

Attitudes, Awareness, and Comprehensibility of ASEAN English Accents: A Qualitative Study of University Students in Thailand

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Abstract

Though several studies examined the linguistic features of ASEAN's diversity of English, not many have looked at how and to what extent ASEAN speakers perceive and comprehend the English variety spoken in their own and/or outside their countries within the same region. This qualitative study aims to explore awareness, attitudes, and the level of comprehensibility of a small group of ASEAN speakers towards ASEAN English accents. Twenty students enrolled in a Thai international university participated in this study. They were asked, in a questionnaire and interviews, how they perceived each variety of ASEAN English and if they had difficulty in comprehending it. To examine the participants' ability to identify ASEAN English accents and their levels of comprehensibility, each participant was asked to listen to ten different short articles, which were read and audiotape-recorded earlier by a university student from each of the ten ASEAN countries. The results indicated that the participants' previous experience of being exposed to a certain English variety was a significant factor in determining levels of intelligibility and comprehensibility of a variety. Finally, this study proposes a pedagogical implication for the teaching of English to promote an awareness of and familiarity with ASEAN Englishes.

Keywords: ASEAN English Varieties, Intelligibility, Accent Identification, Comprehensibility

Introduction

The diffusion of the English language around the world has not only made English one of the most powerful languages, but also created several English varieties. Scholars have studied various uses and functions of English varieties in different contexts (Crystal, 1997; Jenkins, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2009; Kirkpatrick 2007; Sharifian, 2009). From this the term *World Englishes* has emerged, providing a framework for understanding the global spread and functions of English. This term is neutral in a sense that it is "inclusive and does not associate any privilege with English in any one circle or any one of its specific varieties" (Kachru & Nelson, 2006, p. 2).

Historically, since its formation in 1967, the Association of South East Asian Nations (hereafter ASEAN) has used English as its working language. H.E. Le Luong Minh, the present Secretary-General of ASEAN, stated the following:

English is an important and indispensable tool to bring our Community closer together...Through English, we are raising our awareness of the ASEAN region and, with the many characteristics we share and hold dear, further strengthening our sense of an ASEAN Community. (p. 2)

The forthcoming ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) 2015 has created even more alertness in the use of English among the ten ASEAN member states, which consist of Brunei Darussalam (hereafter Brunei), Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR (hereafter Laos), Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Despite being a common language for communication among the ASEAN nations, English within the region has been infused with local linguistic practices. Several studies about English varieties in Southeast Asia (e.g.

Jenkins, 2003, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2003, 2007, 2008; Wilang & Teo, 2012a, 2012b) have revealed systematic accounts of linguistic features pertinent to these varieties. There are both shared and distinctive linguistic features in the Englishes used by speakers from the ten ASEAN member states. The common linguistic features that Southeast Asian speakers of English display include a tendency to use syllable-timing (Kirkpatrick, 2007, 2008), the shift of uncountable nouns to countable ones (Kirkpatrick, 2007), and the coinage of collocations (Jenkins, 2009). Nonetheless, there are linguistic features which are found only in certain regions of ASEAN. For instance, Kirkpatrick reported a difference between Malaysian and Singaporean English wherein Singaporean English is non-rhotic, while Malaysian speakers produce a post-vocalic /r/ sound in certain discourse situations (2007). Another distinctive feature common to both Malaysian and Singaporean speakers is the use of the final particle *lah*.

As mentioned earlier, there have been quite a number of studies about linguistic features of ASEAN Englishes; however, how speakers from all ten member countries of ASEAN perceive and comprehend the English varieties spoken in their own and outside their countries within the same region has not been studied much. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the attitudes, level of intelligibility, and the comprehensibility of ASEAN speakers towards the English varieties spoken in this particular region.

Review of Literature

The Spread of English

The most influential model of the spread of English has been Kachru's three concentric circles, namely the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle (Jenkins, 2003; Kachru & Nelson, 2006; Moore & Bounchan, 2010; Wilang & Teo, 2012a). The three circles "represent the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition, and the functional allocation of English in diverse cultural contexts" (Kachru, 1992, p. 356). The Inner Circle, the first diaspora of English, comprises of England and areas such as Australia, New Zealand, and North America where speakers from Britain took the language with them as they migrated. The Outer Circle, the second diaspora of English, involves the development of a number of second-language varieties in the countries, which were once colonized by the British. These include such countries as India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Singapore, The Philippines, and Malaysia. Lastly, the Expanding Circle represents the countries where the language is still spreading, such as Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, and Korea. Jenkins further elaborates this paradigm by suggesting that the variety spoken in the Inner Circle countries is considered a norm-providing variety, while those in the Outer Circle can be considered norm-developing, and finally those found in the Expanding Circle can be considered as norm-dependent (Jenkins, 2003).

