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Do you Like My English? Thai Students' Attitudes towards Five Different Asian Accents

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Abstract

This research aims to explore how Thai speakers of English perceive their Asian peers' accented English and evaluate the acceptability of their accents namely Burmese English, Chinese English, Indian English, Japanese English, and Vietnamese English. The participants were eighty undergraduate students at an International University in Thailand where English is used as a medium of instruction. They were asked to listen to five recorded speech extracts taken from five different intermediate-level reading passages. A triangulated study is used to examine the data from different angle including a questionnaire survey in a Likert-type scale and a follow-up semi-structured interview. The Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient were also applied to assure the content validity of the research methodology. The results in this study indicated that Thai student participants were easily able to identify that five speakers were all non-native speakers of English. The majority preferred Indian accented English to other accented Englishes. Most participants showed negative attitudes towards Japanese and Burmese accented English. It is somewhat conclusive that the participants still believe that a native-like accent is overvalued their perceived English accents.

Keywords: Asian accents, Asian Englishes, attitudes, English as a Lingua Franca

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Introduction

In the contemporary world, English has become the international language in which most intercultural communication is conducted (Seidlhofer, 2011). The number of speakers using English as a foreign or second language outnumbers the number of native speakers of the language six times (Crystal, 2003) and, accordingly, English is used more commonly as a Lingua Franca in the international context than to communicate with its native speakers (Jenkins, 2007).

Across Asia, the numbers of people having at least a functional command of the English language have grown exponentially over the last four decades, and current changes in the sociolinguistic realities of the region are often so rapid that it is difficult for academic commentators to keep pace. Because of the global spread of English, there are more people who speak English with a non-native accent. As a result, such accents often bring about the rise of stereotypes the accents of speakers in terms of academic success and employability (Lippi-Green, 1994). From decades of research in social psychology and sociolinguistics, it has been established that accent plays a significant role in how native speakers perceive non-native speakers of English (Garrett, 2010). However, little has been done in exploring how Thai speakers of English view their Asian peers' accents and judge the acceptability of their accents. In this study, the researchers try to understand from the learners perspective of their perception of five different Asian accents namely Vietnamese, Burmese, Chinese, Indian and Japanese.

Literature Review

In ELT, one of the two Englishes, American or British, however, has been promoted as prime while other forms of English have been ignored. For example, some varieties of Asian English in were either treated as non-standard or often excluded in research or in teaching (Jenkins, 2009). Accordingly, researchers have regarded the notion of standard English as problematic (Smith, 1992). Smith and Nelson (1985) explain that intelligibility refers to lexical-level recognition, comprehensibility is about understanding sentence-level meaning in context, and interpretability is the ability to see the embedded meaning rather than the literal one. Munro and Derwing (1995) define intelligibility as to whether or not the intended message of a speaker is acknowledged by a listener as the base for comprehensibility, which refers to how easy it is to understand a speaker.

According to Anurit, Selvarajah and Meyer (2011), unlike its neighboring countries, Thailand has never been colonized. Hence, as Wiriyachitra (2004, p.1) puts it, "Thailand has always been a country with only one official language which is Thai. He further explains that as Thailand needs to progress in terms of business, education, and tourism industries, Thais need to be able to demonstrate high proficiency for communication and negotiation with those who cannot speak Thai in today's globalized world.

EFL studnets in Asean social settings have been found to purport preferences for native speakers' articulation and elocution especially to speaking practice or pronunciation centered classroom exercises in the conviction that these instructors are better ready to demonstrate oral familiarity and 'right' articulation (Árva & Medgyes 2000; Callahan 2006; Lasagabaster & Sierra 2002; Medgyes 1992).

