Thai in Blood, American in Taste: English Learners’ Preferences for Varieties of English

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Abstract

In this paper, the researcher argues that the appropriate English model for teaching English as an international language (EIL) should be notified by glocal contexts and language learners’ sociolinguistic needs. Based on the current survey on Thai tertiary English learners’ preferences for varieties of English accent, it’s revealed that the majority nominated inner-circle Englishes as their preferences. The researcher maintains that English language teaching (ELT) assumption in Thailand has been deeply influenced by the framework of English as an inner-circle language. This paper ends with suggestions and recommendations for all parties involved in ELT: Approaches to ELT needs to be viewed and operated under the paradigm of EIL so as to better prepare learners for the messier world of English as an international language.

Key words: EIL, lingua franca, world Englishes, accents, preferences for varieties of English

1. Contextualization and significance of the study

   English is the language “on which the sun never sets” (Kachru, 1998: 90). This quote illustrates the fact that globalization has brought English to a position that other languages can hardly rival (Graddol, 1997) in terms of its extensive use in several domains of life. Kachru (1992) outlines the roles of English in the world as three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle refers to countries where English is used as a mother-tongue language (e.g., USA, UK, Ireland). The Outer Circle refers to countries where English is used as a second language (e.g., Singapore, India). The Expanding Circle refers to countries where English is used as a foreign language or an additional language (e.g., Thailand, China).

   The pluralization of English has led to the question of what model of English accent should be taught in classroom? When considering what English accent should be used as a
learning and functional model, one broad consideration is whether it’s native (NS) or non-native (NNS). In Thailand, the issue of accent priority has been a hot debate on several academies. The discussion on what accent is inherently better than another doesn’t only seem endless but also invoke strong reactions which often turn out to be a political rather than linguistic matter (Holliday, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2006). Generally speaking, NS accents are often associated with positive attributes such as ‘standard’, ‘authentic’ or ‘intelligible’, while NNS accents are often considered ‘poor’, ‘rural’ or ‘unintelligible’. Below is the quotation cited from an online educational blog reflecting the opinion of a blogger who takes side on NS accent:

“There are only two accents that can be used as the appropriate English models in the world arena: standard American and British English. Why? Accents like Indian, Filipino and Thai would only cause students to speak poor English. As for Australian one, it is regarded as a rural English accent and it’s not intelligible at all. So please do not rob the bright future of our students.” (Limsuwanrote, 2010)

If ones were convinced by the above expression, they wouldn’t hesitate adopting either American or British as their accent model for fear that their bright future would be robbed by evil NNS usages. Unsurprisingly, this imperialist view has been adopted extensively by many people involved in ELT resulting in students being forced to strive for NS competence blindly (Buriphakdi, 2008). As a reaction to the above anachronistic claim, a few questions pop up: Why should only American and British voices be heard in the world arena? Why is it assumed that adopting either American or British model would guarantee the bright future? Does such a claim represent how English is used in the world arena?

Such expression doesn’t seem to hold true in today’s functional contexts of English. In fact, English is learnt not only to interact with NSs but also NNSs, and it’s the latter case that accounts for majority of English interaction in the world. Thus in the world arena, it makes no sense to allow only American and British voices to be heard. If statistics bears some points, in China alone there are more English language learners than the populations of countries in the Inner Circle (e.g., USA, UK, CA, AUS, NZ) combined (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Smith (1983, in Matsuda, 2003) impressively illustrates how people in the world use English:

A Thai doesn’t need to sound like an American in order to use English well with a Filipino at an ASEAN meeting. A Japanese doesn’t need an appreciation of a British lifestyle in order to use English in his business dealings with a Malaysian. The Chinese do not need a background in western literature in order to use English effectively as a language of publications of worldwide distribution. The political
leaders of France and Germany use English in private political discussions but this doesn’t mean that they take on the political attitudes of Americans. It is clear that in these situations there is no attempt for the user to be like a native speaker of English. (p. 7)

These international or lingua franca uses of English mirror how unrealistic and inappropriate NS models would be when the language is to be used to suit a wide range of purposes in outer- and expanding-circle contexts (Jenkins, 2000; Kachru, 1992; McKay, 2002; 2003; Yano, 2009). Accordingly, it is forceful to say that “[h]ow English develops in the world is no business whatever of native speakers in England, the United States, or anywhere else…The very fact that English is an international language means that no nation can have custody over it” (Widdowson, 1994: 385). This message implies that international English should be approached through the lens of linguistic hybridization, dehegemonization or pluralization. However, most learners seem to take it for granted interpreting the so-called ‘international English’ as pertaining to the process of linguistic Britishization or “McDonaldization” (Jenkins, 2005: 6) authorized by NSs. This mistaken belief is reflected in the study conducted by Matsuda (2000) showing that Japanese students perceived English being an international language in the sense that it consisted of only two varieties: American and British.