Despite its usefulness for explaining the dispersal of English, Kachru's concentric circles model has instigated a considerable amount of debate. Kirkpatrick (2007), for instance, argues that Kachru's concentric circles model "underestimated the roles that English would come to play in Expanding Circle countries" (p. 29). Yano (2009) further added that there are speakers of English in the Outer Circle who have high-level proficiency and native speaker intuition, which warrants for a change in the paradigm for the dispersal of English.

Linguistic Features of ASEAN English Varieties

Several studies have revealed the roles and development of English, as well as distinctive linguistic features in the lingua franca use of English of nationals from ASEAN. Examples of those studies include the studies of Brunei English (Deterding & Sharbawi, 2013; McLellan & Haji-Othman, 2012), Cambodian English (Keuk, 2009; Moore & Bounchan, 2010), Indonesian English (Smith, 1991; Tiono & Yostanto, 2008), Laotian English (Smith, 1996), Malaysian English (Hashim & Tan, 2012), Burmese English (M. Myint, personal communication, November 19, 2012; Win, 2003), Philippine English (Bautista, 2001; Dayag, 2012), Singapore English (Deterding, 2007; Low, 2012), Thai English (Thep-Ackrapong, 2005; Trakulkasemsuk, 2012), and Vietnamese English (Tam, 2005).

Aside from distinctive features of English varieties found in the Englishes within ASEAN, there are also some traces of shared features in terms of phonology, syntax, and lexicon in these varieties (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2007, 2008, 2012; Jenkins, 2009). However, since the present study's highlight is on ASEAN English accents, there will be a primary interest on phonological features of ASEAN Englishes. A shared phonological feature among ASEAN Englishes is discussed by Kirkpatrick (2008), where different

speakers of ASEAN English have been found to speak in a syllable-timed manner. This may be well because the ASEAN languages are all syllable-timed, not stressed-timed as it is in English. A result of this feature is that ASEAN speakers of English become prone to avoid the reduction of vowels when speaking English, leading to the use of full vowels even in unstressed syllables. Another phonological features can be found at the segmental level, where simplification processes are always applied, such as dental fricative sounds replaced by [t] and [d] (Moore & Boonchan, 2010), diphthongs replaced by monophthongs, and deletion of final consonant clusters (Kirkpatrick, 2007, 2008).

Concepts of Understanding Speakers of Different English Varieties

The rise of sub-varieties of English within ASEAN can cause misunderstandings among speakers from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. In determining the degree of understanding, Smith (1992, 2009) proposed a three dimensional approach to understanding cross-cultural communication. They are intelligibility, which measures a listener's ability to identify words or utterances, comprehensibility, which measures a listener's ability to understand the meanings of words or utterances in their given context, and finally interpretability, which measures a listener's ability to perceive and understand the speaker's intention. Understanding can be increased when a speaker is exposed to more than one variety (Smith, 2009). Jenkins (2007) also pointed out that language attitudes could influence one's perception and understanding of a certain English variety. In her study (2007) on teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards English, Jenkins concludes the six main categories of comments from her participants towards various English varieties including *reservations* (commenting perceptively on the difficulty and/or inappropriateness of each accent), *personal preferences* (liking), *accent problems* (problems of non-native speakers in general), *intelligibility* (acceptable, comprehensible, and pleasant accent), *prejudice* (bias against one particular accent), and *familiarity* (experience of an accent). The familiarity with the topic and the language variety, asserted by Smith (1992), may also influence people in believing that they understand most of what they hear.

Intelligibility and Comprehensibility of Englishes within ASEAN

The use of English as a lingua franca in the Southeast Asian region has, to some degree, raised the questions of mutual intelligibility. This is because in the ASEAN context, "the English used by speakers is likely to be characterized by variation and variety" (Kirkpatrick, 2008). Jenkins (2009) reported that certain features of Expanding Circle pronunciation have been shown to lead to problems in ELF communication. For example, there is extensive empirical evidence showing that when the sound [ɜ:] is substituted with another long vowel, the result is an intelligibility problem.

