# Exploring Thai university students' attitudes towards the accents of other Englishes users

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> English users naturally exhibit a diverse range of accents when they interact in real-world situations where English serves as a common language for communication among people from various cultural backgrounds. This research, therefore, delves into the attitudes of Thai English major undergraduate students across three programs regarding the accents of English speakers from countries in the *Inner Circle, Outer Circle,* and *Expanding Circle*. Using interview data from ten students at a north-eastern Thai university, the study employed a qualitative content analysis method for data interpretation. The results showed that, due to the students' exposure and interactions with individuals from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including foreign students and teachers, most of them displayed a favourable attitude towards English accent diversity. They appreciated the unique identity and charm that different accents convey to their speakers. However, a few students still considered Inner Circle accent as the ideal model of English. This suggests that Thai learners have started to recognise accent variations, acknowledging that English is not exclusively owned by a particular nation. Thus, the practice of devaluing English accents from Outer and Expanding Circle countries for not closely resembling Inner Circle accents and judging them as substandard is considered inappropriate.

## Introduction

English, as a global language, is spoken by more than two billion individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Galloway, Numajiri & Rees, 2020). Consequently, it is unsurprising that there are emerging ideological variances and attitudes towards the use of English as it fulfils its global role. Research on the evolution and changing roles of English as a global language abounds (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021; Rose, McKinley & Galloway, 2020). In the mid-1980s, Kachru delineated the global proliferation of English into three concentric circles: the *Inner Circle*, the *Outer Circle*, and the *Expanding Circle* (Kachru, 2006). The Inner Circle denotes nations where English is a native or primary language (e.g., the UK, USA, Australia), the Outer Circle encompasses former British colonies where English is employed as an official language in government and social life or as a second language (e.g., Nigeria, Ghana, Singapore), and the Expanding Circle comprises countries where English is used as a foreign language in education and communication with speakers from the Inner and Outer Circles (e.g., Thailand, Japan, China).

In the past, prior to the era of English diversity brought about by globalisation, English speakers from Kachru's Inner Circle were traditionally seen as the standard and norm-providers for the English language (Rose & Galloway, 2019; Wilang & Singhasiri, 2017). However, in the present day, this characterisation of speakers in the Inner Circle does not accurately represents the prevailing diversity and variations of English, especially concerning differences in accents. This shift is due to the increasing number of non-native

English users who are contributing to linguistic changes in the language. Consequently, a significant issue that continues to be debated is whether English is employed in the same manner in the various circles of Kachru's model (Outer and Expanding Circles) as it is in its native Inner Circle countries such as Britain and America.

English has undergone a transformation from its original singular form (English) to its current plural form (Englishes), resulting in the existence of diverse English varieties beyond those of Britain and America (Ambele, 2022; D'Angelo, 2018; Batunan et al., 2023). Indeed, a multitude of English varieties have emerged in recent years, originating from the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles (Boonsuk et al., 2021; Prabjandee, 2019). These distinctions are notably evident in the way the language is used, particularly in terms of accent differences. This phenomenon is what has elevated English to its current global and international status. Research findings emphasise that no single group or individual can assert exclusive ownership of the language, as English is now a language of international ownership. Anyone and everyone can adapt the language to suit their specific contexts (Fang & Ren, 2018; Wilang & Singhasiri, 2017; Vu, 2023). Given this, it raises pedagogical concerns within English language teaching. The primary concerns revolve around determining which Englishes, including different English accents, should be embraced or used as models in English language teaching, learning, and communication. Additionally, the question arises as to which accents would be appropriate for various communicative situations and contexts, whether in English classes, everyday interactions, or intercultural communication with other English users.

