

THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF THAI ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION AMONG THAI ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Abstract

English has become a global language essential in education, diplomacy, and intercultural communication. Effective communication in English is increasingly dependent on intelligibility, the ease with which a listener can comprehend speech, rather than adhering to native-speaker norms. This study examines the intelligibility of Thai-accented English, focusing on four Thai English teachers at a kindergarten in Sadao, Thailand, as perceived by four non-Thai listeners, specifically Indonesian student teachers participating in a teaching practicum (PPL). Data were collected from audio recordings of the teachers' speech and semi-structured interviews with the listeners. Using a qualitative case study approach, the findings indicate that segmental features, such as the substitution of /r/ with /l/ (for example, rice pronounced as lice), and difficulties in reading passages were observed to lead to misunderstandings. Intelligibility was also influenced by both the speakers' pronunciation and the listeners' familiarity with Thai-accented English. This study contributes to the field of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), highlighting that intelligibility rather than native-like pronunciation is key for effective intercultural communication.

Keywords: *Intelligibility, Thai English, Pronunciation, phonological features ,ELF, Intercultural Communication*

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication in English depends largely on intelligibility, which refers to the extent to which spoken language can be understood by listeners (Ashyralyyev et al., 2025; Walker, 2005). Within the perspectives of World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), English is viewed as a shared means of communication among speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds, shifting the focus from native-speaker norms to mutual intelligibility (Baker et al., 2024; Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2020). Intelligibility is particularly important

in education because English teachers serve as language models whose pronunciation influences students' communicative development and classroom interaction.

Intelligibility concerns the extent to which listeners understand spoken language, regardless of the presence of a foreign accent (Munro & Derwing, 1995). Unlike accentedness, which relates to how foreign a speaker sounds, and comprehensibility which refers to the listener's perceived ease of understanding, intelligibility focuses on successful message transmission and is therefore particularly relevant to listener perception in multilingual communication contexts (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010).

Pronunciation plays a central role in intelligibility because phonological features such as consonant and vowel production, word stress, and intonation directly influence listener comprehension (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Kordi Tamandani, 2017). In Thailand, the influence of the Thai phonological system has contributed to the development of Thai English, which includes pronunciation patterns that may reduce intelligibility for listeners unfamiliar with the accent (Peerachachayanee, 2022; Phetkla, 2020; Suntornsawet, 2022). On the other hands, classroom observations and preliminary interactions with Thai English teachers revealed recurring comprehension challenges among non-Thai listeners, particularly in cases of consonant substitution, such as the realization of /r/ as /l/ (e.g., "rice" pronounced as "lice"), which occasionally required repetition or clarification. These challenges are especially important in educational settings because teachers function as primary language models whose pronunciation influences learners' exposure to spoken English and communicative competence (Luchini, 2024; Tiwari, 2023). From the perspectives of World Englishes and ELF, however, pronunciation should be evaluated based on its contribution to intelligibility rather than its conformity to native-speaker norms (Jaelani, 2021; Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2004). Consequently, pronunciation instruction should prioritize features that support listener comprehension and effective communication across diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Despite the growing body of research on intelligibility and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), the pronunciation of Thai English teachers has received limited attention, particularly from the perspective of non-Thai listeners. Previous studies have largely focused on learners rather than teachers (Destiyana & Laila, 2020; Doloh & Chanyoo, 2022), relied on quantitative measures Kim (2017) or overlooked qualitative evaluations of listener perceptions in authentic ELF interactions. This gap highlights a limited understanding of how non-Thai listeners perceive the intelligibility of Thai English teachers' pronunciation within ELF contexts, particularly regarding how phonological features influence listener comprehension. Existing research has largely overlooked listener-centered qualitative perspectives, leaving limited insight into how intelligibility is negotiated in authentic intercultural communication involving Thai English teachers. Addressing this gap is important because listener perception plays a crucial role in determining whether pronunciation facilitates or hinders successful communication.

