You Understand I Na Ka?: A Study of Comprehensibility of Thai English to Foreign Tourists

Kukiet PHUENGPITIPORNCHAI
Prince of Songkla University, Thailand
Email: kukiet.jk@hotmail.com

Adisa TEO
Prince of Songkla University, Thailand
Email: adisa.s@psu.ac.th

Abstract

The objectives of this study were to explore foreign tourists' responses to Thai English, a variety of English emerging in Thailand, in terms of comprehensibility, and to identify the linguistic features that made Thai English incomprehensible. One hundred international tourists in Bangkok from four regions including East Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America were surveyed after they listened to a set of five authentic speech samples from four speakers in Thai tourism industry. The data were collected and analysed quantitatively and qualitatively to yield multidimensional results. The results show that Thai English was comprehensible to most of the tourists from all four regions. While syntactic and morphological features of Thai English were well understood, the phonological features were a major hurdle for the comprehensibility of Thai English. This study not only proposes pedagogical implications of prioritizing those linguistic features, especially phonological features which mainly impede comprehensibility of Thai English, but also suggests Thais to be more confident in communicating in English for their specific needs and purposes.

Keywords: *Thai English, Comprehensibility, Foreign Tourists, Linguistic Features, Phonology*

Introduction

Owing to globalization, technology, business growth, tourism and many more key influences, English dominates the world as no other languages ever have. However, languages are not static. Once English is introduced to different people, it can deviate from the original forms due to many factors, such as its mixing with local languages, cultural backgrounds and learning processes of the indigenous peoples, resulting in the emergence of varieties of English including their spread across the world (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2007) and Thailand is no exception.

Annually welcoming over 38 million international foreigners, Thailand adopts English as a lingua franca in many contexts. However, the English spoken by Thais, also called Tinglish or Thai English, remains questionable in terms of its comprehensibility as it is full of unique features (Bennui, 2017; Jaroensak & Saraceni, 2019; Roger, 2013). Several studies exploring Thais' attitudes toward English varieties in pedagogical context (e.g. Buripakdi, 2012; Chamcharatsri, 2013; ChoedChoo, 2015; Jindapitak, 2012; Ying Ying & Christina, 2013) showed negative views toward those non-native varieties of English including Thai English. Nevertheless, only few attempted to investigate how non-Thais think about Thai English and whether it is comprehensible enough for international interlocutors.

Moreover, Nattheeraphong's (2004) study revealed that most Thai teachers believe that in order for students to produce language intelligible to other speakers, the influence of students' mother tongue needs to be eradicated. These findings illustrate some Thais' deep-rooted mindset of how to maintain the comprehensible conversation, but is that really the case for one to carry out an understandable conversation in English? Unless these issues are addressed, the comprehensibility of Thai English to foreigners would remain controversial. This present study, thus, explored the extent that Thai English used in professional communication context is comprehensible to foreign tourists as well as linguistic features affecting Thai English comprehensibility.

Literature Review

As in many other parts of the world, the spread of English across Asia has been propelled by a number of related economic and social factors, including demographic growth, economic change, technology and educational trends (Graddol, 2006). In many parts of Asia, English is not considered a colonial import but it is the language of education, business, regional cooperation, culture and tourism. For this reason, over 700 million people use English for various purposes throughout Asia. The number is close to the combined populations of Great Britain and the United States, where English serves as a mother tongue for most citizens (Bolton, 2008).

Home and abroad, many Asians use English more often as the world becomes more and more globalized, especially with other Asians than with people considered English native speakers (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Since the contact among Asians in the educational and professional fields is expected to increase, it is prime time to explore the issue of English communication in Asia.

As a member of Asian nations, Thailand has welcomed English due to the expansion of the British Empire. English has been valued in Thai society, especially in, media, tourism (Horey, 1991), education (Foley, 2005; Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2003), and personal communication (Glass, 2009). Interestingly, English teaching in Thailand has engaged with Thais for centuries which is considered to be one of the longest histories among Southeast Asian countries (Bautista & Gonzalez, 2006).

Though English is a compulsory subject in Thailand since the initial stage, Thai is the national language. Hence, English is considered a foreign language which has been taught among other languages, such as Chinese, French, and many others. Since English acts as a lingua franca in Thailand, the influence of Thai as a mother tongue inevitably makes Thai people use English in different ways (Buripakdi, 2008). The concept of these idiosyncrasies in the way Thais use their English has been defined as an emerging characteristic of one of English varieties or so called "Thai English".

