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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THAILAND: EXPLORING THAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' VOICES TOWARDS THE USE OF NON-STANDARD ENGLISH IN AN ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Given the diversity of the English language nowadays, the issues regarding the use of non-standard English in English language teaching have been argued whether it is acceptable or not. Therefore, it is interesting to conduct a study on voices towards the use of non-standard English. This study, then, sought to investigate Thai university students' voices towards the use of non-standard English and understand how it had impacts on them. This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the voices and its impacts. Thirty Thai university students who enrolled in English for Airline Business course were selected as participants. To collect in-depth data, the semi-structured individual interview was employed as a main research instrument. Thematic analysis was utilised to organise data while interpretive analysis was employed to interpret data.

The findings showed that the participants had three main different levels of acceptability of the use of non-standard English including highly acceptable, moderately acceptable, and poorly acceptable. Moreover, the findings revealed that there were five main impacts of the use of non-standard English including boosting confidence, enhancing fluency in speaking English, creating confusion among Thai students, causing embarrassment, and raising awareness on diversity of English which was a new category emerging from this study. The findings also contribute to the understanding of the voices towards the use of non-standard English in the context studied. This study is hoped to provide those in higher education with useful ideas in designing appropriate courses which might benefit students and English language teaching in Thailand.

Keywords: English language teaching in Thailand; students' voices; non-standard English



INTRODUCTION

Given the diversity of the English language nowadays, the issues regarding the use of standard English and non-standard English have been argued. Standard English represents the globally recognized form of the language, characterized by adherence to grammatical conventions, and is regarded as the formal or official mode of communication. In contrast, non-standard English refers to the informal variant of the language, which varies based on geographical and social contexts. Non-standard English nowadays has been adopted and used in every part of the world, both in native English speakers (NES) and non-native English speakers (NNES) countries and the use of non-standard English is found in many domains such as tourism, entertainment, the Internet, and even education (Nishanthi, 2018, p. 872). Although the widespread use of non-standard English seems bringing pedagogical changes to today's English language teaching (ELT), standard English employing NES models still widely dominate in many English as a lingua franca (ELF) countries.

In Thailand, this NES-dominance models focus on the use of standard British and American English in language education, native-like linguistic imitations as the correct and valid way to use English, and teachers from NES countries as the best role models in ELT (Baker, 2012, pp. 22-23). Moreover, from the researcher's direct experiences as a university lecturer, English language teaching in Thailand have still focused on the accuracy of standard English grammar and recognised mainly on the English linguistic practices of the UK and US. In fact, this does not correspond to a wide variety of English nowadays. The number of studies on ELF, especially those on students' voices, is insufficient. Even though previous studies from Rajprasit & Marlina (2019, p. 30), Ambele & Boonsuk (2020, p. 213) and Jeharsae, Chaweewan & Boonsuk (2023, p. 510) shed light on voices of Thai learners towards English language teaching such as teaching materials, classroom environments, and teachers' performance, they suggest that there is still a particular need to focus on learners' voices towards the use of non-standard English in ELT classrooms. These situations have led the researcher to interests and investigations of Thai university students' voices towards the use of non-standard English in an English classroom, in this case English for Airline Staff classroom. Therefore, the conceptual framework of this study involved the study of Thai university students' voices towards the use of non-standard English in an English classroom



which might lead to new knowledge and benefits to English language teaching and relevant contexts.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To investigate the voices of Thai university students towards the use of non-standard English in their classrooms and seek to explore its impacts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research participants Employing a convenient sampling, the participants of this study included 30 English major students who enrolled in English for Airline Business course taught by the researcher. All of them were 3rd year university students who enrolled in various English courses taught by both NES and NNEs lecturers. Although they shared some similarities such as educational backgrounds, there were some differences such as their genders, their personal backgrounds, and their challenges they experienced in ELF classrooms where non-standard English and standard English were used.

