

# A Learner of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Becoming a Teacher of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Perspective on the Goals of ELT in Thailand

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*Studying English in one century but teaching English in another century requires a lot of willpower from teachers to understand changes and adjust their perceptions and practices. This paper reflects on the notion that the ultimate goal of teaching and learning English should be a native speaker-like command of the language. The question is whether or not this goal of being native-like is a reasonable, necessary and achievable goal. Effective cross-cultural communication requires not only language ability, but also intercultural competence. Therefore, this paper calls for a shift from using a native speaker as a model to using an intercultural speaker as a model in English language teaching. A perfect combination of developing English language ability and intercultural competence would lead students to the proficiency of English in this new century. This intercultural approach can help learners to become effective users of English in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which most English users are non-native English speakers from a variety of sociolinguistic and cultural backgrounds.*

**Keywords:** native speaker model, intercultural speaker model, goals of ELT

## INTRODUCTION

Learning English in Thailand thirty years ago was a difficult job for a student, but teaching English in Thailand nowadays is much more difficult. Things keep changing and teachers need to make a lot of changes in their teaching practices. As a learner once and now a teacher of English, I have found most learners and teachers still hold the same idea they held many years ago and that is possessing a native-like command of English. Their main goal in teaching and learning English, therefore, is to master the language based on the norms of native English speakers.

This paper questions that ultimate goal. It first presents my perspective as a learner of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose major was English in a Thai university in the eighties, explaining the situations in which I was strongly expected to master the language. Then it deals with the shifting of my perspective on the goal of teaching and learning English after I became an English teacher of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among a number of different approaches, English has been viewed differently, such as English as a second language (ESL), English as a foreign

language (EFL), English as an international language (EIL), English as a lingua franca (ELF), English as one of the varieties of World Englishes (WE), and English as a translingual (Canagaraja, 2013). I faced a dilemma whether to adopt a traditional approach in which students are strongly encouraged to master the language like a native speaker or to implement a new approach in which students are no longer being bound to a native-like mastery of English, but are still able to succeed in their cross-cultural communication.

With the belief that my students should not need to struggle in order to be successful users of English, I have decided to adopt a new approach. In this alternative approach students are not forced to achieve the unattainable and unnecessary goal of possessing native-like proficiency. Instead, it is more worthwhile for them to focus on the intelligibility of their own English, which is used as an international language or a lingua franca, and to develop intercultural competence while they learn English. The final part of the paper then describes how I tried to overcome obstacles when I decided to adopt this new approach.

## **PERSPECTIVE OF A LEARNER OF THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY ON THE GOAL OF LEARNING ENGLISH**

Majoring in English at the tertiary level in Thailand in the eighties was considered more prestigious than other language majors because English was regarded as a high-status foreign language and widely taught in Thailand (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2002). Actually, this statement was not only true in the past, but it is also true at the present time. With this viewpoint, English-majoring students have been burdened with high expectations from their teachers and society because they are viewed as future native-like users of English. I studied English as my major and I was a case in point. I faced high expectations of being able to speak the language perfectly, and I thought it was my sole obligation to do as expected.

In Thailand thirty years ago, not many students could speak English fluently or speak English perfectly if they were not educated in a native English-speaking country or had not studied with native English-speaking teachers. I had never been abroad, had never studied with native English teachers, and hardly had a chance to speak English. I was able to get into university because I did well on the National University Entrance Examination, which was offered only in Thai. The tests measured students' ability to memorize grammatical rules, vocabulary or expressions rather than their ability in applying grammatical knowledge or language skills to practical use in communication. Then, when it was time for me to really study in class, I was expected to be able to master all skills, including listening and speaking. Speaking in front of the class always sent

shivers up my spine and made me feel anxious and frustrated. I was not confident because my Thai accent English was too far from being native-like.

