Reconsidering Objectives of English Language Learning in English as a Lingua Franca Context

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Abstract: It is undeniable that English has become a global language and the enormous global demand for using English as a means for communication has been apparent. With this spread of English and globalization, the result has led to a great demand for English language teachers who can be both native and non-native English speakers. The study aims to explore university students’ attitudes towards native and non-native English speakers’ teaching practices in a context where English has been used as a lingua franca and an international language. Samples were 348 students who took a foundation English course in semester 2/2011. The instruments used were the questionnaires and interviews. It has been found that students had positive attitudes towards both native and non-native teachers’ teaching practices; however, there were some different reasons why students felt positively towards each group of English language teachers’ teaching practices. It is suggested that concerned administrators should not divide between nativeness and non-nativeness, Recognition of teachers’ pedagogical and professional abilities should be put into consideration. For teachers of English, they should have a full understanding of the goals of language learning in current situations and reality. Future research should extend to investigate a broader sample of students in other schools or institutions where English has been used a medium of instruction or as a foreign language.

Keywords: English language learning, English as a lingua franca, teaching practices, teachers’ roles

Introduction

Recently, the field of TESOL has seen increasing interest in the role of English as an international language and there has been an increase in the number of English teachers with a wide variety of language backgrounds (Holliday and Aboshiha, 2009). It has been confirmed by Liu (1999) that the majority of English teachers worldwide are non-native English speakers: NNESTs. More discussion has been made in the expanding circle countries where English has played as a foreign language and in this setting (ELF), such as China, Japan, Korea, and Thailand, learning English from instructors whose mother tongue is the same as their students’ is not only realistic, but also very successful (Medgyes, 1994).

In Thailand, it is evident to see that English has been one of the requirements for qualified employees to be competent in the four language skills. Therefore, the demand for English language teaching in Thailand exceeds the supply of language schools and institutions (Weawong and Singhasiri, 2009). However, if we consider English language teachers, Todd (2006) posits that one basic consideration is whether they are native speakers (NSs) or non-native speakers (NNSs) and he points out that NS teachers are perceived as being somewhat “better” but the predominance of NNS-NNS use of English in Thailand means that the goal of learning English should be EIL rather than any NS norms of English.
If English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a contact language used among people who do not share a first language, and is commonly understood to mean a second (or subsequent) language of its speakers (Jenkins, 2007), English in Thailand is currently used as a lingua franca between NNSs of English rather than between or among NSs and NNSs speakers. To address the roles of English in English language teaching in Thailand, English has been in the National Curriculum since 1980. In 1960 English was one of the compulsory subjects in primary schools, in 1978 it was one of the elective subjects in primary schools and in 1996 it became one of the elective subjects recommended to be taught in primary schools from the first grade. Finally since 2001, it has been the first foreign language to be introduced from the first grade (Luksaneeyanawin, 2005). In this respect, based on Kachru’s concentric model (1985) representing the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition, and the functional allocation of English into three circles: English in Thailand has been categorized in the expanding circle where English is used as a foreign language.

If English in Thailand is ELF or EFL, the main argument whether native or nonnative teachers should be prioritized will be in our great interest. Todd (2006) shares his previous review that some could contend that NS teachers’ English is better than that of non-native speakers. Their pronunciation meets accepted norms, their use of vocabulary is more appropriate and accurate, and they do not make grammatical mistakes (Todd, 2006). In terms of English accents, Jenkins (2007) conducted questionnaires asking 326 respondents (300 were NNSs of English) to answer and rank English accents. It was revealed that UK and US English accents were ranked first and second “best” by a very large majority of respondents. However, there are some unique characteristics of non-native English speakers in EFL settings. Medgyes (1994) describes non-native English speaking teachers as follows:
- They provide a good learner model for imitation.
- They teach language learning strategies more effectively.
- They supply learners with most information about the English language.
- They anticipate and prevent language difficulties better.
- They are more empathetic to the needs and problems of learners.
- They make use of the learners’ mother tongue.

Within the field of English language teaching, Assumption University has been one of the leading international universities in Thailand where English has been used as a medium of instruction. According to the survey on the enrollment number of foreign students in Thai higher educational institutions (2008), it was shown that there are 16,361 foreign students enrolled in 96 Thai higher educational institutions and Assumption University was ranked in the top five universities. The number of foreign students has reached 2,558 and most importantly, this number consists of 87 nationalities (External Quality Assessment by ONESQA, 2011). This statistical number challenges both various types of qualifications needed for English language teachers and objectives of language teaching and learning.