In their recent discussion on the comprehensibility among ELF users, Wilang and Teo (2012b) asserted that Kachru's (1985) three concentric circles of English. With samples from the outer and expanding circles, Wilang and Teo (2012c) used the paradigm of World Englishes speaker-listener matrix (Levis, 2005) as theoretical background for their study on the measurement of comprehensibility of ELF speakers within ASEAN. In examining if Englishes in the Outer Circle are comprehensible to the citizens of the Expanding Circle nations, Wilang and Teo (2012b) found that there are correlation coefficients between the subjects' comprehension scores and exposures to English through education, work experiences, communication outside the classroom, social media, and travel and stay abroad experiences. Although the participants in their study gave different comprehensibility scores towards each spoken variety, the researchers concluded that there is a moderate comprehensibility of the Expanding Circle listeners toward the Outer Circle speakers (2012b, 2012c).

Research Methodology

This section explains the research questions, theoretical background of study, research setting and participants, and data collection and analysis.

Research Questions

The present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the participants perceive the English varieties spoken in their own countries, in the South-East Asian region, and in the world context?
2. To what extent do the participants recognize the accents of ASEAN English varieties?
3. Which ASEAN English varieties were the most and the least intelligible ones to the participants?
4. To what extent do the participants comprehend the listening texts representing ASEAN Englishes' accents?
5. Which ASEAN English varieties were the most and the least comprehensible ones to the participants?

Theoretical Background of Study

To answer the research questions mentioned above, the present study drew on Jenkins' (2007) factors influencing one's perception and understanding of a certain English variety, and Smith's (1992, 2009) three dimensions of understanding. It should be noted here that only the bottom two levels of understanding, as proposed by Jenkins (2007), intelligibility and comprehensibility, were applied to this study. Unlike Wilang and Teo (2012c), the terms intelligibility and comprehensibility are not used interchangeably in the present study. In this study, the term "intelligibility," is defined fairly differently from the one suggested by Smith (1992, 2009) and Wilang and Teo (2012a, 2012b, and 2012c). To examine the level of intelligibility of the participants and the ASEAN English varieties, a focus was placed on accent identification rather than word and utterance recognition. Furthermore, to examine the participants' level of comprehensibility, attention was devoted to the comprehensibility levels of the participants as well as that of the ten English varieties within ASEAN.

Research Setting and Participants

Twenty students of both undergraduate and graduate levels who enrolled in an international university in Thailand participated in this study. This university is considered an international university mainly because English is used as a medium of instruction, and there are a great number of teachers and students whose mother tongues are not Thai. There were students from eighty-three different countries at this research site at the time this study was conducted. These participants were majoring in various fields of study, namely business administration, business English, education, science and technology, and engineering. Each of them was originally from one of the ten ASEAN member countries. Specifically, there were twelve males and eight females, who were between 18 to 26 years old. Each participant was selected on a voluntary basis, meaning that he/she could voluntarily decide whether or not to take part as a research participant and to withdraw from the study at any time.

Each participant was fully informed about the research goals, data collection procedures, as well as their privacy protection. The participants were also guaranteed that their real names would not be used in the research report. The participants' names displayed in this present study are all pseudonyms. All of them gave the researchers their consent to participate in the study before data collection took place. The number of participants from each ASEAN nation was different because of limitations on accessibility and availability. That is why there was only one participant from Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Moreover, since the selection was based on a voluntary basis, the initial number of participants who volunteered to represent Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam was reduced as participants backed out.

Table 1 *Descriptions of the Participants*

Nationalities	Level of Study		Total
	Undergraduate	Graduate	
Bruneian	1	0	1
Burmese	1	3	4
Cambodian	0	1	1
Filipino	3	1	4
Indonesian	1	0	1
Laotian	2	0	2
Malaysian	1	0	1
Singaporean	1	0	1
Thai	0	2	2
Vietnamese	3	0	3
Total	13	7	20

Data Collection and Analysis

Methodological triangulation was employed in this qualitative study, mainly to achieve validity of the research findings that reflect the research context accurately and to provide ample support as evidence. Moreover, triangulation will encourage an in-depth understanding of the issues being studied (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). Three data collection methods that were involved include a questionnaire, followed by an interview, and finally a listening comprehension test. The questionnaire collected participants' information about personal language abilities (i.e. their first language, how they rate their level of English proficiency, their experience of exposure to any Southeast Asian English varieties), as well as their perceptions towards the local English variety spoken by people in their home country, the ones spoken in the Southeast Asian region and in the whole world context, as well as whether or not they had some difficulty comprehending such variety (see Appendix).

Right after the participants completed the questionnaires, they were interviewed by the researchers. The interview, conducted in English, gave the participants the opportunity to elaborate their responses in the questionnaire. The interview data was noted, tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Then, the participants were asked to schedule for a listening comprehension test. The listening test was scheduled based on the participants' convenient time.