This study aims to explore non-Thai listeners' perceptions of the intelligibility of Thai English teachers' pronunciation and to identify phonological features that influence

intelligibility. The study seeks to provide insights that can inform pronunciation teaching and teacher education in multilingual contexts. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do non-Thai listeners perceive the intelligibility of Thai English teachers' pronunciation? (2) Which phonological features facilitate intelligibility? (3) Which phonological features hinder intelligibility? The findings are expected to contribute to teacher education by identifying pronunciation features that enhance intelligibility in multilingual classrooms. The findings are expected to offer practical insights for English teachers and teacher educators by emphasizing pronunciation features that support effective international communication rather than the attainment of native-like accents.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the intelligibility of Thai English teachers' pronunciation as perceived by non-Thai listeners. Positioned within the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) framework, it examined listener perceptions of intelligibility in cross-cultural communication, addressing the limited qualitative research on how non-Thai listeners perceive Thai English teachers' pronunciation (Jenkins, 2000; Munro & Derwing, 1995).

The participants consisted of four Thai English teachers and four Indonesian student teachers who served as non-Thai listeners during a teaching practicum (PPL) at a kindergarten in Padang Besar, Sadao District, Thailand. Participants were selected through convenience sampling because they had direct experience with Thai-accented English and intercultural communication. Ethical procedures were observed through informed consent and voluntary participation. Participants' English proficiency levels were estimated based on classroom communication performance and informal teacher assessment aligned with CEFR descriptors (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Etikan, 2016).

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information.

No	Respondent ID	Teaching Experience in Thailand (months)	English Proficiency Level
1	R1	3	A2
2	R2	2	A2
3	R3	2	B1
4	R4	2	A2

As shown in Table 1, participants had between two and three months of teaching experience in Thailand, with English proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B1.

Data were collected through audio recordings, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. Audio recordings captured pronunciation features commonly associated with Thai-accented English, including interdental sounds, final consonants, vowel length distinctions, diphthongs, and word stress patterns (Peerachachayanee, 2022). Recordings were conducted in a quiet classroom using a smartphone, with each teacher recorded for approximately 3–4 minutes. Background noise was minimized to ensure clear audio quality. Semi-structured interviews explored listeners' perceptions of pronunciation intelligibility and comprehension,

while field notes provided additional contextual information to support data interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mackey & Gass, 2015).

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Audio recordings, interview transcripts, and field notes were coded and grouped into themes related to pronunciation intelligibility and listener comprehension. To enhance credibility, member checking and inter-coder reliability procedures were conducted throughout the analysis process. Four teachers and four listeners were involved in providing exploratory insights into pronunciation patterns that facilitate or hinder intelligibility in cross-cultural classroom contexts to emphasize depth of understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Intelligibility of Thai English Teachers' Pronunciation to Non-Thai Listeners

The outcomes of the investigation indicate that the Intelligibility of Thai-accented English improves with listener exposure and familiarity, highlighting its dynamic and experience-dependent nature. Listeners with prior exposure to the Thai accent demonstrated a greater ability to understand Thai-accented English than those who were less familiar with it. Several listeners provided insights regarding their familiarity with the accent:

"Generally, I can still understand English with a Thai accent, although it requires a bit of adjustment at first. After hearing it a few times, I began to get used to the pronunciation patterns." (R1)

"There are a few and almost all the pronunciations used are not easy for me to understand, because there are pronunciations that differ from standard English pronunciation." (R2)

"I understand fairly well even though there are some words that need to be repeated so that I can understand. Because sometimes there are pronunciations that differ, so I sometimes misinterpret what is being said." (R3)

"Overall, my level of understanding of English pronunciation with a Thai accent is fairly good. Although there are differences in pronunciation from the accents I usually hear, I can still follow the content of the conversation." (R4)

These statements indicate that although there are initial challenges in understanding the Thai accent, listeners with higher levels of exposure are able to adapt through repeated listening. This suggests that intelligibility is not static but develops gradually as experience and exposure to the accent increase.

In contrast, listeners with limited exposure to the Thai accent demonstrated lower levels of comprehension. Respondents stated:

"In many situations, I can understand the main point being made without having to ask for clarification. However, in certain parts, I sometimes need to ask for a repeat to make sure that I understand the meaning correctly." (R1)

"Sometimes I understand, sometimes I don't, but often I have to ask for a repeat because I don't always get the point." (R2)

"Sometimes I need repetition, especially when the pronunciation is unclear or when the speaker talks too quickly." (R3)

"In most situations, I can understand the main message without having to ask for clarification. However, in certain parts, especially when the speaker is speaking fairly quickly, I need to double-check what they mean." (R4)

