Title of Project:

Accents and Workplace Listening Comprehension of Thai Undergraduates in Asian ELF Contexts

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

The role of English as a lingua franca (ELF) is prominent in Asia (Kirkpatrick, 2010). For Thai university graduates to be successful in their future careers, being able to understand various accents with Thailand's major trading partners, particularly American, Chinese, and Japanese, seems vital. As a listening test that included these different accents was needed, the Workplace Listening Test (WLT) was developed to determine whether Thai students need more training in understanding these accents. Before a test becomes operational, validity arguments for test score interpretations are needed (AERA et al., 2014).

Accents have been identified as obstacles to successful listening comprehension. Closely related to the effects of accents on comprehension are the notions of a shared first language (L1), but previous research has provided inconclusive findings (e.g., Major et al., 2002). Only a few studies have addressed the fact that, apart from the shared-L1, accent familiarity can also be considered as the degree of exposure to accents (e.g., Harding, 2011; Ockey & French, 2016). Thus, it is important to measure listeners' accent familiarity and examine its effects on comprehension.

Another factor that is closely related to accent familiarity and listening comprehension is attitudes toward accents. Although L2 listeners prefer native to nonnative accents, it is unknown if negative attitudes would result in low listening comprehension scores or positive attitudes would yield high listening scores. Only a few studies investigated this issue, and the findings were inconclusive (e.g., Harding, 2011; Kang & Rubin, 2009).

The primary purpose of this study, which was situated in the context of ELF, was to investigate the effects of accented speech on workplace listening comprehension of Thai undergraduates. This examination included three aspects. First, the study sought to provide

justification for the need of the WLT as a readiness measure for Thai undergraduates. Second, the study investigated potential effects of American, Chinese, Japanese, and Thai speakers' accents on students' listening comprehension. Third, the study sought to understand the roles accent familiarity and attitudes toward accents played on their listening performances.

Research Questions

This study had three research questions.

Research question 1. To what extent is the interpretation of the Workplace Listening Test's scores supported? Following the interpretation/use argument (IUA) approach, four types of inferences—domain definition, evaluation, generalization, and explanation—were addressed.

Research question 2. To what extent do speakers' accents affect listening comprehension of Thai students?

Research question 3. To what extent do accent familiarity and attitudes toward accents in listening tests predict listening comprehension?

Research Methodology

Participants included 144 undergraduates at a Thai university. Four main instruments were employed—the English Learning Questionnaire, the WLT, two accent familiarity questionnaires, and two accent attitudes questionnaires.

First, the English Learning Questionnaire provided information about students' proficiency levels. It provided a determination of their initial ability levels (i.e., low, lower-mid, upper-mid, and high), recent English courses, and course grades. Students of each level were randomly assigned to create four equivalent groups of mixed-proficiency levels.

Second, students took the WLT and listened to eight monologic listening passages spoken by two male speakers each of American, Chinese, Japanese, and Thai accents. The order of the speakers was counterbalanced. The topics covered various functional areas of business and industry. Each passage had six multiple-choice questions with total scores ranging from 0 to 48 points. Scores were interpreted as the ability to listen to accented speech (readiness) or not (unreadiness). The cut-off score determined by the contrasting group method was used to make such decisions.

Third, the accent familiarity questionnaires consisted of two portions—immediate and overall judgments. The first portion was embedded in the listening test. That is, after students answered the questions in each passage, they were asked to immediately rate their familiarity with the speaker's accent that they had just heard. The second portion was the overall accent familiarity, which was administered after students completed the test. The ratings were done on a 5-point Likert scale. The ratings for the two speakers of the same accents were averaged resulting in immediate and overall familiarity scores (from 1.00 to 5.00) for each accent.

Fourth, the attitude questionnaires also consisted of two portions—immediate and overall judgments. The first portion was placed in the listening test after the immediate familiarity judgment question. That is, after students answered questions in each passage and rated their familiarity with each accent, they were asked to immediately rate their attitude toward the accent they had just heard. The second portion was the overall attitudes toward accents, which was given to students at the end of the test. Students rated their attitudes on a 5-point Likert scale. Scores from the two speakers of the same accent were averaged. This procedure resulted in immediate and overall attitude scores (from 1.00 to 5.00) for each accent.

To validate the test scores, evidence was gathered following the IUA approach. Four inferences—domain description, evaluation, generalization, and explanation—were examined. One part of the study utilized a quasi-experimental research design to investigate effects of accents on workplace listening comprehension. The design was a replication of a four-by-four Latin square. A three-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data.

This study also used a correlational design. The data obtained from the questionnaires on accent familiarity and attitudes were used to examine the extent to which these two variables would contribute to prediction of listening scores. For each of the four accents, a Spearman's correlation was used to examine the relationships between (a) immediate familiarity and listening scores, (b) overall familiarity and listening scores, (c) immediate attitudes and listening scores, and (d) overall attitudes and listening scores.

Summary of Findings

WLT score interpretations. Some substantial evidence was found to support the domain definition, evaluation, generalization, and explanation inferences. Overall, the WLT was deemed moderately appropriate to measure the ability to understand accented speech in the Asian ELF workplace although the test needed some revisions. The test lacked an appropriate number of easy and difficult items. Thus, some items should be rewritten to increase discrimination power. Revisions should yield better psychometric properties of items as well as the reliability of the test.

Effects of accents. Results supported the shared-L1 benefit between the listener and the speaker. When the listeners and speakers were Thai, the listeners' comprehension was facilitated. No differences were found among American, Chinese, and Japanese accents; Thai test-takers had a similar level of difficulty listening to these three accents. Unexpectedly, effects of listening passages were present. One of the eight listening passages was generally easier than the rest and this led to a few marginally significant interactions.

Accent familiarity, attitudes, and listening comprehension. Results showed that immediate and overall familiarity and attitudes were not related to listening scores when the speaker's accent was American, Chinese, Japanese, or Thai. Interestingly, it was also found that scores on immediate and overall judgments of familiarity and attitudes were statistically unrelated and so could not be combined.



Implications

This dissertation provided three types of implications—theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical. First, the WLT was developed following the theoretical models of listening regarding cognitive processing and speech production, L2 assessment, and L2 pedagogy (Bejar et al., 2000; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). With this multi-faceted framework, it is viable to measure workplace listening comprehension at local and global levels. Second, methodologically, it is viable to identify the target language use domain and use semi-structured outlines to create listening stimuli, which should better represent real-world listening in an Asian ELF context. Last, Thai undergraduates need to develop their listening competence for ELF workplace tasks. Once the WLT is implemented, students would not only be informed of their listening readiness to understand various accents, but they would also be motivated to improve their listening skills if more training was needed. Stakeholders, such as English instructors, curriculum developers, and administrators, could revise the curriculum better to help prepare students for the Asian ELF workplace by revising the existing courses or creating new courses with a greater proportion of listening activities that include a variety of English accents.



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