บทความวิจัย (Research Article)

ความสามารถของนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีในการระบุเสียงพยัญชนะเหลว /r/ และ /l/ ที่ตำแหน่งต้นคำภาษาอังกฤษ

Undergraduates' Ability to Identify the English Liquids /r/ and /l/ at Word-Initial

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บทคัดย่อ

ความสามารถในการฟังช่วยสนับสนุนให้ผู้ฟังรวบรวมข้อมูลจากคู่สนทนาและทำให้การสื่อสารประสบผลสำเร็จ ในทางกลับกัน ความเข้าใจผิดและการตีความสารที่ได้รับผิดพลาดอันเนื่องมาจากการขาดความสามารถในการฟังที่ดีย่อมส่งผลให้เกิดความล้มเหลวในการสื่อสาร ทั้งนี้ ความสามารถในการฟังที่ต่ำอาจเป็นผลมาจากการที่ผู้ฟังไม่สามารถแยกความแตกต่างระหว่างหน่วยเสียงบางหน่วยเสียงที่มีลักษณะทางสัทศาสตร์ร่วมกันบางประการ ดังนั้น ในงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ ผู้วิจัยจึงสนใจศึกษาความสามารถในการระบุพยัญชนะเสียงเหลวภาษาอังกฤษ /r/ และ /l/ ที่ปรากฏตำแหน่งต้นคำ กลุ่มตัวอย่างคือนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีชั้นปีที่ 1 ของมหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีราชมงคลล้านนา (มทร.ล้านนา) พิษณุโลก จำนวน 60 คน ที่ลงทะเบียนเรียนในรายวิชา GEBLC101 ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารในชีวิตประจำวัน ประจำภาคเรียนที่ 1 ปีการศึกษา 2562 ใช้วิธีการคัดเลือกกลุ่มตัวอย่างด้วยวิธีการสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบเจาะจง เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัยประกอบไปด้วย แบบทดสอบการฟังเพื่อตรวจสอบความสามารถในการระบุพยัญชนะเสียงเหลว /r/ และ /l/ ที่ตำแหน่งต้นคำ และแบบสอบถามข้อมูลทั่วไปเกี่ยวกับผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัย แบบทดสอบการฟังประกอบไปด้วยคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษ จำนวน 40 คำ แบ่งเป็น คำศัพท์ที่ขึ้นต้นด้วยเสียงพยัญชนะเหลว /r/ จำนวน 20 คำ และเสียงพยัญชนะเหลว /l/ จำนวน 20 คำ วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงสถิติโดยหาค่าเฉลี่ย และค่าร้อยละ ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ในภาพรวม กลุ่มตัวอย่างสามารถระบุเสียง /r/ ที่ตำแหน่งต้นคำได้ถูกต้องมากกว่าเสียง /l/ ที่ตำแหน่งเดียวกัน เมื่อพิจารณาความสามารถในการระบุพยัญชนะเหลวที่ตำแหน่งต้นคำ

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ของกลุ่มตัวอย่างรายคณะ พบว่า ผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยจากคณะบริหารธุรกิจและศิลปศาสตร์ สามารถระบุพยัญชนะเสียงเหลว /r/ และ /l/ ที่ตำแหน่งต้นคำได้ถูกต้องมากที่สุด ในขณะที่ผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยจากคณะวิศวกรรมศาสตร์มีปัญหาในการระบุพยัญชนะเสียงเหลวต้นคำ /r/ มากที่สุด และผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยจากคณะวิทยาศาสตร์และเทคโนโลยีการเกษตรมีปัญหาในการระบุพยัญชนะเหลวต้นคำ /l/ มากที่สุด ผู้วิจัยเสนอว่า ครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษควรส่งเสริมให้ผู้เรียนได้ทำแบบฝึกทักษะการฟังเพื่อให้ผู้เรียนสามารถแยกความแตกต่างระหว่างหน่วยเสียงที่มีคุณลักษณะทางสัทศาสตร์ที่คล้ายคลึงกัน และเพื่อให้ผู้เรียนได้พัฒนาทักษะการฟังจับใจความต่อไป

