

Research Article

COMPARING FORMER ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY OF THAILAND STUDENTS' ASPIRATIONS TO ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION MODELS WHILE AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL WITH THEIR EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION MODELS AFTER GRADUATION

Valentin Valentinov Tashev*

Faculty of Liberal Arts, Kaya University, Republic of Korea

*E-mail: valentinetashev@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The overall objective of this study was to examine the relationship between former Assumption University of Thailand (AU) students' aspirations to English pronunciation models at the university level and in general, their daily exposure to English pronunciation models in a post-university environment, at work, and for socializing purposes after graduation. More precisely, this study tried to compare students' aspirations to the pronunciation models of native speakers (NSs) of English with the pronunciation models of non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. The study employed the use of a questionnaire, and the data was collected and analyzed solely quantitatively. The study found that from students' perspectives, the NS English pronunciation models were the preferred models to be learned at the university level and, also, were the desirable models for the purpose of general communication in English. Nevertheless, when examining students' daily experiences in terms of their communication in English after graduation, the study found that students interacted with NNSs of English more than with NSs and, therefore, were exposed to NNS norms more frequently. As the findings suggest, students might hold a certain bias toward NS norms,

and their aspirations, therefore, could be largely socially-constructed. Furthermore, this study implies that Thai learners of English need to be taught and exposed to a large variety of pronunciation models of English, especially in intercultural and international settings where English serves different communicative ends and functions in different forms, such as Thailand.

Keywords: Aspirations, Native Versus Non-Native Speaker of English, Pronunciation Models

INTRODUCTION

Provided that nowadays NNSs of English outnumber NSs of English and English has become an international language of communication (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Ishaque, 2018), it is therefore a must to take into account varieties of English and, especially, varieties in terms of pronunciation. Varieties related to the area of pronunciation are especially important for communication among NSs and NNSs in various international settings, as well as among various groups of NNSs.

EXPECTED BENEFITS

Having said that, it is quite important to determine what constitutes acceptable or correct pronunciation in English, and what pronunciation models learners of English should learn, adhere to and/or be exposed to. Such awareness will help provide language practitioners with important information as to how English should be both taught and assessed

from one learning environment to another. This type of knowledge is also important for a local Thai context as well. Provided that nowadays lots of NSs and NNSs in Thailand communicate through a common and shared language, here English, students' aspirations to pronunciation therefore could provide us with an understanding of the features and existing levels of mutual intelligibility amongst those various speech groups. One could then establish the necessary benchmarks, steps and educational policy changes as to how to better facilitate communication among those various speech groups in this highly internationalized context as Thailand.

As Nanni (2021) explains, Thai students are more and more likely to use English in the future to communicate with other learners of English and English is on the road of becoming the lingua franca of Southeast Asia. In addition, Kirkpatrick (2020) argues that English will continue

to play more wide-ranging and diverse roles in the future in the Expanding Circle (EC) countries of Asia as it is being increasingly used as a lingua franca for a variety of purposes by multilinguals in Asia. This current study, therefore, could provide valuable information as to the impact of English language education on Thailand's future role in global and regional contexts and, especially, within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the EC countries of Asia.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This particular study is driven by the following two main objectives. It tries to examine the aspirations of former AU students regarding their preferred models of English pronunciation at university level and also for the purpose of general communication by precisely comparing those of NSs with those of NNSs. On a larger scale, this study tries to examine the relationship between students' aspirations to models of pronunciation with their real exposure to pronunciation models after graduation from university or in a post-university environment, such as at the work-place and when socializing.

Keeping these research objectives in mind, this research study will address

the following two research questions (RQs):

1. What are students' aspirations as to their preferred models of English pronunciation at university level and in general?

2. Is there a match (or mismatch) between students' aspirations and students' real exposure to English pronunciation models in a post-university environment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The opinions of learners on their desired English pronunciation models in view of the NS/NNS dichotomy have been extensively examined in previous research studies. Thus, learners have been asked repeatedly to provide their opinions regarding how English pronunciation should be both taught and evaluated. For example, in a study conducted with university students in Vietnam and Japan, Walkinshaw and Oanh (2014) established that the participants felt the pronunciation of native English teachers (NETs) was more authentic, clearer and a desired model in terms of linguistic output.

