

A Survey on Attitudes Towards the Benefits of Learning Phonetics to Listening and Speaking Skills by English Major Students at Dhonburi Rajabhat University

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Abstract

Listening and speaking skills are considered the most crucial skills of the four basic skills in learning English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To be able to listen and speak effectively, is, therefore, very important for all English language learners. Phonetics, a systematic study of human speech sound, then plays a vital role because it provides knowledge of sound system, stress, rhythm, intonation, etc. As a result of the fact that all English Major students in Rajabhat University in Thailand have Phonetics as a compulsory course, we, as English instructors, should devise a follow-up activity in order to check how effective a particular phonetic course is. This study is hence guided by three goals: 1) to investigate the Dhonburi Rajabhat University second, third, and fourth year English Major students' attitudes towards the benefits of learning phonetics on their listening and speaking skills, 2) to find out how the students apply their phonetic knowledge in their daily lives, and 3) to investigate the problems or difficulties the students often encounter while applying their phonetics knowledge.

Introduction

In Thailand, English has been a required subject for a long time and it is compulsory that every student studies English from a young age. English plays an increasingly important role nowadays. Whatever you do, English will be required at some point. There are four basic skills in English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening and speaking are the two most practical skills that enable you to communicate with other people. (Hubbard, Jones, Thornton & Wheeler, 1995).

The general consensus is that English is a language of poorly-spelt words. We can rarely guess the pronunciation of each word correctly if we do not already know that word. And being able to pronounce properly is so crucial that Bygate (1988, p. vii) maintained that speaking is the skill by which we are most frequently judged, and through which we may make or lose friends. As a result, a single mistake in pronouncing a word can lead to a huge misunderstanding, or even worse, the speaker's intention is not made clear.

Oral expression involves the use of the right sounds in the right patterns of rhythm and intonation. Thus if you want to speak English well, merely uttering sounds is not enough. Therefore, pronunciation is also one of many important features that will determine whether or not others will understand you. Likewise, no matter how good your speaking ability is, if you have poor listening skills, you might interact or answer wrongly and differently from your intended meaning and this can surely confuse others. Although many students have very good knowledge of vocabulary, they still cannot understand the words they already know because they do not know how those sounds should be pronounced.

Phonetics serves as a solution to this problem. Both Marmberg (1963), and S. Singh and K. Singh (1976) suggested that Phonetics has very great practical importance in the teaching of foreign languages and many other educational fields. Both in listening and speaking skills, the knowledge of Phonetics is essential, since it will teach students to achieve acceptable English pronunciation of sounds, stress, intonation, and to know how to produce sounds correctly, and to be able to make use of 'Phonetic Alphabet'. However, students do not have to have a perfect accent; they should have communicative efficiency. They should

be given as much exposure to spoken language as possible in order to adjust their ears to be familiar with native-like speaking. (Harmer, 1992)

Now that we realize that Phonetics is helpful for listening and speaking skills, we then understand why Phonetics is a compulsory course for English major students in Rajabhat Universities in Thailand, according to the Ministry of Education. In this study, the investigator chose a number of second, third, and fourth year English major undergraduates in the Faculty of Education, from Dhonburi Rajabhat University as representatives of Thai undergraduate Rajabhat University students.

Gardner (1985) suggested that positive attitudes and motivations are related to success in learning a second language. Madsen (1983) also pointed out that students or learners provide very helpful feedback for the teacher. It is, therefore, worthwhile to explore the attitudes of the undergraduate students towards advantages in learning Phonetics to their speaking and listening skills for the benefit of both Thai instructors who teach English and the students themselves. Consequently, this research acts as a follow up investigation of the students' attitudes, application and difficulties towards Phonetics after the completion of the course.

Objectives of the Study

This study has the following purposes:

1. To investigate the Dhonburi Rajabhat University second, third, and fourth year English major students' attitudes towards the benefits of learning Phonetics to their speaking and listening skills.
2. To find out how the second, third, and fourth year English major students at Dhonburi Rajabhat University apply phonetic knowledge in their daily lives.
3. To investigate the problems and difficulties the second, third, and fourth year English major students of Dhonburi Rajabhat University often encounter in applying their phonetic knowledge in real life situations.