I studied with the feeling of being inferior since I started to fix my thoughts on a native speaker as my model of an ideal English speaker. The framework of English which belongs to inner-circle countries has long been used in English language teaching in Thailand (Jindapitak & Teo, 2010), and it is undoubtedly believed that this English framework is the only standard for the measurement of students' language ability. Although in the 1980s a communicative approach was promoted, it was not implemented in classrooms (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2002), most teachers still used the grammar translation approach with an emphasis on linguistic ability, and the goal of learning was set as close to native-like proficiency as possible. Both the grammar translation approach and the communicative approach share the same learning method of adopting a native speaker model as the main goal in teaching and learning English. As a matter of fact, I did not face much trouble with receptive skills as I could understand what teachers said and what I read from texts. However, I had difficulty in productive skills. I suffered from low confidence and always perceived my Thai accent and style of writing to be deficient. Due to these perceptions, I judged myself by the deceptive standard of native speakers' norms and was locked into the notion that I was not a successful English language learner and user.

## **PERSPECTIVE OF A TEACHER OF THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY ON THE GOAL OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH**

The aim of possessing native-like English proficiency and the negative feelings toward my own English ability preoccupied me through my years of university studies. Jenkins (2009) would perceive my imperfect English in a different way. In Jenkins' view, any language feature that is different from the variety of English spoken by native speakers should not always be considered an error, but actually it should be identified as a legitimate variant (p. 202). Unfortunately, at that time, when I was in my twenties, I had an opposite view to Jenkins, so I felt I was not a good example of an English language user.

I got this kind of perception not only during my university life but also my early teaching life. At the beginning of my teaching career, I always considered myself not a good model of an English speaker to my students. As a result, I lacked confidence in teaching listening and speaking courses and generally taught only English grammar and structure courses. There was a myth that to effectively implement an appropriate methodology, English should be taught monolingually (Kirkpatrick, 2007), and this reinforced my belief that only a native or a native-like speaker can be a good model for students. In addition, I

strongly believed I should not teach speaking courses and I should not use Thai mixed with English in any English classes.

Fortunately, while furthering my studies, I encountered a number of variations of the English language such as World Englishes (WE), English as an international language (EIL), English as a lingua franca (ELF) and importantly, English taught using an intercultural approach. According to Kirkpatrick (2010), World Englishes are a variety of Englishes which allow English language users to express their own identity and to reflect their local cultures in their communication with others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As for English as an international language (EIL), it is considered as a function of English as an international common language rather than a single linguistic variety used in all international contexts (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011). English as a lingua franca (ELF) is defined by Jenkins (2009) as “English being used among non-native English speakers from the Expanding Circle” (p. 201). She also mentions:

In the ELF perspective, no matter which circle of use we come from we all need to make adjustments to our local English variety for the benefits of our interlocutors when we take part in lingua franca English communication. (p. 201)

In Thailand the number of teachers who are aware of these new variations of English is increasing. Although these alternative views share something in common, they have some particular differences. Teachers who recognize different varieties of English introduce their students to different types of English such as Singaporean English, Indian English, and Chinese English. Students are encouraged to recognize and differentiate their differences because the teachers who believe in teaching English as an international language put an emphasis on its function rather than its language features. In this case, the choices of language use might depend on the learners who use the language, but they need to pay close attention to the intelligibility of their language use. Teachers who treat English as a lingua franca would not pay attention to native speaker norms, but instead would try to figure out the ways in which English learners use their English in cross cultural communication. They would also take English as a multicultural language and focus on developing students ‘language skills and intercultural awareness’ when they use English.

These alternative views with their similarity and differences encourage me to review my perspective on how to teach English to students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Accordingly, I firmly believe that the goals of teaching and learning English in Thailand should be changed. It is not necessary for a learner to master the language like a native English speaker. This belief is a result of my experiencing and reconsidering the attainability of achieving native-like proficiency. It is as Mackenzie (2014) puts it, “to be a native speaker is to have complete possession of a language, and complete possession of a language is what a native speaker

has” (p.7). This has confirmed my stance on the idea that no non-native learner of English should be required to have complete possession of the language. There are several reasons why I am convinced it is time for Thailand to call for changes in the goals of ELT which has had a native speaker as a model for a very long time to be replaced by the goal which puts the focus on an intercultural speaker as the model for English learners.

