

Students' Perspectives toward the Learning of an English Phonetics and Phonology Course and Its Application in English for Communication Development

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Abstract

This research attempted to investigate 1) the students' expectations toward the learning of English phonetics and phonology, 2) their perspectives toward the lesson difficulty, and 3) their self-evaluation toward the improvement of their verbal communication ability. The participants were 141 English-for-International-Communication (EIC) students at the Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts, Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna, Phitsanulok, Tak, Lampang, Nan, and Chiangmai campuses. All of the participants already finished the BOAEC 104 Essential English Phonetics and Phonology for Communication course. The convenient sampling technique was applied for participant selection. A researcher-developed questionnaire with an overall Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) value of 0.66 intended to collect quantitative data, and a semi-structured interview with an overall IOC value of 0.84 aimed at gathering qualitative data. The quantitative data were statistically analyzed to find the mean score, percentage, and standard deviation. Content analysis was also available for qualitative data explanations. The results of the study revealed that, on average, the participants had a high expectation ($\bar{X}=4.37$) in learning English phonetics and phonology. They especially expected the learning to benefit their future lives and increase their confidence in speaking. Considering the lesson difficulty, the participants concurred

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that, on average, the lessons were difficult (\bar{X} =3.67). However, when the participants were followed up with an interview question, they commented that the lessons were difficult but challenging. Regarding the participants' self-evaluation, after the completion of the course, the participants reported a high improvement (\bar{X} =3.87) in their verbal communication ability. Clear pronunciation and the ability to use correct stress placement and intonation enhanced their verbal communication ability. The participants also reported the application of learned knowledge in other subjects, such as Public Speaking, Oral Presentation, and Listening-Speaking.

Keywords: English phonetics and phonology, Students' expectations and perspectives, Communication ability, English language skill development

Introduction

A course in English phonetics and phonology has been taught in different academic contexts and higher education institutions (Mompeán, Ashby, & Fraser, 2011; Lintunen & Mäkilähde, 2013). For those students who take English as their major, the course is one of the requirements, and the subject aims to deepen their knowledge in the language (Lintunen & Mäkilähde, 2013). However, for those who major in other disciplines and study English courses under the General Education program, phonetics and phonology are indirectly and implicitly introduced to them as part of pronunciation practices.

In Thailand, undergraduate students who major in English under the Bachelor of Arts and the Bachelor of Education programs obligatorily undertake a course in phonetics and phonology since it is a required subject matter. For example, the first-year English-for-International-Communication (EIC) students at Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) mandatorily enroll in a three-credit course in English phonetics and phonology entitled "BOAEC 104 Essential English Phonetics and Phonology for Communication" (Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna, 2017). Similarly, English-major students at Naresuan University (NU), Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University (PSRU), Maejo University (MJU), and Chiang Mai University (CMU) are mandated to take an English phonetics and phonology course. However, the course names vary from university to university, namely English Phonetics and Phonology (Naresuan University, 2018; Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University, 2017), English Sounds and Sound System (Maejo University, 2017), and English Phonetics (Chiang Mai University, 2013), respectively. At the same time, English-major students under the Bachelor of Education program, who are trained to be English teachers

after graduation, are also mandated to take the stated course (Naresuan University, 2017; Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University, 2012).

Although the course names vary, the concurrence in the course objectives of the English phonetics and phonology exists. The main objective of the course is to provide the students with a body of knowledge in English speech sound production (consonant and vowel sounds), organs of articulation, the sound system of English, syllable structure, and suprasegmental phonemes (stress, intonation, and sandhi-variations). After the completion of the course, the students will be able to apply learned knowledge in their careers or to further their higher education. Learning of English phonetics and phonology will also establish some background knowledge that leads to better English speaking ability, as Sheth (2016) mentioned that phonological accuracy is a sub-skill of English speaking.

Considering which topics are necessary to students, the teaching of English phonetics and phonology depends hugely on the course description available in the curriculum manual. Similarly, lecturers who are usually assigned to master the course are those who hold degrees in English Linguistics or Applied Linguistics. These considerations seem reasonable; however, the revision and the planning of the course rarely include students' perspectives about their learning expectations, the difficulty of lessons, and their opinions toward the enhancement of communication ability after the completion of the course. It seems that students who are the main stakeholders of the course do not receive a privilege to be a part of the course planning or revision. Concerning Mompeán, Ashby, and Fraser's statement (2015) that different students occupy distinct needs, goals, and preferences in learning, it is worth to consider and pay some more attention to the students' voice. Consequently, this paper attempted to investigate the EIC students' expectations toward the learning of English phonetics and phonology, their perspectives toward the difficulty of the lessons, and their self-evaluation toward the improvement of their oral communication ability after the completion of the course. The discussion of how students apply learned knowledge to enhance their English language learning and oral ability development was also available.

