

Former AU Students' Preferences for English Pronunciation before Graduation versus Exposure afterwards

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Abstract

Purpose: The study examines the relationship between former Assumption University of Thailand (AU) students' preferences for English pronunciation models at university with their exposure to English pronunciation models after graduation. **Research design, data and methodology:** The study compares students' preferences for pronunciation models of native speakers (NSs) of English with those of non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. This study employs a questionnaire, and the data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. **Results:** The results show that in students' eyes, the NS models were the desired models to be learned at university level. However, when examining students' daily interactions in English after graduation, the results reveal that students communicated with NNSs more than with NSs. **Conclusions:** The findings suggest that students might be to some extent biased toward NS norms, and, therefore, their preferences could be somehow influenced by practices supporting the ideology of native speakerism. Secondly, the study reveals that Thai learners of English need to learn and be exposed to a large variety of English pronunciation models, especially in Thailand, where English is used more by NNS communicating with one another. The study, therefore, suggests that pronunciation teaching locally and beyond needs to adhere to the plurality of English accented speech.

Keywords : Native Speaker of English, Non-native Speaker of English, Preferences, Pronunciation Models

JEL Classification Code: Z00, Z13, Z19

1. Introduction

Given that nowadays NNSs of English outnumber NSs of English and English has become an international language of communication (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Ishaque, 2018), it is thus an imperative to consider varieties of English and, especially, varieties related to pronunciation. Such inquiry is particularly important for communication among NSs and NNSs in various international settings as Thailand being one of them. In Thailand, in particular, English is used as a shared and common language of communication among predominantly NNSs who come from different socio-linguistic and cultural

backgrounds (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2020; Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019; Rajprasit, 2022; Sangpetch et al., 2023).

1.1 Expected Benefits

On these grounds, it is quite crucial to establish what pronunciation models learners of English should be taught and learn and, correspondingly, what is deemed acceptable or standard English pronunciation. Such type of knowledge will provide a series of insights into practices concerned with evaluating and assessing English in various contexts and settings world-wide.

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As to Thailand, such analysis is of particular importance too. On the one hand, investigation as such will provide pedagogical implications as to what pronunciation models should be prioritized in the teaching of English at school and university levels. On the other hand, it will provide further insights into the current status and nature of English in the local Thai context, and how it affects communication amongst the various users of English locally.

In this regard, according to Kirkpatrick (2020), English will continue to play more diverse and wide-ranging roles in the future in the Expanding Circle (EC) countries of Asia as it is being increasingly used as a lingua franca by multilinguals in Asia for a variety of purposes. Moreover, Nanni (2021) states that Thai students are more and more likely to use English in the future to communicate with other learners of English and English is on the road of becoming the lingua franca of Southeast Asia. In light of this, this study could provide insightful information as to the impact of English language education on Thailand's future presence in global and regional contexts and, particularly, within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the EC countries of Asia.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to pursue the following two main objectives. First and foremost, it tries to examine the preferences of former AU students for English pronunciation models at university level by precisely comparing NS models with NNS models. On a broader level, the study tries to investigate the relationship between students' preferences for English pronunciation models at AU level with their real exposure to pronunciation models after graduation from university or in a post-university environment, such as at the work-place and when socializing.

1.3 Research Questions

Considering these research objectives, the study will address the following two research questions (RQs)

1. What are students' preferences for English pronunciation models at university level?
2. Are there any matches or mismatches between students' pre-conceived preferences for English pronunciation models at university level and students' real exposure to English pronunciation models after graduation from university?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Background of the Study

Learners' views on their preferred English pronunciation models in the context of the NS/NNS dichotomy have been examined in a large number of studies previously. So, learners have been repeatedly approached to share their beliefs as to how English pronunciation should be both taught and evaluated. In this respect, investigating the attitudes of Hong Kong secondary school students towards both native English teachers (NETs) and non-native English teachers (NNETs), Cheung, 2000 tabulated that most of the participants exhibited preferences for NETs as their oral teachers since NETs' pronunciation was better in terms of accuracy. Furthermore, participants shared that they preferred NETs also because they could correct students' pronunciation and help them lose their accent when communicating in English.

