

# 'It Looks Weird to Me.': Attitudes Towards Standard Usage and Variant Use in Present-Day English

ATIKHOM THIENTHONG

English and Communication Programme, Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand

Author email: atikhom.k@ubu.ac.th

Article information	Abstract
<b>Article history:</b> Received: 20 Feb 2022 Accepted: 21 Oct 2022 Available online: 28 Oct 2022	<i>A growing body of research examines attitudes towards English varieties from an impressionistic perspective, but relatively few studies investigate attitudes towards specific standard and variant grammatical features. This study explores the language attitudes of Thai university students and teachers towards standard grammar and its variation in present-day English. The study adopted an online questionnaire which consisted of 15 pairs of sentences, with each pair containing two corresponding grammatical forms: standard and variant. Respondents chose standard and/or variant forms and provided reasons for their grammar choices. The responses and reasons were analysed using statistical and content analysis methods respectively. The analyses of acceptability responses by 182 students and 182 teachers revealed that the students were inclined to choose variant forms while the teachers were favourably disposed to both standard and variant forms. With respect to reasoning, both groups of the respondents overwhelmingly cited standard grammar rules to justify their preferences. However, they were significantly different in that while the teachers described the variations in grammatical forms, the students employed analogies with similar grammatical patterns. The overall results indicate that the respondents remain influenced by the standard language ideology. The results also suggest that the teachers tend to use their norm-providing roles to regulate standard forms while the students generalise rules of thumb to simplify and regularise prescriptive irregular usages. This article argues that grammar learning and teaching should address language variation and variant linguistic forms from a descriptive perspective.</i>
<b>Keywords:</b> Grammar Standard form Variant form Language attitude Thai students/teachers	

## INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that there are often no uniform patterns of linguistic features between correct standard usage in theory and actual language use in practice. These different aspects are captured through two perspectives of grammar respectively: prescriptive and descriptive. For example, the prescriptive rules of morphology require that the inflectional suffixes *-ed* not be added to the past forms of irregular verbs and *-s* not to uncountable nouns. However, descriptive corpus studies into actual language use have revealed attested evidence of variant grammatical forms which go against the prescriptive rules of grammar. Lieberman et al. (2007), based on

a corpus study of inflectional changes in irregular verbs, predict that many irregular verbs, such as *break*, *choose*, and *draw*, are likely to become regularised. Similarly, Schneider et al. (2020) found that non-standard pluralisation of uncountable nouns is regularly observed among non-native speakers and also occasionally among native speakers of English. In fact, there are some other corpus studies which have discovered variant forms of standard features, such as sentence-initial conjunctions (Liu, 2008), *was*-indicative in the unreal subjunctive (Phoocharoensil, 2014), and the indicative verb form in the mandative subjunctive (Grund & Walker, 2006). This empirical evidence proves that actual language use is not always in line with standard prescriptive rules.

However, variation of standard grammar is not purely a linguistic phenomenon, but it is also associated with evaluative reactions or language attitudes. As Cameron (1995) argues, people do not just use language, but they also react to it. They favour certain usages while stigmatising others. Empirically, language attitudes have received attention from research on English varieties in general and linguistic variations in particular. With respect to the former, many previous studies in Thailand and other expanding-circle contexts have focused on respondents' attitudes towards English varieties based on their general impressions, such as Boonsuk (2021), Boonsuk and Ambele (2019), Seyranyan and Westphal (2021), and Tarrayo et al. (2020). All these studies indicate that the participants tend to prefer standard varieties of English. In terms of language variation, previous studies have investigated language attitudes towards standard features and their non-standard forms, such as gender-neutral singular pronouns (Bradley, 2019), epicene pronouns in non-native writing (Stormbom, 2018), grammatical features of English as a lingua franca (ELF) (Lim & Hwang, 2019; Ploywattanawong & Trakulkasemsuk, 2014), and grammatical features of Hong Kong English (Ting & Wong, 2019). The results of these grammar studies have revealed mixed results, which warrant further investigation.

The studies reviewed have explored attitudes towards English varieties from an impressionistic perspective and non-standard uses of typical ELF grammatical features. However, there is a paucity of recent research, especially in Thailand, into university students' and teachers' attitudes towards standard and variant grammatical features. Thus, this attitudinal study is worthy of investigation because English teaching and learning in Thailand occurs largely in educational contexts (Saengboon et al., 2022). In these classroom settings, more emphasis is likely to be placed on standard grammar rules and proper uses of English (Hinkel, 2018). However, English nowadays is regarded as a global language variety which is primarily used for communication (Galloway & Rose, 2018). This language perspective focuses on actual language use rather than prescriptive standard usage and views language variation as a common phenomenon. In response to linguistic variability, there have been calls for the introduction of variant linguistic features observed in real-world contexts (e.g. Jenkins, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2017). It is therefore worthwhile to explore current participants' language attitudes towards standard grammatical features and their corresponding variant forms. Hopefully, the present study will contribute to an understanding of Thai students' and teachers' language attitudes and also their ideologies through an investigation of linguistic features. The research questions are formulated as follows:

- (1) To what extent are Thai university students and teachers inclined to choose standard and variant grammatical features?
- (2) What are their evaluative reactions to standard and variant grammatical features?
- (3) How do they justify their preferences for standard and variant grammatical features?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### English teaching in Thailand

Thailand is categorised as a norm-dependent country where English has no official status and is taught as a foreign language (EFL) (Kachru, 2005). In most intranational contexts, Thai people do not generally use English to communicate among themselves on a daily basis. By contrast, they are more exposed to English in academic domains through formal instruction. Thus, for many Thai students, they acquire English and its linguistic systems primarily in classroom settings. Because Thailand has no local codified norms of English, English language teaching (ELT) conforms to the norms of Standard English(es) as the teaching models of English (Galloway & Rose, 2015). In Thailand, English is a compulsory course from primary school to higher education. In these educational contexts, Standard English has played an influential role in ELT in Thailand for more than a century (Trakulkasemsuk, 2018). Since Standard English is proper and neatly codified, it is prescribed as the teaching model which EFL students and teachers must follow (Snodin & Young, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2017). The concepts of Standard English still dominate educational and social discourses in Thailand (e.g. Watson Todd & Pojanapunya, 2020). It is therefore reasonable to say that Standard English plays a powerful role in the minds of both Thai teachers and learners.

