



Phonological Difficulties for the Thai Learners of Spanish? The Sounds /s/, /n/, /r/ y /l/

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Abstract

The listening skill may be an obstacle for Thai speakers communicating in Spanish as it is for other foreign languages like English. The difficulties may be related to the two different phonological systems, therefore in this paper, we attempted to study the impact of the Thai phonology in learning Spanish. After comparing the two phonological systems we found different possible mistakes and selected some especially relevant for communication. For example, the cases of some final consonantal sounds /s/, /r/, /l/, /n/. To check the impact of this problem we conducted a study on some Thai learners' ability to perceive these sounds. A group of 26 Thai students were asked to perform a task of pseudoword discrimination to measure their skill of perceiving Spanish sounds. We have discussed the results and proposed some solutions to the issue.



INTRODUCTION

It has been more than 50 years since Spanish started being taught in Bangkok (Batalla C, 2006). The demand for Spanish has grown since then and currently there are around 2000 students studying Spanish in five universities in the country and in public and private schools (Ramos Cuevas, J.P. 2018). Spanish is chosen by students for its value to work in companies, embassies and in the world of tourism, which is probably where there are more opportunities to use Spanish (Fuentes Hurtado, 2014). Although it is true that trade relations between Thailand and Spain are increasing, and the number of Spanish speaking tourists is increasing each year. Actually, they do not represent a percentage as large as that of other countries such as Anglophones (García, 2014). For this reason, the job opportunities related to Spanish in Thailand are not so great and other reasons are sought to explain the students' choice as personal tastes for dances such as salsa, tango, sports such as football or tennis. In other words, it is more likely personal preference related to an affinity with Spanish culture are taken into account (Ramos, 2018).

Despite the popularity of Spanish, the performance is not very high. In Thailand there is only one examining center that frequently does not find candidates for the DELE (Ramos). So there is no reliable data. Anyways, it is estimated that Spanish language students in Thailand rarely would surpass the B1 level when they finish the degree and this situation has not improved over the years (Batalla, Srivoranart P, 2011, pg3). According to these authors, the reason for the problem is the lack of exposure to native Spanish or the student's personality and the Thai culture. In this paper, we want to contribute to the knowledge of the mistakes of the Thais to improve the teaching of Spanish. Since the greatest difficulties are not in the grammar (Srivoranart, pg3), in this study we want to focus on phonology. We argue that communicative difficulties are affected by the perception of a specific group of sounds related to Spanish morphology: / s /, / n /, / r /, and / l /. We try to see to what extent this perception is limited and we propose some solutions. In spite of the communicative approach being the more popular trend in teaching, we will argue that some specific teaching about the sounds of the target language should be done in order to improve the communicative skills of Thai students.

¿GRAMMATICAL MISTAKES OR PHONOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES?

Oral communication relies in knowledge about vocabulary, grammar and pragmatics but it also relies in very basic processes of perceiving and producing the spoken language. Without this abilities the comprehension of the spoken language will be very difficult if not impossible. Thai language is quite different to Spanish in different regards. The phonological and writing systems are to be looked into because of the problems they may create to the students.

This study was aimed to help addressing the problems of communication that students face when trying to speak with foreigners. For example, in a recent Spanish speaking contest at Nonkhai, Thailand among secondary school students from the region of Isaan, 14 students were asked to transcript very slowly read sentences like: Me encantan las chicas altas y morenas (I love tall brunette girls). The following monster sentence combined all the mistakes made:

1. *Mei ~~en~~slcanta~~n~~lrs ~~las~~ las ~~las~~ chicas/n (en) ~~altas~~ s/antas tantas (y) mo~~r~~lenas.*

We could suppose that the problem here is that they didn't know the vocabulary or the basic grammar since they haven't been studying Spanish for long time. Anyways, it is not difficult to see a pattern of omissions and substitutions that didn't happen with other sentences



like: Juan se levanta muy temprano (Jhon wakes up very early).

2. Cuan scelebra/blanta muy mi temprano, plátano tempono

As we can see comparing the two sentences, the mistakes in the first one are about final sounds of the words or the syllables whereas the other sentence has mostly cv structure in its words and shows other mistakes. The first sentence leads us to focus on the final position of consonants, specifically consonants that are related to morphological features crucial to grammar which is necessary to understand a message in Spanish: /s/, /n/, /r/, /l/.