Definition of Terms

1. **1532201 Practical English Phonetics** - the basic Articulatory Phonetics Course Dhonburi Rajabhat University provides for every second-year English major students in the second semester. The main objectives of this subject are to enable students to know how to produce the correct pronunciation of both consonants and vowels. Students will also be able to use stress at the right place and make appropriate intonation and rhythm. They can make use of the phonetic alphabet and phonetic transcription to help their speaking and listening abilities. (Rueysamran, 1999)

2. **The students** - the second, third and forth year English major students of the Faculty of Education at Dhonburi Rajabhat University who have passed the "*1532201 Practical English Phonetics*."

3. **Phonetics knowledge** - basic knowledge on the Articulatory Phonetics which covers areas of the English consonant system, vowel system, stress, rhythm, intonation, and also phonetic transcription.

Review of the Literature

Language is the primary means of human communication. It consists of three main components: grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. If you communicate only through written words, you will need only the first two of these components. But if you want to be able to understand spoken language and make yourself understood well by native speakers, you will need all of these three components. Thus, apart from studying English grammar and vocabulary, one must pay particular attention on standard pronunciation as well.

J.C. Catford (1990, p.1) suggested that "Phonetics is the systematic study of human speech-sounds. It provides a means of describing and classifying virtually all the sounds that can be produced by human vocal tracts". Also, Finegan (1994, chap. 2) explained that this study of sounds made in the production of human speech can be categorized into three principal branches as following:

1. *Articulatory Phonetics*: focuses on the human vocal apparatus and describes sounds in terms of their articulation in the vocal tract.
2. *Acoustic Phonetics*: studies the nature of sound waves produced in human language by using physics tools.
3. *Auditory Phonetics*: studies the perception of sounds by the brain through the human ear.

Since all the sample students from Dhonburi Rajabhat University in this study have learned only Articulatory Phonetics, our discussion in this research study, therefore, will be limited exclusively to the Articulatory Phonetics, which will emphasize five important domains of Phonetics. These are the consonant system, the vowel system, stress and rhythm, intonation, and phonetic transcription.

Articulatory Phonetics deals with describing the speech sounds that occur in language, how they fall into patterns, and how they change in different circumstances. The pronunciation of sounds, stress, intonation, speech organs - the shape of the mouth and lips, the position of tongue, voicing or lack of it, etc., are all covered in Articulatory Phonetics. In addition, Articulatory Phonetics also deals with places of articulation, how the articulators work in producing each sound, and manner of articulation. That is, how each sound is produced.

What phonetic symbols are and why we need them

It is generally known that in English there is no one-to-one correlation between spelling and pronunciation. That is why we have to discuss English spelling to clarify the differences between the sound system of a language and its representation in the ordinary writing system. An English word may have the same spelling but can be pronounced in many different ways. Consider the pronunciation of the following words that are all represented by the letters 'ough'.

cough	/kɔf/	tough	/tʌf/
through	/θɹu/	plough	/pɹʌu/
though	/θəu/		

On the other hand, other sets of English words are pronounced alike but spelled differently. Look at the following set of words. All of the underlined syllables are pronounced in the same sound which is /si/.

<u>see</u>	<u>se</u> nile	<u>sea</u>	<u>seize</u>	<u>cease</u>	glossy
<u>scenic</u>	<u>siege</u>	<u>ceiling</u>	<u>cedar</u>	<u>juicy</u>	sexy

Thus, it is helpful to have a set of symbols indicating the sound of words. Those symbols are called 'the phonetic alphabet'. A good general phonetic notation or alphabet should contain an adequate stock of symbols. The symbols should be distinctive, simple to write, and not be biased in the direction of any particular language or group of languages. As a result, a phonetic alphabet becomes the best tool, and the one most widely used is the International Phonetic Alphabet or IPA (Abercrombie, 1967).

How Phonetics benefits speaking and listening skills

Speaking Skills: "Good speech" could be defined as a way of speaking which is clearly intelligible to all ordinary people. "Bad speech" is the way of talking which is difficult to understand for most people (Jones 1958, p. 4). Therefore, an ability to speak in a standard way might be considered advantageous and useful to all ESL learners of English.

