

A Study of Thai University Students' Attitudes towards Pronunciation Models in English as a Lingua Franca

Nichapat Phusit and Wathana Suksiripakonchai

Abstract—With the widespread use of English, the function of English has been shifted. English is now used as a lingua franca. This study aimed to explore students' attitudes towards English pronunciation models in English as a lingua franca (ELF). The students' attitudes towards their desired English pronunciation models and their interlocutor's pronunciation models were also examined. The participants of the research were 146 undergraduate students majoring in English. The research instrument was a questionnaire. The questionnaire elicited perceptions regarding students' degree of favor or disfavor towards nine English pronunciation models selected from three Kachru's concentric circles, and their attitudes towards their English pronunciation models. The findings of this study revealed that the participants had moderate attitudes towards their desired English pronunciation models, and their interlocutor's English pronunciation models. However, the participants had negative attitudes towards English as a lingua franca. That is, the participants had highly positive attitudes towards American English and British English pronunciation models. They also believed that maintaining their Thai English pronunciation model was not important. This may have resulted from the participants' limited exposure to other English varieties, the entrenched native ideology, and the participants' lack of awareness of other English varieties.

Index Terms—Attitudes, English as a lingua franca (ELF), English pronunciation models.

I. INTRODUCTION

Considered as an international medium of communication, English is widely spoken around the world. English-speaking countries are classified into three concentric circles based on the history, role, and status of English of the countries [1]. The three concentric circles consist of the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. Hence, English is used in various ways among speakers of English from three different circles based on the circumstances in which English is used [2].

In recent years; however, due to the widespread use of English in the Expanding Circle countries, the function of English has been shifted. There are more nonnative-nonnative communications than the native-native or native-nonnative interactions [3]. English is now used as a lingua franca.

English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a “world language whose speakers communicate mainly with other non-native speakers, often from different L1s than their own” [4]. Therefore, English is used as the common language in the

interaction of ELF members who are from diverse cultures, and linguistic backgrounds [5], [6]. For instance, within the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) community, a Thai and an Indonesian may communicate with each other by using English as their common language [7].

As a result of the widespread use of English, the role of ELF has challenged some of the underlying assumptions of ELT; for example, the concept of the varieties of English used in a pronunciation class. The spread use of English has given rise to different varieties of English language, which means that ELT can no longer be restricted to only one variety and favor either British or American English as the primary target variety of instruction [8],[9].

Since the function of English has been shifted, English lessons in Thailand should not be restricted to only so-called native speaker varieties of English [10]. However, previous studies on students' attitudes towards varieties of English have shown that students tend to have positive attitudes towards the native English speaker pronunciation models, which refers to either British or American English [10]. This is because in the pronunciation class, students are restricted to either British or American English varieties and have been exposed to a few different English varieties.

This gap indicates a need to further investigate Thai university students' attitudes towards their desired English pronunciation models, and other English varieties from an ELF perspective in order to provide understanding of Thai students attitudes towards their preferences in English as a lingua franca communication. This is because the attitudes of Thai students towards pronunciation models affect students' pronunciation [11].

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the attitudes of university students towards their desired English pronunciation models?
- 2) What are the attitudes of university students towards their interlocutors' English pronunciation models?
- 3) What are the attitudes of university students towards English as a lingua franca?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

The term ‘lingua franca’ was first used since between the 15th and the 19th century to refer to a variety that was used on the South-Eastern coast of the Mediterranean [13]. A lingua franca is a pidgin language [14], which is “a language with no native speakers” [15]. In other words, a pidgin language is not a native language of anyone; it is only a contact language.

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Therefore, a lingua franca is a contact language that serves as a means of communication among people whose first language is different [13], [14].

Turning to English as a lingua franca (ELF), ELF is “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” [16]. Today, ELF is used in a number of fields in which English is used as the mutual language of choice, such as science, politics, business, and education.

ELF is different from other English language teaching (ELT) terms. For example, ELF is different from English as a second language (ESL) because ELF is a local or contact language between national groups while ESL is a language used within national groups [16]. Besides, the concept of ELF is also different from the concept of English as a foreign language (EFL) because it receives errors in a different way. In EFL, errors are any deviations from learning to be near-native competence. In ELF, on the other hand, the same errors may be considered as different variants [16], [17].

However, it does not mean that an English variety based on ELF is inferior to other varieties. ELF is “different but not deficient” [14]. This means that ELF speakers have the ability to utilize unused possibilities of English such as morphology, syntax, and phraseology [14].