Ten listening texts were short reading passages selected from four English learning websites: www.headsupenglish.com, www.tolearnenglish.com, www.anglaisfacile.com, www.ielts-exam.net, and www.english-teststore.net. These passages were listed as the ones for English learners whose proficiency level is intermediate. Topics of the ten listening texts were general, not specific to any participants' fields of study. This was to ensure that no one had advantage over the others. The ten topics of reading passages were Barack Obama, Black Friday, Negativity at Work, Travel Abroad, Save the Planet, The History of Chess, Youth Crime, Antarctic Penguins, Hamburgers, and WTF (The World Wildlife Fund). Also, to make sure that all selected texts were of the same length, some of the longer articles were shortened. The selected articles were read and audiotape recorded by different university students, each originally from one of ten member countries in ASEAN. The text was randomly assigned to each of the reader. Later, the research participants were asked to listen to each text only once. Each of these texts representing each ASEAN English accent was about one minute long. After the participants listened to each text, they were asked to spend as much time as they needed to answer four multiple-choice questions. The first three questions were comprehension questions, whereas the fourth question concerned the accent identification. Ten choices of accents associated with ten ASEAN English varieties were given to the participants to choose from. Once they finished answering each set of questions, they were then asked to listen to the next listening text. The same procedures were repeated until they finished the whole test.

Results of Study

Findings from Questionnaire and Interview

The responses to the questionnaire and interviews were to answer the first research question regarding the participants' perceptions towards the English varieties spoken in their own countries, in the South-East Asian region, and in the world context. Such responses can be categorized into four categories: prejudice, personal preference, awareness, and familiarity. These categories were somewhat overlapping. All of which were outlined below together with verbatim examples.

Prejudice

Some participants expressed negative attitudes that they had towards some certain English varieties spoken in the ASEAN contexts. These perceptions were also associated with the participants' belief that such English varieties were somewhat comprehensible or incomprehensible to them. For example:

- In Singapore, the accent is quite bad. – Ho, 21-year-old Singaporean
- I think Filipino accent is the hardest one to understand – 25-year-old Thai
- I visited Singapore once and I couldn't understand what they said...it's like I don't know English at all. – June, 20-year-old Vietnamese
- For me, Indonesian English is the hardest one to understand. I have an Indonesian classmate, and I found it difficult to catch his pronunciation – Mint, 20-year-old Vietnamese
- Philippine English is much more advanced than other English in ASEAN. I think it's because we use English as our official language. – Brian, 26-year-old Filipino

Some participants also reported that the English varieties spoken outside the ASEAN context were difficult to understand. For example:

- *English used by Chinese speakers is the hardest one to understand.* – Ray, 19-year-old Bruneian
- *Chinese and Japanese accents were hard to understand.* – Wuttisak, 25-year-old Thai
- *I think Indian English accent is the hardest one to understand...In one of my classes, I watched a video of a talk by an Indian businessman and I couldn't understand much of what he's saying in the video.* – Nasha, 24-year-old Vietnamese

Preference

Native English accents, particularly UK and US accents, are preferred in all respects by most participants. They considered these English accents the most correct, pleasant and acceptable, and thus it was not necessary for them to learn about other ASEAN accents. Only one participant from Cambodia, Thong, said he preferred Australian English accent the most. This could be because he had a few years of experience working with an Australian colleague in Cambodia. However, Thong said Australian English accent was the only native English speaking accent he was ever exposed to. Meanwhile, all ASEAN English accents were perceived by all participants as non-native English accents, and so are non-preferable to them. For example:

- *I don't think it's necessary to learn about any other varieties of English, even the ones used in our region... Learning standard American English would be good enough to connect the people of ASEAN together.* – James, 20-year-old Filipino
- *I was trained to speak English according standard to American or British accents, so I think these are the good models of accents. That's why they're called standard, right?* – Nasha, 24-year-old Vietnamese
- *I like American English because it's mostly used in our life* – Thavee, 18-year-old Laotian
- *American English is like our native language. Filipinos use it across the country. I was taught to speak English since I was little.* – Grace, 20-year-old Filipino

Awareness

Each and every participant was aware that their own English accent was in some way different from the native English accents. For example:

- *My English is not the same as people in my country. It's more standard, I think, because I studied it with American teachers.* –Eric, 18-year-old, Indonesian
- *In pronunciation, I think my English might be a little different from other English in ASEAN.* –Ho, 21-year-old, Singaporean
- *I think my pronunciation is ok...I don't make mistakes in pronunciation like*
- *Vietnamese do. For example, Vietnamese people pronounce 'this' as /ziz/* –Nasha, 24-year-old Vietnamese