คำสำคัญ: พยัญชนะต้นคำ เสียงพยัญชนะเหลว คุณลักษณะทางสัทศาสตร์ ความสามารถในการฟัง

Abstract

A good listening ability helps the listener to comprehensively obtain information while conversing with their interlocutor, and it also enhances successful communication. Contrastively, misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the received messages due to the lack of a good listening ability causes communication breakdowns. A poor English listening ability may be resulted from learners' incapability to distinguish certain sounds that share some phonological aspects such as the liquids /r/ and /l/. Consequently, this research was conducted to investigate the English as Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduates' ability to identify the English liquids /r/ and /l/ at word-initial. The participants were 60 freshmen who took the "GEBLC101: English for Everyday Communication" course in the first semester in the Academic Year 2018 at Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) Phitsanulok, and they were purposively selected. The research instruments were a listening test and a questionnaire asking for the participants' personal information. The listening test contained 40 randomly-organized minimal-pair English words with 20 words starting with the liquid /r/ and 20 words starting with the liquid /l/. The obtained data were statistically analyzed to find the mean score and percentage. The results of the study revealed that, overall, the participants could correctly identify the initial liquid /r/ and /l/. When further studied the ability to identify the liquids /r/ and /l/ at word-initial of the participants from each faculty, it found that the percentages of the Business Administration and Liberal Arts (BALA) (66%) and Science and Agricultural Technology (SAT) (64.25%) participants who correctly identify the initial liquid /r/ were nearly the same. The Engineering (ENG) participants showed the lowest ability to correctly identify the same sound with a percentage of 59.75%. The percentages of the

BALA (55.25%), SAT (46%), and ENG (50.35%) participants who correctly identified the initial liquid /l/ were slightly different. It could be concluded that undergraduates from RMUTL Phitsanulok demonstrate a fairly good ability to identify the initial liquids /r/ and /l/; however, some participants could not perform the identification task well. It is recommended that EFL lecturers put more effort to encourage EFL undergraduates to do more listening practices, so their sound segment identification ability will be improved and their listening comprehension ability will, in turn, be better.

Keywords: Initial consonants, Initial liquids, Phonological aspects, Listening ability

Introduction

Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) means all EFL learners put an effort to acquire all aspects of the English language to master it effectively and efficiently. However, English language teaching practice in Thailand tends to be in a different direction. In an English classroom in Thailand, English teaching and learning emphasizes grammatical contents and vocabulary memorization, and English teachers with heavy workloads tend to use conventional teaching methods, such as rote-memorization, and grammar-translation (Ulla, 2018; Noom-ura, 2013; Khamkhien, 2010). Furthermore, Islam and Bari (2012) and Kwon (2017) mentioned that Thai students expected to get as high scores as possible when they took admission tests like high school and university admission tests. Also, they'd rather focus on getting good grades. As a result, it could be possible that the teaching practice that focuses on grammatical contents and vocabulary memorization seems to have resulted from the need that Thai EFL students have to take different kinds of tests, such as Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) and General Aptitude Test (GAT). It is also a consequence of the emphasis on achieving satisfactory grades. Hence, it is not overstated that the English teaching and learning system has trained Thai EFL students to be test-takers rather than language users.

To be fully equipped with the English skills to master effective communication, learning only grammatical contents and memorizing as many vocabulary words as possible is not sufficient. Another ability that is as important as linguistic and vocabulary knowledge is a listening ability. Listening, as well as watching, is an essential way to communicate and learn new information since language users rely on the listening ability to comprehend, interpret, and access transmitted messages accurately (Özdener & Eşfer, 2009). However,

the lack of a good listening ability can cause communication breakdowns as listeners are unable to determine what their interlocutors are speaking and what messages those people are trying to convey. For example, when a listener hears a speaker says, "A *ladyboy* is walking in the *rain*.", and he cannot identify whether the initial sound of the italicized words is the liquid /r/ or /l/, he seems to have a difficulty understanding the conveyed message even though the speaker has a moderately intelligible level of pronunciation. Therefore, it is advisable that EFL learners and non-native speakers (NNSs) occupy a good listening ability.

