

# Teaching English in the Era of English Used as a Lingua Franca in Thailand

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## Abstract

English has taken an obvious role as a lingua franca in Thailand as the majority of English conversations are primarily made by Thai English users with non-native English speakers, particularly people from Asian countries. In addition, when the ASEAN Economic Community will be officially formed in 2015, Thai people have to work and interact more with a considerable number of people from the ASEAN member countries and its counterparts. Therefore, to achieve effective communication in the English as a lingua franca context, mastering English skills and knowledge to only communicate with native English speakers is inadequate since Thai English users' interlocutors in the workplaces are not only native speakers of English. Hence, the native speaker model of teaching should play a lesser role in English language teaching, particularly speaking skill in Thailand. As a result, this article suggests that Thai English teachers need to put less emphasis on teaching English grammar and pronunciation based on the native English speaking model. Instead, more attention should be paid to exposing students to a variety of English accents and promoting the learners' intercultural communicative competence in ELT classrooms to reach the effective communication goal.

## บทคัดย่อ

ภาษาอังกฤษมีบทบาทชัดเจนในฐานะภาษากลางที่คนไทยใช้สื่อสารกับชาวต่างชาติ ซึ่งส่วนใหญ่ไม่ได้เป็นเจ้าของภาษาโดยเฉพาะชาวต่างชาติที่มาจากประเทศในภูมิภาคเอเชีย ยิ่งไปกว่านั้น เมื่อประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนดำเนินการอย่างเป็นทางการในปี 2558 คนไทยจะต้องทำงานและสื่อสารกับคนจากประเทศสมาชิกของประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนและประเทศคู่เจรจาจำนวนมาก ในการสื่อสารให้ประสบความสำเร็จในบริบทดังกล่าว ความรู้และทักษะภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อใช้สื่อสารกับเจ้าของภาษาเพียงอย่างเดียวอาจไม่เพียงพอ เนื่องจากคู่สนทนาส่วนใหญ่ในสถานที่ทำงานไม่ได้มีเพียงเจ้าของภาษา ดังนั้น การสอนภาษาอังกฤษโดยใช้โมเดลของเจ้าของภาษาก็อาจมีบทบาทน้อยลงในการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในเมืองไทย บทความนี้จึงได้เสนอว่า ครูสอนภาษาอังกฤษคนไทยอาจจะต้องเน้นสอนไวยากรณ์และการออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษโดยยึดแบบแผนของเจ้าของภาษาให้น้อยลง ในทางตรงกันข้ามควรให้ความสำคัญกับการแนะนำนักศึกษาให้รู้จักสำเนียงที่มีความหลากหลายของคู่สนทนา และเพิ่มพูนความรู้ความสามารถในการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรมของตัวผู้เรียนให้มากยิ่งขึ้น เพื่อจะได้สื่อสารได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพต่อไป

## Introduction

English is widely used as a communicative device by people across the globe. Crystal (2008) states that the number of English users worldwide is estimated to reach two million people. Crystal further adds that the figure of non-native speakers of English is significantly greater than English native speakers'. Thus, the status of English is more noticeable as a lingua franca over the world. In Thailand, English also plays a leading role as a lingua franca (Baker, 2009) because it is mostly used by Thais to interact with people whose first language is not English, particularly in the Thai tourism industry (Todd, 2006). Furthermore, this can be most obviously seen with the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015, when English will become an official tool for communication among the ASEAN member countries and its counterparts.

Thus, English is extremely important for Thais for communicating with people from various countries and multicultural backgrounds. In order to prepare Thais for this situation, developing effective English users for intercultural communication has to be taken into consideration. It can be said that Thai English teachers who are in charge of providing Thai students with knowledge and skills for communication in English may have the most significant role. Consequently, this paper proposes some important recommendations to Thai English teachers in providing students with skills and knowledge for more successful intercultural communication in the era of English as a lingua franca in Thailand.

## The Roles of English as a Lingua Franca in Thailand

In order to obtain a clearer understanding of the role of English as a lingua franca in Thailand, defining the term of English as a lingua franca is necessary. English as a lingua franca can be defined as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option",

(Seidlhofer, 2011, 7). Seidlhofer (2011) further explains that native speakers of English appear to be a minority group due to the larger figure of non-native speakers using English as a lingua franca; therefore, native English models cannot play a key role as a linguistic reference norm. Although English as a lingua franca has gained a lot of attention in the fields of applied linguistics and English language teaching (ELT) (Kuo, 2006), many people still do not have clear ideas as to the nature of English as a lingua franca and how it is different from English as a foreign language. Jenkins (2009b) presents some different features between English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a lingua franca (ELF). For example, she explains that people holding the EFL paradigm view believe that L2 users' errors are caused by their English ability deficit, while errors in the ELF paradigm are thought to be an ELF variant. She further points out that code mixing and code switching occurring among second language users are considered to be interference errors in EFL, while they are understood to be bilingual resources according to the ELF paradigm (Jenkins, 2009b).