Familiarity

Most participants said they had almost no problem understanding native English accents and Thai English accent. For example:

- *I think Australian accent is easy to understand...the clearest one ...I didn't have any problem understanding it...I want to speak just like that.* – Thong, 26-year-old Cambodian
- *I'm used to American English accent from the first time of studying, so I am familiar to it gradually... It is the easiest one to understand.* –Nasha, 24-year-old
- *The easiest ones to understand for me are Burmese, Thai, and Cambodian because they speak quite slowly.* –Dave, 26-year-old Burmese

Findings from Listening Comprehension Test

The findings presented this section are divided into four parts, with each part responding to the remaining four research questions. The parts are participants' performance of accent identification, level of intelligibility each variety received, participants' performance of comprehensibility, and level of comprehensibility each text received.

Participants' Performance of Accent Identification

With regards to the participants' performance of accent identification, six out of twenty participants received the highest score, 5, meaning they were able to recognize five out of ten ASEAN English accents. These students reported that they were exposed to different English accents found in the ASEAN region apart from the ones of native English speakers. For example, Kham, the Laotian student asserted that he enjoyed talking with classmates from many different countries in the ASEAN contexts as this would help him practice his English speaking skills. It should be noted that the five participants were able to recognize Thai English accent in addition to the English accents spoken in their home countries (see Table 2).

Table 2 *The Participants receiving the highest scores of accent identification*

Total number of accent identification (out of 10)	Names	Nationalities	List of Identified Accents
5	James	Filipino	B, P, I, L, T
5	Grace	Filipino	P, I, L, M, T
5	Kham	Laotian	P, L, M, S, T
5	Ho	Singaporean	P, I, M, S, T
5	Napat	Thai	B, C, L, S, T
5	Mint	Vietnamese	P, M, S, T, V

Note. B = Burmese English, C = Cambodian, P = Philippine English, I = Indonesian English, L = Laotian English, M = Malaysian English, S = Singaporean English, T= Thai English

The only accent that was not recognizable to all participants was the Brunei English accent. Only two participants, a Laotian and a Thai, were able to recognize Cambodian English accent. Also, there were three participants, Ray (Burmese), Ming (Malaysian), and June (Vietnamese), who did not recognize the English accents representing the ones spoken in their home countries. The two participants who received the lowest score, 2, were the ones from Myanmar and Cambodia, namely *Sei* and *Thong*, respectively.

Levels of Intelligibility Each Text Received

Among the ten ASEAN English accents, Thai English accent received the highest score, 19 out of 20, and was thus considered the most recognizable / intelligible accent. Philippine and Singapore English varieties were in the second and third places with their scores 12 and 9 respectively. It is worth mentioning here that no participant was able to recognize Brunei English accent (see Figure 1).