Literature review

Teaching English phonetics and phonology

Linguists have defined phonetics as a study of human speech sounds in general. The field concentrates on the production, transmission, and perception of

human speech sounds (Kanoksilapatham, 2016; Yule, 2010; Timyam, 2010; Kracht, 2007; Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2007; Zsiga, 2006; Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, & Harnish, 2001; Hayes, 2009). It also deals with the categorization and description of speech sounds. To be more specific, English phonetics delves into the production of English consonant and vowel sounds.

Phonology, on the other hand, emphasizes the sound system of the language and concerns with the combination of individual sounds to form a larger unit under predictable sets of rules (Kanoksilapatham, 2016; Yule, 2010; Timyam, 2010; Kracht, 2007; Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2007; Zsiga, 2006; Akmajian et al., 2001). Hence, English phonology pays attention to the sound system of the English language, and how the English consonant and vowel phonemes cooperate in forming larger units like syllables, words, sentences, and utterances.

Discussing teaching English phonetics and phonology based on the previously provided definitions, teaching English phonetics and phonology to EFL students copes with speech sound production and analysis of the sound system. The main target of English phonetics and phonology teaching is to educate EFL students on what the sound production is, which organs of articulation involve in the production, how to combine individual phonemes to form a larger unit, and how to enunciate the language correctly according to the set pronunciation rules and principles. Another objective is to provide the EFL students with knowledge in English phonetics and phonology so that they can apply it into their oral communication using English intelligibly.

Roles of English phonetics and phonology in developing English oral communication ability

Powers (2010) mentioned that the overall ability for people to interact with one another is to apprehend spoken words and orally produce messages conveyed between them. Hence, language for communication needs to be accurate, clear, and concise (Kostić-Bobanović & Bobanović, 2013), and deficiency in language will cause a communication breakdown (Sadiku, 2015). As a result, pronunciation is an essential factor that affects the oral communication ability of non-native English speakers (NNSs). Marzá (2014) stated that an EFL classroom should significantly emphasize pronunciation teaching and learning, which is part of English phonetics and phonology because the topic is directly relevant to students' verbal communication performance. Furthermore, Burns (2019) reported that one of the three core components of oral communication is knowledge of the language and

discourse. Hence, language users need to be able to master sound patterns of the language, which she referred, in this case, to as the English language. Regarding Burns' knowledge and discourse component of oral communication, the intelligible English pronunciation is part of the knowledge.

Although knowledge in English phonetics and phonology alone cannot lead to successful communication, it is a necessary foundation that builds up effective verbal communication. The intelligible pronunciation of individual sounds to an analysis of the English sound system will lead to successful oral communication, as mentioned by Burns (2003). Therefore, it is inevitable to accept that phonetic and phonology teaching considerably benefits EFL students' speaking ability.

An English phonetics and phonology course at Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna

Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) is one of the many universities in Thailand that offer a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) program in English for International Communication (EIC). Among the six campuses of RMUTL, Chiangmai, Lampang, Nan, Tak, and Phitsanulok campuses offer the EIC program to every interested student. Like any other English majoring program, the EIC program at RMUTL requires first-year students to undertake a three-credit course in English phonetics and phonology entitled "BOAEC 104 Essential English Phonetics and Phonology for Communication." The course covers the contents in English phonetics and phonology, namely speech sound production (consonants and vowels), organs of articulation, broad phonetic transcription, syllable structure, stress, intonation, sandhi-variations, and implication in verbal communication. The course is available in the first semester of every academic year. The course aims at educating the students with an understanding of pronunciation principles, pronunciation practices of consonants and vowels, stress placement in words and sentences, use of intonation patterns to convey messages, and application in communication in different contexts.

Research objectives

This research aimed at investigating 1) EIC students' expectations toward the learning of English phonetics and phonology, 2) their perspectives toward the level of difficulty of the provided lessons, and 3) their self-evaluation on how the learning of the course enhanced their verbal communication ability.

