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The use of English Regular Plural forms by Thai EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

According to Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH), the degree of difficulty in learning a target language can be predicted according to the degree of markedness between the first and second languages. Based on the MDH, this study investigates how well participants could perceive and produce the sounds of English regular plural forms ([s], [z] and [ə z]). Sixty Thai university students majoring in English participated in the study. They were divided into two groups according to their academic year (30 first-year and 30 fourth-year students). Two tests (perception and production tests) were employed in this study. The result shows that participants in both groups have a problem perceiving the regular plural sound [z], while the regular plural sounds [z] and [ə z] were difficult to produce.

Keywords : Perception and Production / English regular plural sounds / Markedness Differential Hypothesis / English as a foreign language / Sound identifications

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Rationale of the study

Phonetically speaking, it is difficult for Thai EFL learners to perceive and produce the English regular plural forms since the Thai language has no final consonant clusters. This causes difficulty for Thai EFL students perceiving and producing these sounds. Furthermore, it seems to be difficult for Thai students considering the differences between the two languages, which means difficulty or no chance to achieve native-like proficiency. Therefore, one of the currently most significant discussed terms is intelligibility. Intelligibility here means being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation (Kenworthy, 1992), and the ability of the listener to recognize or transcribe individual words or utterances of the speakers (Jenskin, 2000; Smith and Nelson, 1985). Besides, intelligible pronunciation helps us to understand other's English varieties (Wei & Zhou, 2002), since there are more non-native than native speakers of English in the world (Kachru 1990). Bansal (1969 as cited in Nelson (2008) states that to be intelligible, the speaker must articulate or be able to produce his/her sounds and words clearly.

The previous studies on the use of plurals morphemes has been done by researchers such as McIlwain & and Peterson (2004); Şen & Kulel (2017); Akanda, (2003); Al-Saidat (2012); Afthoniyah (2012); Ninpanit & Pongpairoj (2016). McIlwain & Peterson (2004) investigated the use of plural morphemes of French and Polish adult ESL learners and found three types of error *(omission, extraneous and overgeneralization)* while the same errors were committed by Turkish prep school students in Şen & Kulel's (2017) study. According to Şen & Kulel (2017), the errors were found in contexts such as after numeral adjectives, after determiners or quantifiers, generic meaning with zero article, and irregular nouns. Similar contexts were divided into three sub contexts *(linguistic, discourse and sentential contexts* by Thai researchers (Ninpanit & Pongpairoj 2016). Both found that Thai EFL learners omitted the plural morphemes in all contexts. Moreover, omission errors also emerged in Yoruba speaking learners of English (Akande, 2003). Akande further added that these errors may be attributable to the result of learners' carelessness and ignorance of certain rules in English while Afthoniyah (2012) claimed that omission errors in the morphemes -s and -es could be assumed to be derived from the overgeneralization of the morpheme -s and -es in the third person singular rule. Thus, in this case, the omission of the plural -s and -es seems to incorporate with overgeneralization, which could be referred to as intralingual error (Al-Saidat 2012).

Apart from the errors committed in the use of plural morphemes, the cause of such errors could be explained through the perspective of the interference of learners' mother tongue (*Native language interference*). According to Şen & Kulel (2017), their study found that the subjects had made most of the mistakes on a singular noun after a numeral adjective

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since in Turkish, a plural suffix is not required, which is in contrast to the English language. The effect of L1 interference has caused problems to learners with different L1 such as Nigerian EFL learners with L1 Yoruba (Akande, 2005). To be more precise, Akande claimed that the errors were the result of L1 interference since in Yoruba the suffixes do not exist. Thus, the errors in the use of plurals were affected by the absence of the language features in their L1. Apart from the use of plural morphemes in morphological aspect, it is essential to review studies on the pronunciation of the plural morphemes since the primary aim of this study was placed on a phonological aspect.