Diaz (2015) conducted a study examining the preferences of students at the University of Rennes towards their NETs and non-native English teachers

(NNETs). Most of the participants exhibited preferences for NETs in the areas of pronunciation and oral exercises. Investigating the attitudes of Hong Kong secondary school students' towards both NETs and NNETs, Cheung (2009) likewise found that most of the participants preferred NETs as their oral teachers, because NETs' pronunciation was better in terms of accuracy. Moreover, participants stated that they preferred NETs also because they could correct students' pronunciation and help them lose their accent when communicating in English.

The views of learners on their desired English pronunciation models have been extensively examined previously in studies conducted in Thailand too. Thus, students have been asked repeatedly to express their views as to how English pronunciation should be both learnt and assessed locally. So, it was found that native varieties of English are still prevalent and are rated more positively and favorably than non-native varieties by Thai speakers of English (Goldsmith & Dennis, 2016; Kanoksilapatham, 2013; Prakaianurat & Kangkun, 2018). It was also established that NS accents were still the desired models to be learnt and used in a Thai context or locally (Jindapitak, 2014;

Jindapitak & Teo, 2013; Kalra & Thanavisuth, 2018; Snodin & Young, 2015).

However, other studies conducted in Thailand support the idea that awareness and recognition of NNS varieties of English, including those related to pronunciation, are important for the purposes of intercultural and international communication, especially when conducted between various speech communities.

For example, Suebwongsuwan and Nomnian (2020) examined the awareness and attitudes of Thai undergraduate hotel interns/students towards spoken English varieties. Thus, while participants still exhibited preferences for NS accents, they at the same time accepted and expressed positive attitudes towards varieties of NNS accents too. So, they showed favorable attitudes towards the global status of ELF and recognized its relevance to the purposes of international and intercultural communication.

Furthermore, Jindapitak and Teo (2013) conducted a study examining the preferences of university students for varieties of English and their attitudes towards the importance of understanding varieties of English. As the findings suggest, despite the fact most learners preferred NS accents, they still considered non-native

English varieties worth understanding and learning.

Rattanaphumma (2013) investigated 348 English language university students' attitudes towards both NETs' and NNETs' English accents and teaching practices. With reference to English accents, the study suggests that learners exhibited positive attitudes towards both NETs and NNETs. On the one hand, respondents perceived NS accents as proper, classical and authentic. On the other hand, they considered Thai English accents as easy and clear to be understood. As so far revealed, concerning the area of correct pronunciation and accent, the results are not as definitive and pronounced as they first might seem in favor of NS accents.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Despite the fact that nowadays NNSs of English outnumber NSs of English and English has become an international language of communication (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Ishaque, 2018), as mentioned earlier, the English language teaching field has for a long time been governed in both theory and practice by a pervasive ideology, known as native speakerism. This ideology has not only prescribed and/or defined the linguistic competencies,

skills, roles and respective advantages of NSs and NNSs, but also their professional identities as English educators. Moreover, this ideology has also influenced how they are perceived by students, other teachers, parents, administrators, as well as how teachers perceive themselves and their own contributions to the teaching profession.

In brief, native speakerism is an ideology that favours the NS, as well as NS English and NS methods (Comprendio & Savski, 2020; Holliday, 1994; 2006, cited in Copland et al., 2020; Jindapitak, 2014; Jindapitak & Teo, 2011; Suwanarak, 2010). Perhaps the earliest scholar, whose work has influenced the trajectory of this debate is Phillipson (1992), who introduced the concept of the so-called NS fallacy, which rests on the assumption that the ideal language teacher is the NET. Yet, the differences between both groups of teachers are firstly described and discussed by Medgyes (1992), who explains that NNETs remain permanent language learners and, therefore, the higher levels of linguistic competence and communicative proficiency that NETs possess would always account as their biggest advantage that cannot be challenged by any other factors prevalent in the learning situation,

such as motivation, experience, perseverance aptitude and education amongst others.