According to Jenkins (2003), English varieties tend to exhibit four levels of variation, namely phonology, morphology, syntax, and

discourse. Considered as a variety of English, Thai English also exhibits these levels of variation. Phonologically, new sounds include the way vowels and consonants of English are uttered by Thai differently from those in British English and other varieties of "new Englishes". The obvious examples are those sounds which do not exist in Thai such as /θ/ and /v/ which are respectively replaced by /t/ and /w/. This phonological level also relates to new accent, tunes, speech rhythms, and intonation. Thai and English consist of the totally different pattern of sound system. While Thai is a syllable-timed language, English is a stress-timed language (Roger, 2013). This can explain why Thai English speakers tend to equally stress and prolong the end sound of English words (Bennui , 2017).

Morphologically, one of the most noticeable differences between Thai and English is that Thai words are not inflected to indicate any grammatical relations within the sentences but English words do (e.g., number, tense, aspect and so on). For instance, in English there is a change in verb form to indicate an action in the past such as eat – ate, and go – went. This linguistic phenomenon doesn't occur in Thai where the verbs stay in their original form despite tense variations. To provide examples, kin (eat), and pai (go) remain the same no matter whether they refer to actions in the past or present. Moreover, Bennui (2017) notes that the morphological features of Thai English relate to a formation of new words. That is, Thais use Thai words such as Mauy Thai, and Tuk Tuk, in English conversations, and sometimes they even mix Thai and English words to create a new word combination like Tom Yam Seafood. Moreover, Jaroensak and Saraceni (2019) demonstrate that Thais even combine English words to coin a new meaning. For example, "checkbill", a coined word which means asking for the bill, is commonly used in Thailand. This word is a mixture of "check" from American English and "bill" from British English.

Syntactically, the syntactical aspects of English influenced by the users' dialects include grammatical elements of English utterances grounded by first language structures, such as tenses and subject verb agreement, which become "new ways of saying it". Thai is a language in which each word determines grammatical

relations and interpretation. For example, Thais always add the word "laew" as a time marker in their speeches to project a past action. By adding this kind of words, Thai people are able to determine grammatical relations without changing forms of any component in the speech (Roger, 2013). That could be the main reason for the syntactical variations of Thai English, such as omission (a lack of grammatical elements), and literal translation (a direct translation of English based on Thai grammar), like "I eat already" which is a literal translation into English based on Thai grammar.

Regarding discourse, spoken and written texts demonstrate new formal and casual styles, repetition, code-mixing, Thai particles, and communication strategies which require cultural and pragmatic conventions (Chamcharatsri, 2013). In Thai, pragmatic contexts involve cultural aspects of Thai people (Baker, 2008). For example, Thai particles such as kha, or khrub show the politeness of speakers, and repetition is used by Thai people to emphasize the degree (e.g. It is very very beautiful), and highlight important elements in their speech (e.g. We have to leave now. More people coming, more people coming).

With these linguistic variations or idiosyncrasies, there is still a dispute over the comprehensibility of Thai English to non-Thais, and whether any particular linguistic features of Thai English cause its incomprehensibility or not.

Regarding the ability to understand, Smith (2009) asserts that cross-cultural communication relies on three levels of understanding: intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability. Intelligibility is the ability to identify a spoken word or utterance which deals with the understanding at the phonological and morphological levels. Comprehensibility is the ability to translate the meaning of a word or utterance which relates to the understanding at the levels of syntax and semantics. Interpretability is the ability to construe the intended meanings behind words or utterances, i.e. understanding at the levels of pragmatics and discourse. Based on McKay (2002), if a listener recognizes that the word help is an English word not a Chinese word, English is then intelligible to him/her. If the listener in addition knows the meaning of the word, it is comprehensible to

him/ her. If he/ she understands that the phrase "Can you give me some help?" is intended to be a request for help, then he/ she is said to be able to interpret the language. To achieve intelligibility, one must overcome such factors as pronunciation, stress, intonation, and the vowel and consonant sounds of English. On the other hand, to attain comprehensibility, other factors ---apart from phonological aspect--- predominate such as grammatical, morphological, and discourse aspects. Accordingly, in this present study, comprehensibility of Thai English to listeners who are foreign tourists in Thailand was the main focus.

Focusing on comprehensibility, the term has been defined in several ways, but the definition used most often in second language pronunciation circles is a listener's perception of how easy or difficult a given individual's speech is to understand, while intelligibility has to do with a listener's recognition of a word uttered by a speaker. Many people confuse the terms intelligibility and comprehensibility, but the former is associated with the effort to identify the utterance, while the latter has to do with the comprehension of the intended meaning of the utterance.

