

## Thai Students' Attitudes towards Native/Non-native Speakers of English

### ทัศนคตินักศึกษาไทยต่อผู้ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษา แม่และผู้ไม่ใช่ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาแม่

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#### Abstract

Issues regarding native and non-native speakers of English are an important topic in English Language Teaching (ELT). Since Kachru established the three circles of English in 1985, criticisms of the circles have been raised as to whether speakers from some countries such as Singapore and India could be categorised as native speakers of English. In this study, attitudes towards perception of native speakers of English were examined. Twenty students were randomly selected to voluntarily participate in the study. They were asked to listen to short recordings made by six speakers from various nationalities. They were also asked to complete a questionnaire about each recording to elicit their attitudes regarding the voices they heard. The results showed implications of problematic attitudes towards the concept of English as an international language (EIL) and English as a lingua franca (ELF). Pedagogical recommendations are discussed to offer assistance to Thai students in relation to adoption of English pronunciation models.

**Keywords:** Native speakers of English, English as a lingua franca, English Pronunciation

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## บทคัดย่อ

ประเด็นเกี่ยวกับเรื่องผู้ที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาแม่และผู้ที่ไม่ได้ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาแม่ นับเป็นหัวข้อที่สำคัญในการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ สืบเนื่องแต่ครั้งที่นักวิชาการชื่อคัชชู ได้สร้างแนวคิดเรื่องวงกลมของภาษาอังกฤษขึ้นในปี ค.ศ. 1985 ส่งผลให้เกิดข้อวิพากษ์วิจารณ์เกี่ยวกับแนวคิดเรื่องวงกลมของภาษาอังกฤษนี้ โดยมีคำถามเกิดขึ้นว่า บางประเทศ เช่น ประเทศสิงคโปร์และประเทศอินเดีย จะจัดอยู่ในกลุ่มประเทศที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาแม่ได้หรือไม่ งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ศึกษาทัศนคติเกี่ยวกับผู้ที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาแม่ โดยการสุ่มคัดเลือกนักศึกษาจำนวน 20 คน ที่เต็มใจร่วมทำงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ ซึ่งนักศึกษาต้องฟังเสียงอัดของผู้พูด 6 คนที่มีพื้นฐานในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษที่แตกต่างกัน และนักศึกษารอกแบบสอบถามที่เกี่ยวกับเสียงอัดแต่ละเสียงเพื่อใช้ในการศึกษาทัศนคติที่นักศึกษามีต่อเสียงอัดแต่ละเสียง ผลงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้แสดงให้เห็นถึงปัญหาเกี่ยวกับทัศนคติของนักศึกษาที่มีต่อแนวคิดเรื่อง ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ งานวิจัยนี้ยังนำเสนอข้อแนะนำด้านการสอนเพื่อเป็นแนวทางช่วยเหลือนักศึกษาไทยในการนำรูปแบบการออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษที่เหมาะสมมาใช้อย่างถูกต้อง

**คำหลัก:** ผู้ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาแม่, ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ, การออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษ

## 1. Introduction

The issues regarding native and non-native speakers of English are important in English language teaching. While there are still people who are of the opinion that native speakers of English from the inner circle of English proposed by Kachru (1985) are superior to those non-native speakers of English who come from either the outer circle or the expanding circles, there is also no denial that the role of English as an international language or the concept of English as a lingua franca have played a significant part in modern English language teaching. In fact, Graddol (2006) suggested that the number of people who speak English as a second or foreign

language outnumbered the number of people who use it as their first language. Nevertheless, in many countries including Thailand, native speakers of English are perceived to be better than non-native speakers of English, especially in English language teaching (Todd, 2006, p.1). This paper investigates attitudes of students towards pronunciation of native speakers of English compared to non-native speakers of English in order to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the students' attitudes towards native speakers of English?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards non-native speakers of English?
3. How do pronunciation models of English affect students' pronunciation learning outcome?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. English as an International Language

At present, there is no denial that English is being used all around the world. Kachru (1985) proposed the circles of English, which consist of the inner, the outer and the expanding circles. Although Kachru's proposal is mainly based on geography in which it has received criticisms and would be argued against by a number of linguists such as those who believe that some countries such as India and Singapore can be considered as inner circle countries. This argument was initiated by some linguists who believed that English was no longer the language owned by the inner circle countries. For example, Smith (1983, p. 2) stated that English now belongs to the international community; it is not the language of the so-called native speakers of English anymore. (Note that the notion of native and non-native speakers of English will be discussed later in this chapter). The argument for the concept of English as an international English is further supported in the quote by Brumfit (1995, p.16):

*"Not only has 'English' become international in the last half century, but scholarship about English has also become international: the ownership of an interest in English has become international. We are no longer a language community which is associated with a national community or even with a family of nations such as the commonwealth aspired to be"*

As it can be seen by the argument proposed by the two scholars above, it is not surprising that such argument is becoming popular in English language teaching. This is because it is a known fact that English is not only used in the United Kingdom or the United States anymore, but it is used almost everywhere in the world. For example, Punthumasen (2007, p. 3) stated that Thailand recognises English as a global language and it is taught as the first foreign language at schools.