Most of the studies about Thai student's difficulties learning Spanish have focused linguistic topics other than phonology, mostly about grammatical mistakes in writing tasks. The general studies about grammatical errors in writing have been classified and ranked similarly by different scholars following the classification purely about the grammatical categories of Santos Gargallo (in Penadés 2003, pag23). The study by Olmos and Alejaldre (2018, pg29) showed the errors made by first year undergraduate students who were asked to write an introduction letter in percentage: Spelling (33.6%), verbs (18.18%), prepositions (10%), articles (9.8%), pronouns (9%), agreement (7.43%), word order (6.33%). Sritong (2006) had studied the errors made by 20 third year undergraduate students when writing a letter to a friend and found the mistakes in the following categories: articles (34.1%), prepositions (30,6%), agreement (12%), (tener/haber) 12,1%, verbs like gustar (10.98%). Both authors pointed out intralingual and interlingual causes for the errors, yet there are many that they didn't know exactly where they came from (Olmos & Alejaldre, 2018, pg 35).

A closer or different look to grammatical mistakes in writing could lead us to some common problems to understand Spanish grammar. Aside from word order and lexical choice, all the other categories need the discrimination and production of the selected sounds: /s/, /n/, /r/, /l/, specially verbs, agreement, and articles, but also prepositions and pronouns. We could see that without discriminating the final sounds of the verbs in Spanish, it is impossible to know the person for example: como, come/s/, come, comemo/s/, coméi/s/, come/n/, come/r/. The same problem occurs with the definite articles: e/l/, la lo/s/ la/s/; plural agreement: manzana/s/ pequeña/s/, some prepositions: e/n/, po/r/, de/s/de, ha/s/ta; and that can even create confusion with the pronouns: é/l/, nosotros/s/ vosotros/s/, ello/s/. Could it be the case that students have problems in perceiving and producing these sounds and this has an effect on their communication and their learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW ABOUT PHONOLOGICAL MISTAKES

We hardly find any study about errors in pronunciation or perception by Thai learners of Spanish language. Llisterra (2018) includes only Srivonart's (2009) study. The author pointed out some difficulties with no existing sounds in Thai: /θ/, /g/, /x/, /p/, /ĩ/ that impact Thai students' learning. She mentioned the difficulty with /r/ in final position and proposed some activities to improve. There might exist other studies like Jitto (2017) who introduced the advantages for Isaan speakers to learn /p/, a specific inexistent sound in Thai that Isaan dialect includes in their repertoire of sounds.

Some of the perception and production for Thai students may be similar in learning other languages like English. Studies about pronunciation and perception of English sounds by Thai students point to the same direction. For example, regarding the production, Patthamawadee and Bhornsawan (2017) agreed with previous many previous studies, that the majority of problem



sounds which Thai students face are the sounds that do not occur in Thai phonological system especially voiced sounds in final position, but also showed that the confusion in final sounds is much bigger and includes sounds existing in English but without the same distribution (Kanokpermpoon, 2007).

Regarding to perception much less studies are found. Allyn (2013) found the same problem to perceive final sounds and gave this example of mistakes commonly:

<i>mat</i>	<i>mad</i>	<i>math</i>	<i>mass</i>	<i>Mask</i>	<i>mash</i>	<i>Match</i>
แมท	แมด	แมทท์	แมสส์	แมสค	แมสท์	แมช

And explained that all seven words are pronounced as mat because Thai orthography prohibits production of these terminal sounds: /d/; /θ/ unvoiced /th/; /s/; /sk/; /ʃ/sh/; /tʃ/ch/ and allows only six terminal consonants: /k/; /p/; /t/; /m/; /n/; /ŋ/. All together we can say that phonological problems for Thai students would occur with sounds that don't exist in the second language but not in Thai and especially with sounds occurring in the final position.

BACKGROUND

It's been stated that the phonological system of the mother tongue filters the perception of sounds from a second language (Troubeztkoy, pg37). This author stated that for a sound to belong to the phonological system and be a phoneme it should have a function on the system. In Spanish: pe/r/o (but) and pe/r/r/o (dog) or /b/eso (kiss) and /p/eso (weight) are different words just because this phonological contrast. If this distinction is not relevant in the mother tongue it wont be perceived, this phenomenon has been called phonological filter or phonological deafness.

To predict phonological errors in a second language learning Flege (1988) distinguished three different difficulties when learning foreign sounds depending on the similitude between them. According to Flege identical sounds are not a problem, new sounds for which is possible achieve a very good pronunciation because there is no interference, and similar sounds in L1 and L2 for which there are more learning problems due to the interference. (Llisterri, 2003, pag 96).

