

Varieties of English and Thai Secondary School Students' Standpoints

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Abstract — The role of English in the inter-connected world nowadays is increase significantly as the international lingua franca. Consequently, varieties of accents, lexical choices, and grammar patterns become challenging. Thailand prepares for the 2015 ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) with many education programs to advance English skill development. A traditional belief of English teaching and learning in Thailand focuses on the notion of the native-like English which runs contrary to the reality where the non-native-like English varieties exist. This presentation discusses the Thai secondary school students' attitudes toward varieties of English. Three characteristic themes were emerged from interviewing 12 students namely the Nativeness Believers, the Flexible Englishers, and the Varieties Supporters. The Nativeness Believers were characterized as students who supported the sole use of native English accent and grammar. The Flexible Englishers illustrated the students who normally supported the native English accent or grammar, but allowed the use of other varieties as far as the intelligibility remained. The Varieties Supporters were characterized as students who accepted the differences or the varieties of ELF without the condition of intelligibility or understandability. The findings revealed that most of the students were the Flexible Englishers and could somewhat accept varieties of English. The majority of the interviewees were the Flexible Englishers. However, there attitudes toward the varieties of English were interchangeable depends on the usage of the language in a particular situation. The results of the study indicate that the students in the current era where English become a lingua franca of ASEAN are more opened to the non-native varieties of English. Thus, the English language teaching and learning, and language beliefs should be adapted to best advantage the learners of English in the Thai context.

Keywords - varieties of English; attitude; acceptance

I. INTRODUCTION

In modern era, English plays an important role as a medium to communicate with people worldwide. A great number of businesses are conducted globally in English as well as a knowledge transfer. It is now a language of modernization, knowledge and globalization (Kirkpatrick, 2010) and due to this fact, researchers and theorists develop models describing varieties of English. Of all the models, Kachru's three circles of English are the most influential (Mollin, 2006).

Kachru (1992) has classified them into three circles: Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle consists of the native-English countries such as the United Kingdom, United States, Australia or New Zealand. The Outer Circle includes the countries where English is not the native language but got involve in their history or use English as the second language such as India, Malaysia, Singapore, etc. The countries in the Expanding Circle are those which use English as a foreign language such as Thailand.

Due to its importance, English is promoted as a core subject in the ASEAN countries' education system. The students need to study English in every level of education: kindergarten, primary, secondary and university. In ASEAN's Outer Circle countries, English is as significant as their local language. Thus, the bilingual and multilingual education policy was adopted. However, it is a foreign language in the Expanding Circle countries. In Thailand, the current language policy bases on the notion of native speakers which propose learners of English to learn and use the language as the native speakers do (Ministry of Education in Thailand, 2008).

The native or Standard English notion has a great influence on English teaching and learning in Thailand. Language beliefs, acceptance, or attitudes of the students in Thailand are shaped by the notion of native English. The non-native varieties of English language features such as accents or grammar patterns seem to be in the inferior position.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Varieties of English

In the inter-connected world, communication among people from different language background is in English. In other words, English is used as an international language or a lingua franca. Additionally, most of the English users are the non-native speakers which hold a greater number than the native ones (Crystal, 2003). The fact that English is used as an international language causes different varieties of English.

Base on the cross-linguistic influence theory, learners transfer their knowledge from their previous experience (Lado, 1957). In other words, linguistic features such as accent, pronunciation, pitch, tone, stress, and grammar rules from non-native speakers of English are transferred from their L1 to

English language. In addition, second language learners who acquire a target language after the puberty period tend to possess their L1 pronunciation and accent (Munro et al., 2006). In brief, the international status of English causes it to change in terms of accent and dialect – different varieties of English have been created due to cross-linguistic influence. Users of English from different linguistic backgrounds tend to speak English with different accents and use different dialects. However, the native-speaker-like notion is in a superior place than the non-native ones (Jenkins, 2009; Holliday, 2009). In addition, such belief could be the root of the non-native English students' problems in the English language learning as they are lack of confidence in speaking English language and remain silent (Holliday, 2009; Zinck, 2012).

In a nutshell, it is a natural phenomenon that the non-native English speakers have different English accents or grammar patterns. However, the non-native English accents and dialects are still less accepted comparing to the native English varieties.

B. Impacts of Attitudes and Acceptance on Language Learning

Language attitude is one of the determining factors that influence the language learning process (Gardner, 1985; Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Verma, 2008; Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011; Youssef, 2012). Its meaning has been defined by various scholars as a set of beliefs and motivation, feelings (positive/negative) or evaluation (good/bad) a person has toward an object or situation that making one respond to it in some particular manner (Adapted and combined from Smith, 1971; Kim & Merriam, 2004; Lopez, 2007; Verma, 2008; Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). Meanwhile, acceptance is defined as the assent a person has to the reality of an object or situation without an attempt to resist or protest (Adapted and combined from Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Wulfert, 1994; Germer, 2005).