The Study

Questionnaires and interview data have shown that 348 L2 learners of Assumption University have positive attitudes towards both native and non-native English language teachers’ teaching practices and English accents. The most frequent positive comments about native speakers of English teachers’ teaching practices concern the role model of good language teacher and a variety of classroom activities. On the other hand, the lack of L2 experiences
and weaknesses in grammar teaching are the most frequent negative comments about native speakers of English teachers’ teaching practices. It is interesting to see teachers’ L2 experiences, determination of teaching, and clear transference of knowledge are the most frequent positive comments towards non-native teachers’ teaching practices. However, most negative comments concern the use of text-based and few activities in classes. This makes classes more serious and inauthentic.

In the area of English accents, it has been found that L2 learners have positive attitudes towards a variety of English accents. Even learners’ preferences fall on native speakers’ accents, they also have positive attitudes towards non-native English teachers’ accents. It is evident that native accents entail prestige and ownership of the language. Moreover, learners perceive that native accents are authentic, proper, and classical. On the other hand, Thai English accents are clear and easy to understand. Likewise, Burmese English and Filipino English accents are acceptable to be used as a medium of instruction. Finally, positive relationships exist between learners’ attitudes towards English accents and teaching practices.

**Implications of the Findings**

Based on the findings, implications are stated below.

1. In terms of teachers’ English accents, since students have no negative attitudes towards either native or non-native English accents, a lingua franca approach should be advantageous for both students and teachers (Kirkpatrick, 2007). As mentioned by Todd (2006) earlier, English in Thailand is primarily used as a lingua franca between NNSs of English rather than a means by which NSs communicate. Therefore, the predominance of NNS-NNS use of English in Thailand means that the goal of learning English should be EIL rather than any NS norms of English. It is added that the standard NS norms for English should be viewed as possible varieties of EIL among a plethora of other possibilities. By adopting this approach, students will be exposed to many varieties of English including the native varieties. It is implied that as the aims to teach and learn English moves towards ways that would allow for effective communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries, the focus of the classrooms moves from the acquisition of the norms associated with a standard model to a focus on learning linguistic features, cultural information and communicative strategies that will facilitate communication (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

2. In terms of teaching practices, a model of collaboration between native and non-native teachers should be promoted. It can be clearly seen that all groups have their own advantages and disadvantages as perceived by students. As suggested by Liu (2007), in addition to team teaching, there are numerous professional development activities and opportunities such as arguments, debates, persuasion, professional training, peer monitoring, and project management training. Liu contends that “Educating the existing faculty and helping them mingle, empowering NNESTs and NESTs through ample opportunities for collaboration, have all proven effective.” In this context, it seems effective when teachers who have different skills, strengths, and weaknesses come to collaborate in team-teaching: native speaker teachers focus on standard accents and language models while non-native speaker teachers focus on grammar teaching and language learning strategies. Like what Liu concludes “…they each have qualities that the other does not possess.”

3. In terms of positive correlation between students’ attitudes towards teachers’ accents and teachers’ teaching practices, it is implied that teachers’ English accents and teaching practices are not separable. In order to be a good quality language teacher, teachers should have an acceptable communication degree of mutual intelligibility. As previously stated, English in Thailand has been used as a lingua franca or international language, the degree of
intelligible accents may range from standard to clear or easy to understand. Teachers’ accents should not impede students’ understanding of the lessons or communication. Similarly, teachers should be competent in the language they are teaching. As Canagarajah’s (1999, cited in Richards, 2010) states, “Most of the world’s English teachers are not native-speakers of English and it is not necessary to have a native-like command of the language in order to teach it well.” It is added by (Bailey, 2006 and Kamhi-Stein, 2009, cited in Richards, 2010) that “The issue is how much of a language does one need to know to be able to teach it effectively, and how does proficiency in a language interact with other aspects of teaching.” In the view of teaching practices, teachers should fulfill their potentials as language teachers. Richards (2010) states that teachers need to be grounded in relevant pedagogical content knowledge because it helps prepare teachers to be able to do things such as the following:
- Understand learners’ needs
- Diagnose learners’ learning problems
- Plan suitable instructional goals of lessons
- Select and design learning tasks
- Evaluate students’ learning
- Design and adapt tests
- Evaluate and choose published materials
- Adapt commercial materials
- Make use of authentic materials
- Make appropriate use of technology
- Evaluate their own lessons

Finally, it can be concluded that both accents and teaching practices mutually play significant roles in teaching English as an international language or as a lingua franca. Without either one of these, the effectiveness of language teaching could not take place. Language teachers should possess or acquire these qualities.

4. Based on the findings, it is implied that the context of teaching and learning English in Thailand, where English has been used as a lingua franca or international language, should adopt the goals of a lingua franca approach. The approach has been initiated by Kirkpatrick (2007) who contends that a lingua franca approach based on the goal of successful cross-cultural communication could be advantageous to both teachers and students. Therefore, a curriculum should be adapted or adopted to match the reality of the context. Kirkpatrick (2007) suggests a curriculum which would include at least three strands:
- Students would need to be alerted to which linguistic features cause particular problems of mutual intelligibility.
- The curriculum would need to focus on how cultures differ and the implications of such differences for cross-cultural communication.
- Students would need to be taught the communicative strategies that aid successful cross-cultural communication.

