# What! Phonological Features of Southeast Asian English

**Netnapa Suaysee and Ruja Sukpat**

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University
*E-mail: netnapha@webmail.npru.ac.th Tel. 0645364162*

Received 23/4/2566
Revised 14/6/2566
Accepted 18/6/2566

## Abstract

As a world language, English means that a diverse group of English speakers will be different in all social dimensions. Those affect the use of English according to the user's objectives. It has long led to questions and controversies in the English-speaking community as to what patterns of use of the English language are considered correct and how to be judged wrong. Before concluding what patterns of English are right or wrong, usable or unusable, we should first know the phonological features of the English language and get to know people who use English as a second and foreign language. This article, therefore, explored English phonological features in four Southeast Asian countries. Singapore English, Malaysian English, and Philippine English were studied in terms of English as a second language, while Thai English was studied in terms of English as a foreign language.

**Keywords:** Phonological features, Southeast Asian English, variety of English, English as an International Language (EIL)

## 1. Introduction

At present, English has been used as a medium for communication around the world in multi-dimension, particularly in economic and educational aspects. Thus, English is considered an international language or EIL (Dewey 2007; Jenkins 2000; Seidlhofer, 2001), not a language that specifically belongs to any country. Accordingly, English has more centers than just America and Britain. We must examine the nature of this diverse language as linguists, language learners, and teachers (Kachru & Nelson, 2006, p. 10). The previous statement shows the vast and varied groups of people who use English as a medium for multipurpose. Since 1985, Braj Kachru, an Indian-American linguist who studied the global spread of English and coined the term 'World Englishes,' has classified 'Englishes' using the now famous 'three circles model.' These were concentric circles, and he called them inner, outer, and expanding circles. The inner circle presents the countries where English is spoken as a first language, such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. These countries' citizens are often considered native English speakers. The outer circle consists of the countries where the language was transplanted by a few colonial administrators, businesspeople, educators, and missionaries. English was introduced to these countries and was typically used as a second language for various purposes, including many national and international domains. Most of the countries in this circle are former British Empire colonies, including India, Malaysia, Singapore, Ghana, Kenya, and others. The expanding circle; on the other hand, covers the

majority of the rest of the world. These countries have no direct colonial or historical ties to English but utilize it as a communication medium. English is commonly used as a second language or lingua franca. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Japan, China, Korea, and others are examples of such countries.

A long history of English in Asia was introduced almost 200 years as English as a second language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), due to the causes of economics, politics, education, trading, and military. The contemporary significance of English throughout the Asian region, together with the formation and recognition of distinct types of Asian Englishes, has played an essential role in the global story of English in recent years. The number of people with at least some understanding of the language has increased rapidly across the Asian region, including South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. These areas have the highest number of "Outer Circle" English-using societies and some of the world's most populated English-learning and English-knowing nations (Bolton, 2012, p. 20).

As aforementioned, due to a large number of English speakers from different corners of the world and in Asia, the English pattern or phonological features could be changed or could be stable as well. Therefore, this paper aims to study the phonological features of Englishes in Southeast Asian countries by focusing on Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The use of English in Southeast Asian countries is divided into two groups, English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL). The Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia are SEA countries where English is used as a second language. Thailand was focused since it is considered a close neighboring country of Malaysia and Singapore and there is a high number of Filipino teachers working as English teachers in Thailand. However, English is used as a foreign language in Thailand because of the different contexts of society. As for EFL teaching and learning, learners should know the phonological features of English on different issues to understand and use English effectively and accurately. Like in Thailand where encounter the use of language in economic or tourism aspects, the issues or questions about the use of English different from the style of English of Thai people are raised and focused. If learners realize the reasons above, it will benefit them in understanding factors that cause the variety of English usage. Consequently, the content of this article will focus on the phonological features of its variety of Southeast Asian countries: Singapore English (Singlish), Malaysian English (ME), Philippine English (PE), and Thai English (TE).