The ideology of native speakerism has also largely influenced the methodology of how English has been taught in Thailand. In light of this, depending on teachers' language backgrounds and nationalities, they have been assigned different teaching roles, foci and different courses to teach, especially at a university level in Thailand: listening or speaking, or reading and writing. Thus, it has been decided by the Ministry of Education that only NETs would be allowed to teach listening and speaking courses since they are suitable models for students to improve their communicative skills and English proficiency (Suwanarak, 2010). Furthermore, there is still a widely-spread belief among teachers, Thai students and parents of students that the most important qualification an English teacher possesses is their nationality (Thaiger, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

The subjects of this study were former AU students who had already graduated from AU prior to when the research study was being conducted. All of them had spent at least 4 years at AU and had graduated from AU with

Bachelor's degrees. All of them had spent at least 2 years of studying English (only) as a compulsory subject at AU. In total, 10 participants participated in the study. All the participants are female Thai nationals, whose mother tongue is Thai. Moreover, most of them (8 participants) were already working in Thailand at the time the research study was being conducted (January-May 2020). Most of the participants are the researchers' former students whom the researcher has kept in close contact with and has had access to throughout the years. More participants were targeted; however, only the participants mentioned and included here are the participants that responded to the survey, after all.

Hence, it should be noted that AU is the first international university in Thailand, where the medium of instruction is solely English. In order to graduate, all students need to have passed the last level of English proficiency measurement, namely English IV. Moreover, it should be noted that AU includes a large number of both NSs and NNSs as English instructors.

Therefore, it is highly likely that AU students are exposed to both groups (NETs and NNETs) throughout their undergraduate studies, pursued in English. As this study will illustrate later, this was also the case

with most of the participants in this particular study as they stated in their own words.

2. Research Procedure

This study employed solely a quantitative means of gathering and analyzing the data. It used a 3-Point Likert scale, containing the options Agree, Disagree and Neutral. This method allowed for displaying the results numerically in the form of figures with percentages later. The survey was submitted online and students sent their completed surveys online. The data was collected and analyzed between January to May 2020.

2.1 Research Instrument

This study employed the use of a single research instrument, a questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part asked for information concerned with the participants' backgrounds and other personal information: their first language and nationality; how many years and semesters they had spent studying at AU, including English.

Briefly speaking, the second part asked students to indicate their preferences regarding whether they preferred to be taught pronunciation by NSs or NNSs while at AU, and it also examined students'

preferences for English pronunciation models beyond university level or in general terms. The last part asked students to provide information as to whether while working and/or for socializing purposes, and precisely after graduation from AU, they correspondingly communicated in English mostly with NSs, or with NNSs, or with both.

RESULTS

1. Students' aspirations as to their preferred pronunciation models at university level and beyond (RQ 1)

It should be mentioned right here from the outset that 7 out of the 10 participants stated that they had been taught English as a subject at AU by both NSs and NNSs. However, this does not mean that the views of the remaining 3 other participants have been excluded here regarding their aspirations and preferences for English pronunciation models.

In other words, the study still tried to establish students' views on pronunciation at university level and in general—even the views of those who claimed that they had not been exposed to both NSs and NNSs at AU level. It was considered that they too might

have had opinions on English pronunciation models and might have been willing to express them when filling in and answering the questionnaire.

So, among all responses given, 69.2 % (69 %) agreed that they found it easier learning pronunciation with and from NSs at university level (see

Figure 1). Also, 69.2 % (69 %) stated that they preferred to be taught pronunciation by NSs as the NS models were the better models for English pronunciation at university level (see Figure 2). Figures 1 and 2 below present all the results in details.