In recent years, a plenty of studies have been conducted to explore the comprehensibility, intelligibility, awareness of, and attitude toward World Englishes such as Singapore English, Bruneian English, Malaysian English, and so on in the pedagogical context (see e.g. Chamcharatsri, 2013; Choedchoo, 2015; Jindapitak & Teo, 2012; McKenzieet al., 2015; Prakaiborisuth & Trakulkasemsuk, 2015; Wilang & Teo, 2012; Ying Ying & Castella, 2012). For instance, Jindapitak and Teo (2012) conducted a survey study with Thai university English majors. The results showed that 9.62% of the participants preferred Thai English accent in ELT context due to its intelligibility, as stated by one of the participants in the interview "Thai English is OK: it is very easy to understand". However, the percentages of the participants preferring Thai English were considered low despite the fact that Thai English is the variety in their country.

In addition, Nattheeraphong's (2004) study explored Thai teachers' beliefs about English varieties outside the Inner Circle with the use of a five-point Likert scale survey. The results demonstrated that 39.30% of Thai teachers in the study, considered

as the highest percentage, agreed that the influence of students' mother tongue, Thai language, needs to be eradicated to maintain the intelligibility of an English conversation. Although the participants in both Jindapitak and Teo (2012) and Nattheeraphong (2004) are in different roles, they still share the same nationality and are in educational context.

In terms of comprehensibility, Wilang and Teo (2012) conducted a study with the use of a multiple-choice questionnaire and audio-visual stimuli to measure the comprehensibility of Outer Circle Englishes to the Expanding Circle citizens including Thais. The qualitative data revealed that Malaysian English was the most comprehensible and Singaporean English was the least comprehensible to the Expanding Circle citizens in their study. Contributing the empirical results to the study, the multiple-choice questionnaire and audio test stimuli were considered reliable and effective tools for comprehensibility research. However, the degree of Thai English comprehensibility to the Outer and Inner Circle citizens was not explored in the study.

Out of educational context, Chamcharatsri (2013) carried out an online survey with 137 respondents to explore their awareness of Thai English and its characteristics. The finding surprisingly revealed that 51% of the respondents had never heard of the term 'Thai English'. The findings of both Chamcharatsi's (2013) and Jindapitak and Teo's (2012) studies seem to agree on the fact that Thai people still lacked an awareness of World Englishes and the varieties of English including their own. Therefore, this points to the need for more studies on Thai English focusing on other unexplored areas and in wider contexts

To sum up, although researchers have already investigated the Thais' beliefs towards Thai English, there are still a few research gaps. First, one of the less explored areas is whether Thai English is comprehensible to non-Thais from different regions of the world. Second, the previous studies did not pay enough attention to the use of Thai English beyond the educational context in which communication in English plays a crucial role. Third, most of the participants in the previous research were students. Other groups of participants who have different backgrounds seem to be underexplored. As Thailand consistently welcomes millions of

foreign visitors, especially tourists, both native and non-native speakers of English, the Thais' ability to carry out a meaningful and understandable conversation with foreigners is vital. How well-understood a conversation in English between Thai and non-Thai interlocutors can indicate whether Thai English successfully serves a wide range of communicative purposes. Therefore, the present research intends to bridge these gaps by attempting to provide insights into the extent that Thai English is comprehensible to foreign tourists and what linguistic features affect Thai English comprehensibility. To accomplish the objectives, the research questions, participants, instruments, data collection, and data analysis will be detailed in the following sections

Methodology

Research Questions
The objectives of this study were accomplished by seeking the answers to the following research questions:
1. To what extent is Thai English comprehensible to foreign tourists?
2. What linguistic features affect Thai English comprehensibility?

Participants and Context
The participants of the study were 100 foreign tourists in Bangkok areas covering three famous tourist attractions, namely the Grand Palace, Silom Road, and Khao Sarn Road. These spots were chosen to obtain responses of tourists across a wide range of nationalities and backgrounds because they were considered must-visit places in Bangkok for foreign tourists according to a *CNN Travel's article, World's greatest city: 50 reasons why Bangkok is No. 1.* (Jorgensen, 2017).

The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 49 years with 46% identified as female, 54% as male. Most of the participants (73%) were first-time visitors, 55% reported not familiar with Thai English at all. The participants were grouped into four categories according to the regions they came from. Based on the demographic information from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Thailand

(2018), this study focused on the tourists from top four regions with the highest numbers of visitors to Thailand including East Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America.

Stratified purposive sampling was used to sort the participants into four sub-categories, and quota sampling was used to reach the required number of the participants from each region in the questionnaire administration stage. The quota of the participants from each region was proportionally allocated based on the Ministry of Tourism and Sport's demographic information. As a result, the participants in this study consisted of 40 from East Asia, 30 from Southeast Asia, 20 from Europe 3 of whom came from the country where English is a national language, and 10 from North America. For the next stage, convenient sampling was employed to choose 20 per cent of the participants from each region as cases to partake in the semi-structured interview.