In a study conducted with university students in Vietnam and Japan, Walkinshaw and Oanh, 2014 found that, according to participants, the pronunciation of native English teachers (NETs) was clearer, more authentic, and a desired target model in terms of linguistic production. Diaz, 2015 examined the preferences of University of Rennes' students towards their NETs and NNETs. The majority of the participants similarly showed preferences for NETs in the areas of oral exercises and pronunciation.

Learners' opinions on their desired English pronunciation models have been extensively explored previously in studies conducted in the local Thai context as well. So, findings reveal that native varieties of English are still prevalent and are rated more favorably and positively than non-native varieties by Thai speakers of English (Goldsmith & Dennis, 2016; Kanoksilapatham, 2013; Prakaianurat & Kangkun, 2018). Findings, furthermore, show that NS accents were still the target models to be learnt and used in a local Thai context (Jindapitak, 2014; Jindapitak & Teo, 2013; Kalra & Thanavisuth, 2018; Snodin & Young, 2015).

Nevertheless, other studies conducted in Thailand provide support in favor of the belief that awareness and recognition of NNS varieties of English, including those linked to pronunciation, are significant for the purposes of intercultural and international communication, especially when conducted between various speech communities.

In this regard, Jindapitak and Teo (2013) examined the preferences of university students for English varieties and their attitudes towards the importance of understanding varieties of English. According to the findings, even though most learners preferred NS accents, they still considered non-native English varieties worth in terms of understanding and learning.

Rattanaphumma (2013) ,furthermore ,investigated 348 English language university students 'attitudes towards both NETs 'and NNETs 'English accents and teaching practices . Regarding English accents, the study suggests that learners displayed positive attitudes towards both NETs and NNETs . On the one hand, participants viewed NS accents as classical, proper and also authentic .On the other hand, they considered Thai English accents as easy and clear in terms of understanding .

Moreover, Suebwongsuwan and Nomnian (2020) investigated the awareness and attitudes of Thai undergraduate hotel interns/students towards spoken English varietiesSo ., whereas participants still showed preferences for NS accents, they at the same time accepted and displayed positive attitudes towards NNS accents too . ,Thus they showed favorable attitudes towards the global status of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and recognized its importance for the purposes of intercultural and international communication. As these findings reveal, in terms of the area of correct pronunciation and accent, the results are not as pronounced and clear-cut as they first might appear to be in favor of NS accents .

2.2 Conceptual Framework

Even though nowadays NNSs of English outnumber NSs of English and English has become an international language of communication (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Ishaque, 2018)as mentioned earlier ., the English language teaching industry has for a long time been driven in both theoretical and practical terms by a pervasive ideology, known as native speakerism. This ideology has not only developed propositions about the linguistic skills, competencies, roles and respective strengths of NSs and NNSs, but also about their professional identities as educators. In addition, this ideology has also shaped how they are viewed by students, other teachers, parents, administrators, as well as how teachers view themselves and their own contributions to the teaching field. This ideology has also influenced the allocation of English programs and curricula, foci and scope of content, the selection of learning materials and recruitment practices (Boonsuk et al., 2023; Liu, 2021, 2022; Maganaka, 2023).

Briefly speaking, native speakerism is an ideology that favors the NS, as well as NS English and NS methods (Comprendio & Savski, 2020; Copland et al., 2020; Jindapitak, 2014; Jindapitak & Teo, 2011; Suwanarak, 2010). Perhaps the earliest scholar, whose work has shaped this ideological trend is Phillipson (1992), who introduced the concept of the so-called NS fallacy, which rests on the assumption that the ideal language teacher is the NET. Yet, the differences between both groups of teachers are firstly described and discussed by Medgyes (1992), who argues

that NNETs remain permanent language learners and, therefore, the higher levels of linguistic competence and communicative proficiency that NETs possess would always account as their biggest advantage that cannot be challenged by any other factors prevalent in the learning situation, such as motivation, experience, perseverance aptitude and education amongst others.