The research context in this study pertains to Thailand, which falls under Kachru's Expanding Circle (Kachru, 2006), where English serves as a lingua franca (ELF) (Ambele, 2022; Prabjandee, 2019; D'Angelo, 2018). ELF denotes the use of the English language among speakers with different native languages, with English serving as their primary means of communication, often the only one. Thailand has become a popular destination for foreigners over recent decades, for purposes like tourism, education, and work, with English being the predominant mode of communication in almost all of such cases. Therefore, Thailand offers a diverse environment in which English is adapted to meet local communication needs. This suggests that Thais may anticipate adapting or adopting the accents of these foreigners, irrespective of their linguistic backgrounds, when communicating in English. In academic settings, for example, Thai students have been observed to engage in English as a foreign language interactions, both with native English speakers and non-native foreign students. These interactions necessitate the use of specific communication strategies (Batunan et al., 2023; Vu, 2023). Given this global role of English, the central question is how Thai students perceive the English accents of English users from the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles. This research, thus, focuses specifically on the attitudes of Thai undergraduate students majoring in English toward English accents, which serve as a prominent indicator of foreignness and influence judgments of English speakers (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021). The objective is to explore these students' attitudes regarding the accents of English users from Kachru's Three Concentric Circles.

## Language and accent attitudes

Language attitude is a phenomenon that provides insights into how individuals perceive their own language or the languages spoken by others. These attitudes play a crucial role in sociolinguistics (Kircher & Zipp, 2022) by influencing language ideologies, language preferences, and language evolution. Language attitudes reveal how interlocutors interact with and assess each other's speech, and how they negotiate satisfaction or dissatisfaction based on these evaluations (Rowley & Cormier, 2023). In English language teaching, language attitudes originate from the learning context and evolve within the social environment. Consequently, language attitudes enable researchers to explore the emotions associated with language use and potential actions or reactions that may arise as a result of using a particular language (Fang, 2019). Language learning can also lead foreign language learners to express their perceptions of the variety of English they are studying, affecting their learning habits, including motivation and learning activities. Additionally, educators and policymakers can leverage language attitudes to address the needs of learners in pedagogical planning and administration (Asakereh et al., 2019; Rowley & Cormier, 2023). In this study, language attitude is pivotal as it elucidates the preferences of Thai students regarding various English accents from Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circle nations. Accent is considered in this study as the foundation for linguistic variation and change (Kircher & Zipp, 2022).

Accents emerge as a prominent element in foreign language usage and the formation of language attitudes. Studies exploring attitudes toward accents are particularly enlightening due to the importance of pronunciation as a distinguishing factor between foreign and familiar speech patterns (Álvarez-Mosquera & Marín-Gutiérrez, 2018). In fact, accent represents the most prominent characteristic in spoken language and serves as the primary focus of this study. Speakers convey their languages, identities, cultures, fluency, and skill through various accents. Consequently, listeners tend to assign stereotypical categorisations to speakers based on the accents they employ. As noted by Rowley and Cormier (2023), 'it seems to be accent that enables people to index who they are ..., and determines how they are perceived.' Consequently, accent and pronunciation are employed as linguistic markers for describing generational differences, social identity, socioeconomic status, educational background, and ethnicity, effectively serving as a means of cultural and social identification within a community. In the context of using a foreign language, the emphasis on language accent attitudes is considered one of the most crucial aspects that exerts the strongest influence on (language-based) attitudes (Rowley & Cormier, 2023).

Previous studies have indicated that Inner Circle British and American accents are generally favoured over others by both students and teachers in the Outer and Expanding Circle contexts (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021; Rowley & Cormier, 2023; Kircher & Zipp, 2022). However, there has been a significant transformation in the attitudes of these English users, which include students and teachers, due to the current global prominence of English as a lingua franca. This transformation is driven by the necessity for users to appropriate and adapt the language to align with their unique local contexts. It is within

this evolving landscape that the present study holds its relevance, as it aims to investigate the perspectives of Thai university students regarding the various English accents spoken by individuals from Kachru's three concentric circles.