In order to understand and correct phonological problems (Llisterri 2003) firstly we need to contrast both phonological systems. *Comparing the tables in Tuycharoen (1990) and Quillis (1978):*

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Lamio-prepalatal	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p p ^h	b	t t ^h	d		k k ^h	ʔ
Nasal		m		n		ŋ	
Fricative		f	s				h
Affricate				tʃ tʃ ^h			
Tap				ɾ			
Lateral				l			
Semivowel	(w)				j	w	

As we can see that the two languages have some sounds exclusive to them. In Thai we find the glottals: / ʔ/ and /h/, the velar /ŋ/ and the lamio-palatal /tʃ/. Besides Thai has aspirated plosives /p^h/, /t^h/ and /k^h/. In Spanish sounds: /θ/, /g/, /x/, /ɲ/, /ɾ/



are not included in the Thai.

From all this differences we could find difficulties in sounds existing in the L2 but not in the L1 and confusion with very similar sounds.

Therefore we could predict problems with perceiving and producing words like /g/ato, /j/uan, Espa/ñ/a o pe/r/o which doesn't exist in Thai. As Srivonarart (2009) points out students will face difficulties and should practice to distinguish from other similar sounds. Facing this errors could be important in order to improve the communicative skills of our students. But according to Llisterra (pg98) we should distinguish between different kinds of phonological errors depending

	Bilabial		Labiodental		Dental		Interdental		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar	
	sur.	son.	sur.	son.	sur.	son.	sur.	son.	sur.	son.	sur.	son.	sur.	son.
Oclusiva	p	b			t	d							k	g
Fricativa		β	f				θ	ð	s		j		x	ɣ
Africada											ç	dʒ		
Nasal		m		ɱ		ɲ		ɳ		n		ɲ	ŋ	
Lateral						l		ɭ		l		ʎ	ʟ	
Vibrante simple										r				
Vibrante múltiple										rr				

on their effect on communication: 1) errors that prevent communication, 2) errors that make it difficult, and 3) errors that don't affect communication and in this study we choose the problematic final sounds.

Similarly to the studies done in English a mere contrast between the two phonological systems doesn't explain the mistakes when perceiving final sounds in Spanish as shown in the sentence 1. in the previous section. Srivonarart (2009) attributes the missing /r/ final sound to the fact that in Thai < ɾ > because the Thai grammar when this consonant occurs in the syllable final has to be pronounced as /n/ in a similar way Allyn attributes it to orthography. But this phenomenon can be explained due to phonotactic rules as Flege (1988, pg322) shows with the case Spanish pronunciation of initial /s/ who tend to pronounce it adding an extra vowel: *school* would be pronounced as *eschool*, or the Italian pronunciation adding an extra vowel at the end of syllables ending with voiceless consonants as in *friend* -- *friend@*, the sounds exist in L1 but cannot be pronounced in some distributions on the syllable.

In this study we will check if there is a problem for listening to the final sounds in Spanish, it could be said that the problem in perceiving sentence1 was lack of grammatical or lexical knowledge, but we aim to check if without any grammatical or lexical interference these sounds are well perceived or not and to what extent and what interferences we find.

METHODOLOGY

Similar to Allyn (2013), we set an experiment of discrimination of sounds, but in our case we tested the perception of our target sounds in final position in the context of two syllable words. The participants were third year undergraduate students Spanish major, who were supposed to be already skillful in grammar. All the students had similar exposure to Spanish. We disqualified students who had been exposed to Spanish before. Most of the students were from the region of Isaan.

A multiple choice test was provided to choose the word perceived from a list which included the word with the target and other four words with sounds commonly confused and five for /r/ and /l/ including a transposition. For example, pu/r/ca was the target and students had to

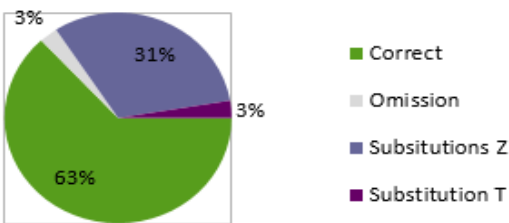


choose from *purca*, *pruca*, *puca*, *punca*, *pulca*. To avoid a familiarity effect, our words were pseudo words following the rules of word formation in Spanish but without any meaning. Also the accentuation was taken into account, half of the words had the accent in the target syllable. The words were recorded by a native speaker with the standard pronunciation of Castilian to normal speed. The ability to perceive the sounds was checked with another native teacher. The speed reduced to 25% and the word was read two times in an interval of 3 seconds.