Unfortunately, no research on the production of the English regular plural morphemes has been conducted in the Thai context, however, a few studies were found regarding the phonological area especially plurals pronunciation. Here are more details about them. Focusing on pronunciation of plural morphemes, Budge (1989) provided some interesting explanations in a phonologically productive use of regular plural inflection. He found Cantonese English speakers with a Chinese mother tongue reduced the morpheme [s] in both final and final cluster sounds. Budge explained that the reduction was the effect of the first language, since these phonological features are absent in Cantonese. Al-Janaideh & Mahadin (2015) carried out a study with EFL students whose L1 is Arabic and found differences between the two sample groups although their English level was the same. Their results showed that the eighth graders performed the best in the sound [z], and the least in the sound [ə**z**]. Alternatively, in the eleventh graders' group, the [z] sound was the most difficult sound to pronounce, then the [ə**z**] sound was the second most difficult sound. They also found that students tended to replace the [z] with the [s] sound when a noun ends with a voiced obstruent. The results from the eighth graders were compatible with those of Mealings, Cox, & Demuth (2013) in which they found that the [ə**z**] sound was acquired later than the [s] and [z] in children with English L1. Moreover, Mealings, Cox, & Demuth's (2013) findings were supported by Berko's (1985) findings in that children were worst at adding the [ə**z**] when noun stem ends with sibilants. As mentioned earlier, no study with Thai EFL learners in this topic have been done. Thus, this study will fill the gap in knowledge and help to draw a more complete picture of English plural sounds by EFL learners.

Framework

Eckman (1977) proposed the MDH in order to justify the areas of difficulties in second language learning. The concept is that it predicts the areas of difficulty following these notions: (1) Those areas of the target language which differ from the native language and are more marked than the native language will be difficult; (2) The relative degree of difficulty of the areas of difference of the target language which are more marked that the native language

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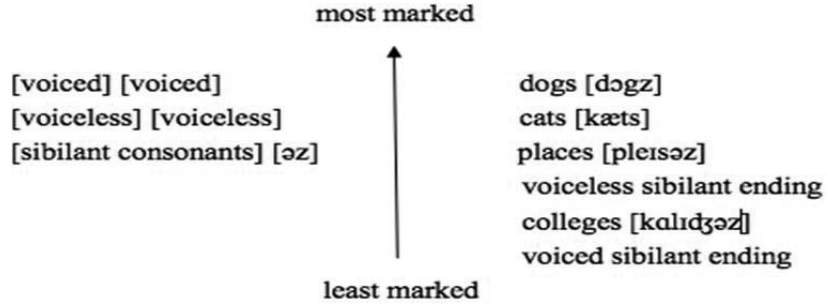
will correspond to the relative degree of markedness; (3) Those areas of the target language which are different from the native language, but are not more marked than the native language, will not be difficult. Below is a-markedness scale based on the theory of the MDH for production and perception of English regular forms of Thai EFL learners. The scale was adapted from Solt, Pugach, Klein, Adams, Stoyneshka, & Rose (2004), who constructed the scale based on the notions of the MDH.



In this scale, the marked sounds will take longer time to acquire than the unmarked sounds. Among the three sounds, [ə̆z] should be the easiest to perceive and produce than the other two sounds. [z] should be the most marked sound or the most difficult one to perceive and produce since it does not exist in the Thai phonological system.

Research Question

To what extent do first and fourth-year students perceive and produce English plural sounds?

Research Hypothesis

In relation to MDH, the participants in this study will perceive and produce the regular plural sound [ə̆z] the best and [z] the worst.

Methodology

1. Tokens

There are fifteen English nouns end with voiceless, voiced and sibilant sounds (sibilant sounds are sounds that make a hiss or buzz when producing them). They can be either voiced or voiceless. Below are some example the tokens.

1. desk voiceless final ending
2. item voiced final ending
3. wish sibilant final ending

There are fifteen non-English words (pseudo) ending with voiceless, voiced and sibilant sounds. Created by the researchers, the pseudo words are nonsense words which

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were used to measure whether participants were able to perceive and produce the regular plural forms when encountering unfamiliar words and some are listed below.

1. na**f** voiceless final ending
2. ke**b** voiced final ending
3. tis**h** sibilant final ending

The word tokens used in the tests did not include all English sibilants sounds since the purpose of this study was to investigate whether students could perceive and produce the extra syllable.