English as a lingua franca has become a much-debated issue in applied linguistics and English language teaching thanks to the greater number of non-native speakers of English involved in global communication. Some scholars in the field have proposed that an English as lingua franca core be employed in ELT. For example, it was suggested by Jenkins (2002) that this core can be used in teaching phonology in international English classrooms. Jenkins (2002) points out that the teachers and the learners can obtain many benefits from this teaching model, namely promoting intelligibility, its appropriateness for regional English communicators, and being easy to teach. However, some scholars (e.g. Kuo, 2006; Timmis, 2002) do not support this view. They claim that studies show that the majority of parents and English learners still hold the view that the native speaking model is their preferable norm

in teaching and learning English. Kuo (2006) further indicates that teaching English as a lingua franca model is not widely accepted for several reasons, including standardization, popularity, and application in ELT. Despite the fact that adopting English as a lingua franca model in ELT appears unacceptable to many scholars, it has raised important issues regarding communication features and culture in English as a lingua franca communication and this will be useful for English teachers to consider in equipping students with the appropriate knowledge and skills for intercultural communication.

Regarding the role of English as a lingua franca in Thailand, Baker (2009) indicates that Thailand is an expanding circle country, according to Kachru's three-circle classification model, and English generally takes on a role as lingua franca in Thailand. Similarly, Todd (2006) points out that Thais who work in the Thai tourism industry mainly communicate in English as a lingua franca with foreign tourists who are primarily non-native speakers of English. Todd (2006) adds that approximately 70% of tourists who visit Thailand are Asian. Hence, English is clearly used as a lingua franca in the Thai tourism industry. However, English has a vital role not only in communication with foreigners in the tourism industry but also in the international business field. According to the World Bank (2010, as cited in Simpson, 2011), Thailand is expected to be the second most attractive country in ASEAN in drawing international business investment using English as a communicative device. Consequently, English has become a tool for international companies based in Thailand. More importantly, English will play a role as the main language for interaction between the ten ASEAN member countries in the ASEAN Community in 2015. Thus, English is clearly in use as a lingua franca in Thailand.

### **English Teaching and Learning in Thailand**

While English will inevitably become part of Thai people's lives, English teaching and learning

in Thailand is likely to be ineffective in producing perfect Thai English users. Prapphal's study (2001) reveals that the English ability status of Thai graduates is ranked eighth among ASEAN member countries, according to the CU-TEP (Chulalongkorn University Test of English Proficiency). Additionally, Wiriyaichitra (2002) emphasizes that the lack of effective English skills of Thais communicating in the workplace, particularly in the Thai tourism field, tends to give foreigners a negative attitude towards Thailand. One of several factors leading to this problem is the English teaching system in Thailand. According to Simpson (2011), English teaching in Thailand concentrates on grammar and accuracy and teachers primarily deliver English lessons using the Thai language; therefore, students are not sufficiently introduced to speaking and listening skills. As a result, Thais have problems with English language speaking and listening. Some researchers have attempted to explore other factors contributing to unsuccessful English teaching and learning in Thailand. For example, Mackenzie (2002) found that being too shy to speak English, having no motivation to communicate in English, worrying too much about accuracy, and relying on rote memorization are characteristics of Thai learners that lead to ineffective English language learning.

The lack of English communication proficiency mentioned above has worried the Thai government for a long time and they have made a great deal of effort into dealing with this problem. As Punthumasen (2007) indicates that the government has launched various strategies and policies to help Thai students to master better English skills of over a period of two decades. Punthumasen (2007) further adds that the Thai government has allowed many schools throughout Thailand to set up English programs with the increased employment of native English teachers. In addition to this, several teaching approaches such as communicative language teaching (CLT) or student centeredness have been adopted to improve Thai English learners. However, these

teaching pedagogies appear unsuccessful due to many reasons. For instance, adopting communicative language teaching (CLT) approach was considered inappropriate for the Thai setting due to Thai learners' cultures of unquestioning and obeying the senior people (Wangkijichinda, 2011). Regarding to adopting student centeredness, it seems not to fit the Thai culture since Thai English teachers were familiar with being the center of the classroom and acting as knowledge providers while the students were accustomed to listening to teachers and taking a role as knowledge receivers in their mean of learning in the classroom. Consequently, students do not seem to realize that learning can occur outside of the classrooms. Although it is essential for the government to take English skills development as a priority to promote English communication success in intercultural contexts, other skills and knowledge such as intercultural communicative competence also need to be accounted for.