Research Methodology

1. Research tools

This mixed-method research implemented two research instruments. The first instrument was a 5-scale researcher-developed questionnaire. It intended to gather quantitative data about the students' expectations and perspectives toward the learning of an English phonetics and phonology course and their self-evaluation on how their learning enhanced their verbal communication ability. The second research instrument was a semi-structured interview. It intended to collect qualitative data about the students' perspectives on to what extent the learning of English phonetics and phonology helped to develop their English listening and speaking ability, their confidence in oral communication, and their application of learned knowledge to support their English language learning in other English courses.

Before the distribution of the questionnaire and the initiating of the semi-structured interview, five experts in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics validated the designed questionnaire and the semi-structured interview questions. The items that earned the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) value, which was equal to or more than 0.5, were included in the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview. According to the evaluation of the five experts, the questionnaire received an overall IOC value of 0.66, and the semi-structured interview earned an overall IOC value of 0.84.

2. Research participants

The participants of the current research were students who major in English for International Communication (EIC) in the Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts (BALA) at Rajamangala University Lanna (RMUTL), Phitsanulok, Tak, Lamphang, Nan, and Chiangmai campuses. All the participants had finished the phonetics and phonology course entitled "BOAEC 104 Essential English Phonetics and Phonology for Communication." This research recruited only the first-, second-, and third-year EIC students as the research participants because all of them are current EIC students under 2017 (B.E.2560) Revised Curriculum. The total number of active research participants was 141 EIC students. Out of the 141 active research participants, 35 participants voluntarily and anonymously participated in the semi-structured interview.=

3. Data collection method

The designed questionnaire was made available online after the five experts

in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics validated it. The 367 first-, second-, and third-year EIC students from the five campuses received the link to access the online questionnaire. The participants had a month, starting from January 15 to February 15, 2020, to respond to all the question items. However, only 141 participants finished and turned it in online. After analyzing the gathered data from the completed questionnaire, the researchers recruited 35 active participants to take part in the semi-structured interview. As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, this research implemented the semi-structured interview via a phone call. During the interview, a voice recorder intended to record the conversations, and an individual conversation took about six to ten minutes. Before the interview started, all the participants were informed and confirmed that their personal information would be kept confidential, and all the information would be solely used for academic purposes. During the interview, each participant was called by an assigned code starting with PT, which stands for Participant, and a number.

4. Data analysis

The gathered quantitative data were statistically analyzed to find the mean score, percentage, and standard deviation. Content analysis and written explanations provided detailed analyses of the qualitative data from the semi-structured interview.

Results of the study

Part 1 Analyses from the questionnaire

1. The participants' personal information

The first section of the questionnaire contained two questions asking about the participants' gender and year of study. Out of the 141 participants, 35 participants (24.82%) were male, and 106 of them (75.18%) were female. 40 of them (28.37%) were freshmen; 55 of them (39.01%) were sophomores; 46 of them (32.62%) were juniors. Although the number of female participants was three times higher than the male participants, the percentages of participants from the three years were just slightly different.

2. The EIC participants' expectations toward the learning of English phonetics and phonology

Section 2 of the questionnaire contained five questions asking about the participants' expectations toward the learning of English phonetics and phonology. The questions were the five rating scales of Likert's, which 5 referred to as *Extremely*

High Expectation and 1 referred to as *Extremely Low Expectation*. Table 1 presents the finding of the EIC participants' expectations toward the learning of English phonetics and phonology.

Table 1 The EIC participants' learning expectations

Items	\bar{X}	SD	Interpretation
1. To acquire a near-native speaker accent.	4.28	0.67	High Expectation
2. To learn contents that help to develop a clearer and more intelligible pronunciation of English words, sentences, and utterances.	4.38	0.71	High Expectation
3. To promote self-confidence in English speaking for communication.	4.40	0.73	High Expectation
4. To apply learned knowledge in professions in the future.	4.41	0.70	High Expectation
5. To apply learned knowledge to further higher education.	4.39	0.74	High Expectation
Average	4.37	0.71	High Expectation

Note that the interpretations of the mean scores are as the following. 4.51-5.00 *Extremely High Expectation*; 3.51-4.50 *High Expectation*; 2.51-3.50 *Moderate Expectation*; 1.51-2.50 *Low Expectation*; 1.00-1.50 *Extremely Low Expectation*.

