

# Assessing Students' Pronunciation: Voices from Native English Teachers (NETs) and Non-native English Teachers (NNETs)

VALENTIN VALENTINOV TASSEV

PHANITPHIM SOJISIRIKUL

*King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi*

*This research study investigates and compares the operational criteria of three native English teachers (NETs) and three non-native English teachers (NNETs) when assessing English pronunciation of Thai learners. Supposedly, all six participants had already developed their own criteria of evaluating and grading pronunciation by the time the research study was completed. The main research instrument used throughout the study were individual semi-structured interviews conducted with all participants. The findings revealed that both NETs and NNETs considered intonation/rhythm, stress and grammar important aspects and features of pronunciation in English. Nevertheless, the findings illustrated that NNETs also considered other non-pronunciation features per se, such as visual clues, which according to them played a contributory role in terms of how the message is being delivered to the listener. In this regard, NNETs assessed students' pronunciation on a broader level or more holistically than their native counterparts and most of them included overall intelligibility as a separate category throughout their assessment practices. According to them, successful communication thus takes place in the presence of other non-verbal clues or paralinguistic features of human behaviour, such as body language, eye contact, facial expressions, voice and gestures amongst others, which go hand-in-hand with pronunciation and largely contribute to the clarity of the message being conveyed.*

**Keywords:** native English teachers (NETs), non-native English teachers (NNETs), pronunciation, assessment criteria

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In the wake of the rapid growth of English as an International Language (EIL) or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), questions have emerged as to the evolving nature and status of English covering issues of ownership, identity, conformity as well as the establishment and pursuit of various assessment criteria and practices. The interest in this present study is indeed rooted in the ongoing debate about the extent of the role and involvement of both NETs and NNETs in assessing oral performance in English and, in particular, pronunciation.

Specifically, this study aims to investigate what operational criteria both NETs and NNETs propose and implement throughout their assessment practices when evaluating non-native English pronunciation.

Drawing comparison between both teachers' criteria employed for the purpose of pronunciation assessment could provide some theoretical and practical suggestions on how pronunciation should be assessed. In light of this, this study could provide some insights whether pronunciation in English should conform to the native-speaker (NS) model or other varieties of English could be considered equally legitimate and acceptable, as the EIL paradigm stipulates. Furthermore, this study could provide insights into whether new assessment practices and grading rubrics need to be introduced to ensure high levels of inter-reliability coefficients between both groups of teachers in terms of assessment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Various Perspectives on the Study of Pronunciation*

The study of pronunciation at large is concerned with analysing speech on both segmental and suprasegmental levels. When analysing speech on segmental level, one looks at single speech sounds, such as vowels and consonants. When analysing speech at supra-segmental or prosodic level, one looks at stress, rhythm, intonation and elision (the deletion of phoneme when speaking). Suprasegmental features occur simultaneously with the segmental features, and normally stretch over more than a single segment: possibly a syllable, a complete word, phrase, whole sentences, or even more (Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo, 1998). Previous studies suggest that pronunciation of words on a sentence level with the correct intonation and stress is also crucial towards comprehending and evaluating one's speech (Khamkhien, 2010a, p.187).

An alternative way of looking at pronunciation is intelligibility. In spite of a large number of studies conducted concerning intelligibility, its definition has remained varied. Im (2007, p.6), for example, defines intelligibility as "the extent to which the pronunciation features of speech are recognizable by a listener in a communicative exchange". Field (2005, p.410) defines intelligibility as "the extent to which the acoustic-phonetic content of the message is recognizable by the listener". Munro and Derwing (1995; 1997) explain that intelligibility is the extent to which a listener is able to decode utterances and measure them by the accuracy rate of a transcription task. In determining the degree of understanding, Smith (1992, 2009), on the other hand, proposes a three-dimensional approach to understanding inter-cultural communication. The first approach or level is intelligibility, which measures a listener's ability to identify and recognize words or utterances. The second level is

comprehensibility, which measures a listener's ability to understand the meanings of words or utterances in their given context. The third level is interpretability that measures a listener's ability to perceive and understand the intention of the speaker.

Moreover, intelligibility could be enhanced by other features of communication which are not part of language and pronunciation (Crystal, 1971; Kanoksilapatham, 2009; Roach, 1991; Singhanuwananon, 2016; Wang, 1987; Widdowson, 1996). These features include paralinguistics, such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact and voice quality (tones of voice, intonation, articulation and pitch range). These features of communication are quite meaningful, contextually relevant, attitudinal in function and they, therefore, could largely contribute to intelligibility and successful communication.