## 2. Research Methodology

### The Phonological Features of Southeast Asian Englishes

#### Singapore English (Singlish)

In Singapore, people are mixed of four different four national languages; Hokkien, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. The following data present languages are the most frequently spoken at home in Singapore (%);

**Table 1: Languages Most Frequently Spoken at Home in Singapore**

| Language | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 | 2020 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| English | 18.8 | 23.0 | 32.3 | 48.3 |
| Mandarin | 23.7 | 35.5 | 35.6 | 29.9 |
| Chinese Dialects | | 23.8 | 14.3 | 8.7 |
| Malay | 14.3 | 14.1 | 12.2 | 9.2 |
| Tamil | 2.9 | 3.2 | 3.3 | 2.5 |
| Others | | 0.9 | 2.3 | 1.4 |

*Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Singapore*

In addition, according to Singapore's latest census of population released by the Department of Statistics (DOS), more households are using English as the language most frequently spoken at home. Among residents aged five and above in 2020, 48.3 percent spoke English most frequently at home, up from 32.3 percent in 2010, as presented in Figure 1.

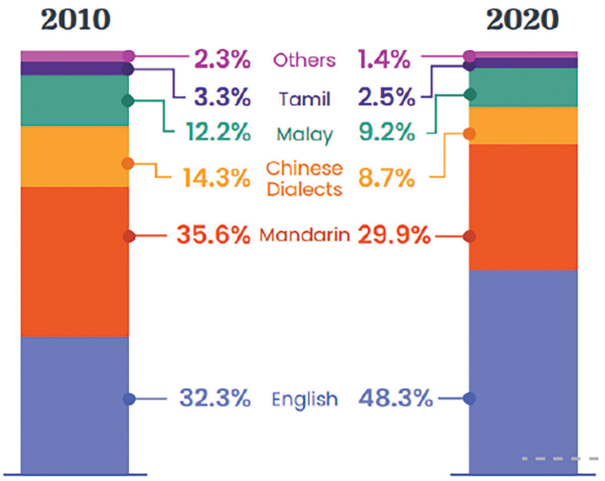


**Figure 1: Languages Most Frequently Spoken at Home in Singapore for Resident Population Aged 5 and Above**

*Source: https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/visualising_data/infographics/c2020/c2020-literacy-homelanguage.pdf*

Surprisingly, English growth at home is increased, which might be caused by education in Singapore using English as the sole medium. However, many students need to be literate in English and their L1 (first language). Thus, they use colloquial Singaporean English, also known as Singlish. It has several features, no rules, and play or creativity. The following figure presents the Singapore Colloquial English (SCE).

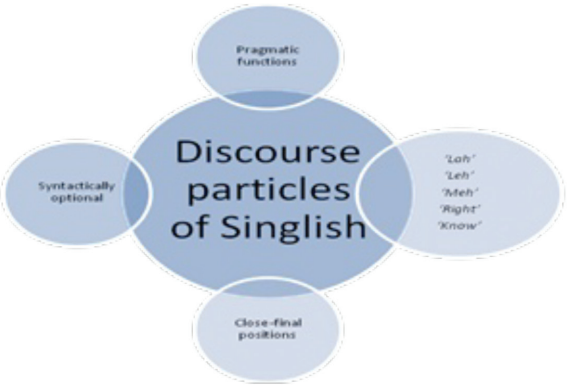


**Figure 2: Singapore Colloquial English**

*Source: Angle Tan (2010)*

Additionally, Bao (1998), as cited in Bautista & Gonzales (2006), described the phonological features of Singapore Colloquial English as follows:

1. Stops are unaspirated in all positions;
2. /θ/ becomes /t/ and /ð/ becomes /d/ before a vowel (thin → tin; then → den); /θ/ and /ð/ become /f/ in word-final position (breath → brɛf; breathe → brif)
3. There is a lack of length contrast and tenseness contrast in vowels;
4. There are no syllabic laterals and nasals;
5. In word-final position, voiced stops become voiceless (leg → lɛk).

**Malaysian English (ME)**

The second country is Malaysia which British English established the first English medium schools. Although Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had a solid power to encourage the Malay population to use Bahasa Malaysia after the independence in 1957, when it ends of his power, English was a medium of education once. The following phonological features of Malaysian English are identified by Bautista & Gonzalez (2006), Schneider (2003), and Hashim & Tan (2012) as follows:

1. merger of [i:] and [ɪ]: feel- fill, bead-bid all have [i];
2. merger of [u:] and [ʊ]: pool- pull, Luke-look all have [u];
3. merger of [ɛ] and [æ]: set- sat, man-men all have [ɛ];
4. merger of [ɒ] and [ɔ]: pot- port, cot-caught all have [ɔ];
5. variant realizations of [ə]: schwa tends to get replaced by a full vowel as [a], [e], [o], [eɪ], or [ɪ], the quality of which frequently depends upon orthography;
6. monophthongization of diphthongs, e.g., coat, load with [o], make, stake with [e];
7. shift in the placement of stress, e.g.,

| BrE | MalE |
|---|---|
| /ˈkæmərə/ | /kəˈmerə/ |
| /ˈɪndəstrɪ/ | /ɪnˈdʌstrɪ/ |
| /ˈrelətɪv/ | /riːˈleɪtɪv/ |

8. omission of final voiceless stop or its replacement by a glottal stop in monosyllabic words with a CVC structure, e.g., rope [rəʊʔ], rub [rʌʔ], put [pʊʔ], spark [spɑːʔ], plug [plʌʔ];

9. reduction of word-final consonant clusters, usually dropping the alveolar stop, e.g., /tends/ tends realized as [tens];

10. replacement of dental fricatives by stops, e.g., three [tri:], that [dæt], there [deə], panther [pæntə], brother [brʌdə].

From Malaysia English phonological features, they can be categorized into two types; English-medium-educated Malaysians and Malay-educated and Colloquial Malaysian English. The first type differs from standard British English, which is caused by the influence of graphology, especially in pronunciation, e.g., /siks/ for /siks0/. But syntax and proper use are used as British English and American English standard. However, the lexis of Malaysian English is localized, such as missus instead of the word 'wife.' In the second type of Malaysian English, most of the words' pronunciation and spelling are influenced by Bahasa Malaysia, which originated from English words. A considering point of Malaysian English is colloquial with a local dialect, which is not a complication of forms and uses and comes from the standard of native English.

**Philippine English**

In the case of Philippines English, Gonzalez & Alberca (1978) have presented its phonological features as follows:

1. absence of schwa;
2. absence of aspiration of stops in all positions;
3. substitution of [a] for [æ], [ɔ] for [o], [I] for [i], [ɛ] for [e;];
4. substitution of [s] for [z], [ʃ] for [ʒ], [t] for [θ], [d] for [ð], [p] for [f], [b] for [v];
5. simplification of consonant clusters in final positions;
6. syllable-timed, rather than stress-timed, rhythm;
7. shift in placement of accents.

Why does Philippine English have phonological features different from other native speakers? Before we conclude Philippine English, we should not miss claiming to lexical features of Philippine English as follows:

1. Loan words from other languages and local dialects such as Spain, Chinese, and Tagalog. For example, from all describing of characteristics of variations of English in the countries in the outer circle. It shows that L2 (second language) speaker countries have their own identities and also varieties.

For example:

> Last August 26, The Pathways Bahay Kapwa (BK) participants
> welcomed our Casa Bayanihan (CB) friends with
> a warm Bienvenida Party
> held at CTC 201, Ateneo de Manla University.

Source: http://www.pathwaysphilippines.org/blog/21

From the above example, the Spanish word '*Bienvenida*' means "welcome party."

2. New invented words (word coinage) by combining observations from one or more languages (English, Spanish, Tagalog).

For example:

> ***Toyota van taken by carnappers in broad daylight in QC***
> MANILA, Philippines—Despite an expanded anti-carnapping division at the Quezon City Police District, car robberies continue to take place in the city in broad daylight.

Source: https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/8895/toyota-van-taken-by-carnappers-in-broad-daylight-in-qc

As shown in the example above, the word '*Carnapper*' is a word coinage (car + kidnapper) that means a person who steal a car.

3. The third lexical features of Philippine English are semantic shifts, e.g., uses of '*calling card*' instead of '*business card.*'

4. The fourth lexical features are part of speech shifts.

For example: noun → adjective

- "I didn't pass through Edsa because I knew it was so traffic."
- "I didn't pass through Edsa today because I knew traffic was bad."

Additionally, Philippine English always uses code-mixing for better understanding in communication among native speakers and non-native speakers. It also shows their identity and ethnicity to gain solidarity (Bautista, 2009). In addition to these features, characteristics of grammar, even among highly educated Filipinos, have been identified as follows:

1. lack of subject-verb agreement, especially in the presence of an intervention prepositional phrase or expression;
2. faulty tense-aspect usage, including unusual use of verb forms and tenses, especially the use of the past perfect tense for the simple past or present perfect;
3. lack of tense harmony;
4. modals *would* and *could* be used for *will* and can;
5. adverbial placed at the end of the clause, not between auxiliary and main verb;
6. non-idiomatic two-or three-word verbs;
7. variable article usage - missing article where an article is required; using an article where no article is required;
8. faulty noun subcategorization, including non-pluralization of count nouns and pluralization of mass nouns;
9. lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent;
10. *one of the* followed by a singular noun.

