

INFLUENCES OF TEACHER POWER AND THE USE OF PHONETICS WEBSITE OVER EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SPEAKING ENGLISH INTELLIGIBLY

by **Noparat Tananuraksakul**

Huachiew Chalermprakiet University

18/18 Bangna-trad Road, KM 18, Bangplee

Samutprakarn 10540, Thailand

noparat2000@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper investigates two hypotheses: 1) EFL undergraduate students have positive attitudes towards the use of the phonetics website; and 2) teacher power can greatly influence their positive attitudes toward speaking English intelligibly. Research outcomes derive from questionnaire (n=79), crosschecked with interview data (n=47), revealing their alignments. The first hypothesis was confirmed at a high level; the second was partially supported. Teacher power appeared to be distracted by power relations in interactions between native and non-native English speakers and among non-native English speakers themselves. The study offers two insightful directions for EFL teachers.

Keywords: teacher power; language attitude; spoken English with intelligibility; phonetics website

1. Introduction

Power is an abstract concept that can be found in almost every context, and it has been defined from different perspectives. Politically speaking, Shokri (2017) suggested that in order to understand the concept one must recognize 'power over' as authority, 'power to' as rights and 'power of' as capacity. Drawing on a well-known philosopher Michel Foucault's definition of power as a relationship that operates through action, Alsobaie (2015) connects it with a university lecturer and his/her students. The former has the authority to influence the latter's behaviors in learning and doing assignments so as to earn the grades. This relational-based power is free from coercion because students would have freedom to or not to complete the assignments while lecturers allot grades in reference to their students' performances. It can be said that teachers are entitled to authoritative power due to their professional position.

The relational-based power between teacher and students is also recognized as a fundamental set of power relations in pedagogy. Gore (2002) posits that teaching not only

produces power but also constructs relations between teacher and students, self (subjectivity) and knowledge (discourse), which have an effect on students' learning achievement. Teachers are therefore strongly advised to embrace their authoritative or position power and exercise it consciously to enhance their students' learning. Similar to McCroskey and Richmond (1983), teachers become powerless in the classroom if they fail to exert the kind of power they want to communicate with their students.

Tananuraksakul (2011) found the aforementioned propositions to be insightful for teaching English listening and speaking in Thailand, the context where English is socially alien to learners and where the hidden culture undermines their learning behaviors. Students are culturally deemed to be disciples (*luk-sid* in Thai) and behave passively in the classroom in order to show their respect to their teacher. Their passive behaviors appear to limit improvement of their speaking skills that require active interactions. In such a case, she embraced and exercised the power she holds in the classroom, especially attractive and reward power to build up a rapport with her students and commend them every time they tried to interact with her.

In connection with conscious awareness of power relations in pedagogy, Tananuraksakul's (2017) research findings are also insightful for EFL teachers to positively influence their students' social behaviors and language learning by means of promoting their positive attitudes toward their own non-native English accented speech with both authoritative power and the use of University of Iowa's *Sounds of American English* website, known as the "number 1 phonetics website". Her study is firstly based on the arguments that English has been used as a lingua franca (ELF) in many social contexts and that sounding like a native English speaker is not as important as speaking intelligibly. Secondly, the phonetics website is considered to be a learning tool that can intrinsically motivate young learners to learn because they may find it relevant to their daily lives (Tananuraksakul, 2014, 2015).

This present study aims to investigate Tananuraksakul's (2017) findings more extensively, in particular: 1) the degree of students' attitude toward the use of the phonetics website; and 2) the influence of EFL teachers' authoritative or position power over their students' attitude toward speaking English intelligibly.

2. Related literature review

Power in classroom has existed in various forms, but the ones developed by two social psychologists, French and Raven in 1959, appeal to many researchers (e.g. McCroskey and Richmond, 1983; Tananuraksakul, 2011; Özer et al. 2013; Alsobaie, 2015). Both initially

introduced five separate bases of power – attraction/reference, expert, reward, legitimate and coercion (Raven, 2008). These forms of social power have the potential to influence individuals and can be applied in classroom as teacher power. Attractive power is associated with the ability to make a good relationship in order to influence students' behaviour in learning. Teacher's positive personal traits may attract or motivate his/her students to study.

