

## **An attempt to raise Thai students' awareness of *World Englishes* in a General English Program**

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### **Abstract**

As witnessed over three decades in the field of Applied Linguistics, the emergence of world Englishes (hereafter WE), thanks to the global spread of English, has prompted various scholars to call for the need to critically revise the ways in which teachers teach English. Specifically, practitioners have been encouraged to raise their students' awareness of WE. Examples of WE-informed curricula, modules, or lessons have been showcased by WE advocates from different parts of the world. However, most of these curricula, modules, and lessons are taught or delivered within TESOL teacher-education programs, leading some educators to question the relevance of WE to language learners. This paper showcases and evaluates critically how a WE-informed practitioner at one of the leading universities in Thailand attempts to inspire students enrolled in a General English program to develop respectful views of English language variation. Although the attempt has resulted in minor changes in students' views, it certainly highlights that the teaching of world Englishes to English language learners is far from an idealistic attempt.

**Keywords:** World Englishes, English as an International Language, General English program, adult learners, Thai Higher Education

### **Introduction**

It has been numerously established that, whether by force or by choice, English is one of the widely used languages for international exchanges in today's globalized economic and cultural arenas. This internationalization of the status of English is undoubtedly thanks to the exponential expansion of the language, leading to the pluralisation of its users and forms (Jenkins, 2015; Galloway & Rose, 2015). Hence, the fact that English has acquired the status of an international language, the view of English as a homogeneous language spoken exclusively by the so-called

'native-English speakers' has become irrelevant and anachronistic. A wealth of published works such as in the journal of *World Englishes* as well as *English Today* has explicitly documented the pluralising nature of English. Pedagogically, the teaching and learning of an international language needs to move beyond the teaching and learning of a single variety of language and culture from a particular speech community. The diversifying nature of English has led to various calls from scholars (e.g. Canaragarajah, 2015; McKay & Brown, 2016; Matsuda, 2017; Marlina, 2018) urging language educators to raise their learners' awareness of WE, to instill in them respectful attitudes towards varieties of English other than the two commonly taught varieties of American and British English, and most importantly to learn how to communicate across Englishes and cultures. Although there have been works (Marlina & Giri, 2014; Matsuda, 2014, 2017) that show how WE-informed educators attempt to respond to the aforementioned call, the response, echoing Rose's (2017) observation, is still relatively minimal, especially in the ASEAN region. This paper, therefore, aims to respond to the call made by scholars by showcasing and critically reflecting on how a WE-informed practitioner, one of the authors of this paper, at a leading university in Thailand attempts to inspire tertiary students enrolled in a General English course – English for Effective Communication (EEC) – to develop respectful views towards linguistic and cultural diversity. Prior to describing what this course is about, and evaluating the strengths and limitations of this course, the following explains the purpose of teaching a WE-informed course.

## **Purpose of teaching WE-informed course**

To justify our choice for developing or teaching a course that is informed by, as Kubota (2014) termed, 'anti-normative' paradigms like World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, Global Englishes, or English as an International Language, one potential criticism that we, as WE-informed course developers, anticipate that we are likely to face is that we simply wish to follow what has been regarded as 'fashionably trendy'. Specifically, in the teaching of the English language based on the aforementioned paradigms, there is a possibility of WE-informed course developers, educators, or advocates being seen as trying to be 'politically correct' or showing "a gesture to be inclusive and egalitarian" (Matsuda, forthcoming). Echoing the same view expressed by Matsuda (forthcoming), the reasons behind developing and/or teaching a WE-informed course are informed by our understanding and acceptance of the 'reality'. Apart from the reality highlighted in the earlier section of the paper, i.e. the dynamic

nature of the English language, there are other ‘realities’ that have driven us to see the need to raise Thai students’ awareness of World Englishes and to inspire them to learn to develop the ability to communicate across cultures.