Another term that is usually found in the study of modern English language is "English as a lingua franca". Unlike the English as an international language concept, which mainly means non-native to non-native English communication, Seidlhofer (2001, pp.143-144) as cited in O'Keefe et al (2007, p. 28) explained that English as a lingua franca refers to the means of communication for speakers whose language is not the speakers' native language. This means that English as a lingua franca can be a conversation between a non-native English speaker and a non-native English speaker or between a non-native English speaker and a native English speaker. This is often the case in places such as Thailand. Prapassit (2003, p. 28) stated that English is commonly used by Thai nationals with foreign nationals in large cities such as Bangkok. To consider Prapassit's statement, foreign nationals who communicate with Thai speakers of English can be either native speakers of English or non-native ones. Therefore, Thai speakers of English are not limited to one form of English that is native English model; therefore, in relation to the teaching of English:

*"The gist of Kacru's proposal has been that in teaching English to L2 learners, teachers should expose their students to not only the main stream of English but also to a wide variety of Englishes that, in some case, may be more relevant to those learners, professionally and academically"* (Saengboon, 2002, p. 48)

This means that it is important for teachers to ensure that both native and non-native forms of English are introduced in class particularly non-native models, which may be more appropriate to some students in certain countries than the native speaker model. The issues around native and non-native speakers of English are discussed in the next topic.

## 2.2. Relation between Native and Non-native Speakers of English

Some scholars raise some questions such as who are considered native speakers of English and what are the criteria to consider ones as native speakers of English. For many English language learners, their goal is to approximate their pronunciation as close as possible to that of a native speaker of English (Timmins, 2002 as cited in O'Keefe et al., 2007, p. 27). Nevertheless, some scholars such as Jenkins (2000, p. 1) has argued that it is unrealistic and unnecessary in the international use of English for an English language learner to aim for the native-like pronunciation. Radwanska-William (2008, p. 140) initiated the idea that the native speaker concept is simply used in a metaphorical sense. A person can be considered as a native speaker of English from either a linguistic point of view or a sociolinguistic point of view.

From a linguistic point of view, there is an argument whether a native speaker of English, in a traditional sense referring to speakers of English from an inner circle country possesses superior linguistic competence than a non-native speaker of English. Chomsky believed that non-native speakers of English were imperfect, unreliable and that they did

not have the knowledge of an idealised speaker-hearer in which native speakers of English did (Radwanska-William, 2008). Nevertheless, this notion is in the decline. As Davies (2003, p. 8) stated that

*“a highly proficient non-native speaker may also have acquired both linguistic and communicative competence and be, therefore, in terms of what is required in formal higher education and in intuitions about Standard English, indistinguishable from a native speaker.”*

Todd (2006, p. 7) conducted research about using native speakers as a model of English proficiency by exploring their linguistic competence (writing skills) of native English speakers. He found in his study that native speakers of English could not be relied upon due to some caveats concerning some linguistic mistakes made by the native speakers. That is, according to Todd's study, native speakers made some spelling mistakes and grammatical mistakes that would lead to students obtaining incorrect information. On the other hand, a proficient non-native speakers may be very careful when using English and that they may make less mistakes when teaching students. The term native speaker may not be necessarily used to distinguish the two types of speakers; therefore, supporting the concept proposed by Radwanska-William – native speaker as a metaphor.

From a sociolinguistic aspect, the concept of native speaker is simply a social condition. It is normal for a language community to consider its members as native speakers and outsiders as non-native speakers. That is being a native speaker may be based primarily on the attitudes of members of a community (Davies, 2003, p. 57). Higgins (2003, p. 616) explained that the concept of native and non-native speaker is “more of a social construction than a linguistically based parameter and have asserted

that speakers' own ideological stances toward their linguistic identities should be more significant than the label they are given by others" Thus, anyone can be a native speaker of English from a sociolinguistic point of view as it seems to depend upon the attitudes of members of the group and their feelings of identity.

