The Development of Supportive Activity Simulation to Improve English Pronunciation Competence and Communication Strategies: A Case Study of Chinese Students at Chiang Rai Rajabhat University

การพัฒนากิจกรรมจำลองสนับสนุนเพื่อพัฒนาทักษะการออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษและกลยุทธ์การสื่อสาร : กรณีศึกษานักศึกษาจีนในมหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏเชียงราย

Kannikar Kantamas[1]* and Chaiyathip Katsura[2]

กรรณิการ์ คันทมาศ[1]* และชัยทิพย์ คัดสุระ[2]

[1]Western Languages Program, Faculty of Humanities, Chiangrai Rajabhat University, 80, Village No.9, Phaholyothin Rd, Bandu Sub-district, Muang Chiangrai District, Chiangrai Province 57100. Thailand

[2]School of Liberal Arts, Mae Fah Luang University, 333 Moo 1, Phaholyothin Rd, Maesalongnai Sub-district, Chiangrai Province 57100. Thailand

[1]โปรแกรมภาษาตะวันตก, คณะมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏเชียงราย 80 หมู่ 9 ถ. พหลโยธิน ต.บ้านดู่ อ.เมืองเชียงราย จ.เชียงราย 57000

[2]คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยแม่ฟ้าหลวง 333 หมู่ 1 ถ.พหลโยธิน ต.แม่สลองใน อ.แม่ฟ้าหลวง จ.เชียงราย 57000

*Corresponding Author, E-mail: kantamas.k@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This study aimed 1) to identify the problems of English consonant clusters in onset and coda positions encountered. 2) To develop a Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS) for Chinese Undergraduate Students in Chiangrai Rajabhat University under the "2 + 2 Student Exchange Programme". 3) To evaluate the effectiveness of the Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS) by using criteria to see if, how and to what extent the approaches raise the Chinese undergraduate students' pronunciation and communication abilities. The populations of this research were 28 third-year Chinese undergraduate students. The participants entered the experiment without English proficiency scores. The instruments used in this study consisted of reading passages containing English consonant clusters as a pronunciation pre-test and post-test, and five selected thematic activities designed to assist the participants to improve their English pronunciation and communication strategies. The study found that the use of the Supportive Activity Simulation for Pronunciation and Communication Strategies (PS+CSs) satisfactorily improved the participants' English pronunciation and communication strategies. Also, the compensatory strategy adopted by the majority of the participants was the use of fillers, such as 'um', 'uh', and 'okay', as a means of gaining more time to think of what to say and how to pronounce it correctly in a given situation.

Keywords: Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS), Pronunciation and communication strategies (PS+CSs), English consonant clusters

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาปัญหาของเสียงพยัญชนะควบกล้ำภาษาอังกฤษในตำแหน่งพยัญชนะต้นและ
พยัญชนะท้าย เพื่อการพัฒนากิจกรรมจำลองสนับสนุน (SAS) สำหรับนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีจีน ลงทะเบียนเรียนที่
มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏเชียงรายภายใต้โครงการแลกเปลี่ยนนักศึกษา 2 + 2 และเพื่อประเมินประสิทธิผลของการพัฒนากิจกรรม
จำลองสนับสนุน (SAS) เพื่อดูว่าวิธีการและขอบเขตอะไรช่วยเพิ่มความสามารถในการออกเสียงและการสื่อสารของนักศึกษา
ระดับปริญญาตรีจีน ประชากรของการวิจัยครั้งนี้คือ นักศึกษาจีนระดับปริญญาตรี จำนวน 28 คน ผู้เข้าร่วมไม่ได้มีผลคะแนน
ทดสอบระดับความสามารถภาษาอังกฤษ เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการศึกษาครั้งนี้ประกอบด้วย ข้อความการอ่านที่มีเสียงพยัญชนะ
ควบกล้ำเป็นแบบทดสอบการออกเสียงก่อนและหลังการทดสอบ และกิจกรรมเฉพาะเรื่องที่จัดทำขึ้นเพื่อช่วยผู้เรียนในการ
พัฒนากลยุทธ์การออกเสียงและการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษของตน ผลการศึกษาพบว่าการใช้กิจกรรมจำลองสนับสนุน (SAS)
และกลยุทธ์ออกเสียงและการสื่อสาร (PS + CSs) ช่วยให้การออกเสียงและการสื่อสารของผู้เข้าร่วมเป็นไปอย่าง
มีประสิทธิภาพ นอกจากนี้ กลยุทธ์การชดเชยที่ใช้โดยผู้เข้าร่วมส่วนใหญ่คือการใช้ตัวเติมเสริม เช่น 'อืม' 'อ่า' และ 'โอเค'
เพื่อเป็นการเพิ่มเวลาในการคิดถึงสิ่งที่จะพูดและออกเสียงอย่างไรให้ถูกต้องในสถานการณ์ที่กำหนด

