Teaching Suprasegmental Features of Spoken English through Films to Develop Listening Achievement of Learners

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Abstract: Teaching suprasegmental features of spoken English through films is focused in the research to develop listening achievement of learners. The research was aimed to investigate the efficiency of the lessons designed for teaching suprasegmentals through films, to compare learners’ achievement in listening before and after the treatment, to find out the correlation between learners’ competence in suprasegmentals and listening achievement, and to evaluate learners’ attitudes towards teaching suprasegmentals of spoken English through films. The subjects were 34 first-year students from various faculties of Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, involved by purposive sampling. Teaching experiment was conducted for 5 weeks in April-May 2012. The research instruments were score profiles of the tests taken at the end of each lesson, a pre and post listening test, a test on suprasegmentals, and questionnaire. From the findings, the efficiency value, E1/E2 of the designed lessons was 72.98/70.68, lower than the estimated value 80/80. Furthermore, there was no correlation at the level of significance 0.05 between the test scores for suprasegmentals and for listening at the end of the project. However, it was found that the mean of post-test score was higher than that of the pre-test score with the T-value 14.412 at the level of significance 0.1. Likewise, the students’ attitudes towards teaching suprasegmental features of spoken English through films were positively rated at the level of “a lot” showing 4.06 for a mean and 0.76 for Standard Deviation.

Keywords: Suprasegmentals, Films

Introduction

Thai learners of English usually have problems in listening to English native speakers’ utterances. They are not able to catch words correctly when listening to them, and this probably leads to failure in communication. As Yang, Lin, and Chung (2009) state that roughly 40% to 50% of people’s communication is taken up by listening, listening is therefore an essential skill that students need to develop firstly when studying English as a second or foreign language.

The researcher, an instructor at Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, found that many students enrolling in the compulsory English courses (English I & English II) had a low level of listening achievement. According to the students’ reaction to such problem, three main points can be concluded. Firstly, the students were not able to catch English words when listening to a conversation or a story even though it contains words which are not new for them and they have been acquainted with those words in the previous lesson. Secondly, the students commented that the English speakers speak so fast that it is quite difficult for them to get what is said despite the fact that it is the common speed of spoken English. And lastly, the students expected to hear all words in an utterance as clearly as they see those words written in the textbook. They do not realize that spoken language has special features that are different from the written language. To solve these problems, the researcher decides to teach suprasegmental features of spoken English through films to students who want to develop their listening achievement. Films are used as the teaching media since Hughes (2009) claims that the films contain samples of real-world language within meaningful visual
contexts. Therefore, films are good sources to enhance students’ listening. Certainly, using films in a language class motivates students to participate in the lesson (Sherman, 2003). Therefore, the objectives of the research are as follows.

1. To evaluate the efficiency of the lessons designed for teaching suprasegmentals through films
2. To compare learners’ achievement in listening before and after the treatment
3. To find out the correlation between learners’ competence in suprasegmentals and their listening achievement
4. To evaluate learners’ attitudes towards teaching suprasegmentals of spoken English through films

**Literature**

Dobrovolsky and Higgins (2001) state that the flow of speech can be divided into segments and those segments are characterized by specific phonetic properties. In terms of segments, they are known as the smallest linguistic units which make sound to occur. A segment is also referred as a phoneme. We can listen to each phoneme independently, but the phoneme on its own does not carry any meaning. Ladefoged (2006) also informs that vowels and consonants together form the syllables that make up utterances. In general, learners of English at college or university level know about the articulation of English sounds or segmental units which are the smallest element of phonological structure. When they listen to a single English word, they do not have problems to identify each segment in that word. For example, they know that the word “equip” consists of the following segmental elements which are shown separately below.

![Segmental units diagram]

To prepare Thai learners for English listening, English phonological system such as vowel, consonant, cluster, and so on must be reviewed, especially the sounds of some English consonants that do not occur in Thai language such as /ɡ/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /z/, /θ/, /z/, /dʒ/, and /dZ/. When they understand the combination process of individual segments: consonants and vowels to form larger units such as syllables and words, they will have strong background to
develop their listening. However, spoken language has a number of phonological features which extend or spread over more than a single segment. Kuiper and Allan (2004) call these features suprasegmentals. It is natural characteristics of all languages in the world. If suprasegmental features of spoken English are introduced and practiced among learners, their listening will be improved; in other word, problems about listening will be reduced.