### 2.3. Students' Attitudes and Impact on Learning English Pronunciation

There are a number of factors that can affect one's ability to learn English pronunciation such as age, native language, exposure to the English language, identity, attitude and so on. In this research, the focus is placed upon the attitude factor. It is important here to define what it is meant by the term attitude. Allport (1935) defined attitude as a state of readiness of a mental and neural condition through experiences that are related to objects or situations. Thurstone (1946) as cited in Rinswat (1996, p. 45) defined attitude as "the intensity of positive or negative effect toward a psychological object" and "[a] psychological object means a symbol, person, phrase, slogan, or idea about which people can differ with respect to positive or negative effect". It can be seen that both definitions of the term attitude involves a mental or psychological state derived from various experiences. In this research, an attitude means a positive or negative perception or state of mind towards native and non-native English pronunciation.

Zhang (2009, p. 41) stated that students with negative attitudes towards learning a language could be influenced negatively by such attitudes. For example, Punthumasen (2007, p. 4) claimed that one factor that led Thai students to unsuccessful or unsatisfactory outcomes in learning English was their attitude, which was the fact that they found the subject matter boring.

Attitudes of a listener can also impact on how he/she decodes information. For example, Kachi (2004) conducted interviews and word-for-word dictation tasks on Chinese, Japanese and Indian speakers of English.

Kachi asked speakers from the three English backgrounds to listen to a recording of Japanese-accented English. The results from the interviews revealed that the Chinese and the Japanese speakers found the recording easier to understand as they were more sympathetic towards the Japanese accent. On the other hand, the Indians did not have a positive attitude towards the Japanese accent; therefore, rated the Japanese recording very poorly. An important aspect of students' attitudes that is worth considering is the attitudes towards learning English as a second or foreign language. This means it is possible that students' failure to master English pronunciation is because they lack positive attitudes to learn (Rinswat, 1996, p. 48). For example, in Thailand, people mainly use Thai language to communicate in their everyday life and using English is minimally required; therefore, it is not surprising that Thai people may not necessarily have positive attitudes or motivation to learn English let alone English pronunciation. Therefore, in a pronunciation class it is important for a teacher to help students build up their positive attitudes towards learning pronunciation.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design and participants

This study was a quantitative approach consisting of 20 second year students of the Airline Business programme, Suan Dusit Rajabhat University where the researcher is a full-time lecturer. The students were asked to listen to recordings made by speakers of English from various nationalities from the three circles proposed by Kachru. This means that there would be a variety of native and non-native pronunciation models. While listening to each recording, the students were asked to write down a short statement they had from the recording. In addition,



immediately after each recording, the students were asked to rate the comprehensibility of each recording in order to find the pronunciation models that were easier for them to understand. Towards the end of the comprehensibility test, students were to, in their own opinions, decide whether each recording they had listened to was spoken by a native speaker of English or a non-native speaker of English. Finally, students were asked to complete questionnaires regarding their attitudes towards native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English.

### 3.2 Research instruments

3.2.1 Intelligibility test. The intelligibility test was used to measure how intelligible students were in relation to their listening skills. It was also used to test whether students were able to identify a native and non-native speaker of English. The test was made of six recordings of statements produced by six speakers comprising an Australian, a New Zealander, a Filipino, an Indian, a Chinese, and a Thai. This selection is in accordance with the Circles of English with Australia and New Zealand being the inner circle, The Philippines and India being the outer circle and China and Thailand being the expanding circle. Each speaker will produced six similar statements in which each statement was made up of no less than seven words but not more than nine words to assist students with their working memory as suggested by the 'Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two' rule of George A. Miller (1956). These were also common statements that the students in the airlines business area often hear in their daily conversations or classrooms.

3.2.2. Comprehensibility test. The comprehensibility test was used to measure the students' comprehensibility in relation to the six recordings they heard. A Likert Scale was used to measure students' comprehensibility ranging from (1) The voice is difficult for me to understand, (2) The voice is a little difficult for me to understand, (3) The voice is neither

difficult nor easy for me to understand, (4) The voice is quite easy for me to understand and 5: The voice is very easy for me to understand.

3.2.3 Questionnaires. The questionnaire method was used to elicit the students' attitudes about each recording they heard. The questionnaires were also used to explore their attitudes about various pronunciation models they preferred including both native and non-native speakers of English.