### ***A Comparison between the Oral Assessment Criteria of NETs and NNETs***

The distinction between NETs and NNETs has long been at the core of the debate within the field of applied linguistics and, in particular, English language education. Yet, studies drawing comparison between both teachers' oral assessment criteria and the process they go through when evaluating oral proficiency and, in particular, pronunciation, are quite limited. Kim (2009, p.206) conducted a qualitative study to examine how NETs and NNETs assess students' oral performance in English. The study revealed differences in the criteria that NETs and NNETs used to assess students' oral performance. Kim (2009) found that the NETs' criteria include pronunciation accuracy at segmental level such as words that were mispronounced ("arrive for alive"); pronunciation issues that caused confusion ("can/can't"); occasionally unclear pronunciation (e.g. "really") and examples of pronunciation difficulty (e.g. "l/r, d/t, f/p"). Besides accuracy for pronunciation, NETs also paid considerable attention to the accurate use of prepositions as well as the precise use of verb tenses amongst others aspects of grammar use. Content accuracy was also another criteria NETs used in evaluating students' speaking ability.

While NETs focused on accuracy, NNETs focused more on the "overall quality" of students' oral performance. They did not seem to be interested in details related to pronunciation accuracy as their native counterparts, but they were more focused on "intelligibility". The fact that NNETs did not identify linguistics errors as accurately as did the NETs could perhaps be due to the fact that the NNETs were more familiar with the students' pronunciation in English than the NETs, provided that the NNETs shared the same first language background with the students. As a result, the NNETs were not as attentive as NETs to specific aspects of pronunciation accuracy as long as the speech was comprehensible for them. Besides, NNETs did not appear attentive to specific aspects of grammar and content accuracy as long as the speech was comprehensible for them. Kim (2009, p.206) concluded that NETs were more interested and concerned with

pronunciation accuracy of segmental features while NNETs paid closer attention to the overall intelligibility and comprehensibility of students' speech.

In another comparative study, Ekmekci (2016) explored the assessment of both NETs and NNETs of oral proficiency of students learning English. The researcher compared the scores distributed by both groups of assessors across five components of speaking skills, namely, fluency, vocabulary, accuracy, communication strategies and pronunciation. There was not a significant difference of the total scores assigned by both groups of teachers and both NETs and NNETs, therefore, maintained high inter-rater reliability coefficients. The writer thus concludes that both groups of raters displayed similar rating behaviour in assessing students' speaking skills.

However, the only component that created a significant different was pronunciation. The scores assigned by NETs were found to be fairly lower than those of the NNETs. According to Ekmekci (2016, p.103), NETs gave participants lower scores in the area of pronunciation perhaps because they were less familiar than NNETs with some "unusual or strange pronunciation" of words in English. Respectively, Ekmekci (2016, p.102) assumes that NETs might have expected participants to produce "native-like utterances" with regard to the articulation of sounds and, as the participants might not have performed according to their raters' expectations, they were given lower scores for pronunciation as a result. Again, similar to Kim's study (2009), this study also suggests that NETs were stricter in terms of pronunciation accuracy, especially with regard to the articulation of certain phonemes in English on a word level.

The findings of Kim (2009) and Ekmekci (2016), thus, illustrate that at least on a segmental level, NETs are more concerned with the correct pronunciation of words, i.e. they focus on the final product of utterance. In contrast, NNETs focus on the overall intelligibility when evaluating non-native speech in English (Kim, 2009). They tend to apply a process approach to interpreting one's speech. In other words, they assess pronunciation in the context of whether one has succeeded to reach their communicative goals and convey the intended meaning(s) throughout the process of interaction.

### ***Purposes of the Study***

As seen above, previous studies do provide some insights as the extent to which teachers' criteria might influence their evaluation behaviour. Yet, some more research is needed to fill the gap and reveal the exact operational criteria and mechanisms that raters undergo when evaluating and rating non-native speech.

Accordingly, this study addresses the research question of "What criteria do NETs and NNETs use in assessing students' pronunciation?"

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### ***Participants***

The participants for the purpose of this study were three NETs and three NNETs. Two of the NETs come from Canada and the other comes from the United States of America. As for the NNETs, two of them come from countries where English has been taught as a Foreign Language (EFL): respectively, Thailand and Hungary. The other NNET comes from a country where English has been taught as a Second Language (ESL): the Philippines.

All participants have been English language lecturers at the Institute for English Language Education (IELE), Assumption University of Thailand (AU), which is an English medium university in Bangkok. They have taught for at least three years by the time the research study was conducted. The idea in mind is that they had already developed their own criteria of evaluating and grading pronunciation by the time of the research.

At IELE, AU, NETs focus mainly on teaching Listening and Speaking Courses at intermediate level of which teaching oral performance and pronunciation forms an integral part. NNETs, on the other hand, teach mostly Academic Courses (reading comprehension, writing and grammar) at upper-elementary and intermediate levels.

Yet, all NNETs in this study had taught pronunciation to some extent or as part of non-regular and non-credit courses, even though to a far lesser extent in comparison to the NETs. Moreover, it has been a common policy of IELE at AU to assign regular listening and speaking courses to NNETs in case that there are not enough NETs available. Furthermore, as stated above, when teaching non-regular courses, such as the Intensive English Programme (IEP) of which teaching oral performance and pronunciation form an integral part, both NETs and NNETs are considered. All NNETs had taught the IEP up to various degrees prior to the research study. Moreover, one of the NNETs in this study stated that he had taught pronunciation all along since this had been one of his main research interests. It could be concluded therefore that the NNETs in this study have also been familiar with teaching and assessing pronunciation.

