

# **BUILDING UP THAI EFL STUDENTS' POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD THEIR NON-NATIVE ENGLISH ACCENTED SPEECH WITH THE USE OF PHONETICS WEBSITE**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examined the hypothesis that Thai EFL students' positive attitudes toward their non-native English accented speech could be promoted by the use of University of Iowa's *Sounds of American English* website, known as the "number 1 phonetics website". Fifty-two undergraduate students in the field of sciences participated in the investigation, which took place at two different stages. The findings of both stages mirrored non-native-like identity they perceptually obtained and native-like identity they socially aspired to possess. The findings of the second stage confirmed the hypothesis to some extent because of their synchronous feelings of slightly decreased embarrassment and increased pride and offer two insightful directions for EFL teachers. Firstly, irrespective of students' actual English accented speech, there is a need to promote their positive attitudes toward their own accent at an early age. Secondly, helping them understand that speaking intelligibly is more important than sounding like a native speaker.

**Keywords:** Thai EFL learners; language attitude; non-native English accented speech; phonetics website

## **1. Introduction**

English has been commonly used as a lingua franca among non-native speakers in many social contexts. In Thailand, it is thus the language nationally recognized as a compulsory subject at all educational levels. Thai students must study English for years, yet their ability to speak English is rather poor due to affective, linguistic and socio-cultural factors. Affectively, they tend to possess high anxiety in and negative attitudes toward speaking English (Akkakoson, 2016; Toomnam & Intaraprasert, 2015) and lack confidence and pride when interacting with foreigners (Tananuraksakul, 2012). Linguistically, there are mother tongue interference and sound system differences between English and Thai (Wei & Zhou, 2002), and only English major students are required to take linguistic courses. Socio-culturally, English is learned and used as an EFL, and they personally and/or socially aspire to speak like

a native because a native-like sound is attached to prestige, privilege and power (Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2014). British English and American English as norm providers remain preferred accents to many Thais.

The affective, linguistic and socio-cultural factors argued above appear to be dichotomous, raising a question or a concern about English language teaching in Thailand. Khamkhien (2010) found that Thai undergraduate students in the field of sciences had limited competence in English pronunciation and further suggested that teachers of English should focus more on pronunciation features in the classroom. This suggestion aligns with Wei and Zhou's (2002) personal observations that teaching pronunciation is normally neglected in a Thai EFL classroom because non-native teachers do not have enough confidence with their limited linguistic knowledge. In terms of a variety of English, Smith and Nelson (2006) highlight the importance of speaking the language fluently and intelligibly rather than speaking it like a native tongue. In the same vein, Jenkins (2005) stresses that non-native English accented speech should be promoted and treated as acceptable varieties since a larger number of non-native speakers frequently adopt English as a medium of international communication.

As a result, speaking English with a Thai accent and clear English pronunciation should be promoted among Thai adult learners who have a tendency to speak English less like a native. In addition, intelligible pronunciation allows international communication among both native and non-native English speakers and among non-native speakers themselves to be easier (Wei & Zhou, 2002), which may concurrently promote EFL learners' positive attitudes toward their own non-native accent. Positive language attitudes can greatly influence EFL learners' social behaviours in general and language learning in particular (Castro & Roh, 2013). Thus, the aim of this paper is to investigate to what extent using a phonetics website can help promote EFL undergraduate students' positive attitudes towards their non-native English accented speech.