## Attitudes of Thai EFL students towards English accents

Prior research has highlighted a deep-seated perspective among Thai English language learners and educators regarding English accents, with the prevalent belief that traditional English accents are more authentic and preferable in comparison to those spoken by individuals from the Outer and Expanding Circle nations (Thienthong & Uthaikorn, 2023). This viewpoint is rooted in a limited understanding of pragmatic communication and the intricacies of accent variations. This social bias is grounded in the ideological assumption that English is solely owned by native speakers in Inner Circle countries, thus reinforcing the notion that native English varieties and ELT instructors from native backgrounds are the preferred approach to language learning.

Jindapitak, Teo and Savski (2018) investigated the preferences of English learners in Thai universities and their understanding of various English varieties. The primary objective of this analysis was to assess the extent to which different native and non-native English varieties would be accepted within English language teaching models. The findings revealed that learners held a positive view of popular English varieties, such as British and American English, perceiving them as legitimate, acceptable, natural, desirable, attractive, and credible. However, non-mainstream English varieties did not enjoy the same level of favourability. Similarly, in other studies (e.g., Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021; Jindapitak, 2022; Thienthong & Uthaikorn, 2023), the majority of Thai university students displayed a preference for speakers with native English accents. They regarded them as possessing greater language proficiency, social status, and respect in comparison to those with non-native accents. Mainstream English varieties were often associated with positive characteristics such as eloquence, fluency, common usage, correctness, appropriateness, fluency, and expertise, while non-mainstream English varieties were linked with negative traits, including brokenness, inadequacy, infrequency, inappropriateness, and imperfection (Baker & Fang, 2021).

These observations suggest that many participants view native English varieties as the only appropriate linguistic model, with Inner Circle speakers being the only individuals who speak English correctly. Put differently, native Englishes are perceived as the ideal models for facilitating correct English speaking, which is why many English language learners aspire to speak like native speakers. As Fang (2019) noted, some English learners may regard native-like pronunciation as the sole meaningful objective. Despite the apparent prevalence of Inner Circle English dominance, recent research challenges this perspective by presenting compelling findings that illustrate students' awareness and appreciation of accents from other English varieties, including Thai learners (Wilang & Singhasiri, 2017; Vu, 2023). Therefore, Thai students are now recognising the diversity of the English language, understanding that there are various English accent varieties beyond those of British and American origins.

This study holds significance because, in addition to the ongoing discussions about standards and norms within English as a foreign language settings for teaching and learning, as well as considerations of linguistic prestige and identity, it is crucial to delve into the perspectives held by Thai undergraduate learners regarding the English accents of speakers from Kachru's Three Concentric Circles. This is especially pertinent in a context that predominantly emphasises native-oriented pedagogy. Given that pronunciation serves as a significant indicator of non-nativeness, further investigation into non-native learners' attitudes toward both native and non-native accents is warranted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this linguistic phenomenon. Despite the wealth of research on English accents in many English as a second language (ESL) and EFL contexts, particularly those that involve native speakers' judgments of non-native speech, studies specifically examining Thai students' attitudes toward accents, particularly those of other speakers from both native and non-native backgrounds (excluding the participants' own Thai English accent), are lacking in Thailand. As a result, this study aims to address this research gap.

## Method

### Participants and setting

Data for this study was gathered from a group of ten (N=10) Thai undergraduate students majoring in English. These students were pursuing various degree programs and were in their third and fourth year of studies at a university located in north-eastern Thailand. Detailed information about these participants is given in Table 1. The selection of this university for the study was deliberate, as it hosts a diverse community comprising Thai and foreign teachers and students coming from various countries across Asia, Europe, America, and Africa, who engage in teaching and learning activities together. Consequently, the participants chosen for this study possessed substantial exposure and experience with the English accents of both teachers and students from Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circle nations. This exposure occurred through in-class learning and extra-curricular activities.