Practicing English language lecturers from AU also have been chosen with the interest in mind that they would provide their own criteria as well as interpret their own criteria in terms of pronunciation assessment quite independently or in their own ways, considering that there is very little guidance provided by the school in this regard. Thus, IELE provides only one grading scheme as part of the listening and speaking courses that is particularly related to giving presentations. In addition, the rubrics or criteria set in this scheme are too general and pronunciation by itself is not outlined and addressed clearly. When

giving presentations, these criteria are the only two and defined as follows: 'language' or the extent to which language errors might affect comprehension and 'delivery', or whether a student makes consistent eye contact and whether his/her voice is audible most of the time. As seen clearly, with only limited guidance provided by the school, teachers' voices and criteria employed for the purpose of pronunciation assessment could indeed be insightful to reveal whether there were any substantial differences between both groups of teachers in this regard.

### ***Research Instrument***

#### ***Semi-structured Interviews***

The semi-structured interview is the instrument used in this research study. The questions in the interview include the criteria for oral assessment and their reasons for choosing those criteria. (See appendix). The interview took about 10-12 minutes. After the interview, the researcher transcribed the interview for analysis.

#### ***Task***

Eight video clips of undergraduate students, four males and four females, of King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) were used as a prompt. The students were selected on the basis of a purposive sampling method, considering factors such as levels of proficiency, age levels, duration of oral performance, topic related to performance and course of study, amongst others.

The content in the clips was a reflection of elementary level KMUTT students who did self-studying on English reading and listening activities in the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) at KMUTT. They shared what and how they self-studied. The clips were about three minutes long, which provides enough time for the participants to assess the students' pronunciation.

The video clips were used instead of a face-to-face report with the presence of a teacher because the clips would allow students to feel freer and more relaxed in a non-controlled, less strict environment without a teacher being there. Consequently, students would sound more natural to express their own views.

In particular, KMUTT students were selected rather than AU students, because IELE, AU does not provide any facilities similar to the SALC at KMUTT. Thus, unlike KMUTT students, AU students do not have access to resources and facilities whereby they could record their own video clips for the purpose of self-study analysis. When teaching, all NETs and NNETs have to follow a curriculum strictly set in place and examinations of oral performance, therefore, do not include tasks related to self-study analysis and self-study reflection. For that reason, KMUTT students and the context in which they could reflect on

their own self-study progress better suited the purpose of assessing their oral performance.

### ***Data collection***

The process of data collection included preparing eight video clips for participants to develop oral assessment criteria, participants listening to the clips and setting their own criteria for assessment, and participants being interviewed for the criteria they set.

As a start-up, the participants had to listen to the students discussing their own self-study progress. While listening, the participants had to establish and choose their own criteria for the purpose of assessing students' pronunciation by writing down these criteria. The assessors were not given any guidance as to how to write down and establish their own criteria; thus, they were allowed to write their own criteria completely in their own way. Then, they had to submit these written criteria to the researcher. The idea in mind was that such practice would allow for further investigation as to whether there are indeed any differences between the criteria that NETs and NNETs employ in terms of assessing pronunciation.

Subsequently, to ensure the validity of the criteria respondents chose initially for assessment purposes, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews that were aimed at supplementing the responses given earlier and allowing participants to elaborate more on their answers.

### ***Data analysis***

#### *Coding Technique*

Throughout the process of analysing participants' choices of criteria prior to the interviews, a coding technique was used. The researcher looked for emerging patterns, recurring thematic aspects and similarities among the criteria chosen first by NETs and then NNETs. The researcher paid attention as to whether the same types of criteria and/or explanations of criteria appeared among the NETs, then the NNETS and, lastly, between the NETs and the NNETs. For example, if the category 'rhythm' appeared repetitively under the list of criteria chosen by NETs, or NNETs, or both, then this particular category was defined and pointed out as a separate criterion. Bearing in mind that assessors were not given any guidance as to their choices of criteria and how to go about assessing pronunciation, the researcher relied solely on the terms and explanations they themselves used when recording their criteria on paper.

The following step of the research involved participants justifying and elaborating on the criteria they had proposed and developed earlier in the form

of semi-structured interviews. On average, the interviews lasted about 11 minutes. Again, a coding technique was used to examine the causal factors and conditions that might have influenced the participants in choosing the criteria that they had noted down initially. The idea in mind was that this technique would help present the findings in more refined themes, concepts, relationships, variables and categories. The list of interview questions could be found in the appendix.

## FINDINGS

### 1. *The oral assessment criteria proposed by NETs*

The three participants will be referred to in this section as Native English Teacher 1 (NET1), Native English Teacher 2 (NET2) and Native English Teacher 3 (NET3). All three NETs were concerned with suprasegmental or prosodic aspects and features of speech when evaluating the students' pronunciation. In brief, the NETs discussed and referred to the following criteria: rhythm, stress (word stress and syllable stress) and elision.

