

The Effect of Cluster Simplification in Thai on the English Language Learners

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Abstract

This research is aimed at studying the effect of the change in progress of spoken standard Thai in terms of true consonant cluster simplification on the Thai students learning English language. Thai language permits CC- with /k, kh, t, p, ph/ { ก, ข, ค, ต, ป, ผ, พ } in the first position and /r, l, j/ { ร, ล, จ } as the second consonant. The Cr- and Cl- are the consonant clusters that are facing the simplification in most of the speakers of Thai while Cj- remains intact. Subjects are 50 freshmen from Department of English, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University in Bangkok, Thailand. They are asked to complete two tasks that are 1) Translate Thai words into English and 2) Short story-telling about their family. The results show that 89% of subjects simplified Cr- and Cl- clusters in English both writing and speaking which is the same phenomena in their native language.

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Introduction

There are 44 consonantal alphabets in Thai in which give 21 consonantal phonemes for initial position. The language has phonotactical constraints that allow certain syllable structures and consonant clusters. Initially, Thai permitted 11 combined consonantal patterns as follow:

/kr/ (กร), /kl/ (กล), /kw/ (กว)
/k^hr/ (กร,คร), /k^hl/ (กล,คล), /k^hw/ (กว,คว)
/pr/ (ปร), /pl/ (ปล)
/p^hr/ (พร), /p^hl/ (ผล,พล)
/tr/ (ตร)

More cluster combinations surfaced as loanwords entered the language such as /t^hr/ (ทร) and /fr/ (ฟร), totally 13 in combined consonantal patterns. However, in spoken register, it is evident that most Thai simplifies the consonantal combinations of C₁ + /r/ or /l/ in all words.

C₁ + /r/
/kri:t/ > /kri:t/ 'to cut'
/fri:/ > /fi:/ 'free'

C₁ + /l/
/k^hlo:n/ > /k^ho:n/ 'mud'
/k^hlû:n/ > /k^hû:n/ 'wave'

The simplification occurs massively in most of the speakers of Thai especially in spoken register, with younger speakers as a majority of the said phenomenon. Language change and variation are common and inevitable in all living languages.

L2 is widely known to be affected by a learner's native language, L1. Performance of writing skill is influenced by the spoken mode. Therefore, it is of the researcher's interest that to what extent the change in L1, Thai language in this case, will affect L2, English language in different mode.

The objectives of this study are to explore the effect of the change in progress of spoken standard Thai in terms of true consonant cluster simplification on the Thai students learning English language.

Methodology

The subjects of this research are 50 freshmen: 15 male and 35 female from Department of English, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University in Bangkok, Thailand. They are asked to complete two tasks i.e. 1) Translate Thai words into English and 2) Short story-telling about their family.

In the translation task, all students listen to 20 words (table 1), read aloud in Thai by a teacher twice for each word. Then, they translate the given words into English. The dictation list consists of one-syllable word and multi-syllable words. The Cr- and Cl- clusters appear in the initial syllable position and second and third syllable position. Only the correct choice of words – not including synonyms, regardless of the erroneous spelling, is included in the analysis.

Table 1 Dictation list (target English words)

	Vocabulary
1	crop
2	trash
3	brother
4	profile
5	province
6	construction
7	attractive
8	express
9	country
10	extraordinary
11	clap
12	plum
13	classic
14	blessing
15	conclusion
16	complete
17	simply
18	public
19	complicated
20	exclusive

The results show that 89% of subjects simplified Cr- and Cl- clusters in English both writing and speaking which is the same phenomena in their native language.

In the second task, short story-telling, the students are requested to tell a story in English for about 3 minutes, one person at a time, about themselves e.g. their family, interests, personal experience, relationships or life goal. The interviewer asks them questions when they pause to keep the conversation going. The research elicits words with clusters from their speech and conduct statistical analysis.

Results

The results show that 89% of subjects simplified Cr- and Cl- clusters in English both writing and speaking which is the same phenomena in their native language.

The results of the two tasks :

- 1) Translate Thai words into English:

The result of this task shows that majority of the participants tend to simplify the Cr- and Cl- consonant clusters in English e.g.

profile > /p^ho:.fai/

attractive > /at.t^hac.t^hi:p/

- 2) Short story-telling about their family:

For the spoken mode task, that majority of the participants tend to have the same behavior in simplifying the Cr- and Cl- consonant clusters in English e.g.

Province > /p^ho:.win/

brother > / ba:.dæ:/

Conclusion

It is evident that cluster simplification in Thai is almost complete especially in spoken language with younger speakers exemplifying such change. Language change and variation in Thai language do have effect on the performance of the foreign language, English, that the students are acquiring. Although, there are phonological similarities in both languages' sound system but it is important to address the language change and variation in learners' native tongue when teaching L2.

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