

# STAGE PLAY: STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

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## Abstract

This study aimed to improve students' English pronunciation. The participants were 19 English Program students in the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences and Education, Kamphaeng Phet Rajabhat University, Thailand. These students performed as characters in an English play entitled "The Audition". The data collection methods were 1) video recordings, 2) word-checking tables, 3) post-interviews, and 4) pronunciation evaluation interviews. The findings showed that the students had significant difficulty with some aspects of English pronunciation, such as omitting the final sounds when pronouncing words with endings such as "th", "ed", "sh", "s" and "d". Furthermore, results of pronunciation evaluation interviews with the play director and the head of the English Program showed that the students' pronunciation were improved by the help of the teacher-coaches. The findings of post-interviews also revealed that coaching helped reduce the students' anxiety and increase their confidence when pronouncing English words. Results showed significant pronunciation improvement.

**Keywords:** English pronunciation; Play; Thai university students

## 1. Introduction

The faculty of the English Program believed that one of the benefits of extracurricular activities would be to provide more opportunities for the students to practice English in more social and non-academic situations. In late 2017, program teachers proposed producing an English language play with a view to providing an enriched learning experience for our students. The plan was to audition students in December 2017, cast the play, conduct rehearsals beginning in early January 2018, and present the finished play in public performances in March 2018. However, during play casting in the first week of December, teachers observing the students' performances found numerous pronunciation problems. One of the problems was that the students encountered difficulties in English mispronunciation and felt nervous whenever they pronounced some unknown words. These problems could become a barrier to a successful performance of the play in March. Therefore, this research project was initiated to help the students practice their English pronunciation for the play, to help reduce their anxiety level and to help increase their self-esteem level. As mentioned in Shand (2008) and Barnett (1998), plays or drama can help students increase self-image, motivations, and positive emotional state together with English skill practice. Additionally, participating in a play would promote a cooperative relationship among the students and enhance their positive feelings toward the English language.

Moreover, Monroe (2015) mentioned that pronunciation is hardly given enough attention; in fact, it is one of the most difficult aspects in learning the English language. At the secondary and tertiary levels, pronunciation seems to be a growing problem among foreign students (Jenkins, 2007). Most of these students lack neutral ground to practice their English skills and to sharpen their pronunciation skills. It causes difficulty in speaking English efficiently in the future.

According to Putri, Marbun and Rosnija (2016), teaching correct pronunciation by using drama techniques improved students' achievement. In this study, it was found that the students' achievement increased by a mean score of 5.62 between pre-test and post-test as a result of using drama techniques to improve pronunciation. Supporting this research, Punsiri (2011) and Atas (2015) found that drama training and drama techniques significantly lowered the speaking anxiety of EFL learners.

## **2. Research Objectives**

This research declares the objectives as follows:

1. To identify English pronunciation problems
2. To solve the problems found in 1

## **3. Literature Review**

In the field of teaching and learning English, drama is seen as a technique which helps improve learners' English language skills, especially in pronunciation. In this aspect, Carkin (2004) mentioned that drama has been used for the purpose of developing clear pronunciation and good speech habits. Drama in the classroom where English is used as the target language can support communicative language practices and also encourage the development of imaginative interplay among language learners. In addition, it can be used as a tool in pronunciation practice. In terms of practicing pronunciation, repetition helps learners develop better speech and articulation habits and achieve the clear speech they are expecting. Furthermore, the use of repetition in rehearsing the play can assist the learners in taking control of the correction process by making them more aware of the sound problems.

Putri, Marbun and Rosnija (2016) stated that the dialogue in a good play will be accurate and natural. It will be similar to the way we talk. We do not talk in practice patterns and drills. We talk about ideas. We talk with emotion. We talk with feelings, and we learn to add these to the words if we are going to have true communication. Putri, Marbun and Rosnija (2016) also noted that the actors and actresses in a play will have monologues to say to the audiences. Thus, the monologue itself must be practiced by those performers many times. This repetition will help the learners become accustomed to the language they have chosen as their target language. In this aspect, Davies (1990) elaborated that drama activities facilitate the type of language behavior that should lead to fluency, and if this is accepted, the learners want to learn a language in order to make themselves understood in the target language.