คำสำคัญ : กิจกรรมจำลองสนับสนุน (SAS) กลยุทธ์การออกเสียงและการสื่อสาร (PS + CSs) เสียงพยัญชนะควบกล้ำ
ภาษาอังกฤษ

Introduction

At the present time, an average household in China is affording to pay for their children's
education. Sending a child to study abroad is a popular trend for Chinese families and the demand for
Chinese students studying abroad has been consequently driven by rising incomes for their families
(Songsathaphorn et al., 2014) from this reason, the friendly educational environment in Thailand has
become attractive to students from China and other foreign countries, including ASEAN and Asian countries.
The Office of the Higher Education Commission's (Office of High Education Comission (OHEC), 2014) statistics
show that 16,361 International students were studying in Thailand in 2013 and 2014. The highest percentage
was from Asia (86.92%), followed by North America(5.78%), and Europe (5.27%). More specifically, in a
global context which includes second language (L2) speakers of English from many different first language
(L1) backgrounds and L2 proficiency levels that mutual intelligibility has become more of a challenge.
Pronunciation and intelligibility are often used interchangeably and refer to related but distinct concepts.
This means that whether the listener recognizes the intended word or sentence, we should use the listener
feedback and use the current intelligibility study will make recommendations about what should be
prioritized in pronunciation teaching especially with the academic speech community. This is associated to
Hayes-Harb, Smith, Bent & Bradlow (2008) tated that the interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit for
listeners held only for the low phonological proficiency listeners and low phonological proficiency speech.
Specifically, native Mandarin listeners are more accurate than native English listeners at identifying Mandarin-
accented English words. Second language acquisition (SLA) research is interested in the degree to which L2
English learners approximates the proficiency of monolingual L1 speakers and necessarily an L1 variety of
English and the standard for intelligible English pronunciation is set by L1 English listeners. This has set the

stage for researchers of SLA, World English (WE), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) to make a case for which standards should be used to determine the intelligibility of English for International communication (Hardman, 2010).

Using Roach (2009) analysis of English phonology, this study focused on measuring the pronunciation of both English initial and final consonant clusters by the Chinese students from Pu'er Teachers' College who came to study in Chiangrai Rajabhat University under the "2 + 2 Student Exchange Program". The approach of communication strategies postulated by Oxford (1990); Dörnyei & Cohen (2002) and Nakatani (2006) to analyze and interpret the Chinese undergraduate students'communication strategies used in dialogues obtained from selected thematic activities also used (see figure 1). However, the study especially focused on the aspects of language competence in relation to the difficulties in the pronunciation of English consonant clusters in onset and coda positions of Chinese undergraduate students within the exchange program. Furthermore, it was not only attempt to integrate the concepts of conversation analysis to interpret the selected multi-cultural learners' discourses taken from their selected thematic tasks, but also a constructed supportive programme designed to enhance Chinese undergraduate students' English pronunciation. This study sought to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the characteristics of a supportive activity simulation to provide assistance for Chinese undergraduate students to overcome their problems of English pronunciation and communication? 2) What kind of learning situations for the Chinese undergraduate students' English pronunciation and communication can be recommended for further studies in this field?
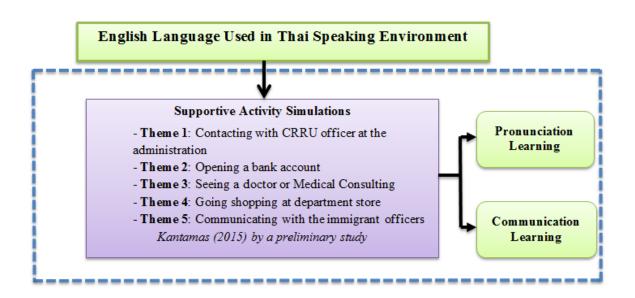

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Objectives

1) To identify the problems of English consonant clusters in onset and coda positions encountered.
2) To develop a Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS) for Chinese Undergraduate Students in Chiangrai

Rajabhat University under the "2 + 2 Student Exchange Programme". 3) To evaluate the effectiveness of the Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS) by using criteria to see if, how and to what extent the approaches raise the Chinese undergraduate students' pronunciation and communication abilities.

