

A Study of the Performance of the YUFL First Year BA Thai Students in Pronouncing Thai Vowel Sounds: with the Problem- Based Learning Method

Su Su Khin*

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the mispronunciation in the Thai vowels of the Thai language specialization students of Yangon University of Foreign Languages, before and after being taught by the pronunciation skill exercises. It also used the pronunciation skill exercises using the problem-based learning method. The subjects of the study were 37 first year Thai Languages specialization students of the academic year 2014-2015. The research instruments consisted of pre-test and post tests in Thai vowel pronunciation and Thai language pronunciation skill exercises. In Thai vowels pronunciation pre-test 35% of vowel /i:/ and 27 % of vowel /ə:/ are mispronounced by the students. After taking re-media pronunciation skill exercises, it can be seen the improvement of the pronunciation of that two vowels. Each exercise was for the students' pronunciation practice. It consisted of four work sheets contained 10 sentences in each. In re-media pronunciation exercises consisted of the vowel /i:/ and /ə:/ words. For post test used the same exercise of pre-test. The post test results can be shown that all students were improved with the Thai vowel pronunciation skill exercises by using problem-based learning method.

Key words: mispronunciation, vowel /i:/, vowel /ə:/

Introduction

Thai is a tonal language, with the meaning of each syllable determined by the pitch at which it is pronounced. The students of YUFL are emphasized by learning four skills; listening skill, speaking skill, reading skill and writing skill. Among them, as the productive skills, speaking and writing skills are important for the expressive purposes. How well a language user uses the productive skill reflects the personality of the user. When comparing with the other language skills, speaking and writing convey the message that is the most difficult one for them because the tone, the body languages, and the pronunciation are used while the speaker speaks. Most of Thai language students have problems with the speaking skill especially in Tones and vowels. If the problems are not solved in the early stage of learning, it would be difficult to solved them later.

Teaching Thai language focus not only on the four language skills, but also on personality training and the correct use of Thai language. As a result, if Myanmar student who speaking Thai language pronounce words unclearly or incorrectly, their personalities will be

* Associate Professor, Head of the Thai Department, Yangon University of Foreign Languages

affected: that is, they lack the confidence in speaking, and if this problem lasts for a long time, it will be harder to be solved.

The problems about Thai vowel pronunciation refer to the mispronunciations of the vowels /i:/ and vowel /əə/. For instance, mispronunciation is made when using the incorrect vowels as in “sia” and “sja”, or “khəy” and “khi”. Achievement refers to the students’ performance in doing the Thai pronunciation skill exercises. The researcher, thus, aimed at solving them mispronunciation of the first year Thai language specialization students of YUFL and at solving the problem about limited teaching time by taking the students’ feedback into consideration. In conducting research, the research used the Thai pronunciation development drill with problem- based learning as it is the teaching method that uses problems to promote the students’ learning skills and to motivate the students to perform self-practicing.

The method, moreover, was expected to create the systematic progressive learning behaviors among the learners as well.

Aims and Objectives

The aims of the research are to find out the most common errors of first year Thai language specialization students of YUFL in pronouncing Thai vowel sounds, to compare the achievement in the Thai pronunciation of the students before and after being taught by the Thai pronunciation skill exercises, and to highlight the effect of using the problem-based learning method using in communicative Skills course.

Literature Review

As for mispronunciation in foreign language teaching, there are two main causes of it. First, it results from organ disorders such as cerebral palsy, deaf, cleft lip, cleft palate, and the problems concerning the position of teeth and jaws. Second, it results from other factors such as mispronunciation imitation, bilingualism, and a second language learning. (Prasong Rainasuk.1989: 30-31)

Although the pronunciation problem is now perceived, the methods of how to solve the problem are not yet well employed as nowadays the mispronunciation problem in all ages and educational levels can still be seen. The importance of correct pronunciation and the results of mispronunciation are not well realized. “The incorrect usage of Thai language can cause a

negative effect to the national language. As long as Thai language is used for communication, the nation of Thailand will still be rising. The incorrect pronunciation can result in the incorrect message and misunderstanding between the speaker and the listener, and even worse, the end of their friendship.” (Panthipa Ornsang.1989:3)

In teaching Thai pronunciation, there are eighteen simple vowel sounds. There are two groups, short vowels and long vowels. The short vowels are a, i, u, e, x, ə, ɪ, ə, o and the long vowels are aa, ii, uu, ee, xx, ɔɔ, ɨɨ, əə and oo. Among the vowels in the Thai language, /ɨ/ and /əə/ are difficult to pronounce correctly. Sometimes mispronunciation can be occurred. J. Marvin Brown (1999) found out that for the learners of Thai as a foreign language, the frequency of the mispronunciation of the /ɨ/ vowel sound is the highest. Most of the language learners might have the exposure of English. He stated that the vowel sound does not have any near equivalent in English.