Moore (1997) mentioned that drama can enable us to investigate how accurately students can pronounce words and use meaningful intonation. It is true that using drama as a technique in the language classroom can help learners have better and more clear pronunciation. Thus, they will be trained simultaneously in how to pronounce each word from the play script so that the audience does not misunderstand it.

There are some research studies focusing on using plays to improve students' English pronunciation and to reduce their anxiety level in using English. For example, Putri, Marbun and Rosnija (2016) studied about using drama techniques to improve students' English pronunciation. The drama techniques consisted of dialogues which involved certain sounds which were extracted from an English language drama, and which were applied to 25 students. In addition, the students

were given a pre-test and a post-test. The results of data collection showed that drama techniques positively affected students' pronunciation as it provided the students with the correct pronunciation of English to practice. In this respect, the students were able to speak accurately and fluently in English. Additionally, they could understand utterances more easily.

Studies of drama techniques and speaking anxiety were also conducted with EFL learners; for example, Fung (2005) studied the effect of anxiety in a drama-oriented second language classroom. The participants in the study were 37 students in English as the medium of instruction (EMI) secondary school in Hong Kong. The results from an FLCA measuring questionnaire and an individual interview, including journals from the participants were varied because while most students were found to have a lower level of anxiety in the drama-oriented second language classroom, a small group of students felt nervous occasionally. Furthermore, role-play was found to be an activity that helped decrease students' level of anxiety.

Punsiri (2011) studied the effectiveness of drama techniques on Thai EFL students' Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) reduction by investigating the types of FLCA that the students had, examining drama activities that affect English language learning of the students with FLCA, and improving drama techniques in order to reduce FLCA. Forty-four non-English major university students selected by a non-random sampling method participated in the study. Eight drama technique-based lesson plans, an FLCA questionnaire and guided questions for focus group discussion were employed to serve the purposes of the study. The results revealed that all participants had overall FLCA at the moderate level before the experiment. It also found that the participants had Communication Apprehension at the high level in accordance with three types of FLCA classified with Fear of Negative Evaluation and Test Anxiety at the moderate levels. After learning through drama techniques, the FLCA of the participants reduced significantly at the .05 level. Based on qualitative data analyzed, it indicated that prepared-improvised drama and drama games were the most effective activities in reducing the students' FLCA. Lastly, the participants reported that teachers had a friendly appearance, a sense of humor, and used non-threatening words to make the students feel safe in class. In addition, they also recommended that teachers pay careful attention to the students' language performance in order to help correct their mistakes.

Another example was the study of Atas (2015) which aimed to find out how and to what extent drama helps to lower the level of speaking anxiety among EFL learners. The study was conducted with 24, 12<sup>th</sup> grades students at high school in Kuzan, Turkey. In his study, the triangulation of the data was established with pre and post-tests; semi-structured pre and post interviews; and student diaries. The teacher's reflections strengthened the qualitative aspect of the study. After six weeks of language and drama training, the results revealed that the drama techniques significantly lowered the speaking anxiety of EFL learners.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

##### **4.1 Participants**

The participants were 19 English major students. A purposive sampling method was applied in this study, as the purposes of the study was focused on investigating only the pronunciation problems and the anxiety level of the actors and actresses in the stage play.

##### **4.2 Research instruments**

The research instruments of the study included the video recorded on the audition day used to identify students' English pronunciation problems, the word-checking tables used to record and track students' pronunciation improvement, the interview used to elicit their anxiety level, the interview used to discover students' pronunciation competency as reported by the

director of the play, a native English speaker and the interview used to explore students' specific pronunciation errors, as reported by the head of the English Program, a PhD in Applied Linguistics.