Kachru (1992) argues that EIL must be denationalized and dissociated with the colonial past. Hence, it follows logically that the ownership of English and linguistic human rights should be awarded to everyone who uses the language to suit their own purposes (Widdowson, 1994; 1997). This means that EIL learners are permitted to use local varieties (accents) to project or express their own identity through English without having to worry that their localized L2 production will be judged vis-à-vis NS benchmark or fall short of NS expertise criteria (Jenkins, 2002). This is because EIL treats the word ‘expertise’ by considering “what you know rather than where you come from” (Rampton, 1995, as cited in Jenkins, 2006: 147). Hence, NNS accents should democratically be treated as “legitimate accent varieties of English which are different from NS varieties but not deficient for that reason” (Jenkins, 2005: 3). However, allowing L1 identity in L2 speech does not go indisputably. That is there are multiple concerns over whether English will fragment into mutually unintelligible variants. This, therefore, seems to be a major reason why NS Englishes have been promoted as sole linguistic or pronunciation models (Kirkpatrick, Deterding and Wong, 2008). This trend of thought is reflected in a study conducted by Scales et al. (2005) which indicates that the international students strived for American English as
accent model and perceived it as the most intelligible accent, while, NNS accents (Chinese and Mexican) were considered unintelligible. In a contrastive picture, Jenkins (2000) argues that NS accent is not necessarily intelligible or appropriate accent when NNS is communicating with another NNS. In the same vein, Kirkpatrick (2007) and Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2007) provide empirical supports that speakers whose mother-tongue languages are syllable-timed (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Thai, French, Malaysian, etc.) are likely to find many syllable-timed non-native English accents more intelligible than stress-timed rhythm of inner-circle accents (e.g., American and British). Thus, NNS Englishes should also be accepted as intelligible English models.

However, sometimes the acceptance of NNSs or NNS versions of English does not necessarily mean NNS forms being accepted as models. Some research studies highlight this phenomenon. Kim’s (2007) finding suggests a shift in attitudes of language users towards the localized spoken English model. She discovered that Korean adult English learners perceived Korean English teachers being competitively able to teach not just grammar but also speaking; but when asked what English model the learners opted for, mainstream inner-circle Englishes were voiced surpassingly. In the similar fashion, Nattheeraphong (2004) found out that although her Thai teacher participants didn’t show irritation with NNS accents, they were reluctant to accept them as models.

To seek a definite answer of what makes NS varieties especially American accent superior to other NNS counterparts or why aren’t NNS Englishes recognized as aspiring models (like in the two cases above) is a complex issue. However, there are some scholars trying to make these phenomena explainable. For example, Kahane (1992) suggests that American English has become prestigious in several communities because of its economic influence that has power to affect English users across the world. This is known as “the rise of US as a superpower” Graddol (1997: 8) in the world arena. As a result of their economic prestige, the varieties they speak are automatically considered prestigious and standard. This assumption has been empirically documented in the literature. Gibb (1997, 1999) found out that the American English has captivated the hearts of Korean participants in her studies because of its economic advantage and prestige. Correspondingly, in the Thai context, Methitham (2009) discovered that about half of his teacher participants expressed their will to encourage their students to cling to NS pronunciation for the purpose of gaining social image or prestige. This reflects that the promotion of English in the world has been deeply approached through the framework of linguistic imperialism (Graddol, 2006; Phillipson, 1992). However, as “the language is going to carry on changing” (Crystal, 1999: 11) and
becoming denationalized (Kachru, 1992), attitudes to or preferences for prestige varieties may be open to alterations. Kirkpatrick (2007) gives an example of how a valued accent encounters significant change in the perceptions of people. He highlights that 20 years ago the type of English spoken by Black people were vociferously downgraded when compared to RP, but today the prestige of RP has been reduced while Black English accent has become more common. Similarly in China, the British English was, in the past, considered as the most prestigious accent that learners wanted to emulate, but today, American English has taken the position of the British English being the most preferred accent model. Graddol (2006) calls for a paradigm shift in attitudes to the spread of English as he suggests that “it’s time to understand the new dynamics of power which global English brings” (p. 112). He uncloses international surveys of public opinions in 2005 that the USA is now failing to keep possession of international prestige as the transfer of people’s interests from West to East is gathering a steady pace. A good instance can be seen in the globalization of world’s media: US soap opera has earned a windfall in Chinese market and was finally out-gunned by Korean soap opera. Thus, if economic power, social change and cultural flows are thought to be the contribution to the shift in prestige and people’s perceptions, wouldn’t it be possible for language users to consider a Chinese or Korean English as the most favorable variety in the tomorrow world?