Repeated exposure to Thai-accented English enables listeners to recognize recurring phonological patterns and maintain intelligibility despite pronunciation differences. These findings suggest that intelligibility develops dynamically through experience, as listeners gradually adapt to unfamiliar accent features over time. Consistent with perceptual adaptation theory (1995), continued exposure facilitates listeners' adjustment to Thai-accented English and supports more effective understanding in subsequent interactions. This suggests that listeners gradually develop expectations regarding accent-specific pronunciation patterns and become more capable of identifying intended meanings even when pronunciation differs from standard English norms. Therefore, familiarity appears to facilitate not only recognition of speech sounds but also the development of effective listening strategies for understanding accented speech.

A similar relationship between accent exposure and comprehension was reported by Kim (2017) and Doloh and Chanyoo (2022), who found that regular exposure to a particular accent improves listeners' ability to interpret accented speech. The underlined finding of this study is that familiarity with Thai-accented English appears to play a greater role in intelligibility than English proficiency alone. Participants who were already accustomed to the accent demonstrated greater confidence in interpreting spoken messages, even when pronunciation deviated from standard English forms. This suggests that comprehension depends largely on listeners' ability to recognize accent-specific patterns developed through previous communicative experiences. In other words, successful understanding is not determined exclusively by linguistic knowledge but also by listeners' experience in processing accent variation.

The interview data also reveal that listeners gradually shift their attention from individual pronunciation differences to overall message interpretation. As exposure increases, listeners become more capable of relying on contextual information and pattern recognition to infer meaning, reducing the impact of unfamiliar pronunciation features on comprehension. This finding highlights the adaptive nature of listening, where listeners

actively adjust their perception in response to recurring accent characteristics rather than expecting pronunciation to conform to native-speaker norms.

Although familiarity emerged as the primary factor influencing intelligibility, English proficiency was also found to support the adaptation process. Participants with stronger English skills reported that they were better able to infer meaning from context and compensate for pronunciation differences through their linguistic knowledge. However, the findings suggest that proficiency alone does not guarantee successful comprehension when listeners lack familiarity with the accent. Rather, intelligibility appears to result from the interaction between linguistic competence and accent familiarity, both of which contribute to listeners' ability to interpret spoken messages successfully.

This observation supports the findings of Doloh and Chanyoo (2022), who argue that linguistic competence enhances listeners' capacity to adapt to non-native accents through increased linguistic awareness and listening experience. The findings have important implications for English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) communication. The results demonstrate that successful communication can be achieved even when pronunciation differs substantially from native-speaker norms. What appears to be most important is not pronunciation conformity, but listeners' ability to adapt to accent-specific features through experience and exposure. This suggests that intelligibility should be viewed as a shared communicative achievement shaped by familiarity, adaptive listening behaviour, and linguistic competence rather than by native-like pronunciation accuracy alone.

This finding support the Lingua Franca Core framework (Jenkins, 2000), which prioritizes mutual intelligibility over native-speaker conformity. Intelligibility develops through the interaction of accent familiarity, perceptual adaptation, and linguistic competence. Repeated exposure enhances listeners' ability to understand Thai-accented English despite pronunciation differences, highlighting the dynamic nature of intelligibility in multilingual communication.

Although familiarity with the Thai accent plays a major role in comprehension, listeners' English proficiency also significantly influences their level of understanding. Listeners with higher levels of English proficiency tend to adapt more quickly to the Thai accent, even if their familiarity with it is still limited. The participants explained their views as follows:

"The more proficient you are in speaking, the easier it is to understand English with a Thai accent because you only need to focus more on the characteristics of their accent. If a person's English proficiency is sufficient, comprehension won't be too difficult." (R3)

"Yes, my level of familiarity with the accent and my English proficiency greatly influence my level of comprehension. The more I listen to that accent, the more accustomed I become and the easier it is to understand the pronunciation. Better English proficiency also helps me understand even when there are differences in accents." (R4)

"I believe that my familiarity with the accent and my English proficiency greatly affect my understanding. The more I am exposed to the accent and the stronger my English skills, the easier it is for me to comprehend the speech." (R2)

The findings indicate that English proficiency functions as a supporting factor in the intelligibility of Thai-accented English. While stronger English proficiency helps listeners use contextual cues and interpret meaning despite pronunciation differences, familiarity with the Thai accent remains essential for successful understanding. These findings suggest that intelligibility is shaped by the interaction of linguistic competence and accent familiarity, although familiarity appears to play a greater role in supporting listener confidence and understanding.