#### 4.3 Data collection

In this study, the play rehearsals were held during January and February, 2018, and the data collection was organized with the following steps:

1. The researchers recorded the stage play on the audition day in order to identify students' English pronunciation problems.
2. The researchers watched the video, analyzed and listed the mispronounced words from the video and then created the word-checking tables for pronunciation practice.
3. The students practiced the words listed with their specific pronunciation problems. The words were checked by the teachers in the word-checking tables. After that, the students rehearsed the script lines with the teachers and the words were checked by the teachers in the word-checking tables. This process was done three days per week for a period of six weeks. Apart from that, the students also rehearsed the play with the director five times per week.
4. An interview was used to investigate the anxiety level of the actors and actresses of the play before and after the three public performances.
5. An interview was used to assess students' pronunciation competency as reported by the director of the play at the start of rehearsals and after the three public performances.
6. An interview was used to explore students' specific pronunciation errors as reported by the head of English Program at the start of rehearsals and after the three public performances.

#### 4.4 Data analysis

In this study, a content analysis was employed to confirm whether the play helped improve students' English pronunciation. In this aspect, the word-checking tables, the interview used to measure students' anxiety level, the interview used to discover students' pronunciation as reported by the director of the play and the interview used to explore students' pronunciation as reported by the head of English Program were analyzed based on 1) decontextualization (identifying meaning units), 2) recontextualization (comparing the units with the original data), 3) categorization (condensing meaning units and bringing subjects together), and compilation (finding the underlying meaning of the text) (Bengtsson, 2016; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). To ensure whether the qualitative data were reliable and consistent, the researchers went through the examined data by comparing and checking the word-checking tables and the interviews together with the interviewers and the students.

### 5. Results

The results are divided into two parts based on the two objectives. Part 1 presents the pronunciation words list that were determined during casting. Part 2 demonstrates the solutions based on the interview of the cast members and pronunciation teacher-coaches.

#### Part 1 English pronunciations identification

As stated, the first objective is to identify pronunciation problems of the actors and actresses. This study discovered the pronunciation problems during the casting audition and the words found as the pronunciation problems of the cast members were listed in the word-checking tables.

#### Part 2 Pronunciation solutions

The second objective is to solve the pronunciation problems that were mentioned in the first objective via coaching by the four teacher-researchers. The results of coaching revealed that the pronunciation of the actors and actresses who had English pronunciation problems were improved as shown during the final public performances. These findings were supported by the word-checking tables and the interviews of the actors, the actresses, the director, and the head of the English Program.

There is some supporting evidence from the interviews shown in the followings.

Character: Carrie's mother

Before coaching - "I didn't prepare the screenplay of the character for the casting audition, so I didn't understand the character and situations. In the end, I used the wrong tone in the scene. I also mispronounced some words as well."

After coaching - "After I got trained with my teachers, my pronunciation has been improved. I pronounce the words more correctly. Also, I understand the situations better, I could use the right tone in that situation."

Character: Elizabeth's mother

Before coaching - "I got stuck and didn't have much confidence in pronouncing unfamiliar words."

After coaching - "I pronounce more fluently and have more confidence when I speak English."

Character: Alison's father

Before coaching - "My pronunciation was quite terrible. I wasn't confident speaking my lines."

After coaching - "My pronunciation has improved a lot. I was much more comfortable speaking on stage."

Director:

"During the auditions, and in the early rehearsals, many of the students' had significant pronunciation problems, in phrases such as: 'throw the ball', 'battered and assaulted', 'pig ran thru a department store', 'best of the best', 'really strong skills', and 'become a dermatologist'."

"After training with the coaches, their pronunciation improved dramatically. Some of the students could not pronounce the problem words at all in the beginning or the pronunciation was very difficult to understand. The coaching and frequent practices made a big difference, in a positive way. It helped strengthen their pronunciation."

English Program Head:

"On the day of the audition, the students not only mispronounced words that contain sounds like ð θ ʒ but also placed the wrong stress on the syllables. Moreover, many problems of saying connected speech, especially with regard to sentence stress linking and intonation, were found. In the public performances, it could be concluded that the students' pronunciation was improved based on the intensive coaching program the teacher-coaches gave to the students."

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

In this part, the results of an investigation are discussed into two aspects.