To conclude, the immense spread and growth of English as an international language (EIL) has led to changes in language learners’ learning needs and goals. However, this doesn’t mean that “soon everyone everywhere will be speaking English, wearing jeans and dancing to a disco beat” (Strevens, 1992, in Smith, 1983: 41). In the context of learning, when one learns English, he may speculate that “if a typical American has no wish to speak like or be labeled as a British user of English, why should a Nigerian, an Indian or a Thai user feel any differently?” [italic added] (Kachru and Nelson, 2000: 18). In other words, it doesn’t follow that every language learner desires or has to speak American-ly or act British-ly when it comes to English language learning. Rather, he may want to bend it to suit his own will and effectively uses it as a communicative tool to intelligibly convey his thought to interlocutors of different L1s. Is this message shared by Thai English learners? This originates the researcher’s interest in investigating what varieties of English accent the English learners want to learn and use and why they hold such attitudes. Knowing the learners’ preferences and their sense of priority may foster a clearer understanding of the extent to which non-native varieties gain acceptance as English models and whether their views are consistent with the ideology of English as an international language.
2. Research Methodology

The informants recruited in this study were the 52 third-year English majors from the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Thaksin University, Songkhla, Thailand. The informants were asked to indicate their preferred English accent on the designed multiple-choice questionnaire in which several options of English varieties were provided. Moreover, they were also asked to provide reasons for their preferences in the given open-ended question. The questionnaire was in English, however; the informants were allowed to provide written answer in either Thai or English. The administration of this study was carried out on December 27th, 2009 at Thaksin University, Songkhla Campus by the researcher himself. Data obtained from the informants were calculated using descriptive statistics (frequency). Responses provided for the preferred English varieties were sorted into major themes for qualitative analysis.

3. Findings and discussion

Findings pertaining to the informants’ preferences for varieties of English were divided into two parts. The first part deals with the informants’ preferences presented in terms of individual varieties, while the second part deals with the data presented in terms of concentric circles. In addition, reasons (obtained from the open-ended question) given by the informants for their preferred English varieties were in depth examined to cast light on their priorities as well as logical justification behind their preferences.

3.1 The informants’ preferences for varieties of English: Individual varieties

Table 1: The informants’ preferences for varieties of English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chosen English varieties</th>
<th>Frequency (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American English</td>
<td>15 (28.85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British English</td>
<td>11 (21.15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai English</td>
<td>5 (9.62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese English</td>
<td>4 (7.69%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian English</td>
<td>4 (7.69%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian English</td>
<td>3 (5.77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian English</td>
<td>2 (3.85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese English</td>
<td>2 (3.85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singaporean English</td>
<td>2 (3.85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysian English</td>
<td>2 (3.85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean English</td>
<td>1 (1.92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any variety</td>
<td>1 (1.92%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table above unsurprisingly reveals that the majority of informants identified the two mainstream accents as the most preferred models to learn and use (28.85% for American English and 21.15% for British English). The third most preferred variety was Thai English (9.62%). Additionally, it should be noted that the discrepancy in percentages between the third preferred accent (Thai English) and the first two accents (American and British English) was considerably high. The next most chosen accents were Chinese and Australian accents with equal percentages of 7.69, followed by Canadian English (5.77%). Russian, Japanese, Singaporean and Malaysian varieties were equally preferred by 3.85% of the informants. Among the varieties in the list that were chosen by the informants, Korean English was the least preferred accent model with 1.92% opting for it. Similarly, the same percentage (1.92%) selected ‘any variety’ which signifies that this informant has no preference for any variety of English to learn and use. This finding convincingly happens to be in line with the studies conducted by Gibb (1997, 1999), Kim (2007), Methitham (2009) and Scales et al. (2006) in that the mainstream varieties (AmE and BrE) were preferred most favorably.