(See appendix for the tokens used in the study)

2. Participants

The participants in this study were 30 first-year students who had never taken nor were currently taking a phonetics course, and 30 fourth-year students who had already taken phonetics courses. All participants in this study were Thai EFL university students aged between 18 and 22. The participants were selected by using a purposive sampling method. Unlike first-year students, the fourth-year students had already taken the English courses "Phonetics and Phonology". The content of these courses involves the sound system in English language. The content covers the topics such as consonant and vowel sounds, speech organs, minimal pairs, phonemes, allophones and rules of sound. Therefore, fourth-year students who had already taken these courses will perform better than the first-year students who had never taken these courses.

3. Research instruments

Two instruments are used in this study: a perception test and a production test. The details of the tests are discussed below.

3.1 The perception test consisted of two parts: perception test part 1 and 2. The perception test part 1 was designed to measure how well the participants can perceive the sounds of English regular plural forms ([s], [z], and [**ə**z]) and part 2 was designed to measure the students' ability to identify the number of syllables in each item. The perception test part 1 was conducted in a room with high quality sound speakers. Thirty participants participated in the data collection room, answer sheets were handed to the participants and they had to give a check mark to choices A, B, C, or D to match the sound they were hearing. The perception test part 1 consisted of 35 multiple choice. Questions number 1 to 5 were the distractors which were not included when counting the score. After the test was completed, perception test part 2 was handed to the participants. Participants listened to the recording again and then identified the syllables of each word they were hearing by writing down the number on the answer sheet. This procedure took approximately 40 minutes, and the same procedure was also employed with the second group on a different day. The syllable

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identifications test was constructed in order to attest the perception test part 1 (listening test) mainly on the [ə z] sound where an extra syllable is required. The scores of the perception test part 1 and 2 were counted by the researchers. Each correct answer was given one point and zero for an incorrect answer. The total score of each part was 30 points.

3.2 The production test consisted of two parts; part 1 and 2. Part 1 was designed to measure how well the participants can produce the sounds of English regular plural forms ([s], [z] and [ə z]). Similar to the perception test part 2, the production test part 2 was designed to measure the students' ability to identify the number of syllables in each item. The same word tokens which were used in the perception test were put in a list. The production test was conducted individually a month later, and since this was a pronunciation test, the data was conducted in a quiet room. Individual participants were given a paper sheet containing a list of words which were the same words used in perception test part 1 and 2. Participants read each word twice with a 2 or 3 second pause between the first and second reading in each word they were reading, and the pronunciation of each participant was recorded with an audio recorder by the researchers. After this procedure was completed, participants read the given list of 35 words again, this time, after each word they read, they identified the number of syllables by writing down the number on the answer sheet. This procedure took approximately 20 minutes for each participant. To score the test, three raters who were selected based on the three circles model of Kachru, (1990) were invited to grade the test separately. Each item would get either one point or zero points if at least two raters shared the same decision. Finally, since the production test part 2 needs no raters, the score was given in the same way as it was given in the perception test part 1 and 2.

4. Instrument validity and reliability

Validity can be established in two steps. First, tokens were sent to three experts in English language and linguistics to check and ensure that they fit the objectives of the study. To establish content validity, the IOC (Item Objective Congruence Index) was employed in calculating the scores given by the experts. After calculating the scores through the IOC form, some changes were made by the researchers. Some tokens were eliminated, and then they were ready for the construction of the perception test and production test. Second, after the tests were constructed, they were tried out with 10 participants who were not in the same sample group. This pilot study helped validate the effectiveness of the instruments to ensure that they elicited the right information from the participants. As a result, content validity was established.

Reliability can be formed in two steps. First, since the production tests required three raters to grade the students' scores, the inter-rater reliability in the form of Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to see whether the rating of the individual three raters

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was in the same direction. Because there were two groups of participants in the main study, the correlation test was run twice. In the first- year students, Pearson correlation value was *r* = .45 (moderate positive correlation). In the fourth- year students, Pearson correlation value was *r* = .60 (high positive correlation).