The language ideology that asserts Standard English to be the correct and proper version for teaching has been promoted in many ways in ELT in Thailand. In many Thai classrooms, English is “treated as a subject matter rather than as a language for use in daily life” (Imsa-ard, 2020, p. 141). Consequently, many Thai teachers tend to concentrate on teaching standard rules and usages. For example, Saengboon (2017) examined Thai students’ knowledge and perceptions of grammar and reported that grammar teaching focused on correct and perfect grammar for examinations rather than for communication. In relation to this finding, scholars point out that the standard model of teaching in many EFL contexts adheres to the dominant constructs of second language acquisition (SLA) which are grounded on “monolingual norms and practices” (Canagarajah, 2007, p. 934). Therefore, ELT is primarily intended for educational purposes, cognitively attuning students to language correctness (Mauranen, 2012). Furthermore, Thai students and teachers depend on standard language authorities, such as ELT textbooks and reference books produced by native-speaker scholars (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019). This is because those materials serve as the standard points of reference with “straightforward usage advice on questions of linguistic correctness” (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2020, p. xi). Thus, there seems no doubt that many studies have found that Thai students and teachers have favourable attitudes to standard English forms (e.g. Boonsuk, 2021; Snodin & Young, 2015; Tarrayo et al., 2020) while being reluctant to accept non-standard linguistic features (e.g. Ploywattanawong & Trakulkasemsuk, 2014).

In pedagogical discourse, there is substantial evidence that Thai students and teachers continue to be influenced by the standard language ideology. One prevalent ELT practice conforming to standard language norms is related to language assessment (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). In many Thai classrooms, assessment practices are oriented to SLA principles which explain students' competence from a deficit point of view in comparison to standard norms, concentrate on prescriptive rules (Booth, 2019), and favour correctness over communication (Saengboon, 2017). Thus, students are ideally expected to achieve correct language standards (Galloway & Rose, 2018; Trakulkasemsuk, 2018). However, despite the prevalent belief that Standard English is a proper model in EFL pedagogy, this standard language ideology has been increasingly challenged by the pluricentric conceptualisation of English as a global language (i.e. Global English). Nowadays, English is regarded as having diverse, flexible, and multiple forms (Galloway & Rose, 2018). As a result, English varieties have emerged which are sociolinguistically diverse and dynamically variable (Seidlhofer, 2017). Given the standard model and global role of English, there may exist two conflicting views and attitudes in the teaching and learning of English, which should be explored.

### Standard grammar and grammatical variation

There are no other areas of ELT that have received as much instructional attention as grammar teaching (Borg & Burns, 2008). In many EFL countries, such as Thailand, standard grammar rules are generally taught in education (Saengboon et al., 2022; Trudgill & Hannah, 2017). Standard rules are those versions that serve as the correct and proper models of instruction (Peterson, 2020) and points of reference, particularly with regard to grammar (Kuo, 2007). In theoretical models of standardisation, standard rules and norms are codified in language authorities, such as curricula, grammar references, and examinations (Seidlhofer, 2017), and "speakers [i.e. teachers and students] have traditionally been marginalised as passive followers of [those rules and] norms established by language authorities" (Lukač, 2018, p. 5). However, scholars agree that every natural language is always dynamic (Trask, 2010) and variable (Seidlhofer, 2017); linguistic forms can deviate from their standard forms in actual language use. Some common processes of language variation include simplification (i.e. replacing complex forms with simple ones), regularisation (i.e. making rules general and consistent), and approximation (i.e. using rough equivalent forms) (Mauranen, 2012). For example, language users may pluralise uncountable nouns, such as *researches* and *works* (Martinez, 2018) and use the same ditransitive patterns for *tell* and *inform* by analogy as they are semantically related (Mukherjee & Schilk, 2012). Hubers et al. (2020) noted that such analogy-induced variations are often instigated by language users who do not completely or adequately master prescriptive rules.

In language study, grammar is generally labelled as prescriptive and descriptive (e.g. J. Brinton & D. Brinton, 2010; J. Milroy & L. Milroy, 2000). Prescriptive grammar imposes explicit rules about (in)correct and (un)acceptable forms on language users to maintain correct standard usage (J. Milroy & L. Milroy, 2000; Lukač, 2018; Peterson, 2020). Prescriptivism serves to standardise the language (Hinkel, 2018) as it prescribes and proscribes certain language usages (J. Brinton & D. Brinton, 2010). In some cases, prescriptive rules stipulate irregular usages which cannot be explained by general grammar rules (Curzan, 2014). Prescriptivists assume

that there is only one single standard language, known as Standard English (Crystal, 2007; Peterson, 2020), so it is viewed as being linguistically uniform and non-dynamic (Davila, 2016). This monolingual notion is strongly associated with prescriptive grammar rules which teachers and learners must follow (Seidlhofer, 2017). Accordingly, Hinkel (2018, p. 3) argues that “prescriptive [rules] are conservative..., and thus are not easily given to language innovation and change”. The classic examples of prescriptive rules include non-split infinitives, sentence-initial prepositions, coordinated *he or she*, sentence-initial conjunctions, *whom*-accusative, irrealis *were*, and the mandative subjunctive. Many of these rules are broken more often in actual language use and they are becoming more acceptable.