According to Table 1, the EIC participants showed high expectations in learning English phonetics and phonology. The average mean score of the participants' expectations was 4.37. The EIC participants showed nearly the same level of expectation that the course would benefit their future careers (\bar{X} =4.41), increase their self-confidence in English speaking (\bar{X} =4.40), provide a body of knowledge for higher education (\bar{X} =4.39), and promote clearer and more intelligible pronunciation (\bar{X} =4.38). The participants' expectation to achieve near-native pronunciation was the lowest (\bar{X} =4.28). It seems that the EIC participants expected to earn a body of knowledge that they could implement in their professional and educational lives. They also see the importance of clear and intelligible pronunciation rather than a native norm of English accent.

3. The EIC participants' perspectives toward the level of difficulty of the provided lessons

Section 3 of the questionnaire contained eleven items asking the participants to identify the level of difficulty of the specified lessons in English phonetics and phonology. The questions were the five rating scales of Likert's, which 5 referred to as *Extremely Difficult* and 1 referred to as *Extremely Easy*. Table 2 illustrates the EIC participants' perspectives toward the level of difficulty of the lessons provided in the BOAEC 104 Essential English Phonetics and Phonology for Communication course.

Table 2 The EIC participants' perspectives toward the difficulty of the provided lessons

Items	\bar{X}	SD	Interpretation
1. Introduction to English phonetics and phonology; Definition of English phonetics and phonology	3.51	0.81	Difficult
2. Sub-fields of phonetics (articulatory phonetics, acoustic phonetics, auditory phonetics)	3.65	0.80	Difficult
3. Articulatory phonetics and organs of articulation	3.72	0.80	Difficult
4. Consonant sound production	3.66	0.79	Difficult
5. Vowel sound production	3.72	0.76	Difficult
6. Broad phonetic transcription	3.83	0.84	Difficult
7. Syllable and syllable structure	3.71	0.87	Difficult
8. Word and sentence stress	3.61	0.89	Difficult
9. Intonation patterns	3.59	0.85	Difficult
10. Sandhi-variations or connected speech	3.63	0.81	Difficult
11. Pronunciation practice	3.67	0.78	Difficult
Average	3.67	0.82	Difficult

Note that the interpretations of the mean scores are as the following: 4.51-5.00 *Extremely Difficult*; 3.51-4.50 *Difficult*; 2.51-3.50 *Moderate*; 1.51-2.50 *Easy*; 1.00-1.50 *Extremely Easy*.

Table 2 presents the EIC participants' perspectives toward the level of the lesson difficulty. Overall, the EIC participants reported that the lessons provided in the BOAEC 104 Essential English Phonetics and Phonology for Communication course were difficult (\bar{X} =3.67). The top three most difficult topics were broad phonetic transcription (\bar{X} =3.83), articulatory phonetics and organs of articulation and vowel sound production (\bar{X} =3.72), and syllable and syllable structure (\bar{X} =3.71), respectively. On the other hand, the three easiest topics were an introduction to English phonetics and phonology, definition of English phonetics and phonology (\bar{X} =3.51), intonation patterns (\bar{X} =3.59), and word and sentence stress (\bar{X} =3.61), respectively.

4. The EIC participants' self-evaluation on how the learning of English phonetics and phonology enhanced their oral communication ability

Section 4 of the questionnaire contained five questions inquiring the EIC participants to evaluate themselves to what extent they thought their oral communication ability improved after the completion of the course. They are the five rating scales of Likert's, which 5 referred to as *Extremely High Improvement*, and 1 referred to as *Extremely Low Improvement*. Table 3 presents the EIC participants' self-evaluation toward the level of improvement in their oral communication ability.

Table 3 The EIC participants' self-evaluation toward their oral communication ability improvement

Items	\bar{X}	SD	Interpretation
After the completion of the course, I ...			
1. have better pronunciation of English words, sentences, and utterances.	3.95	0.71	High Improvement
2. am able to better use word and sentence stress to convey messages.	3.84	0.80	High Improvement
3. am able to better use intonation patterns to convey messages.	3.80	0.79	High Improvement
4. can better understand connected speech in daily communication.	3.84	0.73	High Improvement

Items	\bar{X}	SD	Interpretation
5. have more confidence when pronouncing English words, sentences, and utterances.	3.92	0.78	High Improvement
Average	3.87	0.77	High Improvement

Note that the interpretations of the mean scores are as the following. 4.51-5.00 *Extremely High Improvement*; 3.51-4.50 *High Improvement*; 2.51-3.50 *Moderate Improvement*; 1.51-2.50 *Low Improvement*; 1.00-1.50 *Extremely Low Improvement*.

