Attitudes of Thai University Students towards ASEAN Englishes

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, when people with different first languages have to communicate to one another, they will absolutely need a particular language as a bridge to be connected. In ASEAN community, non-native varieties of English have developed to serve the communicative purpose. Undeniably, ASEAN Englishes is distinct from the native models. Apart from the ability to communicate in English, attitude is a significant factor that makes a non-native variety to be accepted. Dubiously, how people’s attitudes towards non-native accents could have an effect on the communication without depending on the native models. In this research, we collected audio-record files of 10 participants from 10 countries in the region. The participants were required to talk about a similar topic about their countries of origin. Thai participants were recruited to listen to an audio-recording, and respond to a questionnaire. Findings reveal Thais’ attitudes towards the different English accents from 10 countries and will indicate the possibility of using non-native English variety as means of the communication among ASEAN countries.

Keywords: Non-native variety, ASEAN Englishes, attitudes, accents
Background

As the ten ASEAN countries do not share exactly the same language, a language to be used as the contact language is needed. English seems to be the most convenient and neutral language for this purpose since it has long been used as an international language worldwide. For this reason, English is chosen to be a contact language used among the 10 countries.

According to Kachru’s three concentric circles (1992), the speakers of English in ASEAN can be divided into two categories – the outer and the expanding circles. The outer circle consists of former colonial countries which are Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines. English in the outer circle is used as a second or official language of these countries. Meanwhile, the expanding circle refers to countries where English is used as a foreign language.

Since all English speakers in the ten ASEAN countries are non-native speakers, it is not unusual for different accents to emerge. With the deviation from native norms, the accents can possibly be criticized. Thus, language attitudes towards the ten ASEAN English accents appear to be a significant entity for criticism.

Language attitudes

In a sociolinguistic point of view, there is an interaction between language and society and how people use language as a social phenomenon. The speaker of non-native English accents, which have its own distinctive features, might encounter social judgment. Regardless of the ability of the speaker, a speech can be judged by people’s attitudes towards the accent as there is “a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols” (Hogg, & Vaughan, 2005, p.150).

Language attitudes play important roles in the acceptance and understanding of a particular accent. The allusion from related studies to language and attitudes has shed some light on a significant effect on people’s intelligibilities. For example, Holmes (2008) indicates that people tend to understand better when they listen to the speakers they admire. Even though the attitudes towards the admired speaker is important, the attitudes towards variations of people’s accents should also be put on the spot. Assuming that language and attitudes are closely connected (Meyerhoff, 2011), people’s preferences might be one of the factors affecting intelligibility and comprehensibility of...
a particular English accent. The study of Labov (2006), focusing on the [r]-pronunciation, claims that people categorize social classes of others based on their language and accent. In fact, there is a little effect on the intelligibility of the speech with or without [r]-pronunciation (Holmes, 2008). However, disregarding the spoken content, the result of the study shows that the [r]-pronunciation is considered as a good speech according to people’s attitudes in a certain society, New York. Nonetheless, the effect of the attitudes on the accent can be distinctly seen from the study of Rubin (1992), investigating factors affecting students’ judgments of teaching assistants. The study result reveals that “the more foreign the accent was judged, the lower the rating of teacher effectiveness” (Rubin, 1992). To put it differently, people’s attitudes towards the accent are more superior to the actual content of a speech. A profound suggestion can be found in Roh’s study (2010), assessing Korean students’ attitudes towards three English varieties – American English, Filipino English and Korean English. The study advocates that people’s attitudes towards the equality of language varieties should be re-concerned in a bid to improve students’ level of intelligibility. Thus, it might be claimed that language attitudes are one of the significant factors affecting people’s intelligibility of, especially, an international conversation.

The attitudes does not only show its bright side, but it might also be the barrier of language acquisition. Proving by the study of Al-Mansour (2014) on the effect of attitudes on foreign language acquisition, students with positive attitudes towards Arabic language show better performance in terms of pronunciation and accent than those with the negative ones. In other words, the positive attitudes towards an accent can lead to the better understanding and acquiring of the accent.