Firstly, although the Kachruvian circle classifies Thailand as an Expanding Circle country where English functions primarily as a foreign language, English today is increasingly being used in various public domains of communication in the country particularly due to the rapid forces of globalization. The rapid spread of multinational companies, the communication and technology advancement, migration, and rapid movement of services, goods, and ideas around the world have increased the frequency of contact between people from different parts of the world and increased the exposure to different varieties of English (Mauranen, 2018). As observed by Canagarajah (2006), today’s social context is marked by the importance of “international involvement at diverse levels for economic and production enterprises as well as the porosity of national boundaries that allow people, goods, and ideas to flow easily between borders” (p.231). Thus, not only do today’s global citizens communicate with their fellow countrymen who may speak a similar variety of English, but also speakers of Englishes from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In Thailand specifically, Jindapitak and Teo (2013) observe that international tourism, multinational business operations, and academic collaborations have led to a significant increase in interactions between Thai speakers of English and speakers of English from various countries in the ASEAN region and the world. Therefore, a course that raises students’ awareness of the diversity of the English language is urgently needed in order to prepare students for this reality.

Secondly, from an employment perspective, the forces of globalization have also to a large extent changed the requirements for university graduates. Many graduates are required to demonstrate intercultural communication skills, familiarity with world Englishes, and mindsets or attitudes that can help them function competently in social and professional settings in which intercultural exchanges are relatively frequent (Briguglio, 2005; Singh & Shrestha, 2009; Crossman & Clarke, 2010). For example, Briguglio’s (2005) case study analyses of multinational companies in Malaysia and Hong Kong have shown that all graduates, upon completion of their study, are required to (1) know how to work with different world Englishes; (2) show acceptances of different accents in English as a lingua franca; and (3) develop accommodation strategies when faced with unfamiliar accents. Though there has not yet been much research done on graduates’ attributes in multinational companies in Thailand, calls for the need for Thai students to learn how to be interculturally and multidialectally competent have been made (please see Laopongharn & Sercombe, 2009;

Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016). Thus, a course that professionally develops graduates to demonstrate the aforementioned knowledge, attitudes, and skills is needed.

Finally, according to the Twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021) of Thailand, a linkage between national economic development and international cooperation has been in a focus in all the regions on the basis of mutual dependency, increasing more interactions between nations and regions. In addition, the Thailand 4.0 Policy has stressed the importance of people development and preparation for workforce market and global community in the present century (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2017). At the university level, thanks to the present economic and social changes, internationalization is part of the institution's mission as the number of international students and international programs are gradually increasing. In an attempt to align oneself with the mission, one of the authors 'internationalized' the course within the General English program that he is in charge of, aiming to enhance linguistic competence and critical thinking skills, and at the same time raise an awareness of WE, and the importance of intercultural communication skills. The following describes in detail what the course is about, and how he (Krich) attempted to incorporate the element of WE in the course on English for Effective Communication, which, from its name, may appear to be one that is based on a 'native-speaker' model.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Context: English for Effective Communication (EEC) course***

English for Effective Communication 1 is one of the compulsory modules within the General English program that is undertaken by first year undergraduate students from all majors in the university where the author (Krich) is based. This course aims to teach students to learn to develop and improve their general communication skills in English in today's globalization era where English functions as a tool for international communication. In this 15-session (180 minutes per session) course on Effective Communication, students are engaged in learning to develop both receptive skills (reading and listening) and productive skills (speaking and writing) in English. However, as a WE advocate, the author (Krich), at the time of revising this course, felt that teaching only the aforementioned skills was not consistent with the university's mission to internationalise its curriculum, and with the role of English in today's globalising Thailand.