In discourse, Philippine English has yet to find transfers of any patterns of indigenous epics and poems into contemporary Philippine English (Bautista & Gonzalez, 2006). The last point to consider about Philippine English is that it also has a different style in spoken and written from the native standard.

**Thai English**

In 1848, during the reign of King Rama IV, English was introduced in Thailand. However, only the king's wives and children were educated in this language. Then, under King Rama V, English education expanded extensively throughout the country, covering various sectors such as business, trade, the educational system, the media, and the press.

For over seven decades, English has played a crucial role in Thai society. When looking back on learning and teaching English in Thailand, the focus has been on vocabulary, grammar, the development of four language skills, and the use of commercial texts written by native speakers. As a result, students were encouraged to adhere to the content and context of these materials. Unfortunately, Thai students generally limited their English usage primarily in the classroom, and they had no experience with English speakers and could not develop their own linguistic identities or apply their language skills. Therefore, they do follow the form and pattern of English provided to them in the texts.

To address this issue, it is essential to guide and teach Thai students the know-how of how English could be used in different phonological features as well as in various circumstances, allowing them to more successfully create and use their linguistic identities.

## 3. Discussion

As the phonological features of L2, Singlish, Malaysian English, and Philippine English are identified, the English varieties are merged in L2 speakers. Although these countries use it as an official language, there are many aspects to joining all types of English; as Kachru et al. (2006) claimed, "*the most vital aspects of Asia lives-our cultures, our languages, our interactional patterns, our discourse, our economics, and indeed our politics. All aspects transform our identities…these transformations are evident in a variety of contact languages and literature…*" These countries create their own language and finally have new English that is acceptable to native and non-native speakers.

Thailand, as a country where English is used as a foreign language (EFL), has incorporated English into the educational system with different degrees of success. Since 1996, English has been a compulsory subject in the curriculum at all educational levels. Its goals are to enhance students' communication skills, broaden their knowledge, facilitate access to higher education, and foster career advancement. The learning and teaching focus on grammar and communication. In both 2000 and 2008, English remained a compulsory subject in the curriculum. However, the objectives of English education shifted towards promoting communication in any foreign language, engaging with native speakers, and encouraging students to use foreign languages outside the classroom through global communities. Due to these factors, Thai English is still considered a foreign language, compared with the concept of "new English" found in other countries in Southeast Asia. In contrast, well-educated English students, foreign teachers, educators, and scholars are able to use English successfully and independently analyze its form. Among these groups of users, two frameworks have emerged for creating Thai English texts: the transfer of religious, cultural, and social elements. This framework involves several processes, including the shift of old sayings, metaphors, or fixed collocations,

translation, lexical borrowing, reduplication, and hybridization (Kachruvian as cited in Watkhaolarm, 2005, p. 145).

To answer the question, 'Can Thai English be another variety of World Englishes?' The answer might be, 'it depends on the acceptance among native and non-native speakers, especially in written and spoken.' Watkhaolarm's (2005) study is one example of Thai English that examined discourse strategies in literary texts written by two Thai English bilingual authors, Kumut Chandrung and Pongpol Adireksarn. Although the first author's text was written about 100 years ago and the second author's text was written almost 71 years ago, their processes align with Kachruvian's framework on contact literature. This study also revealed that writing strategies of the two authors can be explained by the linguistic and social conditions in which they were produced. For these points, according to Kachru (1987) as cited in Watkhaolarm (2005), the creation of bilingualism emerges from local, cultural, and stylistic strategies, allowing the writers to apply their ideas and create language in their texts. Based on this research, written Thai English has its own identity, which was accepted by both native and non-native speakers. We cannot justify that Thai English in written aspect could be only new Englishes or varieties of World Englishes. However, some Thai English signs, advertisements, and restaurant menus on the roadside in Thai communities might be identified as Thai identities and creativities because various techniques to incorporate English as an international language have been applied, such as truncated, localized, indigenized, hybridist, and loan words.

