training, but continued with their regular English classes, this group showed some development in their listening comprehension skills, but not statistically significant.

4.3. Research Question 3

Is there a difference between the experimental group and the control group in terms of their development in listening comprehension at the end of the 10-week period?

A further Independent Samples T Test analysis was conducted to examine if the developments of both groups (\bar{x} experimental = 3.32, \bar{x} control = .46) are significantly different from each other. Table 3 shows the mean difference of both groups.

Development			T-Test		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	P
Experimental	155.36	34.845	-3.779	136	.000*
Control	178.48	36.985			

Table 3: The Difference in the Developments of the Experimental and Control Groups

* $P < .01$ Level

According to the Independent Samples T Test results, the development of the experimental group is higher than that of the control group suggesting that the treatment made a statistically significant difference in the increase of experimental group against the control group ($t(136) = 3.78$, $p < .01$). This analysis confirmed that there was a significant effect of explicit pronunciation instruction on listening comprehension. Therefore, it can be concluded that the findings indicating that explicit pronunciation instruction has an effect on developing listening comprehension skills more than the regular English classes are accurate.

5. Conclusion

According to the statistical tests, there is a statistically significant increase in the experimental group after a 10-week of explicit pronunciation instruction. According to the findings, the development that the experimental group has performed is significantly higher than the control group. Thus, the results suggest that explicit pronunciation instruction has an effect on the listening comprehension skills of Thai EFL students. This study confirms the previous literature on listening and pronunciation which suggests that the integration of pronunciation training into the teaching of listening is more effective in developing listening comprehension skills than merely employing traditional methods. To develop listening skills, adapting listening strategies, utilizing technology and opportunities for authentic input are strongly recommended. In addition, integrating different language skills are encouraged in order to promote unity and meaningful instruction. Particularly, making learners familiar with the pronunciation of the target language by showing how real speech in an authentic environment occurs is what the literature suggests (e.g., Ak 2012; Khaghaninejad & Maleki, 2015; Kissling, 2015; Mihara, 2015; Souza, 2017). This study proved this suggestion by indicating that explicit pronunciation instruction supports the development of listening skills more than regular classes.

6. Suggestions for Further Research

Since the pre-test means were slightly different for the experimental and the control groups, their levels of English were not exactly at the same level at the beginning of the study (see Table 1 and Table 2), the findings might not have been interpreted correctly. In addition, the present study was conducted with only beginner to elementary level participants; thus, a wider scope of samples can be employed and different proficiency levels might be examined for further studies.

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