- *Rhythm*

In terms of prosodic aspects of speech, all NETs referred to rhythm as an essential criterion when assessing students' pronunciation. In this regard, NET1 shared the following thought during the interview stage.

“...but the rhythm, I think, is an important feature or factor I would listen for in pronunciation.” (NET1).

In this regard, two of the participants (NET2 and NET3) pointed out that they had evaluated a student's performance largely on the basis of whether the student would pronounce sentences using a neutral or staccato type of rhythm that is quite typical and common for Thai students as they speak in English.

According to Smyth (2001, p.344, 347), the “staccato effect” refers to the tendency of Thai speakers to assign “equal weight and timing” to each syllable, and the author explains that this kind of pronunciation might often create problems related to the meaning being conveyed. The answers that both NET2 and NET3 shared are as follows.

“...and after a while with enough exposure, you just expect certain things, right; the same with the like what I was saying...with the staccato prosody, right; you, you get used to these things also.” (NET2).

“...many sentences are spoken or read in a monotone, using a staccato rhythm. This may be due to the tonal nature of the Thai language, thus the students try to pronounce things as neutrally as they can within their perceptions of neutral.” (NET3).



- **Stress**

Two of the participants (NET1 and NET3) referred to stress as another aspect of evaluating students' pronunciation. They paid attention as to whether the students would place stress on the right syllable within a word (syllable stress) and also place stress on key words in the sentence(s) whenever needed (intonation). In other words, they were concerned with stress on the suprasegmental level. However, only NET1 elaborated on stress during the interview stage and he shared the following thought.

"...and also I think stress points are another important factor I listen for with pronunciation only because they are problems that I, you know, you persistently see with student performance within Thai, within the Thai students, I guess." (NET1).

- **Elision**

With regard to segmental features of speech, elision is another aspect of assessment that all participants pointed out. Thus, participants noticed that certain sounds/phonemes were either omitted or reduced, or perhaps both. For example, one participant pointed out the elision of grammatical endings of words (NET1) as in the following excerpt.

"...what I listen for, I think, most often, for some Thai students is certain things like pronouncing the ending correctly in certain words like the -ed-endings and the endings with an -s- for instance." (NET1).

Furthermore, two of the participants (NET2 and NET3) noticed the occurrences of cluster reduction whereby consonant clusters were being simplified, reduced or fully omitted. The participants' answers are listed below.

"OK, so long/short vowel distinctions; substitutions; initial consonant approximation or elision; final consonant approximation or elision, right; or the reduction of the initial/final consonant clusters; all those go together, right; and I think these are more important than the timing, the tone, that sort of thing." (NET2).

"...although there are common truncations used in English, these are unique to Thai English speakers, and may have developed from an urge to reduce most words into monosyllables." (NET3).

## **2. The oral assessment criteria proposed by NNETs**

The three participants will be referred to in this section as Non-Native English Participant 1 (NNET1), Non-Native English Participant 2 (NNET2) and Non-Native English Participant 3 (NNET3). NNETs discussed and referred to the following criteria: intonation/rhythm, elision, stress and overall intelligibility.

- **Intonation/rhythm**

In terms of prosodic aspects of speech, intonation/rhythm appeared among all the participants' responses. NNETs found rhythm and intonation quite important aspects of speech as they contribute a lot to the clarity of the message being conveyed as shown in the following excerpts. Two of the participants (NNET1 and NNET3) shared the following answers during the interviews.

“...just some words and some intonation, you know...like Thai student...they cannot distinguish the tone...the question and the confirmation...but when (what) I can figure out...because... I know both Thai and English tones...; so, I can just figure that out.” (NNET1).

“...I thought articulation and rhythm, and pitch, and intonation, and all those were components of pronunciation, part of the production of sound by few of them; so, I thought I needed to include them in my set of criteria.” (NNET3).

- **Elision**

Elision is another aspect of assessment that all participants referred to. For example, NNET2 explained it as the students' tendency to drop speech sounds from words (e.g. grammatical endings: /id/ of Past Simple Tense) or simplify consonant clusters. Moreover, NNET1 noted down instances where words' endings were mispronounced or final phonemes were dropped. Furthermore, NNET3 referred to consonant/vowel dropping or deletion and noted down the types of mistakes that each student made and provided as examples the exact words where any of these mistakes occurred.

Yet, only NNET3 elaborated on this particular feature during the interview stage. Thus, she shared the following thought during the interview.

“...I was saying that: Oh, if I haven't been familiar with the Thai students' pronunciation, I would probably have difficulty listening to certain parts of the speech sample or the speech presentation; but because I was familiar with the way students speak in English, then, it kind of facilitated my understanding of some problem areas like when a word ending or an -s-sound is missing.... So, my familiarity and exposure to Thai pronunciation really helped me filling the gap while I was listening.” (NNET3).

- **Stress**

Stress was another aspect that all participants referred to, whether they classified it or described it as word stress or syllable stress. For example, NNET3 pointed out the exact mistakes that each student made in terms of placing word stress on the wrong syllable within a word.