As illustrated in Table 3, the EIC participants displayed a high level of improvement (\bar{X} =3.87) in oral communication ability after the completion of the BOAEC 104 course. The participants showed nearly the same level of improvement in their pronunciation of words, sentences, and utterances (\bar{X} =3.95) and the level of self-confidence in their English pronunciation (\bar{X} =3.92). For the participants, the two elements, namely better pronunciation and a higher level of self-confidence, seem to collaborate and support each other. That is better pronunciation enhances the participants' self-confidence and vice versa.

Part 2 Semi-structured interview

To follow up on the participants' self-evaluation toward their oral communication ability improvement after the completion of the course, the semi-structured interview commenced via a phone call. The semi-structured interview comprised five questions inquiring about to what extent the participants thought their listening, speaking, and self-confidence improved, as well as how they applied learned knowledge to the learning of other English subjects, and how their learning experiences were. The following section provides the findings gathered from the semi-structured interview.

Question 1: To what extent do you think your listening ability improved after the completion of the course?

According to the interview of the 35 participants who were voluntary and anonymous, it revealed that almost all of the interviewed participants agreed that their listening ability improved at a moderate to a high level, especially when they conversed with international interlocutors, who were specifically foreign English lecturers on campus or tourists, and watched English-speaking series or movies. They also added that what helped them improve their listening ability was a better understanding of stress, intonation, and connected speech. One participant stated

that learned knowledge about sandhi-variations enhanced them³ to be able to identify keywords concerning the sounds and word link in fast speech (Participant #1, Interview, March 18, 2020). Similarly, Participant #26 reported that after learning the BOAEC 104 course, they could enjoy watching English-speaking series and movies on Netflix without looking at the subtitles all the time (Participant #26, Interview, March 20, 2020). Another participant also mentioned that they implemented learned knowledge about stress and intonation when they took the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Listening to the stress and intonation in the test recordings helped them do the test better (Participant #11, Interview, March 18, 2020). However, Participant #22 reported that their listening ability was still at the same level. They thought the course dealt greatly with pronunciation, so their listening ability did not improve much after the learning of English phonetics and phonology (Participant #22, Interview, March 19, 2020).

Question 2: To what extent do you think your speaking ability improved after the completion of the course?

All the participants reported that their speaking ability improved at a moderate to a high level. When asked what made their speaking ability improved, they mentioned that clear pronunciation played the dominant role. They added that when they perceived their pronunciation ability was good enough, they felt more confident to converse with their interlocutors using English. Here are some comments from the participants.

“[Learning of phonetics and phonology] helped me improve better pronunciation. I mean I can pronounce words more clearly, and I think foreigners can understand me better. For example, before the learning of the course, I always pronounce every syllable of the word ‘different’, but now I know that there is a vowel deletion process, and the word has only two syllables.” (Participant #3, Interview, March 18, 2020)

“Sure that after learning English phonetics and phonology, my speaking ability is better. I know where to stress and what type of intonation to use. Clear pronunciation with correct stress and intonation helps me speak eloquently.” (Participant #9, Interview, March 18, 2020)

“After the learning of English phonetics and phonology, I learned that the -ed ending has three different ways of pronunciation. I used to pronounce the

³ When talking about an individual interviewed participant, the pronoun “they” and its related forms are used to avoid revealing the participant’s personal information.

word 'stopped' as stop-ped without knowing that the -ed ending in this word is pronounced as /t/. Now, I know that the three different ways of the -ed ending pronunciation are /t/, /d/, and /ɛd/ depending on the sound that precedes it." (Participant #12, Interview, March 18, 2020)

"[Learning of phonetics and phonology] helped me a lot [in speaking English]. There are some words that I usually mispronounced before learning English phonetics and phonology, like 'vegetable'. I always say this word 'vet-get-ta-ble'. But now I know how to say the word correctly." (Participant #26, Interview, March 20, 2020)

Question 3: To what extent did your self-confidence in English speaking improve after the completion of the course?

The majority of the participants answered that their self-confidence in English speaking improved at a moderate to a high level. They reported that having clear pronunciation enhanced their self-confidence in English speaking since they believed that their interlocutors would understand what they were saying. Here are some comments from the participants.