Expert power stems from superior knowledge, and teachers earn students' respect because they are perceived to be intelligent or knowledgeable in the subject they teach. Reward power derives from a positive incentive, and there are different forms of reward power teachers can use to influence their students' learning behaviour. Legitimate power is the same as position or authoritative power. Culture in the forms of high and low power distance is seen to influence relationship between teacher and student (Hofstede, 1997). Higher power distance culturally puts teachers in a highly respected position as a master (Jambor, 2009). Coercive power is used to manage the classroom or discipline students. Teachers exercise this kind of power when they punish their students.

It appears that researchers were more interested to study the kinds of power teachers employed in the classroom. For example, McCroskey and Richmond (1983) found that 156 American teachers from grade seven through college perceived that they were more likely to exert reward, attractive and expert power. Stoyanova and Ivantchev (2016) discovered that Bulgarian high school teachers tend to exercise legitimate and reward power most frequently and overlooked attractive power. Kuadnok (2017) explored issues of power and pedagogical practices that influence teaching EFL writing in Thai primary school students. The results indicated that teacher-student interaction produced certain sorts of power while teaching was carried out. Agustina and Cahyono (2016) examined how face-threatening and face-saving utterances were produced by lecturers and how power was exercised in their utterances.

However, little attention has been paid to ways in which EFL students' language learning and social behaviour can be influenced positively by teacher power. For example, Tananuraksakul (2011, 2013) quantitatively investigated the effects of both positive reinforcement (reward power) and power distance reduction (attractive power) on her students' confidence in speaking English and attitudes toward teaching and learning the language. The findings revealed positive impacts. Since due to their nature adults require autonomy and self-directness, it was recommended by Alsobaie (2015) that university lecturers exercise their reward and expert power in the classroom. In the same vein, Özer et al. (2013) assert that attractive, expert and reward power are considered "prosocial forms of power and are positively associated with cognitive learning, affective learning, and student motivation" (p. 2590).

In learning EFL with achievement, affective domains are proved to be determining factors (Salmani Nodoushan, 2011), especially motivation, attitudes and self-confidence. These three determinants are interconnected in that the higher the degree of motivation to learn EFL, the more positive the attitude toward learning the language with linguistic self-confidence, and vice versa. Teachers can also blend any available learning technology in their teaching to increase young adult learners' motivation and positive attitudes toward learning (Tananuraksakul, 2016; Ebrahimzadeh & Alavi, 2017). It can imply that teachers can exert attractive power and reward power to increase learners' motivation in and positive attitudes toward language learning and self-confidence in language use while expert power to enrich their knowledge and influence their social behaviour and language learning.

Grounded on related studies as summarized above, two hypotheses are generated for the current research:

H1: Students have positive attitudes toward the use of the English phonetics website.

H2: Teacher power can greatly influence students' positive attitudes toward speaking English intelligibly.

3. The present study

3.1. The aim and context

Both authoritative and expert power was exerted in the classroom to enrich students' knowledge and influence their language learning and social behavior. In doing so, at the start of the semester, the following current issues were discussed in the classroom: 1) World Englishes and intelligibility/ unintelligibility in contexts where people from non-native and native English speaking backgrounds come into contact through the medium of English that may create in-group and out-group power relations; 2) the trend of speaking English with clear pronunciation or intelligibility rather than speaking like a native; and 3) adult learners like them have a tendency to speak English less like a native.

Attractive power was also exercised to build up students' positive attitude toward speaking English intelligibly through weekly usage of the phonetics website as a language model for pronouncing English consonant sounds systems that do not exist in Thai sounds systems (i.e. /g/, /v/, voiced /th/, voiceless /th/, /z/, /sh/, /zh/, /ch/, /j/ and /r/). Along with each weekly pronunciation lesson, the same kinds of teacher power were exercised in the classroom so as to emphasize the importance of speaking English intelligibly for the purpose of international communication.

Eighty nine undergraduate students, who were non-English major and took English listening and speaking for professional purposes during August and December 2017, were recruited purposively. Out of these, seventy nine voluntarily participated in this study.