NNET2 and NNET1 also paid close attention to word stress and, in particular, whether students might misplace stress on a syllable within a word. None of the participants, however, elaborated on this particular aspect during the interview stage.

### **3. Overall intelligibility**

Apart from considering supra-segmental features when assessing students' oral performance, two of the participants (NNET1 and NNET3) also analysed students' oral performances more holistically or in the context of overall intelligibility, and they considered other aspects of speaking or non-pronunciation features per se that, according to them, were essential in terms of how the message was conveyed to the listener. Both participants considered overall intelligibility as a separate category even though it was defined by NNET1 rather as overall impression during the first stage of the research.

Under this general category, both NNET1 and NNET3 quite often referred to body language, eye contact, facial expressions and voice quality as features of how well the students interacted with the audience or how successfully they performed the communicative task. Thus, they found these features essential for the purpose of evaluating a student's oral performance as a task completion project or when examining whether the student has been able to fulfil and complete the requirements of the given task.

Despite the fact that NNET2 did not note down these aspects and criteria prior to the interviews, he did discuss them during the interview stage. The participants elaborated on these aspects and features as well as others by sharing the following thoughts.

“...I just chose the major, you know, points. When I communicate with somebody, you know, what do I expect, you know, of them?... And then, yeah, sometimes... it's the same that you said: delivery, you know, the intonation and later the eye contact. I don't know, I am a person who cares a lot about the eye contact.” (NNET1).

“Yes, I am very happy it was a, it was a video. I watched the video first and then I listened one more time with my eyes closed...and I got, I understood so much more from body language, from gestures, from the face. So, that was...the biggest impression is that just listening is one thing but you need actually visual clues to really get the message across.” (NNET2).

“...I, at that time probably, yes, because for me...overall intelligibility is...it covers many, many things. Well, because I could see the face of the student(s), their facial expression, their body language. I thought those non-pronunciation maybe features or elements were, were contributory to intelligibility.” (NNET3).

“Para-linguistics...I think they contribute to intelligibility, but if I was just listening to the sounds without really looking at the face or the, the gestures or movements of the students, then my assessment will be based purely on sound and pronunciation...” (NNET3).

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Throughout the process of analysing the data, the following similarities and differences were registered when comparing the criteria proposed by the NETs and NNETs. In terms of similarities, both NETs and NNETs referred variously to the same features of pronunciation, such as rhythm, intonation, stress and elision. However, the major difference between both groups was that NNETs went beyond segmental and supra-segmental features of pronunciation to cover intelligibility and visual clues.

### 1. Similarities

- *Rhythm/intonation*

Rhythm and/or intonation were aspects of pronunciation that both NETs and NNETs considered important in terms of how the meaning was being conveyed to the listener. This is an area where students need some more improvement and more practice because oral performance is largely judged based on the rhythm in which they speak as it contributes a lot to the clarity of the message being conveyed.

Most participants stated that their exposure to the neutral and unvarying (or staccato according to some) rhythm in which Thai students speak in English has resulted in them becoming more conscious and familiar with that type of speech as well as more aware of what types of mistakes to expect and anticipate.

As mentioned earlier, according to Smyth (2001, p.344, 347), the “staccato effect” that is quite common among Thai speakers in terms of how they pronounce words might often create problems related to the meaning being conveyed. Similarly, a more recent study done by Khamkhien (2010a, p.187) also suggests that Thai students often read and pronounce words on a sentence level without “intonation, pauses or stress”, which could often lead to misunderstanding(s) on the part of the interlocutor, especially if that interlocutor is an NS.

- *Stress*

Both NETs and NNETs referred to word stress as another important component of students' speech mostly in the first stage of the research. Their answers revealed again that they were familiar with and aware of mistakes related to misplaced stress, and perhaps expected them to occur. However, as their assessment practices suggest, Thai students need more practice and guidance in terms of placing the stress on the right syllable within a word and also on the right word within a sentence. In this regard, NNET3 was very precise in terms of providing a list with concrete examples where such mistakes had occurred as a means for both correction and self-correction. Moreover, the NETs, especially during the interview stage, found stress on the sentence level (along with

intonation and rhythm) an important aspect in terms of how the meaning was being conveyed to the listener.

As mentioned above, a study done by Khamkhien (2010a, p.187) suggests that Thai students often read and pronounce words on a sentence level without “intonation, pauses or stress”, which could often lead to misunderstanding(s) on the part of the interlocutor. Other studies also provide support in favour of the findings of this study. For example, a recent study done by Khamkhien (2010b) suggests that Thai students tend to misplace stress within words and they need more guidance and practice in this area. In addition, Wei and Zhou (2002) suggest that stress is one of the biggest problems that Thai students face as they tend to place stress usually on the last syllable within a word.

- ***Elision***

In terms of segmental features of speech, elision is another aspect of assessment that all participants pointed out. All participants referred to the omission of final phonemes/sounds of words and most of them mentioned the omission of grammatical endings as examples at one point or another. It seems therefore that on a segmental level, words should not only be assessed based on purely pronunciation level, but based on grammar as a separate assessment criterion as well.

