

“Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”: The Influence of Thai Word Stress on English Pronunciation

“Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”: อิทธิพลของการลงเสียงหนักเบาในคำไทย ที่มีผลต่อการออกเสียงในภาษาอังกฤษ

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Abstract

Stress, as a part of pronunciation, plays a vital role in terms of the overall effectiveness of communication that reflects intelligibility and comprehension. This paper examines the influence of Thai word stress on English pronunciation among Thai EFL learners (subjects), and the results are reported through a reading experiment. The couplet “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” by British poet and novelist Jane Taylor, which is unfamiliar to the subjects of this experiment, is chosen and used as a reading material. The experiment shows how the subjects assign stresses to English words in the material, and how Thai word stress influences English pronunciation while the subjects are applying transfer strategy from their native language to assign stresses. According to a contrastive study of English and Thai stress, this experiment shows the reasons for the way the subjects apply stress in English words.

Keywords: Thai word stress, English stress, pronunciation, teaching English as a foreign language

บทคัดย่อ

การลงเสียงหนักเบาเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการออกเสียงที่มีบทบาทสำคัญต่อการสื่อสารให้มีประสิทธิภาพ และสะท้อน ถึงความชัดเจนและความสามารถในการเข้าใจระหว่างการสื่อสาร งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ศึกษาอิทธิพลของการลงเสียงหนักเบา ในคำไทยต่อการออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษในกลุ่มผู้เรียนชาวไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ และรายงาน ผลงานวิจัยผ่านการทดสอบการอ่าน โดยเลือกโครงบทละสองบรรทัดภาษาอังกฤษ “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” แต่งโดย

เจน เทย์เลอร์ ซึ่งเป็นกวีและนักวรรณกรรมชาวอังกฤษ ทั้งนี้ กลุ่มตัวอย่างในงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ไม่คุ้นเคยกับ กลอนบทนี้มาก่อน การทดสอบการอ่านนี้ศึกษาวิธีการลงเสียงหนักเบาในภาษาอังกฤษของกลุ่มตัวอย่างระหว่างที่อ่าน บทกลอนชิ้นนี้ และการลงเสียงหนักเบาในคำไทยมีผลต่อการออกเสียงในภาษาอังกฤษอย่างไร ในขณะที่กลุ่มตัวอย่าง ใช้กลยุทธ์การถ่ายโอนความรู้จากภาษาแม่ของตัวเองเพื่อกำหนดเสียงหนักเบาในภาษาอังกฤษ และจากการศึกษา เปรียบเทียบภาษาอังกฤษและภาษาไทย การทดลองนี้เผยให้เห็นวิธีการที่กลุ่มตัวอย่างใช้ในการกำหนดลงเสียงหนัก เบาในภาษาอังกฤษอีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ : การลงเสียงหนักเบาในคำไทย, การลงเสียงหนักเบาในภาษาอังกฤษ, การออกเสียง, การสอนภาษาอังกฤษ เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

Introduction

Since the integration of the ASEAN Economic Community was ratified in December 2015, the world has become smaller and more accessible for many citizens in the ten ASEAN countries. With a concrete plan to connect ASEAN countries together through modern transportation, people will be able to trade and exchange knowledge to one another; citizens from one country can move to and work in other country members under the free flow of workforce initiative. In this connection, English as a working language for ASEAN people becomes vital as a communication tool to drive trade and economic growth.

One of the most important skills when using English for communication is speaking. How well a speaker can perform this skill reflects their intelligibility and comprehensibility. Moreover, speaking easily conveys messages to hearers or interlocutors through their use of tone, body language, and pronunciation, yet a lot of Thais have problems regarding the speaking skill of English language. Unclear and incorrect word usage along with mispronunciation of single sounds cause ineffective communication as well as misunderstanding. If these problems don't receive much attention, it is likely that these mistakes will become accepted and Thais will continue to misuse the language. Then the problems will be very hard to be solved.