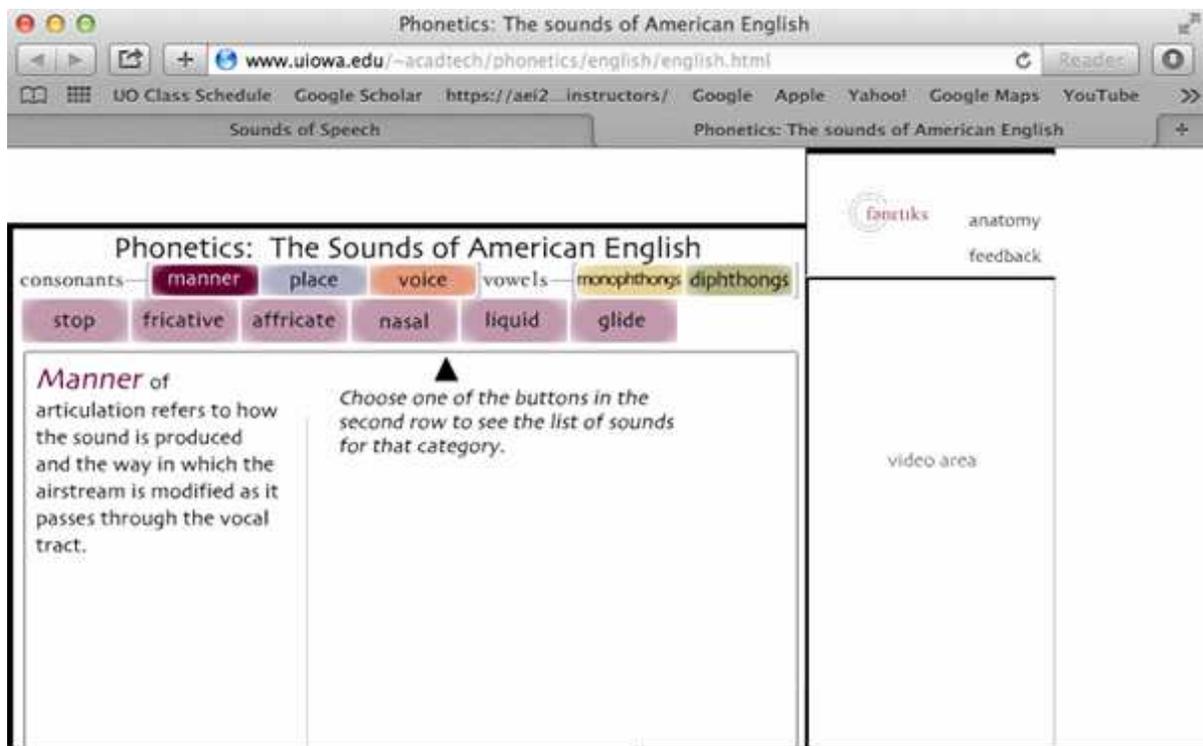
## **2. Related literature review and hypothesis**

One of the most important factors of foreign language learning achievement is language attitude, which is inescapably included in many studies into English language teaching and learning, target groups of people, and accented speech (e.g. Lontou, 2015; Prakaiborisuth & Trakulkasemsuk, 2015; Castro & Roh, 2013; Arishi, 2012). In Thailand, it appears that there is no investigation into promoting EFL learners' positive attitudes toward their own non-native English accented speech. Many have studied learners' attitudes toward a variety of

English accents. For example, McKenzie, Kitikanan and Boriboon (2016) examined Thai nationals' evaluations of specific varieties of English speech while Snodin and Young (2015) surveyed Thai perceptions of and attitudes towards varieties of English.

It is therefore worth finding a useful teaching tool to boost Thai learners' positive attitudes toward their Thai English accented speech with intelligibility. The University of Iowa's *Sounds of American English*, known as the "number 1 phonetics website", was reviewed favorably as a teaching tool to enhance learners' English literacy (Eller, 2015) and perhaps positive attitudes towards their own accented speech because it is learning technology that young people may identify themselves with (Tananuraksakul, 2014, 2015). In other words, it is a kind of new technology that may motivate new generations to learn. EFL teachers can use the phonetics website as a language model for pronouncing English consonant sounds systems in their classroom while learners can further self-practice in their leisure time. It gives a comprehensive understanding of how American English speech sounds are formed, including videos, audio samples and animations describing the essential features of the consonants and vowels. Figure 1 shows the website with manner and place of articulation of each English consonant sound.