"I feel more confident to speak English after studying English phonetics and phonology. Knowing how to pronounce words more clearly make me not hesitate to speak out." (Participant #23, Interview, March 19, 2020)

"I want to link speaking to the studying of phonetics. Phonetics deals with places of articulation. So, when I know which organs are involved in producing certain sounds, I can pronounce the sounds and words correctly and clearly. And learning about stress and intonation principles helps me speak more fluently and clearly. I think my self-confidence in English speaking improved a lot." (Participant #24, Interview, March 19, 2020)

However, there were a few participants reported that their self-confidence in speaking did not improve so much. Here are their comments.

"For me, I think my self-confidence improved a little. Even though I studied English phonetics and phonology and know how to pronounce English sounds, I still hesitate to speak with foreigners in English. I am afraid that they might not understand me because I might pronounce the words wrongly. Or my accent might make my speaking unclear." (Participant #14, Interview, March 18, 2020)

"My confidence in English speaking did not seem to improve that much after studying English phonetics and phonology. I think it is not so different from before [studying the course]." (Participant #17, Interview, March 19, 2020)

Question 4: How did you apply the learned knowledge in English phonetics and phonology class in learning other subjects?

All of the participants mentioned that they applied the learned knowledge in English phonetics and phonology in learning speaking-and-listening-related subjects, such as Public Speaking, Listening-Speaking, Listening Development, and Oral Presentation. They added that in the Public Speaking, Oral Presentation, and Listening-Speaking classes they employed knowledge in word pronunciation, stress, and intonation to develop their English speaking ability. They also reported that clear pronunciation and the correct use of stress and intonation enhanced the level of their speech intelligibility. For the Listening Development class, they mentioned that the knowledge of allophones and syllable structure helped them understand the speech they heard well, and they could guess the messages better. Here are some of their comments.

“I mostly apply the knowledge in English phonetics and phonology in the Oral Presentation and Listening-Speaking classes. It helps me catch the messages that the speaker is sending by listening to their utterances carefully and with phonetic and phonology knowledge. Then, in the Oral Presentation and Public Speaking classes, knowing how to use correct organs of articulation in speech sound production also helps me speak with clear pronunciation.” (Participant #12, Interview, March 18, 2020)

“Besides the Public Speaking class, I also apply knowledge in English phonetics and phonology in preparation for impromptu speech. It helps me feel confident that I speak with clear pronunciation and deliver clear messages to my classmates. I am also a volunteer translator. Learning to pronounce English words clearly helps me communicate well, and I can make myself clear” (Participant #14, Interview, March 18, 2020)

Question 5: What were your experiences toward the learning of English phonetics and phonology?

Regarding the semi-structured interview, the 35 participants showed positive experiences and felt satisfied with the learning of the BOAEC 104 Essential English Phonetics and Phonology for Communication course. They understood and saw the importance of the course in enhancing their oral communication ability in English. Although the lessons seemed to be difficult at the beginning due to their unfamiliarity with the nature of a linguistic course and some technical terms, the participants mentioned that they could adjust themselves with the learning well

when the time went by. Here are some of their comments.

“To be honest, this subject was difficult for me. However, the lecturer tried to explain the lessons to me and my classmates and gave us time to practice during the class sessions. Learning with my classmates and with support and feedback from the lecturer helped me understand the lessons better, and I could do well in this class.” (Participant #5, Interview, March 18, 2020)

“At first, I was so stressed and worried about learning this course. I thought it was not only about pronunciation, but it dealt with many details. And my background in English was not good enough. However, when I started learning, I found that learning English phonetics and phonology was fun. Yes, the lessons were difficult but challenging.” (Participant #9, Interview, March 18, 2020)

One participant reflected some ideas that they thought might benefit the upcoming students. Here is their reflection.

“I think it would be better if the lecturer had provided the students with more practices, rather than focusing on theories. Then, the students could apply learned knowledge and skills in real-life communication. Moreover, English phonetics and phonology should be available individually. The program should offer one course in English phonetics and the other in English phonology.” (Participant #27, Interview, March 20, 2020)

Conclusion and discussion

The current study attempted to investigate the EIC students' perspectives toward the learning of an English phonetics and phonology course entitled “BOAEC 104 Essential English Phonetics and Phonology for Communication” at RMUTL. It also focused on how the students applied the learned knowledge to help them develop English oral communication ability. The English for International Communication (EIC) program at the Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts (BALA) provides the course to the first-year EIC students in the first semester of every Academic Year. A researcher-developed questionnaire and a semi-structured interview intended to obtain quantitative and qualitative data for analyses, respectively. The 141 participants completed the questionnaire available online. Then, out of the 141 participants, 35 of them voluntarily and anonymously participated in the semi-structured interview. The results of the study were as the following.