The first reason concerns the purpose of teaching and learning English nowadays which is different than it was in the past. In the past, learners studied English as a foreign language with the intention of communicating with the owner of the language. Nowadays, however, English is learned and used as an international language. Smith (1976, as cited in McKay, 2002, p.11) first defined an ‘international language’ as a language which is used by people of different nations to communicate with one another. Smith (as cited in McKay, 2002, p.12) also made three assumptions regarding the relationship of an international language and culture. First, there is no need for its learner to internalize the cultural norms of a native speaker. Second, the ownership of an international language becomes de-nationalized. Third, enabling learners to communicate their ideas and culture to others should be the educational goal of learning.

The second reason is the fact that English users should have the right to express who they are when they use the language in cross-cultural communication. Non-native English speakers should be entitled to reflect their own identity based on their sociolinguistic and cultural background through their use of English. Speaking English might be illustrated by an analogy of a person singing a song in a contest. Any contestant who tries to imitate the original artist hardly becomes the winner. That is because judges do not look for a contestant who can sing exactly the same as the song’s original artist, but instead they prefer the one who can sing and get the message and the mood of the song across to the audience with his or her own style. I believe this is similar to the way in which non-native speakers in this century use English in their intercultural communication. They use it to convey messages across, not for being judged whether they can use it like a native or not, and what they need to ensure is the fact that their English is intelligible to their interlocutors.

The perceptions of expressing identity and being intelligible are supported by Mackenzie (2014) who points out that when a person uses English as a lingua franca, adopting ways of speaking to enhance mutual intelligibility is more important than imitating the norms of native English speakers. Therefore, it is not a perfect, native-like accent that should be the goal, but it is the intelligibility of English that should be taken into account. With this new perspective, teachers are supposed to be more tolerant when learners demonstrate their ability in the selective use of grammatical, lexical, or phonological features differently from the standard. Some grammatical

structures or vocabulary choices might naturally be influenced by their first language. Students' pronunciation of English might also be influenced by the norms of Thai pronunciation. These deviations from the native speaker's norm should be accepted as long as it is intelligible and accessible to their interlocutors.

The third reason that a native speaker model should not be the main goal is the fact that the sociolinguistic context of native English speakers, no matter whether it is an American, British, or Australian context, is neither the same as the context of Thai learners nor is it necessarily the context of the future interlocutors of Thai learners. In addition, users of English might not share the same meaning in their pragmatic use of the language even though all of them are communicating in English. Why is it useful to teach students to express feelings in their speech acts like apologizing, requesting, thanking, or inviting in the same ways as native speakers of English do when their interlocutors might be Asian people?

When adopting a native English-speaker model, teachers might warn students not to use imperative sentences for requesting or offering because it is not polite and should be avoided as it sounds like an order. However, in some Asian countries, including Thailand, this kind of language is sometimes considered as an invitation. If a speaker says, 'Come! Sit down! Sit down!' it might be used in order to invite someone to enter the house and have a chat. It should not signify that a Thai speaker of English who uses this kind of sentence fails to meet the politeness requirement of the English language system.

Labov (as cited in Mackenzie, 2014, p. 8) states that "it is a sociolinguistic commonplace that is iniquitous to measure one group of speakers against the norm of another group". Sticking to the native speaker model in teaching and learning, teachers tend to use the norms of native English speakers to assess their students' English proficiency. This might lead to an unfair and inaccurate assessment of learners' English proficiency.

From all the reasons above including a new purpose of learning and using English as well as its context where English is actually used, it seems no nation has ownership of the English that people nowadays use. Learners and users of English, therefore, have no need to associate their use of English with any specific national culture. Furthermore, for English learners to be prepared to effectively communicate with other people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, language ability alone is not sufficient for them. In addition to language ability, they might need to possess intercultural competence. To Byram (1997), even people who use the same language still need intercultural competence, so he defines intercultural competence as a person's ability to interact in their own language with people from another country and culture. In this respect, he or she needs to use his or her knowledge about intercultural

communication, attitudes of interest in otherness and their skills in interpreting, relating and discovering. Using these skills effectively results in his or her overcoming cultural differences and enjoying intercultural contact.