5. Data Collection

The data collection was divided into two phases. In Phase 1, perception test part 1 and 2 were distributed to the participants. In the following month, the researcher launched Phase 2. That is, all participants were asked to have their speech sounds tape-recorded through the production test part 1 and 2.

6. Data Analysis

The obtained data of the perception test part 1 and 2) was calculated and analyzed by the researchers using the computer program SPSS. For production test part 1, the data was sent to the three raters and then the obtained data from the three raters was calculated and analyzed using the SPSS program. Finally, the data obtained from the production test part 2 was calculated the same way as it was done with the perception test part 1 and 2. The results from the analysis were presented in tables with mean score and standard deviation.

Results

This part discusses the results of the findings of the perception and production tests with an attempt to answer the research question: *To what extent do first and fourth-year students perceive and produce English plural forms?* To test the research hypothesis, we predicted that t*he participants in this study would perceive and produce the regular plural sound [ə*z*] the best and [z] the worst.* Since there are two parts in each test, part one will be discussed first, then part two is presented, respectively.

Table 1 Group Statistics (Total perception test part 1)

Groups	Mean	SD	t	p-value
First-year students (N = 30)	25.03	4.80	-1.45	.156
Fourth-year students (N = 30)	26.47	2.54		
Total score 30				

There was no statistically significant difference between both groups at an alpha level of 0.05 (t = -1.45; p > .05). Table 1 illustrates mean scores and standard deviation of perception test part 1 in both groups. Both groups had an outstanding performance in perception test part 1.

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Table 2 Perception test part 1 mean scores in each sound

Sounds	Students	Mean	SD	t	p-value
[s]	1st	8.53	1.85	-1.09	.278
	4th	8.97	1.12		
[z]	1st	7.77	2.03	-1.52	.132
	4th	8.47	1.48		
[ə z]	1st	8.73	1.78	-.81	.421
	4th	9.03	.93		

Table 2 illustrates the performance of English regular plural forms in each sound. From the statistical findings, there was no statistically significant difference between both groups' performance in all three sounds [s], [z] and [əz] at an alpha level of 0.05 ($t = -1.09$; $p > .05$), ($t = -1.52$; $p > .05$) and ($t = -.81$; $p > .05$), respectively. In other words, the mean scores show difference between the two groups but cannot identify which group performed better.

Table 3 Group Statistics Perception test part 2 (perception syllable number identifications)

Groups	Mean	SD	t	p-value
First-year students (N = 30)	25.17	6.89	-2.86	.008*
Fourth-year students (N = 30)	28.80	1.13		
Total score 30				

From table 3, the statistics show that there was a statistically significant difference between both groups at an alpha level 0.05 ($t = -2.86$; $p < .05$). The standard deviation of the perception test part 2 was 6.89 in first-year students and 1.13 in fourth-year students. When the SDs between the two groups are taken into account, a low SD in the four-year students describes a low spread or variability of the scores around the means. With high mean scores and low SD, the fourth-year students had performed much better than the first-year students in the perception test part 2.

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Table 4 Perception test part 2 mean scores mean scores in each sound

Sounds	Students' academic year	Mean	SD	t	p-value
[s]	1st	7.70	3.57	-2.27	.030*
	4th	9.23	.94		
[z]	1st	8.47	3.00	-2.46	.020*
	4th	9.83	.53		
[ə z]	1st	9.00	1.69	-2.26	.030*
	4th	9.73	.58		

*sig. <0.05

Table 4 illustrates the mean scores in each sound and the statistics show that there was statistically significant difference in each sound [s], [z] and [ə z] in both groups at an alpha level of 0.05 (t = -2.27; p < .05) (, (t = -2.46; p < .05) and (t = -2.26; p < .05) respectively. It can be concluded that both groups had a high performance in both perception test part 1 and 2 in overall. When the scores were further divided into the major sounds [s], [z] and [ə z], the scores of each sound show that there was no significant difference between first and fourth-year students in the perception test part 1 and 2.