3.2 The informants’ preferences for varieties of English: Concentric circles

From the preliminary data shown above, it can be put in a nutshell that the two mainstream varieties (AmE and BrE) surpassingly penetrated into the informants’ choice of accent models. To shed more light on the understanding of the informants’ preferences, there was a need to further investigate the extent that native and non-native varieties were prioritized by them and what reasons lied in the preferred varieties. To do so, the informants’ preferences as well as the reasons provided for their preferences were detailed and interpreted in terms of Kachru’s concentric circles so that clearer patterns of native and non-native priorities and their direct justifications (rationales) of the preferred varieties could be illustrated (Table 2).

Table 2: Thematic responses of the informants’ preferences as categorized by circles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Responses</th>
<th>Inner Circle</th>
<th>Outer Circle</th>
<th>Expanding Circle</th>
<th>Any Variety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard English</td>
<td>13 (25.00%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International English</td>
<td>8 (15.38%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligible English</td>
<td>5 (9.62%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 (7.69%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local English, My English</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (1.92%)</td>
<td>4 (7.69%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trendy English</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 (7.69%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vague comment</td>
<td>4 (7.69%)</td>
<td>3 (5.77%)</td>
<td>1 (1.92%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unanswered</td>
<td>3 (5.77%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (1.92%)</td>
<td>1 (1.92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>33 (63.46%)</td>
<td>4 (7.69%)</td>
<td>14 (26.92%)</td>
<td>1 (1.92%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2.1 Preference for the inner-circle varieties

The largest group of the informants (63.46%) identified inner-circle varieties of English as the most preferred accents that they wanted to learn and use. The typical three reasons as shared by many informants are detailed below.

Firstly, the majority of the informants (25%) tended to politically associate NS Englishes with some positive social and political dimensions, status and linguistic criteria. Implicitly, such descriptors as ‘Oxford English’, ‘educated English’, ‘high-class English’, ‘prestigious English’, ‘Queen’s English’ and ‘smart English’, that the informants provided as rationales for their preferred English accents, were coded into the family theme of “standard English”. This theme lies in the assumptions that English is tied up with the concept of possessing native-like competence and the ideology of social, political and linguistic hegemonization. As two of them remarked (the preferred English variety and informant code are provided in parenthesis):

*The most standard and best accent is unquestionably the Queen’s English. (British English, informant 37)*

*I want to be able to speak like the Prime Minister Abhisit because he speaks smart English (Oxford English). (British English, informant 2)*

This could be explained by the fact that social prestige may play a key role in making these informants adhere to the so-called standard inner-circle varieties. To elaborate, these informants tended to consider the inner-circle Englishes as the most pleasant or prestigious varieties basically owing to the imposition of cultural norms (the Imposed Norm Hypothesis) (Giles et al., 1974). The reason that certain varieties enjoy high social status is clearly the result of high status social groups or elites who speak those varieties. In the present study, the informants referred to i.e., the Prime Minister, a former Oxford graduate, the UK Queen and American people. Thanks to their high social rank, their spoken varieties tended to be perceived as ‘prestigious’ and, therefore, attitudinally coded as ‘standard’.

Secondly, eight of the informants (15.38%) who opted for inner-circle varieties tended to associate their preferred accents with “international English”. And this was used as the theme to describe these informants’ rationales. In detail, they believed that when real-life or international communication is involved, the most suitable accent models for this milieu should be that of the native-speaker varieties. As two of them articulated:
I prefer British English because it is used internationally and very suitable for real-life use. (British English, informant 52)

When we speak English with native speakers we must use international/real English accent that native speakers use. (American English, informant 21)

Drawing from these informants’ responses, it’s interesting to note that the term “international English”, in the eye of informants, seems to be synonymous with the Inner Circle only (especially with the two mainstream varieties: AmE and BrE). Put most simply being “native” equates being “international”. Furthermore, they also credited using native-like accent to be something authentic in real-life communication. In this sense, the findings seem to conform to Matsuda (2000) that the Japanese learners perceived English as an international language but they did not believe that it belonged internationally.

Thirdly, five informants (9.62%) thought that their preferred NS varieties were intelligible, and this made them want to assimilate such varieties. Hence, this theme was coded as “intelligible English” and used to describe these informants’ rationales which imply their goals in learning and using inner-circle intelligible English models. In details, the informants tended to refer to their experiences and/or familiarity using English with native speakers whom they thought spoke intelligible English. As two of them remarked:

According to my experience with native speakers, this accent is the most intelligible accent. (Australian English, informant 27)

I like Ajarn James’ accent because he speaks clear English. (American English, informant 6)

The informants’ reasons seem to resonate with the universal assumption in English language learning across the globe that the most intelligible production of English or accent is the one uttered by a native speaker (Kirkpatrick, Deterding & Wong, 2008). Put most simply, being “native” warrants being “intelligible”. The reasons for this justification as reflected in the responses are clearly the informants’ experience with and/or familiarity with native speakers.