The underlined finding of this study is that listeners with higher English proficiency appear to adapt more efficiently to unfamiliar pronunciation patterns because they possess greater linguistic resources for interpreting meaning. Nevertheless, participants who combined strong English proficiency with previous exposure to the Thai accent reported the highest levels of comprehension. These findings suggest that listeners adapt more effectively when English proficiency is supported by familiarity with the Thai accent.

This interpretation is consistent with Doloh and Chanyoo (2022) who argue that linguistic competence facilitates adaptation to non-native accents through increased linguistic awareness and listening experience. However, the present findings further suggest that English proficiency alone does not ensure intelligibility unless accompanied by sufficient exposure to the accent being heard.

These findings also contribute to the understanding of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) communication. The results demonstrate that successful communication is achieved not through adherence to native-speaker pronunciation norms, but through listeners' ability to adapt to pronunciation variation and negotiate meaning during interaction. This supports Jenkins' (2000), argument that mutual intelligibility is the primary objective of ELF communication. In the context of Thai-accented English, both accent familiarity and English proficiency contribute to listeners' ability to maintain comprehension despite pronunciation differences.

Phonological Features that Facilitate Intelligibility of Thai English Pronunciation

Both segmental and suprasegmental features influence the intelligibility of Thai-accented English. Features such as word stress, vowel clarity, sentence intonation, and final consonant release facilitate intelligibility by enhancing listener perception and word recognition. The key features contributing to intelligibility are summarized in Table 2.

The following table summarizes the segmental and suprasegmental phonological features that contribute to both ease and difficulty in understanding Thai-accented English pronunciation, as derived from the interview results.

Table 2. Phonological Features Facilitating Intelligibility in Thai-Accented English

No.	Phonological Features	Category	Standard Pronunciation	Thai Accent Realization	Description
1	Word Stress	Suprasegmental	table (TABLE /'teɪbəl/), hotel (hoTEL /'həʊ'tel/)	taBLE, HOtel	Word stress may be shifted or produced more evenly due to the influence of the tonal characteristics of the Thai language.
2	Sentence Intonation	Suprasegmental	Rising intonation in questions	Flatter intonation with less pitch variation	Thai speakers often use flatter intonation patterns, particularly in interrogative sentences.
3	Vowel Clarity	Segmental	ship /ʃɪp/ vs. sheep /ʃi:p/	Vowels articulated clearly and carefully	Clear vowel articulation may help listeners distinguish words more easily and support comprehension.
4	Final Consonant Release	Segmental	stop /stɒp/, need /ni:d/	Final consonants pronounced more audibly	The clearer release of final consonants can improve word recognition and intelligibility for listeners.
5	Consonant Substitution	Segmental	think /θɪŋk/, this /ðɪs/	tink /tɪŋk/, dis /dɪs/	Dental fricatives such as /θ/ and /ð/ are often replaced with /t/ and /d/ because these sounds do not commonly occur in Thai phonology.

One feature that is believed to facilitate comprehension is word stress. Although Thai-accented English does not always follow standard English stress patterns, several respondents reported that clear and consistent stress placement helps them recognize spoken words more efficiently. The interview findings indicate that listeners are generally able to identify key words more quickly when the stressed syllable is perceptually prominent, even when the pronunciation differs slightly from the English accent they are accustomed to hearing.

"When the stress is clear on the first syllable, I can identify words faster, even if the accent is unfamiliar." (R1)

"I find it easier to understand words with clear stress on the first syllable, such as 'hotel' or 'table,' even though it sometimes differs from the stress patterns I'm used to hearing." (R3)

"Stress on the first syllable helps me recognize key words without struggling with the rest of the sentence." (R4)

Another suprasegmental feature that supports comprehension is sentence intonation. Pronunciation with relatively flat intonation, particularly in interrogative sentences, provides a higher level of predictability for the listener. This characteristic allows listeners to grasp the overall meaning of the sentence more smoothly, even without noticeable pitch variations. Respondents stated:

"Intonation and rhythm in sentences guide my comprehension, especially when important parts are emphasized." (R1)