In contrast, descriptive grammar focuses on describing what people actually use in writing and speech (Aitchison, 2001). It is a non-judgemental approach which is interested in the dynamism of language, i.e. language variation and change (e.g. Friedrich & Diniz de Figueiredo, 2016). Corpus studies have found that many standard grammatical forms have become less popular and uniform while their variant forms have gained more ground (e.g. Grund & Walker, 2006; Leech et al., 2009; Lieberman et al., 2007; Novogradec, 2009; Perales-Escudero, 2011; Phoocharoensil, 2014, 2017; Sketch Engine, 2021; Stormbom, 2018). While standard forms (e.g. irrealis *were*) are prescribed as the proper models of teaching (e.g. Azar, 2002; Huddleston & Pullman, 2002; Murphy, 2012), they are likely to undergo variation in practice. This linguistic variation involves a standard form and its corresponding variant(s) under the same variable which share equivalent grammatical characteristics and can be replaced in identical environments by each other (Grund & Walker, 2006). For example, the mandative subjunctive is a variable which has three variants: the subjunctive, the modal auxiliary *should*, and the indicative. J. Milroy and L. Milroy (2000) add that standard forms and their variant forms have equivalent usages, and they are not different in meaning. In the case of the mandative subjunctive, Berg et al. (2019) note that the mood choices are not in dispute as variants since their meanings appear to be minimally different. They are treated as competing variants. However, the subjunctive form tends to be prescribed as the proper usage (e.g. Grund & Walker, 2006).

### **Language ideology and attitude**

Ideology and attitude are two related constructs: people’s attitudes depend on their underlying ideologies shared by other members in society. Language attitudes can be defined as “evaluative reactions to different language varieties” (Dragojevic, 2018, p. 179). Such reactions involve favourable or unfavourable and acceptable or unacceptable responses (Galloway, 2017) and value-judgements about language styles and features (Peterson, 2020). The ways people express such attitudes are determined by their ideological systems. Ideologies are defined as a set of social beliefs shared by people in society. They control attitudes towards specific events and experiences (van Dijk, 2013). When social beliefs are widely shared by people in society, they tend to be viewed as normal; while other alternatives which do not conform to widely shared beliefs tend to be judged as deviant (Ricento, 2013). Thus, people’s standard language ideology tends to inform their negative attitudes towards non-standard or variant forms of language.

Language attitudes are often seen to comprise three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioural (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). They have many important consequences for ELT. The cognitive component relates to people's beliefs about which variety they perceive to be the standard model of teaching (Galloway, 2017). In this respect, exploring attitudes can reveal whether or not language speakers are prescriptivists (Kostadinova, 2018, p. 29). The affective component concerns people's feelings because they may not favour certain grammatical forms (Galloway, 2017), so they may have a stereotypical view of them (Liu et al., 2021). Finally, the behavioural component involves people's actions (Galloway, 2017). For example, students may choose to study with a teacher who uses standard English forms. While investigating language attitudes can reveal language ideologies, there are some important implications for ELT. Ting and Wong (2019) studied 52 local Hong Kong Chinese undergraduates' attitudes towards non-standard local features of English. The study found that most participants tended not to accept the non-standard usages of English for formal contexts, such as in education. This finding suggests that language attitudes are subject to the implementation of variant grammatical features in classrooms.

Previous studies on language variation have taken an acceptability approach to examine respondents' explicit attitudes towards non-standard grammar. Several studies measured the extent of acceptability on a Likert scale with varied numeric and semantic properties. For example, Lim and Hwang (2019) used a five-point scale: very unnatural, unnatural, neutral, natural, and very natural, Ting and Wong (2019) adopted a five-point scale: totally unacceptable, slightly unacceptable, slightly acceptable, totally acceptable, and don't know, and Wilson (2021) a four-point scale: (1) acceptable - (4) unacceptable. Instead of a rating scale, Ploywattanawong and Trakulkasemsuk (2014) adopted a four-choice format: good, bad, average, and no comment. From these previous studies, it is useful to note that while the study by Lim and Hwang (2019) used short dialogues as the context of the target linguistic features, the others used sentences. Furthermore, while Likert scales are quite common in research on attitudes towards grammar, Wilson (2021, p. 475) notes that "[i]n societies with strongly prescriptive attitudes, ... Likert scales are somewhat inappropriate since speakers appear to view language acceptability as right or wrong".

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Participants

This study involved students and teachers of English who had studied and taught at university level across Thailand. They were invited to participate in the present study via the academic Facebook group named Thai Association for Applied Linguistics (TAAL). Personal emails were also sent directly to potential participants whose email addresses were obtained from the TAAL website and their institutions' websites. The participants were also asked for assistance to snowball through their eligible second-order contacts. In total, 364 complete and qualified responses were analysed. For purposes of comparison, they were divided into 182 responses by students and 182 responses by teachers. The participants were native-Thai speakers from 38 different universities. The majority (63.2%) were females while 33.5% were males. Very few respondents (3.3%) identified themselves as non-binary.



The participants are English-major university students and university teachers of English. In view of language proficiency, they are generally considered sufficiently good at English grammar, given their field of study and status in educational discourse. The teachers are linguistically more competent than the students. This grammatical knowledge is confirmed by the results of the present study. Moreover, because of their social status as students and teachers, they study and teach standard grammar rules prescribed in grammar references. For educational purposes, the students and teachers usually follow standard grammar rules and concentrate on grammatical correctness (e.g. Saengboon, 2017). In this educational discourse, it is likely that they position themselves as norm-followers, norm-providers, and prescriptivists to ensure standard and correct usage (Seyranyan & Westphal, 2021; Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2013).

### **Grammatical features**

This study used 11 grammatical features to explore how standard and variant forms were assessed by the Thai university students and teachers. The grammatical features under investigation were selected from standard grammar references, namely Azar (2002), Huddleston and Pullman (2002), Longman (2021), Murphy (2012), and TruePlookpanya (2019, 2020a, 2020b), and also from corpus studies into traditionally prescribed grammatical features, namely Grund and Walker (2006), Lieberman et al. (2007), Perales-Escudero (2011), Phoocharoensil (2014), and Stormbom (2018). These grammatical features were investigated because they were competing variants in theory (i.e. standard forms) and practice (i.e. variant forms). The standard forms refer to the grammatical instances which have been traditionally prescribed in grammar references while their corresponding variant forms refer to the non-standard instances which are susceptible to variation in practice and observed in actual language use.