3.2. Research tools and data collection

Mixed research methods were applied in this investigation, employing questionnaire and interview questions. The questionnaire comprised two parts. The first part asked about gender, age, frequency of class attendance and chance of international communication. The second part had six items reflecting one's attitude, defined as "learners' feelings [and opinions] about something, especially as shown by their behaviors" (Tananuraksakul, 2015, p. 12), which involve students' enjoyment in learning English pronunciation from the website, perception of better performance and confidence in speaking English after practices with the website. The higher degree of their enjoyment, performance perception and confidence students possess, the more positive attitude they have. The first three items measure the students' attitude toward the English phonetics website usage whereas the last three items measure perceptions of influence of teacher power on attitudes toward speaking English intelligibly with clear pronunciation to interlocutors from non-native and native English backgrounds. It is viewed to be more practical than speaking with a native-like accent.

The reliability of the questionnaire (Cronbach's Alpha) was tested with IBM SPSS 20 software. As seen in Table 1, the questionnaire manifests reliability.

Table 1. Reliability of the questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.809	6

Structured interview questions encompass:

- 1) How do you like or feel about your own English accent with all the pronunciation practices in the classroom?
- 2) What do you think about the ideas of speaking intelligibly, not natively?

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the end of the semester. Descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were used to interpret the quantitative data, analyzed statistically by IBM SPSS 20 software and interpreted based on the following scales:

5-rating Scale

4.20 – 5.00

Descriptive Rating

crucial/always/very high

3.40 – 4.19	very important/often/high
2.60 – 3.39	moderate/sometimes
1.80 – 2.59	sometimes important/rarely
1.00 – 1.79	not important/never

Qualitative data were used to descriptively report and crosscheck the quantitative data.

3.3. Procedure

In week one, the researcher discussed the present study in the classroom and informed students of the present project. From week two onwards, during the first 5-10 minutes of each lesson, one English consonant that had sound difference from Thai was introduced to the class, and the group was instructed how to pronounce it properly through the English phonetics website. Mimic and minimal-pair activities (e.g. rice / lice, vow / wow, thorn / dawn, chair / share, jam / yam, zoo / sue, vision / fashion) were used to demonstrate and practice the sounds.

In week 2: Introduce /g/ vs /k/. Mimic the sounds and practice these minimal pairs with students: game/came, gold/cold, got/cot, gap/cap, bag/back, pig/pick, dug/duck, clog/clock and bug/buck.

In week 3: Introduce /v/ vs /w/. Mimic the sounds and practice these minimal pairs with students: vest/west, vow/wow, vine/wine, vet/wet, vary/wary and vile/while.

In week 4: Introduce voiceless /th/ vs /t/. Mimic the sounds and practice these minimal pairs with students: theme/team, thought/taught, thin/tin, thigh/tie, thank/tank, through/true, three/tree, both/boat, tenth/ten, path/pat and Ruth/root.

In week 5: Introduce voiced /th/ vs /d/. Mimic the sounds and practice these minimal pairs with students: they/day, there/dare, though/dough, those/doze and breathe/breed.

In week 6: Introduce /z/ vs /s/. Mimic the sounds and practice these minimal pairs with students: zoo/sue, sip/zip, zinc/sink, eyes/ices, prizes/prices, buzz/bus and rise/rice.

Weeks 7 and 8 were excluded because the students took listening and speaking exams.

In week 9: Introduce /sh/ vs /ch/. Mimic the sounds and practice these minimal pairs with students: sheep/cheap, shin/chin, share/chair, ship/chip, match/mash and watch/wash.

In week 10: Introduce /ch/ vs /t/. Mimic the sounds and practice these minimal pairs with the key sounds in final position: beach/beat, arch/art, coach/coat, hatch/hat and match/mat.

In week 11: Introduce voiced /j/ vs /d/. Mimic the sounds and practice these minimal pairs with students: hedge/head, badge/bad, gym/dim, jam/dam, dog/jog and page/paid.

In week 12: Introduce /r/ vs /l/. Mimic the sounds and practice these minimal pairs with students: rice/lice, raw/law, race/lace, read/lead, right/light, wrong/long and alive/arrive.

During week 13, 79 students completed the questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously. Structured interviews were conducted in weeks 14 and 15. In order to avoid or reduce power distance between the researcher and the students, the students were asked to write down their answers to those interview questions anonymously and voluntarily. Forty seven participants returned their answers.