Another aspect of Thai English that is spoken cannot be justified the its varieties by accents or articulator settings. It is based on factors such as the interlocutors' level of education, ethics, experience, and social status. In casual contexts, like English conversations on the street, people do not account for correct forms or complete sentences in communication, as seen in a conversation between a foreigner and a taxi driver. However, they can communicate successfully.


**Figure 3: An Example Conversation between a Foreigner and a Taxi Driver**

*Source: http://hilight.kapook.com/view/65487*

Speaking successfully without focusing on suprasegmental elements, L1 also has an impact on Thai English on the spoken side. Since it rejects some characteristics of an international language, Thai English cannot, as previously said, be a variant of Thai English in all contexts. Interestingly, Singapore English (SE), Malaysian English (ME), and Philippine English (PE) have their own varieties, both written and spoken, and native and non-native speakers also accept them. However, when English

does not belong to native countries anymore and changes its role to EIL, many aspects should be changed.

According to Jenkins (2000), "*EIL can be forced of intelligibility and identity and it concerned with spoken English; pronunciation is the common dominator, which it is one of the language features that will help speakers to preserve their L1 identity.*" From the proposes of Jenkins, English in expanding circle should be prepared well by incorporating World Englishes into speaking and listening at an early age and raising the teacher's knowledge of EIL and ELF to transfer them to the students. The most important thing is that the teachers have to be exposed to varieties of English to share these with the students both inside and outside the classroom. When they are familiar with the variety of English, they will be accepted differences and uses English with their norms and varieties. On the other hand, if the teachers lack of knowledge and experience in English varieties, they cannot create lessons and activities to teach the students appropriately and successfully. As Kirtpatrick (2007) suggested, "*specific teaching and learning contexts and needs of learners should determine which variety of English should be taught. Each model may be appropriate for one context, but may not for another.*" His statement has supported the class with different L1 to promote their intelligibility. Another aspect that should be considered for teaching speaking and listening is testing; the teachers cannot provide the paper test for speaking examinations and force the the students to follow a script and accept the phonological features of pronunciation. The test should be flexible and encourage them to create their ideas in communication settings; the teacher just be a facilitator and give them some advice. Mutsuda (2003) presented her idea for communication testing: "*In testing, students should have evaluated their communicative effectiveness rather than solely on grammatical correctness based on native speaker norms.*" As an EFL teacher who has taught communication and class at the tertiary level, all the phonological features are faced in her context. The students have similar L1 but differences in local or dialect; thus, it influences foreign language as English. They are embarrassed to do articulation settings and produce unfamiliar sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/. Although she encourages and demonstrates the students with various kinds of teaching aids, the students often find it difficult to produce these sounds themselves; worse, they laugh at someone who makes a correct sound.

Additionally, in Thailand, a test is one of the problems in teaching English communication because of the institute's policy to have a paper test for the final examination. It cannot justify the students' intelligibility or encourage them to learn. Regardless, the students create class activities with role play and interactions in various situations such as shopping, asking and giving directions, eating out, and telephoning. However, all situations are based on the objectives of the curriculum. Despite having access to social networks and other media platforms that allow them to learn English at any time and from anywhere, the students still lack motivation and never think it is a benefit for their daily lives; they do not want to acquire English knowledge both inside and outside the classroom. Consequently, Thai students still lack opportunities to improve their creativity in language use and never know how people in different countries use English for communication in the globalized world.

## 4. Conclusion

Singapore English (SE), Malaysian English (ME), and Philippine English (PE) are just a few examples of the English varieties found in Southeast Asian countries. These English varieties have merged with the phonological features of the second language to produce distinct English variations for L2 speakers. These countries have created their own language, which is acceptable by both native and non-native speakers. Thai English, on the other hand, is regarded as a foreign language and is not recognized as a variety of World Englishes. However, by exploring the phonological features of Southeast Asian English, teachers can design more effective instruction to assist students in developing a better understanding of the pronunciation patterns, enabling them to communicate effectively and confidently in English. It is possible for people to understand more about the linguistic diversity found in Asian English-speaking communities. This understanding can promote intercultural communication by using English in a variety of ways other than standard English. Furthermore, to promote the development of English as an International Language (EIL), particularly in expanding circle countries like Thailand, a variety of English should be included in speaking and listening instruction. Teachers should have extensive knowledge of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as an International Language (EIL). Testing methodologies might place more emphasis on assessing communicative effectiveness than solely adherence to native speaker standards.

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