**Table 1**  
**WE-oriented topics and assignments**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Assignment</b>
<p>Week 1: How do we start a conversation with people from other countries?</p>	<p>Students listen for specific information to the conversations between (1) Chilean and Thai participants at the meeting in Bangkok, and (2) Japanese and English tourists in Britain. Then, answer the questions. They are assigned to work in a group of four, thinking individually and sharing, in pairs and with a group, discussing how intelligible and comprehensible the English conversations between two NNES, and NNES and NES are. Each group shares their ideas in front of the class.</p>
<p>Week 2: What are the taboos in World's cultures?</p>	<p>Students listen to four phone calls made by Arabic, Indian, Spanish, Thai and English tourists for main ideas and summary regarding each countries' manners and etiquette. Then, answer the questions. They are asked to work in a group of four, thinking individually and sharing, in pairs and with a group, discussing how intelligible and comprehensible the English conversations of each speaker are (including NNES, and NES). Each group gives an oral presentation in front of the class.</p>
<p>Weeks 3-4: Which varieties of English are you familiar with?</p>	<p>Students watch five video clips of five NNES from Malaysia, Germany, India, and Thailand talking about their professions for main ideas and summary. Then, they answer the questions. They are assigned to work in a group of four. Each of them is given a task sheet and has to respond to each question after watching the five video clips. Then, each group will discuss which varieties of English they are familiar with, and shares their perceptions about those varieties' uniqueness, and how intelligible and comprehensible those varieties of English are in front of the class.</p>
<p>Weeks 5-6 : Which varieties of English are intelligible and comprehensible?</p>	<p>Students watch three speakers (i.e. Indian, Korean American and English) in the two video clips for main ideas and specific information. The first clip is a small talk between English and Korean people who were born and grown up in the US. The other one is an interview with an Indian scholar about intercultural awareness. Each of them is asked to do a test of intelligibility and comprehensibility. Then, each group discusses which of the three speakers is most intelligible and comprehensible, and also shares their perceptions about those speakers' intelligibility and comprehensibility in front of the class.</p>
<p>Weeks 7-8: What are cultural similarities and differences between you and me?</p>	<p>Students work in a group of four. Each group chooses only one country, and the country should be selected from different continents. Then, they will individually look for the information of the selected country regarding do's and don'ts, alternative medication, unusual events or festivals, natural disasters, and local services. After that, they will compare the information to their own country to develop a script for an oral presentation presenting cultural similarities and differences of the selected country and Thailand, reflecting their understanding of intercultural awareness. Then, present their topic in front of the class, and discussing how intelligible and comprehensible English of their classmates (Their own English) is.</p>

Motivated by his desire for consistency, he revamped the course with the following aims that students will hopefully achieve upon completion of the course:

1. To be able to listen and read for main ideas and specific details.
2. To be able to deliver an effective presentation on various topics.
3. To use basic language structures accurately and appropriately for internationally communicative purposes.
4. To apply vocabulary relevant to various contexts.
5. To express confidently and critically one's personal views on English language variation.

In order to achieve the above aims, the course content was divided into two compulsory sections, namely 'regular section' and 'World Englishes section'. The former equips students with knowledge of language (grammar and vocabulary) and communication skills (receptive and productive skills) in which the prescribed textbook called *Top Notch: English for Today's World* (Saslow & Ascher, 2015) is used. The latter, through various learning activities with specific themes on World Englishes and Intercultural Communication (please see table 1), raises their awareness of World Englishes and the need to learn to be interculturally competent. There are no specific prescribed readings for this section as there has not yet been a WE-informed textbook that is appropriate for students at the chosen university. Thus, the author (Krich) had to rely on videos from youtube in order to expose students to different cultures and Englishes.

### ***Evaluation of the course***

As it was the first time to incorporate elements of World Englishes (WE) and Intercultural Communication in the existing General English course at the chosen university, we were interested in exploring the efficacy of such course from students' perspectives. Specifically, we wished to investigate, as curiously anticipated by WE advocates, the extent to which the topics and activities have influenced students' attitudes towards English language variation. Though there have been similar studies (see Suzuki, 2011; Chang, 2014; Galloway & Rose, 2014; Wang, 2017) evaluating the efficacy of EIL-oriented course in influencing students' attitudes towards WE, they are mostly from East Asian contexts, such as Japan for both Suzuki (2011) and Galloway & Rose, (2014); and Taiwan for Chang (2014) and Wang (2017). Since there has not been much research in Thai context, the present study aims to make a modest contribution to the ongoing conversations in the field.