Establishing a good listening ability requires EFL learners and NNSs to be able to identify exactly the sounds they are hearing, especially those that share some phonological aspects, but they are distinctly different phonemes. For example, Thai EFL learners seem not to be aware of the phonological differences between the liquids /r/ and /l/ since they usually pronounce the two sounds interchangeably. Frequently, Thai EFL learners, when speaking Thai, place the Thai liquid /l/ in place of the Thai liquid /r/, and they seem to transfer the consonant substitution to their English speaking by substituting the English liquid /r/ with the liquid /l/ (Kanokpermpoon, 2007). However, the two sounds are distinct phonemes that the substitution of the former with the latter and vice versa will result in the change of words' meanings. An application of a minimal pair technique will help EFL learners distinguish the two distinct sounds. A minimal pair refers to a pair of words that are contrast only one phoneme in the same position (Yule, 2010; Roach, 2009). For instance, when the initial liquid /r/ in the words *rice, rink,* and *read* is substituted with the liquid /l/, the new different and meaningful words *lice, link,* and *lead* are formed. So, the three sets of word pairs *rice-lice, rink-link,* and *read-lead* are exemplified minimal pairs.

The English liquids /r/ and /l/ share some phonological aspects. They are voiced alveolar sounds. This means they are produced with the tip of the tongue getting closer to the alveolar ridge, and the vocal folds vibrate during the sound production process. The specific description of the liquid /r/ is *voiced alveolar retroflex* as the tip of the tongue is curled back and forth in the sound production process. In contrast, during the production process of the liquid /l/, the airstream is freely released around the sides of the tongue (Yule, 2010), and its specific description is *voiced alveolar lateral* (Roach,

2009). The feature that makes the liquid /l/ distinct from the liquid /r/ is that it has the [+lateral] feature (Akmajian et al., 2001).

Since different phonemes make each word different in their meanings, EFL learners' ability to distinguish certain phonemes that share some phonological aspects will help them identify what sound they are hearing, and then they will be able to tackle the speakers' messages more accurately. Furthermore, according to Jenkins' English as a Lingua Franca Core (LFC) (2000), non-native English speakers (NNESs) should occupy all consonantal inventory, except the /θ/ and /ð/. Regarding this fact, EFL learners should be able to perform both the pronunciation and the identification of the liquids /r/ and /l/ at word-initial more correctly since the substitution of the liquids /r/ and /l/ will create different words with different meanings. Consequently, this research intended to investigate the EFL undergraduates' ability to identify the initial liquids /r/ and /l/ in English words. The liquids /r/ and /l/ were the focus of this research because the two phonemes share some phonological aspects, and they draw some phonological difficulties to Thai EFL learners in producing the two phonemes (Kanokpermpoon, 2007). Moreover, classroom and out-of-the-classroom practices to promote Thai EFL learners' awareness of the distinction between other sets of phonemes were discussed.

Objective

This research aimed at investigating Thai EFL undergraduates' ability to identify the liquids /r/ and /l/ at word-initial.

Research Methodology

1. Research instruments

This quantitative research applied two research instruments for data collection. The first instrument was a questionnaire requiring the participants to respond to questions asking about their personal information. The second instrument was a self-made listening test. The listening test contained 20 minimal pairs of words. So, the total number of words was 40 simple English words with 20 words beginning with the liquid /r/ and the other 20 words beginning with the liquid /l/. All the 40 words were randomly ordered in the list. The MP3 files of all the 40 words were retrieved from Cambridge Dictionary online

(Cambridge University Press, 2018). Three experts in Applied Linguistics had validated the questionnaire and the listening test before they were distributed to the participants.