Firstly, the results of identifying the actors' English pronunciation problems showed that the students produced mispronounced words as follows:

The words with "th" were omitted such as "with", "birthday", "think". In this regard, it can be speculated that Thai speakers generally have troubles with dental fricatives [ð] and [θ] in

English as there are no dental fricatives in Thai context. The findings were consistent with the study of Han (2013), which reported that Chinese speakers generally have troubles with dental fricatives [θ] and [ð] in English as there are no dental fricatives in Mandarin Chinese (through there are dental fricatives in other Chinese dialects).

This study also found that the participants produced mispronounced words such as “wish” and “finish”. It can be speculated that Thai speakers have trouble with fricative post alveolar [ʃ] because there are no final sounds of fricative post alveolar in Thai context. However, the fricative post alveolar [ʃ] was substituted with plosive alveolar [d]

The words with “ed” ending were omitted such as “existed”, “diseased” and “looked”. Incidentally, it can be explained that there are no “ed” ending sound in Thai context; however, when this sound is omitted, it affects the meaning in terms of past tense.

The words with “s” ending were omitted such as “songs”, “flowers” and “applications”. It can be said that there are no “s” ending sound in Thai context; nevertheless, when this sound is omitted, it affects the meaning in terms of plural form.

The words with “d” ending were omitted such as “understand”, “food” and “weird”. It can be explained that there are no “d” ending sound in Thai context; however, when this sound is omitted, it may cause miscommunication.

Based on the findings mentioned above, it can be seen that the Thai students always omit the final sounds of English.

Secondly, the results of coaching showed that the pronunciations of actors were improved by coaching for 6 weeks. The result was consistent with the word-checking tables. The number of mispronunciations was reduced based on the results of word-checking tables, the director’s interview and the head of English Program’s interview. There is some evidence from the interviews of the director and the head of English Program that supports the findings mentioned above. The director said “After training with the coaches, their pronunciation improved significantly. Some of the students could not pronounce the problem words at all in the beginning or the pronunciation was very difficult to understand as they pronounced words unclearly or incorrectly. The coaching in between rehearsals, and then the extra practice they received in rehearsals made a big difference, in a positive way. In addition to better pronunciation, the students began to improve their intonation, which was just as important or even more important, because they were acting; they were speaking to other characters in a stage voice and trying to convey certain emotions with their voices. Intonation is a big part of this, and in some cases, it helped strengthen their pronunciation.”

The head of English Program said “After the students received some coaching, I noticed a huge improvements in all areas:

- The pronunciation of problematic sounds; for instance, pronouncing ð θ ʒ was better.
- Stress problems both at word level and sentence level were lessened.
- Students were able to say connected speech with more appropriate linking, stress and intonation.

“I believe the improvement in pronunciation was the result of the intensive coaching program the coaches gave to the students.”

The findings corresponded to the study of Putri, Marbun and Rosnija (2016), which found that using Drama Technique affected students’ pronunciation. They confirmed that using such techniques provided students opportunities to practice their pronunciation through drill or repetition.

Moreover, coaching in the play helped reduce students' anxiety levels in producing correct pronunciation. The correct pronunciation implied that it reduces anxiety and increases self-esteem for actors and actresses according to the students' interviews. In addition, the director of the play and the head of English Program also supported that the pronunciation coaching helped improve the students' pronunciation skills and also made their speech more natural as well as improving intonation and tone which have an impact on semantic competence. The findings were consistent with Punsiri (2011) that drama activities helped reduce students' anxiety level.

Lastly, it can be concluded that the intensive coaching by English teachers could help improve student's pronunciation by correcting their mistakes and encouraging them to use the correct speech. Moreover, the play also provided students opportunities in target situations that helped them make their speech, intonation, tone, and inflection more natural, all of which had a positive impact on semantic competence.