Research Methodology

Research Design

There were three significant steps of the investigation that used a mixed method approach. This study was conducted using a mixed method approach.

Population

The population of this research are 28 third-year Chinese students enrolled in the 2+2 Undergraduate Joint-Degree in English Studies Programme (the Faculty of Humanities) with no English proficiency approval such as IELTS or TOEFL but only with a small English test results from Chiangrai Rajabhat University, an international academic collaboration between Chiangrai Rajabhat University and Pu'er Teachers' College, Pu'er in Yunnan province, the People's Republic of China (PRC), in the first term of the academic year 2016 at Chiangrai Rajabhat University in Chiangrai Province, Thailand.

Research Instrument

1. A pretest and posttest (passage reading on English consonant cluster pronunciation test).

2. An observation checklist on Chinese EFL undergraduate students communication strategies.

3. A Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS) for Chinese students to improve the English pronunciation competence and communication strategies on five selected thematic activities.

Data Collection

There were seven major steps as follows: 1) Search the guidelines for the study to identify the problems of English consonant clusters in onset and coda. 2) The Chinese students' passage readings tested on three sessions (Pre-test). 3) Designed five major themes and the Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS). 4) Experiment (Try Out) the Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS). 5) Analyzed and interpreted after using the Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS) (Post-test) with Pronunciation Strategies and Communication Strategies (PS+CSs). 6) Collected programme implementation data for analysis evaluation. 7) Presented and the findings of the study.

Data Analysis

Ratings on the population's forms were compiled by one native speaker and two non-native speakers (the researcher and English experts) or linguists. Data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 22.0 (SPSS) software program with 5 rating scales of level of the agreement on Pronunciation and Communication Strategies (PS+CSs). Content analysis using the data obtained from the audio-recorded OCT was performed to check the findings from the questionnaire analysis.

Results

The problems of English consonant clusters in onset and coda positions encountered.

The results of the pretest on the most occurring problems of English onset consonant clusters included /pr/, /tw/, /sp/, /tr/, /sc/, and/ pl/; otherwise, another English onset consonant clusters are rarely observed. Also, the most occurring problems of their English coda consonant clusters were /nc/, /nt/, /nz/, /ld/, /st/, /pt/, /md/, /ts/, /pls/, /mp/, /nd/, /ʃt/, /sts//, /lz/, and /rs/, meanwhile the fewer numbers of English coda consonant clusters are also found.

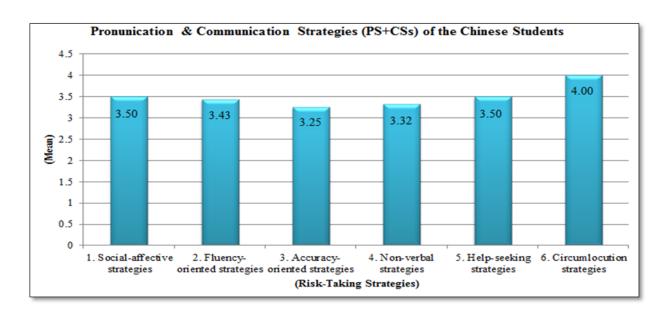### Developing a Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS)

From all the above problems led the researcher to develop the Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS). The first explanation relates to the use of Pronunciation and Communication Strategies (PS+CSs) of the students with the subcategories of Risk-Taking Strategies (Social-affective strategies, Fluency-oriented strategies, Accuracy-oriented strategies, Non-verbal strategies, Help-seeking strategies and Circumlocution strategies) and Risk-Avoidance Strategies (Message abandonment strategies, Message reduction and alteration strategies and Time-gaining strategies).