Table 1: Participants' demographics (N=10)

| Pseudonym | Degree program | Gender | Age | Year of study |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P-1 | English | Male | 22 | Year 4 |
| P-2 | Business English | Female | 20 | Year 3 |
| P-3 | English for International Communication | Female | 21 | Year 4 |
| P-4 | Business English | Male | 23 | Year 4 |
| P-5 | English | Male | 19 | Year 3 |
| P-6 | English for International Communication | Female | 22 | Year 4 |
| P-7 | Business English | Female | 19 | Year 3 |
| P-8 | English | Male | 21 | Year 4 |
| P-9 | Business English | Female | 20 | Year 3 |
| P-10 | English for International Communication | Male | 21 | Year 3 |

To recruit participants for this study, a purposive-convenience sampling strategy was employed (Mackey & Bryfonski, 2018). Several criteria were observed during this selection process. Firstly, the participants were restricted to third and fourth-year undergraduate students who had substantial exposure and experience with different English accents of teachers and students at the university, both within and outside of the classroom, as well as during internships. Secondly, the participants were exclusively drawn from English major programs, including Business English, English for International Communication, and English (Table 1). These students, by virtue of their third and fourth-year status, had undergone multiple classes conducted entirely in English. Lastly, the participants were individuals who had participated in informal extra-curricular activities and formal internship experiences that required interaction with foreign students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds using English as a lingua franca. These criteria were carefully observed to ensure that the selected participants could provide insightful perspectives on the investigated phenomenon.

**Instrument**

This qualitative study employed a semi-structured interview to collect data from the participants. The semi-structured interview is often the most widely used instrument in qualitative inquiries, as it allows participants to express themselves, giving the researcher an opportunity to access their ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words, rather than in the researcher's words (Selvi, 2020; Mackey & Bryfonski, 2018). The choice of this research instrument was motivated by two factors. First, it aligned with the overall aim of the study, which was to explore students' perspectives on the English accents of other English users. Second, conducting a study by gathering data through interviews provides an effective means to obtain in-depth personal information about attitudes and an understanding of personal viewpoints that can be challenging to attain through surveys or observations. Interviews are a cornerstone of qualitative research, allowing the researcher to gain insight into the hidden conceptual and emotional world of individuals. A semi-structured interview permits both pre-prepared questions and those that arise during the interview process (Roulston & Choi, 2018). In other words, this interview style offers guidance for the interviewer while allowing the interviewee to develop their own thoughts. Consequently, the interview questions in this study were designed to enable participants to reflect on their understanding, attitudes, and insights regarding the accents of other English users, as their responses offered insights that effectively addressed the research objectives and questions (Kircher, & Zipp, 2022). The interview questions were divided into two main parts: the first part aimed to elicit participants' attitudes toward the English accents of speakers from the Inner Circle, while the second part sought to understand their views on the English accents of speakers from Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries (Table 2).

Table 2: Interview questions

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Can you describe how you got to learn and started studying English? |
| 2. | In your perspective, what do you think about the English accents of your peers or others who speak English using their own accent? |
| 3. | Please share your opinion on how you feel about the English accent of speakers from native English speaking countries? |
| 4. | Do you think that the native speaker accent should be the only model for teaching English in Thailand? If yes, why? If no, why not? |
| 5. | Do you think other English accents are also understandable as the native accent? Please explain. |
| 6. | What can you say about the recognition of other English accents in schools alongside the native ones? |
| 7. | Could you describe your reaction of how you feel when someone speaks English using their own accents? |