According to the latest English proficiency index in 2016 by Education First (EF), English language proficiency in Thailand is very low, ranked 56 out of 72

nations. In Southeast Asia alone, Thailand is grouped among the three worst countries in Asia on Education First’s annual English Proficiency Index.

Although Thailand has the largest tourism industry, the country’s English proficiency remains low. EF, an international education company specializing in language training, educational travel, academic-degree programs and cultural exchanges, noted that Thailand’s school system performs poorly on international evaluation in many subject areas.

English education in Thailand focuses on a communication-based approach, regardless the use of standardized grammar and pronunciation. This results in poor performance when communicating in English with foreigners. Stress is one of the vital suprasegmental features in the English sound system that optimizes the effectiveness of communication. However, stress is often a problem for Thai EFL learners.

Objectives of the Study

This research aims at investigating the influence of Thai word stress on English pronunciation among Thai learners. An objective of the study is also to see how the Thai learners of English are speaking (pronunciation) English, especially how the learners are articulating certain words. This research then aims to advise as to how to pronounce these certain English words correctly for Thai learners.

Research Questions

1. How do Thai learners assign stresses in English words?
2. How does the Thai word stress influence English pronunciation?

Scope of the Study

This research was conducted through a poem-reading experiment with Thai university students (three males and 32 females), who have been learning English as a foreign language for at least six years. These subjects had no prior information regarding this research. The poem “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” by British poet and novelist Jane Taylor is selected as the reading inventory. Only content words are

selected and analyzed as to the influence of Thai word stress has on English pronunciation.

Literature Review

1. Language Transfer

ESL and EFL learners in general experience the challenging task of English acquisition with the knowledge of their mother tongue, adding that prior knowledge and experience of one or more languages often affects the way in which ESL and EFL learners understand a new language. Studies regarding transfer and interference have focused on the influence of L1 on their L2 language performance (Odlin, 2003; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Arbona and Chireac, 2014). This is to say that transfer consists of a specific directionality as structures are often transferred from L1 into L2.

The transfer in all aspects of language covers phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Ellis (1994), however, suggested that the transfer at the level of phonology is more important than those of other linguistic levels. He further stated that foreign accents of L2 learners exist, and native speakers have no difficulties to detect it, adding that the language background of different learners can easily be distinguished by native speakers. Traces of foreign accent remains in their pronunciation no matter how successful L2 learners are in acquiring L2 phonology (Kirkova-naskova, 2010). He further elaborated that foreign-accentedness is widely understood that it is a result from various factors, including the particular characteristics of learners' native and non-native sound systems, exposure to different language experience, aptitude and needs as well as the social environment in which language learning takes place (Piske, MacKay & Felge, 2001; Hansen 2006). Odlin (2000) suggested the influence of L1 is particularly important in segmental phonology in which pronunciation errors in part of phonemic, phonetic, allophonic and distribution are explained as transfer errors as a result of the overlapping of the phonemic inventories of L1 and L2. He further suggests that such influence is also noticeable at suprasegmental level in which the stress, syllable structure, intonation and rhythm of L1 and L2 interact. Recent theoretical models are shown the influence of L1 on L2, and all models in general agree that learners tend to map L2

sounds onto L1 sound categories. In this connection, the models predict possible learning scenarios depending on the similarity or dissimilarity of native and non-native pronunciation (Major, 2001; Escudero, 2005).

Thai and English are grouped into two different language families. Both languages have differences in their phonological systems. Thai has more vowel sounds compared to English; there are 32 vowel sounds in the Thai language while the English language has 20 vowel sounds; many English phonemes do not exist in Thai; the suprasegmental features of both languages are different (Ariyapitipun, 2004). Research shows that learning English by Thai learners is often interfered with by their mother tongue, particularly at a phonological level. Thus, it is important to highlight this to Thai teachers of English to realize the impact that Thai language has on English pronunciation learning and teaching.