It is useful to note that whether a non-standard use is viewed as a mistake or a variant depends on the respondents' language ideology and attitudes. Some non-standard features (e.g. split infinitive, sentence-initial coordinating conjunctions, sentence-final prepositions) have become less prescribed and more acceptable. However, scholars argue that prescriptivism has its roots in history (Jenkins, 2015) and persists today as a result of concentration on prescriptive standard rules in education (Booth, 2019). In reality, nevertheless, corpus evidence shows that the variant features of standard grammar have gained more ground in actual language use. To ensure that the variant forms being investigated were attested in actual language use, their occurrences were checked against those of the standard forms by using a web-based corpus of 38 billion words (enTenTen20) compiled from a wide range of documents and registers. This corpus represents an international variety of English (Sketch Engine, 2021). The corpus data shows that the variant forms occur frequently rather than by accident (see Table 2). The grammatical features under investigation are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Variables, standard forms, and variant forms under investigation**

Variables	N*(Items)	Standard forms	Variant forms
1. Noun inflection	1 (1)	Uncountability	Countability
2. Verb inflection	2 (2, 3)	Irregularisation	Regularisation
3. Epicene pronoun	2 (4, 5)	Coordinated <i>he or she</i>	Singular <i>they</i>
4. Genitive case	1 (6)	<i>Of</i> -genitive	<i>S</i> -genitive
5. <i>To</i> -infinitive	1 (7)	Non-split infinitive	Split infinitive
6. Position of preposition	1 (8)	Sentence-initial	Sentence-final
7. Position of conjunction	1 (9)	Sentence-medial (Sentence coordinator)	Sentence-initial (Linking adverbial)
8. Complementation	1 (10)	<i>That</i> -clause	Personal object + <i>to</i> -infinitive
9. Accusative pronoun	1 (11)	<i>Whom</i> -objective	<i>Who</i> -objective
10. Mandative subjunctive (Necessity)	3 (12, 13, 14)	Bare form of verb	Present indicative, <i>should</i> -periphrasis
11. Unreal subjunctive (Non-factuality)	1 (15)	<i>Were</i> -subjunctive	<i>Was</i> -indicative

\*Number of variant forms

## Data collection

This study adopted an online survey questionnaire which could easily reach a wide group of participants. Before the questionnaire was implemented, it was pilot-tested for its validity with two students and two teachers who were not included in the actual study. The finalised questionnaire was then administered through the academic Facebook platform, TAAL and personal email invitations. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: demographic information and language attitudes. The first part had five demographic questions which sought to obtain information about participants' gender, nationality, occupation, alma mater, and current institution. The second part comprised 11 grammatical features investigated in 15 pairs of sentences, each of which dealt with one grammatical variable in two versions: standard and variant (see Table 2). Some grammatical features (e.g. epicene pronouns, the subjunctive mood) were investigated by more than one sentence pair since they had several variants.

The 15 sentences containing the grammatical features were taken from a corpus of 38 billion words (enTenTen20), accessed via Sketch Engine. The corpus, representing an international variety of English, comprises a wide range of online texts and registers in natural contexts (Sketch Engine, 2021). The sentences were intended to be neutral in terms of register; they were not specifically characteristic of spoken or written language. This allowed respondents open choices to express their views. To avoid any syntactic deviation and overloading of the respondents, the original sentences were simplified and proofread for naturalness by two experienced teachers of English: a native Thai speaker and a native English speaker. The target grammatical forms were underlined to direct the respondents' attention.



The acceptability items were designed using a multiple-choice format. To complete a questionnaire, the respondents had to choose the standard usage and variant use of the grammatical forms. Two preferences were also allowed if they thought that both versions were (un)acceptable. In total, there were four possible choices that the respondents were able to make: (un) acceptance of standard usages (2 choices) and (un)acceptance of variant uses (2 choices). Whichever choice they made, they were additionally requested to provide comments on their grammar choices in Thai or English. This allowed respondents to discuss the grammatical features more extensively. If they were unable or did not wish to give any reason or comment, they were instructed to write a question mark (?). This was to ensure that the items were not inadvertently skipped.

### **Data analysis**

The study employed both statistical methods and content analysis to process the quantitative and qualitative data respectively. With regard to the statistical methods, descriptive statistics viz. frequency counts were used to compute the respondents' four choices of standard and variant forms. In addition, chi-square tests were carried out to determine statistically significant differences between the students' and teachers' responses. For the content analysis, the respondents' reasons and comments were inductively scrutinised to discover emerging themes with respect to justifications for grammar choices. The responses which were considered invalid and excluded for the content analysis were respondents' admitted guesses, unclear and irrelevant explanations. The analysis showed that most of these invalid responses were provided by the students.

The process of data analysis involved three phases: coding, categorising, and theming (Saldaña, 2016). The analysis was performed on a spreadsheet involving multiple cycles of coding, proceeding as follows. Firstly, the comments were carefully read to identify meanings that indicated attitudes towards the grammatical features. Such meanings were then coded. Secondly, the individual codes that shared common properties of meaning were grouped into the same category. During this process, categories were established based on the codes and then named according to the commonality of their respective codes. Next, the relationships within and across the categories were explored where some similar categories were conflated. Finally, the central categories were finalised and themed in concise words. The themes were presented using raw frequency counts and percentages. More or less prominent themes were determined by the frequency of the codes (see Table 3).

## **RESULTS**

### **Choosing and reacting to standard and variant features**

The students and teachers chose and reacted to the standard usages and variant uses in significantly different ways. The sum of the responses from each of the 15 test items revealed that the students were inclined to choose the variant forms ( $n = 1,090$ ) and the standard forms ( $n = 989$ ) in order, whereas the teachers were likely to accept both grammatical forms ( $n =$

1,248) and the standard forms ( $n = 1,112$ ) in order. Chi-square tests revealed that the first and second categories of responses by the students and teachers were significantly different at  $p < 0.05$ . The least frequent were the students' choices of both grammatical forms ( $n = 636$ ) and the teachers' choices of variant forms ( $n = 349$ ). It is noteworthy that the smallest number in one group is the largest number in the other, thus indicating the divergent language attitudes between the students and teachers.

Table 2 summarises the respondents' selections of grammatical features and their attested occurrences in the enTenTen20 corpus of international English. The corpus data are included to demonstrate that the variant forms are attested in actual use, some of which are even more frequent than the standard ones. The results of the grammar choices are derived from the respondents' answers which fall into four possible categorical choices. They include (un) acceptance of either standard form (a) or variant form (b), and (un)acceptance of both grammatical forms (c). The either-or responses mean that the acceptance of standard forms translates into the unacceptance of variant forms and vice versa.