A broad assemblage of research dating from early investigations utilizing the matched guise technique (e.g. Cargile et al. (1994); Lambert, Anisfeld, and Yeni-Kosmshian (1965) has reliably demonstrated that audience's view of accents are affected by extralinguistic data. Factors, for example, the speaker's nationality or L1 foundation may intercede audience members' view of specific phonemes and impact their judgment of the speaker's complement; this has been appeared to be genuine notwithstanding when the speaker and audience share a similar dialect or vernacular (Hay, Nolan, and Drager (2006); Hu and Lindemann (2009); Niedzielski (1999).

In nations, for example, Malaysia, India or Singapore where English has a solid regulated status and might be a native language to a few parts of the population, confidence in and acknowledgment of limited pronunciation standards might be of hard impact (Timmis 2002; Tokumoto and Shibata 2011). Anyway the two students and instructors may consider local English Speakers' intonations to be clearer and more right (Evans and Imai (2011); Jenkins (2005); Li (2009); Sifakis and Sougari (2005); Tang (1997); Tokumoto and Shibata (2011).

World Englishes Perspective

World Englishes (WE) notion that tries to go beyond the nativeness in order to be able to better serve the current English profile as an international language (EIL), or to highlight that the language no longer belongs to any particular speech community (McKay, 2012; Jenkins, 2009; Widdowson, 2003). During the last three decades, *World Englishes* notions have emerged and gained more acceptance from the situation that English has been used in multicultural contexts as a lingua franca between people who share different first languages (Jenkins, 2009, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2007). The changing profile of speakers, in which non-native speakers of English' outnumber the native speakers, implies that, especially in terms of the use English as an International Language (EIL), one has a tendency to engage in English communication with non-native speakers than with native speakers of English (Smith, 1992 as cited in Lee, 2012). This also suggests that native speaker models should be put aside (Cook & Singleton, 2014; Jenkins, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2007; McKay, 2002; Kachru, 1996;) since the concept that all learners of English need or desire so-called '*native speaker competence*' would not much contribute to understanding their various language needs nor reflect the type of English the learners would need to use in their current and real-world intercultural lives outside (Renandya, 2012; Jenkins, 2009, 2012; Lee, 2012; Matsuda, 2003, 2012; McKay, 2002, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Kasper, 1999 as cited in Jenkins, 2009; Kachru, 1996).

Chinese English

The first feature of Chinese English is that it is not confined to any specific group of people because there is no clear cut-off point between a learner and a user of English. In terms of how and how much English is used in their lifeworld (Husserl, 1970), the millions of Chinese people who are learning or have completed their learning of English in formal education may be positioned somewhere on a continuum. The second feature is that, being a new variety of English, "it is only natural that China English is characterized with cross-linguistic influences from the Chinese language since the learners' acquisition of a second language is influenced, either negatively or positively, by their mother tongue, and by the linguistic environment" (He & Li, 2009, p. 83). Some salient features of Chinese in terms of Phonological standard *e.g. dental fricative as in the word theory may be pronounced with f or s or t instead of 'th'.) which is what makes the Englishes

spoken by Chinese speakers from different background less intelligible (Jiang, 2003). Moreover, Schneider (2011) also adds that other distinctive sound features can be found in Chinese English such as omitting final consonants, appending an additional vowel, changing voiced consonants to voiceless, and using strongly aspirated voiceless stop.

Indian English

English has been with India since the mid -1600's, the point at which the East India Company begun exchanging and English preachers initially started their endeavors. A substantial number of Christian schools giving an English instruction were set up by the mid- 1800's. Kachru takes note of that English currently has national and universal capacities that are both particular and corresponding. English has subsequently gained another power base (Kachru 1986, p. 12).Only around three percent of India's populace communicate in English, however they are the people who lead India's monetary, modern, proficient, political, and public activity. Despite the fact that English is basically a second dialect for these people, it is the medium in which an incredible number of the collaborations in the above areas are completed. Having such vital data moving in English courses is frequently not increased in value by Indians who don't talk it, yet they are generally feeble to change that. Its inactivity is with the end goal that it can't be effortlessly surrendered. This is especially valid in South India, where English fills in as an all-inclusive dialect in the manner in which that Hindi does in the North. In spite of being a three percent minority, the English talking populace in India is very expansive. With India's huge populace, that three percent puts India among the best four nations on the planet with the most noteworthy number of English speakers. English presents numerous focal points to the powerful individuals who talk it - which has enabled it to hold its unmistakable quality regardless of the solid restriction to English which rises occasionally.