"Although the intonation is flatter, I find it easier to understand the speaker's intent because there are no drastic pitch changes. Interrogative sentences remain easily understandable." (R2)

"Even with accent differences, consistent intonation and moderate speed help me grasp the overall meaning." (R4)

The findings indicate that suprasegmental features play a substantial role in facilitating the intelligibility of Thai-accented English. Although Thai-accented pronunciation does not always conform to standard English prosodic patterns, listeners generally reported that clear stress placement and consistent intonation supported their ability to identify words and interpret meaning. This suggests that successful comprehension depends not solely on conformity to native-speaker pronunciation norms but also on the predictability of prosodic cues that assist listeners in processing speech efficiently.

The underlined finding of this study is that listeners appeared to rely more heavily on salient stress patterns than on precise phonological accuracy when recognizing spoken words. Respondents reported that clearly stressed syllables helped them identify key lexical items more quickly, even when the pronunciation differed from the accent varieties they were accustomed to hearing. This finding suggests that word recognition is facilitated when prominent syllables provide reliable cues for lexical processing. Consequently, consistent stress placement may compensate for certain pronunciation deviations by directing listeners' attention toward important information within an utterance. The interpretation is consistent with Celce-Murcia et al.(2010) who argue that clear word stress improves comprehensibility by increasing predictability during spoken communication. Similarly, Jenkins (2000), emphasizes that intelligibility in English as a Lingua Franca depends more on communicative effectiveness than on conformity to native-speaker pronunciation models.

The findings concerning sentence intonation further demonstrate the importance of prosodic consistency in communication. Respondents generally perceived flatter intonation patterns as understandable provided that speech remained clear and moderately paced. Rather than creating confusion, predictable intonation appeared to assist listeners in maintaining focus on the overall meaning of the message. This suggests that listeners adapt not only to individual pronunciation differences but also to broader prosodic patterns that characterize a particular accent.

Furthermore, the interview data indicate that intelligibility is facilitated when multiple suprasegmental features operate together. Consistent stress placement, stable rhythm, and moderate speech rate collectively reduced processing difficulty and enabled listeners to infer meaning even when pronunciation differed from standard English norms. These findings imply that comprehension is influenced by the interaction of prosodic features rather than by a single phonological characteristic in isolation.

This is supported by Seidlhofer (2020) argument that rhythm and intonation contribute significantly to maintaining communicative clarity in English as a Lingua Franca interactions. The present findings extend this perspective by demonstrating that listeners can successfully adapt to accent-specific prosodic patterns when those patterns remain relatively consistent throughout communication.

Another contribution of this study is its emphasis on suprasegmental features as facilitators of intelligibility. Previous studies have largely focused on segmental aspects of pronunciation, such as consonant and vowel production, when examining accented speech. However, the present findings suggest that listeners frequently depend on prosodic information to interpret meaning and maintain comprehension. This indicates that intelligibility cannot be explained solely through phonemic accuracy but must also consider the role of stress, rhythm, and intonation in supporting communication. While studies such as Destiyana and Laila (2020) and Kim (2017), primarily emphasize segmental features, the present findings highlight the importance of suprasegmental characteristics in shaping listeners' perceptions of intelligibility.

This study expands current understanding of Thai-accented English intelligibility by demonstrating that suprasegmental features function as important resources for communication rather than merely as deviations from standard pronunciation norms. The findings suggest that pronunciation instruction within English as a Lingua Franca contexts should place greater emphasis on prosodic competence, particularly stress placement, rhythm, and intonation, because these features contribute directly to listeners' ability to comprehend spoken messages across diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Phonological Features Hindering Thai English Intelligibility for Non-Thai Listeners

Both segmental and suprasegmental deviations affect the intelligibility of Thai-accented English. Features such as consonant substitutions, final consonant reduction, and vowel length variation may hinder intelligibility by reducing word recognition and pronunciation clarity. The key phonological features contributing to intelligibility difficulties are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Phonological Features Hindering Intelligibility in Thai-Accented English