#### 4. Results and Analysis

In the intelligibility test, students were asked to write down the six statements they heard. The first statement "ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard flight QF2 to Bangkok" produced by the Chinese speaker of English. Eighteen students wrote down "... welcome about flight QF2 ..." instead of "... welcome aboard flight QF2". This is because the Chinese speaker pronounced the term "aboard" very close to how the word "about" is pronounced. The other two students could not identify that part of the first statement. The second statement "good morning ladies and gentlemen, it's your captain speaking". Most students had difficulty identifying the second part of the sentence "it's your captain speaking". The Filipino speaker emphasised the word "speaking" at the end of the statement making the words preceding it lightly difficult for the students to identify. As for the statements produced by the New Zealander, Thai and Indian, most students managed to write down what they heard from each recording correctly. However, the statement produced by the native Australian speaker appeared to be most difficult to the students. Most students were able to identify the first part of the statement "ladies and gentlemen". Nevertheless, the rest of the statement "... welcome aboard flight QF1 to Brisbane" was not written down by most students.

Table 1 below indicates the results regarding the students' ability to guess or identify whether the voices they heard were produced by native or non-native speakers of English. The first statement was produced by the Chinese speaker of English in which 65% of the students identified the voice produced by the Chinese speaker as non-native speaker of English. The voice produced by the speaker of English from the Philippines was believed to be the voice of a native speaker of English from 70% of the students and 85% stated that the voice of the New Zealander was the voice of a native speaker of English. In the case of the Indian speaker, it was clear to the students that it was the voice produced by a non-native speaker of English with 90% stating the Indian voice to belong to a non-native speaker. The percentage is higher reaching up to 95%, in the case of the Thai speaker of English being a non-native speaker of English. As for the Australian speaker, 85% of the students believed it to belong to the native pronunciation model.

**Table 1: Identifying Native and Non-native Speakers of English**

Sentence	Nationality	NS	NNS
1	Chinese	35%	65%
2	Philippine	70%	30%
3	New Zealander	85%	15%
4	Indian	10%	90%
5	Australian	85%	15%
6	Thai	5%	95%

Table 2 demonstrates the students' comprehensibility level regarding the recordings they heard in the intelligibility test. The results indicated that the two native speakers of English from New Zealand (20%) and Australia (35%) were rated most difficult to understand. On the other hand, the Thai speaker of English (5%) and the Indian speaker of English (5%) were rated very difficult to understand. It is interesting to see that only 5% of the students rated the Australian voice to be the easiest to understand and the New Zealand pronunciation, another native model, was found to be the easiest to understand (15%). In this study, the Thai speaker of English was rated as having the easiest voice to understand (45%). The other non-native pronunciation models were rated easier than native ones – the Indian (30%) and the Chinese (20%).

Table 2: Comprehensibility Rating Results

Rating Descriptions	Statement No.					
	1 Chinese	2 Philippine	3 New Zealander	4 Indian	5 Australian	6 Thai
1. The voice is difficult for me to understand	10%	15%	20%	5%	35%	5%
2. The voice is a little difficult for me to understand	20%	55%	30%	5%	20%	-
3. The voice is neither difficult nor easy for me to understand	45%	20%	25%	25%	40%	25%
4. The voice is quite easy for me to understand	15%	10%	20%	35%	-	25%
5. The voice is very easy for me to understand	20%	-	15%	30%	5%	45%

Table 3 shows the students' attitudes towards native and non-native speakers of English as a teacher. 75% of the students preferred teachers who were native speakers of English and 70% stated that they felt more comfortable and that it was easier learning pronunciation with native speakers of English. It is interesting to note that students did not have strong negative attitudes towards non-native speakers of English as 70% responded 'neutral' to the attitude of dislike towards the non-native speaker model. Only 10% of the students felt that native speakers of English were easier to understand. However, one aspect about the native speakers of English that all students agreed upon was the fact that native speaker pronunciation holds more prestige. This is not surprising when 75% of the students stated that they would like to be able to sound like a native speaker of English. The majority of students were of the opinion that English was an important factor in life as 95% of them disagreed with the fact that English was not an important language to learn. Another interesting finding is that only 5% of the students reported that to be successful in speaking English, one would have to be able to speak like a native speaker of English.

**Table 3: Students' Attitudes towards Native and Non-Native Speakers of English**

Questions	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1. I prefer teachers who are native speakers* of English.	75%	20%	5%
2. I feel more comfortable or find it easier learning pronunciation with native speakers of English.	70%	30%	
3. I do not like the way non-native speakers of English speak.	15%	70%	15%
4. I find it easier listening to native speakers** of English as compared to non-native ones.	10%	50%	40%
5. I find the way of speaking of native speakers of English more attractive than non-native ones.	100%	-	-
6. I would prefer to be able to speak like a native speaker of English.	75%	25%	-
7. I would feel embarrassed or less confident if I could not sound like a native speaker of English.	50%	25%	25%
8. Because I do not sound like a native speaker so I feel less confident speaking English.	70%	25%	5%
9. I do not like learning English so trying to sound like a native speaker of English is not important to me.	-	5%	95%
10. I think the only way to become successful in speaking English is to be able to sound like a native speaker of English.	5%	30%	65%

The following section is the responses of students in relation to their attitudes towards native and non-native speakers of English.