Research instrument This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interview as a main research instrument. This approach allowed the researcher to gain in-depth data from the participants. Richards (2003, pp. 47-48) notes that “interviews form the mainstay of qualitative research. They can provide an effective way to elicit in-depth personal information, explain motivations and attitudes, and gain an understanding of personal perspectives in a way that is difficult to achieve through surveys, or from observation”. The questions used in the interview were reviewed and revised by a research supervisor and the Research Ethic Committee to ensure the appropriateness and intelligibility of the contents. The questions were adjusted to be broader to allow the participants to be able to express their point of views. The questions are as follows:

1. Can you tell me about yourself?
2. What is your opinion about the use of non-standard English in the classrooms?
3. How would you rate your acceptability of the use of non-standard English in the classroom? (Highly acceptable, moderately acceptable, acceptable, poorly acceptable, and unacceptable)
4. How does the use of non-standard English have impacts on you?



5. Do you have anything else to share with me?

Data collection In the first class of English for Airline Business course, students were explained about the research project and their rights as participants. Information sheets and consent forms written in Thai were sent to them through LINE application. The consent forms were later returned to the researcher after signed. Thirty students out of 47 students agreed to participate in this research project. Throughout the course, participants were exposed to a variety of English through class activities including role-playings, making airline announcements, group discussions, grooming, and job interviews.

After the course was finished in week 15, the researcher contacted participants for individual interviews. All the interviews were conducted in Thai since the participants could understand the interview questions easily and express their opinions fully and freely through Thai. Audio-recording was used during the interviews to record conversations between the participants and the researcher. It was expected for each interview to be not over 30 minutes in order not to exhaust both the participants and the researcher. However, the duration was flexible and they could extend it. During the interviews, the researcher established a good rapport with the participants and avoided interruption and leading questions. This way, it allowed participants to give more in-depth answers which were relevant to the study. Some answers led to new areas which were useful for this study. The researcher was aware that his role as the participants' lecturer might obstruct them to express their true feelings in the interviews. Therefore, the researcher tried to position himself as one of their friends to make them feel relaxed and unthreatened. They were also informed that the answers they gave either positive or negative would not affect their scores or any benefits they should have received. The researcher took ten days to complete all interviews with the participants. The length of the interviews ranged from 15 to 26 minutes.

Data analysis Interpretive analysis was employed as a method to examine the interview data. This approach seeks to grasp the significance of the participants' experiences, enabling the creation of a detailed description or comprehensive narrative regarding the phenomenon being studied. According to Bhattacharjee (2012, p. 35), interpretive analysis can yield different interpretations based on the various perspectives that a researcher brings to the study. Additionally, this research utilised Guest, MacQueen & Namey's (2012, p. 49) thematic analysis which involves six main steps including 1) familiarising with data, 2) producing



initial codes, 3) looking for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) labelling themes, and 6) writing a report. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim.

RESEARCH RESULT

This section is divided into two main parts of the findings based on two main research questions, including Thai university students' voices towards the use of non-standard English (RQ1) and the impacts of the use of non-standard English on them (RQ2).

Voices towards the use of non-standard English

Based on the questions associating with participants' voices and acceptability of the use of non-standard English, the data showed five levels of acceptability as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Levels of acceptability of the use of non-standard English

Levels of acceptability	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Highly acceptable	18	60.00
Moderately acceptable	9	30.00
Acceptable	0	0.00
Poorly acceptable	3	10.00
Unacceptable	0	0.00
Total	30	100.00

Table 1 presents levels of acceptability of the use of non-standard English. It reveals that the majority of participants had 'highly acceptable' level towards the use of non-standard English as it was reported by 18 participants or 60%. This is followed by 'moderately acceptable' level which was reported by nine participants or 30.00%. 'Poorly acceptable' level is the least reported level which was reported by three participants or 10.00%. Overall, it can be said that the participants of this study accepted the use of non-standard English but they had different levels of acceptability. Below are example extracts showing how participants viewed the use of non-standard English in their English for Airline Business classroom.



Extract 1: Highly acceptable

“I strongly agree with the use of non-standard English in your classroom. I like it. I like that I do not have to worry about grammar. I think the use of non-standard English is highly acceptable. I enjoyed it.”

(Student 11, individual interview, 2024, October 10)

Extract 2: Moderately acceptable

“I think it is not good and it is not bad to use non-standard English in your classroom. It might be because of the nature of your course which is about airline business and real-life communication. But I do believe that it is better to use standard English so that we can get used to it. For me, it is moderately acceptable.”

