

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This research was conducted to study the effect of pronunciation training on students' speaking skill. It was undertaken by a teacher with co-workers as teachers of English at Loei Rajabhat University. The study was a collaborative classroom investigative research to see whether pronunciation training contributes to the development of students' speaking skill throughout a case study of a pronunciation training process.

### **1.1 Background and Rationale**

Thai students at Loei Rajabhat University tend to express Thai speech patterns or styles when communicating in English. Some will not speak English because they are afraid of making mistakes. They are either unfamiliar with words and sounds, or embarrassed. As a result, a great number of Loei Rajabhat University students still have difficulty with English speaking skills, especially with poor pronunciation. Consequently, focusing on pronunciation teaching and training is a key element to help Loei Rajabhat University students improve their English speaking skill with confidence.

Pronunciation is one of the most difficult language parts for non-native learners to master in the classroom (Shumin, 1997). In Thailand, there are many academic English curricula or training courses focusing on speaking skills; however, they do not focus on pronunciation (Sukamolson, 1989; Syananondh, 1983). According to studies of the levels of Thai students' English ability in speaking and listening between 1972-1988, Sukamolson (1989) suggests that students have problems in listening to dialogues and texts as well as pronunciation. Wiriyaichitra (2001) claims that the English Curriculum in the Thai universities cannot meet the demands of English used in the workplace. The skills they use most are listening and speaking, which are not the principle skills in the Thai tertiary education English curriculum. Wiriyaichitra (2001) also states that one reason why English learning in

Thailand is not very successful is that most learners lack the opportunity to learn English in the environment and for interact in daily life.

However, many researchers have paid close attention to pronunciation instruction (Celce-Murcia, 1987; Gilbert, 1994; Morley, 1994). Also, Scarcella and Oxford (1994) state that pronunciation should be taught in all second language classes through a variety of activities. Moreover, the ability to speak English clearly and confidently is also considered one of the most important skills that university students of English as a Foreign Language need to acquire. However, traditional approaches to English pronunciation teaching still dominate. Some thought the critical period meant adults could not learn pronunciation, so there was no point trying to teach it, even that it was inappropriate to criticize their students' pronunciation (Macdonald, 2002). Non-native English students, therefore, still have many difficulties in pronunciation, especially at Loei Rajabhat University. When speaking English, with less confidence or poorly trained in pronunciation skills, Loei Rajabhat University students have problems either making themselves, or others understood.

Teaching pronunciation has often been questioned and it has undergone a shift in thinking, so that nowadays, its framework may encompass not only linguistic competence, but also discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence (Morley, 1994). Pronunciation teaching is increasingly being emphasized as one of the important components of the English as a Foreign Language lesson. As claimed by Pennington (1994, p. 105), the value of pronunciation instruction lies in the fact that it can help learners develop their interlanguage phonology by giving them "the perceptual and the productive experience they need to re-conceptualize the performance targets while offering motivation to change and social experiences to develop a new value set".

When addressing the pronunciation syllabus of helping non-native English speakers become intelligibly competent, the terms segmental and suprasegmental features are considered. Many researchers such as Morley (1991, 1998) and Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe (1998) state that effective English pronunciation training should include both 'segmental' and 'suprasegmental' aspects, that is to say sounds, stress, and intonation.



In second language acquisition, pronunciation goes beyond the sounds of syllables and words. It encompasses the sound of a language as well as rhythm, stress, and intonation, what Gilbert (2001, p.8.) refers to as “the music of English”. Marques (1997) refers to pronunciation as how words are spoken in context. It includes the articulation of individual sounds of a language and how these sounds are connected, accented, and varied in pitch. As English teaching has moved to language functions and communicative competencies, in an effort to understand the pronunciation teaching and to help non-native speakers become intelligibly competent speakers of English, urgency for the teaching of pronunciation has arisen (Celce-Murcia, 1987; Gilbert, 1994; Morley, 1994). Improving English pronunciation is not just about understanding and practicing the differences between vowel sounds and consonant sounds, it is also very important to be aware of how all the different elements that create speech are put together (Hagen and Grogan, 1992).