The combination of language ability and intercultural competence can help students to better deal with cross-cultural communication in which people of different cultural backgrounds who do not share the same first language have to communicate by using English. Therefore, an intercultural speaker model is a better alternative as it promotes understanding between those people concerning not only language ability but also awareness of intercultural differences. Byram (1997) combined language ability with intercultural competence and he coined the term 'intercultural communicative competence'. He describes a person with intercultural communicative competence as follows:

...someone with Intercultural Communicative Competence is able to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language and they are able to negotiate a mode of communication and interaction which is satisfactory to themselves and the other and they are able to act as a mediator between people of their cultural origins. Their knowledge of another culture is linked to their language competence through their ability to use language appropriately — sociolinguistic and discourse competence — and their awareness of the specific meanings, values and connotations of the language. They also have a basis for acquiring new languages and cultural understandings as a consequence of the skills they have acquired in the first. (p. 71)

In my point of view, teachers should spend as much time in developing students' intercultural competence as in developing their language ability. It might be better if teachers intentionally develop student's intercultural skills, such as being aware of cultural differences, interpreting intercultural interactions and analyzing cross-cultural communication rather than putting too much emphasis on imitating native speakers' style of language use especially in terms of grammatical and phonological aspects. Therefore, the goal should be shifted from using a native speaker as a model to using an intercultural speaker as a model.

I now strongly believe that in an English language classroom, teachers need to focus on the intercultural speaker model rather than push their students to achieve native-like proficiency. This newly-set goal is of great relevance to Phan's (2008, as cited in Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011, p. 332) suggestion that it is important for English as an international language to put more emphasis on the identity of teachers and empowering non-native English speakers. As a teacher, when I realized the need to change of the goal of English learning, I felt less constrained by the standard of the native speaker model and was more enthusiastic about teaching and enjoyed teaching English to my students more

than before. Moreover, gaining confidence in speaking without striving for a native-like accent, I found myself fluent in English and had no problem in getting my message across to both native speakers and non-native speakers. As a result of my shifted perspective on teaching and learning goals, I now perceive myself as a non-native teacher of English who can be a model as a user of English to my students and who understands how to deal with communication in intercultural settings.

The idea of deviating from using a native speaker as a model to adopting an intercultural speaker as a model in English language teaching is also strongly supported by Baker (2012) who has extensively done research concerning intercultural competence in the Thai context. He supports this new goal stating in his article “From cultural awareness to intercultural awareness: culture in ELT” as follows:

The use of English as the global lingua franca highlights the need for understanding of cultural contexts and communicative practices to successfully communicate across diverse cultures. Yet, it also raises the problem of naively associating the English language with a specific culture or nation. Traditional conceptions of communicative competence and cultural awareness in ELT have focused on an understanding of particular cultures and countries such as the USA or UK and their associated sociocultural norms. English as a global lingua franca forces us to go beyond notions of teaching a fixed language and cultural context as adequate for successful communication. (p.69)

## **OBSTACLES OF ADOPTING THE INTERCULTURAL SPEAKER MODEL AND NEGLECTING THE NATIVE SPEAKER MODEL**

In teaching at a university level, the process of evaluation and assessment is an important procedure that all teachers must follow. When the writer or any other teacher adopts any new instructional approach, it must be related to the aspects of assessment and it sometimes causes a disagreement with colleagues who are not in favor of the same approach. A variety of reasons obstructs the implementation of this new approach which neglecting a native speaker model.

The first reason is that most teachers who have a fixed idea of accepting only American and British English do not agree with the proposal to change. In the situation that I have to face, there are two main streams of teachers. One group of teachers, who understand and agree with the ideas of EIL, ELF and WE, started to devalue pushing students to be native-like because they fully understand how people really use English in the real world. This group has realized the possibility of using English differently from the native speakers’ norm. They are more flexible in their grading and put an emphasis on teaching



cultural content in general rather than focusing on only cultures of the native English speakers.