**Data collection procedure and analysis**

Adhering to ethical procedures, 10 students were purposefully chosen for interviews at a location and time convenient for them within the university. Since these students had a strong command of English (all scoring a minimum of 6.5 on the IELTS examination when they enrolled in the university), the interviews were conducted in English during the first semester of the 2023 academic year. Each interview had a duration of approximately 15 to 25 minutes. The collected interview data were transcribed by the researcher (amounting to about 13,670 words) and a qualitative content analysis (involving assigning content, systematically, to categories in a subjective manner while considering the how frequent the content categories occur) (Selvi, 2020; Boonsuk, Ambele, & McKinley, 2021) was used to evaluate and interpret the interview data. To inductively identify significant patterns within the data, the transcription was carefully reviewed multiple times. To enhance data trustworthiness, a friend of the researcher voluntarily reviewed the coded data and transcripts. His coding was then compared to the researcher's. Subsequently, a 'member check' process was initiated by sending the sorted categories resulting from the coding to all 10 participants via email to verify accuracy (Kircher, & Zipp, 2022). After receiving responses from the participants, all of whom confirmed their satisfaction with the coding, the coding framework was established. Coding played a pivotal role in describing, structuring, and interpreting the interview data by segmenting similar contents from the transcripts into the same categories. Emerging themes from different sections of the data were adjusted, organised, and grouped to form a coherent categorisation, ultimately yielding interconnected results. The data was then consolidated into two overarching themes in alignment with the study's objectives, as discussed in the next section.

## Findings and discussion

Two overarching themes were identified, based on Krachu's Three Concentric Circles Model (Kachru, 2006): students' attitudes towards Inner Circle English accents, and Students' attitudes towards Outer and Expanding circle English accents. Data contents

relevant to the research objectives and these themes are illustrated below by excerpts. The inumbered excerpts are presented (e.g., Excerpt 2) with an identification by the participant's number (e.g., P-5).

**Students' attitudes towards Inner circle English accents**

Overall, the data from the participants revealed a somewhat mixed attitude toward their perception of the English accent of speakers from Inner Circle countries; however, most of the participants expressed that, with the changing and global roles of English as a lingua franca, a variety of accents should be expected and appreciated for effective English language usage with different lingua-cultural users across varied linguistic borders. According to three participants, Inner Circle speaker's English accent is "the best and ideal accent for learning and use" (P-3, P-5, P-6), given that this is what they were taught by their teachers during secondary and high school. Excerpts 1 and 2 below highlight this point.

Excerpt 1     The Inner Circle English accent is the ideal and predominant accent worldwide. I believe this is the case because of the historical development of the English language; Inner Circle countries appear to serve as the most appropriate models for the English accent. The inner circle countries are the rightful owners of English. Therefore, only inner circle speakers can teach us the correct English accent. I still think that only pure standard accents should be taught in our schools so that the learners can speak like native speakers from America, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (P-3).

Excerpt 2     In my perspective, inner circle accent is smooth, sexy, admirable and more natural. The language is native to them and from childhood, they all know how to rightfully use the language and pronounce words correctly. That was what our teacher told us in secondary school. This made me struggled hard to imitate the accent of users from Inner circle countries and I always feel special when I speak using the accent. My friends and everyone that listens to me always look at me with such great admiration when I use this accent. So, I think that native English accent is the best and should be the model especially in teaching (P-5).

These responses indicate that, despite the students' exposure to and interactions with a variety of lingua-cultural interlocutors, such as foreign students and teachers, they continue to adhere strongly to the "native speakerism concept" (Baker & Fang, 2021; Rose & Galloway, 2019), which prioritizes native speakers as the ideal models for English learning and use. In other words, the participants clearly portrayed a positive attitude towards the Inner Circle English accent. One of the participants mentioned "feeling embarrassed when using a non-native English accent" (P-7). Similarly, some participants expressed concerns about achieving "correct English speaking", believing that this would require them to speak with a native English speaker accent (P-6 and P-7). It is apparent that these two participants were dissatisfied with using or being exposed to Outer and Expanding Circle accents, as they demonstrated a strong desire to pronounce words like native British or American speakers. This finding aligns with Fang's (2019) study, where

Chinese EFL students expressed a preference for native accents over others, including their own.

The ideology of native accent superiority, which emerges from the way participants learned English during their secondary and high school years, has imposed linguistic anxieties on the students (Baker & Fang, 2021; Jindapitak et al., 2018). As previously highlighted by Wilang and Singhasiri (2017) and Vu (2023), it is well-established that accents can significantly influence how listeners perceive a speaker's background, intelligence, capabilities, and character. The students reported that whenever their teachers asked them to read aloud or share their opinions in class, they would often receive negative feedback from their peers regarding their English accent, including teasing, jesting, and laughter. Even worse, their teachers would also chastise them for mispronouncing words or utilising non-native accents, insisting that they adopt Inner Circle speaker accents, such as those of British or American origin.