The effectiveness of the Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS)

Table 1 The nine communication strategies (CSs) employed by Chinese Students

Pronunciation and Communication Strategies (PS+CSs) of the students	$\overline{X}$	S.D.	Level of the Agreement
Risk-Taking Strategies			
1. Social-affective strategies	3.50	0.64	Usually
2. Fluency-oriented strategies	3.43	0.50	Rarely
3. Accuracy-oriented strategies	3.25	0.70	Rarely
4. Non-verbal strategies	3.32	0.61	Rarely
5. Help-seeking strategies	3.50	0.64	Usually
6. Circumlocution strategies	4.00	0.38	Usually
Total	**3.50**	**0.58**	**Usually**
Risk-Avoidance Strategies			
1. Message abandonment strategies	3.43	0.50	Rarely
2. Message reduction and alteration strategies	3.71	0.53	Usually
3. Time-gaining strategies	3.07	1.02	Rarely
Total	**3.40**	**0.68**	**Rarely**

Table 1 and figure 2-3 below show a selection of the types of Communication Strategies (CSs) used by Chinese students with the overall risk-taking strategies that the Chinese students usual use ($\overline{X}$ = 3.50). The results indicated, after an examination of the subcategories, that the Chinese students used Social-affective strategies the most rather than other strategies ($\overline{X}$ = 4.00). The second strategies used were Help-seeking strategies and Fluency-oriented strategies ($\overline{X}$ = 3.50). The last strategy which rarely uses by Chinese students is the Fluency-oriented strategy ($\overline{X}$ = 3.43). The least uses strategy that the Chinese students use is the Accuracy-oriented strategy ($\overline{X}$ = 3.25).

Pronunication & Communication Strategies (PS+CSs) of the Chinese Students

Strategy	Mean
1. Social-affective strategies	3.50
2. Fluency-oriented strategies	3.43
3. Accuracy-oriented strategies	3.25
4. Non-verbal strategies	3.32
5. Help-seeking strategies	3.50
6. Circumlocution strategies	4.00

(Risk-Taking Strategies)

Pronunicatin & Communication Strategies (PS+CSs) of the Chinese Students

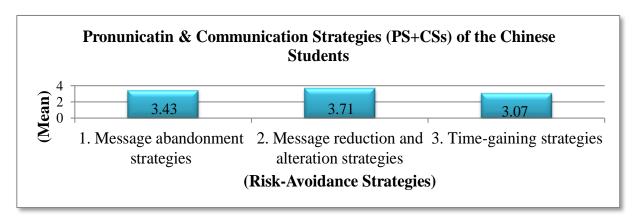| Strategy	Mean
1. Message abandonment strategies	3.43
2. Message reduction and alteration strategies	3.71
3. Time-gaining strategies	3.07

(Risk-Avoidance Strategies)

Figure 3: Risk-Avoidance Strategies

Surprisingly, the Chinese students rarely use overall Risk-Avoidance Strategies ($\overline{X}$ = 3.40). However, it is interesting to note that the Message reduction and alteration strategies are the most usually used ($\overline{X}$ = 3.71). So, the Message abandonment strategies ($\overline{X}$ = 3.43) are more rarely used than Time-gaining strategies ($\overline{X}$ = 3.07) the subcategories revealed. The reasons for this probably occurred because time-gaining strategies are surface strategies which do not involve making connections between known and

unknown knowledge. It is possible that the Chinese students were having more difficulties due to their limited L2 knowledge and from this they had to use this strategy more regularly to make up for their limitations. Concerning the use of time-gaining strategies which do not require much effort or time and contribute less to English language learning. Quingquam et al. (2008) stated that time-gaining strategies do not involve making connections between known and unknown knowledge and do not require much effort or time.

As for help-seeking strategies, Chinese students' usual use of this kind of Communication strategy which indicates that they are more active and tend not to be afraid of losing face when turning to others for help. On the other hand, some Chinese students in this study may have been unwilling to look foolish and afraid that others would regard their questions as silly and laugh at them. In addition, time-gaining strategies were employed and Chinese students used more of this type of CS. This may be because their limited language proficiency causes them to use fillers such as 'um', 'uh', and 'okay' in order to gain time to think what to say. All of the above were the use of Pronunciation and Communication Strategies (PS+CSs) of the students together with the real world practice on Chinese Student's Difficult English Consonant Clusters (Onsets and Codas) on theme 1 – 5 with the details as follows (Table 2);

Table 2   Overall of Chinese Student's Difficult English Consonant Clusters (Onsets) on theme 1-5.