Concerning the effects of attitudes towards the accents, English language teaching (ELT) in Thailand should keep the students informed of the attitudes towards ASEAN English accents. According to the study of Jindapitak and Teo (2012), Thai students’ favorable attitudes fall into the native-speaker model rather than the nonnative one. However, the study of Jenkins (2000) suggests that “all English language learners need to be prepared for future encounters with speakers of varieties of English that differ from their own”.

To be promptly ready for ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), teachers of English should play an important role in raising their students’ awareness of non-native varieties and simultaneously adjusting their attitudes towards them. Therefore, the concept of prioritizing the native-speaker model in ELT should be reconsidered as
proposed in the study of Jindapitak and Teo (2013). The expected effect of the attitudes towards the language is that Thai students would be able to understand the ten different accents and communicate effectively with people from the ASEAN countries. To prepare for such a paradigmatic shift in ELT in Thailand, this paper aims to investigate students’ attitudes towards different ASEAN English accents.

**Collection of people’s attitudes**

“An attitude can be viewed from various dimensions and its relation with language can also be measured in many ways.” (Wu, 2005). To conduct a research about attitudes to language, the most important thing to be considered is that real attitudes can only be observed through the behavior reflection. Therefore, the collection of data about attitudes towards language can be problematic and challenging (Holmes, 2008). According to Holmes (2008), three main methods are brought up for researchers to conduct the data on attitudes to language namely; direct observation, direct questions and indirect measures.

The simplest method is direct observation. The use of this method provides a chance for the researcher to act as an observer. The data about people’s attitudes, language changes in progress can be gathered from newspaper, magazine, radio, TV, or on the internet. The method helps puzzle out the area for further investigation. However, the research result rarely represents the research area. The study called ‘Language and Societal Attitudes: A Study of Malawi’s ‘New Language’” (Moto, 2001) is one of the most distinguished studies, using the direct observation method. The research was conducted by carefully observing the new language in Malawi in order to identify what stage the language was on in the society. The result of the study can be used for further investigation in terms of education and language policy in Malawi. However, this research does not provide the in-depth information about the attitudes people have for the new language.

The direct question technique can solve the problem that the direct observation has as the researcher can ask yes/no questions or open questions to a large number of participants from the target population they want to conduct the research from. Only one complication is that the true attitudes of people are hardly elicited. The study of Kraus about ‘Language attitudes of Québécois students towards le françias québécois standard and le franco–québécois’ (2006) demonstrates the use of three methods to
collect the data. In this paper, the focus is only on the direct question method. The researcher used a questionnaire to rate the varieties of French. The research result clearly evinces the dominant role of le françias québécois standard. To avoid the problem in revealing the true attitudes of people, the third method – the indirect method – was applied in this study.

The most sophisticated indirect method – matched guise – is used to expose the attitudes in the participants’ answers. Participants’ attitudes is subconsciously elicited by using the same speaker, talking about the same thing in two different ways. Participants have to listen and evaluate the personality of the speaker by using the speech rating scale. Without recognizing that the same speaker is speaking with two varieties, the participants are being deceived into rating the speech. This method helps elicit true attitudes of the participants and it clearly answers the research questions.

The study of Kraus (2006) shows the use of a verbal guise test, in which the matched guise technique is applied. The participants were asked to listen to a set of audio records from 10 speakers reading the same text. After that, the participants had to match the speakers with six provided professions. The result of the study implies the real attitudes of people that le franco–québécois is in the same level of prestige as le françias québécois standard. Thus, concerning the effectiveness of the indirect method, the research team decided to apply this method to collect the data.

**Research Methodology**

**Research Participants**

The participants in this study are 100 freshmen; 70 are from King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) and 30 are from Chulalongkorn University (CU). The criteria used to recruit the participants are shown as follows:

1. The participant is a first year undergraduate student.
2. The participant must not have English as their major area.

**Instruments**

Two instruments were used for collecting data which were audio recordings and a questionnaire.
Audio recordings
The audio records were used in order to represent the ASEAN English accents. Representatives of these ten accents were speakers from the following member countries; Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand. The speakers were given a topic and they could prepare the content before they made a recording of their speech. To represent the accent of each country, the speakers were selected by using the following criteria:

1. The speaker must never live in English speaking countries.
2. The speaker must at least hold a diploma, or a bachelor’s degree.
3. The speaker must not have English as their major area.