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

3. Research Methods and Materials

3.1 Population and Sample

In total, 32 participants took participation in the study. The subjects of this study were former AU undergraduate students. 31 of them had already graduated from AU before the research study was completed. The remaining 1 student had probably decided to continue her undergraduate studies elsewhere. All participants had spent at least 4 years at AU. All of them had spent at least 2 years of studying English (only) as a compulsory subject at university. They are all female Thai nationals and their mother tongue is Thai. The majority of the participants are the researchers' former students whom the researcher has kept in close contact with over the years.

It should be mentioned here that AU is the first international university in Thailand, where the medium of instruction is strictly English for all degrees and programs at university .In addition, it needs to be added that AU includes both NSs and NNSs as instructors in various fields of study, including English instructors .Having said that, it is highly likely that AU students are generally highly exposed to both groups of teachers, NETs and NNETs, while pursuing their undergraduate studies in English education at university .

As to the participants in this particular study, they all shared that they had been indeed taught by both NETs and NNETs throughout their English studies at AU. Moreover, on average, as it will be shown later, participants in the study

were seemingly well aware of the various nationalities of their English teachers (the nationalities of both NETs and NNETs) while at AU, and they accordingly most of the time named correctly where their teachers are from. These indications and the choice of participants here further allow for the data to be analyzed and discussed, and so make the study worth in terms of being both researchable and interesting.

3.2 Research Design

This study employed both a quantitative and qualitative means of gathering and analyzing the data. In terms of the quantitative analysis, it primarily used a 3-Point Likert scale, consisting of the options Agree, Disagree and Neutral, concerning a number of variables, such as, for example, familiarity, comprehensibility and clarity regarding students' choices for various pronunciation models. This method ensured the display of the results numerically in the form of a few figures with percentages later.

In addition to students' preferences for the given variables, participants also were asked to answer a more general open-ended question in order to explain and justify in more details their previously-stated preferences. This particular method provided the premises for the qualitative analysis of the data since it examined students' beliefs and attitudes, and it provided insights into students' informed opinions and learning experiences with both groups of teachers, and also evaluations of their diverse roles. The survey was distributed to students online and students submitted their completed surveys online. The data was collected and analyzed between November 2023 to March 2024.

3.3 Research Instrument

This study employed the use of a questionnaire as the means for gathering the data. The questionnaire comprised three parts. The first part addressed participants' demographic and additional personal information, such as their first language and nationality, number of years and semesters spent at AU (including learning English), along with other relevant and supporting information deemed important.

In brief, the second part asked students to indicate their preferences regarding whether they preferred to be taught pronunciation by NETs or NNETs while at AU, and it particularly examined students' preferences for English pronunciation models at university level across a number of variables, such as, for example, familiarity, comprehensibility and clarity. The third part asked students to provide information regarding whether while working and/or socializing, and specifically after graduation from

AU, they communicated in English mostly with NSs, or mostly with NNSs, or on average with both groups of speakers.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Students' Preferences for English Pronunciation Models at University Level (RQ1)

So, taking into account the responses given by all 32 participants regarding RQ1, the majority of the participants (68.75 %) agreed that they found the pronunciation models of NSs at university level clearer, more comprehensible and more familiar. Also, the majority (65.63 %) stated that they preferred to be taught pronunciation by NSs. Lastly, again most of the participants (65.63 %) shared that they were trying to mimic and copy NS pronunciation models in their English classes while at AU (see Figure 1).