The EIC students at RMUTL, overall, expected that learning English phonetics and phonology would provide them some beneficial knowledge they could implement

in their future careers. This is in line with a study of Lintunen and Mäkilähde (2015) which also reported that English-major students at a Finnish university considered learning English phonetics would benefit their future lives. Furthermore, the EIC students at RMUTL also assumed that their confidence in English speaking would increase since they had an opportunity to practice and achieve clear and intelligible pronunciation over time. Being confident with their pronunciation would enhance the EIC students to improve their oral communication ability. Considering how pronunciation confidence raises verbal communication ability, Marzuki, Ting, Jerome, Chuah, and Misieng (2013) mentioned that good oral communication skills involve confidence in uttering messages interactively and knowledgeably.

Regarding the difficulty of the provided lessons in the BOAEC 104 course, the EIC students concurred that, on average, the lessons were difficult but challenging, which is similar to the research report of Lintunen and Mäkilähde (2015). The EIC students further commented that some unfamiliar technical terms made the lessons perplexing at the beginning. However, over time and with the lecturers' and the classmates' support, they could adjust themselves with the learning well and comprehend the lessons better. There were some sound segments that the EIC students still have problems enunciating them, such as /θ/ as in thing, thigh, and through, and /ð/ as in the, they, and there. This finding supports the study of Sahatsathatsana (2017) in the point that some unfamiliar English sound segments usually draw a pronunciation difficulty to EFL students, with no exception to those who take English as their major.

Considering the EIC students' self-evaluation toward the improvement of their oral communication ability after the completion of the BOAEC 104 course, the students reported the highest improvement in their word, sentence, and utterance pronunciation and a higher level of pronunciation confidence. These two components, namely intelligible pronunciation ability and speaking confidence, seem to be inextricable. When one perceives to have intelligible pronunciation, they are likely to have a higher level of confidence. When they have a higher level of confidence, they seem to be able to improve their oral communication ability better, and vice versa. This finding supports the claim of Talebzadeh and Gholami (2015) that those who are afraid of verbally expressing themselves due to their lack of confidence in pronunciation will refrain themselves from English learning and development. A similar situation happened to some engineering students as reported in the study of Phonhan (2019) that first-year engineering students faced

English communication difficulties as a result of their language inaccuracy, limited background knowledge, incorrect pronunciation, and low level of confidence.

This research also revealed that the EIC students applied learned knowledge in English phonetics and phonology to the learning of other courses, such as Public Speaking, Listening-Speaking, Listening Development, and Oral Presentation. They noted that knowledge in phonetics and phonology was advantageous for their English skill development, typically when it dealt with speaking matters. Consequently, lecturers in every English subject should have some knowledge of English phonetics and phonology. So, they can provide explanations about phonetic-related topics for students to help them understand the lessons conclusively and develop their verbal communication ability better. Although English pronunciation alone cannot guarantee successful communication, it is inevitable to admit that it is a necessary foundation for a better, clearer, and more intelligible oral communication.

Suggestions for the teaching of essential English phonetics and phonology to EFL students

Regarding the results of the study and taking Burns' (2003) and Gilakjani's (2012) features of English pronunciation into account, the researchers have suggested additional topics in essential English phonetics and phonology that will enhance EFL students' oral communication ability. Besides the teaching of consonant and vowels production and pronunciation, stress, intonation, and linking, as suggested by Burns (2003) and Gilakjani (2012), the topics of syllable structure, assimilation, deletion, insertion, and juncture are worth investing in the teaching time to help EFL students better understand spoken English in everyday communication. These additionally suggested topics aim to enhance EFL students, who are either English-major or other discipline students, to have intelligible oral communication ability. Moreover, a considerable amount of time should be allocated to oral practice, so EFL students have more chances to develop their verbal ability. Marzà (2014) commented in her study that one required an ability to perform good pronunciation to develop oral communication skills. Similarly, Shetah (2016) reported that accurate phonological performance is a sub-skill of verbal communication in English. Consequently, having these additionally suggested topics as an outline for lesson planning would be beneficial for both EFL lecturers and students.

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