3.2.1 Preference for the expanding-circle varieties

The informants by 26.92% (second largest group) preferred the expanding-circle varieties to learn and use. The typical three reasons as shared by many informants are detailed below.
Firstly, ease of understanding (“intelligible English”) was provided as reason by the informants (7.69%) who preferred other expanding-circle varieties (e.g., Thai, Japanese and Chinese English) to learn and use. These informants mentioned that they didn’t have difficulty understanding these varieties, and therefore opted for such varieties. As two of them put it:

*From my experience, I think Japanese accent it is easier to understand than a native speaker’s accent. (Japanese English, informant 46)*

*Thai accent is OK, and it’s very easy to understand. (Thai English, informant 10)*

This finding seems to support a plethora of intelligibility-based research studies which demonstrate that NNS varieties are found to be more internationally intelligible than is normally assumed, being easier to understand than certain inner-circle varieties (e.g., Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2007; Hung, 2002; Kirkpatrick, Deterding & Wong, 2008). Speakers whose mother-tongue languages are syllable-timed (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Thai, French, Malaysian, etc.) are likely to find many syllable-timed non-native English accents more intelligible than stress-timed rhythm of inner-circle accents (e.g., American and British) (Hung, 2002). Thus, the so-called syllable-timed pronunciation features of NNS varieties that increase intelligibility may be the determining factor of the informants’ preferences for the expanding-circle Englishes.

Secondly, the informants (7.69%) who identified Thai English as their preferred accent tended to broadly stand out in the discourse on identity and ownership. That is to say, they seemed to label their English “my English”. This theme discusses the rationales advocated by the informants who didn’t find their Thai ways of pronunciation problematic but tended to perceive their own ways of speaking to be part of identity. As two of them stated:

*I am Thai and I want to speak English with Thai accent; there is nothing wrong with it. (Thai English, informant 4)*

*I want to learn and use Thai English accent because I don’t want to speak like a foreigner, and it’s not my English. (Thai English, informant 43)*

This finding clearly shows that these informants claimed the right of their own use of Thai English by constructing L1 identity through English: using English as a means to
express their Thainess. To elaborate, these informants preferred not to orient themselves toward native-speaker norms or conventional wisdom of trying to achieve native-speaker likeness but tended to perceive their own ways of speaking to be part of identity. The informants’ justification towards their accented English seems to echo Strevens’ (1980) stance that local accent can be used as a desirable means of voicing their social and local identity.

Thirdly, the informants (7.69%) who preferred certain expanding-circle varieties (e.g., Korean, Japanese, Russian and Chinese English) as accent models seemed to be inspired by global trends on pop culture and economy. The informants’ positions towards the aforementioned Englishes should relatively be conceptualized as “trendy English.” As three of them stated:

Korean trend is now rampant, I often watch my Idols on Youtube and when they speak English I think it’s very lovely. (Korean English, informant 7)

I actually want to learn both Russian and Chinese accents because they are going to be the next world’s economic powers and we will need to communicate with people from these countries a lot in the future. (Russian English, informant 47)

China is growing very fast and its populations are everywhere. (Chinese English, informant 16)

The current dominance of East Asian pop culture (e.g., Korean and Japanese music, drama series and movies) in Thai media and the evidence of considerably high economic strength of new economic giants (e.g., the Russian Federation and China) seem to contribute to what makes the informants hold preferable attitudes towards the aforementioned English accents. Graddol (2006) and Kirkpatrick (2007) regard this phenomenon as the shift in linguistic preference and prestige as determined by economic, social and cultural change. To elaborate, these shifting trends are reflected in the present study as follows; first, English learners appeared to be attitudinally gravitated to a certain English variety (e.g., Korean or Japanese English) where its pop culture is gaining substantial momentum in media. Learners may develop likeability attitudes towards people in the target culture and may want to integrate themselves into the community where a variety is spoken. Second, the learners tended to prefer a certain variety (e.g., Russian or Chinese English) where its political or economic motion is gaining recognition in the world arena. This view, to a certain extent, shares an established mutual relation to Graddol’s (1997) assumption that a language (but
accent in the present study) that is spoken in countries with great financial resources is likely to be perceived more attractively than one with no access to remunerative markets.