## 7. Suggestions

In this study, the 7 students who performed as the main characters in the play (many of whom had longer monologues) also used an application called "Elsa" to help them practice their pronunciation. It was found that the application helped them improve their English pronunciation, as it allowed them to compare their pronunciation with that of native speakers of American English. They were able to practice with the goal of replicating the pronunciation they heard on the app, and then listen to their own recorded voice in comparison. Previous English program students at Kamphaeng Phet Rajabhat University had completed a research study (2017) on the specific methodology that the "Elsa" application employs, and clearly outlined its benefits for improving pronunciation. This technique was not examined in detail in this research because only some of the actors/actresses used the application to practice pronunciation.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Example of Word Checking-Tables**

**ACTOR: Alison**

**WEEK 1**

No.	WORD	DAY 1 ( _ / _ / _ )				DAY 2 ( _ / _ / _ )				DAY 3 ( _ / _ / _ )			
		W	S1	Po	S2	W	S1	Po	S2	W	S1	Po	S2
1	bass												
2	experience												
3	beast												
4	crucible												
5	role												
6	that												
7	fool												
8	certain												
9	both												
10	mistake												
11	list												
12													
13													
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28													

**W** warm up  
**S1** script practicing (round1)  
**\*** pronunciation problems found later

**Po** post  
**S2** script practicing (round2)

### **Appendix B**

#### **The Students' Interview**

##### **The Students' Interview**

1. On the audition day, how was your pronunciation?

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2. After you were coached by the teachers for your pronunciation, how was your pronunciation?

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### **Appendix C**

#### **The Director of the Play's Interview**

##### **The Director of the Play's Interview**

1. On the audition day, how was the pronunciation of the students?



2. After they were coached by the teachers for their pronunciation, how was the pronunciation of the students?

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**Focus : Opportunities and**  
**Challenges in a Globalizing**  
**Society**

**11 – 12 July, 2019**  
**at Amari Pattaya Hotel,**  
**Chonburi, Thailand**

6	15.00 – 15.20	He Ke	SWOT Analysis and Countermeasure on the Sustainable Development of Phuket Vegetarian Festival	Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus
7	15.20 – 15.40	(1) Parinya Nakpathom (2) Kanjansit Chinapha (3) Nattapat Rakkijwanittanadee (4) Parichart Veeraphan (5) Kantaphon Akepat (6) Pandara Chajang (7) Gao Li Juan	Sustainable Tourism Perception of local population perception and local population Commitment towards Festival Tourism in Bangsaen City, Thailand	Burapha University International College
8	15.40 – 16.00	(1) Si Zhang (2) Yun Zhang Ling	A Comparative Study of the Development Situation and Trend about Tourism Standardization between China and Thailand	Beijing International Studies University

### **PAPER PRESENTATION (Global Communication and Education)**

**Venue: AMARI TOWER MEETING ROOM I**

**Friday, 12 July 2019**

**MODERATOR: Dr. Charlton Bruton**

**Time: 09.00 – 12.00**

No.	Time	Author (s)	Paper Title	Institution
1	09.00 – 09.20	(1) Riccardo Corrado (2) Patchanee Tungjan	Teachers' Motivation and Quality Education Represent the Key for the Change in Cambodia	(1) Department of Management of Information Systems Paragon International University (2) Department of Occupational Therapy Chiang Mai University

2	09.20 – 09.40	Chartaya Nilplub	The Effect of Source of Information on Student Expectation in Higher Education Service	Faculty of Business Administration Rajamangala University of Technology Isan
3	09.40 – 10.00	Phatsanan Sriaphiphan	A Comparative of Chinese and Thai Language's Measure Words of Animals	Chinese International Program Bangkok University
4	10.00 – 10.20	Minh Nhat Tran Viet	The Effect of Self-Efficacy to Regulate Exercise Factors on University Students' Physical Activities	Burapha University International College
	10.20 – 10.40	Coffee Break		
5	10.40 – 11.00	(1) Anon Klaypha (2) Nantanat Tonboon (3) Chutima Sangwarinta (4) Archanya Sriwantanasin (5) Nisakorn Prakongchati (6) Joel Grisell	Stage Play: Strengthening Students' English Pronunciation	English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Kamphang Phet Rajabhat University
6	11.00 – 11.20	Charlton Bruton	Becoming English Proficient: Developing Joint Intentional Competencies in International Higher Education	Burapha University International College
7	11.20 – 11.40	Thada Wangthammang	Enhancing the Student Performance Using Pair Programming in HTML Floating Layout Lesson	Digital Media Program, Prince of Songkla University International College