In contrast to the favourable attitudes held by some of the students towards Inner Circle English accents, a majority of the participants (P-1, P-2, P-4, P-7, P-8, P-9, and P-10) hold a different perspective. Their viewpoint acknowledged and reflected their awareness of the global usage of English as an international lingua franca, spoken by diverse individuals. According to four participants, this diverse use of English "will inevitably give rise to different English accents" (P-4, P-7, P-8, and P-9). Two participants expressed the belief that these varying accents merely represent "variations of different accents and not the superiority of one accent over another" (P-1 and P-10). Excerpts 3-5 illustrate this awareness of accent variation from three participants (P-2, P-8, and P-9).

Excerpt 3    To prioritise an accent as most important than others is a myth. Even though native speaker English accent is good, I totally disagree with the idea that it is the ideal accent against others. Inner circle countries are not the only owners of English but speakers from other countries who use English too rightfully own English. This is even truer with globalisation and the use of English as an international lingua franca. Other countries use English with their own different unique accents which I think is as equally important as that of speakers from Inner circle countries (P-2).

Excerpt 4    Before, it used to be that if one speaks using the Inner circle accent, then one is considered as special and more important in social interactions than others. But now, English has changed and the manner in which people use English around the world makes it even more complex. People now feel prouder using their own accent instead to show who they are and where they are from instead of trying to sound native (P-8).

Excerpt 5    An accent is only good and ideal when it fulfils the communicative needs of the people within that context. I think my local English accent too is good and more relevant to the interactants within my community. Even though the Inner circle accent is good, that has changed and now made complex with the status of English as an international language. After all, learning other accents too makes one to become a good communicator with other speakers from other circles (P-9).

It can be observed that P-2, P-8, and P-9 (as seen in Excerpts 3-5) expressed their dissatisfaction with the exclusive use of native accents in their education and the pressure from their teachers to mimic a native-like pronunciation. These excerpts demonstrate that these students would prefer exposure to and instruction in other English accents that they are more likely to encounter in their everyday lives, such as Singaporean and Malaysian accents (Thienthong & Uthaikorn, 2023). The participants conveyed that the Inner Circle accent is not the sole ideal accent for English learning and use, considering the belief that it is the only ideal is a "myth" (P-2). The participants argued that "other English accents also exist, and these should be given equal importance and priority" (P-9 and P-10). This perspective can be more comprehensively analysed and understood within the context of sociolinguistics in general and language attitudes in particular. In this framework, speakers can adapt their pronunciation to create specific impressions (Kircher & Zipp, 2022). This complexity has led to significant variation in the English spoken worldwide, with each group of speakers exhibiting distinctive characteristics (Fang, 2019).

The results of this study align with previous research findings, emphasising that the use of English today is anything but uniform (Boonsuk et al., 2021; Prabjandee, 2019). This situation is further compounded by the intricately varied linguistic landscape in which English operates across different countries worldwide. Discussing the multitude of English accents found globally, D'Angelo (2018) highlighted that there is an almost unlimitled array of English varieties across the world. If such assertions hold true, then listeners, including the participants in this study, are likely to develop diverse attitudes when exposed to these various accents, driven by the phenomenon of linguistic prejudice.

## Students' attitudes towards Outer and Expanding circle English accents

In this study, outer Circle accents represent the English accents of countries that were once colonised and have English as an official language, whereas Expanding Circle accents are found in countries where English is considered a foreign language. This section of the paper combines and discusses these two categories of English users. In alignment with the views expressed by P-2 (Excerpt 3), P-8 (Excerpt 4), and P-9 (Excerpt 5), and with the exception of two participants (P-3 and P-5), the remaining eight participants (P-1, P-4, P-6, P-7, P-8, P-9, and P-10) reported that the accents of Outer and Expanding Circle nations are easier to learn in comparison to the Standard British or American English accents (see Excerpts 6-8).