In other words, grammar forms an integral part of oral performance and correct pronunciation corresponds to correct grammar in terms of how pronunciation is being produced, perceived and later on assessed. Previous studies also suggest that the omission of word endings is common among Thai students and the incorrect pronunciation of endings of words could often create problems in communication (Supannamoke, 2015).

This study thus reveals that there are indeed certain benchmarks that both groups of teachers/assessors agree on and adhere to when assessing pronunciation, such as intonation/rhythm, stress and grammar. For them, accuracy at segmental and supra-segmental levels highly contributes to the clarity of the message being conveyed, especially in the absence of visual and contextual clues. For example, the omission of grammatical endings could indeed create major problems with communication as one could not tell when the action took place, past or present, if the grammatical ending /ed/ of Past Simple Tense is omitted.

In participants' eyes, these aspects of pronunciation are quite important and they highly affect the levels of comprehension from a listener's perspective. Thus, despite the perception of the role Thai pronunciation or Thai accent might play on assessment beliefs and practices, both groups of teachers/assessors revealed that students should aim at producing the target items accurately at a sound, word and sentence level in the new language. Their ideas thus perhaps

support the belief that if students are not able to fully imitate the accuracy of a native speaker, they should at least strive towards achieving a native-like competence in terms of oral performance, bearing in mind those key areas.

## 2. Differences

- ***Visual clues***

One of the major differences between both types of participants was related to the role of visual clues in understanding and interpreting Thai students' pronunciation. As revealed earlier, especially throughout the second stage of the research, all three NNETs shared the idea that visual clues hugely play a supportive role in terms of how the message is being delivered to the listener. They variously referred to body language, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures and levels of confidence in the voice amongst others, which, according to them, facilitated and contributed to the listener's understanding of the meaning that has been conveyed.

It could be concluded therefore that from these participants' perspectives, evaluating students' pronunciation and speech highly involves evaluating students' oral performance on the basis of other non-pronunciation features which go far beyond simply the levels of phonetics. In participants' eyes, the manner of presentation and one's body language while speaking reveal one's attitudes and the levels of persuasion that quite often play a contributory role in terms of how the message is being delivered and later on understood, and interpreted. These other behavioural characteristics, in other words, reveal the levels of how successfully the speaker has managed to perform the communicative task and whether the speaker has managed to complete the activity as a task completion project.

These results are thus in line with the points raised by a number of scholars cited earlier, who argued that paralinguistic features of communications, such as facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, tones of voice, intonation, articulation and pitch range amongst others, could contribute largely to successful communication and intelligibility (Crystal, 1971; Kanoksilapatham, 2009; Roach, 1991; Singhanuwananon, 2016; Wang, 1987; Widdowson, 1996). Nakatani (2006), as well as Chuanchaisit and Prapphal (2009), added further that if students failed to convey the desired meaning using linguistic knowledge and resources, then they would often employ non-verbal strategies, such as facial expressions and gestures, in order to reach their communicative goals.

- ***Overall intelligibility***

Having considered more aspects and features of speech than their native counterparts, NNETs assessed students' pronunciation on a broader level or more holistically than NETs. Thus, rather than looking at oral performance on purely a pronunciation level or more micro-level, they looked at pronunciation

on a more macro-level and considered elements and features of human behaviour that go hand-in-hand with pronunciation and contribute largely to the clarity of the message being conveyed.

NETs also considered a series of non-verbal clues, such as body language, eye contact, facial expressions and voice quality among others, which in their understanding were highly contributory to intelligibility and successful communication.

These thoughts perhaps lead up to the idea that for NNETs, the process of interpreting and evaluating one's speech is not only centred around issues of conformity to native-like standards and norms in terms of accuracy and fluency, but it is also concerned with whether the overall meaning of a message has been successfully communicated to the listener. In other words, in their eyes, successful communication often takes place in the presence of a series of linguistic and non-linguistic features and elements as people negotiate meaning across different languages and cultures.

This result indeed corresponds to the finding of Kim (2009, p.206) who found that when judging students' oral performance in English, NETs were more interested and concerned with pronunciation accuracy while NNETs focused on and paid closer attention to the overall intelligibility and comprehensibility of students' speech. This result also supports the finding of Ekmekci (2016), who established that NETs were more concerned than their non-native counterparts with pronunciation accuracy, especially with regard to the articulation of certain phonemes in English on a word level.

The result found here, thus, is consistent with the findings of Kim (2009) and Ekmekci (2016) in the sense that at least on a segmental level, NETs rather focus on the final product/outcome when evaluating non-native speech in English or they are more concerned with the correct pronunciation of words. On the contrary, as Kim's study (2009) suggests, NNETs are rather focused on the overall intelligibility when evaluating non-native speech in English. In other words, they tend to apply a more processual approach to evaluating one's speech and they conduct their assessment practices from a broader interactionist perspective, whereby the focus is on the negotiation of meaning in the context of human interaction and communication.