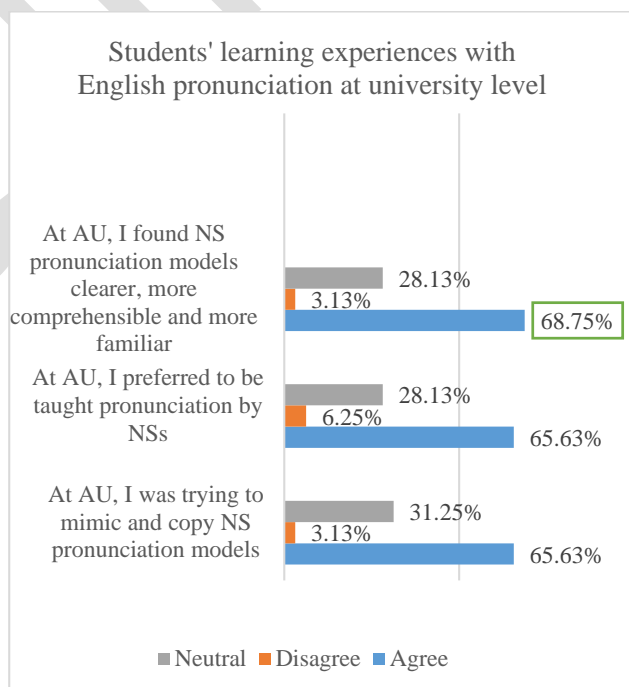


Figure 1: Students' Preferences for English Pronunciation Models at AU

4.2 Students' Post-university Exposure to Various English Pronunciation Models (RQ2)

Regarding students' communication in English in a post-university environment or after graduation from university in light of RQ2, most of the participants (46.88 %) shared that they were communicating in English often or on a regular basis. So, it could be assumed that their usage of English in a post-university environment, or at least around

the time the study was completed (November 2023-March 2024), proved to be quite sufficient. This finding allowed for further examining students' levels of exposure to English pronunciation models in a post-study environment. Moreover, it revealed that their usage of English had extended beyond the field of academia and had been used for purposes exceeding study-only purposes. Figure 2 below presents all the results.

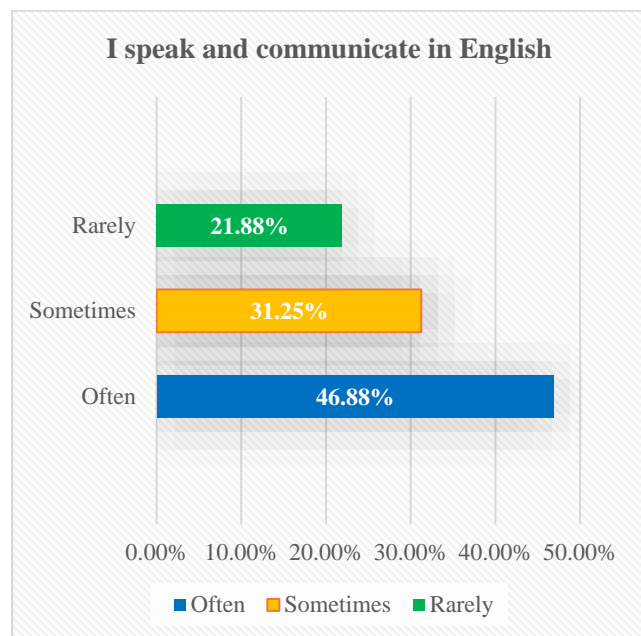


Figure 2: Levels of Frequency of Using English after Graduation

On these grounds, what follows next is to unravel and discuss the relationship between two closely-linked and relevant variables :1 (whether students at the time were communicating in English for professional purposes (in the professional field), or for social purposes (when socializing), or for both; and 2 (whether students were communicating in English mostly with NSs, or mostly with NNSs, or actually with both groups of speakers).

So, the majority of the participants (43.75 %) stated that they communicated in English both professionally and for socializing, or both for professional and social purposes. In addition, most of the participants (59.38 %) shared that on average they communicated both with NSs and NNSs. Quite strikingly, only 2 of the participants (6.25 %) stated that they communicated mostly with NSs. Figures 3 and 4 below display all the results, respectively.