Excerpt 6      People tend to retain their native accent when speaking, especially in a second or foreign language. While it may be enjoyable to use an American or British accent when speaking English, the crucial point is that the accent does not significantly matter. Language serves as a means of communication, and if others can comprehend what we are saying, the accent is does not matter. Effective communication occurs when individuals can express themselves in a way that others can understand and, in turn, comprehend the message, regardless of the accent used (P-1).

Excerpt 7      I believe that English, like any other language, is primarily a tool for communication. The specific English accent used has a minimal impact on

interpersonal communication, making the debate about the best accent irrelevant. People should not be compelled to conform to Native Speaker English standards but should have the freedom to use or learn English in their preferred manner to preserve their cultural identity. The way we use language reveals our identity and culture, and therefore, if we are forced to speak like native speakers, it therefore means we are being denied of our own local identity – our own way of being us (P-4).

Excerpt 8　　My knowledge on Global Englishes makes me to understand that the notion of a standard English accent is a fallacy. I feel this is even true when I started my internship and I was engaged in communications with people from different parts of the world; they all sounded so differently, yet, intelligible. Despite having a non-native accent, I was still understood when conversing with people from other countries (P-10).

Based on the data, the majority of students exhibited open-mindedness and awareness of, as well as acceptance for, variations in accents across various linguistic contexts (Excerpts 6-8). Their exposure to other English users has led them to realise that, beyond British and American accent varieties, there exists a rich diversity of English accents worldwide that deserve recognition and respect (Ambele, 2022). Furthermore, while non-native English speakers may employ English differently from native English speakers, these deviations should not be dismissed, as they contribute to shaping new norms for various English varieties in contemporary English discourse (Prabjandee, 2019; D'Angelo, 2018).

The students consistently concurred that each English accent variety possesses a unique identity, and speaking English with other accents should not be a source of "shame" (P-1, P-3, and P-4). They perceived that using familiar accents could be appealing as it reflects and signifies the collective identity of the people (Galloway et al., 2020). In a similar vein, some students expressed the view that, in effective communication, "what truly matters are not the specific accents used but the communicative strategies that successfully convey messages to the interlocutors" (P-8 and P-9). Other students (P-7, P-6, P-7, and P-10) conveyed the idea that speaking English with different accents should not be considered unusual or indicative of language inadequacy (Galloway & Rose, 2019; D'Angelo, 2018). Moreover, the students indicated that they found more enjoyment and relief in using various English accents, as they no longer felt pressured to conform to the standards of Inner Circle accent speakers. This perspective suggests that the students have come to understand that speaking with their unique accents is not a cause for embarrassment, given the widespread recognition that English does not belong exclusively to a particular nation (Rowley & Cormier, 2023; Jindapitak, 2022). Furthermore, devaluing the English accents of Outer or Expanding Circle countries for not resembling those of the Inner Circle and judging them as substandard is viewed as inappropriate (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021). To keep pace with the linguistic dynamism of English, users should reconsider these notions and re-evaluate contemporary perceptions and practices related to English, aligning them with the real nature of English, which is pluricentric and diverse (Álvarez-Mosquera & Marín-Gutiérrez, 2018).

The perception of an accent can encompass the beliefs and impressions that listeners hold about speakers with that accent. It is suggested that non-native accents are now gaining recognition and acceptance in communication, alongside native English accents, due to the greater number of non-native English speakers compared to native English users (Baker, 2021; Galloway & Rose, 2015). To illustrate, Fang and Ren's (2018) study found that non-native accents are often considered more comprehensible by non-native English speakers than native accents. This implies that students and teachers may not necessarily need to focus on acquiring a native-like accent, especially given the relatively smaller number of native English speakers worldwide. Therefore, in an English as a lingua franca context like Thailand, it may not be practical to teach students to imitate native-like accents. Instead, students should be exposed to a variety of accent types from both within and outside their geographical boundaries to enhance their effectiveness as communicators.