To identify the difficulties of English pronunciation that is influenced by Thai phonological transfer, Thai teachers of English must be more aware of the similarities and differences between English and Thai sound systems. The sound system of English comprises two parts: segmental features and suprasegmental features. Segmental features consist of individual vowels and consonants; suprasegmental features include stress, intonation and rhythm (Ariyapitipun, 2004). At the same time, Meyer (2009) suggests suprasegmental study extends its focus to units that are larger than individual segments including syllables, words phrases, and clauses as well as to the features of sound that explains these units, especially stress and intonation. Although it is difficult to say which feature is more important than another, Carrol (2000) suggests that false suprasegmental features may significantly affect intelligibility and comprehensibility, comparing to the errors of segmental features.

Since phonology plays a vital role in communication, this paper focuses on the Thai stress pattern as a source of interference in English pronunciation, which is based on the theory of linguistic transfer.

The role of linguistic transfer (Arbona & Chireac, 2014), the imposition of priority acquired patterns onto a new learning language, has a facilitation or inhabitation effect on the development in mastering a new language (either L2 or L3 of the learners). When adopting the transfer, interpretations and definitions of terms

will be different depending largely on the background knowledge of the hearers. Odlin (2003) suggests that the influence of transfer is the result of the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that the learners previously acquired. Where units of both or more languages are identical or similar, learning easily takes place through positive transfer of the native language pattern. In contrary, the differences in the language system can cause learning difficulties, which results in errors from negative transfer (Ellis, 1994). For instance, the consonant sounds /v/, /θ/ and /ð/ don't exist in the Thai language system; therefore, Thai learners replace these sounds with /w/, /s or t (unaspirated)/, and /d/ respectively, which in turn creates errors and causes incomprehensibility and misunderstanding when communicating in English with foreigners.

2. Contrastive Study of English and Thai

When analyzing the influence of Thai word stress on English pronunciation, a contrastive analysis, especially on the stress of English and Thai, should be applied. In many languages, speakers produce vowels with different prominence. Any vowel that receives more prominence than others is to be considered as stressed. Stress refers the greater prominence that a vowel or syllable exhibits with in a word or sentence, in the least two degrees --- strong/weak (Teschner & Whitley, 2004). Fry (1958) said that stress takes place due to the interaction of pitch, intensity, and duration; therefore, a stressed syllable is normally louder and longer than an unstressed one, which helps prevent monotony.

3. Stress

Stress is normally identified into two types --- word stress and sentence stress. However, only word stress is the focus of this research.

As for English word stress, Clark & Yallup (2000) stated that one or more of the syllables in a word that receives the greater prominence than others is stressed. The syllable with the highest stress is the primary stress while the other stressed ones are assigned as secondary stress. As Cruttenden (2001) put it, the primary stress falls on words that are the most important for meaning. In this connection, primary stress will be the focus of this research.

Although there are no certain rules to guide how words are stressed, some general principles have been established, which learners can use and observe to

facilitate themselves when pronouncing English words (Yavas, 2011). In these principles, all monosyllabic words must be stressed while the pronunciation of multisyllabic words varies. For instance, the great majority of English words or at least three out of four of two-syllable words are stressed on the first syllable such as *n'ever*, *br'eakfast*, and *s'andwich* (Ariyapitipun, 2004). The third syllable of words of three or more syllables receive the stress such as *ec'onomy*, *f'amily*, and *phot'ography*. Words with the same spellings with different stresses results in different meanings such as *pr'oduce* (n.) and *prod'uce* (v.), *pr'esent* (n.) and *pres'ent* (v.), and *'abstract* (n.) and *abstr'act* (v.). Compound nouns normally receive stress on the first word section when they have noun meanings such as *'greenhouse*, referring to a house with sides and roof of glass, kept warm for growing plants; *'blackbird*, referring to a common European singing bird; and *'darkroom*, referring to a dark room in which photos can be developed.

Stress in Thai words is an important feature, which is nearly 100% ignored by Thai learning texts. This causes difficulties when learning the Thai language for non-Thai native speakers as they struggle to recognize, and look up common Thai words they hear. In Thai, it is a total language where the pitch of the voice picks out different words. Thai also has long and short vowels, which cause different meanings. In most Thai words, the last syllable of a word is always stressed, especially the only syllable for one-syllable words such as / 'pit/ (year), /mo: 'kha/ (null), /ya: nphaha 'na/ (vehicle), etc. (Khanetnok, 2014). Other than that, there are no patterns for Thai word stress. Similar to the English language, the stressed syllable is called a strong syllable, and other unstressed syllables are weak ones.