**Suprasegmentals**

According to Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistic (Richard, Platt, and Weber, 1985, p. 281), suprasegmentals are units which extend over more than one sound in an utterance such as stress and tone. Similarly, Ladefoged (2006) explains that suprasegmental features are aspects of speech that involve more than single consonants or vowels. The principal suprasegmental features are stress, length, tone, and intonation. Clark, Yallop and Fletcher (2007) inform that suprasegmentals can be referred as prosodic features or nonsegmental features. They are features of spoken language such as pitch, rhythm, and tempo which are not easily identified as discrete segments. Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2007) indicate that prosodic or suprasegmental features are over and above the segmental value since the word “supra” means above or beyond. Therefore, suprasegmentals are units which govern more than one sound in an utterance. They cannot occur by themselves but they extend over the segments in words, phrases, and sentences. In spoken language, not only the segmental elements but also the other units known as suprasegmentals are involved. If learners know features from the smallest component of spoken language or segments to the larger one or suprasegmental units, they are likely to achieve their listening. Therefore, the researcher plans the lessons for teaching each feature of suprasegmentals apart from individual sounds of English words. Each of them is informed as follows.

**Stress**

Ladefoged (2006) states that stress is a suprasegmental feature of utterances. It applies not to individual vowels and consonants but to whole syllables. When a syllable or a word is pronounced with more force than other syllables or words, we can say that it is stressed. At the same time, the listeners can hear that stressed syllable in a word louder, stronger, and slightly higher than the rest or the unstressed one. In general, at least one syllable is stressed in a word. For longer words, there is often more than one stressed syllable. However, in our daily life, we listen to speech with more than one isolated word, and it is not natural for English native speakers to emphasize the stress on each word in an utterance. Therefore, the stresses will be given only on content words which carry the important meaning in that connected speech. On the other hand, the function words which show only the grammatical relationship in the utterance are not stressed. The learners have to notice the stress placement in sentences when listening because the stress placement is important in conveying the meaning in spoken language.

**Rhythm**

Since stress plays an important role in English language. Roach (2010) indicates that English speech has a rhythm that allows us to divide it up into more or less equal intervals of time called feet. Each foot begins with a stressed syllable; however, the number of unstressed syllables between each stressed one or in each foot varies. As a result, spoken English has stress-timed rhythm; that is the time from each stressed syllable to the next tends to be equal. Learners of English can practice to divide utterances into feet while listening.
**Assimilation**
In speech, the sounds do not occur in isolation, but they come in sequences. Kuiper and Allan (2004) state that assimilation is one of the processes which affects individual segments. This means one segment become more like another, or two segments become more like each other. The sound is assimilated because it is influenced by the place or the manner of articulation from the sound neighboring. If learners know assimilation and understand how it happens, listening will not be difficult for them.

**Elision**
Roach (2010) indicates that when native speakers of English talk to each other, a number of phonemes or segments are not pronounced. Elision always occurs in less formal speech. Therefore learners of English should not expect to hear every segment. Both consonant and vowel elision are common in spoken language.

**Linking**
As we have known that there are differences between pronunciation of words in isolation and in connected speech. British Council (2006) indicates that linking happens when the last sound of a word is a consonant and the next word begins with a vowel sound. Therefore, linking is very common in spoken English. Learners of English need to be aware of linking that they will meet in listening.

**Intonation**
Intonation can be defined as pitch movement in spoken utterances (Dobrovolsky, 2001). Intonation is a crucial factor for spoken English. It is not related to differences in word meaning, but the changing tune affects the range of meaning. English intonation can change grammatical function in that phrase or sentence. In addition, the intonation pattern: a rise-fall and a fall-rise is used with different intention and feeling. Learners must notice intonation pattern when listening.

**Pitch**
When people speak, the pitch of their voice is changed all the time. Fromkin et al (2007) explain that the pitch depends on how fast the vocal cords vibrate. The faster they vibrate, the higher the pitch. Kuiper and Allan (2004) indicated that the pressure of the air coming out of the lungs and the tension of the vocal cords affect the pitch of the voice. Pitch is varied; people sometimes speak with their normal pitch, a low pitch, a high pitch, a rising pitch, or a falling pitch. The pitch is altered appropriately from the lowest note to the highest not depending on each kind of situation.

In conclusion, the concept of suprasegmentals can help foreign learners of English to listen and understand English in an effective way. How the teacher designs the lesson for teaching suprasegmentals is a challenging task.

**Teaching Suprasegmentals**
Because suprasegmentals occur with real speech, each of them cannot be identified separately outside the context of speech. Films are then the most appropriate media to illustrate each feature of suprasegmentals. Below are steps to follow in the teaching session.

1. **Contextualizing**
Due to the time constraint, not a whole film can be used in one class. Therefore, students need to have some background knowledge about the film before watching. At this step,
learners are prepared with the theme of the film or difficult key vocabulary that learners need to know before they begin watching.

2. Watching the film extracts
Learners are allowed to watch the film extracts continuously around twice or three times (depending on learners’ need).

3. Learning suprasegmental features
Theme-based questions can be used to activate learners to participate in the lesson. Then each feature of suprasegmentals is introduced and studied together in a class through the film extracts. Learners study a film script with sounds from the film. Suprasegmentals are emphasized in order that learners know and understand clearly each type of them.