English Consonants (Onsets)	Intelligibility	
	N	In Order
Theme 1	75	3
Theme 2	41	5
Theme 3	78	4
Theme 4	81	2
Theme 5	99	1

Table 2 as the above and figure 4 below show the overall level of Chinese Student's Difficult English Consonant Clusters (Onsets) on theme 1-5 in order. The results have found that the most difficult English Consonant Clusters (Onsets) in the real-world practice or in real situations are communicating with Immigrant officers, next is shopping at department stores, contacting with CRRU officers at administration, seeing a doctor or medical consultant and finally the last and most difficult English consonant clusters (Onsets) in the real world practice for Chinese students is opening a bank account.
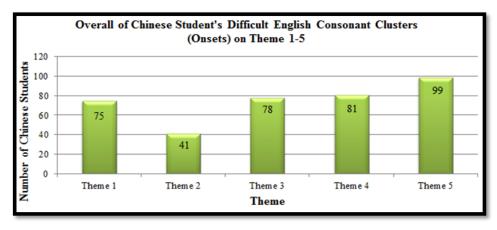
Figure 4: Overall of Chinese Student's Difficult English Consonant Clusters (Onsets) on Theme 1-5.

The reason why, in the real-world practice or real situation, communicating with Immigration officers was the most difficult English consonant clusters (onsets) was because Chinese students felt uncomfortable communicating with such people because they do not talk to, or meet them often. Certainly, they are students in Thailand but they applied for their student visa from China before they came to Thailand and from this would make them feel uncomfortable and make them think if they made any mistake then they may not get a renewed student visa.

Table 3 and figure 5 below show the Chinese Student's overall Difficult English Consonant Clusters (Codas) on theme 1-5 in order. The results found that the most difficult English Consonant Clusters (Codas) in real-world practice or in a real situation is going shopping at a department store, next is communicating with the Immigrant officers, contacting CRRU officers at administration, opening a bank account and the last and most difficult English consonant clusters (Codas) in the real world practice for Chinese students is seeing a doctor or medical consultant.

The reason why in real-world practice or in real situations, communicating with Immigration officers was the most difficult English consonant clusters (Codas) along with going shopping at a department store. This was because Chinese students felt different feelings when they met different people with different English levels. For example: when they tried to speak some English words to a shop assistant and the shop assistant cannot speak much English and/or had a different accent, the Chinese students would get encounter problems understanding.

Table 3 Overall of Chinese Student's Difficult English Consonant Clusters (Codas) on theme 1-5.

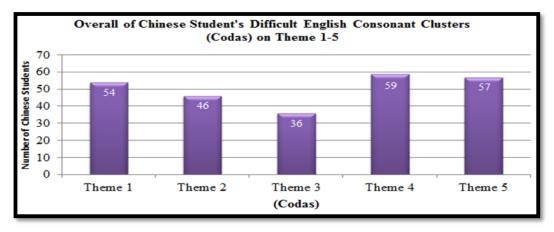| English Consonants	Intelligibility	
(Onsets)	N	In Order
Theme 1	54	3
Theme 2	46	4
Theme 3	36	5
Theme 4	59	1
Theme 5	57	2

Figure 5: Overall of Chinese Student's Difficult English Consonant Clusters (Codas) on theme 1-5.

The research has found that the problems of English consonant clusters in onset and coda positions encountered by Chinese undergraduate students studying English in a Thai-speaking environment such as the word "price", /sp-/ is consonant cluster in the word "speak" and /tr-/ is consonant cluster in the word "try", the /-st/ is consonant clusters in the word "list", /-nt/ is consonant cluster in the word "different" and /-nd/ is consonant clusters in the words "brand" and "find" respectively. The reasons for the above mentioned could be that different backgrounds from China may cause the pronunciation and communication change. This is because there are many dialects in Chinese such as, Mandarin and Cantonese. Not surprisingly, all the Chinese students come from different parts of China and more of them are especially from Kunming, Yunnan Province, Southwest China. Kunming has its own dialect and very similar to that of Sichuan and Guizhou but uses the third tone much less than standard Chinese, this means L1 knowledge would interfere with the L2 and the L1 could actively aid L2 learning. So, there are no consonant clusters in Chinese, because consonants are always separated by vowels. Especially when Chinese students pronounce consonant clusters in English, they tend to add a vowel between the consonants. Therefore, with the results when they articulate an English word, Chinese students tend to add a vowel at the end; either they pronounce the word "like" as /laikə/ with /ə/ added to the end (Wu Ying, 2010; Yu Xuelei & Bao Chengli, 2009; Yu Lixia, 2008).