No.	Phonological Features	Category	Standard Pronunciation	Thai Accent Realization	Description
1	Contrast /r/ – /l/	Segmental	rice /raɪs/ – lice /laɪs/	rice → /laɪs/	The /r/ sound is frequently realized as /l/, which may cause confusion between words with different meanings.
2	TH Sounds (/θ/ and /ð/)	Segmental	think /θɪŋk/, this /ðɪs/	think → tink /tɪŋk/, this → dis /dɪs/	Interdental sounds /θ/ and /ð/ are commonly replaced with /t/ and /d/ because these sounds do not exist in Thai phonology.
3	Final Consonants and Final Clusters	Segmental	dog /dɒɡ/, friends /frendz/	dog → dok /dɒk/, friends → fren /fren/	Final consonants and consonant clusters are often weakened, devoiced, or reduced by omitting one or more consonants.
4	Initial Consonant Clusters	Segmental	school /sku:l/, strong /strɒŋ/	school → sa-kool /səku:l/	Initial consonant clusters are frequently simplified through vowel insertion to ease pronunciation.
5	Vowel Length and Diphthongs	Segmental	ship /ʃɪp/ – sheep /ʃi:p/, boy /bɔɪ/	ship → /ʃɪp/, boy → /boi/	Vowel length distinctions and diphthongs may be simplified, resulting in reduced vowel movement and less distinct contrasts.
6	Reading Passage Performance	Segmental and Suprasegmental	“This boy likes to play outside with his friends.”	“Dis boi laiks to play outsai wit his fren.”	In connected speech, several phonological features occur simultaneously; however, contextual cues often help listeners understand the intended meaning.

Among the features identified, the substitution of /r/ with /l/ emerged as the most significant source of comprehension difficulty for non-Thai listeners. This segmental deviation often reduced lexical clarity and created confusion between words with different meanings, particularly among listeners who were unfamiliar with the Thai accent.

"For example, in words with final consonants like 'student' or 'first,' the final sound is often unclear, so it sounds different." (R1)

"Differences in consonants like 'S' and 'R' make words sound quite different; for example, 'Lotus' sounded like 'Lotad.'" (R2)

"Final consonants such as -ed or -s are often unclear; differences between 'r' and 'l' sometimes cause confusion." (R4)

This phonemic shift impacts communication, especially when the words in question have crucial differences in meaning, such as 'rice' and 'lice' or 'right' and 'light.' The substitution of the voiceless interdental sound /θ/ with /t/ (e.g., "think" pronounced as "tink") and the voiced interdental sound /ð/ with /d/ (e.g., "this" becoming "dis") is another phonological feature that hinders comprehension. This occurs because interdental sounds do not exist in the Thai phonological system, making it difficult for non-Thai listeners to accurately recognize the words. Kim (2017) explains that this type of sound substitution can cause confusion in conversation, particularly when these words serve as key elements in sentences requiring precise understanding.

A distinctive feature of Thai-accented English pronunciation is the tendency to elide or weaken final consonants. Words like "dog" sound like "dok" or "map" without a clear /p/. Respondents noted:

"There are indeed words that sound similar, especially when the final consonant isn't clear. I often have to rely on context to understand the actual meaning." (R4)

"Yes, some words sound similar because of differences in the pronunciation of certain consonants. For example, the difference between the sounds of "r" and "l" sometimes sounds almost the same, so I have to pay attention to the context of the sentence to understand which word is actually meant." (R3)

"Sometimes there are words that sound similar because of differences in the pronunciation of certain sounds, so I need to pay attention to the context of the sentence to understand their meaning." (R1)

This issue causes non-Thai listeners to rely more heavily on context to grasp the meaning of words. Consequently, the communication process becomes slower, especially in fast-paced conversations where context does not always provide sufficient clues regarding the speaker's intent.

In addition to consonant modifications, the findings reveal that vowel length variation also contributes to intelligibility challenges for non-Thai listeners. Respondents frequently reported difficulties when pronunciation differences reduced the distinctiveness of words that normally carry contrasting meanings in English. These findings suggest that listeners do not experience comprehension problems

because of individual phonological deviations alone, but because multiple segmental features may occur simultaneously and reduce the clarity of lexical contrasts. As a result, listeners are often required to rely on contextual information to infer meaning when acoustic cues become less reliable.