(Student 10, individual interview, 2024, October 10)

Extract 3: Poorly acceptable

“I think I am more comfortable to use standard English. I believe if I learn standard English and follow its rules, I can do better in exams. And it is good for tests like TOEIC. I have to say non-standard English is poorly acceptable in this classroom. The accuracy of English grammar will help me get good scores.

(Student 23, individual interview, 2024, October 4)

Impacts of the use of non-standard English

Adopting thematic analysis, five main themes associating with how non-standard English had impacts on the participants emerged from the data as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Impacts of the use of non-standard English

Impacts of the use of non-standard English	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Boosting confidence	27	90.00
Enhancing fluency in speaking English	27	90.00
Raising awareness on diversity of English	30	100.00
Creating confusion among Thai students	9	30.00
Causing embarrassment	3	10.00



Table 2 shows the impacts of the use of non-standard English which affected the participants. These include boosting confidence, enhancing fluency in speaking, raising awareness on diversity of English, creating confusion among Thai students, and causing embarrassment. It reveals that ‘raising awareness on diversity of English’ is the most reported impact which was reported by all participants or 100.00%. This is followed by ‘boosting confidence’ and ‘enhancing fluency in speaking English’ which were reported by 27 participants or 90.00%. ‘Creating confusion among Thai students’ is one of the impacts reported by nine participants or 30.00%. Lastly, ‘causing embarrassment’ is the least reported impact which was reported by three participants or 10%. Interestingly, although participants perceived the impacts of the use of non-standard English differently, either positive or negative impacts, all of them mutually reported that the use of non-standard English in the classroom raised their awareness on diversity of English. Below are example extracts showing how the use of non-standard English had impacts on participants.

Extract 4: Boosting confidence

“I think using non-standard English is easy and boost up my confidence when I have to communicate in English. Although my English is not perfect and it is non-standard English, I am now more confident using it. I remember you always say English is just a language not a measurement of our intelligence.”

(Student 6, individual interview, 2024, October 1)

Extract 5: Enhancing fluency in speaking English

“I feel that I have become more fluent in speaking English. I can use English freely. I do not have to worry about grammar. I just have to speak. I am more comfortable with non-standard English.”

(Student 8, individual interview, 2024, October 1)

Extract 6: Raising awareness on diversity of English

“To be honest, although I disagree with the idea of using non-standard English, I do feel that it reflects the diversity of English. I kind of like it. I can experience new ways of speaking English and various accents. It is quite funny when my friends speak English with weird accents.”

(Student 17, individual interview, 2024, October 3)



Extract 7: Creating confusion among Thai students

“I think it causes confusion among students in your class. But it is not a big deal for me. I do get what my friends want me to do when they speak English using non-standard English. It is not terrible to use non-standard English. However, I do feel that they should learn how to pronounce words properly. “

(Student 13, individual interview, 2024, October 2)

Extract 8: Causing embarrassment

“I personally feel that speaking English in a non-standard English way is quite wrong. It is embarrassing. I feel embarrassed for those who use the language wrong. They are making themselves look stupid. Many people might look down on them. It seems like they are not well educated. I don’t want to be like them. I have been trying my best to use standard English so that when I communicate with foreigners they would be impressed by my English. I mean the standard one.”

(Student 27, individual interview, 2024, October 5)

DISCUSSION

In the discussion of the participants’ voices towards the use of non-standard English in their English for Airline Business classroom, the majority of participants reported that they highly accepted it. They shared the similar voices that the use of non-standard English made them feel more relaxed in using English, specially speaking. This is similar to Stoimcheva-Kolarska’s (2020, pp. 13-14) study on the impact of relaxed learning environment on English language learning. The study revealed that relaxed learning atmosphere led to positive feedback and fruitful educational and life-long learning. The participants who reported that the use of non-standard English was moderately acceptable tended to agree that the use of non-standard English should be flexible and they were tolerant of it. In the light of flexibility and tolerance of using non-standard English, Shao (2021, p. 112) points out that learners can be flexible and tolerate in order to be able to communicate according to the contexts in which they find themselves. This also supports Sa-idi & Pittpunt (2024, pp. 78-79) who investigated the needs of English skills and intercultural competence among Thai student trainees at a Thai airport. The participants in this study pointed out that the use of English, especially speaking, should be flexible in intercultural communication in order to negotiate



mutual understanding among them since passengers were from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Finally, the participants who perceived that the use of non-standard English was poorly acceptable highly focused on the norms of standard English and the accuracy of English grammar since they believed it was beneficial for her exams and international standardised tests. This is in line with the study of Chaengjaroen (2024, pp. 2-3) which stated that Thai university students were encouraged to acquire high skills and knowledge of English and pass any standardised English tests in order to meet a graduation requirement.