**Table 2**  
**Acceptability and unacceptability of standard and variant features and their occurrences in corpus**

Grammatical features	Acceptability	Unacceptability	Corpus data
	Student/Teacher	Student/Teacher	Frequency (wpm*)
<b>1. Noun inflection</b>			
a. The company has a total of <u>150 staff</u> .	55/118**	96/13**	69,783 (1.55)
b. The company has a total of <u>150 staffs</u> .	96/13**	55/118**	1,339 (0.03)
c. Both forms	31/42	0/9	
<b>2. Verb inflection</b>			
a. Max <u>quit</u> his job last month.	39/84**	111/34**	26,450 (0.59)
b. Max <u>quitted</u> his job last month.	111/34**	39/84**	9,840 (0.22)
c. Both forms	32/64**	0/0	
<b>3. Verb inflection</b>			
a. I have <u>chosen</u> a present for my mom.	139/162	29/0**	1,776,039 (39.49)
b. I have <u>choosed</u> a present for my mom.	29/0**	139/162	1,827 (0.04)
c. Both forms	14/20	0/0	
<b>4. Epicene pronoun</b>			
a. Every writer has <u>his or her</u> own writing style.	58/54	68/13**	1,090 (0.02)
b. Every writer has <u>their</u> own writing style.	68/13**	58/54	8,827 (0.2)
c. Both forms	56/114**	0/1	

Grammatical features	Acceptability	Unacceptability	Corpus data
	Student/Teacher	Student/Teacher	Frequency (wpm*)
<b>5. Epicene pronoun</b>			
a. Somebody left <u>his or her</u> book in my office.	82/67	46/18**	2,648 (0.06)
b. Somebody left <u>their</u> book in my office.	46/18**	82/67	92,740 (2.06)
c. Both forms	54/96**	0/1	
<b>6. Genitive case</b>			
a. <u>The cover of the book</u> is beautiful.	53/42	26/1**	9,044 (0.2)
b. <u>The book's cover</u> is beautiful.	26/1**	53/42	2,550 (0.06)
c. Both forms	99/139**	4/0	
<b>7. To-infinitive</b>			
a. Ken wants to understand his grammar lessons <u>fully</u> .	69/13**	46/34	98,903 (2.2)
b. Ken wants to <u>fully</u> understand his grammar lessons.	46/34	69/13**	60,607 (1.35)
c. Both forms	65/135**	2/0	
<b>8. Position of preposition</b>			
a. They may have a job <u>for</u> which you're looking.	39/10**	110/40**	212,073 (4.72)
b. They may have a job which you're looking <u>for</u> .	110/40**	39/10**	5,117 (0.11)
c. Both forms	33/132**	0/0	
<b>9. Position of conjunction</b>			
a. Max tried hard, <u>but</u> he failed.	130/118	7/2	13,505,747 (300.33)
b. Max tried hard. <u>But</u> he failed.	7/2	130/118	4,987,622 (110.91)
c. Both forms	44/61	1/1	
<b>10. Complementisation</b>			
a. My teacher <u>suggests that</u> I study harder.	41/70**	89/23**	290,060 (6.45)
b. My teacher <u>suggests me</u> to study harder.	89/23**	41/70**	15,357 (0.34)
c. Both forms	50/88**	2/1	
<b>11. Accusative pronoun</b>			
a. I don't know <u>whom</u> to ask.	57/41	81/22**	7,384 (0.16)
b. I don't know <u>who</u> to ask.	81/22**	57/41	31,912 (0.71)
c. Both forms	42/118**	2/1	

Grammatical features	Acceptability	Unacceptability	Corpus data
	Student/Teacher	Student/Teacher	Frequency (wpm*)
<b>12. Mandative subjunctive</b>			
a. It's essential that he <u>stay</u> here.	50/86**	111/49**	356 (0.01)
b. It's essential that he <u>stays</u> here.	111/49**	50/86**	1,077 (0.02)
c. Both forms	19/47**	2/0	
<b>13. Mandative subjunctive</b>			
a. We advise that this book <u>be</u> revised.	65/109**	84/25**	708 (0.02)
b. We advise that this book <u>is</u> revised.	84/25**	65/109**	741 (0.02)
c. Both forms	31/42	2/6	
<b>14. Mandative subjunctive</b>			
a. We suggest that he <u>not</u> stay.	17/35	134/70**	301 (0.01)
b. We suggest that he <u>should not</u> stay.	134/70**	17/35	1,222 (0.03)
c. Both forms	31/76**	0/1	
<b>15. Unreal subjunctive</b>			
a. If I <u>were</u> rich, I would buy a new house.	95/103	52/5**	31,364 (0.7)
b. If I <u>was</u> rich, I would buy a new house.	52/5**	95/103	9,364 (0.21)
c. Both forms	35/74**	0/0	

\*word per million

\*\*significant at  $p < 0.05$

Table 2 illustrates the individual results of the respondents' judgements about the acceptability of grammatical features. Of the four choices, the respondents' unacceptance of both grammatical forms was removed from the statistical analyses since there were too few responses to draw statistically robust conclusions. As a result, the remaining three choices were analysed for significant differences by employing chi-square tests. The separate chi-square analyses of the item-based frequency of the students' and teachers' preferences revealed 14 non-significant and 31 significant results. The non-significant results clearly indicate that the two groups tended to express similar attitudes. Of these similar choices, eight cases were standard forms, three of which (3, 9, 15) were predominantly preferred over the variant ones.

The significant differences in the respondents' attitudes were noted in the students' single choices of variant forms and the teachers' dual choices of standard and variant forms. The majority of the students were inclined to express acceptable attitudes towards the variant forms which appeared to be grammatical as a result of applying rules of thumb and analogy to similar patterns. This phenomenon was observed in five grammatical items (1, 2, 10, 12, 14). In the case in (1), for example, they applied the principle of s-addition to the uncountable collective noun *staff* which is not pluralised according to the prescriptive rules. As far as the preceding numeral (i.e. 150) was concerned, they linked it with the plural marker -s. Similarly,

in (12) most of the students (111 out of 182) chose the variant indicative form of the mandative subjunctive in which the finite verb in the embedded clause is inflected in the case of the third person singular present simple. Choices of this kind are also common in the corpus data, but not in the teachers' responses.