Discussion

The results have found that the pretest on the most occurring problems of English onset consonant clusters included /pr/, /tw/, /sp/, /tr/, /sc/, and/ pl/; and English coda consonant clusters were /nc/, /nt/, /nz/, /ld/, /st/, /pt/, /md/, /ts/, /pls/, /mp/, /nd/, /ʃt/, /sts//, /lz/, and /rs/, meanwhile the fewer numbers of English onset and coda consonant clusters are also found. Especially in real-world practice or in real situations is going shopping in department stores. The results is like this because the Chinese students are speaking English in a Thai-speaking environment which makes them confused about which language they should speak to communicate to a shop assistant. From the results, the research also found that while Chinese students cannot communicate with a shop assistant, then they try to speak Thai instead. This is because of the way they

are thinking, if they speak Thai, the communication would not be a problem instead of speaking English especially in a Thai-speaking environment. This is associated with problems for learners who will need to mentally restructure their way of thinking (Rababah & Zughoul, 2007).

Furthermore, the researcher developed a Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS) that can be conducted to provide assistance for these Chinese undergraduate students to help overcome their problems of English pronunciation competence and communication strategies. The results showed that the Chinese students have improved in English pronunciation competence and communication strategies. This is because to be successful teaching English to non-native speakers, the teacher needs to develop some method or tools to improve their teaching, especially in order to meet the demands of modern society. This is associated to the research of Chuanchaisit & Prapphal (2009) on "an action research study of pronunciation training, language learning strategies and speaking confidence".

Last, the effectiveness of the Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS) was the Chinese Students' intelligibility had improved and they understood how to self-correct. Especially students showed improvement in their speaking competence after they had been trained how to pronounce English sounds using segmental and suprasegmental aspects as well as the direct LLS. Overall, to be successful in teaching English to a non-native English speaker, teacher needs to develop some method or tools to improve their teaching, especially in order to meet the demands of modern society. This is associated to the research of Chuanchaisit & Prapphal (2009) on an action research study of pronunciation training, language learning strategies and speaking confidence. His research showed that English is a vehicle for international communication, so, English teachers need to pay more attention to the development of learners 'competence and focus on a more effective and successful method.

Conclusion

This study was on the development of a Supportive Activity Simulation (SAS) for Chinese students to improve the English pronunciation competence and communication strategies and conducted using a mixed method approach. The words such as "price", /sp-/ is consonant cluster in the word "speak" and /tr-/ is consonant cluster in the word "try were the problems of English consonant clusters in onset and coda positions encountered by Chinese undergraduate students studying English in a Thai-speaking environment. So, the reason could be that different background and many dialects in Chinese such as, Mandarin and Cantonese. This means L1 knowledge would interfere with the L2 and the L1 could actively aid L2 learning and because there are no consonant clusters and always separated by vowels in Chinese. The results showed that the most difficult English Consonant Clusters in real-world practice or in real situations are going shopping in department store. This is because the Chinese students are speaking English in a Thai-speaking environment that makes them confused about which language they should speak while they cannot communicate to a shop assistant who cannot speak English, and finally they try to speak Thai instead.

Suggestions

1. Learning English in Thai-speaking environment, the institution should be required for the English proficiency score test such as IELTS or TOEFL and the researcher can be used the same research processes with other International students such as Japanese and Korean.

2. For further studies in this field, the dictionary usage could help Chinese students practice and check whether their pronunciation was correct. Teachers reported that they learned how to improve their pronunciation and they knew their weaknesses. Finally, the researcher can be used the same processes of this research with other International students who study English in Thai-speaking environment.

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