In this study, the problem-based learning method is used. It is a style of active learning. Working in groups, students identify what they already know, what they need to know, and how and where to access new information that may lead to the resolution of the problem. The role of the instructor is to facilitate learning by supporting, guiding, and monitoring the learning process. The teacher must build students' confidence to take on the problem, and encourage the students, while also stretching their understanding. Problem-based learning represents an alternative way from traditional teaching and learning philosophy, which is more often lecture-based. The constructs for teaching Problem-based learning are very different from traditional classroom or lecture teaching Hence, it is useful to use this method in doing research,

The YUFL students who are studying Thai also have that kind of pronunciation problem in learning Thai language. In this study, it aimed to find out that what the difficulties they are having in teaching pronunciation are and how the teacher can help them in solving these problems.

Research Questions

The following research questions are formulated for this study.

1. Which Thai vowel sound(s) account(s) for the majority of errors that Myanmar students majoring in Thai language make?

2. What are the effective ways to overcome the problems faced by the students in pronouncing Thai vowel sounds?
3. What pedagogical implications can be drawn for teachers to help students deal with such kind of errors?

Materials and Method

The data were collected from 37 first year Thai language specialization students who attended the first semester of 2014-15 Academic year. As a result, they were considered the suitable subjects for the research experiment. The pre-test and post-test were given to find the students' mispronouncing the all Thai vowels. The pre-test and the post-test obtain the same items. It consists of sentence level items with nine types of vowel pronunciation, which according to teaching experience, it is found that it hard for the students to pronounce. In doing this research, the problem-based learning method and supplementary exercises on speaking skills are used. The research methods which are used in the research are both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Research procedures

The procedures are of 4 steps:

1. *Self-Investigating*: The students investigated the types of mispronunciation they had and then the researcher started to collect data. After the pre-test was given, the students were informed of the types of mispronunciation they had. Using this strategy they could compare whether the self-investigating result found before doing the test was close to the one after the test or not;
2. *Problem Analysis*: The students needed to find the vowel sound which is wrongly pronounced in the highest frequency. The students were told to do group discussions about the causes of mispronunciation while the teacher assisted in giving valuable information and collected any interesting discussion issues;
3. *Solution Presentation*: Groups of students researched to find the solutions to Thai language mispronunciation problems and did a presentation in class while the teacher also proposed ways to solve the problems. Finally, all of them brainstormed to find the solutions closet to their natures;

4. *Practice*: They were also required to take pronunciation training with the researcher. It lasted for 40-50 minutes. After the intensive pronunciation exercises, they were required to do self-studying. The students and the teacher used the proposed ways to solve the problems and the proposed ways were presented as follows.

- To learn more about vocal organs, vocal position and vocal direction
- To listen to the correct pronunciation and repeat
- To analyze their pronunciations and those of their friends
- To practice pronouncing syllables and words; to read sentences aloud by using intensive pronunciation exercises
- To do individual pronunciation practices with the teacher in the classroom
- To do pair-practicing
- To do self-practicing by recording their pronunciations and do self-evaluating.

If they had any problems or demanded more training, they could see the teacher after the class.

Finally, the post-test which was the same as the previous one was given to the students. After that the pronunciations recorded in the recorder both before and after the training were compared.