### **Intercultural Communicative Competence**

Thai speakers need to use English as an important medium to interact mainly with non-native speakers of English. Consequently, other skills apart from English may be necessary for successful intercultural communication. Referring to Baker (2011), possessing only linguistic knowledge such as lexis, grammar, or the cultural norms of English native speakers appears not to be sufficient for communication with people from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds. Baker further explains that it is necessary to understand a variety of contexts and cultures for success in intercultural communication in English as a lingua franca. As a result, developing intercultural competence should be taken into consideration as part of English language teaching and learning. Intercultural competence or intercultural communicative competence is defined by Byram, Gribkova & Starkey (2002, 11) as “the ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of

different social identities” and the “ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality”. In addition, Byram, Nichols & Stevens (2001) further propose five key components of intercultural communicative competence: attitudes (*savoir etre*), knowledge (*savoirs*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s' engager*). Thus, these knowledge, skills and attitude should be developed among English language learners and English teachers have a crucial role in preparing students for effective intercultural communication later on.

### **Teaching English in the Era English Used as a Lingua Franca**

To succeed in intercultural communication, Thai English users may be required to possess several skills and knowledge. Thus, English teachers who are responsible for developing the knowledge and skills in their students may have to adjust their teaching roles and their teaching foci to provide the students with appropriate skills and knowledge for effective intercultural communication in the lingua franca context. Some interesting recommendations to Thai English teachers in teaching English in Thailand will be presented in the following section.

#### **Teaching English Grammar and Pronunciation**

English grammar has been the center of the interest in ELT in Thailand for many years as most formal educational institutions largely equip learners with grammatical knowledge and they evaluate the learners' learning achievement with English grammar knowledge they acquire. However, this teaching focus appears not to help learners succeed in English interaction in the workplace. The evidence is that Thai English users' English capability cannot meet workplace communication requirements, even though they have been taught English grammar since

primary school. Thus, placing too much emphasis on English grammar may not enable learners to employ English in their daily lives and it also tends to reduce learners' confidence and motivation. As a result, English teachers may need to encourage learners to learn English to fulfill communication needs rather than to acquire native English grammar accuracy.

It therefore follows that the improvement of the learners' necessary English skills, particularly listening and speaking skills should be taken into consideration to produce effective English users. One factor to improve learners' speaking ability is teaching the learners English pronunciation. Thai English teachers should reconsider the use of native speaking models in teaching English pronunciation since the main interlocutors for Thai speakers are not from English speaking countries. According to Baker (2012), Thai ELT should not focus primarily on native speaker varieties of English because Thai English speakers do not mainly interact with people from inner circle countries; therefore, preparing students to be ready for many different varieties of Englishes is indispensable. Nevertheless, this idea tends to be difficult to apply in the ELT classroom as non-native English teachers and English learners may generally desire to achieve the aim of sounding like a native speaker (Kramch, 1993, as cited in Jenkins, 2000), even though, it is considered an unreachable goal for English learners (Cook, 1999, as cited in Ur, 2010). This is because parents and English learners often still hold the view that English teachers with non-native accents are less knowledgeable or 'authentic' than English teachers with native accents (Butler, 2007).

As a consequence, many English teachers, including Thai teachers, are unlikely to abandon this model for teaching English pronunciation. For example, when English pronunciation teachers teach students to pronounce the words "the" and "hold on" in the classroom, they expect students

to pronounce them accurately in accordance to a native model. Many Thai students are unable to pronounce /ð/, in the word "the" and do not produce connected speech in the phrase "hold on". This teaching focus can disappoint both teachers and learners. Students may feel embarrassed about making English pronunciation mistakes and subsequently lose confidence and motivation to speak English. As discussed above, many Thai speakers are not proficient in English, particularly in terms of their speaking skills. Hence, moving away from a focus on accuracy and native pronunciation models may help to alleviate this problem. This may enable learners to speak English confidently and worry less about English accuracy while speaking.