This particular result found in the study also supports the statements made by a number of scholars quoted earlier, who stated that paralinguistic features of human behaviour could play a highly supportive role in terms of reaching the desired communicative goal (Crystal, 1971; Kanoksilapatham, 2009; Roach, 1991; Singhanuwananon, 2016; Wang, 1987; Widdowson, 1996). Again, according to Chuanchaisit and Prapphal (2009) and Nakatani (2006) quoted earlier, these CSs could highly enable learners to express themselves more

effectively, especially if they lack the necessary linguistic knowledge and resources to do so. Furthermore, Chuanchaisit and Prapphal (2009, p.117) even suggested that it “might be profitable” to teach students those CSs apart from teaching them linguistic knowledge, as such CSs could help them communicate meaning more successfully in the absence of available linguistic resources at the time.

One could argue therefore that as people communicate across various languages and cultures, the efficacy of a message cannot be separated from the surrounding context in which communication takes place. All the elements and features referred to above contribute to mutual intelligibility and successful communication, especially in contexts where English functions rather as an EIL, including in Thailand. Perhaps, the same idea could be applied to EFL and ESL contexts; yet, independent case-studies need to be conducted in each assessment context or country in order to establish whether English is being taught and assessed according to the native-speaker model still or rather from an emerging EIL perspective.

In terms of assessment, this study thus suggests that in the emergence of EIL or ELF, overall intelligibility perhaps could be included as a separate criterion in assessment rubrics and/or rating scales, and other non-pronunciation and non-verbal features should also be accounted for, such as body language, eye contact, facial expressions and gestures amongst others.

At the same time, this study also suggests that there are certain benchmarks that both NETs and NNETS agree on and adhere to when assessing pronunciation, such as intonation/rhythm, stress and grammar. In participants' eyes, these aspects of pronunciation concern both students and teachers alike as pronunciation is being assessed. Thus, despite the role perceived that Thai pronunciation or Thai accent may play on assessment practices, both groups of teachers revealed that these features were essential for successful oral performance in English.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

A series of challenges were experienced while conducting this research study and there is also a number of limitations that could be addressed in a subsequent research study or in a study of similar kind. For example, perhaps a larger sample would account for more validity when comparing the criteria of both types of assessors. On the other hand, quite often it was difficult to organize and categorize the findings as different participants at times might have talked about the same concept/term while using their own explanations and definitions.

Moreover, lots of additional comments made variously by the participants, especially during the interviews, could not have been included here as they could not be categorized and assigned to represent the views of either NETs or NNETs. Quite often, certain comments given by the respondents rather represented and reflected the participant's personal views, no matter whether he/she was a NET or an NNET.

Last but not least, it would be worth examining students' pronunciation with audio-only tracks instead of video recordings, where visual clues might influence the listener's understanding of the meaning of the message. Such practice could perhaps be a more valid tool for assessing pronunciation and provide more feedback as to how pronunciation should be taught and learnt. Yet, this would be a matter of another research study!

## **CONCLUSION**

The aim of this study was to reveal the operational criteria that both NETs and NNETs employed when evaluating non-native pronunciation in English. The findings revealed that according to both NETs and NNETs, there were certain benchmarks that learners of English should adhere to when practicing and mastering English pronunciation, such as intonation/rhythm, stress and grammar.

Yet, one of the major differences was that NNETs evaluated students' pronunciation more holistically than their native counterparts and they considered other non-linguistic features of human behaviour that largely contribute to the clarity of the message being conveyed. Thus, they referred to the role of visual clues or paralinguistic features of communication, such as body language, eye contact, facial expressions, voice and gestures amongst others, which in their eyes contribute to the manner of presentation and reveal the levels of how successfully the speaker has managed to perform the communicative task.

In this regard, two NNETs considered overall intelligibility or overall impression as a separate category and again expressed the idea that successful communication takes place in the presence of a series of other non-pronunciation, behavioural features and characteristics, which largely contribute to how the message is being interpreted by the listener. The participants' responses hence suggest that in the wake of the spread of EIL or ELF at least in Thailand, overall intelligibility could perhaps be included as a separate criterion or category in assessment rubrics and/or grading scales. The findings of these study also suggest that it might be beneficial to teach students various CSs and non-verbal clues (as shown and referred to above), as such elements and strategies could highly enable students to express themselves

more successfully in English, especially if they lack the required linguistic resources and knowledge to do so at the given time.

## THE AUTHORS

**Valentin Valentinov** has recently completed his Master's degree in Applied Linguistics (ELT) at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT). His special interests include English as an International Language (EIL), sociolinguistics, pragmatics and intercultural communication.

*valentinetashev@gmail.com*

**Phanitphim Sojisirikul** is an English lecturer at the Department of Language Studies, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT). Her special interests include constructivism, e-learning, and course and curriculum development. She has been involved in the design and revision of task-based curriculum.