The teacher respondents tended to accept both standard and variant forms. These positive views are demonstrated by the most frequent choices in eight items (4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14) which were much more prevalent among the teachers. Among these items, there were five items (4, 6, 7, 8, 11) which received more than one hundred preferred responses. These responses are attested by the actual use of both standard and variant forms; some of the variant forms are even more common in the corpus data. In the case of epicene pronouns in (4), for instance, there is approximately an eightfold difference between the traditional coordinated *he* or *she* and the variant singular *they* that refers to individuals of any gender identity (e.g. *every writer*). While the former occurs 1,090 times or 0.02 words per million, the latter occurs 8,827 times or 0.2 words per million. The same pattern is also true of the pronouns *who* and *whom* in the accusative case in (11). The variant *who* is significantly more widespread in actual language use than the standard *whom*, with the former occurring 31,912 times or 0.71 words per million and the latter 7,384 times or 0.16 words per million.

### Reasons for choosing standard and variant features

The respondents explained the reasons for their linguistic choices, in ranked order, in English, Thai and a mix of both languages. The analysis of their responses yielded 5,555 answers. However, only 3,310 (59.59%) relevant reasons were included in the analysis (see Table 3). Of these valid responses, the teachers supplied 2,140 (64.65%) reasons which were about twice the number of reasons 1,170 (35.35%) given by the students. These figures indicate that the teachers had better knowledge of the standard rules and felt more strongly about the grammatical features and then made greater efforts in vindicating their grammar choices. The results are presented in Table 3. It should be noted that since the total numbers of reasons provided by the students and teachers were not equal, the percentages were reported alongside the raw frequencies to ensure a meaningful comparison.

**Table 3**  
**Frequency and percentage of reasons for choosing standard and variant forms**  
**(Grand total percentage in bold and group percentage not in bold)**

Reasoning categories	Either form				Both forms				Total		Grand total
	Standard		Variant		Yes		No				
	S*	T	S	T	S	T	S	T	S	T	
Rule	343 (29.32)	610 (28.50)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	343 (29.32)	610 (28.50)	953 (28.79)
Variation	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	151 (12.91)	377 (17.62)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	151 (12.91)	377 (17.62)	528 (15.95)
Analogy	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	322 (27.52)	130 (6.07)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	322 (27.52)	130 (6.07)	452 (13.66)
Judgement	44 (3.76)	166 (7.76)	51 (4.36)	39 (1.82)	23 (1.97)	108 (5.05)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	118 (10.09)	313 (14.63)	431 (13.02)
Meaning	4 (0.34)	3 (0.14)	44 (3.76)	26 (1.21)	39/4** (3.33/0.34)	80/38 (3.74/1.78)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	91 (7.78)	147 (6.87)	238 (7.19)
Register	0 (0.00)	10 (0.47)	2 (0.17)	2 (0.09)	14 (1.20)	137 (6.40)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	16 (1.37)	149 (6.96)	165 (4.98)
Prescription	39 (3.33)	108 (5.05)	5 (0.43)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	44 (3.76)	108 (5.05)	152 (4.59)
Experience	19 (1.62)	33 (1.54)	4 (0.34)	8 (0.37)	8 (0.68)	48 (2.24)	0 (0.00)	2 (0.09)	31 (2.65)	91 (4.25)	122 (3.69)
Communication	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	1 (0.09)	0 (0.00)	30 (2.56)	76 (3.55)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	31 (2.65)	76 (3.55)	107 (3.23)
Preference	1 (0.09)	38 (1.78)	2 (0.17)	32 (1.50)	8 (0.68)	1 (0.05)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	11 (0.94)	71 (3.32)	82 (2.48)
Alternative	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	10 (0.85)	36 (1.68)	10 (0.85)	36 (1.68)	46 (1.39)
Others	2 (0.17)	3 (0.14)	0 (0.00)	8 (0.37)	0 (0.00)	21 (0.98)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	2 (0.17)	32 (1.50)	34 (1.03)
Total	452 (38.63)	971 (45.37)	431 (36.84)	245 (11.45)	277 (23.68)	886 (41.40)	10 (0.85)	38 (1.78)	1,170 (35.35)	2,140 (64.65)	3,310 (100.00)

\*Student, Teacher

\*\*Identical meaning/Different meaning

The reasons given by the respondents ranged from explaining prescriptive rules to overtly expressing personal preferences. The respondents provided most of the reasons when they made the dual choices of standard and variant forms and the sole choices of standard forms. This pattern was predominantly observed among the teachers. On the other hand, the students cited the highest number of reasons to explain their choices for variant forms. This was twice the number of reasons offered by the teachers for the same grammatical variable. In terms of text length, the comments analysed ranged from one-word evaluations (e.g. 'weird' and 'incorrect') to longer, more detailed explanations of grammar rules.

Table 3 presents the frequencies and percentages of 12 themes of reasoning given by the students and teachers, ranked from most to least frequent. The two groups are markedly different in providing reasons in support of their language evaluations. The teachers provided 11 out of 12 reasons much more frequently than the students. However, generally there is a similar pattern of reasoning in terms of order ranking. The teachers' top five reasons involve rule, variation, judgement, meaning, and register. The students' top five reasons include rule,



analogy, variation, judgement, and meaning. Strikingly, register and analogy are in stark contrast between the two groups. The former is favoured by the teachers, but absent from the students' top five, while the opposite is true of the latter. In contrast, the bottom five reasons are similar across the two groups, consisting of experience, communication, preference, alternative and others (e.g. different emphasis).