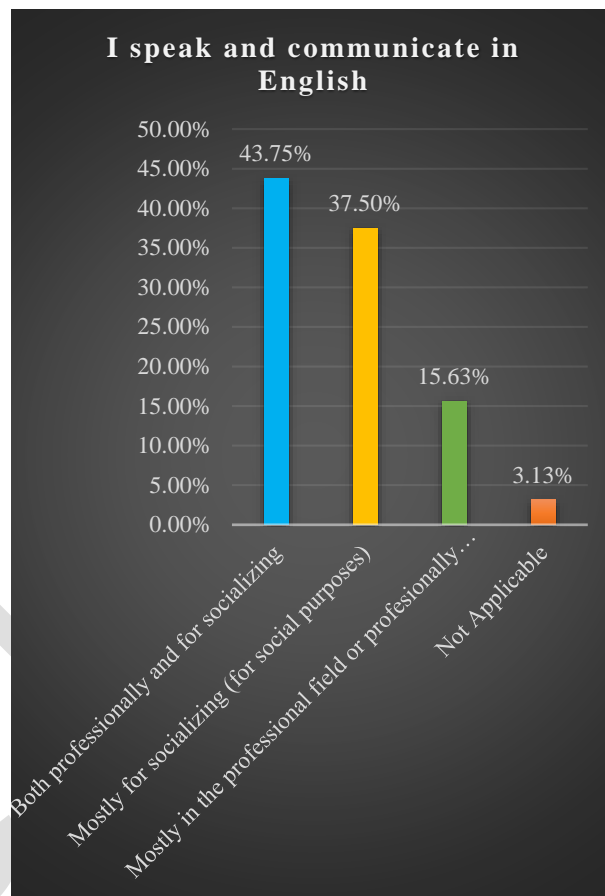


Figure 3: Purposes for Using English after Graduation

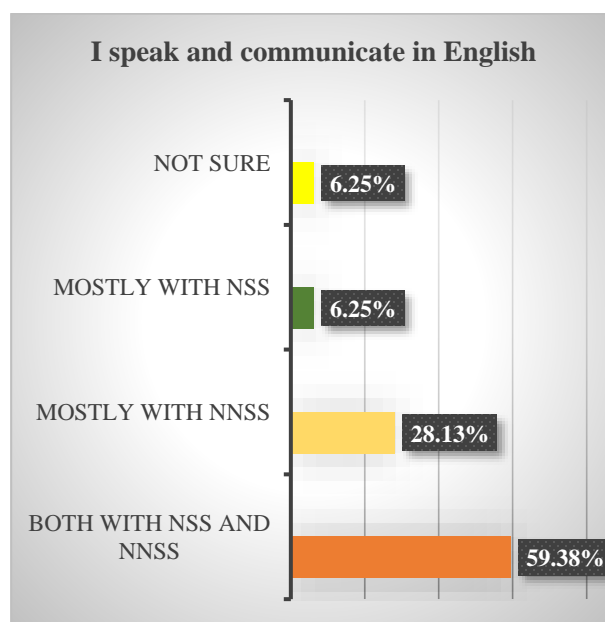


Figure 4: Students' Interlocutors in English Communication after Graduation

5. Conclusions

5.1 Answers to the RQs

Drawing a comparison between the responses provided in relation to both RQ 1 and RQ 2, the figures above suggest that students' pre-established preferences for NS pronunciation models perhaps provide further support for ideological perspectives, theoretical orientations and pedagogical practices in the educational realm that revolve around the NS sociological construct and native speakerism. Thus, students' learning choices further reaffirm the prevailing belief that NS pronunciation models are the acceptable, legitimate and, therefore, desired norms in terms of pronunciation and, in particular, the teaching/learning of pronunciation at university level in Thailand.

These findings, as such, provide support for previous studies, which reveal that as far as pronunciation is concerned, the NS model is the one that learners should learn and use locally (Jindapitak, 2014; Jindapitak & Teo, 2013; Kalra & Thanavisuth, 2018; Snodin & Young, 2015). The findings of this study are also in line with Tashev's (2023) study, who found that according to other former AU students, the NS English pronunciation models were the desired models to be learnt at the university level and, moreover, they were also the preferred models to be used in terms of general communication in English.

A number of notable comments provided by participants in the present study providing support for NS pronunciation models at university level have been provided below. Slight corrections have been made whenever needed:

"I prefer NSs because it's good to learn the correct pronunciation and accent." (Participant 10).

"To be taught pronunciation by Native Speakers will get correct pronunciation and they can be a good example for me to follow." (Participant 28).

"I preferred [preferred] to study with NSs because I would like to copy tone and sound and pronounce it correctly [correctly]." (Participant 25).

"I love to learn English courses with NSs because they can provide me correct pronunciation. When they teach, I can practice myself while they are teaching." (Participant 22).