Methodology

1. Selection of Material

The poem “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” by English poet and novelist Jane Taylor was used to carry out the evaluation of pronunciation for this research. This five-stanzas Couplet was selected because the subjects are not familiar with it. Only content words are selected and analyzed in this experiment. Below is the sample of the poem with the underlined selected content words.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.

When the blazing sun is gone,
When he nothing shines upon,
Then you show your little light,
Twinkle, twinkle, all the night.

Then the traveller in the dark,
Thanks you for your tiny spark:
He could not see which way to go,
If you did not twinkle so.

In the dark blue sky you keep,
And often through my curtains peep,
For you never shut your eye,
Till the sun is in the sky.

As your bright and tiny spark
Lights the traveller in the dark,
Though I know not what you are,
Twinkle, twinkle, little star. – Jane Taylor

2. Data Collection

The data is collected from the subjects who are first-year students from the Faculty of Business Administration at Rajamangala University of technology, Phra Nakhon by using an iPod recorder (Serial Number: CCQP533GF4K1) in a closed room to avoid the outside noise. Thirty-five subjects who have been learning English as a foreign language for at least six years were selected, and none of them had prior information in regards to this research. The subjects were asked one by one to read the poem just like they are reading prose. Names of subjects are not mentioned on

ethical grounds. These subjects were selected, for they are not familiar with the unseen poem and reading poems in general. Before the subjects start reading (articulating) the poem (test material), they were given enough time to practice by providing neatly typed words in a paper. The researcher then transcribed the sound of the subjects from the recorder into the sound symbols, which is based the Received Pronunciation (RP) sound symbols on an excel file to better understand the sounds produced from each subject.

Findings and Discussion

Answers to research question 1:

Table 1: The table shows the results of 35 subjects in pronouncing the content words in the poem.

| Words | Twinkle | Twinkle | Little | Wonder | Diamond | Blazing | Nothing | Little | Twinkle | Twinkle | Traveller | Tiny | Twinkle | Often | Curtains | Never | Tiny | Traveller | Twinkle | Twinkle | Little |
|--------------------|------------|------------|---------|---------|---------------|-------------|----------|---------|------------|------------|--------------|-----------|------------|----------|--------------|----------|-----------|--------------|------------|------------|---------|
| RP | /ˈtwɪŋkəl/ | /ˈtwɪŋkəl/ | /lɪtl̩/ | /wʌndə/ | /ˈdaɪ.ə.mənd/ | /ˈbleɪ.zɪŋ/ | /ˈnʌθɪŋ/ | /lɪtl̩/ | /ˈtwɪŋkəl/ | /ˈtwɪŋkəl/ | /ˈtræ.vəl.ə/ | /ˈtaɪ.ni/ | /ˈtwɪŋkəl/ | /ˈɒf.ən/ | /ˈkɜː.tən.z/ | /ˈnev.ə/ | /ˈtaɪ.ni/ | /ˈtræ.vəl.ə/ | /ˈtwɪŋkəl/ | /ˈtwɪŋkəl/ | /lɪtl̩/ |
| Correct Stress | 8 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Wrong Stress | 26 | 27 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 34 | 25 | 31 | 33 | 31 | 35 | 32 | 32 | 35 | 20 | 35 | 32 | 31 | 33 | 33 | 31 |
| Unstressed | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Number of Subjects | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 |

According to the result table above, most subjects assign wrong stresses to the content words. In the first stanza, 26 subjects assign a wrong stress in the word “twinkle”; 27 in the word “twinkle” (second word in the same stanza); 35 in the word “little”; all of them assign a wrong stress in the word “wonder”; also, all assign a wrong stress in the word “diamond”.