Table 5 Group Statistics (Total production test part 1 scores from three raters)

Groups	Mean	SD	t	p-value
First-year students (N = 30)	12.50	5.02	-1.56	.126
Fourth-year students (N = 30)	14.23	3.47		
total score 30				

Table 5 shows there was no statistically significant difference between both groups at an alpha level 0.05 (t = - 1.56; p > .05). Table 5 illustrates mean scores and standard deviation of production test part 1 in both groups. The total mean scores were calculated from the scores obtained from the three raters. Both groups had a low performance. The first-year students' mean score was 12.50 with the SD of 5.02. The fourth-year students' mean score was 14.23 with the SD of 3.47.

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Table 6 Production test 1 scores in each sound from three raters

Sounds	Students	Mean	SD	t	p-value
[s]	1st	6.37	2.75	-2.14	.037*
	4th	7.77	2.30		
[z]	1st	1.40	1.38	3.71	.001**
	4th	.33	.76		
[ɘz]	1st	5.37	2.71	-2.64	.011**
	4th	6.97	1.92		

*sig. <0.05; **sig. <0.01

Table 6 shows that there was statistically significant difference in the sound [s] at an alpha level 0.05 (t = -2.14; p < .05). The fourth-year students scored the sound [s] better than the first-year students. In the sound [z], there was a statistically significant difference between both groups at an alpha level .001 (t = 3.71; p < .001). The first-year students' performance was better than the first-year students. In the sound [ɘz], there was a statistically significant difference between both groups at an alpha level 0.05 (t = -2.64; p < .05). In this sound, the fourth-year students had performed better than the first-year students.

Table 7 Group Statistics (Total production scores syllable identifications)

Groups	Mean	SD	t	p-value
First-year students (N = 30)	24.37	5.79	1.96	.057
Fourth-year students (N = 30) total score 30	26.60	2.28		

There was no statistically significant difference between both groups at an alpha level 0.05 (t = 1.97; p > .05).

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Table 8 Production test part 2 scores in each sound

Sounds	Students	Mean	SD	t	p-value
[s]	1st	8.27	2.82	-1.49	.145
	4th	9.10	2.18		
[z]	1st	8.57	3.13	-1.34	.190
	4th	9.37	.10		
[ə z]	1st	7.53	1.92	-1.29	.203
	4th	8.13	1.68		

From table 8, there was no statistically significant difference in each sound [s], [z] and [ə z] between both groups at an alpha level 0.05 ($t = -1.49$; $p > .05$), ($t = -1.34$; $p > .05$) and ($t = -1.29$; $p > .05$), respectively. Both groups had high scores in the three major sounds.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate only the performance on the perception and the production of the English regular plural forms. Below the perception parts will be discussed first then the production parts.

The results revealed that in the perception test part 1 and 2, there was a high performance in both groups. Moreover, in part 1, it was found that when the individual sounds were taken into consideration, the findings showed that the sound [ə z] was perceived at the highest level by both groups. This can be possibly explained in that the sound [ə z] is truly more salient than the other two sounds ([s] and [z]). The [ə z] sound, when added to a noun with a sibilant ending, produces an extra syllable. This makes this sound clearer to perceive than the other two. Moreover, it was not surprising that the sound [z] had the lowest score since this sound does not appear in the Thai sound system. This assumption could also be supported through the L1 interference perspective (McIlwain & Peterson, 2004; Şen & Kulel, 2017; Akande, 2005). The absence of L1 in a target language has influence in the learning of L2. Furthermore, the findings are congruent with the theoretical framework (Eckman, 1977), specifically the accessibility hierarchy scale: [ə z] > [s] > [z] (Solt, Pugach, Klein, Adams, Stoyneshka, & Rose 2004), and immediately supported the research hypothesis. In part 2, there was statistically significant difference found between first and fourth-year students in both the overall score and when each sound was compared. To test the hypothesis (accessibility hierarchy scale: [ə z] > [s] > [z]), the obtained scale from both groups were compared.

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Perception test part 2 obtained the following scales:

First-year students: [ə̀z] > [z] > [s]

Fourth-year students: [z] > [ə̀z] > [s]

From the scales, it can be said that the obtained scales were not in line with the set-up scale, which rejected the research hypothesis. The performance of both groups was different in the sounds [ə̀z] and [z]. First-year students had the highest score in the sound [ə̀z], while fourth-year students' highest score was in the sound [z]. However, when looking at the mean of the sound [ə̀z], both groups still had a high score, M=9.00 in first-year students, and M=9.73 in fourth-year students. Thus, this sound was still clear and salient, which was the easiest to perceive among the two sounds.