Even though the standard model of native speakers of English has been primarily favored by students, the aims of language learning should be shifted to effective communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries rather than focused on the standard or codified model (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Students should be exposed to varieties of English including standard varieties.

5. Regarding the design of English as a subject to be taught – the definition of the E in English as a foreign language (EFL) or teaching English for speakers of other languages (TESOL) – this should involve two things: the objective that is to be eventually attained and the process whereby it is to be reached (Seidlhofer, 2011). The specification of ends and
means should be rethought. This is to say, learners are not learning a language but learning to language.

**Recommendations of the Study**

**For Educational Administrators**

1. The findings reveal that students have no objection or negative attitudes towards varieties of teachers’ English accents. This is because of the good qualities the language teachers possess. Educational administrators are recommended to recruit both native and non-native teachers for teaching positions in the Expanding Circle countries including Thailand. Concerned administrators should not divide between nativeness and non-nativeness; on the contrary, they should be concerned about teachers’ competence and performance in language teaching. Recognition of teachers’ pedagogical and professional abilities should be put into consideration rather than the division between nativeness and non-nativeness.

2. Both native and non-native teachers can be trained to be in a favorable position and to become competent and highly-performing in English language teaching (Liu, 2007). Educational administrators should look more closely at making them more competent and confident users of the English language (Braine, 2010, p.81). Both native and non-native teachers should be provided collaboration through learning, team-teaching, and reflection. Educational administrators should provide teachers the core of expert teaching competence and performance in language teaching.

3. In relation to curriculum design, educational administrators should adapt or adopt a curriculum that reflects the context of Expanding Circle norms. The goals of language learning should respond to the roles of English as a lingua franca, international language, or even as English and ASEAN. The model of native speakers should be maintained for codification, but at the same time, non-native models should be empowered as well.

4. In relation to teacher education, educational administrators should tailor training programs or courses to local purposes (Seidlhofer, 2011). The focus should be on the education, not just training of teachers so as to provide the essential understanding of the nature of language and its use that underpins their pedagogic practices. The programs or courses should enhance teachers’ status as well informed and self-reliant professionals.

**For Teachers of English**

1. Teachers of English, whether native or non-native, should be able to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses. This reflection could help teachers to empower their competence, performance and professional abilities.

2. Teachers of English should have broad perspectives about the roles and functions of English in different contexts. They should understand the goals of language learning in current situations and reality, and select appropriate choices of teaching methodologies and assessments to match needs and problems of students and the contexts as a whole.

3. Teachers of English should understand that English language teaching is not something that anyone who can speak English can do. It is a profession, which means that English teaching is seen as a career in a field of educational specialization (Richards, 2010). Therefore, teachers of English should know the components of quality teaching practices and try to maintain such qualities.
Recommendations for Further Research

1. It is recommended that future research should extend to investigate a broader sample of students in other institutions where English has been used as a medium of instruction and as a foreign language. In other words, different studies employing the same methodology should be conducted. This is to strengthen the findings and the reliability of the current study.

2. Future research on self-perceptions of NSs and NNSs English teachers should be explored. This is to study whether students’ perceptions match or mismatch teachers’ own perceptions. This could be useful to design the appropriate curriculum.

3. Future research on the effectiveness of collaboration between NSs and NNSs should be studied. This is to help expand the success of the goals of language teaching and teacher empowerment.

4. It is recommended that future research should investigate in-depth how students’ attitudes towards teachers’ accents and teaching practices are correlated with other variables such as learning outcomes, motivation, identity, or L1 or L2 learning experiences.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and its discussions, it is undeniable that the establishment and rethinking of English language teaching and learning and language planning in the Expanding Circle, including Thailand, should be reconceptualized. As Seidlhofer (2011) point outs, “The freeing of a language from particular territories and groups of people is precisely one of the conceptual challenges that we are faced with in the age of globalization, then a study of what is “in fact done, actually performed” in the use of English as a lingua franca should be emphasized. Language variations which lead to a variety of English accents, if they do not impede intelligibility, should be promoted in language classrooms. Both native and non-native English teachers should perceive their own weaknesses and strengths in terms of their own accents and teaching practices and then empower and collaborate with each other to enrich the roles and functions of English as an international language or lingua franca. Likewise, educational administrators should well understand the dynamics of English and adapt or adopt the school curriculum and teacher training courses to be more realistic by localizing the courses or teaching materials.

References