In the second stanza, a wrong stress is assigned in the word “blazing” by 34 subjects; 25 in the word “nothing”; a wrong stress is assigned in the word “little” (in the same stanza) by 31 subjects; 33 in the word “twinkle”; and 31 in the second word “twinkle” in the same stanza.

In the third stanza, all subjects assign a wrong stress in the word “traveller”; 32 in the word “tiny”; and 32 in the word “twinkle”.

In the fourth stanza, all subjects assign a wrong stress in the word “often”; 20 in the word “curtains”; and all of them assign a wrong stress in the word “never”.

In the last stanza, 32 assign a wrong stress in the word “tiny”; 31 in the word “traveller”; 33 in the both words “twinkle”; 31 in the word “little”.

Since this experiment selected only content words and most of them are disyllabic, it is not difficult to identify how Thai learners pronounce these words. Sound symbols of Received Pronunciation (RP), which is a standardized English pronunciation, are shown in the table with the assignment of correct stress. The results clearly show a general tendency for the subjects to use the strong form at the last syllable; in other words, more stress is given to the last syllables that are supposed to be unstressed or weak form. When the subjects are evaluated that they assign a wrong stress in any word, it means that they assign a stress in different syllables that are not the correct ones. For instance, in 26 subjects assign a stress on the syllable /-kʰ/ instead of /twɪŋ-/ in the word “twinkle”. This explanation also applies to other results. Other functional words, especially monosyllabic words, will not be included in this part, for all subjects can assign a correct stress in each word.

Answers to research question 2:

In the literature review section, a prediction is made that EFL learners of English are prone to transfer their prior knowledge from their native language to another or other languages. The results table shows clearly that Thai learners apply their stress strategy while reading the reading the material, especially the unfamiliar one. As most Thai words receive stress at the last syllable (Khanetnok, 2014), subjects in the experiment tend to assign a stress in each word in the way that they do with Thai words.

For instance, all subjects assign a stress in the second syllable of the word “little”, and per the RP rule of pronunciation, the first syllable in the word “little” receives the stress. The stress is wrong although these subjects have been studying English for more than six years; and the word “little” is a common and basic word

in English textbooks in Thailand. Also, this can be explained in the same way for the words “nothing”, “tiny”, “often”, and “never”.

Assigning stresses on other words such as “twinkle”, “diamond”, “traveller”, and “curtains” can be challenging for subjects with no knowledge of proper pronunciation; thus, they struggle assigning stress during the negative transfer. And while conducting this experiment, subjects found it difficult to pronounce words in the poem.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research is to confirm that the native language of L1 learners has a significant influence on their learning language(s); moreover, whatever approach is taken, it can be predicted that dissimilarities of sound inventory between L1 and L2 will prompt learners to make negative adaptations by substituting the new or difficult sound with the most similar acoustic and articulatory L1 sound; in this research, it includes word stress as well as sentence stress, which will also influence other features such as intonation and pitch. And this is unavoidably reflected in speech production as foreign-accented speech (Kirkova-naskova, 2010).

As mentioning in the proceeding sections, English stress is difficult for Thai EFL learners, for they apply the transfer strategy of their native language to English. Stress plays an important role in terms of an effective communication, which reflects intelligibility and comprehensibility. It is important for Thai learners to have a proper knowledge of English stress. Thus, more attention should be given to how to teach English pronunciation effectively. English pronunciation is deserved to be taught in all English classes, not just in a pronunciation class. This will help students communicate better in English even when in class and in their career life. Teachers of English language in both basic-skill subjects or technical subjects are encouraged to study English pronunciation, and they are encouraged to speak English with correct pronunciation in class as teachers are role models for students.

Future researchers can cover the pronunciation as an aspect of effective communication at work or in companies where the English is used and Thai employees are working in, the attitude of foreigners when listening to the English pronunciation of Thai learners, and even the gratification of foreign customers and

tourists when asking for information from Thai customer services. In terms of proving pronunciation among Thai learners of English, researchers can even invent pronunciation apps that evaluate sound imitation from learners comparing to the correct pronunciation from the apps to help learners to get familiarized with it and learn how to produce sounds correctly and clearly.

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