2. Participants

The participants of the research were 60 freshmen who, at the time of the study, were enrolled in an English course entitled "GEBLC101: English for Everyday Communication" in the first semester in the Academic Year 2018. The course is under the General Education Program. The same number of 20 EFL undergraduates were purposively selected and were from the Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts (BALA), the Faculty of Science and Agricultural Technology (SAT), and the Faculty of Engineering (ENG) at Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) Phitsanulok. Since all of the participants were freshmen, and they did not have prior experience learning English in higher education, they were suitable as the research samples.

3. Data collection method

The questionnaire validated by three experts in Applied in Linguistics was distributed to the participants before they completed the listening test. They were given ten minutes to answer all the question items in the questionnaire. Then, the listening test was administered. In the listening test, the participants had a chance to listen to the recordings of 40 English words beginning with the liquids /r/ and /l/. While listening to the recordings, they had to mark the box corresponding to the initial sound they heard. Each recording was played only once, and the words were not printed on the test paper. The participants were also informed that the gathered data would be solely used for academic purposes, and their participation in the research would be kept confidential.

4. Data analysis

The obtained data were statistically analyzed to find the mean score ($\bar{x}$) and percentage. Explanations also intended to provide information about the ability to identify the initial liquids /r/ and /l/ of the participants from each faculty.

Results

1. The participants' personal information

Out of the 60 participants, 30 of them were male and the other 30 ones were female. The same number of 20 participants were recruited from the Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts (BALA), the Faculty of Science and Agricultural Technology

(SAT), and the Faculty of Engineering (ENG). They were freshmen taking different disciplines at RMUTL Phitsanulok. Figure 1 presents the majors that the participants were taking in the three faculties.

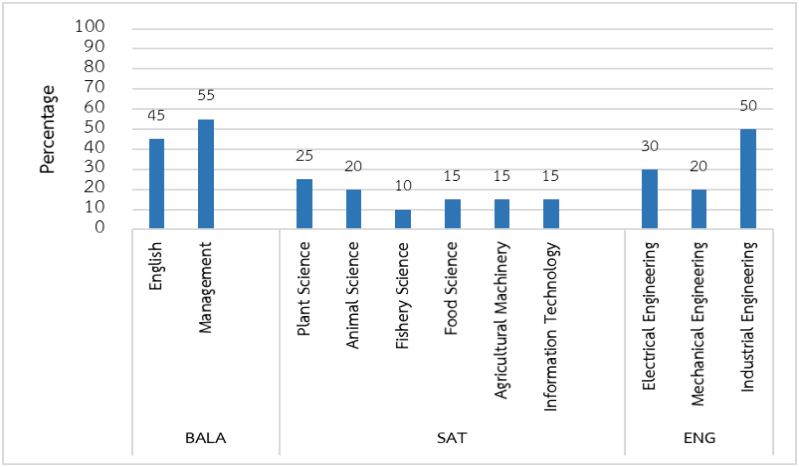

Figure 1 The participants' majors according to their faculties

According to Figure 1, the percentage of the BALA participants who were taking Management as their majors was slightly higher than those taking English as their major. The percentages of the SAT participants taking different majors were not highly different. Most of the SAT participants were majoring in Plant Science, followed by Animal Science, while only a few of them were taking Fishery Science. The same number of SAT participants was taking Food Science, Agricultural Machinery, and Information Technology as their majors. For the ENG participants, the greatest number of the participants were majoring in Industrial Engineering, followed by Electrical Engineering and Mechanical Engineering, respectively.

The participants were also asked about their educational background before they passed the admission test to study at RMUTL Phitsanulok. Figure 2 presents the information about the participants' programs of study when they were in high school, or equivalent, level.