Questionnaire
A set of questionnaire was used to collect data of the participants’ attitudes towards each speaker from the ten ASEAN countries. The questionnaire consisted of 14 items, adapted from Holmes (2008). For each of the items, a five-point rating scale was provided so as to elicit the participants’ answers.

Data Collection
The following procedures were employed for data collection:

1. 100 first year undergraduate students from two universities were recruited based on the aforementioned criteria.
2. All the participants were asked to listen to the audio record of 10 ASEAN English speakers from 10 ASEAN countries talking under a similar topic.
3. The participants completed the questionnaire after listening to each speaker.

Data Analysis
To carry out the data analysis, the gathered data from the questionnaire were sorted and analyzed by the researchers. Then, the scores for central tendency estimate (mean, mode, and median) were computed. Since the data set showed its normal distribution, the mean was thus chosen for the interpretation. Since the five-point rating scale was used in the questionnaire, the interpretation of mean scores should also fall into five categories with equal intervals. Therefore, the mean scores of 1-1.8, 1.81-2.6, 2.61-3.4, 3.41-4.2 and 4.21-5 were sorted into five different categories, respectively.
Findings, discussion, and implication

Based on the total mean scores, the general attitudes of the Thai participants towards the ten ASEAN English accents can be interpreted as shown in Table 1. It can be seen that the participants felt neutral to most of the accents. Only three accents were rated differently. Lao English speaker was disliked, while Malaysian and Singaporean speakers were liked.

Table 1: General attitudes towards the ten ASEAN English accents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>BRN</th>
<th>BUR</th>
<th>CAM</th>
<th>IND</th>
<th>LAO</th>
<th>MAL</th>
<th>PHL</th>
<th>SG</th>
<th>THA</th>
<th>VIE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>3.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>like</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>like</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The seven neutral accents can be further divided into 4 subgroups based on the detailed information of the separate attitudinal items (Table 2). The first group includes the Indonesian accent. It is the accent that shows a sound combination of positive and neutral ratings, although its total mean score does not suggest it as a preferred accent. The second group consists of the accents that share a pattern of having a proportional combination of positive, neutral, and negative ratings. The accents classified into this group are Brunei, Burmese, and Vietnamese accents. However, by looking into details, the three accents do not seem to receive the same attitudinal judgments, except the fact that all of them were rated to sound highly educated but have less sense of humour. The third group includes the accents that were mostly rated neutral for all attitudinal items: Thai and Cambodian accents. The last group includes only the Filipino accent which shows a slightly equal combination of negative and neutral judgments.