"I think it's good for students if native speaker to teach the English language so that they [students] can practice listening and pronounce it more correctly." (Participant 16).

"I preferences [prefer] to be taught pronunciation by NSs because practicing English with NS makes me improve listening and speaking skills and learn to pronounce like a native speaker." (Participant 15).

As the above comments clearly reveal, participants expressed preferences for the NS model as the desired and target model to be learnt while being enrolled at university.

However, the issue of adhering mostly to NS models of English pronunciation needs to be further challenged and revisited because, as mentioned earlier, nowadays NSs of English are outnumbered by NNSs of English (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Ishaque, 2018), and Thailand has followed the trend of comprising of lots of NNSs communicating with one another on a daily basis (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2020; Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019; Rajprasit, 2022; Sangpetch et al., 2023; Todd, 2006).

5.2 Implications for Theory and Practice

On these grounds, the tendency to conform to NS norms as the only acceptable, legitimate and desired models in terms of pronunciation goes against the current demographic and sociolinguistic landscape existing in Thailand, whereby English is used as a tool for communication by multilinguals for a variety of purposes, needs and goals. These trends and policies are thus inconsistent with changing views as to the ownership of the language and could also lead to biased and discriminatory practices in terms of the recruitment of English teachers with high degree of preferences for NETs rather than NNETs (Huttayavilaiphan, 2021; Maganaka, 2023).

In fact, the ideology of native speakerism is still highly embedded in the Thai society and it largely affects attitudinal orientations towards English teachers and current practices in terms of recruitment-both predominantly in favor of NETs. For example, examining the biographical hiring criteria and teacher visuals found in the recruitment websites of online English schools in Asia and Southeast Asia, including Thailand, established that schools required nationality, residence, proficiency and the NS criterion from candidates. Moreover, the most common description of the ideal teacher of the language was being white and American (as cited in Maganaka, 2023, p. 123).

Once again, these choices and practices are further challenged by recent and current sociolinguistic changes in terms of the usage of English in Thailand and the large number of NNSs communicating with one another locally via the common and shared language: English (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2020; Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019; Rajprasit, 2022; Sangpetch et al., 2023; Todd, 2006).

Moreover, as the findings in relation to RQ2 of the present study supportively reveal, students shared that they communicated with both NSs and NNSs for both professional and social purposes at the time the study was being conducted. These findings, therefore, further reinforce the urgent need and call for action for more inclusive, context-dependent and pedagogically-sensitive approaches and practices in the educational field that would meet the demands for students' future encounters, rapports and exchanges in English that would or might take place

later in their lives .

In the wake of today's constantly evolving status and nature of English, and given the usage of the language by diverse speakers worldwide, it is, therefore, a must to inform and expose English learners to varieties of English, both NS and NNS varieties .Despite recent and current developments in English language education, such as for example integrating an ELF model in the local context that widens the debate by addressing the global and evolving landscape of English (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2020; Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019; Rajprasit, 2022; Sangpetch et al., 2023), still more steps and measures are needed to inform the wider public and, especially, people outside of academia about the various norms, settings, contact zones and communicative purposes related to the usage of English in different linguistic and social environments internationally .

Such knowledge and especially awareness of the various English pronunciation models people might come across in their daily encounters in English would help remove barriers to communication and also instances of lack of intelligibility, recognition and acceptance provided that people in the future would be hopefully more open to the idea that accentedness is a natural linguistic feature of the non-native user of English and, more importantly, that one's accent is a signature of one's own socio-linguistic identity.

In addition, learners need to be introduced and exposed to those varieties of English in early educational settings that implement steps and measures oriented towards promoting learners' higher levels of competence and awareness of the highly diversified nature and status of English .Higher levels of intercultural awareness and competence would help learners negotiate meaning more successfully across intercultural, national and linguistic boundaries through the use of a shared, yet highly multifaced in its own right language :English .As to the local Thai context, this idea is even more applicable and relevant provided that the role of English in Thailand is multi-layered and quite significant in terms of promoting intercultural awareness and positioning the presence and roles of Thailand in regional and international contexts even more strongly through the use of the language (Akkakoson, 2019).