Jenkins (2003) classifies Indian English (IE) as an institutionalized variety of the Outer Circle. That is to say IE is the official language used in business, education, law, and media. Several salient phonological features of IE includes the use of retroflex stops for alveolar stops, deletion of some fricative sounds (Wells, 1982).

Vietnamese English

Vietnamese is in the Austro-Asiatic language family. Singer (2012) asserted that Vietnamese is a tone language that makes it sound musical when Vietnamese speak English. In Vietnam, English is taught as a compulsory subject from Grade 3 (Nguyen, 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that second language (L2) speakers experience issues with choosing fitting pitch shapes for sentences (He et al. 2012) and that their use of pitch can indicate cross-etymological impact (Gut 2009). One of the main investigations that found the cross-etymological impact on L2 sound was by Wennerstrom (1994), who analyzed the pitch stature toward the finish of a yes-no inquiry in a perusing section created by local English speakers to that delivered by local Thai, Japanese and Spanish L2 speakers of English. Her outcomes demonstrate that the Thai local speakers did not stamp the inquiry with a high closure ascend as the local English speakers did, while the other two student bunches delivered rises like the local speakers. She theorized that these contrasts between L2 speakers might be because of L1 impacts, and particularly 'the way that in Thai, a tone dialect, pitch capacities to separate lexical as opposed to discourse meaning'.

Japanese English

Ellis (1994) stated, the majority of English learners in the Expanding Circle do not reach native-like proficiency, probably due to limited exposure to English and the learners' lack of strong motivation to master the language. As for Japan, Stanlaw (1992) reported the surprisingly low fluency of English among Japanese people, who usually learn the language in school for six to ten years. The exact word "Japanese English" is used very derogatorily in Japan, mainly referring to the distinctive pronunciation traits that L1 Japanese transfer to L2 English. When the assumption that any deviations from the native model are shameful is removed, however, the very distinctive features that are commonly observed in English spoken by Japanese native speakers entitle their language variety "Japanese English." Baxter (1980) stresses the importance of recognizing the fact that, for the majority of Japanese, English is not a foreign language but a language for international communication with both native and nonnative speakers. Like Suzuki (1971) and Smith (1976), Baxter (1980) also declares that Japanese need not speak like Americans, while they might want to conform to native English varieties in vocabulary and grammar.

Consonants. Standard Tokyo Japanese includes the following consonants: /p, t, k, b, d, g, ts, S, z, m n, r, h, y, w /. The Japanese "r" is often a flapped sound, eI, similar to the "t" in American English "city." The forms/p, t, k/ are usually, but not always, described as unaspirated. Certain consonants (e.g. Is/) have allophones (e.g., U]) occurring before high vowels. A mora nasal conventionally represented as INI becomes 1m! before Ip, b, ml, In! before It, d, nI, and II]/before /k, g, 1]/. Japanese also has a mora obstruent represented as /9/, which is always realized as the same obstruent that follows it, creating a geminate (or "double") consonant. Only /IJ/ and 101 can close syllables. American English has the following 25 consonants: Ip, b, t, d, k, g, f, v, 0, 6, s, z, 1, 3, t1, d3, m, n, Ij, 1, r, j, W, Iil, hi. The forms /p, t, k/have aspirated allophones at the beginning of words and at the beginning of all stressed syllables. (Vance, 1987)

Burmese English

Kirkpatrick (2010) asserted that the linguistic context and the role of English in Burma as a British colony were changed its institutional role of English due to the power of the military dictator.Win (2003) identified the phonological traits of Burmese English spoken by Burmese English speakers including the use of non-prevocalic /r/, unaspirated voiceless stop in the syllable- initial position, glottal stop in the syllable- final position, and consonant cluster omission.