As suggested by Álvarez-Mosquera and Marín-Gutiérrez (2018) and Baker and Fang (2021), it is essential for teachers to acquaint Thai students with the diverse accents of ASEAN [https://asean.org/ ]interlocutors, particularly in terms of speaking and listening. Consequently, English language teaching classrooms should incorporate a wide array of listening materials, including talks, speeches, films, and videos related to ASEAN nations. Acquiring familiarity with various English accent variations will not only prepare students for the future but also fosters an awareness that there exist different English accent variants recognized by diverse groups of English speakers, beyond just Native Speaker English accents (D'Angelo, 2018). This exposure will equip them with the ability to comprehend a wide range of both native and non-native English accents, as opposed to just one or a limited number of accents (Baker & Fang, 2021).

## Conclusion and implications

The purpose of this research was to investigate the viewpoints of Thai undergraduate students in Thailand towards the accents of other English users from the Inner, Outer, and Expanding circle nations. The data analysed from the interviews revealed that, among the ten participating students, the majority shared a common perspective. They recognised and embraced English as a global lingua franca, emphasising the importance of achieving clear and comprehensible accents in English conversations, rather than adhering to the accent of any specific nation. The data from the interviews demonstrated their awareness of and appreciation for the diversity of English accents spoken by linguistically and culturally diverse individuals, whether they belong to Inner, Outer, or Expanding circle users. Additionally, the participants recognised that a significant portion of their real-life communication involved interactions with non-native speakers. Consequently, they rejected the exclusive focus on Inner Circle accent pedagogy and imitation (D'Angelo, 2018; Galloway & Rose, 2019).

While both native and non-native English accents were valued by almost all the participants for English learning or learning in English (as seen in Excerpts 3-8), only two participants expressed a preference for learning English exclusively with an Inner

Circle accent (as shown in Excerpts 1 and 2). Given these findings, the concept of prioritising native speaker accent imitation in an English as a Foreign Language context like Thailand should be re-evaluated (Baker & Fang, 2021). Moreover, the notion of linguistic correctness should be redefined to align with contemporary sociolinguistic realities of accent diversity (Ambele, 2022). This shift is warranted because most participants believe that an intelligible accent does not necessarily equate to a native accent. With exposure to and interaction with English accents from diverse speakers, learners have become more accepting and appreciative of both non-native and native accents.

While the limited number of participants in this study may pose a constraint in terms of obtaining in-depth insights into attitudes regarding Inner, Outer, and Expanding circle accents, the findings are assumed to reflect common attitudes held by many students and English teachers in EFL settings, in line with previous research (Prabjandee, 2019; Jindapitak, 2022). Consequently, future research could explore how a strong grasp of discipline-specific vocabulary, such as in fields like engineering, medicine, mathematics, and specialised sciences, might serve as a partially effective countermeasure to mitigate the challenges posed by less comprehensible accents. This suggests that when parties engaging in oral communication share familiarity with the typical discourse or jargon within their profession or current activity, communication becomes more manageable.

Moreover, this study highlights the need for a reevaluation of the emphasis on accent in English classes in Thailand, a direction that should involve educational stakeholders. While Inner circle accent varieties should still be part of the curriculum, alongside other varieties from non-native contexts, it is worthwhile to consider raising awareness regarding the status of English as a lingua franca and how it is manifested in English language teaching in Thailand (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021; Batunan et al., 2023). That is, given that communication occurs predominantly among Outer and Expanding circle speakers rather than among Inner circle speakers, ELT should be reoriented to expose students to a diverse range of accent varieties and variations. This approach aims to prepare them effectively for intercultural communication (Rose et al., 2020; Fang & Ren, 2018).

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