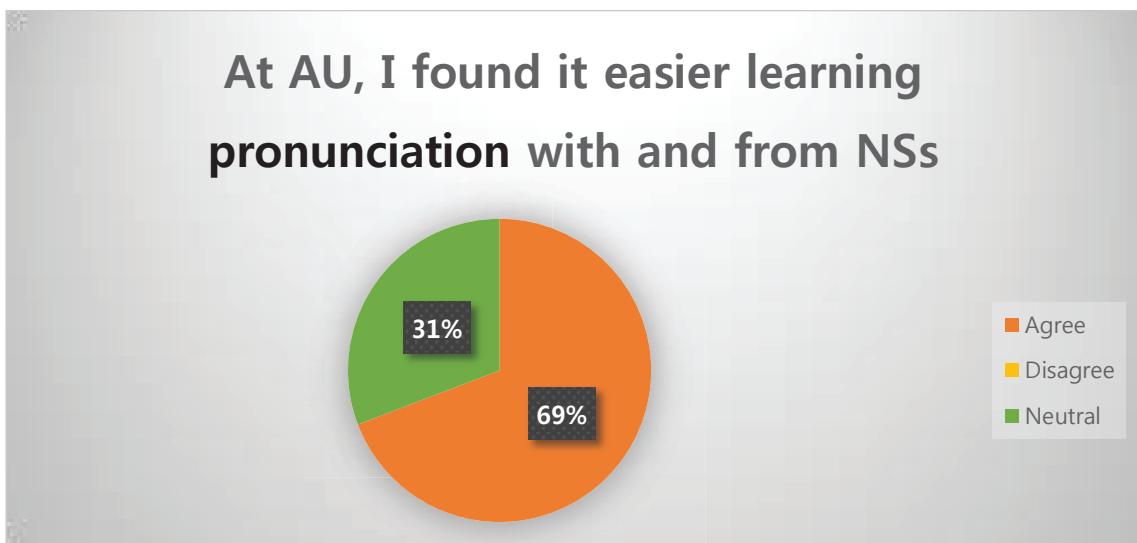


Figure 1 Easier English Pronunciation Models to Learn at University Level

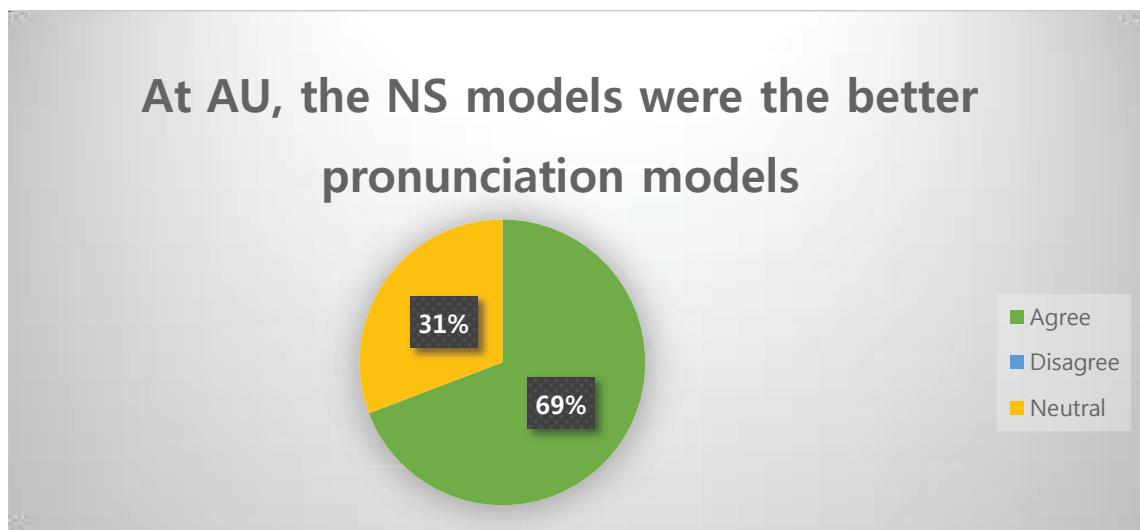


Figure 2 Better English Pronunciation Models at University Level

As to the students' general attitudes towards pronunciation models and, thus, not only at university level but beyond as well (or in a post-university environment), participants again exhibited preferences for NS models. Thus, 61.5 % (61 %) stated that in, general, they found the pronunciation of NSs easier to understand (see Figure 3).