4. Doing controlled practice
Learners watch a new extract of the same film. They are assigned to identify suprasegmentals. They share the answer and discuss with friends in a class.

5. Doing free practice
Learners are assigned to practice listening outside class. They watch a film at home, share to class what they practice, and give examples to class.

Methodology

Subjects
The subjects in this study are 34 first-year students from various faculties of Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep. They participate in the project “Learning English through Films” with the aim to improve listening achievement.

Instruments
1. Score profiles (listening quiz at the end of each lesson) after teaching suprasegmentals through film
2. A listening test with 25 items for completing the missing part after watching a short film extract to measure listening performance at the beginning and the end of the project
3. A test on suprasegmentals
4. Student questionnaire to evaluate learners’ attitude toward the project

Procedure
Teaching experiment is conducted according to the schedule below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1  - 1.30 hrs</td>
<td>Giving a pre-listening test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1  - 1.30 hrs</td>
<td>Teaching lesson 1 - An introduction to English Segmentals and Suprasegmentals / Quiz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2  - 1.30 hrs</td>
<td>Teaching lesson 2 - Stress / Quiz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2  - 1.30 hrs</td>
<td>Teaching lesson 3 - Rhythm / Quiz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3  - 1.30 hrs</td>
<td>Teaching lesson 4 - Assimilation / Quiz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3  - 1.30 hrs</td>
<td>Teaching lesson 5 - Elision / Quiz</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings
According to an analysis of data, the main findings are presented in the tables below.
Table 1. The efficiency value of the lessons designed for teaching suprasegmentals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening performance</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Total scores</th>
<th>$\bar{x}$</th>
<th>S.D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quiz at the end of each lesson</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>51.09</td>
<td>5.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post – listening test</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17.67</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Efficiency value : $E_1 / E_2 = 72.99/70.68$

According to the result, the efficiency value, $E1 / E2$ is 72.99 / 70.68 which is lower than the estimated value 80 / 80.

Table 2. A comparison of the pre-listening test scores and the post-listening test scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Testing</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>$\bar{x}$</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11.12</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>14.412</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17.68</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Level of significant difference = 0.001

Table 3. The correlation of the test on suprasegmentals and the post-listening test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of the test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>$\bar{x}$</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>rho</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A test on suprasegmentals</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17.71</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-listening test</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17.67</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion
Below is discussion about the results of the teaching experiment and the researcher’s reflection on each of the findings.

1. The efficiency value, E1/E2 of the designed lessons was 72.98/70.68, lower than the estimated value 80/80.
1.1 Because the subjects in the study have only superficial knowledge of phonological structure and learning suprasegmentals is new for them, a longer period of time is required to learn and practice more. They need time to practice listening through films continuously. Besides, suprasegmentals cannot be studied in isolation; they come together with segments in spoken language. If learners do not have basic concept about English phonetics, it is quite difficult for them to identify suprasegmentals.
1.2 Since the listening test has no alternatives for learners to select as the answer, they have to listen to each item carefully and then catch words on their own to complete the missing parts in the test. Their answer is based on their application of the principal of suprasegmentals. Therefore, the scores that the learners get from the test are not high but reliable.

2. The mean of the post-test score was higher than that of the pre-test score with the T-value 14.412 at the level of significance 0.1. At the beginning, the mean of the pre-test scores is 11.12 (out of 25), or 44.75 per cent which needs improvement. However, at the end of the project or after learning about suprasegmentals, the mean score of the post-test is 17.68 (out of 25) or 69.29 per cent which means better development. The difference between listening achievement at the beginning and at the end of the project is quite satisfying. Apart from this, the result from the questionnaire shows that the learners believe that their listening problems will be decreased and they are more confident to apply what they learned about suprasegmentals to their listening at the level of “a lot”.

3. There was no correlation at the level of significance 0.05 between the test scores of suprasegmentals and listening at the end of the project. According to the assumption, learners who have high scores on suprasegmentals also have high scores on listening or vice versa. However, from the statistical results, there was no correlation between them. This might be because of some weak points of the testing technique. When there is a large gap of level of difficulties between two sets of the test, it will be a failure to find out the correlation between them.

4. The students’ attitudes towards teaching suprasegmental features of spoken English through films were positively rated at the level of “a lot” showing 4.06 for a mean and 0.76 for Standard Deviation. It was found that learners’ feedback on the project focusing on teaching suprasegmentals of spoken English through films is good; especially they suggest that this kind of project should be launched regularly for students in the university.

Recommendations
Since English is an essential tool for studying and working all over the world, students should be encouraged to study most of their time not only in a classroom, but also outside the classroom on their own pace. Films are the best linguistic source for teaching and learning English. The most important thing is to choose the kind of films that interest learners.
Moreover, the level of difficulty of English in the films, in terms of the vocabulary and the accent should be taken into consideration.

References