Figure 1: The phonetics website



Evidently, Thai learners have English pronunciation problems due to the fact that both languages have more sound systems differences than similarities. The most obvious difference are the consonant sounds that do not exist in Thai but are used or do exist in English: /g/, /v/, voiced /th/, voiceless /th/, /z/, /sh/, /zh/, /ch/, /j/ and /r/. Unlike English, Thai has fewer voiced consonants, and final voiced consonants are silent. It is also hard for Thais to pronounce words with initial and final consonant clusters. When Thais are unaware of these problematic differences, they tend to speak English with substituted Thai sound systems (Wei & Zhou, 2002), producing unintelligible accented speech. However, Kanokpermpoon (2007) concludes in his research that they can speak English with more confidence if they are aware of the differences and practice pronouncing those sounds. Moffatt (2006) also suggests that Thai learners need to understand the importance of developing good English pronunciation and want to self-improve it. These arguments led the researcher to hypothesize that inclusion of teaching English pronunciation features in an EFL classroom through the use of the phonetics website could build up Thai EFL learners' positive attitudes toward their non-native English accented speech.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Participant recruitment**

Fifty two students studying in the field of sciences and taking the English Listening and Speaking for Professional Purposes course with the researcher during August and December 2015 were purposively recruited. Regardless of the students' actual English proficiency, they were required to take this course in their third year. Since the study primarily investigated the students' attitudes toward their own English accent, they were not asked to take a placement test.

#### **3.2. Research tool**

A questionnaire consisting of two parts was the main tool employed to examine the participants' positive attitudes toward their English accent. The first part was related to demography (age, opportunity for communication in English and preference for English communication). The second part had ten questions adopted from Episcopo's (2009) questionnaire on attitudes toward non-native English accents using five-point semantic differential scales, Likert scales, and frequency Likert scales. All ten questions reflect the participants' attitudes toward their own accent and others' in general because in this study attitude refers to "feelings people have about their own language or the languages of others"

(Crystal, 1997, p.215). Since embarrassment and lack of pride when interacting in English with foreigners are negative feelings that can render non-native English speakers self-worthless (Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2011), feeling proud of one's own English accented speech marks positive attitude. On the other hand, feeling embarrassed marked negative attitude.

### 3.3. Data collection and analysis

In order to test the hypothesis, the investigation consisted of two stages: at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Data collected in those stages were analysed statistically by IBM SPSS 20 software and interpreted based on the following scales, percentage and ratings:

<b>5-rating Scale</b>	<b>Descriptive Rating</b>
4.20 – 5.00	crucial/ always
3.40 – 4.19	very important/ often
2.60 – 3.39	neutral/ sometimes
1.80 – 2.59	sometimes important/ rarely
1.00 – 1.79	not important/ never
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Descriptive Rating</b>
more than 80	strongly agree
61 - 80	agree
41 - 60	neutral
21 - 40	disagree
Less than 20	strongly disagree

During the first week of the semester, the researcher initially surveyed the participants' attitudes toward their own accent and others' in general by asking them to complete the questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously. Since the findings revealed that they possessed negative attitudes toward their own non-native English accent and that they were not English majors, the researcher encompassed sound system differences between English and Thai in the regular lessons. During the first 5-10 minutes of each lesson, the researcher introduced one English consonant that does not exist in Thai and demonstrated how to pronounce it properly through the phonetics website. Additionally, the researcher mimicked possible accents and minimal-pair activities with them (e.g. *rice / lice, vow / wow, thorn / dawn, chair / share, jam / yam, zoo / sue, vision / fashion*). The researcher also informed the participants of the findings, explained this project to them and emphasized the

importance of pronouncing English words as clearly as they could for the purpose of international communication. The second stage took place at the end of the semester, the researcher asked the participants to complete the same questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

In Stage One, 51 participants, 10 males and 41 females, returned the questionnaire. The first part indicated their common range of age between 20 and 25 as well as different levels of frequent opportunity and preference for English communication detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' demographic information