However, the other group of teachers has never experienced any new trends with teaching models or varieties of Englishes. They do not realize the need to deviate from the standard of American and British English because they believe it is the only valid model. The following two examples can illustrate the situations that take place when teachers have a fixed idea of promoting a native speaker as a teaching and learning model.

Nowadays some publishers are improving their textbooks by adjusting the content to acknowledge the validity of non-native varieties of English. They have also added more cultural content, including Asian cultures or even some listening recordings with Asian characters speaking English. Although some teachers seem to like the way their students can be exposed to different kinds of English accents, other teachers who are fixed with American and British English as the perfect models complain a lot when they have to use this kind of listening recordings. They are afraid of their students picking up wrong accents from these listening recordings. These incidences illustrate a strong belief that English of native speakers is the only valid variety.

Another example is the difficulty of dropping native speaker norms even when teachers would like to. When it comes to implementing a new approach with a focus on intelligibility, fluency, and less attention given to grammatical structures, some teachers are not comfortable with the idea. For example, when teachers say that they focus on spoken forms of the language, and they mean that they have asked students to write the spoken forms in the written exams. However, they cannot help but deduct points for different word choices or grammatical structures which are different from American and British English even though students' answers demonstrate their understanding in the communication. As a matter of fact, in this circumstance if teachers shift the focus to measure levels of intelligibility, rather than grammatical knowledge, they would be able to deviate from native speaker norms.

To solve the first problem of being stuck to American and British English, I have tried to encourage teachers to realize the existence of other English varieties in the present world of English. In fact, it is beneficial to their students to use listening activities with non-native accents. Students would have chances to be exposed to other English varieties and they might be more open-minded and comfortable regarding the usage of others (Nelson, 2011). According to Catford (1950, as cited in Nelson, 2011, p.3), the familiarity with another language or variety of that language can lower the threshold of intelligibility. It can make the speech in question more accessible and reduce resistance.

The second reason that it is problematic to replace a native speaker model with an intercultural speaker model is the practice of teaching culture in English language classrooms. The idea of a language teacher teaching intercultural competence has not yet been pervasively recognized. Some teachers include cultural content concerning native speakers' countries in order to help students better understand language used in the American and British context. However, Jandt (2013) has an opposite idea to those teachers and emphasizes that a person involved in intercultural communication gain insight about the definition of culture and understand clearly that "cultures are not synonymous with countries" (p. 6).

In this respect, teachers might take it for granted that their students will be able to effectively understand anyone if those people can speak English. In fact, even though people speak English, it does not mean that they will express themselves in the same ways as American and British speakers do through the use of English. The fact is that no matter where people live in this world their underlying cultural beliefs and values still influence what they say and do. It is therefore important to recognize that people might have different underlying meanings although they say the same thing. Wong (2004) states that:

...a speech pattern highly valued in one culture could turn out to be a socially destructive instrument in another, even if people in the two countries are said to speak the same language. The differences in the ways people make requests and state opinions in the two societies clearly leave a lot of room for cultural misunderstanding (p. 246).

There is no guarantee that if learners can speak English well, they will be able to make themselves understood linguistically and culturally. There are many possible ways in which a person might unwittingly create misunderstanding in communication or unintentionally offend people from other cultures.

To solve the second problem of misunderstandings relating to teaching culture in classrooms, I believe that as global citizens and as effective English users, students need more than just knowledge of the institutional, historical and political aspects of culture provided for them in a traditional classroom. In order to encourage learners to become effective English users, teachers should implement a new approach of teaching English through an intercultural approach. This approach is not fixed on using a native speaker as a goal of learning English nor does it teach the culture-specific dimension which views a culture as a nation. Learners should be equipped with critical tools so that they can gain insight of their own cultures and other cultures through a critical approach to become intercultural speakers.

Finally, there is a lack of teacher training related to this new perspective. Educational institutions should be responsible for providing teacher training

courses which can provide new information and new trends of language teaching which are aligned with the development of students' skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some English teachers graduated a long time ago and they need to be provided with new information and equipped with teaching techniques and materials for new teaching trends.

