

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

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Revisiting native-speakerism in Thailand: Perceptions of Thai-accented English and the Inner Circle varieties

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1. Background

In English language teaching (ELT), American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) have been regarded as prestigious and favorable (Manzouri et al., 2024). Previous studies focusing on English(es) in Thailand have confirmed this trend by providing evidence of native-speakerism (Jindapitak, 2019; Saengboon, 2015). Regarding Thai-accented English (TaE), previous findings are mixed, with some accepting it as a marker for Thai identity and uniqueness (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021), while others reject it due to feelings of embarrassment (Saengboon, 2015). The present study revisits native-speakerism in Thailand by examining TaE and the Inner Circle (IC) varieties, according to the Kachruvian three concentric circles, within educational and communication contexts.

2. Methods

Comprising a seven-point Likert scale questionnaire and an open-ended section, an online survey was created on Qualtrics and was available for two weeks. Participants were 125 Thai speakers, with an average age of 29.8 years and at least a bachelor's degree. Most respondents (66) lived in Bangkok, 17 lived abroad, and the rest were scattered across Thailand. With 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 7 indicating “strongly agree”, the Likert scale assessed (dis)agreement with 16 statements: 1–7 on English in education and 8–16 on English in communication settings. Additionally, four open-ended questions were included. In the survey, NATIVE SPEAKERS were defined as residents of the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, with NATIVE ACCENTS referring to accents spoken in these countries.

3. Results

3.1 The rating questionnaire

3.1.1 English in educational settings

Findings are presented in Table 1. Darker shades in Tables 1 and 2 indicate a higher density of responses. Comparing Statements 1 to 3, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) were the most preferred, followed by Thai teachers with a native-like accent and those with TaE, respectively. Statement 4 indicated that TaE was generally accepted to a certain degree in ELT but less so in pronunciation teaching (Statement 5). Comparing Statements 4 and 6, native accents of English scored higher

*A reproduction of the poster discussed is available in the supplementary material published alongside this article on Cambridge Core.



Table 1. Ratings of English in educational settings

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Mean |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|-------|
| 1. You want to learn English with NESTs. | | | | | | | | 6.24 |
| 2. You want to learn English with Thai teachers who speak with a native English accent. | | | | | | | | 5.896 |
| 3. You want to learn English with Thai teachers who speak TaE. | | | | | | | | 2.624 |
| 4. TaE can be used in English language classrooms in Thailand. | | | | | | | | 5.088 |
| 5. TaE can be used to teach English pronunciation in Thailand. | | | | | | | | 3.432 |
| 6. Native accents of English should be used in English language teaching and learning in Thailand. | | | | | | | | 5.56 |
| 7. Having native-like competence in English is the ultimate goal of learning this language. | | | | | | | | 5.352 |

than TaE in ELT in Thailand. Furthermore, the rating scores in Statement 7 suggested that native-like competence was likely the participants’ learning goal.

3.1.2 English in communication (work) settings

Table 2 displays results concerning English in communication settings. Overall, the ratings fell around the middle of the scale demonstrating a less dichotomous pattern compared to Table 1. Results from Statements 8 to 10 showed that speaking English in a native-like manner was not necessary, though there was a slight tendency toward native-speakerism. Comparing Statements 11 and 12, regardless of interlocutor status, the participants likely disagreed that Thais should adjust their speech to sound more native-like. Ratings for Statements 13 to 16 generally indicated that the respondents were

Table 2. Ratings of English in communication settings

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Mean |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|-------|
| 8. In the workplace, when speaking English, having a native-like accent increases your value than having a Thai accent. | | | | | | | | 4.44 |
| 9. When speaking English, Thai students should learn how to speak with a native accent. | | | | | | | | 4.744 |
| 10. Thai learners should be able to speak English native-likely. | | | | | | | | 4.16 |
| 11. Thai speakers of English should adjust their Thai accent by making it more native-like when speaking English with NESs. | | | | | | | | 3.608 |
| 12. Thai speakers of English should adjust their Thai accent by making it more native-like when speaking English with NNEs (non-Thai). | | | | | | | | 3.4 |
| 13. Thais learn English to primarily speak with NESs at work. | | | | | | | | 3.712 |
| 14. Thais learn English to primarily speak with NNEs (non-Thai) at work. | | | | | | | | 4.616 |
| 15. Thais learn English to primarily speak with NESs in everyday life. | | | | | | | | 3.456 |
| 16. Thais learn English to primarily speak with NNEs (non-Thai) in everyday life. | | | | | | | | 4.056 |

more likely to interact with non-native English speakers (NNESs) than with native English speakers (NESs), irrespective of the situation (at work vs. in everyday life).