The two preferred accents, Malaysian and Singaporean accents, gained positive ratings for most of the attitudinal items. The Singaporean speaker seemed to be liked in all dimensions except sincerity which was rated neutrally and sense of humour which was rated negatively. The Malaysian speaker seems to receive different detailed ratings from the Singaporean speaker. He was rated extremely high for being self-confident and fluent. A number of dimensions were rated neutral that are the quality of being pleasant, likeable, sincere, and friendly.
The Laotian accent was the only one rated as an unpreferred accent. It was rated negatively in most of the dimensions. The only three points that were rated quite fairly are the quality of being friendly, highly educated, and high job status.
### Table 2: Attitudes towards the ten ASEAN accents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>BRN Mean (SD)</th>
<th>BUR Mean (SD)</th>
<th>CAM Mean (SD)</th>
<th>IND Mean (SD)</th>
<th>LAO Mean (SD)</th>
<th>MAL Mean (SD)</th>
<th>PHL Mean (SD)</th>
<th>SG Mean (SD)</th>
<th>THA Mean (SD)</th>
<th>VIE Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Pleasant</td>
<td>2.83 (0.88)</td>
<td>2.58 (0.67)</td>
<td>2.53 (0.95)</td>
<td>2.54 (0.87)</td>
<td>1.89 (0.75)</td>
<td>3.32 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.39 (0.84)</td>
<td>3.61 (0.85)</td>
<td>2.86 (0.79)</td>
<td>3.16 (0.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Attractive</td>
<td>2.74 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.74 (0.79)</td>
<td>2.59 (1.01)</td>
<td>2.89 (0.84)</td>
<td>1.90 (0.72)</td>
<td>3.66 (0.88)</td>
<td>2.36 (0.80)</td>
<td>3.64 (0.84)</td>
<td>3.17 (0.84)</td>
<td>3.11 (0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Self-confident</td>
<td>3.40 (1.01)</td>
<td>3.37 (0.97)</td>
<td>2.92 (0.95)</td>
<td>3.67 (0.82)</td>
<td>2.04 (0.80)</td>
<td>4.53 (0.63)</td>
<td>2.56 (0.80)</td>
<td>4.09 (0.74)</td>
<td>3.30 (0.86)</td>
<td>3.30 (0.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Likeable</td>
<td>3.37 (0.75)</td>
<td>3.11 (0.67)</td>
<td>3.02 (0.87)</td>
<td>3.30 (0.71)</td>
<td>2.55 (0.71)</td>
<td>3.37 (0.84)</td>
<td>3.03 (0.73)</td>
<td>3.60 (0.73)</td>
<td>3.28 (0.82)</td>
<td>3.42 (0.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Fluent</td>
<td>3.57 (0.88)</td>
<td>3.09 (0.87)</td>
<td>3.16 (1.02)</td>
<td>3.67 (0.88)</td>
<td>2.02 (0.71)</td>
<td>4.66 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.98 (0.74)</td>
<td>4.37 (0.61)</td>
<td>3.10 (0.90)</td>
<td>3.65 (0.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Reliable</td>
<td>3.17 (0.77)</td>
<td>3.39 (0.76)</td>
<td>3.21 (0.77)</td>
<td>3.34 (0.67)</td>
<td>2.57 (0.81)</td>
<td>3.79 (0.71)</td>
<td>2.93 (0.71)</td>
<td>3.64 (0.70)</td>
<td>3.31 (0.85)</td>
<td>3.39 (0.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Sincere</td>
<td>3.5 (0.73)</td>
<td>3.38 (0.75)</td>
<td>3.16 (0.84)</td>
<td>3.56 (0.67)</td>
<td>2.93 (0.83)</td>
<td>3.37 (0.66)</td>
<td>3.12 (0.71)</td>
<td>3.44 (0.70)</td>
<td>3.43 (0.84)</td>
<td>3.48 (0.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Ambitious</td>
<td>2.62 (1.00)</td>
<td>3.46 (0.99)</td>
<td>2.61 (0.97)</td>
<td>3.35 (0.92)</td>
<td>2.35 (0.88)</td>
<td>3.98 (0.78)</td>
<td>2.6 (0.85)</td>
<td>3.46 (0.82)</td>
<td>2.82 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.92 (0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Friendly</td>
<td>3.63 (0.76)</td>
<td>3.16 (0.67)</td>
<td>3.27 (0.79)</td>
<td>3.62 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.96 (0.86)</td>
<td>3.41 (0.67)</td>
<td>3.29 (0.88)</td>
<td>3.63 (0.68)</td>
<td>3.57 (0.81)</td>
<td>3.51 (0.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Intelligent</td>
<td>3.20 (0.67)</td>
<td>3.67 (0.82)</td>
<td>3.22 (0.77)</td>
<td>3.71 (0.69)</td>
<td>2.87 (0.80)</td>
<td>4.07 (0.71)</td>
<td>3.01 (0.66)</td>
<td>4.00 (0.64)</td>
<td>3.17 (0.66)</td>
<td>3.56 (0.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Good sense of humour</td>
<td>2.26 (0.86)</td>
<td>2.17 (0.82)</td>
<td>2.03 (0.89)</td>
<td>2.87 (1.07)</td>
<td>1.84 (0.83)</td>
<td>2.59 (0.87)</td>
<td>2.1 (0.86)</td>
<td>2.60 (0.96)</td>
<td>2.50 (1.01)</td>
<td>2.46 (0.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Leadership skills</td>
<td>2.58 (0.89)</td>
<td>3.24 (0.82)</td>
<td>2.74 (0.92)</td>
<td>3.17 (0.74)</td>
<td>2.23 (0.81)</td>
<td>4.03 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.42 (0.83)</td>
<td>3.62 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.91 (0.83)</td>
<td>3.12 (0.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Highly educated</td>
<td>3.49 (0.72)</td>
<td>3.91 (0.74)</td>
<td>3.60 (0.74)</td>
<td>3.79 (0.77)</td>
<td>3.32 (0.70)</td>
<td>4.04 (0.67)</td>
<td>3.19 (0.67)</td>
<td>3.99 (0.67)</td>
<td>3.23 (0.78)</td>
<td>3.73 (0.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 High status job</td>
<td>3.13 (0.63)</td>
<td>3.57 (0.73)</td>
<td>3.19 (0.72)</td>
<td>3.40 (0.67)</td>
<td>2.85 (0.76)</td>
<td>3.86 (0.77)</td>
<td>3.04 (0.63)</td>
<td>3.87 (0.68)</td>
<td>3.16 (0.75)</td>
<td>3.49 (0.67)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The values represent the mean and standard deviation (SD) for each item across the ten ASEAN accents.
It is interesting to see from the findings of this study that the Thai participants’ attitudes towards the ten ASEAN accents are generally neutral. In most of the previous studies, the non-native accents are usually viewed less positively (Friedrich 2003; Jenkins, 2007; Matsuda, 2003; Shim, 2002). Even though the Thai participants in this study knew that all speakers were non-native, they did not strongly state any very negative reactions to any of them. Thus, this is a hopeful indicator showing that if ones regard attitudes as one important factor supporting successful communication, Thai people should not have many attitudinal problems in communicating with others in the ASEAN community. In other words, they tend to be open-minded to accept and adjust to other different English speakers.