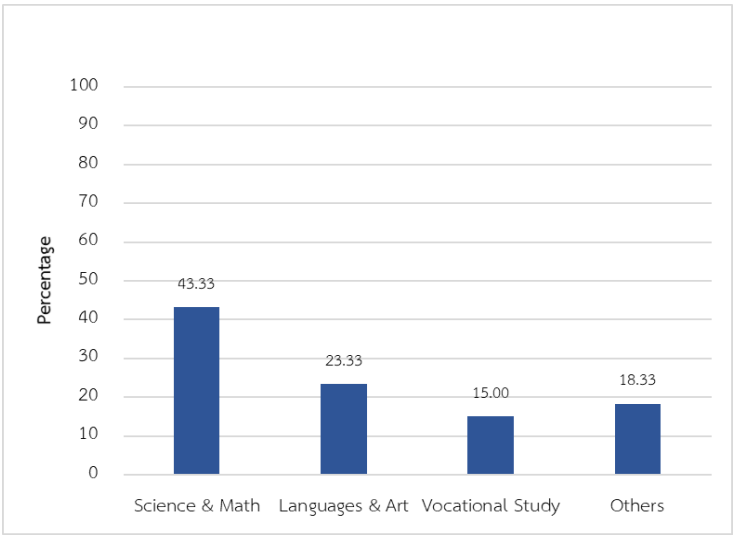

Figure 2 The participants' programs of study in the high school, or equivalent, level

According to Figure 2, almost half of the participants (43.33%) studied in the Science and Math program in high school, and it was nearly double the number of the participants who studied in the Languages and Art program (23.33%). The percentage of the participants who graduated from vocational schools (15%) was slightly lower than that of the participants who studied in other programs (18.33%) rather than Science and Math and Languages and Art. So, it means more participants studied in other programs like Social Studies and Art, Math and Art, and Technology and Art than those who graduated from vocational schools.

2. The participants' overall ability to identify the initial liquids /r/ and /l/

The overall ability of the participants performing the initial liquids /r/ and /l/ identification task is illustrated in Figure 3.

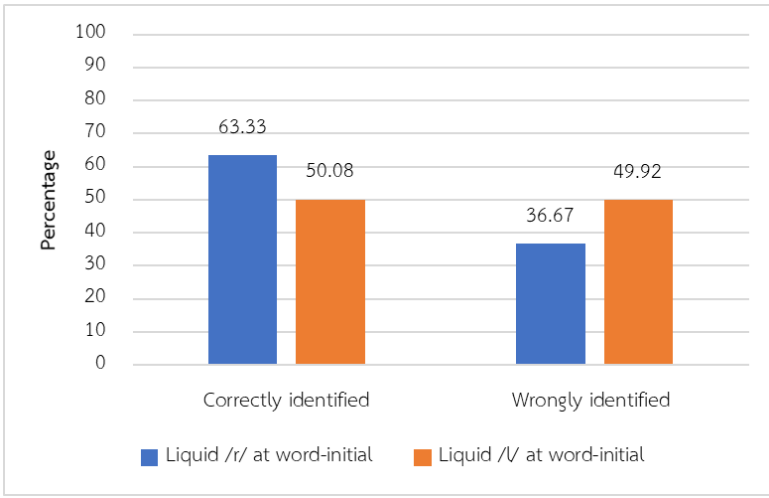

Figure 3 Overall ability of the participants to identify the initial liquids /r/ and /l/

As illustrated in Figure 3, the percentage of the participants who correctly identified the initial liquid /r/ was nearly double the percentage of the participants who wrongly identified it. However, the percentages of the participants who correctly and wrongly identified the initial liquid /l/ were almost the same. Overall, the participants performed slightly more correctly in identifying the initial liquid /r/ than the initial liquid /l/. They misidentified the initial liquid /l/ slightly more than the initial liquid /r/.

3. The participants' ability to identify the initial liquid /r/

Figure 4 presents the participants' ability, according to their faculties, whether they were able to correctly identify the initial liquids /r/.