From personal experience, it is clear that difficulties with English native speakers models of pronunciation happen to other non-native speakers of English. Jenkins (2000 cited in Seidlhofer, 2005) interestingly points out that mispronounce of some sounds such as "/ð/" or "/θ/" normally occurs in ELF users and it is not considered a serious concern since it does not affect international intelligibility among ELF users. Similarly, Seidlhofer (2005) proposes that some features that do not interrupt intelligibility may not need to be taught where people use English as a lingua franca. Therefore, not being able to pronounce words as native speakers may not cause any problems for English learners who use English in the lingua franca context, such as most speakers in Thailand. As a consequence, teaching English pronunciation with native varieties of English appears to be less necessary for Thai English language users. On the contrary, teachers who teach English pronunciation or speaking may have to ignore some small mistakes in speaking classes as long as intelligibility can be achieved in the communication process since it can encourage learners who lack confidence and motivation and are afraid of making mistakes to speak and practice English more.

Besides, giving students feedback whenever they make common mistakes needs to be considered carefully. If English teachers rely strictly on native models and English grammar in teaching speaking or pronunciation, they may take common pronunciation and grammar errors as serious mistakes and provide students with the direct feedback whenever such errors are made. This causes language learners to feel embarrassed when speaking and discourages them from speaking English and they may not want to practice or speak English anymore. Thus, placing less emphasis on the native norms positively affects the way English teachers correct students' English grammar or pronunciation in the conversation classroom. As a result, students feel positive about speaking and practicing English in the classroom.

### **Exposing Thai Students to Different Accents**

English accent is another issue that should be mentioned in teaching English pronunciation in the ELF context. As already stated, a vast number of people may prefer Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA) accents to their own native accents in speaking English. However, Jenkins (2009a) indicates from empirical studies that non-native accents are perceived by non-native speakers of English to be more understandable than RP and GA accents.

Additionally, Jenkins (2005) further points out from her study that speaking English with the learners' L1 accent can present speakers' own identities and this may be one reason why some non-native English users desire to maintain their accents when speaking English. Therefore, it seems acceptable that Thai English users and English teachers should not be overly concerned about their accents. Speaking and teaching English with their own accent can be a good way to present themselves as a Thai and they do not have to strictly imitate native models of pronunciation. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the Thai education system has relied heavily on the

native speaker model. Consequently, English teachers may mostly expose their students to British or American accents in the classroom. This can cause many Thai English users' difficulty in trying to understand non-native English speakers when they have to use English in the authentic situations and it may affect the communication and relationships of Thai people in workplaces later on. It can be said that teaching students to have a native accent is not as important as teaching them to understand a variety of English accents since English is widely used as a lingua franca in Thailand.

Some teachers may argue that it is impossible to introduce students to every English accent in ELT classrooms because there are so many English users across the globe. However, they should try to expose students to as many accents as possible, particularly the accents of people who are likely to be students' future interlocutors in their workplace, such as people from Asian countries or the ASEAN community. Interestingly, Sharifian (2011) proposes the use of Facebook as a tool to expose learners to various English forms and accents since teachers can post video clips for students to access easily. Thus, Thai English teachers can use the Internet and websites such as Facebook and YouTube to present students with a variety of English accents.

Another effective way to offer students more opportunity to experience different accents of people in the intercultural communication process is to assign students to do tasks, or activities that involve real and virtual communication in English as a lingua franca setting. These kinds of activities enable students to be exposed to various accents or pronunciations from their real communications. Additionally, encouraging students to do internships in workplaces where English is spoken tends to be an effective approach that possibly broadens students' views on the real use of English in their future careers. It helps students perceive the authentic use and problems of English at work. Furthermore they will



have a chance to experience communicating with native or non native interlocutors in the real workplace. Students may be able to cope with accent differences more easily when they have to use English for their real life in the future. Hence, English teachers should have another role of exposing students to a variety of English accents, particularly people from ASEAN countries who will be their important interlocutors in the near future.

### **Promoting Intercultural Communicative Competence**

Being proficient in English knowledge tends to be insufficient for success in intercultural communication, with other factors such as intercultural competence playing a key role. As a result, Thai English teachers may have to raise Thai learners' awareness of issues of intercultural communication. Baker (2012) notes that as Thais may have to interact with people from multilingual and cultural backgrounds, improving Thais' English skills is obviously not enough. English linguistic knowledge, pragmatic competence, as well as intercultural competence should be developed in Thai English users since they are equally important for successful intercultural communication (Baker, 2012). Simpson (2011) points out that a lack of communication strategies and intercultural communication skills is seen as an obstacle to intercultural communication through English in the Thai tourism industry. Weber (2003, as cited in Damnet, 2008) adds that developing students' intercultural competence is necessary to avoid several intercultural communication problems such as misinterpretation, prejudice and misunderstandings which can occur in intercultural interactions. In addition, Ramjee (n.d.) notes that there are different cultural issues in terms of the interpretation of eye contact, body language or unfamiliar phrases that possibly contribute to misunderstanding in intercultural situations in the workplace.