Employing purposive sampling, we managed to recruit a group of thirty undergraduate students majoring in Finance, enrolled in the EEC course to participate in the evaluation of the course. Females (73.33%) outnumbered males (26.67%). At the time of data collection, the majority of them did not have any opportunity to stay and/or study in other countries where English is used as a first (e.g. the US, the UK, Australia etc.) or second language (e.g. Singapore, the Philippines etc.).

To explore their views, two research instruments were used namely, questionnaires and diary. Pre-and post-teaching questionnaires were developed in order to investigate the attitudes of students towards varieties of English, native English speakers (NES), non-native English speakers (NNES) and Thai speakers. They were in a five-point Likert Scale format, ranging from one (Strongly disagree) to five (Strongly agree), and comprised of three parts, which included demographic information in the first part, and the other parts were the two aspects (i.e. attitudes toward varieties of English, and attitudes towards NES, NNES, and Thai speakers) which were adapted from Choi (2007) and Natiladdanon and Thanavisuth (2014). The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the employed questionnaire was .872, indicating that the questionnaire is relatively effective in generating insights into their views towards the English language.

As they were engaged in learning about World Englishes and Intercultural Communication, they were asked, at the end of the lesson, to write a diary on their reactions to the key messages conveyed through the WE-focused topics and activities. The data generated from this instrument has provided us with further insights into their views.

## **Findings**

In this section, the results from the questionnaires are reported, and followed by their post-WE content reflective diary. The statistical analysis of the students' overall attitudes towards world Englishes before and after participating in the course is neither overly encouraging nor mortifyingly disappointing (see table 2). In other words, their attitudes towards English language variation did not, unsurprisingly, change dramatically even after having participated in a 15-session course on WE and Intercultural Communication.

One possible explanation for the neutrality is that the students were still unable to decide whether to strongly agree or disagree with various competing ideological standpoint about 'Standard' English, 'legitimate' accents of English, and ownership of English underlying the questionnaires after studying in a relatively short and intensive course on WE and Intercultural Communication. This similarly echoes findings from previous

studies (Chang, 2014; Ali, 2015; Wang, 2017). However, a closer analysis of the questionnaire and reflective diary reveals that there are certain views that have, to some extent, changed; and there are others that, naturally, the students still struggled to change.

**Table 2**  
**Overall Pre- and Post-Teaching Mean Scores**

Aspect	Pre-teaching			Post-teaching		
	Mean	SD	Level	Mean	SD	Level
1. Varieties of English	3.23	.690	Neutral	3.27	.810	Neutral
- Standard English	3.21	.828	Neutral	3.13	1.005	Neutral
- Thai English	3.25	.856	Neutral	3.45	.744	Neutral
2. Accents of NES, NNES, and Thai speakers	3.17	.764	Neutral	3.30	.783	Neutral

### *American/British English vs Thai English*

The overall mean score of their attitudes towards varieties of English has not revealed much change in their attitudes after completing the EEC course. However, a closer analysis of table 3 reveals that although the participants still believed that British or American English is a legitimate standard variety of English, their awareness of WE has, to some extent, prompted them to re-think their view towards the US or the UK being the exclusive owners of the English language. A neutral attitude was evident in the table when asked whether or not Thai English should have the same equal and legitimate recognition as American/British English. Despite of this, the students, surprisingly, felt 'more' ashamed of their Thai accent and agreed to 'get rid of it' after being made aware of world Englishes. One possible explanation of this is either the absence of a topic on how language organically evolves/changes or a large number of YouTube videos in which various accents are palely imitated and thus interpreted as objects of laughter. This might have motivated them more to learn to emulate the UK or US English accents.

### *NSE, NNSE, and Thai Accents*

As expected, a dramatic change of students' attitudes towards accents of NES, NNES and Thai speakers was rarely observed.