MacDonald, Yule, and Powers (1994) also state that the development of second language (L2) pronunciation is a primary goal for non-native English speakers. Consequently, instructors need to give high priority to pronunciation because poor pronunciation is a prevalent barrier to good communication with native speakers. Even if syntax, the grammar of the language, and vocabulary are completely correct, effective communication cannot take place without good pronunciation.

Furthermore, poor segmental articulation and poor suprasegmental production distract the listener and impede comprehension of the message (Eskenazi, 1999). Morley (1999) adds that non-native English speakers who have intelligibility problems find themselves "at risk educationally, occupationally, professionally, and socially" (p.2). The researcher continues to say that learners who do not have comfortable intelligibility avoid speaking with natives and deprive themselves of the learning and practice effects of such interactions. Therefore, instructors, who have a genuine concern about students' pronunciation problems, in particular their poor speech intelligibility and inarticulate speaking skills, need to incorporate a strong pronunciation component in the English language curriculum (Morley, 1994). Further research indicates that limited pronunciation skills are detrimental to non-native speakers. Self-confidence is damaged, social interaction is often limited, and a negative light is shed on the abilities and intelligence of the speaker (Morley, 1998).

As a consequence, language instructors need to teach language that can suggest what might be possible for the students to solve their communicative problems, and in turn, students can use language to change where their language ability and pronunciation has placed them. Language instructors need to teach the pronunciation skills that will give learners the ability to speak English intelligibly, to understand English, and to communicate with confidence (Gillespie, 1996).

In English speaking courses, it is easy to make an assumption that students' competence and confidence can be developed by any kind of speaking activities. However, while attempting to develop effective instruction in spoken language, we need to address an important issue that acquires the ability to communicate effectively with the requirement of learning the language skills of speaking. It's important to emphasize specific pronunciation instruction and training. Furthermore, raising awareness of pronunciation problems and teaching the skills to change pronunciation problems will be the key that help learners intelligibly competent. This could also improve the status of non-native English speakers in language class and help meet the demands of the workplace or during international communication. The objective of this research is therefore to investigate whether pronunciation training can increase confidence and improve speaking skill of Loei Rajabhat University students. In addition, this study is to determine whether raising the awareness of students' pronunciation problems can make them have skill to produce features of English language well enough for others to understand them.

## **1.2 Purposes of the Study**

This study aimed to:

- 1.2.1 investigate the pronunciation problems of Loei Rajabhat University students.
- 1.2.2 examine the awareness of the pronunciation problems among Loei Rajabhat University students.
- 1.2.3 investigate the effect of the pronunciation training on Loei Rajabhat University students' English speaking skill.



### 1.3 Research Questions

1.3.1 What are the pronunciation problems of Loei Rajabhat University (LRU) students?

1.3.2 Does the pronunciation training help promote the awareness of the Loei Rajabhat University students of their pronunciation problems?

1.3.3 Does the pronunciation training help improve Loei Rajabhat University students' English speaking skill?

### 1.4 Hypotheses

1.4.1 Pronunciation problems of Loei Rajabhat University (LRU) students make them unable to produce effective English speaking skills.

1.4.2 The pronunciation training helps promote the awareness of the LRU students of their pronunciation problems.

1.4.3 The pronunciation training helps increase the LRU students' confidence and therefore helps improve their English speaking skills.

### 1.5 Scope of the Study

The sample of this study comprised first year Loei Rajabhat University students majoring in Public Health, who enrolled in 0001102 English for Communication 1 course, academic year 2009.

The study aimed to see if pronunciation training can improve students' speaking skill with confidence that occurred during and after the training process. The research was therefore conducted as a case study.