Findings and Discussion

In this research, the data were collected from the pre-test and the post-test. As the both test are the same, the total number of vowel sounds used in 40 recorded sentences in the test are 200. There were all nine types of the long vowel sounds included in the test. During the pre-test, the students mispronounce only a couple types of the vowel sounds frequently. The vowel sounds accounts for the largest proportion of all errors are /i:/ and /æ/. It is found that the mispronunciation of the vowel sound /i:/ are 340 out of 962 (35%) and the vowel sound /æ/ are 360 out of 1332 (27%). As the vowel sounds do not have any near equivalent in the Myanmar language, it is found out that for the Myanmar learners of Thai a language, the frequency of the mispronunciation of the /i:/ vowel sound is the highest. The other vowel sounds have the similar equivalent vowel sounds in Myanmar. The data are presented with the percentage in the following table.

Table 1: The result of the mispronunciation of vowel sounds in pre-test.

Vowel Sounds	/ɑɑ/	/ɪɪ/	/uu/	/ii/	/ee/	/xx/	/ɔɔ/	/əə/	/oo/
Total numbers (no.of items x no.of students)	1332	962	296	962	502	830	444	1332	740
Mispronounce numbers	20	30	7	340	22	28	22	360	22
%	1.5	3	2	35	4	3	5	27	3

According to the problem-based method, the practices were emphasized on the area which is the largest proportion of the errors. In the research procedures, the students are required to take pronunciation training focusing on the majority of the errors with the researcher. The students and the teacher tried to find the ways to solve the problems which they are facing. After the discussion, the researcher and the students used the proposed ways in the intensive pronunciation exercises and they needed to do self-studying. The research also gave the opportunities for the students to discuss their problems after the training.

In the post-test after practicing, the performance of the students in pronunciation vividly improved. The following table shows the results which include the number of errors in each type of vowels and the percentage found in the post-test.

Table 2: The result of the mispronunciation of vowel sounds in the post-test.

Vowel Sounds	/ɑɑ/	/ɪɪ/	/uu/	/ii/	/ee/	/xx/	/ɔɔ/	/əə/	/oo/
Total numbers (no.of items x no.of students)	1332	962	296	962	502	830	444	1332	740
Mispronounce numbers	18	20	4	81	10	17	20	41	18
%	1.4	2	1	8	2	2	4.5	3	2.5

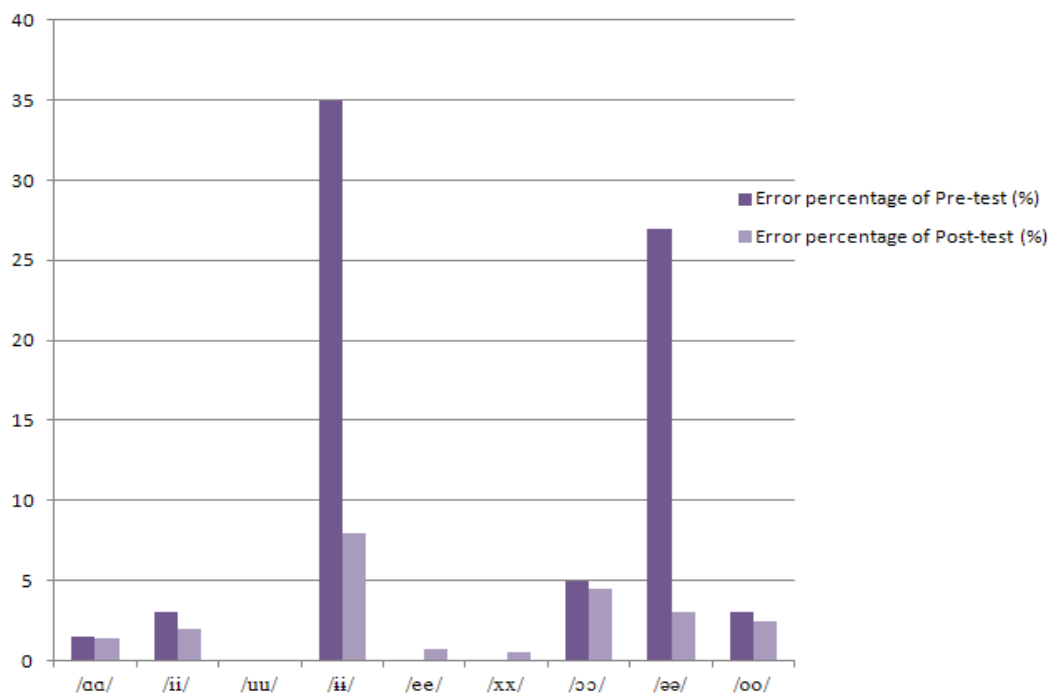
The summary of the errors found in the students' performance in both pre-test and post-test are shown in the following table.