**Table 3**  
**Comparison of Mean Scores of attitudes towards varieties of English**

Varieties of English	Pre-teaching			Post-teaching			Remark
	Mean	SD	Level	Mean	SD	Level	
<b>Standard English</b>							
1. Standard English is British or American English.	4.27	.640	Strongly agree	4.00	.947	Agree	Decreased*
2. English belongs to the UK or the USA.	3.37	1.033	Agree	3.07	1.311	Neutral	Decreased*
3. It is British or American speakers of English who have right to decide how English should be.	2.47	1.306	Neutral	2.50	1.225	Neutral	Same
4. I am ashamed of my Thai (local) accent and try to get rid of it when I speak English	3.40	1.037	Neutral	3.20	1.157	Agree	Increased*
5. If English is used differently from British or American English, it must be wrong.	2.53	1.279	Neutral	2.33	1.241	Neutral	Same
<b>Thai English</b>							
6. I have heard of World Englishes.	3.10	1.269	Neutral	3.67	.884	Agree	Increased*
7. Thai English (my local variety of English) should be recognized and stand alongside British or American English.	3.37	.889	Neutral	3.37	.928	Neutral	Same
8. I am proud of my Thai accent when I speak English.	3.57	1.104	Agree	3.43	.898	Agree	Same
9. Thai English (my local variety of English) is used differently from British or American English. It should be learned by foreigners, especially the native speakers of English who want to communicate with Thai (my local) people in English.	2.97	1.159	Neutral	3.13	1.224	Neutral	Same
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3.23</b>	<b>.690</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>3.27</b>	<b>.810</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Same</b>

**Table 4**  
**Comparison of Mean Scores of Attitudes towards Accents of NES, NNES and Thai speakers**

Accents of NES, NNES and Thai speakers	Pre-teaching			Post-teaching			Remark
	Mean	SD	Level	Mean	SD	Level	
1. It is important for me to sound like a NES.	3.77	.898	Agree	3.80	.805	Agree	Same
2. When I am speaking to another NNES, it is important for me that he or she should have a native-like accent.	3.03	1.066	Neutral	3.17	1.109	Neutral	Same
3. My English accent is intelligible when I speak English with NNES	3.17	1.085	Neutral	3.17	1.019	Neutral	Same
4. My English accent is intelligible when I speak English with NES	3.23	1.165	Neutral	3.17	.874	Neutral	Same
5. NES always understands my English accent.	3.20	1.064	Neutral	3.10	.959	Neutral	Same
6. NNES always understands my English accent.	3.23	1.040	Neutral	3.23	.971	Neutral	Same
7. My English accent is excellent.	2.87	1.196	Neutral	2.67	1.028	Neutral	Same
8. My English accent is close to NES accents.	2.83	1.147	Neutral	2.60	.968	Neutral	Same
9. When I listen to NNES, I always pay attention to his or her accent.	3.17	1.117	Neutral	3.67	.922	Agree	Increased*
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3.17</b>	<b>.764</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>3.30</b>	<b>.783</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Same</b>

As observed in Table 4, the students, unsurprisingly, still believed in the importance of sounding like NES speakers when speaking English, though at the same time they displayed uncertainty about how 'close' their own accent was to NES accents, or how 'good' it is. Their reflective diary during one of the WE sessions, however, indicates their awareness of Englishes spoken by NNES speakers and their willingness to learn to understand those varieties. As asserted by some of the students in their reflective diaries:

*I am opened for those different accents which are not NES accents, and was able to tell those accents apart. (S1)*

*Now I know which accents I could understand clearly and which one not. After this, I will practice listening to more NNES accents for better understanding. (S2)*

What is even more encouraging is, after completing the WE-oriented activities, students have realized how accent naturally develops. Some perceived that one, particularly NNES, naturally ‘picks up’ any accent, depending on where he or she grows up. One of the participants was relatively critical towards a reified view of accent as being a geographically bound linguistic system:

*Having a particular accent, either NES or NNES, does not relate to your nationality or ethnic. The environment that one grows up and an attempt to have such accent are key factors.*