In addition, 61.5 % (61 %) found the way of speaking of NSs more attractive than that of non-native ones (see Figure 4). Lastly, all participants (100 %) stated that they would prefer to be able to speak like NSs (see Figure 5). Figures 3, 4 and 5 below present all the results, respectively.

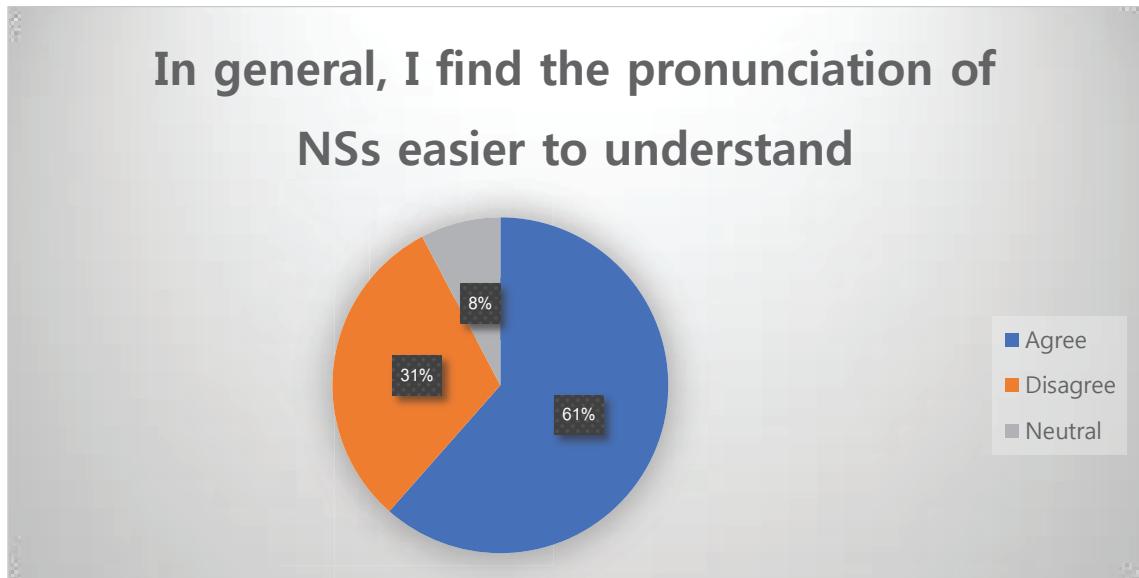


Figure 3 Easier English Pronunciation Models to Understand

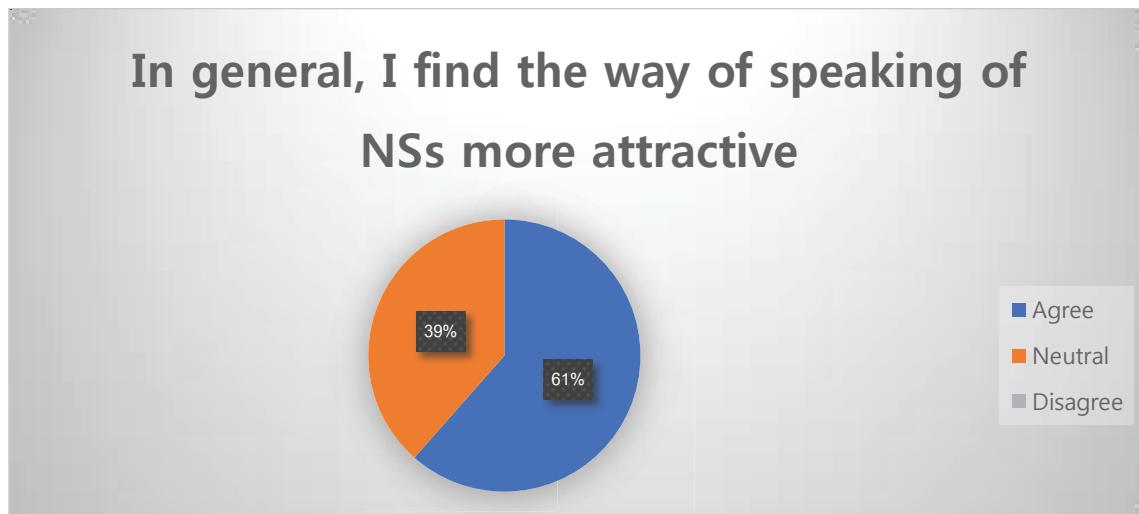


Figure 4 NS speech as More Attractive



Figure 5 Preferences for Sounding like NSs

2. Students' post-university exposure to various pronunciation models (RQ 2)

Regarding students' communication in English in a post-university environment or after graduation from university, 38.5 % (39 %) stated that they communicated in English "often" and 30.8 % (31 %) stated that they communicated in English "every day". These figures, thus, suggest that students' communication in English in a post-university environment or, more precisely, around the time the study was completed (January-May 2020), was quite sufficient. One could, therefore,

conclude that around that time, altogether, 69.3 % (close to 70 %) of the participants were communicating in English on a regular basis or regularly as the border line between "often" and "every day" in terms of usage is quite blur.

This data, therefore, allows us to establish that English was still widely used among the participants at the time and, thus, was not confined to being used only in the academic domain when they were pursuing their studies at university (AU) previously. Figure 6 below presents all the results.



Figure 6 Levels of Frequency of Using English after Graduation

Having these figures in mind, what needs to be established and discussed next are two closely-related, subordinate variables: 1) whether students at the time were communicating in English in the professional domain (for professional purposes), or for social purposes, or for both; and 2) whether students were communicating in English mostly with NSs, or mostly with NNSs, or rather with both groups.

Hence though, it should be added and repeated again that when the research study was being conducted (January-May 2020), all the participants were already working and performing various jobs, such

as working as a cabin crew, in the hotel industry, in the area of customer service, and others.

This information, however, has not been included here as it was more important to confirm that the participants were already employed during the time the study was being conducted, rather than specifying the kinds of jobs they were performing.

So, 84.6 % (85 %) of the participants stated that they communicated in English both professionally and for socializing, or both for professional and social purposes (see Figure 7). Quite interestingly though, 69.2 % (69 %) stated that they mostly communicated with NNSs and 30.8 % (31 %)

stated that they communicated with both NSs and NNSs. Thus, none of the participants stated that they communicated mostly with NSs (see Figure 8). Figures 7 and 8 below present all the results, respectively.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Comparing the responses given to both RQ 1 and RQ 2, the figures above imply that students' positive attitudes towards NS pronunciation models might