3.2 The open-ended questions

3.2.1 Q1: Which accent of English do you think you speak?

The top five responses were TaE (36.36%), AmE (31.40%), TaE and AmE (12.4%), SITUATIONAL (3.31%), and BrE (3.31%). The SITUATIONAL responses indicate that participants' accents varied depending on the situational context.

3.2.2 Q2: Which accent do you want to have? Why?

AmE accounted for 39.52% of the responses due to its INTELLIGIBILITY, FAMILIARITY, and MEDIA, referring to the prevalence of American media and entertainment. BrE (29.84%) was chosen because of its elegance, respondents' personal preference, and its prestige. Of the responses, 22.58% did not specify any accent, indicating a preference for any intelligible accent.

3.2.3 Q3: What do you think about Thai-accented English?

POSITIVE responses (14.58%) described TaE as unique, intelligible, and easy to understand. ACCEPTABLE responses (63.89%) considered TaE intelligible, emphasizing the importance of pronunciation over accent and recognizing TaE as an example of language variation. NEUTRAL responses (15.97%) indicated that TaE could be difficult to understand for some but intelligible for others. A few responses (5.56%) expressed NEGATIVE feelings, indicating that TaE could cause difficulties in communication. Perceptions of its strangeness also led to negative judgments.

3.2.4 Q4: Which variety of English should Thai students be taught? Why?

The majority (66.13%) favored AmE for its prevalence, intelligibility, and exposure through American media. BrE (15.32%) was chosen for its standardness/prestige, elegance, and participants' familiarity. Some respondents (11.29%) opted not to specify a variety, suggesting that any intelligible variety or one with clear pronunciation instruction would suffice, acknowledging language variation. A small portion (2.42%) preferred both AmE and BrE.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The results from the rating questionnaire indicated native-speakerism in ELT in Thailand, as reflected in Statements 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7. This ideology was also found in the open-ended questions, specifically in Q2 and Q4, with the prominence of AmE and BrE. This suggests that Thai speakers viewed the IC varieties as the ideal learning models, reflecting native-speakerism. The preference for native English-speaking teachers aligns with THE NATIVE SPEAKER FALLACY in ELT, which states that “[t]he ideal teacher of English is a native speaker” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 185), or even with THE NATIVE ACCENT FALLACY, as Thai teachers with a native-like accent were also preferred despite their non-native status. However, the influence of native-speakerism became less pronounced in communication settings where native-like production was deemed unnecessary. The participants' belief that they likely interacted with NNESs aligns with the sociolinguistic reality of English, where NNESs now outnumber NESs (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Intelligibility appears to be of crucial importance for communication and a key factor that mitigates the influence of native-speakerism in this context.

Even though TaE was highly acceptable in Q3, caution is needed in interpretation, as familiarity with this accented speech could influence its perceived intelligibility and acceptability. Such familiarity was supported by the fact that several respondents reported speaking TaE, as indicated in Q1. The high acceptance might not be found in other non-IC Englishes, as unfamiliarity could lead to rejection or negative attitudes. Overall, the findings suggest a perpetuation of native-speakerism in ELT (Irham, 2023; Jindapitak, 2019; Saengboon, 2015; Seyranyan & Westphal, 2021). It is thus encouraged

to call for a shift from traditional ELT, which views NESs as the learning model, to Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT), which includes the diversity of Englishes and considers expert English users, regardless of native status, as the model for language learning. Further analyses will explore social factors such as age and location, along with statistical analysis.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000235>.

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