The "smile" in Thai culture may be a clear example of misunderstanding occurring due to different interpretations of non-verbal communication. According to Damnet (2008), the "Thai smile" can convey many meanings namely happiness, pleasure, and all kinds of embarrassment. Thus, different interpretations of a "smile" in Thai and other cultures may easily lead to misunderstandings. For instance, Thai students' smiles of guilt and embarrassment for being late for class may be wrongly interpreted by their foreign lecturers who may believe that students do not feel guilty for being late since they are still smiling happily. As a result, foreign teachers, particularly from western countries who are unfamiliar with Thai culture may have negative attitudes towards Thai students due to misinterpretations of their smiles. It seems that misunderstandings of the non-verbal aspects of communication of different cultures may contribute to communication problems. This is because people tend to interpret verbal or non-verbal communication based on their own cultures and norms (Damnet, 2008).

It can be seen that being aware of one's own culture and the culture of interlocutors play an important role in successful communication. Therefore, English learners' intercultural competence should be taken seriously. Although intercultural competence tends to be significant for successful communication in Thailand, Thai English education has not paid much attention to this issue. Damnet (2008) states that intercultural competence and intercultural learning have gained less attention in Thai English classrooms as a result of applying communicative language teaching (CLT) to the Thai curriculum. This may be because CLT focuses mainly on developing English skills and cultural knowledge of the target language. According to Alptekin (2002), communicative competence used in CLT approaches is based on native speaker norms; therefore, it encourages English users to understand the target cultures in order to communicate successfully in

English with native speakers. However, Alptekin (2002) does not agree with this approach where English has become a lingua franca. Alptekin states that intercultural communicative competence should be more strongly emphasized when teaching English learners. Currently, it is a crucially important time to raise Thai English learners' awareness of other people's cultures, particularly the knowledge of people from the ASEAN countries who will come and work freely in Thailand when the official establishment of the ASEAN Community will begin in 2015.

Thai English teachers can play a role in enhancing the intercultural knowledge of students in a number of ways. Media such as social sites, movies, or songs can be employed in ELT classrooms since students nowadays are able to access the Internet easily and they spend a large amount of time on the Internet. Therefore, English teachers may use this channel to raise students' intercultural communicative competence. For instance, Thai English teachers may show students VDOs from YouTube and movies from different countries and ask students to discuss and share ideas about their perspectives on other cultures in the classroom. As Ekahitanond (2013) suggested that media such as movies, song, and TV commercials can be used in ETL classrooms to help learners increase their learning motivation, creating the language learning Environment, enhancing critical thinking skills and cultural awareness. Ekahitanond (2013) further points out movies may offer great benefits to learners since facial expression, different gestures and authentic language use are presented in the movies. Movies not only give exposure to authentic vocabulary, visual manners and gestures, but also increase interesting cultural knowledge and learners' critical thinking skills Ekahitanond (2011). Therefore, movies possibly become a key tool for Thai English teachers to use in the classroom. Thai English teachers may therefore have to pay more attention to raising the awareness of Thai English learners' regarding intercultural issues so

that they can use English to reach the goal of successful intercultural communication in Thailand.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that English has a clear role as a lingua franca in Thailand, the traditional goal of learning and teaching English to interact primarily with native speakers may have to be changed. Thai English teachers have to adjust their roles and teaching foci. Emphasizing only native speaker norms in teaching pronunciation and focusing too much on teaching English grammar in teaching speaking or pronunciation seems ineffective in promoting learners' English skills and knowledge since it may not help promote Thai learners' motivation and confidence in speaking English. However, it does not mean that this article suggest the teachers to teach English based on the English as a lingua franca model since it is understandable that there has been a lot of arguments on application of English as a lingua franca form. However, the writer proposes that teaching students to reach the goal of intelligibility may be better than accuracy in developing Thais' English speaking since it appears difficult for learners to achieve the native-like goal. In particular, in Thailand where students seem shy of speaking English, making mistakes and lacking English learning motivation. As a consequence, this teaching approach may be effective in enhancing the learners' motivation and confidence in speaking well. In addition to this, exposing learners to a variety of Englishes and accents is important for English as a lingua franca communication, particularly with people from ASEAN member countries. Finally, intercultural competence should be developed in Thai language learners in order to avoid misunderstandings due to cultural differences. In short, Thai English teachers may have to realize the three important roles mentioned to help their students communicate in English as a lingua franca effectively in Thailand. ♥



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