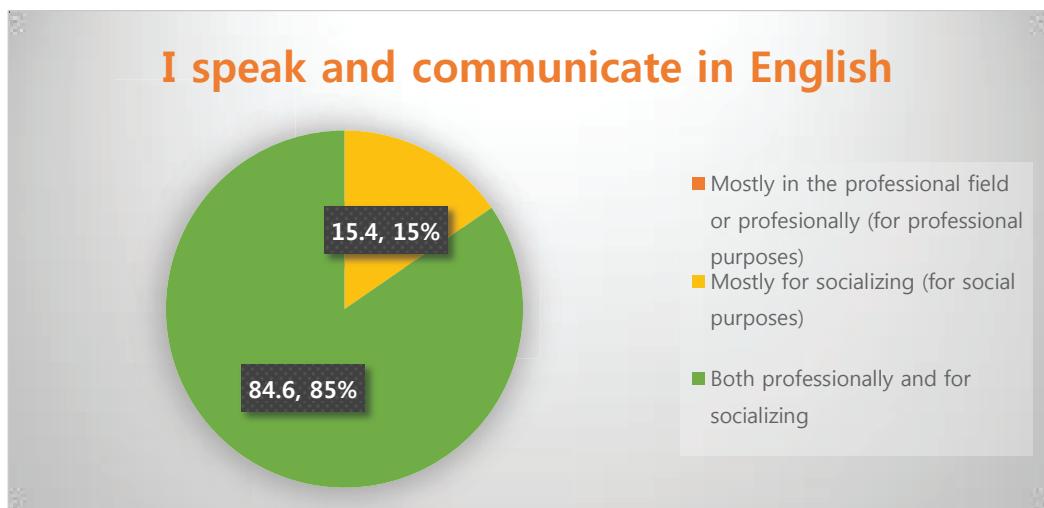


Figure 7 Purposes for Using English after Graduation

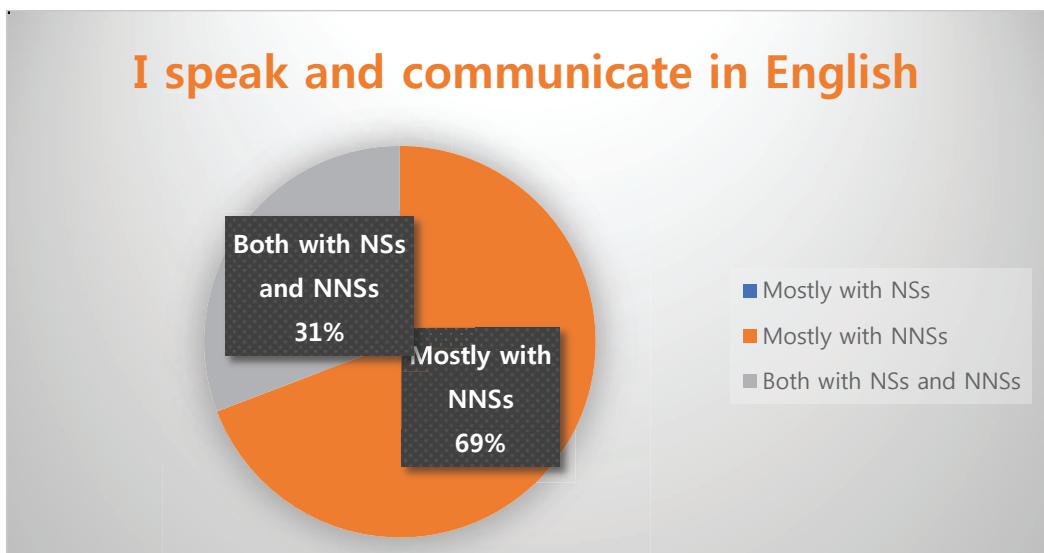


Figure 8 Students' Interlocutors in English Communication after Graduation

largely reflect prevalent language teaching and learning practices existing in the educational domain, which are built around the NS sociological construct and the widely-known assumption that NS varieties are the correct and acceptable norms in terms of pronunciation and, in particular, pronunciation teaching. In other words, students' aspirations perhaps do provide support in favor of native speakerism, which is highly prevalent in the educational domain and, precisely, in the literature concerned with the NS/NNS dichotomy.

As stated earlier, there is a certain bias or myth existing in many countries, including Thailand, that the NS model is the one that learners should learn and imitate, especially when it comes to pronunciation (Jindapitak, 2014; Jindapitak & Teo, 2013; Kalra & Thanavisuth, 2018; Snodin & Young, 2015).

Yet, this issue needs to be further and carefully re-examined because, as mentioned earlier, nowadays NNSs of English outnumber NSs of English (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Ishaque, 2018), and Thailand has followed the trend of comprising of lots of NNSs communicating with each other daily (Todd, 2006). Therefore, the tendency

to adhere to NS norms as the only legitimate, acceptable and target models in terms of pronunciation in a country with highly divergent sociolinguistic trends and changes in terms of the usage of the English language, such as Thailand, needs to be re-visited.

In today's highly globalized and interconnected world and given the constantly evolving status and ownership of English, it is, therefore, an imperative for English learners to be exposed to various norms of English, both NS and NNS norms. Despite the fact that the debate on the global status of English has gained tremendous popularity even more recently, still more pedagogical initiatives should be implemented in order to inform learners and make them aware of the various functions of English in different socio-cultural contexts and settings, as well as the communicative ends it serves in each one of them. Exposure to various types of English pronunciation models would also facilitate the process of communication better, especially in inter-cultural settings such as Thailand, whereby many NNSs communicate with other NNSs in a shared and common language-English.