Therefore, the speakers from the Expanding Circles in Asia such as China, Japan, Korea, and Thailand would benefit from the awareness raising of the emerging role of ELF from the appropriate use of code switching and accommodation strategies, as ELF can be regarded as a useful communicative instrument that allows its users to be understood in international communication [18]. This means that for Thai students, the presence of ELF will help them to develop strategies to adapt and accommodate to English in the Thai context, and allow them to be more confident in using English.

B. Attitudes

Theorists have defined the concept of attitude in various ways. For example an attitude is an inner mental component which is expressed through “beliefs, verbal statements or reactions....and in various other aspects of behaviour” [19]. The attitude is also defined as “a mental and neural state of readiness” [20]. Attitude is organized through experience, and influenced by personal response to all related objects and situations [20]. However, attitude was also defined from a different perspective. It was defined as a hypothetical construct because attitude is used to describe the direction and existence of human behavior [21]. On the other hand, the attitude concept has been narrowed down to “its evaluative component” [22]. Another definition of attitude is “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” [23]. Because this research focused on attitudes towards English pronunciation models, an attitude refers to a positive or negative belief of the speakers towards pronunciation models.

With regard to language learning, studies of attitudes have gained attention since 1960's [13]. Attitudes have significant relationships with foreign language learning achievement [24]. Several studies of attitude have focused on positive or negative outcome on language learning [25], and their

findings indicated that attitude is one of the crucial elements of language learning [26]. As a result, attitude can influence students' success or failure in their learning. It means that students with positive attitudes towards the language they are learning will tend to do better than students with negative attitudes [26], [27].

C. Teaching and Learning English Pronunciation in Thailand

Since 1996, English has been prescribed by law as a compulsory subject for all primary schools in Thailand due to the significance of English as the major foreign language in the curricula of educational institutions of Thailand [28]. In general, most English lessons conducted in Thailand follow the traditional teaching model based on the inner circle teaching norms namely British or American English teaching. This is supported by [29] who explains that the evaluation and measurement of English language teaching in Thailand are conducted based on the inner circle countries' baseline; thus, it becomes the major model of English teaching.

Similarly, the direction of teaching English to second language learners is affected by assessment which is based on the first language norms [30]. Consequently, these teaching norms affect the main goal of teaching English in Thailand. For instance, as far as pronunciation is concerned, Thai students' pronunciation aim is to master or approximate native-like. However, the native-like pronunciation models may not be appropriate as the only standard pronunciation models for Thai students to follow [31]. This is because the different phonological systems between English and Thai language can affect students' English pronunciation performance [31].

Besides, it can be said that the inner circle teaching norm plays a significant role in influencing Thai students' attitudes towards their use of English, for example in choosing their pronunciation model. Scholars [32], [33] found that Thai students preferred to learn and use American English and British English than Thai English or any other varieties of English. To be precise, the inner circle teaching norms affect students' attitudes towards their use of English and their ultimate goal of learning English in Thailand.

Although Thai students have learned English for many years, Thai educators indicate that Thai students' English pronunciation performance is unsatisfactory. The major reason that causing Thai students' English pronunciation problems is that students have insufficient exposure to the English language [34]. Moreover, there are other factors related to teachers and learners, as well as the different language systems between Thai and English language. However, in a globalized society and in reality, Thai students do not only communicate with speakers from the inner circle but also from the outer circle and the expanding circle countries. Therefore, for English teaching in Thailand, intelligibility should be encouraged as the students' learning goal as opposed to acquiring native-like pronunciation. Moreover, Thai students should have more opportunities to be exposed to various varieties of English rather than one specific variety of English.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was quantitative research. It employed the survey research method. The data of this study was obtained through a questionnaire.

A. Population

The population for this study was the undergraduate students majoring in English who enrolled in the second semester of 2016 academic year in a public university in Thailand. The reasons for choosing students majoring in English were that English major students were prone to being frequent English users or future English teachers. Moreover, they had a chance to experience different varieties of English. Thus, their attitudes towards pronunciation models provided an extensive insight into the field of English as a lingua franca.

B. Participant Selection

The participants were the students majoring in English in a public university in Thailand who enrolled in the second semester of 2016 academic year. The selected participants were calculated by using Yamane's formula [35] in order to be used as the representative of the population. Thus, the participants of this study were 168 students.

C. Research Instruments

The instrument of this study was a questionnaire. Questionnaire is widely used as a technique to collect elicited responses, beliefs or attitudes [36]. In this research, the questionnaire comprised three parts; the first part elicited personal information of the participants, which included sex, and year of study, while the second and the third part of the questionnaire focused on the participants' attitudes towards ELF.