### 1.6 Definitions of Terms

**1.6.1 Pronunciation:** The ways in which sounds are produced. Features of pronunciation are divided into segmental phonology (individual sounds) and suprasegmental phonology (Nunan, 1999).

**1.6.2 Segment:** A term used in PHONETICS and LINGUISTICS primarily to refer to any DISCRETE UNIT that can be identified, either physically or auditorily, in the stream of speech. 'Segmentation' can take place using either physical or auditory criteria: in the former case, ACOUSTIC or ARTICULATORY change-points

can be identified as boundaries of segments; in the latter case, perceptible changes, in QUALITY or QUANTITY, often showing the influence of the language's PHONEMIC units, are the basis of division. The term is especially used in phonetics, where the smallest perceptible discrete unit is referred to as a PHONE (Crystal, 1991).

**1.6.3 Suprasegmental:** A term used in PHONETICS and PHONOLOGY to refer to a vocal effect which extends over more than one sound SEGMENT in an UTTERANCE, such as a PITCH, STRESS, or JUNCTURE pattern. In its contrast with 'segmental', it is seen as one of two main classes into which phonological UNITS can be divided (Crystal, 1991).

**1.6.4 An Utterance:** A basic unit of spoken communication that proposes at least one of three characteristics: (a) an intonation contour; (b) a pause in a flow of speech; (c) and a unit of semantic completion (Crookes & Rulon, 1985; Crookes, 1990).

**1.6.5 Awareness:** The ability to attend to the phonological or sound structure of English language from its meaning. In this study, phonological awareness includes phonemic awareness, rhyme awareness, syllable awareness, word awareness and sentence awareness. The awareness is also the ability to think consciously about perform mental operations on speech sound units such as segmenting and changing order of speech - sound sequences (Antony & Francis, 2005).

**1.6.6 Speaking Skill:** An interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997).

**1.6.7 Thai Students:** First year students, majoring in Public Health at Loei Rajabhat University who enrolled in 0001102 English for Communication 1 course, in academic year 2009.

## **1.7 Significance of the Study**

Studies on pronunciation reported that Thai students have many difficulties on English pronunciation (Jotikasthira, 1999; Wei & Zhou, 2002; Wongsothorn & Pongsurapipat, 1992). This knowledge partly helps explain why Thai students learning English cannot master English speaking skill. The lack of motivation and confidence on the students' part can be regarded as some of the factors which impede their language learning (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley 1999). When English

language instruction in Thailand is considered, particularly in Loei Rajabhat University the results are not surprising as the pronunciation instruction has been excluded from the English curriculum. This is because of the belief that pronunciation is not necessary, can not be taught and can be “picked up” by learners (Morley, 1994).

In the field of English language learning, pronunciation instruction has been found to move from the approach of teaching pronunciation where specific pronunciation features, known as segmental aspects of the language, were given priority to the study where suprasegmental aspects were also included. The study of interlanguage phonology, taking language transfer into account received attention later (Ioup & Weinberger, 1987). The trend has then shifted to investigate the effects of different approaches to pronunciation on learners’ accents, including learners’ own perspectives (cited in Derwing & Rossiter, 2002a, 2002b). Such aspects of socio-psychological factors as language attitudes, motivation, identity and confidence have been taken into account when pronunciations learning as well as speaking skill were investigated (Dörnyei & Csizer, 2002; Songsiri, 2007; Varasirin, 2007). As a result, the study of how to promote students’ awareness on pronunciation is still very important. Luoma (2004) adds that the ability to speak in a foreign language is at the heart of what it means to be able to use foreign language. Wongsuwana (2006) also suggests that speech can be trained and it does not depend on talent. As the role of pronunciation still plays an important part in second/foreign language teaching and learning, this present study therefore has as its purpose to promote the awareness of the pronunciation problems among LRU students with the intention to help create their confidence in producing correct sounds, and to investigate the effect of the pronunciation training on the LRU students’ speaking skill.