By considering the accents of all the ASEAN speakers, it was found that all of them speak English with some deviations comparing to native speaking norms. However, the positive or negative attitude does not seem to relate to how close the accents are to those of the native speakers. Certainly, educated speakers from the outer circle speak English with more native-like accent than those from the expanding circle. Notwithstanding the native-like accent, the outer circle accents are not significantly more preferred than the expanding circle accents. Moreover, when taking a closer look at the pronunciation features, it was found that the most preferred accent in this study, Singaporean, contains a large amount of deviated pronunciation features. Meanwhile, the neutral rated accents like Brunei, Indonesian, and Burmese have only few different pronunciation features from the native models.

For a non-native speaker to be liked or disliked may not be attributed only to the accent. Definitely, if an accent is unintelligible, it might be poorly thought of. However, since all the speakers in this study possess an intelligible accent, being non-native like might not be a crucial influence on participants’ judgments. After listening to the recordings repeatedly, the researchers found that the main influence on the judgments might be how the speakers delivered the story. Although the speakers were asked to talk about the same topic, they had their freedom to compose the story. The more interesting story associated with the more enthusiastic speech leads to higher positive ratings. The Singaporean speaker, though delivering the speech with the strong Singaporean accent, had narrated the story respectively and attractively. On the other hand, the Brunei speaker, who speaks with the most native-like accent, spoke with a rather serious manner and the content was more formal.
The area of attitudes study can be very interesting. This current study was initiated with the assumption that the varieties of accents might have a strong effect on the attitudes of the listeners. In fact, the result is somewhat contradictory to what we have assumed. Further studies on factors (such as communication styles, strategies, and content composition) that truly have an impact on listeners’ attitudes should be conducted.

To broaden and deepen the area of study, additional research on comprehensibility and interpretability of the accents in the field of ASEAN Englishes should be conducted. The positive correlation of comprehensibility with attitudes towards speakers can be significantly found as shown in the study of Wilang and Teo (2012a). Also, some investigations on related factors of comprehensibility levels had already been done in the study of Wilang and Teo (2012b). However, more studies are needed to support their research results.

As for pedagogical implications, it should be noted that in teaching pronunciation, teachers who wish to prepare their students for ASEAN or international communication may not have to expect the students to master the native accents. In international communication, intelligible accents should be more important. As the findings of this study partly support, to speak English with non-native accents does not make the listeners, at least the Thai listeners, feel negatively towards the speakers unless it is unintelligible (the Laos speaker’s accent, which was rated a bit more negative than others, was quite difficult to understand). Furthermore, to help students be successful international English users, communication strategies should be emphasized in English language teaching as well.

References