Learners' attitudes and acceptance could be an encouragement or discouragement in language learning. To date, a great deal of research on the role of attitudes and acceptance in language learning has been conducted. Theorists and researchers claim that positive attitudes and motivation can lead to success in language learning (Gardner, 1985; Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Verma, 2008; Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). Thus, language attitudes and acceptance help in shaping learners' way to achieve their goals in learning.

In brief, attitudes and motivation have an impact on language learners. If students have a negative attitude, this can produce an unsuccessful result. Likewise, positive motivation and attitude can increase learners' proficiency and efficiency in language learning. As class facilitators, teachers need to know their students' attitudes toward learning the subject in order to assist their students reach their goals.

C. Related Studies

A number of studies on language attitudes and acceptance were conducted and yielded similar results. The participants in most studies expressed their preference on the native English varieties.

Timmis (2002) investigated students' and teachers' attitudes toward the native-like English. He found that the participants in his study wanted to conform to the native speaker norm.

Kioko & Muthwii (2003) found that the Kenyan speakers of English had more positive attitudes toward the native English varieties than the non-native English varieties.

Nomnian (2008) examined the impact of native preference attitudes on Thai learners of English. The findings revealed that learners who could not accept language diversity tended to have problem in class as they would be unwilling to participate. In this case, Nomnian suggested students to nurture positive attitudes toward multilingualism and varieties of English. Nevertheless, Methitham's (2009) study revealed the opposite ideas of Thai teachers of English.

Methitham (2009) presented the Thai teachers of English preferred the English native speakers' norm and claimed that Thai students would learn and use English language better if they conformed to the native speakers of English's norm.

Jindapitak (2010) reported that the university students in Indonesia indicated their preference on the Inner Circle varieties of Englishes.

Siregar (2010) reported the similar findings. The university students in Indonesia indicated their preference on Standard Englishes (British English and American English).

Young & Walsh (2010) explored the beliefs of non-native English speaking teachers regarding whether varieties of English are useful and appropriate to be introduced to students as compared with native speaker varieties. They reported that the majority of their participants learned a local or a non-native variety of English but decided to teach American English in their classroom.

Zinck (2012) investigated the reasons why Thai university students hesitate to speak English. He found that the students concerned about their Thai accents and resulted in lack of confidence when speaking English.

In summary, studies related to language attitudes could be grouped into three themes: studies which show participants' Standard English preference and conformance (Timmis, 2002; Kioko & Muthwii, 2003; Jindapitak, 2010; Siregar, 2010;), studies which show the native English nurture and the teachers' beliefs in the native English notion (Methitham, 2009 and Young & Walsh, 2010), and the studies which present the impacts of attitudes on language learning (Nomnian, 2008; Zinck, 2012). Most participants have a positive attitude toward the native varieties of English and the Standard English norms. Non-native varieties of English are seen as inferior and less acceptable, with these negative attitudes acting as a barrier in English language learning. Nevertheless, teachers of English still believe in the notion of native English superiority. However, the participants in the mentioned studies are teachers of English and university students. The voices of secondary school students are missing. Therefore, the researcher decided to explore attitudes the secondary school students have toward varieties of English.

III. METHODS

This study was conducted in two public secondary schools and one private secondary school in southern Thailand. Twelve students volunteered to participate in the semi-structure interview. The interview contained about 10 questions and was conducted in Thai language. The ten main research questions are presented below.

- Please introduce yourself and your English learning experience.
- How is English important to you?
- What areas (pronunciation, accent, grammar, varieties of English, etc.) does the teacher focus on?
- To you, what area (pronunciation, accent, grammar, varieties of English, etc.) is the most important? Why?
- Let the participant listen to three varieties of English: British, Malaysian and Japanese then ask how does the
- Among all varieties of English in the world, what variety of English is your most favorite one? Why?
- How will you feel if there is a non-native English teacher teaching you with an accent and dialect of other varieties of English besides the Standard English? Why?
- How do you speak English? (Is it native-like or non-native-like?) Why?
- How is the reaction from other people when you use a non-native-like accent or grammar?
- According to the previous questions, how does the reaction from other people affect you?

To imitate the real and common situation where listeners could receive the speaker's message via speech and gesture, the participants were asked to watch the three video clips of the different varieties of English accents and dialects which represent the samples of English varieties from each concentric circle.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The participants answers and discuss over the 10 main questions could be categorized into three characteristic themes namely the Nativeness Believers, the Flexible Englishers, and the Variety Supporters.