The context of this study

Regarding the context of this study, data for this study come from two groups of participants. They all were students studying in an International University in Thailand in a course name Introduction to Linguistics at the time this study was being conducted. This course is a major requirement subject for students in language major. It aims to provide basic knowledge about the study of language in a systematic way. English is used as a medium of the instruction. Students also have to use English in the classroom and communicate with foreign friends. They have a chance to expose to different accents.

The first group consisted of five speaker participants (2 male and 3 female speakers). Their recorded speech extracts were used in this study spoken, namely Vietnamese English, Japanese English, Indian English, Chinese English, and Burmese English.

Another group was listener participants with a total number of 80 Thai university students (58 females and 22 males), who took the course of Introduction to Linguistics at the university with which both authors are affiliated.

Methodology

With the help of a recording technician, the researchers prepared recordings of 5 different Asean speakers of English reading a text taken from an intermediate-level reading; a text similar to what students are likely to have heard while attending the university. The recordings lasted about 2 minutes playing time.

In order to yield more useful results by examining the data from a different angle, this study will therefore include a triangulated methodology. According to Merriam (1998) "triangulation strengthens reliability as well as internal validity" (p. 207). According to Mackey and Gass (2005, p.92), a survey in the form of the questionnaire is one of the most used methods in order to collect data consisting of a variety of questions in second language research. The questionnaire in this study will elicit students' belief and attitude towards a different variety of accents in this research study. In this research, a semi-structured interview in which the participants were given time to answer was used and they were allowed to interrupt, ask questions and comment. The purpose of the interviews was to fill in the gaps left and to elicit answers to questions that might not be answered through the questionnaire. According to Gliem and R. Glime (2003, p.8) "When using Likert-type scales it is imperative to calculate and report Cronbach's alpha coefficient for internal consistency reliability for any scales or subscales one may be using" .So, as to assure the researcher and the participants of the appropriateness and correctness of the instruments, the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient were applied. Besides, prior to a large-scale investigation, a pilot study was also conducted to assess the likelihood of success of the main study.

It is claimed that "the content validity of a measurement instrument for a theoretical construct reflects the degree to which the measurement instrument spans the domain of the construct's theoretical definition" (Rungtusanatham, 1998, p. 11). As measuring the content validity of research instruments are of paramount importance and necessity, the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) was then applied to assess the content validity of the questionnaire survey as well as the interview questions. Besides, the researcher also calculated Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient to assess the reliability of a questionnaire survey. In this study, the coefficient alpha was 0.79.All interviews were conducted in the researcher's office at the University. The interviews were also recorded. Duranti (1997) suggests that after a researcher has conducted interviews, copies of the original tapes should be made as a precaution, and so I used two recording devices, one cassette recorder and one digital recorder, to ensure that all the interviews that the researcher conducted were backed up and available on tape as well before analyzing it in terms of salient themes and patterns.

Results and Discussions

Students' perception each accents were surveyed and the results are as follows:

Table 1. *Thai students' perception towards Vietnamese accent*

Unfriendly	2%	16%	63%	19%	Friendly
Stupid	0%	12%	72%	16%	Smart
Boring	21%	66%	5%	14%	Interesting
Lazy	11%	64%	19%	6%	Energetic
Unclear	2%	12%	72%	14%	Clear
Unsuitable for communication in English speaking countries	4%	22%	66%	14%	Suitable for communication in English speaking countries
Difficult for you to comprehend	3%	15%	60%	22%	Easy for you to comprehend
Difficult for native speakers to comprehend	13%	15%	70%	2%	Easy for native speakers to comprehend
Unacceptable English accent	3%	16%	61%	20%	Acceptable English accent
I would not like to sound like this person	33%	44%	21%	2%	I would like to sound like this person
I am definitely sure this person is a non-native speaker of English	87%	10%	3%	0%	I am definitely sure this person is a native speaker of English
Not suitable accent for non –native English speaking countries	3%	2%	50%	45%	Suitable accent for non-native English speaking countries

It is clear from table 1 that Thai students were easily able to identify that this speaker was a non-native speaker of English (97%). Even though the majority claimed that it is suitable for communication in English speaking countries (80%), they would not like to sound like the speaker (77%). Overall, the accent was positively viewed by majority of the students.