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of four items designed to ascertain background information of students concerning factors such as gender, age, and education background and experience.

The second part of the questionnaire was researcher-made. It comprised 18 items dealing with students' degrees of favor or disfavor towards English pronunciation models selected from three Kachru's concentric circle. A Likert scale, ranking from 1-5, was used to reflect participants' levels of agreement with a list of statements. The mean value was classified into: 5) strongly agree, 4) agree, 3) neutral, 2) disagree, 1) strongly disagree.

The third part of the questionnaire adapted questions from Risan [37]. It consisted of seven multiple-choice questions, two simple yes/no questions and one open-ended question relating to the students' attitudes towards English pronunciation models.

IV. FINDINGS

First, this study investigated the attitudes of university students towards their desired English pronunciation models. The analysis of the data indicated that the participants had moderate attitudes towards their desired English pronunciation models. In addition, the results revealed that the participants had moderate attitudes towards the Thai

English, Australian English and Singaporean English pronunciation models. However, the participants had highly positive attitudes towards American English, and British English pronunciation models. Moreover, the results showed that the participants had negative attitudes towards Pilipino English, Indian English, Chinese English, and Korean English pronunciation models.

Besides, this study also examined students' attitudes towards their interlocutor's pronunciation models. The results of the questionnaire revealed that the participants had moderate attitudes towards their interlocutor's pronunciation models. Additionally, it showed that the participants had moderate attitudes towards their interlocutor's Thai English, Pilipino English, and Singaporean English pronunciation models. However, the participants had highly positive attitudes towards their interlocutor's American English and British English pronunciation models and positive attitudes towards their interlocutor's Australian English pronunciation models. Furthermore, the participants had negative attitudes towards Indian English, Chinese and Korean English pronunciation models.

Lastly, this study explored the students' attitudes towards English as a lingua franca. In terms of students' preference in English pronunciation models, the findings showed that the majority of the participants preferred American English, British English, and Australian English pronunciation models as they listed these models as their first three favorite English pronunciation models. Moreover, the participants were in favor of aiming to have American English as their English pronunciation model. They also believed that American English pronunciation models should be used when teaching English in Thai school. Furthermore, the participants would encourage their future students to have American English pronunciation models. They provided reasons that American English pronunciation models were universal, and intelligible. In terms of students' attitudes towards their own English usage, the results showed that the participants were satisfied with their English. Besides, they would not mind if their Thai origin was recognized through their use of English. On the other hand, it showed that the majority of the participants aimed to sound native-like when speaking English. They also thought that maintaining their Thai English pronunciation model was not important. Moreover, the findings showed that English as a lingua franca was not widely known among students. Therefore, it can be concluded that the results of the questionnaire indicating that Thai university students had negative attitudes towards pronunciation models in English as a lingua franca.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Based on the results of the three research questions, it can be concluded that Thai university students had a moderate attitude towards their desired English pronunciation model, and their interlocutor's pronunciation model. Besides, the students had negative attitudes towards English as a lingua franca.

It is evident that the students' limited of exposure to other English varieties, the entrenched native ideology, and the

students' lack of awareness of other English varieties could led students to displaying negative attitudes towards their desired English pronunciation models, their interlocutors' English pronunciation models and English as a lingua franca. For these reasons, English teachers in Thailand should focus on exposing their students to a wide variety English pronunciation models from the outer circle and the expanding circle pronunciation models in order to provide students' awareness of other English varieties.

VI. LIMITATIONS

This study was limited to the undergraduate students majoring in English in a public university, which was a very particular group of students. Therefore, the findings of this study might not be applicable used as generalization or representative of students in other Thai universities. Besides, this study aimed to explore students' attitudes towards pronunciation models in English as a lingua franca through students' attitudes towards their desired English pronunciation models and their interlocutors' pronunciation models. Therefore, the findings of this study derived from attitudes towards pronunciation might not be generalizable for students' attitudes towards English as a lingua franca regarding other respects.

This study was conducted to explore the English majored undergraduate students' attitudes towards pronunciation models in English as a lingua franca. Therefore, it will be interesting to investigate the attitudes of students towards pronunciation models in English as a lingua franca with students of other levels or majors. Moreover, the instrument of this study was only the questionnaire. It will be interesting to conduct on interview section in order to gain more extensive insight of students' attitudes towards pronunciation models in English as a lingua franca.

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