4. Findings and discussion

The questionnaire completed by 79 students revealed a greater number of females (69, 87.3%) than males. Most of their age (92.4%) ranged between 20 and 25. Forty nine (62%) always attended the class while 18 students (22.8%) never missed it. Most students (80%) sometimes had a chance to communicate with foreigners in English while 11 people (13.8%) never had such a chance. Only 3 students (3.8%) always had a chance to do it.

As can be seen in Table 2, the students possessed positive attitudes toward the inclusion of teaching pronunciation features in the EFL classroom because they enjoyed learning English pronunciation from the English phonetics website ($\bar{x} = 3.7848$), could pronounce English words better ($\bar{x} = 3.7468$) and felt more confident in speaking English after pronunciation practices with the phonetics website ($\bar{x} = 3.7215$) at a high level.

The quantitative outcomes align with qualitative data, frequency of class attendance and age range, since 46 students agreed that they liked learning pronunciation through the use of the phonetics website because it helped to boost their confidence in speaking (eight students), improve their pronunciation (thirteen students), give them a chance to practice pronunciation in the classroom (five students), attain a native-like accent (one person). Only one person disagreed because he/she felt pressured to speak English. Therefore, the findings supported the first hypothesis.

Table 2. Analysis of students' positive attitudes toward the use of the English phonetics website

Statements	N	Mean	Overall Meaning
1. I enjoy learning English pronunciation from the English phonetics website.	79	3.7848	High
2. I can pronounce English words better after pronunciation practice with the phonetics website.	79	3.7468	High
3. I feel more confident in speaking English after pronunciation practice with the phonetics website.	79	3.7215	High

The findings in Table 3 indicated that teacher power greatly influenced the students' positive attitudes toward their own non-native English accented speech since they thought that clear English pronunciation was more practical than native accent imitation ($\bar{X} = 3.6203$). Qualitative data accord with this quantitative analysis. Out of 47, as many as 39 people said it was not necessary to speak like a native, but it was necessary to speak with clear pronunciation.

However, when it came to speaking English to particular groups of native and non-native speakers, they thought that talking with a Thai and clear accent is moderately, not highly, practical. The qualitative data also comport with this quantitative analysis as 7 out of 47 people (14.89%) mentioned that having a native-like accent was more practical, and 1 person (2.12%) thought that it was important to talk slightly like a native to people from different linguistic backgrounds.

These findings suggest that interactions between non-native and native speakers of English as well as among non-native speakers themselves produce power relations (Menard-Warwick, 2005), which distract teacher power in this sense. As such, the findings partially confirm the second hypothesis.

Table 3. Analysis of teacher power's influence on students' positive attitudes toward their non-native English accented speech

Statements	N	Mean	Overall Meaning
1. I think clear English pronunciation is more practical than native accent imitation.	79	3.6203	High
2. I think speaking English to a native speaker with a Thai and clear accent is practical.	79	3.3797	Moderate
3. I think speaking English to a non-native speaker with a Thai and clear accent is practical.	79	3.3165	Moderate

5. Conclusion

The present study conducted a quantitative and qualitative investigation into influences of teacher power and the use of the phonetics website over EFL undergraduate students' attitudes toward speaking English intelligibly. Two hypotheses drawn on Tananuraksakul's (2017) research findings were examined. Both quantitative and qualitative data support the first hypothesis but partially confirm the second hypothesis. Although the students have positive

attitudes toward the use of the English phonetics website, teacher power – authority, expert and attraction – appear to be hindered by power relations of interactions between native and non-native English speakers and among non-native English speakers.

Despite the lowest frequency of international communication for most students, such mentioned interactions reflect identity they create in mind, what Pavlenko and Novton (2007) call ‘imagined identity’. They further argue that teachers need to be aware of their students’ imagined identities so that they can prepare for productive language learning activities, which is in line with Gore’s (2002) proposition.

The study findings offer two insightful directions for EFL teachers. First, they need to embrace and exercise the power they have in the classroom to recognize their students’ imagined identity created by power relations of interactions between them and other native and non-native English speakers. Second, they can blend the phonetics website usage in their teaching as a means to promote their students’ affective domains.