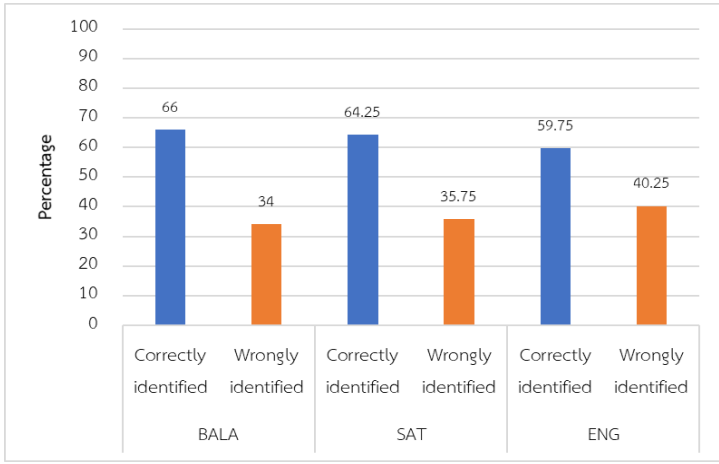

Figure 4 The participants' ability to identify the initial liquid /r/

According to Figure 4, the participants from the three faculties, namely BALA, SAT, and ENG, showed a slight difference in their ability to correctly identify the initial liquid /r/. The percentages of the BALA and SAT participants who correctly identified the initial liquid /r/ were almost double the percentages of those who wrongly identified the initial liquid /r/. However, the percentage of the ENG participants who correctly identified the initial liquid /r/ was almost-two-times higher than the percentage of those who wrongly identified the initial liquid /r/.

4. The participants' ability to identify the initial liquid /l/

Figure 5 illustrates the participants' ability, arranged by their faculties, whether they could correctly identify the initial liquid /l/.

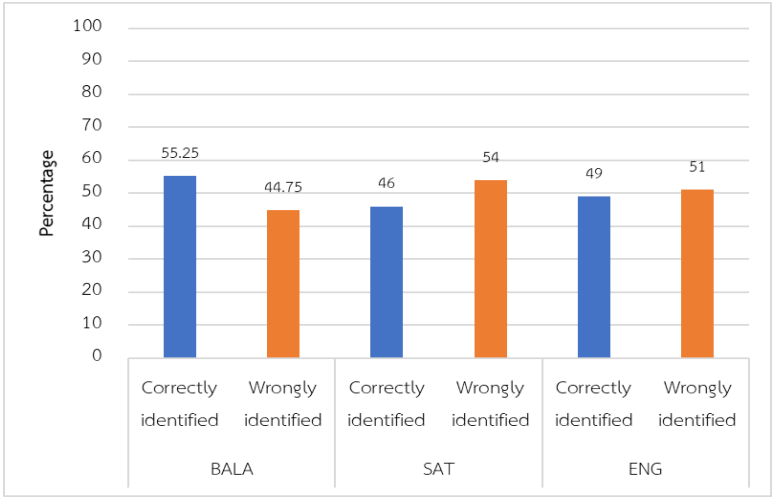

Figure 5 The participants' ability to identify the initial liquid /l/

As illustrated in Figure 5, only the BALA participants showed a slightly higher percentage in their ability to identify the initial liquid /l/ correctly than wrongly. For the SAT and ENG participants, the percentages of the participants who correctly and wrongly identified the initial liquid /l/ were almost the same.

Conclusion and Discussion

Good listening ability is as important as a good speaking ability for language users to obtain comprehensive information and to achieve their goals of communication. A poor listening ability of EFL learners has partly resulted from the inability to identify English sound segments, especially those that share some phonological properties like the liquids

/r/ and /l/. The liquids /r/ and /l/ share the places of articulation, and the vocal cords vibrate during the sound production process. That is one of the reasons why EFL learners, without exception to Thai EFL learners, are usually confused and have trouble producing and perceiving the sounds. Consequently, this research was done with the aim to find out the ability of EFL undergraduates at RMUTL Phitsanulok to identify the initial liquids /r/ and /l/ by implementing a listening test consisting of a list of 40 minimal-pair words: 20 words beginning with /r/ and the other 20 words beginning with /l/.