In the production test, the results revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between both groups in part 1 and 2. Both groups had a low score in production test part 1(pronunciation test) overall. A possible reason for the low performance in part 1 can be that most of the students from both groups might not have known how the words should be read. In other words, they did not know the pronunciation rules of the words and of the English regular plural forms, especially the [ə̀z] and [z] sound. This had been observed by the researchers during the production data collection procedure. Akande (2005) stated that it is important for learners to have adequate morphological awareness in order to reduce the occurrence and frequency of morphological errors in their spoken and written English. Many students from both groups were struggling and hesitating when producing the words. Furthermore, when difference in sound was taken into consideration, the results revealed that the [ə̀z] sound was not performed the best. Thus, the result immediately rejected the research hypothesis, that is, the participants in this study will perceive and produce the regular plural sound [ə̀z] the best and [z] the worst. The accessibility hierarchy that was set up based on Markedness Differential Hypotheses (Eckman, 1977) was denied. The obtained scale of the production test part 1 by first and fourth-year students was [s] > [ə̀z] > [z]. This result was in line with Al-Janaideh & Mahadin (2015) in that they found the [ə̀z] was not the easiest to produce compared to the [s] and [z] sound by learners with Arabic L1.

In part 2, the overall score was high in both groups, however, when analyzing the scores in different sounds, the score of the [ə̀z] sound was the lowest of all among the three sounds. It can be assumed that wrong syllable identification was influenced by the mispronunciation of the word tokens from production test part 1 since part 2 was employed immediately after students completed production test part 1. They were asked to produce the words again and then identify the number of syllables for each word. This result could be described as morphophonemic errors (Akande, 2005) in that learners use the plural

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morphemes correctly, however in pronunciation, learners ignore certain rules. Surprisingly, the token "stops" had the lowest score in perception and production test 2. This can possibly be explained in that the first language has played an important role in second language learning (McIlwain & Peterson, 2004; Şen & Kulel, 2017; Akande, 2005). As was observed by the researchers during the data collection, many students produced the initial [s] in the word "stops" as one syllable. Thus, students might identify this word as a two syllable word. Thus, the research hypothesis was rejected. The obtained scale of the production test part 2 is: [s] > [z] > [ə**z**]. This could be explained in correlation with the result of Mealings, Cox, & Demuth' (2013) who found the [ə**z**] was acquired later than the other two sounds in children with English L1, while Berko (1985) found that children were worse at adding the [ə**z**] with noun stems ending with sibilants. The result of the production test part 1 was also in line with the result of Al-Janaideh & Mahadin, (2015) who researched the pronunciation of plural morphemes by Arabic L1 learners end found the [ə**z**] sound was the most difficult to pronounce for the eighth and eleventh graders.

It is obvious that listening is much easier than pronunciation. The evidence emerges when the two tests (perception and production) are compared. The results of the perception and production syllable identifications revealed an interesting finding, that is, the scores of the production test part 2 were lower than in the perception test part 2. This can reflect that the students did not know the English phonological rules well enough. Their inconsistent performance in both parts shows that they did not have enough practice not only to perceive and produce as showed in part 1 from the two tests, but also to identify the three sounds.

Suggestions

Further studies could investigate the perception of regular plural sound [s] and [z] with a small sample group with different English proficiency levels. The data collection should be an interview which could provide qualitative information in depth.

In pedagogical perspective, more attention should be paid to the teaching of courses such as English phonology since the English learning environment in Thailand does not support the learning especially English listening and speaking. Teachers should encourage their students to frequently practice these two skills both in and outside the classroom. In doing this, it could certainly help students in improving their English proficiency in listening and speaking.

Finally, since there are numerous electronic teaching materials such as applications for mobile phones, computer programs and websites available, teachers of phonology courses should encourage their students to use these programs. This can provide additional help in learning and practicing.

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