In order to have a standard way of speaking, students have to know how to produce each sound correctly and how to string those distinctive sounds into connected speech. All of the basic knowledge mentioned is combined in the study of Phonetics. Christophersen (1956) confirmed this idea by suggesting that the best way to learn pronunciation of another language is by the ***phonetic method***, that is, by a systematic study of the sound of language and the way in which they are produced.

Morley (1987) suggests that the most powerful signals in spoken English are intonational devices: pitch patterns and timing. She also proposed that intonation's functions are critical in discourse between the speaker and listener because they keep clear what topics are important and how they interrelate. Therefore, her perspective can significantly reinforce the necessity of learning Phonetics.

Foreign students who have already acquired considerable vocabulary and have worked with the structure of the language also need to work on the correct *stress and intonation* of English to improve their powers of communication at the same time. Students should know how to make all phonetic elements such as stress, rhythm, and intonation correctly. Therefore, if you have phonetic knowledge, of course, your speaking ability will surely improve.

Listening Skills: While students practice speaking, they can also hear the sounds they produce themselves and at the same time they will hear the sounds that native speakers make too. O' Connor and Desmond (1980) suggested in the book 'Better English Pronunciation' that students must hear English. But just hearing is not enough; they must listen to it as well, not only for the meaning but also for the sound.

When students of a foreign language first hear it spoken, they often fail to understand what has been said and they often claim that the vocabulary of the utterance is too difficult for them. When a written text is placed before them, they can, many times, interpret the same material correctly and react accordingly. It is not, then, only a lack of knowledge of vocabulary items, which is causing the trouble. It is the inability of the student to recognize the sounds of the language.

There is a good example in that when Spanish-speaking students see the picture of a woman washing a baby and then another in which the woman is watching a baby, he understands the difference in the two situations. But when he hears the sentence "The mother is watching the baby", he is often unable to decide which of two actions is being described (Lado and Fries, 1969). This is because he cannot differentiate between the final sound of wash and watch. Therefore, the teaching of sounds is as important as the teaching of the grammatical domain.

As mentioned before, in teaching Phonetics, we also emphasize the importance of intonation and stress. These two features influence the meaning of an utterance to a great extent. A significant word is often stressed simply by being pronounced in a higher 'key', 'Certainty', 'doubt', 'irony', 'seriousness', and 'humor' are examples of this. These attitudes can be implied by characteristic intonation patterns as much as by choice of words (Ur, 1996). Those characteristics can help avoiding misunderstanding. After having knowledge of intonation and

stress, second language learners might be able to guess the other's attitudes and emotions when they are communicating with other speakers.

How attitudes affect learning

According to the book entitled "Psychology in Teaching", Smith (1962, p.128) gave the definition of the word '*attitude*' namely that "attitudes are acquired dispositions towards issues, institutions, and groups. Attitudes prompt us to react in a certain typical manner. They influence our understanding and also guide our own actions". Interestingly, Gardner (1985) also mentioned that positive attitude and motivation are related to success in second language learning.

Motivation is one of the most fascinating and important areas in psychology. Teachers should know students' attitudes and try to make them positive in order to motivate them and create a good classroom atmosphere. When students feel good while learning, they will have "*a need learning*" feeling. And when they have a sense of efficacy, they will learn best (Smith, 1962).

This research study, as a result, was done in order to find out the attitudes of the students from Dhonburi Rajabhat University who have passed the *1532201 Practical English Phonetics*, and figure out whether they think Phonetics can help improve listening and speaking skills or not.

Methodology

1. **Subjects** - 81 second, third, and fourth year English majors in the Faculty of Education, Dhonburi Rajabhat University in the academic year 2001 were used as subjects in the study. All of them had already taken and passed *1532201 Practical English Phonetics*.

2. **Materials** - A questionnaire served as the instrument for gathering data about students' attitudes towards the benefits of learning Phonetics to their listening and speaking skills. The main part of questionnaire is in the attitudinal part. The instruments used in this study, therefore, are presented in terms of Likert Scaling. Likert-type scaling presents the respondents with a set of unscaled items and requests

respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement (Helmstadter, 1970).