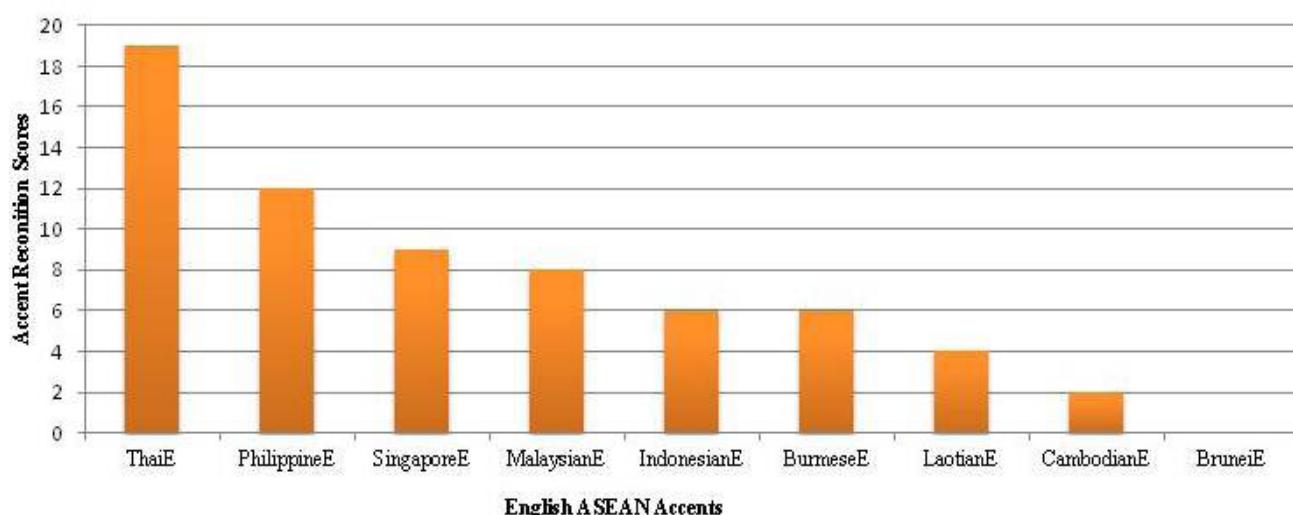


Figure 1. Levels of accent identification. This figure illustrates different comprehensible scores each ASEAN English accent received. E = English

Participants' Performance of Comprehensibility

As mentioned earlier, since there were three questions for each of ten ASEAN English comprehensibility test, the total score for this part was thirty. Five out of twenty participants received the top three highest comprehensibility scores. The graduate Burmese student got the highest score on the test, 23. Coming in at a very close second were the three participants from the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, with a score of 22, while the third place was the undergraduate student from the Philippines, with a score of 21 (See Table 3). The participant who got the lowest score was Thong, a graduate student from Cambodia. He got only 10 out of 30.

Table 3 *Levels of Comprehensibility*

Rank	Total Scores (out of 30)	Names	Nationalities
1	23	Dave	Burmese
2	22	Brian	Filipino
	22	Ho	Singaporean
	22	Napat	Thai
3	21	Noelle	Filipino

Levels of Comprehensibility Each Text Received

Since there were twenty participants answering thirty listening comprehensibility questions, the total score for this part was sixty. Figure 2 below shows that Thai English variety received the highest score 48, followed by Burmese English, 46, and Laotian English, 44. The English variety receiving the lowest score was Malaysian English whose score was 12.