To deal with the final problem, I have promoted a learning community in my institution in which colleagues have shared teaching methods and practices as well as their research projects with other colleagues. In doing this, a group of teachers can help one another to gain new knowledge, stay updated on new trends of English studies, and understand the changes of 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning. In addition, I would call for institutions which are responsible for educating student teachers to be responsible for introducing this concept to future teachers so that they will be more aware of the need for change.

## CONCLUSION

This paper questions the goal of teaching and learning English which aims at gaining a native speaker-like command of the language. It calls for a shift from using a native speaker as a model to using an intercultural speaker as a model. Studying English in Thailand thirty years ago was difficult because students were forced to strive for an unnecessary and unachievable goal to be native-like. In the past, a Thai learner of English might have taken it as a compliment when someone said that his or her accent was like a native accent. However, it might be perceived differently in the future when attitudes towards the prestigious status of the native speaker model change. The acceptance of varieties of English around the world leads to more understanding of the way Thai people can express their identity in the way they select to use some grammatical, lexical or phonological features of the language.

It will be no longer an embarrassing situation when a Thai user of English speaks with his or her Thai accent as long as it is intelligible to his or her interlocutor causing no misunderstanding in their cross-cultural communication. Teachers should not discourage their students by forcing them to conform to native speaker's norms; otherwise, it would be like what Halliday (1968, as cited in McKenzie, 2014, p. 8)) mentions that anyone who is "made ashamed of his own language habits suffers a basic injury as a human being: to make anyone, especially a child, feel so ashamed is as indefensible as to make him feel ashamed of the color of his skin".

Teaching English nowadays, however, is much more difficult because teachers need to prepare themselves to understand differences between the teaching and learning goals of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Being fully aware of upcoming changes, I strongly believe that language ability alone is not sufficient for a

learner to become an effective user of English in this new era in which most of the English users are non-native English speakers from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Language ability should be developed with the view of English as a medium of communication, and not as a prestigious language belonging to the native speakers in the Inner Circle. Intercultural competence is also needed to ensure the effectiveness in cross-cultural communication. A perfect combination of English language ability and intercultural competence would lead to the proficiency of English as defined by Canagarajah (2006) as “the ability to shuttle between different varieties of English and different speech communities” (p. 232). In this respect, he also recommends the focus on negotiation skills such as speech accommodation and interpersonal strategies like repairing, rephrasing, and mutually supporting practices.

From my point of view, the two models, a native speaker and an intercultural speaker, have different focuses with regard to language skills. I am also convinced that an intercultural speaker model emphasizes the more important and practical skills. A native English speaker model generally places an emphasis on students’ productive skills with the expectation that students should speak and write like a native speaker does. It may mislead students about the expectation that anyone who talks to them should use the same English as a native speaker does. It is likely those students who fix their thought on a native speaker as a model might find it difficult and frustrating if their interlocutor is not as they have expected. Additionally, if they cannot adjust their attitude towards this unexpected situation, it might affect their true understanding. An intercultural speaker model, on the other hand, focuses on the receptive skills of reading and listening with understanding. Students with intercultural competence tend to effectively deal with other users of English with more understanding and more tolerance. These students who are educated to have intercultural awareness and recognition of the existence of different varieties of English will be effective users of English. That is because they can use English at an acceptable level of intelligibility, but more importantly, they can use their intercultural skills to understand others and be tolerant of linguistic and cultural differences.

As a teacher of English in Thailand, I hope that the perceptions of the teachers and Thai society will gradually change, and the academic authorities will understand more about the need of change in order for the teaching and learning in Thailand to correspond with the reality of English used in the present world. Svartvik and Leech (2006) point out a difficulty in changing teachers’ attitudes, but have a view of the better future of English:

It will take a long time to overcome the weight of tradition of favouring the teaching and testing of English using standard native-speaker norms. We can imagine a scenario where a codified ELF, based on observed usage, might serve

as auxiliary international English for certain functions — and the English native speakers would have to learn it too. (p. 234)

English education in Thailand is entering a new phase of international communication and Thai learners and teachers must recognize the situation so that they can handle their cross-cultural communication effectively.

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