References

- Alsobaie, M. F. (2015). Power and authority in adult education. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(15), 155-159.
- Agustina, S., & Cahyono, Y. C. (2016). Politeness and power relations in EFL classroom interactions: A study on Indonesian learners and lecturers. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 3(2), 92-100.
- Ebrahimzadeh, M. & Alavi, S. (2017). The effect of digital video games on EFL students’ language learning motivation. *Teaching English with Technology*, 17(2), 87-112.
- Gore, J. M. (2002). Some certainties in the uncertain world of classroom practice: An outline of a theory of power relations in pedagogy. *Conference Proceedings: the Annual Meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Brisbane, December 2-5*. Retrieved 29 August 2018 from <https://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2002/gor02317.pdf>
- Hofstede, G. (1997). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Jambor, P. Z. (2009). Favourable teaching approaches in the South Korean secondary classroom. *Education Resources Information Center*. Retrieved 23 August 2018 from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED507310.pdf>
- Kuadnok, K. (2017). *Pedagogies and Power Relations in Thai English Foreign Language Writing Classrooms: A Critical Ethnography*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Queensland University of Technology. Retrieved 23 August 2018 from https://eprints.qut.edu.au/106915/1/Kuanhathai_Kuadnok_Thesis.pdf
- McCroskey, J. C. & Richmond, V. P. (1983). Power in the classroom I: Teacher and student perceptions. *Communication Education*, 32(2), 175-184. Retrieved 20 August 2018 from <http://www.jamescmccroskey.com/publications/112.pdf>
- Menard-Warwick, J. (2005). Both a fiction and an existential fact: Theorizing identity in second language acquisition and literacy studies. *Linguistics and Education*, 16(3), 253-274.

- Özer, N., Uğurlu, C. T., Sincar, M., Yildirim, M. C., & Beycioğlu, K. (2014). Teacher power use in the college classroom: Turkish students' views. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 116, 2589-2592. Retrieved 23 August 2018 from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/82656701.pdf>
- Pavlenko, A. & Norton, B. (2007). Imagined communities, identity and English language learning. In J. Cummins & C. Davidson (eds.), *International Handbook of English Language Teaching* (pp. 669-680). New York: Springer.
- Raven, B. H. (2008). The bases of power and the power/interaction model of interpersonal influence. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 8(1), 1-22.
- Salmani Nodoushan, M. A. (2011). Temperament as an indicator of language achievement. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 5(4), 33-52.
- Shokri, M. (2017). What is political power? (Theory of political consciousness and integrated concept of power). *Arts and Social Sciences Journal*, 8(3). Retrieved 29 August 2018 from <https://www.omicsonline.org/open-access/what-is-political-power-theory-of-political-consciousness-and-integrated-concept-of-power-2151-6200-1000269.pdf>
- Stoyanova, S. & Ivantchev, N. (2016). Teachers' pedagogical power – A community school study. *Psychology, Community & Health*, 5(1), 44-60.
- Tananuraksakul, N. (2011). Power relations in pedagogy: A constraint on EFL learners' identity confidence and identity anxiety. *FLLT 2011 Conference Proceedings on 'Strengthening Ties between Research and Foreign Language Classroom Practices*, pp. 164-170.
- Tananuraksakul, N. (2013). Power distance reduction and positive reinforcement: EFL learners' confidence and linguistic identity. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 7(1), 103-116.
- Tananuraksakul, N. (2014). Use of Facebook group as blended learning and learning management system in writing. *Teaching English with Technology*, 14(3), 3-15. Retrieved 1 August 2018 from <http://www.tewtjournal.org/issues/past-issue-2014/past-issue-2014-issue-3/>
- Tananuraksakul, N. (2015). The effect of online dictionaries usage on EFL undergraduate students' autonomy. *Teaching English with Technology*, 15(4), 3-15. Retrieved 1 August 2018 from <http://www.tewtjournal.org/issues/volume-2015/volume-2015-issue-4/>
- Tananuraksakul, N. (2016). Blended E-learning. A requirement for teaching EFL in a Thai academic context. *Teaching English with Technology*, 16(4), 48-55. Retrieved 1 August 2018 from <http://www.tewtjournal.org/issues/volume-2016/volume-2016-issue-4/>
- Tananuraksakul, N. (2017). Building up Thai EFL students' positive attitudes toward their non-native English accented speech with the use of phonetics website. *Teaching English with Technology*, 17(4), 52-63. Retrieved 1 August 2018 from <http://www.tewtjournal.org/issues/volume-2017/volume-17-issue-4/>