Table 2. *Thai students' perception towards Japanese accent*

Unfriendly	37%	40%	21%	2%	Friendly
Stupid	36%	43%	21%	0%	Smart
Boring	87%	13%	0%	0%	Interesting
Lazy	64%	29%	7%	0%	Energetic
Unclear	87%	11%	2%	0%	Clear
Unsuitable for communication in English speaking countries	33%	44%	21%	2%	Suitable for communication in English speaking countries
Difficult for you to comprehend	72%	14%	12%	2%	Easy for you to comprehend

Difficult for native speakers to comprehend	36%	41%	22%	1%	Easy for native speakers to comprehend
Unacceptable English accent	35%	40%	23%	2%	Acceptable English accent
I would not like to sound like this person	89%	11%	0%	0%	I would like to sound like this person
I am definitely sure this person is a non-native speaker of English	70%	29%	1%	0%	I am definitely sure this person is a native speaker of English
Not suitable accent for non –native English speaking countries	31%	44%	20%	5%	Suitable accent for non-native English speaking countries

It is clear from table 2 that in general; Thai students have negative perceptions towards Japanese accented English as higher percentages were given for it being unfriendly, boring and lazy. Thai students did not well comprehend the accent (98%). They were certain that the speaker was not a native speaker of English (99%). They did not want to sound like the speaker (100%) and they also think that it would be difficult even for the native speakers to comprehend the accent (77%).

Table 3 *Thai students' perception towards Indian accent*

Unfriendly	0%	0%	11%	89%	Friendly
Stupid	1%	21%	42%	36%	Smart
Boring	2%	12%	12%	74%	Interesting
Lazy	1%	1%	9%	89%	Energetic
Unclear	0%	2%	27%	71%	Clear
Unsuitable for communication in English speaking countries	0%	4%	15%	81%	Suitable for communication in English speaking countries
Difficult for you to comprehend	0%	1%	10%	89%	Easy for you to comprehend
Difficult for native speakers to comprehend	0%	5%	8%	87%	Easy for native speakers to comprehend
Unacceptable English accent	0%	2%	26%	72%	Acceptable English accent
I would not like to sound like this person	7%	2%	30%	61%	I would like to sound like this person
I am definitely sure this person is a non-native speaker of English	33%	44%	21%	2%	I am definitely sure this person is a native speaker of English
Not suitable accent for non –native English speaking countries	0%	4%	17%	79%	Suitable accent for non-native English speaking countries

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Overall perceptions of Thai students from Table 3 shows a positive trend. The majority (98%) said that it was clear and easy to comprehend both for native as well as non-native speakers of English (95%). Even though the accent was clear and positively viewed, the Thai learners were able to identify that the speaker was not a native speaker of English.

Table 4. *Thai students' perception towards Chinese accent*

Unfriendly	0%	4%	79%	17%	Friendly
Stupid	5%	31%	44%	20%	Smart
Boring	3%	15%	70%	12%	Interesting
Lazy	3%	16%	61%	20%	Energetic
Unclear	5%	13%	68%	14%	Clear
Unsuitable for communication in English speaking countries	3%	33%	48%	16%	Suitable for communication in English speaking countries
Difficult for you to comprehend	1%	35%	42%	22%	Easy for you to comprehend
Difficult for native speakers to comprehend	5%	13%	72%	10%	Easy for native speakers to comprehend
Unacceptable English accent	10%	8%	74%	8%	Acceptable English accent
I would not like to sound like this person	68%	27%	3%	2%	I would like to sound like this person
I am definitely sure this person is a non-native speaker of English	70%	29%	1%	0%	I am definitely sure this person is a native speaker of English
Not suitable accent for non –native English speaking countries	3%	32%	49%	16%	Suitable accent for non-native English speaking countries