1) *The Nativeness Believers*: The nativeness Believers are characterized as students who supported the sole use of native English accent and grammar. Five out of twelve participants considered the British English and the American English had the 'correct' forms of accents and grammar as stated by a participant that, "I'd like everyone to speak (English) with the same accent. Sometimes, they mispronounce, we have got the wrong pronunciation. Then when we talk to other people, we will also have the wrong pronunciation." Two participants had slightly different ideas as they stated that the native varieties

of English were clearer or more understandable to them comparing with other non-native English varieties. In addition, the Nativeness Believers showed the insistence to use the Standard English grammar to avoid the misunderstood message. The participants further expressed their negative attitudes toward the non-native English varieties via laughter and learning refusal.

2) *The Flexible Englishers*: The Flexible Englishers illustrated the students who normally supported the native English accent or grammar, but allowed the use of other varieties as far as the intelligibility remained.

Four participants agreed to accept the differences of each English variety as long as the language was understandable to them.

Nadetch stated that, "when I hear a strange accent but if there are some words I can translate, then it is okay."

Mew had the similar idea as she expressed that, "when we talk to the foreigners, our accent aren't so bad that they couldn't understand what we're saying. But, sometimes, the foreigners could understand what we tell them. And the accent that the Thais have isn't very close to the native speakers."

However, two out of these four students further expressed that they still preferred their English to be native-like, especially in formal situations.

Wadee stated that, "There's no problem if it's intelligible but I'd like it to be native." To her, although she could accept the varieties of English, the native speaker's notion still had strong influent. Kim expressed that, "It's okay if we talk/speak like this. We can use whatever (varieties) we want. But when it becomes more international... I want everyone to... like... use the same (variety)."

3) *The Varieties Supporters*: The Varieties Supporters are characterized as students who accepted the differences or the varieties of English without the condition of intelligibility or understandability.

Based on A-ngoon and Pla's answers, the English varieties were acceptable. A-ngoon's statement illustrated the idea that the different English accents in the different countries were a common phenomenon, "I could accept them. Thailand is also... We have our accents... it's like other countries." Pla said that the varieties of English were acceptable due to the speakers' attempt to speak the language of the international communication, "At least they try to speak an international language, not using their own language and we don't understand. They try to speak." Similarly to Bee's thought as she expressed that, "I feel... Like, English accent in each country... I think... it's like... It sure has some differences because those differences are charming and unique to each country."

Three participants showed positive attitudes and claimed that they accepted different varieties of English. The three participants considered the different linguistic features in varieties of English were a natural phenomenon.

TABLE I. THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS CATEGORIZED INTO CHARACTERISTIC THEMES

Themes	Characteristic	Number of Participants
Nativeness Believers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept only native English varieties 	5
Flexible Englishers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept different English varieties but prefer native English varieties Focus on understandability 	4
Varieties Supporters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept different English varieties Focus on language and culture diversity 	3
Total Number of Participants		12

The participants revealed that they did not pay much attention on the grammar rules when they encountered the WE communication. The participants may notice the L1 vocabularies but not the ungrammatical sentences. An explanation for this phenomenon consist of two behaviors: (1) the learner just care for the message of the speakers or (2) the participants might not be skillful enough in English grammar.

Of significance, the learners of English tended to pay more attention to the accents than the dialects when encountering the WE communication. However, the participants had positive attitudes toward the familiar dialects. Nevertheless, Standard Englishes were the most favorite English varieties among the twelve participants.

TABLE II. PARTICIPANTS' FAVORITE ENGLISH VARIETY

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Preferred English Variety	Reason
A-ngoon	American English	Sounds confident
Aom	British English	Melodious
Bee	British English	Charming accent and pronunciation
Cee	British English	Melodious
Jan	British English	Correct and melodious
Kim	British English	Sounds high-class
Mew	American English	Easy to understand
Nadetch	Thai English	Easy to listen to
Nam	American English	Understandable
Pla	American English	Easy to understand
Rose	British English	Melodious

In a nutshell, the three themes of characteristic emerged from participants' comments and interviews namely the Nativeness Believers who accept only the native varieties of English, the Flexible Englishers who accept the slight change in the Standard English grammar, and the Varieties Supporters who could accept the different varieties of English. However, the boundaries among the three groups were blended. In some

situations, a person might be a Native Believers but a Flexible Englishers or a Varieties Supporters in other different situations.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper showed that participants had different attitudes toward varieties of English. Comparing to the previous studies concerning language attitudes and acceptance, the participants in this study had somewhat positive attitudes toward English varieties. Nevertheless, the notion of the native English varieties was still powerful.

Nearly a half of the participants in this paper expressed their preference on native varieties of English such as British English, American English, or other varieties of English in the Inner Circle countries. However, the other half of the participants accepted the non-native English varieties. In this case they focus on the understandability of the messages.

The results from this paper can help learners and teachers of English to reflect on learners' acceptance of and attitudes toward varieties of English as well as the current situation of English language learning and teaching. Perceiving attitudes assists learners to achieve their goals in English language learning and using.

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