Arguably, higher levels of exposure to varieties of English would help students build higher levels of communicative competence and, in particular, the linguistic resources and strategies required in order to be able to engage in communication successfully with NSs and NNSs locally, regionally and globally .

On this note, it needs to be added here that overall, participants in this study were seemingly well informed about the various nationalities of their English teachers)the nationalities of both NETs and NNETs (while at AU, and they accordingly named correctly most of the time where their teachers are from .Also, even though most participants

expressed general preferences for NETs as the ideal providers and target-models in terms of the desired English pronunciation to be learnt at the university level, some participants still acknowledged and recognized the valuable contributions of NNETs in this particular area.

Having said that, some participants demonstrated awareness of NNETs' expertise, previous preparation and training, as well as the effort they had put in while pursuing the endeavor of becoming English teachers. Students' insights, as such, demonstrate existing levels of awareness on students' part of teachers' evolving pedagogical roles in the wake of the globalization and also the glocalization of English-trends which are particularly relevant to Thailand, where students' future interlocutors are more likely to be NNSs, as pointed out earlier. A few relevant quotes have been included below using students' own words with a few corrections made whenever needed:

"I preferred NSs teachers to teach pronunciation class because English is their mother language, however, some NNSs also did a great job." (Participant 2).

"For NSs I think they can improve students [students'] listening skills and pronunciation. On the other hand, NNSs also help students to be more familiar with another accent because in real life we cannot just communicate with native speakers. So I think both have their own benefits, its [it] depends on how we use it." (Participant 21).

"My Preference: I know that the NSs teachers' pronunciation is perfect, yet I find the pronunciation of NNSs more appealing/charming (just my personal liking). Maybe it is because I find it difficult to imitate the pronunciation of the NSs and I am more familiar with the pronunciation of the NNSs." (Participant 27).

In this respect, it also needs to be added here that perhaps students 'awareness of their teachers 'different nationalities)the nationalities of both NETs and NNETs(at university level is as a result of the fact that AU is an international university that conducts all of its study courses in English as the medium of instruction. Besides, AU recruits both NSs and NNSs at large, which further informs students and makes them more aware of the varieties of English and also the diversity of its users .

That said, perhaps other universities could copy the model of the AU too and recruit both NSs and NNSs as faculty members .It is quite likely that these practices would make students more aware of the evolution of English, the diversity of its users and, lastly, the role of various multilinguals in terms of contributing to the quality of education in Thailand in multiple and different ways .

At last, the results of this study provide further support in favor of the ideology of ELF in the sense that given Thailand's constantly increasing role regionally and globally, exposure to different standards of English, both NS and NNS standards, is extremely significant because it helps

English users build the needed skills, strategies and competence levels in order to negotiate meaning with other fellow users of English in a local context (and beyond) successfully.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

This study is not without limitations and future studies of the same or similar kind could address its existing shortcomings. To start with, a future study could examine in more details the reasons behind students' choices and preferences for English pronunciation models, such as perhaps addressing issues like pleasantness, prestige or conforming to an accent in search of an identity of some sort.

In addition, a future study could target a far larger sample and include students that have not been previously taught by the researcher or whom the researcher has not had any prior contact with. The inclusion of such participants will help avoid any potential bias in the selection of participants and will quite likely produce more impartial and valid findings.

Furthermore, a future study could perhaps investigate further whether and how the variables of time and exposure could possibly influence students' aspirations for English pronunciation models, especially long after graduation. In this regard, a longitudinal study comparing students' preferences for English pronunciation models before and long after graduation could shed more light on students' potentially evolving perceptions over time.

Moreover, a future study of the same or similar kind could compare the perceptions of Thai students with those of international students at university level in Thailand. Such mode of comparison will add more value in terms of unravelling the learning needs, expectations and goals that might possibly affect and drive students' choices and preferences for English pronunciation models differently between the two groups of participants.

Lastly, a future study might investigate and compare students' preferences for English pronunciation models across different contexts, including those beyond the Asian context. Such insights will shed more light on whether any attitudinal orientations towards English pronunciation might vary from one location to another.

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