The questionnaire was written in Thai and was divided into 4 sections. First - general information of the respondents, second - attitudes towards the benefits of learning Phonetics to their listening and speaking skills, third - the application of phonetic knowledge in daily life especially in listening and speaking, and the last section - problems and difficulties found in application of phonetic knowledge in real situations.

3. **Procedures** - The questionnaires were distributed to all of the sample students at the Faculty of Education. The students were asked to complete the questionnaires individually. Each student took about 5-10 minutes to complete it and handed it back immediately. Taking the questionnaires home was not allowed.

4. **Data Analysis** - The frequency, percentage, means, and standard deviation were used to describe data. Each attitudinal question typically requires the respondent to check one of three fixed-alternative expressions: strongly agree, moderately agree, and rarely agree. Responses were analyzed by assigning a weighting - a numerical value - to the responses. Numerical values are assigned differently to positive and negative statements. For positive statements the response indicating the most favorable attitude was given the highest score. After collecting the numerical values, we move to calculate the scores by summing up all points one student gets by using SPSS/WIN program (V.7.0).

Findings

General Information of the Respondents

In total, there were 81 respondents in this study. The overwhelming majority of the participants were female, 62 respondents (76.54%). The rest of 19 respondents (23.46%) were male. All of them had already taken *1532201 Practical English Phonetics*. They studied in different years: twenty-seven of them studied in the second year (33.33%), thirty-two of them studied in the third year (39.51%), while the remaining,

twenty-two respondents were in the fourth year (21.16%). Student ages ranged between 19 and 25 years old with an average age of about 21 years.

Attitudes towards the Benefits of Learning Phonetics to Listening and Speaking skills

In the first positive questions, students revealed that they thought Phonetics was necessary for studying English and very useful for English lessons that followed, especially in developing listening and speaking skills. In another positive question, the students also revealed they moderately agreed that Phonetics should be provided for other major students because it is useful for learning English. However, in the first negative statement, the findings clarify that the students strongly agreed that Phonetics causes confusion in listening and pronouncing because of the similarity of consonant and vowel sounds. And they moderately agree that this subject is too difficult and complicated to apply in real life in the second negative statement.

Table 1 Attitudes Towards Benefits of Learning Phonetics to Listening and Speaking Skills (Positive Questions)

Statements	Strongly → Rarely			mean
	3	2	1	
1. In your opinion Learning Phonetics - - - - -				
Positive Questions				
Is necessary for studying English, and very helpful for the following English lessons, especially in developing listening and speaking skills.	70	11	0	2.86
Should be provided for other major students, because it is useful for learning English.	31	45	5	2.32
Negative Questions				
Causes confusion in listening and pronouncing because of the similarities of phonetic characteristics of sounds	39	40	2	1.54
Is too difficult and complicated to apply in real life.	23	56	2	1.74

*Range of mean from 2.34-3.00 means 'strongly agree'

*Range of mean from 1.67-2.33 means 'moderately agree'

*Range of mean from 1.00-1.66 means 'rarely agree'

When students were asked to reveal their attitudes towards the benefits of learning Phonetics to listening and speaking skill, every statement scored relatively high and their means were in the same range (2.34-3.00). That is, more than half of the total 81 students strongly agreed with statements provided in the questionnaire. This means that in the students' opinion, phonetic knowledge can benefit their speaking and listening skills.

Table 2 Attitudes Towards Benefits of Learning Phonetics to Listening Skill

Statements	Strongly → Rarely			mean
	3	2	1	
2. Learning Phonetics benefits your listening skill because - - - - -				
It helps to make students understand foreigners' pronunciation better.	61	17	3	2.72
It helps to reduce listening mistakes.	56	23	2	2.67
You can improve your ability in predicting words from what you hear.	54	23	2	2.66
Knowing intonation patterns will help you to guessing the others' intentions and emotions from what they say.	55	24	2	2.65