Lastly, learners' exposure to those varieties of English needs to have its origin

and be planted in early educational settings, aimed at increasing learners' competence and awareness of the existence of those and mainly of their highly diversified nature and evolution. Such awareness might enable learners to negotiate meaning more successfully across cross-cultural boundaries through the use of a common, yet highly divergent in its own right language: English. In Thailand, this idea/belief holds true even more as the role of English in Thailand is multi-layered, multi-faceted, and quite important for promoting intercultural awareness and positioning Thailand's presence and roles in regional and international contexts even more strongly through the use of the language (Akkakoson, 2019).

The more exposed students become to varieties of English, the more equipped they would become in terms of building higher levels of communicative competence and the linguistic resources needed to be able to communicate successfully with NSs and NNSs domestically, regionally and globally. In this regard, it should be noted here that students on average were seemingly well aware of their English teachers' various nationalities (the nationalities of both NETs and NNETs)

while at AU, and they correspondingly named seemingly correctly where their teachers are from.

However, this piece of information has not been included here as it was more important to establish how well aware students were in terms of the NS/NNS dichotomy in general, rather than assessing their accuracy in terms of naming correctly the exact countries where their teachers were from. This issue could be further explored in a future study of the same or similar kind.

Furthermore, it should also be noted that perhaps students' awareness of their teachers' various nationalities (the nationalities of both NETs and NNETs) is due to the fact that AU is an international university conducting all of its programmes in English, and also given that AU employs both NSs and NNSs-a trend that further makes students more informed about the varieties of English, as well as about the diversification of its speakers.

Having said that, perhaps other universities could copy the AU model and employ both NSs and NNSs as academic staff. Supposedly, these practices would make students more aware of the evolving nature and status of English, the diversification of its speakers and, lastly, how each of these

groups could contribute to the quality of education in Thailand through their diverging practices, sociolinguistic and professional identities and, last but not least, their epistemological beliefs about the role of education in contemporary times.

The findings of this study provide support in favor of the ideology ELF, EIL and WEs in that given Thailand's constantly increasing role regionally and globally, exposure to various norms of English, both NS and NNS norms, is extremely important because it helps users of English build the skills, tools and capabilities to communicate successfully with other fellow users of English locally and also across other various international and inter-cultural settings.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At present, this study has its own limitations, which could be addressed in future studies. Firstly, a larger number of participants needs to be included in a future study of the same or similar kind so as to reveal a more detailed picture of students' aspirations towards pronunciation models.

Moreover, a further research study could perhaps also make use of semi-structured

interviews in support of the questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews would probably help respondents explain and elaborate more on the views and opinions that they had given earlier when filling in the questionnaires. In addition, perhaps an equal number of both male and female students could be included in a future study that would possibly reveal how students' responses possibly intersect across gender as one the variables of the study.

Lastly, in a future study of the same or similar kind, it would be appropriate to examine whether students have been accurate in terms of naming the countries their NETs and NNETs are from after the study was completed. The researcher, thus, could compare students' responses in this regard with the respective true nationalities of the teachers themselves, afterwards. This would reveal whether their preferences for English pronunciation models were truly a result of their exposure to both groups of teachers and a result of English instruction, or were rather socially-constructed, or perhaps both.

As it was mentioned earlier, students on average were seemingly well aware of their English teachers' various nationalities (the nationalities

of both NETs and NNETs) while at AU, and they correspondingly named seemingly correctly where their teachers are from. However, this piece of information was not included here as it was considered more important to determine how well aware students were in terms of the NS/NNS dichotomy in general, rather than assessing their true knowledge on the nationalities of their teachers.

A future study of the same or similar kind aiming for that particular objective could hopefully shed more light on potential matches and mismatches considering the highly likely ambivalent and dialectical relationship between students' true exposure to various English pronunciation models and their in-built perceptions and preferences for pronunciation standards, respectively.

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