Both groups of the respondents attributed their grammar choices to standard grammar rules (28.79%) as the top reason. For this theme, the students (29.32%) provided a slightly higher percentage of responses than the teachers (28.50%). This reasoning is related to the other themes, namely judgement, prescription, preference, experience and alternative, in that they are in line with the standard and prescriptive notions. They involve judging either forms as correct and incorrect, prescribing standard forms, strongly preferring standard forms, seeing and using standard forms, and suggesting alternative forms. Taking these six themes into account, however, they were more common among the teachers and mostly observed where the standard forms were favoured over the variant ones. The respondents' justification for linguistic standards also emerged even when they accepted both standard and variant forms. Generally, they still held strong prescriptive attitudes towards the standard rules about uncountable nouns, irregular verbs, sentence-initial conjunctions, and the subjunctive mood. Citing grammar rules is mainly concerned with three grammatical devices, like rule-based explanations, mechanical rules (e.g. 'quit, quit, quit') and metalinguistic terms (e.g. 'subjunctive mood'). The rule-based explanations are illustrated as follows:

- (1) We rarely use conjunctions (e.g. *but*) to begin a sentence (Undergraduate student 72, female, accepting standard usage, conjunction position).
- (2) Though the past tense requires the past inflectional form of verbs, there is an exceptional group of irregular verbs, such as *put* and *hit*. This is because they have one syllable with a short vowel followed by a consonant (Undergraduate student 28, male, accepting standard usage, verb inflection).
- (3) *Somebody* is a single pronoun. If gender is not mentioned, it should be male (Teacher 108, male, accepting standard usage, epicene pronoun).
- (4) *Staff* is an uncountable noun, so it shouldn't be in the plural form. But adding the plural morpheme doesn't seem like a serious mistake (Teacher 61, male, accepting both forms, noun inflection).

Some respondents preferred both standard and variant features. This preference was justified as variation (15.95%), which was more prevalent among the teachers (17.62%) than the students (12.91%). With respect to this variation theme, there were three related categories: judgement, meaning and experience. The respondents opted for both forms because they perceived them as grammatically correct and semantically identical, and they also reported using and seeing them in actual contexts. These results suggest that both grammatical features have become recognised and acceptable. Generally, they expressed favourable attitudes towards the grammatical features, for example, epicene pronouns, genitive case, *to*-infinitive, preposition positions, *suggest*-complementation, and accusative pronouns. Some respondents made more elaborate comments, revealing that some prescribed features, such as epicene pronouns, have political implications. They responded as follows:

- (5) Both are fine, although some scholars argue that *their* is incorrect, but to be politically correct, it's fine (Teacher 12, male, accepting both forms, epicene pronoun).
- (6) Both can be seen in authentic usage, according to my experience. When we are not sure about the gender of 'someone', it is more politically correct to use *his/her* or *their* (Teacher 134, female, accepting both forms, epicene pronoun).

The only reason that ranked second among those given by the students and was much more prevalent among the students was related to analogy (13.66%). For this theme, the teachers provided only 130 responses (6.07%) while the students supplied 322 responses (27.52%). The percentage difference was almost fivefold. The respondents mostly employed analogies in situations where they chose variant forms. Analogies occurred as they applied the prescriptive rules of thumb and generalised grammatical usages to similar contexts. For example, many students pluralised *staff* by adding the plural suffix -s since it was preceded by *150* as in (7) and explained that *I* was used with *was* despite the prescriptive usage of *were* as in (8). Additionally, some teachers viewed as incomplete the negated clause that lacks *do*-support in the subjunctive mood as in (9) and inflected the irregular verb in the past tense as in (10). The respondents' reasons are exemplified below.

- (7) Grammatically, when things or people are more than one person, the noun must add -s (Undergraduate student 85, male, accepting variant use, noun inflection).
- (8) *Were* is used with a plural subject. The subject *I* is a singular subject, so it is used with *was* (Undergraduate student 99, female, accepting variant use, unreal subjunctive).
- (9) The unit after *suggest that* is a sentence. *He not stay* is not a complete sentence (Teacher 54, male, accepting variant use, mandative subjunctive).
- (10) The event occurred in the past, so the verb must be marked with the past tense (Teacher 32, non-binary, accepting variant use, verb inflection).

Notably, many respondents perceived standard and variant features as different in register and meaning. Regarding register (4.98%), many teachers explained that the standard forms were typical of written and formal discourse while the variant forms were possible in speaking and informal contexts. This result was more common among the teachers (6.96%) than the students (1.37%), indicating that the teachers were linguistically more competent and so demonstrated the niceties of grammatical usages between the standard and variant forms. This somewhat reflects their prescriptive attitudes towards language styles. In the light of meaning, many respondents thought that the standard and variant forms were different, but while the students chose variant forms (3.76%), the teachers favoured both forms (1.78%). Attending more to the register and semantic differences of the grammatical forms, the respondents gave less importance to their communicativeness. Indeed, only 3.23% of the responses concerned comprehensibility.

## DISCUSSION

The overall results showed that the respondents were more inclined to choose the standard forms than the variant ones and justified their choices by mainly attributing them to prescriptive standard grammar rules. These results indicate that the respondents' language attitudes towards English grammar remains influenced by the ideology of Standard English that emphasises linguistic correctness. The notions of Standard English as the correct model of teaching have exerted considerable influence on ELT practices in Thailand. Many of these ELT practices are informed by the traditional EFL paradigm which conforms to monolingual norms and practices (Canagarajah, 2007). As a consequence of EFL pedagogy, students are cognitively oriented to linguistic forms and expected to use them accurately (Mauranen, 2012). To achieve this educational goal, many EFL teachers are required to follow standard norms as prescribed in grammar references (Lukač, 2018; Seidlhofer, 2017). Driven by this educational goal, the teachers may have positioned themselves as both followers of norms imposed by grammar references and norm-providers. They were motivated by their strong need to regulate standard usage. Similarly, the students may have navigated their roles as both norm-followers and future norm-providers since they were mostly exposed to standard grammar rules through formal instruction. Because of their status as teachers and students in educational discourse, they subscribe to the standard language ideology.