Table 3 Attitudes Towards Benefits of Learning Phonetics to Speaking Skill

Statements	Strongly → Rarely			mean
	3	2	1	
3. Learning Phonetics benefits your speaking skill because - - - - -				
After learning Phonetics, you can pronounce English sounds more accurately.	64	16	1	2.78
It enables you to pronounce the problematic sounds in English that do not occur in Thai.	58	21	2	2.69
You can pronounce new words you never knew before by using the knowledge of phonetic alphabet.	58	19	4	2.67
It makes you speak English more naturally and smoothly.	48	28	5	2.53
It can increase your self-confidence in speaking English.	47	29	5	2.52
It helps you to communicate more effectively.	46	31	4	2.52

*Range of mean from 2.34-3.00 means 'strongly agree'

*Range of mean from 1.67-2.33 means 'moderately agree'

*Range of mean from 1.00-1.66 means 'rarely agree'

The Application of Phonetic Knowledge in Daily Life

In terms of application, respondents revealed that there are many areas of phonetic knowledge that can be applied in their daily life. The findings as shown in Figure 1 below indicated that the three most common areas of knowledge were phonetic symbol knowledge (93.82%), knowledge of stress (72.84%), and knowledge of English problematic sounds (67.90%). Interestingly, there were only 9 students (11.11%) who reported that they made use of their knowledge of rhythm in daily life.

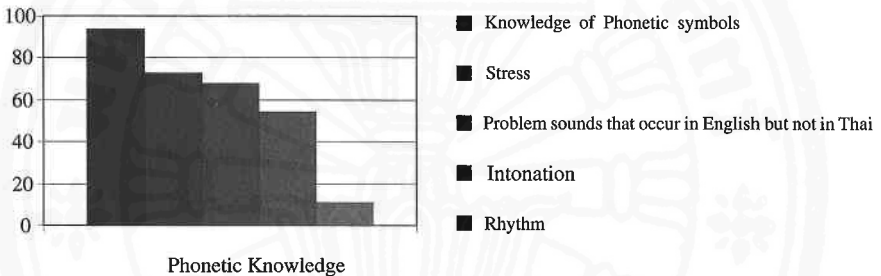


Figure 1 Areas of Phonetic Knowledge Used in Daily Life

The results also indicated that most of the students applied their phonetic knowledge while they were studying in class (91.36%). For the second and third ranks, the findings show a very closed figure, responded by 59 and 55 respondents. That is, they applied phonetic knowledge while doing English homework and watching soundtrack films or VDO, respectively.

In addition, students mostly revealed that they could moderately apply their phonetic knowledge in real life (69.14%).

Problems and Difficulties in Applying Phonetic Knowledge in Real Situations

The results for first problem (71 students or 87.65%) revealed that “there are too many rules and they are difficult to remember”.

The problem that was the least troublesome was “having a lot of phonetic knowledge but not being able to apply it in real life”, (15 students or 18.52%). When respondents were asked to select the three problems and difficulties most frequently encountered, the result showed up in rank as in Table 4.

Table 4 Problems and Difficulties in Applying Phonetics in Real Situations

Problems and difficulties	Number of Respondents	%	Rank
Too many rules which are difficult to remember.	71	87.65	1
Confusion caused by having various systems of phonetic alphabet.	61	75.31	2
Cannot spontaneously apply the knowledge learned.	59	72.84	3
Cannot speak naturally because of adhering to the phonetic rules too rigidly.	37	45.68	4
Phonetic rules correctly applied but still have communication problems.	35	43.21	5
Have a lot of phonetic knowledge but cannot apply it in real life.	15	18.52	6

Respondents commented further in an open question about their attitudes towards the benefits of learning Phonetics to their listening and speaking skills by saying that studying Phonetics is very difficult, so basic knowledge should be provided before taking *1532201 Practical English Phonetics*. They also suggested that examples and activities to support teaching each issue should be provided because it can help students understand more clearly and prevent students from forgetting what they have learned.

Some students needed more time in learning each topic. They felt there were too many details in each period and they also needed some more time in practicing exercises. They also proposed that teachers should emphasize only the practical phonetic knowledge rather than theoretical knowledge. Finally, they found VDO tapes showing how to produce sounds by English native speakers should be made available.