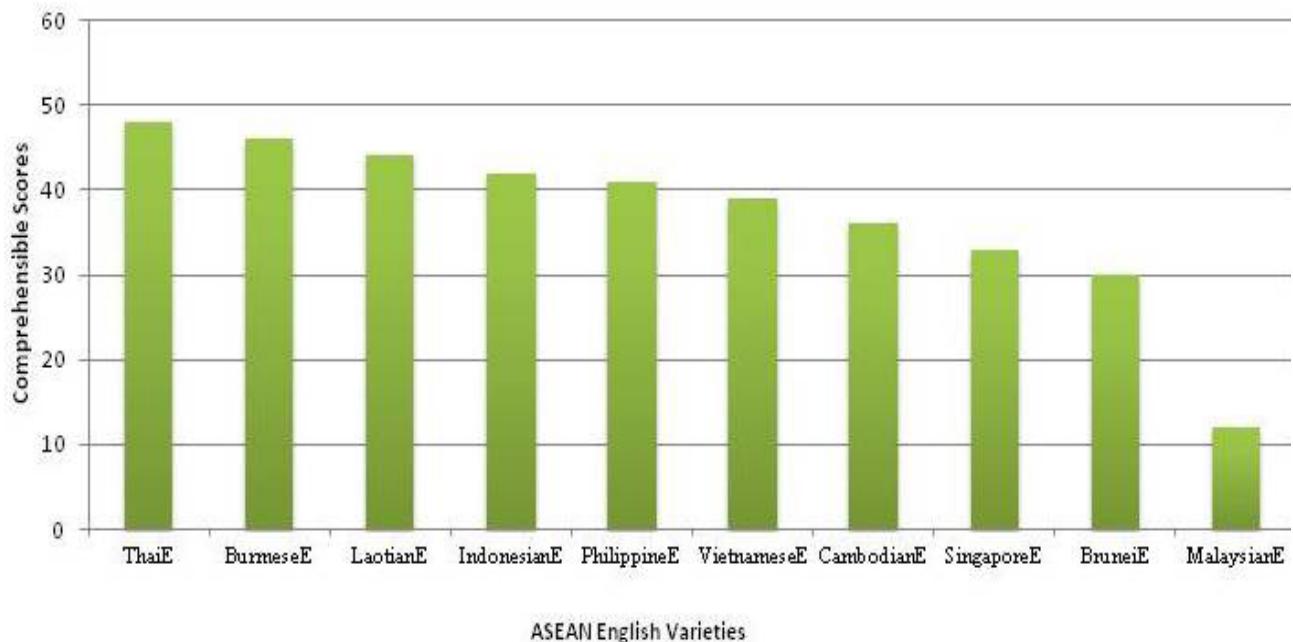


Figure 2. Comprehensible Scores for each ASEAN variety. E = English

Discussion

Drawn from the results of this study, all participants reported that apart from the English accent spoken in their home countries, Thai English accent was the easiest one to understand. This perception equated their performance of recognizing this accent. The results are in harmony with Smith's (2009) and Jenkins' (2007) arguments that familiarity could play an important role on one's perception and comprehensibility of a certain variety. As the participants are students in an international university in Thailand, they are more likely to be accustomed to the Thai English accent, either through interactions with Thai friends and faculty members/staff, or an exposure of this particular accent via social media in Thailand.

All participants also perceived native English speakers' accents (American, British, and Australian) as the pleasant, accurate, and intelligible ones. These student participants have evidently been, to some extent, influenced by the prevailing standard native speakers of English ideology through their exposure of these varieties. The participants seemed to share a common belief that native English speakers' accent is intelligible, whereas most non-native English speakers' accents like the ones in the ASEAN contexts are not. This points out that intelligibility is a factor in people's perceptions of others' accents, and hence it "needs to be considered in tandem with language attitudes" (Jenkins, 2007, p. 83).

The overall results show that the participants were different in their abilities to recognize the accents of ASEAN English varieties and comprehending the texts representing certain varieties. One thing that was common among the participants who got the highest scores of accent identification is that they have been exposed to different English accents, including those from the ASEAN contexts. The participants' nationalities or origins of countries had nothing to do with their accent identification abilities or comprehensibility levels. Also, three out of five student participants who got the highest accent identification scores were originally from Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, which are countries in Kachru's expanding circle (1985).

With regards to the comprehensibility level of the participants, almost all participants comprehended the Thai English variety. This demonstrates the participants' familiarity with the Thai English accent, the typical accent spoken within the Thai context. The six participants who got the top three highest comprehensible scores were from five ASEAN countries: Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. This

particular result shows that the speakers' proficiency level of English does not correlate with the Kachru's (1985) concentric circles of English arguing that the proficiency level of English for speakers in outer circle countries must be better than those in expanding circle countries. These results also conformed to Smith (1992, 2009) that the more exposure of and familiarity with language varieties that a person has, the better ability that person can have in recognizing and comprehending such varieties. It is worth noting here that there is no correlation between the levels of accent identification and the ones for comprehensibility of most English ASEAN varieties. The exception was in Thai English variety because every participant reported that it was the easiest one to understand, and all participants except the graduate student from Myanmar were able to recognize this particular accent.

Each English variety in the ASEAN contexts also received different intelligible (accent identification) and comprehensible scores. The most intelligible ASEAN English variety was Thai, followed by Philippine and Singapore English varieties respectively, while the least intelligible one was Brunei English (as evidenced drawn from the results that no participant recognized Brunei English accent). It should be mentioned here that there is only one Bruneian student enrolled at this University. As Omar asserted that three countries in ASEAN member nations: Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei use the common language, Bahasa Malay, and thus can be grouped as the Core Malay Speaking (CMS) countries (1997, p. 7). In the present study, it could be the case that this Bruneian student and other participants confounded the three aforementioned English accents. With reference to the comprehensibility level of each English variety, Thai English was found to be the most comprehensible one, followed by Burmese and Laotian English varieties. The least comprehensible spoken variety was the Malaysian English variety.

The overall results also indicated that there was no correlation between the participants' perceptions and their actual performances of accent identification and comprehension of texts associated with particular accents. What many student participants reported in the questionnaire and/or interviews regarding their perception of each ASEAN English variety did not always match their accent identification and text comprehension performances. For instance, James, the Filipino student reported in the questionnaire that Burmese English accent was the hardest one to understand. However, the accent identification result showed that he was able to recognize this accent. James also reported that Singaporean English was the easiest one to understand; however, he did not recognize this accent when listening to the text representing Singaporean accent.

Implications for English Language Teaching

The present study has provided informative messages to English language teaching practitioners in Thailand and perhaps elsewhere in the ASEAN contexts. As English has been determined to be used as the lingua franca in the ASEAN contexts, for the readiness of each ASEAN member countries for the AEC in 2015, it is the English teachers' responsibilities to help their learners become more aware of and exposed to different ASEAN English varieties. It would also be necessary for English teachers to help learners understand that "variation is natural, normal and continuous" (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 197). Learners should not only know native speakers' English varieties such as American and British English varieties, but other sub-varieties of English, particularly the ones in the ASEAN contexts, should also be introduced to the English language learning classroom. This is to help the English learners become *multidialectal competence*, as suggested by Canagarajah (2006).