The results of the study showed that, overall, the participants from the three faculties, namely BALA, SAT, and ENG, could correctly identify the initial liquid /r/. The BALA and SAT participants showed a slightly different ability to correctly identify the initial /r/. Even though the ENG participants showed the lowest ability to correctly identify the initial /r/, more than half of them could perform well in the identification task. On the other hand, the participants, overall, seemed to have an issue of identifying the initial liquid /l/ since the percentages of the participants who correctly (50.08%) and wrongly (49.92%) identified the sound were almost the same. However, as previously mentioned, the liquids /r/ and /l/ share some phonological aspects, which are places of articulation, manner of articulation, and voicing. Besides, most of Thai EFL learners often pronounce the two sounds interchangeably (Kanokpermpoon, 2007). Consequently, the participants' low ability to correctly identify the liquid /l/ at word-initial is perceived to be attributable to their confusion in sound perception.

The results of the current study also support the claim that exposure to language practices and use will enhance EFL learners' language ability (Nunan, 2002; Noom-ura, 2013; Al-Zoubi, 2018; Peters & Leuven, 2018). As previously presented in Figure 4, a moderately more than half of the participants from each faculty (66% for BALA, 64.25% for SAT, and 59.75% for ENG) performed the initial /r/ identification task correctly. Even though the participants' ability to identify the initial /l/ did not seem to be perfect, a slightly more than half (55.25% for BALA) and nearly half (46% for SAT and 49% for ENG) of the participants, as previously presented in Figure 5, performed quite well in the initial /l/ identification task. Their ability to perform the initial /r/ and /l/ identification task fairly well seemed to be contributable to their weekly English learning in class which allowed them to expose to English use and their weekly participation in additional activities. As the participants of this study were first-year undergraduate students, they were required to

undertake the GEBLC101 English for Everyday Communication course, and they had to spend some time, approximately one to two hours during the week, participating in additional English language-related activities, such as an Easy English Speaking class and a Listening for Pleasure class, provided by the Language Center. The participants had a chance to practice their English language ability both inside and outside the classroom. Consequently, it is recommended that EFL learners constantly and continuously practice English listening and even speaking skills to be successful in information exchange and communication.

Recommendations

1. Recommendations for EFL lecturers

For EFL lecturers, provision learning activities that help promote the learners' listening ability is recommended. As the results of the current study suggested, EFL lecturers should provide listening activities that allow EFL learners to improve the liquid /l/ identification ability. For example, an activity that allows EFL learner to listen to minimal pairs of words starting with the liquids /r/ and /l/, like *rice-lice, right-light, read-lead, rot-lot, rack-lack*, and so on, will enhance the learners' ability to master the liquids /r/ and /l/ discrimination better. According to scholars and EFL lecturers (Ketkumbonk & Woragittanont, 2017; Haghighi & Rahimy, 2017; Sariçoban & Kuç, 2010; Fryer, 2005; Tuan, 2010), the minimal pair technique is not only beneficial for pronunciation development, but it is also advantageous for improving sound segment discrimination ability.

Another recommended teaching and learning activity is the integration of pronunciation practice to the sound distinguishing ability. Darcy (2018) names it "integrating perception." The activity will allow EFL learners to associate the ability to perceive the target sounds with the ability to pronounce the sounds more accurately. It will improve both the learners' sound identification and production abilities. Most importantly, EFL lecturers should act like EFL learners' firsthand learning source and provide constant support and explicitly constructive feedback (Darcy, 2018) to EFL learners so that they are aware of the sound distinction. Then, they can gradually improve their sound identification and production abilities.

2. Recommendations for further study

Recommended directions for further study are that Thai EFL learners' production ability of the initial liquids /r/ and /l/ and how their production performance associates with their sound identification ability should be studied. It is also advisable that a semi-structured interview should be conducted to obtain more comprehensive factors that affect the participants' listening ability to identify the initial liquids /r/ and /l/. Moreover, an investigation of how each recommended teaching practices in the previous section is also worth conducting, so EFL lecturers will learn which activity is more effective and can choose a more suitable activity for their students.

Acknowledgment

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