Implications from the Study

From the overall results of this study, it can be said that undergraduate students of Dhonburi Rajabhat University gave positive responses towards the benefits of phonetic knowledge in respect to its content and application. We can find through tabulation that the means of scores are relatively high, ranging from 2.32 to 2.86. Moreover, the results of the study also confirm that students felt that phonetic knowledge could help improve their listening and speaking to a certain extent. Therefore, the Institute should offer this subject to all students who are interested in studying English. In the researcher's opinion, the Institute should also provide one basic phonetic course for both English major and minor students because knowledge of Phonetics helps create a good foundation for developing listening and speaking in later stages.

However, students still encountered many problems and difficulties in applying their phonetic knowledge. Most of the students also revealed that they found phonetic knowledge very useful but they could only moderately apply it in daily life because of the many details taught in Phonetics class. Those details are all considered crucial elements, but these advantages can turn out to be disadvantageous. The students may get confused by the many minor issues and be unable to extract the relevant details for their real lives.

Consequently, teachers should recommend that students bear in mind that all elements taught are very useful, but when they want to apply them they have to pick out only the relevant ones. However, it is also the teacher's responsibility to emphasize to the students what the main issues are, or what the more frequently used rules are. Finally, they should concentrate on practical knowledge, not only theoretical knowledge.

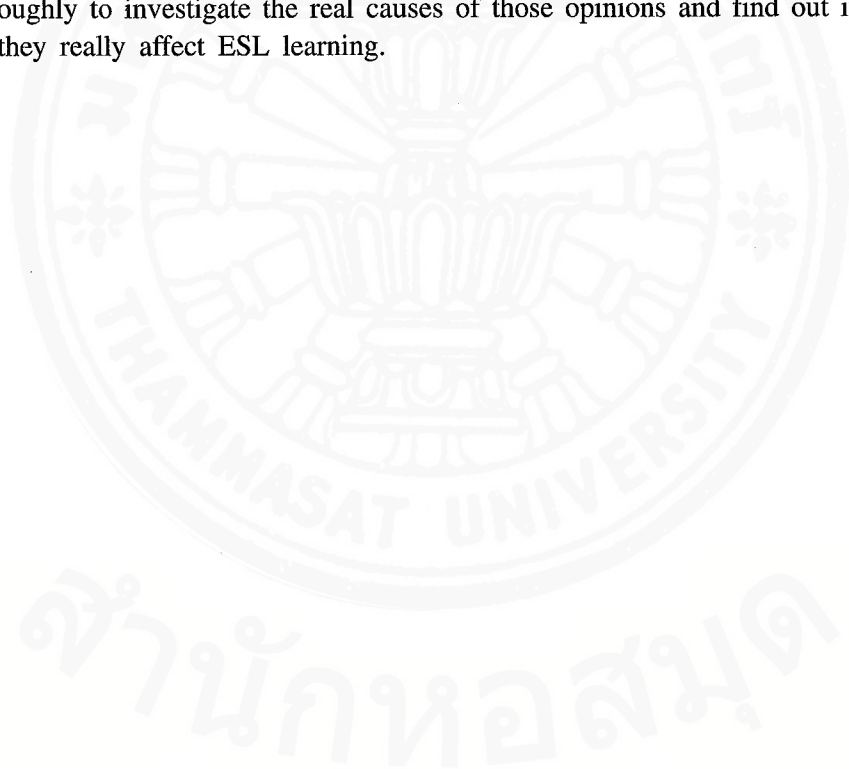
The Department of English and Dhonburi Rajabhat University should consider revising and improving their institute's curriculum, course syllabus, textbooks, teaching aids, or even suitable teaching methodology and techniques. The Department should also adjust the weak points and stress important features by using students' opinions as useful guidelines to enable students to reach the goals of the course.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Further research should be done on a larger scale or should be conducted with a different target population, such as students in other Rajabhat Universities or students in other universities, to find out whether results are different from the present study.

2. Comparative studies on students with the same academic background who have taken phonetics courses and those who have not should be conducted in order to determine if Phonetics is actually useful for the improvement of their listening and speaking skills.

3. Negative opinions of students should be analyzed more thoroughly to investigate the real causes of those opinions and find out if they really affect ESL learning.



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