Moreover, as English is a pluricentric language that will soon be used widely among citizens of ASEAN member nations, it is essential that English language learners be aware of as well as accept the various English varieties spoken in their South East Asian regional contexts. English language teachers should also help their learners achieve the so-called *metacultural competence*, "a competence that enables interlocutors to communicate and negotiate their cultural conceptualizations during the process of intercultural communication" (Sharifian, 2013, p.30). It is very important also for English teachers to have metacultural competence, which could be achieved through collaborations among ten ASEAN member nations through teacher exchange programs. These programs would allow teachers to be exposed to different English varieties in the ASEAN contexts, get better understanding of the ASEAN English speakers' cultures in the real settings, and perhaps most importantly, reduce biases that ASEAN English speakers might have towards one another.

Limitations and Further Research

The data gathered in the present study may be limited to some extent for the investigation. This could be

because of a small number of participants taking part in the study and a limited numbers of the participants representing some ASEAN member countries. Future research on the intelligibility and comprehensibility of ASEAN Englishes should be done quantitatively and with examinations of the communication strategies among ASEAN English speakers through actual communications. The future studies should perhaps be extended to the English teachers' perceptions and awareness on ASEAN Englishes, along with three levels of understanding (intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability, as suggested by Smith, 1992, 2009) that English teachers and learners have towards spoken and written English varieties in this particular region, and perhaps language policy in ten ASEAN member countries. An increasing number of participants involved in the future quantitative study would also help to better verify the results of this study.

Conclusion

In this study, the participants' attitudes towards and the amount of exposure to a certain English language variety could influence the learners' beliefs in the intelligibility and comprehensibility of that variety. However, these attitudes do not always correlate with the actual ability that a learner has in recognizing an English accent or comprehending a text associated with a certain accent. Also, the learners' ability to recognize some English accents is not always interrelated to their ability to comprehend the texts associated with the same accents. This raises a question of how much attention should be devoted to teach varieties of English accents in the classroom as compared to the one given to cultural awareness and communication strategies that learners should use to negotiate their meanings in the ASEAN communication contexts. Another question that comes into play is, "Is it the right time for the English language practitioners to shift their focus from using native English speaking varieties as the norm varieties to incorporating the concepts of English as an International Language and ASEAN Englishes into the classroom?

It is hoped that the overall results of this study would help create more awareness of ASEAN Englishes, as well as how and why these varieties, in addition to the native English speaking ones, should be emphasized in the teaching English language learners in the classrooms as to prepare the learners of English in the ASEAN contexts for their effective intercultural communication in English for the upcoming of the AEC in 2015.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a research study entitled, *ASEAN Englishes awareness: A trigger of English classroom preparation*. The questionnaire is divided into two parts: personal data and personal attitudes and opinions. Please answer all questions of the two parts.

Part I: Personal Data

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you originally from?
3. How many years have you studied English?
4. What is your major of study?
5. How long have you been staying in Thailand?
6. What is/are the reason(s) for choosing to study at this University?

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.....

7. What is your first/native language?
8. How many languages can you speak and/or use? What are they?

.....

9. In what situation(s) do you use English?

.....

10. Please rate your English proficiency level:

Beginner Intermediate Advanced

Please give reason(s) for your rating.

.....
.....

Part II: Personal Attitudes and Opinions

1. Are you aware of AEC in 2015? If "yes," please answer the next question. If "no," please go to question number 3.

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2. In your opinion, how important is it for the role of English in AEC in 2015?

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.....

3. Apart from English language, do you think it is necessary for ASEAN people to learn at least one ASEAN language? Why / why not?

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.....
.....

4. In what way(s) do you think your English is different from other English varieties in ASEAN nations? Please explain and give specific examples.

.....
.....
.....

Pronunciation/Accent.....

Grammar.....

Vocabulary.....

5. How important is it for ASEAN speakers to be aware of unique characteristics of English use in each ASEAN nation?

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6. Have you ever had any problems in your English communication with people from other countries in the university? Please explain and give specific examples.

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7. What do you think about other English varieties used by speakers from other ASEAN nations that you know of?

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.....

8. Which English variety do you think is the easiest one to understand? Please explain with specific examples.

.....
.....

9. Which English variety do you think is the hardest one to understand? Please explain with specific examples.

.....
.....

10. In your opinion, do you think your English is different from other English varieties elsewhere in the world? Please explain.

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