In the discussion of impacts of the use of non-standard English on the participants, the participants who reported that using non-standard English boosted their confidence shared the similar idea that they did not have to worry about the accuracy of English grammar. This supports Stoimcheva-Kolarska's (2020, pp. 15-16) study which revealed that language learners who experienced relaxed environments tended to be more confident and do better in their language acquisition. The participants who reported that using non-standard English enhanced their fluency in speaking English agreed that not having to focus on English grammar made them more fluent in speaking and created the flow of their conversations. Due to the notion of English grammar, Ambele & Boonsuk (2020, pp. 212-213) stated that, as a result of an excessive focus on English grammar, there is an absence of student confidence and fluency in having communication in English wherein they feel nervous and become embarrassed if they make grammatical errors. Therefore, allowing them to move beyond the English grammar and use non-standard English helps enhance the fluency in speaking English. Raising awareness on diversity of English was the most reported impact which was reported by all participants. It reflects that the participants of this study were aware of a variety of English, standard English and non-standard English. This is in line with the study of Rininggayuh, Dewi & Isnaeni (2024, pp. 128-129) which reported that using social media such as YouTube and TikTok in English language teaching and learning significantly improved students' English speaking skills and helped raised awareness among them since there are various English accents spoken in the countries so that they were able to focus more on intelligibility than the English accent in communication. It should be noted that raising awareness on diversity of English was a new category emerging from this study which has expanded from the related studies conducted by Rajprasit & Marlina



(2019, p. 30), Ambele & Boonsuk (2020, p. 213) and Jeharsae, Chaweewan & Boonsuk (2023, p. 510). The participants who reported that the use of non-standard English could create confusion among them when communicating using English were concerned about mispronunciation and wrong sentence structures. This is evidenced in Jeharsae, Chaweewan & Boonsuk's (2023, p. 507) study which stated that non-standard English patterns frequently employed by Thai students caused confusion and misunderstanding among them. The confusion and misunderstanding regarding non-standard forms of verb tenses and subject-verb disagreement in English might stem from the absence of verb tense features in the Thai language. Finally, the participants reporting that using non-standard English caused embarrassment reported that using non-standard English presented negative images of the speakers including low educational backgrounds and social status. Kirkpatrick (2008, p. 28) stated that, for generations, speakers who have better English skills were perceived as well-educated and came from upper middle classes families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for applying research findings

This study might provide those in higher education such as lecturers, academic staff, and educational practitioners with useful ideas in implementing and designing appropriate contents and students' performance evaluation for the English language and airlines-related courses. The findings might be useful for the researcher of this study in designing appropriate contents for his English for Airline Business course. Also, this study documents voices of Thai university students towards the use of non-standard English. In this era where there is a wide variety of English, it is important to pay attention to the notion of non-standard English in English language teaching. This might include the understanding of students' voices, levels of acceptability of non-standard English, and impacts of the use of non-standard English. A variety of English should be introduced to higher education courses. Those courses should be customised and matched with the needs of students so that they can be able to exposed themselves to diverse English used by speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the integration of the findings in this study should be taken into consideration and incorporated into English and airline related courses taught at universities.



Recommendations for future research

This research primarily involved 30 participants, which limits the ability to generalise findings due to the small sample size and singular research setting. A larger participant pool may yield different levels of acceptability regarding the use of non-standard English and its effects. Nonetheless, it is anticipated that the results will be applicable to other English courses and related contexts, allowing for the transfer of research insights to similar scenarios. Consequently, conducting additional studies that replicate this research design in varied contexts, such as different English language classrooms, hotels, and tourism settings, could prove highly beneficial. Future research should involve a broader range of participants and diverse field sites, as this may lead to varied outcomes. The emergence of new data will be advantageous for relevant contexts and will enhance the understanding of students' perspectives on non-standard English, facilitating the application of these insights within their own environments.

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