The students and teachers were significantly different in their first choices of grammatical forms. While the students were inclined to choose the variant forms the most, the teachers favoured both standard and variant forms. However, the comments clearly show that they preferred the variant forms for different reasons. In the case of the teachers, they truly believed that many non-standard forms were acceptable variants, yet they were not solely accepted. The teachers argued that both standard and variant forms were semantically identical and 'can be used now'. In fact, many grammatical features (e.g. singular *they*, split infinitive, sentence-final prepositions, s-genitive with inanimate entities, and *who*-objective) which were once stringently prescribed have become more acceptable and are now in widespread use, even in formal contexts and academic writing (e.g. Martinez, 2018; Perales-Escudero, 2011; Speyer & Schleef, 2019). It is acknowledged that language variation is an ever-changing phenomenon (Trask, 2010), especially in real-world situations where speakers of different native languages communicate with each other (Jenkins, 2015). This actual global use of English leads to variation in its standard linguistic forms which are more diverse and flexible (Galloway & Rose, 2018). Many teacher respondents may have more realised this linguistic reality in today's globalised and multilingual world, so they tended to be more open-minded than students towards non-standard variant forms.

In the case of the students, they chose the variant forms the most frequently. At first glance, it seems that they held a genuine positive attitude. In fact, their reasons clearly indicate that they opted for many variant forms because they may not have fully mastered prescriptive rules and hence generalised their grammatical knowledge by analogy in order to simplify irregular usages (e.g. Hubers et al., 2020). These results are supported on both theoretical grounds and empirical evidence. According to Trask (2010, p. 35), "we...adore analogy". We are eager to see regular patterns and extend such patterns to new forms we encounter. As a consequence,

linguistic rules are often simplified by replacing complex forms with regularised and simpler forms to be more general and consistent (Mauranen, 2012). Studies have also found that language users tend to regularise and simplify grammar rules, especially those with exceptions and irregularities (e.g. Martinez, 2018; Seidlhofer, 2004; Ting & Wong, 2019). There is no doubt that many of the student respondents judged many variant forms as grammatically correct and standard forms as incorrect. The results suggest that the standard grammatical features under inquiry have irregular usage. Because of their irregular usage, some of the respondents commented that they are outdated and difficult to learn and hence should not be taught.

The present study is consistent with previous studies that investigated EFL students' and teachers' attitudes towards English varieties in general and variant grammatical features. The results tend to point in the same direction, namely, that standard and correct forms of English are generally preferred. For example, students and teachers are likely to accept standard English varieties as codified in ELT textbooks even though they are also open-minded towards variant English forms (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019; Tarrayo et al., 2020). Regarding grammatical features, Lim and Hwang (2019) observed the respondents' moderate level of positive attitudes towards non-standard grammatical forms. Similarly, Ploywattanawong and Trakulkasemsuk (2014) and Ting and Wong (2019) found that the respondents had reluctant and negative attitudes. In support of many of these previous studies, the present study indicates that many EFL students and teachers tend to give more importance to linguistic standards and correctness than communicativeness. Overall, it is quite clear that standard forms of English remain preferable. In the case of the present study, some variant features (e.g. the indicative form in the subjunctive mood) are not preferred even though they are amenable to general grammatical explanations.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results generally indicate that even though the students and teachers express attitudes of acceptance towards some variant forms, they remain influenced by standard language prescriptivism. Driven by this powerful ideology, they are inclined to judge grammatical features as 'correct' and 'incorrect', 'acceptable and unacceptable', 'proper' and 'strange'. This standard language ideology which is formed through language standardisation (Lukač, 2018) is maintained and transmitted to norm-followers in educational discourse. Teachers who are both norm-followers and -providers tend to regulate and prescribe standard rules. In turn, students inherit and follow those prescriptive rules. However, notably, students who have not mastered those standard rules are likely to draw on their general linguistic knowledge to generalise and simplify irregular usages.

The present study suggests some implications. Firstly, teachers and students of English should approach grammar and its variation from a descriptive, non-judgemental perspective. Instead of judging standard-deviating forms with negative attitudes, teachers and students should describe them non-evaluatively as potential variant forms. This objective description can be validated by using attested data from real language use. For instance, *staff* and *research* are prescribed as uncountable nouns in grammar references, so adding the suffix *-s* or *-es* is proscribed. But corpus data show that they are often pluralised as *staffs* and *researches*, even

in high-stakes academic writing (e.g. Friedrich & Diniz de Figueiredo, 2016; Martinez, 2018). However, since it may not be reasonable to treat every deviating form as a variant, it is suggested that teachers utilise the attested evidence of actual language use from large corpora, such as English Web 2020 (enTenTen20) and Global Web-Based English (GloWbE), to vindicate their decision. Corpus-based accounts of grammar can provide teachers and students with more reliable and objective validations of typical language use.

Secondly, while it is imperative for teachers to have a standard model of teaching as a point of reference, they should also address language variation and variant grammatical forms. In instructional contexts, this article argues that standard grammar remains a vital starting point in teaching and learning (Kuo, 2007). Indeed, students need to receive proper instruction and standard language input, and they should be aware that language use varies according to context and register. Nonetheless, teachers should not hold too prescriptive an attitude that variant forms are incorrect and should be avoided in all contexts of use. Hence, students should be taught to follow one single prescribed usage. In actual language use, however, teachers should realise that there are possible variant forms of English which deviate from their prescribed usages. These non-standard or variant features could be legitimate in their own right for communicative purposes. Thus, it is important that teachers introduce common variant forms in addition to their corresponding standard forms into language classrooms.

There are some limitations that should be addressed. Firstly, the present study employed a survey questionnaire which aimed to elicit respondents' grammar choices and expansive comments. Even though using questionnaires obtained both types of quantitative and qualitative data, many grammar choices were not justified nor clearly explained by the respondents. To delve deeper into respondents' unexplained choices and unclear explanations, it is suggested that future researchers employ a discourse-based interview approach as proposed by Odell et al. (1983). Discourse-based interviews will enable more insightful investigation where researchers and participants engage in focused discussions. Secondly, the present study treated the grammatical features as neutral in terms of contextual and social aspects. Further research on language attitudes should contextualise non-standard features in relation to factors such as users' social status and competence, mode of communication, and levels of formality (e.g. Ting & Wong, 2019).

## THE AUTHOR

**Atikhom Thienthong** is a lecturer in English and Communication Programme, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand. His research interests include collocation, synonymy, pattern grammar, written discourse, language attitudes, and corpora.

[atikhom.k@ubu.ac.th](mailto:atikhom.k@ubu.ac.th)

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