This observation is consistent with Peerachachayanee (2022) who notes that differences between Thai and English vowel systems may create difficulties in maintaining vowel distinctions that are important for intelligibility. A particularly important finding of this study is that comprehension difficulties rarely originate from a single phonological feature in isolation. Instead, misunderstandings tend to emerge when several pronunciation characteristics occur together, such as consonant substitution, weakening of final consonants, and vowel modification. In such situations, listeners may struggle to identify key lexical items accurately, especially when they have limited familiarity with the accent. These findings suggest that intelligibility is shaped by the combined influence of multiple phonological features rather than by a single pronunciation difference.

The interview data further demonstrate that listeners frequently compensate for pronunciation-related ambiguity by relying on contextual information. While this strategy often allows communication to continue successfully, it also increases processing effort and may slow down comprehension, particularly during rapid speech. Therefore, successful communication depends not only on listeners' linguistic competence but also on the availability of contextual cues that support interpretation when pronunciation differences reduce clarity.

The findings also suggest that some phonological deviations have a greater impact on intelligibility than others. Features that alter lexical identity, such as the substitution of /r/ and /l/ or the replacement of interdental sounds, appear to create more noticeable comprehension difficulties because they directly affect word recognition. In contrast, listeners were generally more capable of adapting to pronunciation differences when sufficient contextual information was available. This indicates that the effect of pronunciation variation on intelligibility is mediated by both linguistic context and listener familiarity with the accent.

This interpretation supports Kim's (2017) argument that consonant substitutions can create communication difficulties when they affect words carrying important semantic information. However, the present findings further suggest that listeners actively employ adaptive strategies, including contextual inference and pattern recognition, to maintain comprehension despite such deviations.

Another contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that intelligibility in Thai-accented English cannot be evaluated solely according to native-speaker pronunciation standards. Although several phonological features deviated from standard English norms, communication often remained successful because listeners

adapted to recurring pronunciation patterns and utilized contextual information effectively. This finding highlights the importance of considering listener perception as an active component of intelligibility rather than focusing exclusively on pronunciation accuracy. This perspective is consistent with English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) research, which emphasizes communicative effectiveness and mutual understanding over strict conformity to native-speaker pronunciation norms (Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2020).

These findings extend previous research by showing that Thai-accented English intelligibility is influenced by the interaction of multiple phonological features rather than isolated pronunciation differences. The results further suggest that pronunciation instruction should prioritize features that support intelligibility and expose learners to diverse English accents to enhance communication in multilingual contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the intelligibility of Thai-accented English from the perspective of non-Thai listeners within an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) framework. The findings indicate that intelligibility is primarily driven by familiarity with the Thai accent, while English proficiency serves as a supporting factor in facilitating comprehension. Suprasegmental features facilitated understanding, whereas the cumulative effect of segmental deviations contributed to comprehension difficulties. These findings highlight the importance of prioritizing intelligibility and exposure to diverse English accents in pronunciation instruction and multilingual communication contexts.

The study also identified several phonological features that facilitated intelligibility, particularly clear word stress, consistent intonation, stable rhythm, and moderate speech rate. These suprasegmental features helped listeners recognize key information and interpret meaning more efficiently. Conversely, intelligibility was hindered by consonant substitutions, such as /r/-/l/ and /θ/-/ð/, the reduction of final consonants and consonant clusters, and variations in vowel length and diphthongs. Comprehension difficulties became more pronounced when multiple phonological features occurred simultaneously, reducing lexical clarity and increasing listeners' reliance on contextual information.

These findings suggest that successful communication in ELF contexts depends not only on pronunciation accuracy but also on listeners' ability to adapt to accent variation. Therefore, pronunciation instruction should emphasize intelligibility rather than exclusive adherence to native-speaker norms. Language teaching practices may benefit from increased exposure to diverse English accents, particularly Southeast Asian English varieties, as well as greater attention to suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. Such approaches can help learners develop adaptive listening skills and improve communication across multilingual settings.

This study has several limitations. First, the number of participants was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of non-Thai listeners. Second, the research was conducted within a single educational setting, namely a kindergarten, and involved Thai English teachers working in that specific context. Consequently, the pronunciation characteristics and intelligibility patterns identified in this study may not fully represent Thai-accented English used in other educational levels, professional environments, or social communication settings. In addition, the study focused exclusively on Thai-accented English and did not compare intelligibility across other non-native English varieties. Future research should involve larger and more diverse participant groups, include multiple educational and professional contexts, and compare different ASEAN English accents to provide a more comprehensive understanding of intelligibility in multilingual communication.

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