1. Do you want to learn English pronunciation with native or non-native English teachers? Why?

The majority of students' responses were in favour of the native English teachers. They were of the opinion that they would rather learn English pronunciation with native speakers of English rather than non-native speakers of English because they believed native speakers were the owner of the English language; therefore, they would have accurate English pronunciation. They also thought that native speakers of English had 'correct' English accent. Nevertheless, in their mind, native speakers of English meant foreign nationals (Caucasian) in which this could mean any European speakers of English. Only two students stated that they would rather learn English pronunciation with Thai teachers as they believed that this would be easier for them in terms of less misunderstanding and opportunities to ask questions.

2. Do you want to be able to speak English like a native speaker of English or is it not important to you? Why?

Most students responded "yes, I would like to be able to speak English like a native speaker of English". The majority of the respondents stated that they would like to sound like a native speaker of English because they would like to be able to communicate with foreign nationals. Some stated that they would like to speak like a native speaker of English because they would like to have a correct English accent. Others reported that they believed being able to speak like a native speaker of English would be beneficial to their future career. One student stated that he would like to speak like a native speaker of English because the accent sounded 'smart'. There were two students who responded negatively towards the native speaker of English pronunciation model. They stated that being able

to speak English like a native speaker was not necessary as they only wanted to be able to communicate effectively in English.

3. Do you find the way native speakers of English speak easier or more difficult to understand as compared to non-native speakers of English? Why?

More than half of the students produced negative responses towards native speakers of English. They stated that it was more difficult listening to native speakers of English because native speakers of English often speak too fast making it difficult to understand. Some stated that they were not familiar with native speaker accents, which made it difficult for them to understand when listening to native speakers of English speak. A few students, although agreed with the fact that native speakers of English were more difficult to understand, they enjoyed listening to the speech produced by native speakers of English because it sounded more authentic. Only few students stated that native speakers of English were easier to understand and their reason was native speakers of English had 'correct' accent.

4. What do think will make you a successful speaker of English?

All of the students' responses indicated that it was important for learners to practise English by speaking and listening to English. More than half of the students stated that practising or learning English with foreign nationals, listening to foreign nationals, watching or listening to foreign movies or music would help them to become successful speakers of English. Some stated that to be successful they would have to know more vocabulary.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings from this research indicate that most students were able to identify who native speakers of English were in accordance with Kachru's



circles of English, but this is not absolute as many of them regarded speakers from the Philippines as native speakers of English and even as high as 35% thought that the Chinese speaker was a native speaker of English. Therefore, it is possible to draw a conclusion that pronunciation alone is not enough for students to identify which recording was produced by a native speaker of English; therefore, it would be possible for them to form an opinion that speakers of English from the Philippines were native speakers of English and for some students this could be speakers of English from China, India or even Thailand. According to the comprehensibility test made by the students, the two native speakers of English (Australian and New Zealander) were rated as the most difficult to understand whereas non-native speakers of English such as the Thai and the Indian were rated as very easy to understand. The twenty students did not do well understanding the pronunciation model produced by the Australian and the New Zealander. They performed well for the non-native speaker model particularly the Thai pronunciation. As a result, it could be concluded that, maybe the native speaker model is not appropriate as the standard for all to follow in Thailand. In other words, it should not be the only pronunciation model that students are encouraged to follow as other non-native pronunciation models may be more appropriate. If non-native pronunciation models are not considered as negative or less prestigious models, it might be possible that the students' performance may not be as low as how it is now. If a scholar such as Jennifer Jenkins who stated that a native speaker pronunciation model is not only necessary but also unrealistic is correct, perhaps it would be more realistic to achieve a non-native pronunciation model. Therefore, pronunciation models do have an impact upon students' learning outcome, which is the answer to research question number 3. The results from the questionnaires help in relation to

the answers to research questions number 2 and 3. This is because they indicate that most students have positive attitudes towards a native speaker pronunciation model and most of them would prefer to have such pronunciation model. The non-native pronunciation models are less popular although they are not completely unwanted as some students did not mind the idea of having a non-native speaker model. This is because they were more interested in the idea of successful communication rather than trying to sound like a native speaker of English. Choosing a pronunciation model is an important step for students, it is essential that teachers inform the students that non-native pronunciation models are not wrong and that they may even be more appropriate particularly in a non-native speaker context.

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