Chinese accent is positively viewed in terms of being friendly and smart with both exceeding 60%. However, the majority of Thai students did not want to sound like the speaker (90%) and they were certain that the speakers are non-native speakers of English (89%).

Table 5. *Thai students' perception towards Burmese accent*

Unfriendly	5%	30%	53%	12%	Friendly
Stupid	3%	38%	49%	10%	Smart
Boring	14%	68%	13%	5%	Interesting
Lazy	16%	49%	32%	3%	Energetic
Unclear	11%	53%	31%	5%	Clear

Unsuitable for communication in English speaking countries	27%	66%	5%	2%	Suitable for communication in English speaking countries
Difficult for you to comprehend	11%	53%	34%	2%	Easy for you to comprehend
Difficult for native speakers to comprehend	1%	77%	15%	7%	Easy for native speakers to comprehend
Unacceptable English accent	77%	15%	8%	0%	Acceptable English accent
I would not like to sound like this person	10%	55%	12%	1%	I would like to sound like this person
I am definitely sure this person is a non-native speaker of English	87%	10%	3%	0%	I am definitely sure this person is a native speaker of English
Not suitable accent for non –native English speaking countries	10%	55%	12%	1%	Suitable accent for non-native English speaking countries

Overall, Thai students are quite negative with Burmese English believing that it was not suitable for even non native speakers to understand (85%). Besides, the majority were able to identify that the speaker was not a native speaker of English (97%). The accent was perceived to be difficult to comprehend for both native and non-native speakers.

Interview results

The semi-structured interview was also conducted to triangulate the result of the questionnaire survey. The interview was conducted with 12 students: four from each category of students classified according to their grade points average. The reason is being that each student from the different group would represent for their level. The students were asked about their preferences and the result coincides with the questionnaire survey result. They were interviewed in Thai, their mother tongue language, in order to be able to elicit clear information. Because of its flexibility, the semi-structured interview has become the most popular tool among researchers wishing to obtain qualitative data of some sort (Nunan, 1992). The advantages of the semi-structured interview are, first of all, the personal contact with the respondent which provides a better chance for an honest and serious response. Secondly, it delegates a degree of power and control over the interview to the interviewee. Furthermore, the researcher is more tuned into the process; therefore, he/she can assess the mood of the respondent, thus reducing the chance of boring him/her. Derwing (2003) explores adult immigrants' perceptions of their own pronunciation and the consequences of speaking with a foreign accent in Edmonton, Canada. The results obtained by Derwing revealed that the learners would like to sound like a native speaker. Timmis' (2002) survey explores attitudes to pronunciation, standard grammar, and informal spoken grammar among students learning English as a foreign language.

Conclusion

Summing up the findings of this paper, it seems safe to conclude that varieties of English are still not adequately represented in current ELT among Thai learners and speakers of English. It must be pointed out to learners of English that the English language is not monolithic but a constantly evolving dynamic system with a pluricentric structure. Teachers, textbook authors, curriculum designers, foreign language education researchers, applied linguists, sociolinguists and other ELT-related experts should make good use of the growing body of systematic linguistic descriptions of varieties of English.

One advantage of monitoring linguistic variability is that students can have a righteous position without stressing over whether their English is non-standard, halfway in view of their limited command of language, and incompletely in light of the fact that they would feel greater when occupied with normally happening importance doing exercises. While a familiarity with fluctuation in English reinforces one's certainty and feeling of language character, phonetic preference will undoubtedly emerge, and is something to avoid through awareness-raising.

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