4.3.2.3 Preference for the outer-circle varieties

The smallest group of informants (7.69%) identified outer-circle varieties of English as the most preferred accents that they wanted to learn and use. In fact, there were only two varieties being selected: Singaporean and Malaysian English. Due to the heterogeneity and ambiguity of the obtained data, it was not possible to code these responses into themes. However, there is one case worth mentioning.

One of the informants who preferred Malaysian English accent expressed the need to use such an accent to mainly communicate with Malaysian people (tourists) in the local context. Thus, Malaysian English in this sense functions as “local English”. As she put it:

*I want to learn Malaysian English because there are many Malaysian tourists in Hat Yai. (Malaysian English, informant 19)*

This reason reflects the learner’s sociolinguistic needs outside of classroom (Matsuda, 2003a) which takes place in a local context where speakers use English as a lingua franca to communicate with target speakers who speak that variety (Malaysian English).

Since the informants’ vague comments provided for preferred varieties of English were not illustrated in the above discussions, a few examples of vague comments are given below to provide greater clarity of the informants’ rationales:

*I don’t know why. (American English, informant 8)*

*British people always speak like Americans. (British English, informant 13)*

*Singaporean people can speak English. (Singaporean English, informant 14)*

4. Conclusion and suggestions

On the basis of the findings presented in the previous section, some remarkable points were discussed as the followings. This study confirms a good many studies in the literature that the majority of learners favor NS Englishes (63.46%) in terms of learning and functional accent models. In addition, the findings also manifest that American and British English have emerged as the two unrivaled models since the discrepancy in percentages between the informants choosing these varieties and other varieties were considerably high. Given the
inner-circle varieties being described as standard, prestigious international and intelligible, it may be assumed that inner-circle Englishes have been firmly established and deeply held as unquestionable linguistic and/or pronunciation standards in language classroom. However, this trend of the promotion of English does not seem to bear fruits in the contexts where English functions as a language for lingua franca communication or as an international language. As Yamuna Kachru supports that the orientations leased out or empowered by only NSs “fail to take account of the multilingual reality of communities…and the reality of more transient, interacting groups throughout the world” (1997, as cited in Jenkins, 2006: 145).

I suggest, then, that there’s the need to expose English learners to varieties of English accent so that it helps create the sense of tolerance of linguistic diversity as well as enrich their linguistic repertoires when they cross-culturally interact with interlocutors from different L1 backgrounds. That is to say, exposure to varieties of English is essential for EIL learners because it gets them ready for the messier world where people speak “Englishes” rather than “English” (Matsuda, 2003). However, I do not finalize that NS models should be completely banned in English classroom. NS models are still good as a point of reference (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994) or as models for those who wish to learn EFL in order to identify themselves with native speakers in an inner-circle environment. In light of this, they can celebrate the choice of model they have chosen and aim for their specific goals.

Given that learners are awarded the freedom of choice to learn and use NS models, we should not forget that there are also a certain amount of the learners or one third of informants in the present study (34.62%, outer and expanding circles combined) who do not want to learn and use inner-circle Englishes. So, their voices must also be heard. Thus classroom pedagogy that’s based on the mainstream approach that adheres to NS “scholastic pursuits” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003: 542) doesn’t seem relevant for these learners. This finding has also challenged the traditional ELT assumption that English learners (who most of their lives learn and use English in Thailand) have to master native-speaker likeness or native-like accent in order to use English effectively in both intra- and international contexts. Rather, these learners want to learn and use other types of English that allow them to glorify their identity, follow the global trends, adapt to suit their needs, claim the ownership and so on. In this case, students have no desire to assimilate the way native speakers use the language or have no feeling of becoming native speakers. Thus, the language pedagogy “must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003: 544).
Last but not least, when teachers are to set teaching objectives that are realistic or attainable for their students, it is wise that they take Cook’s (2002) words into consideration, as he says: In the end “the students will become L2 users, not native speakers” (p. 336).

5. Recommendations for future research

The current study is limited in not shedding light on the relationship between the informants’ preferences for varieties of English and what kinds of actual speaking activities the informants are performing and with whom the informants are generally using English with in their daily lives. All these issues would prove an interesting agenda for research since it may help generate a clearer picture of whether their preferences are consistent with the functional realities, sociolinguistic realities in Thailand and the extent to which they adopt EIL to their uses of English.

6. References