Table 3: The summary of the errors in both pre-test and post-test

Vowel Sounds	/ɑɑ/	/ii/	/uu/	/ii/	/ee/	/xx/	/ɔɔ/	/əə/	/oo/
Error percentage of Pre-test (%)	1.5	3	2	35	4	3	5	27	3
Error percentage of Post-test (%)	1.4	2	1	8	2	2	4.5	3	2.5

The results can be clearly seen in the following figure.

Figure 1: The summary of the errors made by the students in both pre-test and post-test



According to the results, it is clearly found that the performance of the students in the post test is much better than the performance in the pre-test. As a problem-based method is used in this study, the largest proportion of the errors which is the use of the vowel sounds /ii/ and /əə/ are emphasized. In the post-test, it can be seen that the percentage of the errors got lower after

the practice stage. The errors occurred in the use of the other types of the vowels are also slightly lowered as the students recognized their errors by themselves. In contrast, they can be occurred because of their carelessness in using these vowels in the context.

The results from the qualitative data show that the students perceived the correct pronunciation using the. It is seen that the performance of the students is improved after doing intensive teaching and learning on their problematic areas. It can be proved that finding the problems and using the effective way to solve the problems is one of the effective ways to teach pronunciation of the Thai language. It can be help for the teachers to help students to be good at pronunciation.

Conclusion

Based on the observation and record of the data obtained from the first year students of the Yangon University of Foreign Languages who took the Thai language course, It can be seen that the students appear to have a better achievement in Thai pronunciation after being taught by the Thai pronunciation skill exercises and the achievement in the pronunciation of the vowel sounds /i:/ and /æ/ is significantly different with the use of the Thai pronunciation skill exercises. This was because most of the students have problems about pronouncing these vowels, and consequently differences could be found after the training. It is agreed that the large proportion of the common errors made by the Thai as a foreign language learners is the /i:/ vowel sound. (J. Marvin Brown, 1999) Moreover, for the Myanmar students who are studying Thai have the problem in pronouncing the vowel sound /i:/. However, the errors of the vowel sound /æ/ is fewer than the first one as it has the similar sound in English Language.

The reason that the better performance of the students with the pronunciation exercises was the result of the application of the researcher's teaching experience in that some specific mispronunciations were often found. The teaching techniques and Thai pronunciation skill exercises using the problem-based learning method also enabled the students to investigate their pronunciation problems, to find ways to solve the problems, and to focus more on self-development.

In conclusion, according to the comparison of the achievements in the Thai Pronunciation before and after the students were trained, the achievement was significant improved. The reason

that mispronunciation can still be found among the students is the carelessness and the absence of the vowel sounds in their mother tongue.

Therefore, the teacher should promote Thai pronunciation exercise designing by encouraging the students also themselves to participate in the training about techniques in solving speaking problems and in teaching and learning speaking skills. Hence, the teachers can also design the exercises appropriate to the amount of study time and to the students' needs and abilities. The schools or institutions should also provide devices or materials that enable the students to solve their pronunciation problems.

Due to the time constraints, the researcher has focused only on the use of the Thai vowel sounds. There are still more ideas to be studied for future researchers.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my special thanks of gratitude to Kyi Shwin, Rector, Yangon University of Foreign Languages, not only for giving clear guidance and useful suggestion, but also for his encouragement and support. Furthermore, I wish to give my deep sense of gratitude to my students and colleagues who gave me support and useful advice for my research.

References

- Marvin Brown, J. (2000). **Reading and Writing Text: AUA Language Center Thai Course, 15- 20**. Bangkok: AUA Press.
- Ornsang ,Panthipa. (1989). **A Comparison of Ability in Reading Cluster Sounds**, Bangkok: Srinakharinwirot University.
- Rainasuk, Prasong. (1989). **Research Report on the Results of Thai Language Speaking Exercise Usage among Hill Tribe Children, 30-31**. Bangkok: Srinakharinwirot University.
- Sriwilai ponmanee. (2000). **Learning To Read Thai, 21-25**. Bangkok: Center for Teaching as a Foreign Language Faculty of Education.