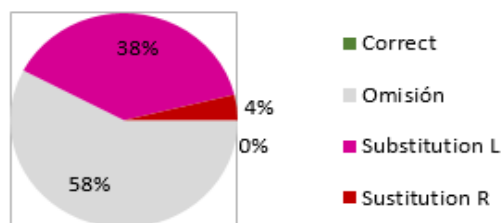
RESULTS

The results show that there are difficulties in perceiving all the final sounds selected. The difficulty varies: /s/ was perceived **correctly** sounds with a 63 % of the cases, /r/ 17%, and /s/ 12%, there was no right choice for /n/ 0%. The difficulty to perceive any sound at all also varied, the sound /s/ was only omitted the 3%, but the other sounds where omitted more: /n/ 58%, /r/ 35% and /l/ 42 %

Perception of final sound /s/

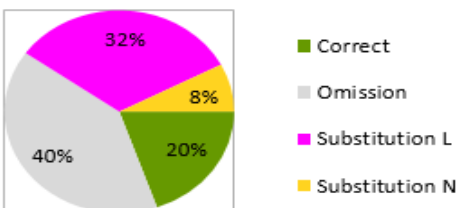


Perception of final sound /n/

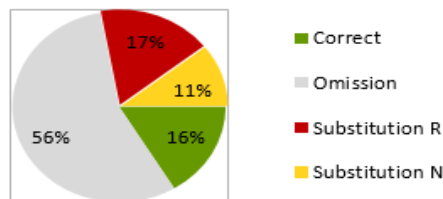


The other effects were the substitutions. In which /s/ was substituted by /z/ in 31% of the cases, and by /t/ only in 3%. It was a lesser confused sound compared to /n/ substituted with /r/ in 38% and with /l/ in 4% and /r/ was substituted with and /l/ in 29% and 12% with /n/; /l/ was the less substituted by /r/ in 12% and by /n/ in 8%.

Perception of final sound /r/



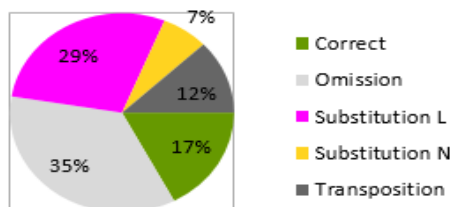
Perception of sound final /l/



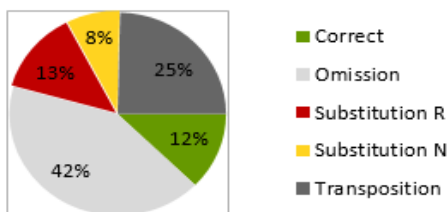
In the last category of mistakes we could see more problems of transposition with final sound /l/ in 25% than with /r/ only in 12%. As a summary, we can say that /s/ is the best perceived sound whereas /n/ is less correct, the most omitted and substituted mostly by /l/. The sounds /r/ and /l/ are more correctly perceived than /n/ but they are affected by transposition. When we don't take into account, transposition of /l/ is almost as badly perceived as the /n/ sound.



Perception of final sound /r/



Perception of sound final /l/



LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study measures the extent of difficulties of the Thai learners of Spanish as a second language. But the results should be carefully for several reasons. Firstly most of the participants are from Isaan region whose inhabitants have a slightly different pronunciation of consonants as /s/ more aspirated in some cases even imperceptible so they will face more difficulties than central Thailand speakers, also the number of participants should be bigger to obtain more reliable data. Secondly the construction of the pseudo words for the test could have taken into account aspects as the possible facilitation of co-articulation with open and closed vowels and the interference of other consonantal sounds in the contest of the syllable. Finally the methodology to exposing the participants to the words to recorded sounds doesn't seem to be completely reliable in spite of being a record by a native speaker speaking, we are looking forward to find other ways.

CONCLUSION

As predicted by our initial intuition and the findings in English literature about final sounds, we found Thais Students face difficulties when perceiving Spanish final sounds /s/, /n/, /r/ y /l/. Since third year students are already supposed to know grammar and vocabulary enough to communicate, the results are consistent with Srivoranart idea that the grammar is not the problem. Grammar can be learnt, and yet can be learnt in a way that is not available to communicate with if perception and production skills are not learnt altogether. The sounds selected are relevant to communicate in Spanish therefore we think the mastery of their perception and production would help the learners considerably.

From the mere comparison of the phonological systems we couldn't explain the problem with final sounds, which are explained because orthography prohibits to read them or because pronunciation rules. It is more likely that some combination of sounds (phonotactics) are not legal in Thai, to the extent that they cannot be produced and are hardly perceived. As this problem doesn't depend on the existence or the sounds in the L1 but to their distribution, we would some specific exercises to improve their perception and production following the verbo-tonal method as we find in Llisterra (2003). For example, Gil Fernandez (2007) suggests some exercises the improvement the perception and production of /r/ sound: 1) Elongate the sounds, 2) Adding an extra vowel 3) Using combinatory phonetics, for /r/ give a model with closed vowels. In Bueno Hudson (2011) we can find some activities that we have applied in our classes: practicing reading out loud texts, especially poems seems helpful to the students when exercising sinalefa, this way they can pronounce final sounds when preceding next word starting with vowel.



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