*phanitphim.soj@kmutt.ac.th*

## REFERENCES

Chuanchaisit, S. & Prapphal, K. (2009). A study of English communication strategies of Thai university students. *MANUSA: Journal of Humanities*, 17, 100-126. Retrieved from [http://www.manusya.journals.chula.ac.th/files/essay/Suttinee\\_p.100-126.pdf](http://www.manusya.journals.chula.ac.th/files/essay/Suttinee_p.100-126.pdf)

Collins, B. & Mees, I. (2003). *Practical phonetics and phonology: A resource book for students*. London, England: Routledge.

Crystal, D. (1971). Paralinguistics. In N. Minnis & V. Gollancz (Eds.), *Linguistics at large* (pp. 162-174), New York, NY: Viking Press.

Deterding, D. & Poedjosoedarmo, G. (1998). *The sounds of English: Phonetics and phonology for English teachers in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Prentice Hall.

Ekmekeci, E. (2016). Comparison of native and non-native language teachers' evaluation of EFL learners' speaking skills: Conflicting or identical rating behaviour? *English Language Teaching*, 9(5), 98-105. Retrieved from <file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/58797-206716-2-PB.pdf>

Field, J. (2005). Intelligibility and the listener: The role of lexical stress. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(3), 399-423. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.2307/3588487/abstract>

Im, J. (2007). Native English speakers' perceptions of intelligibility in the extended discourse produced by non-native speakers. *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*. Retrieved from <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=16068&context=rtd>

Kanoksilapatham, B. (2009). Teaching English intonation in Thailand: Overview. *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, 31(2), 299-319. Retrieved from <file:///C:/Users/User/Desktop/Budsaba%20Kanoksilapatham,%202009.Arts.pdf>

Khamkhien, A. (2010a). Teaching English speaking and English speaking tests in the Thai context: A reflection from Thai perspective. *English Language Teaching*, 3(1), 184-190. Retrieved from <file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/5253-16278-1-PB.pdf>

Khamkhien, A. (2010b). Thai learners' English pronunciation competence: Lessons learned from word stress assignment. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 1(6), 757-764. Retrieved from <http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/jltr/vol01/06/01.pdf>

Kim, Y. (2009). An investigation into native and non-native teachers' judgments of oral English performance: A mixed methods' approach. *Language Testing*, 26(2), 187-217.

Munro, M., & Derwing, T. (1995). Foreign accent, comprehensibility, and intelligibility in the speech of second language learners. *Language Learning: A Journal of Research in Language Studies*, 45(1), 73-97. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227941248\\_Foreign\\_Accent\\_Comprehensibility\\_and\\_Intelligibility\\_in\\_the\\_Speech\\_of\\_Second\\_Language\\_Learners](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227941248_Foreign_Accent_Comprehensibility_and_Intelligibility_in_the_Speech_of_Second_Language_Learners)

Munro, M., & Derwing, T. (1997). Accent, intelligibility, and comprehensibility: Evidence from four L1s. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 19(1), 1-16. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/studies-in-second-language-acquisition/article/accent-intelligibility-and-comprehensibility/729C15F62F9EC9A51A33EAB5C2D05ED0>

Nakatani, Y. (2006). Developing an oral communication strategy inventory. *Modern Language Journal*, 90(2), 151-16. Retrieved from <http://old.filrp.com/download/07062706.pdf>

Roach, P. (1991). *English phonetics and phonology: A practical course*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Singhanuwananon, S. (2016). Intelligibility redefinition and students' confidence in English speaking in Thai ELT. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, 5(4), 209-215.

Smith, L. (1992). Spread of English and issues of intelligibility. In B. Kachru (Ed.), *The other tongue: English across cultures* (pp. 75-90). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Smith, L. (2009). Dimensions of understanding in cross-cultural communication. In K. Murata & J. Jenkins (Eds.), *Global Englishes in Asian contexts: Current and Future Debates*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 17-25.

Smyth, D. (2001). Thai speakers. In M. Swan & B. Smith (Eds.), *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems* (pp. 343-357). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Supannamoke, P. (2015). Problems of pronunciation in speaking English with reference to Thai students in Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 3(9), 126-129. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/1366-3683-1-PB.pdf

Wang, Y. (1987). *The intelligibility of Malaysian English: A study of some features of spoken English produced by university students in Malaysia*. (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/6543/1/DX188143.pdf>

Wei, Y., & Zhou, Y. (2002). Insights into English pronunciation problems of Thai students. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED476746.pdf>

Widdowson, H. (1996). *Linguistics*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

## APPENDIX

### The List of Interview Questions

1. Are there any particular reasons why you came up with/established these particular criteria?
2. Among all of these, which one(s) do you consider the most important and why?
3. Is there anything that made an impression on you while listening to the students' pronunciation in terms of assessment? What struck you while listening to the students' pronunciation in terms of assessment?
4. Does the issue of familiarity (and exposure) play a role in your assessment of the students' pronunciation?
5. Have your assessment criteria in terms of pronunciation changed after you have taught in Thailand for so long?
6. Have there been any other factors that influenced you in choosing those criteria (such as educational background, for example)?
7. Would you like to add anything else in terms of evaluating the students' pronunciation?