

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

As Parker (2000) pointed out, EFL/ESL students often believe that getting the sounds right is the most important aspect of pronunciation. Thus, they may think that improving their control over vowels, consonants and pronouncing every sound in a word well can make them sound more native-like.

With respect to mastery in second language (L₂), Lenneberg's study in 1967 as cited in Lightbown & Spada (1999), proposed the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). He further stated that the ability to learn a language is restricted to the years before puberty. Consequently, many L₂ learners are encouraged to expose to English when they are young in order to gain native mastery in their L₂ performance, especially, in pronunciation.

As stated in Carruthers (2006), learners seem to produce their L₂ by employing the phones that occur in their L₁ sound system. That is to say, the main factor that leads to the difficulty in pronunciation is the perception and production of the nonnative sounds which do not exist in the speakers' L₁ phonological system.

According to Boonruang Chunsuvimol and Nantana Ronakiat (2001), /v/ is a problematic sound for Thai speakers of English since it does not occur in our sound system, either in syllable initial or syllable final position. Actually, Thai speakers seem not to be aware of this particular sound. In terms of perception speech, Tippawan Janyasuparb (1981) proposed that Thai speakers have difficulty in perceiving initial /v/ and final /v/. Thais also have problem in discriminating the sounds /f/-/v/.

Moreover, in production speech, some Thais pronounce the syllable-initial English /v/ by substituting /w/ for /v/. For example, in the word "vote", they substitute /w/ in the syllable-initial. Hence, the way they speak is not "native-like" and they may not be understood when communicating with foreigners. Likewise, Tippawan Janyasuparb (1981), cited in Boonruang Chunsuvimol and Nantana Ronakiat (2000), suggested that some Thais substitute /p/ in word-final position like "safe" and "life".

Phonetically, /f/ is a voiceless labiodental fricative whereas /v/ is a voiced labiodental fricative. As for /f/ and /v/, Boonruang Chunsuvimol and Nantana Ronakiat (2001) concisely stated that:

...English sounds (f) and (v) in particular are problematic for Thai learners for several reasons. In English, while (f) occurs both in syllable initial and syllable final positions, in Thai it is restricted to syllable initial position ...

...English (v) poses greater problems for Thai speakers as this sound does not occur in Thai at all ...

Thai speakers of English tend to have difficulty both in perceiving and producing English /v/ as noted earlier. They are likely to substitute /f/, /p/ and /w/ for /v/ in different word positions (Boonruang Chunsuvimol & Nantana Ronakiat, 2001; Tippawan Janyasuparb, 1981). Thus, /v/ is likely to be perceived and pronounced as sounds existing in Thai phonology.

The researcher constructed a pretest to make sure that the perception and production of English /v/ seem to be problematic for all subjects in this study. Obviously, the pretest scores of each student show that they have the difficulty both in perceiving and producing English /v/. The present study is conducted for investigating the subjects' abilities in perception as well as production of /v/ and for examining whether there is any relationship between these two abilities.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Chitralada School, students have the opportunity to study English with native speakers (both American and British) since Prathom 1 (Grade 1). Hence, M.4 (Grade 9) students in Chitralada School have been exposed to English for almost ten years. However, some of them tend to have difficulty both in perceiving and producing English /v/ sound since it does not occur in our sound system.

So far, there is no research investigating whether there is any relative degree between the perception and production of English /v/ by Thai speakers of English.

The study is conducted to investigate this problem and to explore whether there is a correlation between students' performance in perception and production of /v/.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of this study are:

1.3.1 To explore the correlation between the perception and production of English /v/ of M.4 students at Chitralada School.

1.3.2 To investigate whether students can discriminate (both perception and production) between English words containing /f/-/v/ in initial, medial and final positions.

1.4 HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

The data analysis of the study is based on the following hypotheses:

1.4.1 There is a correlation between the subjects' perception and production of English /v/.

1.4.2 The subjects' perception in /v/ varies according to word positions.

1.4.3 The subjects' production of /v/ is different due to word positions.

1.5 SYMBOLS OF THE STUDY

1.5.1 Phonetic symbols used in the study are from the International Phonetics Alphabet (IPA).

1.5.2 / / represents phonetic transcription

1.5.3 [] represents the variants of phonetic transcription

1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

1.6.1 In this study, the subjects were 10 out of 10 students from the Art program at Chitralada School. The data were collected from M.4 students in the academic year 2007.

1.6.2 The perception test in this study focused on students' ability in discriminating /f/-/v/ and /w/-/v/ in initial, medial as well as final position.

1.6.3 For the production test, the study examined students' ability in producing words containing /v/ in a variety of word positions.

1.6.4 All of the subjects had not taken any formal pronunciation class, hence the study aims at exploring only their perception and production of English /v/.

1.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to the small sample size of the study, the findings could be generalized only for M.4 students (Art program–French) of Chitralada School in the academic year 2007. The present study makes use of all 10 students in Art program since the researcher assumes that students in Art program (French) may have high motivation in learning English.

1.8 BASIC ASSUMPTION OF THE STUDY

1.8.1 This study assumes that all subjects will try their best in order to complete both the perception and production test, thus the result of the study will be reliable.

1.8.2 This study assumes that all subjects will be aware of their pronunciation of /v/ since the particular sound does not exist in the Thai sound system.

1.8.3 This study assumes that, in most situations, some factors such as gender, interest, as well as motivation of students, affect their performance of the particular English sound equally. These factors are individual factors; in the case where it affects the students' performance equally, it will have no effect on the results of the study.

1.9 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

1.9.1 **Students** refers to M.4 students from the Art program in Chitralada School in the academic year 2007.

1.9.2 **Perception test** refers to a test which aims at measuring students' abilities to perceive English /v/.

1.9.3 **Production test** refers to a test which aims at measuring students' abilities to pronounce English /v/.

1.9.4 **Teachers** refers to both native and non–native speakers of English who work as in–service English teachers in Chitralada School.

1.10 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1.10.1 The study may point out the advantages of studying English pronunciation.

1.10.2 The findings can be used as a guideline for teachers as well as materials developers in order to develop English courses and instructional materials to help build students' ability in English pronunciation.

1.10.3 This study may provide the way towards further research with respect to the variations in both perception and production of English /v/.

1.11 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

This study is divided into five chapters.

Chapter One is an introduction presenting the background, statement of the problems, objectives of the study, hypotheses, scopes of the study, basic assumptions, definition of terms, significance as well as organization of the study.

Chapter Two illustrates a review of literature pertaining to different results and viewpoints corresponding to the studied area of perception and production.

Chapter Three describes the subjects, methods and research instrument employed in conducting this study.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study.

Chapter Five provides conclusions, discussions and recommendations for further research.