Items	n	Percentage
Students sometimes had a chance to use English.	41	80.4
Students never used English for communication.	3	5.9
Students preferred to communicate in English at a neutral level.	24	47.1
Students preferred to communicate in English at a high level.	9	17.6
Students preferred to communicate in English slightly.	4	7.8
Students preferred to communicate in English least.	4	7.8
Only one student liked to communicate in English most.	1	2

As evidenced in Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5, the participants thought it was very important for them to sound like a native English speaker ( $\bar{x} = 3.8431$ ) and they thought they possessed negative attitudes toward their own accented speech because they agreed they felt embarrassed about their accented speech when speaking in English (70.6%). Similarly, they agreed their English accented speech was heavy (68.6%) with strong agreement of clearly non-nativeness (96.1%), though a few of them perceived their English accented speech as native-like (3.9%).

When talking to native English speakers, their attitudes toward their own accent tended to be negative because they felt embarrassed about their own accent (72.5%), reflecting symbolic relations of power and identity between non-native and native speakers (Norton, 2000). On the one hand, the findings supported the arguments about dichotomy between affective, linguistic and socio-cultural factors. On the other hand, they reflected non-native-like identity the participants thought they had and native-like identity they socially and/or personally desired to possess (Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2014, pp. 261-262).

In addition, the participants also thought that it was very important for their non-native interlocutors to talk like a native English speaker ( $\bar{X} = 3.5686$ ). They seemed to have better attitudes toward their own accent when talking to those non-natives because they neutrally agreed they felt proud (41.2%) of and embarrassed (56.9%) about their accent.

Table 2. Students' views about their own accent and others'

Questions	N	Means ( $\bar{X}$ )	SD	Meaning
1. How important is it for you to sound like a native English speaker?	51	3.8431	.80926	very important
2. When you are speaking to another non-native speaker, how important is it to you that he or she has a native-like accent?	51	3.5686	1.02479	very important
3. When you are speaking to native speakers, how often are you completely understood?	51	2.8627	.84899	sometimes
4. When you are speaking to a non-native speaker, how often are you completely understood?	51	3.1765	.79261	sometimes
5. When you listen to a non-native speaker, how often do you pay attention to his or her accent?	51	3.1961	1.03961	sometimes

Table 3. Students' feelings about their own accent

Questions	N	Feeling of Pride (n)	Meaning	Feeling of Embarrassment (n)	Meaning
6. How do you feel about your accent when you speak English?	50	27.5% (14)	disagree	70.6% (36)	agree
7. How do you feel about your accent when you speak to another non-native speaker?	51	41.2% (21)	neutral	56.9% (29)	neutral
8. How do you feel about your accent when you speak to a native speaker?	50	25.5% (13)	disagree	72.5% (37)	agree

Table 4. Students' views about their own accent

Question	N	Lightly Accented (n)	Meaning	Heavy Accented (n)	Meaning
9. How would you rate your English accent in terms of degree?	51	31.4% (16)	disagree	68.6% (35)	agree

Table 5. Students' views about their own accent

Question	N	Native-like (n)	Meaning	Clearly Not Native (n)	Meaning
10. How would you rate your English accent in terms of nativeness?	51	3.9% (2)	Strongly disagree	96.1% (49)	Strongly agree

In Stage 2, all 52 participants returned the questionnaire, and its demography was similar to those of Stage 1. As can be seen in Tables 6, 7, 8 and 9, the participants still thought

that it was very important for them to speak English like a native ( $\bar{X} = 3.4314$ ) and strongly agreed that their English accented speech remained heavy (80.8%) and clearly non-native (94.2%). These findings reflect non-native-like identity they perceptually possess as well as native-like identity they socially and/or personally aspire to have, so that they may socially gain prestige, privilege and power (Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2014, pp. 261-263). One person (1.9%) thought he had a native-like English accent, which accords with the number of students preferring to communicate in English most (2%). Since none of the participants spoke like a native, this particular outcome indicates that having a native-like accent may not necessarily mean sounding like a native (Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2014, p. 262) as long as he/she enjoyed using the language.