In terms of intelligibility, the statistical analysis has shown that they were relatively uncertain whether their own English was intelligible when interacting with both NNES and NES. However, one interesting point after being engaged in the WE-oriented activities is that they agreed to pay more attention to NNES accents when interacting with NNES. This does not necessarily mean that they would not pay attention when interacting with NES especially those from the US or the UK. EEC students are familiar with American or British English as these two are widely taught varieties of English and are widely used in international movies or pop songs, unlike varieties of English used by NNES. Therefore, the students felt that the course, to some extent, has alerted them to the need to be fully prepared to listen to accents of Englishes to which they are not accustomed. The fact that they have become aware of the interactions in English is predominantly between NNES, they tend to become open to NNES accents and learn to listen without any prejudice. One lesson that students have learned from a session on the intelligibility and comprehensibility, indicated in their reflective diary, is that they did not experience many struggles in understanding messages conveyed by NNES as many of these speakers “*speak with similar accent to [them]*”. Overall, it can be suggested that, like Galloway and Rose (2014), WE-oriented activities in which students are engaged in listening to various varieties of English have to some extent prompted them to develop open-mindedness towards unfamiliar varieties of English. Although the attitudes in the post-WE session were not significantly different from those of in the pre-WE session, we believe that prompting students to experience ‘cognitive disequilibrium’ is perhaps better than not prompting at all.

## Conclusion and food-for-thought

The present article has critically examined an attempt of a WE-informed practitioner from one leading university in Thailand to raise Thai students' awareness of WE and the importance of intercultural communication and to develop respectful attitudes towards the diversity of the English language (including their own). Since WE-oriented ELT materials are still relatively minimal (Rose, 2017), the practitioner has used various online materials to give students enough prompt to critically visit, reflect on, and hopefully change their existing assumptions on the English language, its use, and its speakers. As indicated in the slight change in the post-teaching score reported in the course evaluation section, there seemed to be a moment in which the students did question the view of English being exclusively owned by the so-called 'native English' speakers and did display the willingness to learn to understand other varieties of English. However, the results of having studied in a 15-session course on WE and Intercultural Communication were in general not overwhelmingly glowing. Similar to findings in other previous studies (Suzuki, 2011; Ali, 2015), students still struggled to be on the same page as the ideological discourses promoted by WE scholars, and displayed attitudes or views that may be interpreted as supportive of the native-speakerism ideology or, as Kachru (1992) termed, attitudinal sins. In response to this, numerous studies that explore the instructional outcomes of a WE-oriented course have suggested that students should spend more time studying WE in order to overcome the struggle. However, we question whether studying a WE-oriented course for a longer period of time guarantees a full acceptance and internalization of WE ideologies. A longitudinal and large scale empirical work that explores students' experiences of studying a 3-year WE-oriented program has proven that it is unrealistic (see Marlina, 2018). By saying this, we do not intend to suggest that it is infeasible to inspire students to learn to develop respectful views towards WE.

It is feasible if WE-inspired educators can continue to view the struggles not as attitudinal sins, but as "*natural* responses to a perspective that encourages its followers to 'swim against the current' that has been flowing in one direction for a very long time" (Marlina, 2014, p.15). As Canagarajah (1993) concurs, students/teachers do not leave behind them at the classroom door discourses that they have heard and developed from their social relations, their rural upbringings, or their relationships to their parents; instead, they bring them in with them. As they encounter different discourses (in this case, WE discourses), "words from the past that echo in our minds as we converse with one another, the routines that we follow in order to participate in institutional settings, the communities or social

networks to which we belong” (Doecke & Kostogriz, 2008, p.82) are used as frameworks to evaluate the extent to which these new discourses make sense. When the students in the EEC course encountered competing and clashing multiple discourses (WE discourses and perhaps the deeply-rooted discourses that promote native-speaker supremacy), they naturally experienced struggle to come to terms with the anti-normative discourses of WE. In order for students to understand or perhaps develop an understanding of the WE discourses, students need to first experience these struggles or as we said earlier, cognitive disequilibrium. In fact, in a context of teaching and learning, “the social interactions that are most effective in promoting learning are those that are filled with tension and conflict” (Freedman & Ball, 2004, p.6). Therefore, from the aforementioned perspective, we believe that we have, to some extent, been successful in putting students in the ongoing pathway of learning to be open towards World Englishes and the perspectives it advocates.

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