As compared to the first stage, the participants' attitudes toward their own accent when speaking English to native speakers remained negative because the level of their feelings of pride and embarrassment were the same as those of the first stage in Question 8. However, when talking to non-native English speakers, their attitudes toward their own non-native English accented speech tended to be slightly more positive because the degree of their embarrassment about their own accent was lower while the pride of their own accent was higher shown in Questions 6 and 7. The analytical findings therefore confirm the hypothesis only to some extent that the phonetics website usage can help promote Thai EFL undergraduate learners' positive attitudes toward their own non-native English accented speech. In one sense, the outcomes mirror their positive attitudes toward developing their English speaking skills (Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2011, p. 198) they may gain through the phonetics website usage and the emphasis of speaking English with a Thai accent and clear pronunciation. The outcomes also disclose a group identity the participants may begin to perceptually share with only non-native English interlocutors because the result from Question 5 reveals that it was very important for them to listen to non-native speakers' accented speech with attention ( $\bar{X} = 3.4231$ ).

Table 6. Students' opinions about their own accent and others'

Question	N	Feeling of Pride (n)	Meaning	Feeling of Embarrassment (n)	Meaning
6. How do you feel about your accent when you speak English?	48	34.6% (18)	disagree	57.7% (30)	neutral
7. How do you feel about your accent when you speak to another non-native speaker?	49	51.9% (27)	neutral	42.3% (22)	neutral
8. How do you feel about your accent when you speak to a	49	25% (13)	disagree	69.2% (36)	agree

native speaker?					
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Table 7. Students' feelings about their own accent

Question	N	Lightly Accented (n)	Meaning	Heavy Accented (n)	Meaning
9. How would you rate your English accent in terms of degree?	48	11.5% (6)	strongly disagree	80.8% (42)	strongly agree

Table 8. Students' opinions about their own accent

Question	N	Native-like (n)	Meaning	Clearly Not Native (n)	Meaning
10. How would you rate your English accent in terms of nativeness?	50	1.9% (1)	strongly disagree	94.2% (49)	strongly agree

Table 9. Students' opinions about their own accent

Question	N	Means ( $\bar{X}$ )	S.D.	Meaning
1. How important is it for you to sound like a native English speaker?	51	3.4314	.90011	very important
2. When you are speaking to another non-native speaker, how important is it to you that he or she has a native-like accent?	48	3.2500	.88726	sometimes
3. When you are speaking to native speakers, how often are you completely understood?	52	2.8846	.92150	sometimes
4. When you are speaking to a non-native speaker, how often are you completely understood?	52	2.8077	.74198	sometimes
5. When you listen to a non-native speaker, how often do you pay attention to his or her accent?	52	3.4231	.95684	very important

## 5. Conclusion

This study quantitatively examined to what extent the use of the University of Iowa's *Sounds of American English* in an EFL classroom could promote Thai undergraduate students' positive attitudes toward their non-native English accented speech. The results from two stages of investigations reflected their perceptual non-native-like identity and desired native-like identity. In the second stage, after the use of the phonetics website in the classroom, the results indicated their better attitudes toward their non-native English accented speech due to their synchronous feelings of slightly decreased embarrassment and increased pride. It was therefore proven to some extent that the phonetics website could help build up Thai undergraduate students' positive attitudes toward their non-native English accented speech. It may be the case that they were slightly motivated to learn through the use of the website.

Although the number of the participants was small in relation to the target population, which may limit the study, the results revealed some insightful directions for EFL teachers. Firstly, irrespective of Thai EFL learners' actual English accented speech, there is a need to

promote their positive attitudes toward their own English accent so as to influence their social behaviours and language learning positively. Secondly, English has been used as a lingua franca in many social contexts, so sounding like a native English speaker is not as important as speaking with intelligibility.

The study may also be limited by the duration of the use of the phonetics website with adult learners of 20-25 years of age or new generations. The phonetics website should be introduced to students at an early age or included in regular English lessons. A larger number of participants and in-depth interviews are recommended for future research.

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