Research Instruments

Test Stimuli. Speech samples were used as test stimuli in this study. The audio file consisted of four speech samples containing Thai English linguistic features in line with Jenkin's (2003) notion of four levels of variation in varieties of English. To ensure authenticity, naturalness and spontaneity, the speech samples were selected without any control or intervention from various online resources in which the speaker in each sample used English to perform his or her routine. The speech samples were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) the speaker had to be a Thai worker in tourism using English for communication in their job, (2) each speech contained at least one typical linguistic feature of Thai English, and (3) each speech was not longer than two minutes. There were four people from various career positions in tourism and hospitality, namely a cycle tour leader, a travel sales agent, a local tour guide, and a Thai cooking instructor. The speech sample transcript including target linguistic features is shown in the appendix.

Questionnaire. The questionnaire of this study consisted of two parts. The first part employed a gap-filling format to elicit the participants' personal information including their gender, region, frequency of visits to Thailand and exposure to Thai English. The

second part took the multiple-choice format to investigate the participants' comprehensibility of Thai English after listening to the test stimuli. This part was composed of eight items, each of which targeted one or more linguistic variations. There were five items related to syntax and phonology, three related to discourse, and two related to morphology of Thai English. Then, the participants were required to choose the correct answer for each item according to the information in the speech samples. The three given choices included (1) True, (2) False, and (3) I don't know. There was only one correct answer, either (1) True, or (2) False for each question. The reason for providing choice (3), I don't know, was to prevent the participants from making a random guess and to obtain their honest answers. For example, after listening to Speech 3 which addressed "Later more people (will be) on this island (aıs-land).", the participants had to decide whether the statement in Item 3 "This island will be full of people." was true or false according to the mentioned speech. The target linguistic features in the speech samples of this study were briefly detailed as follows.

A. Thai English Phonology
- Segmental level: The use of English consonant and sound in Thai way

B. Thai English Morphology
- Loanwords: The borrowing of Thai lexicons into English
- Loan translation: The translation of Thai lexicons into English

C. Thai English Syntax
- Omission: The lack of grammatical elements in sentences
- Literal translation: The ungrammatically direct translation from Thai into English sentences
- Overgeneralization: The misuse and overuse of English grammatical elements
- Restructuring: The simplification of complicated English grammar by rearranging sentence structures in Thai ways

D. Thai English Discourse
- Reduplication: Thai syntactic repetition in English sentences
- Thai particles: The use of Thai particles in English spoken texts

From the list, it can be noticed that Thai English suprasegmental level did not appear as one of the main target linguistic variation in this study. According to Ladefoged (2020), the suprasegmental level concerns the stress (accent), and pitch (tone and intonation) of English (e.g., belonging /bɪˈlɔːŋɪŋ/ was pronounced /bɪ-ˈlɔːŋ-ˈiŋ/, and beautiful /ˈbjuːtɪfl/ becomes /ˈbjuː-ˈtɪ-ˈfl/). Therefore, the researchers decided to exclude the suprasegmental level from this study with two reasons. (1) Thai accent of an individual is beyond the scope of the study, and (2) the unique tone and intonation of the four speakers occurred in almost every word in the speech samples which would cause a fluctuation in identifying the linguistic features that made Thai English incomprehensible.

Semi-Structured Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were recommended by Merriam (1998) as a possibility to the qualitative interview which is considered a useful qualitative method of collecting the needed and relevant information. Semi-structured interviews, therefore, were used in this study to elicit in-depth information from the participants. According to Creswell (2003), the interview allowed the participants to elaborate on the situation and justification based on their responses which contributed multidimensional data to the finding of this study, and it also allowed the researcher to dig deeper into interesting issues or ascertain particular points providing better understanding and insight into the participants' responses (Denscombe, 2003; Patton, 2002). Each interview was open-ended, and lasted about 5 to 10 minutes depending on how much clarification was needed. During the interview, the responses of the participants were recorded with their consent.

Data Collection

The quantitative and qualitative data collection of this study was carried out in October 2019 by one of the researchers himself. Since the participants of this study, foreign tourists in Bangkok, were not an existing group, the questionnaires were given to the participants through personal approach as well as the semi-structured interviews which were carried out immediately after the participants had completed the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted and recorded in English upon their permission.

Data Analysis

Analysis of Data from the Questionnaire. The data collected from the questionnaire were quantitatively analysed by the use of descriptive statistics. A statistical program was used to carry out the data analysis. The final quantitative data were the percentages of responses which determined the foreign tourists' comprehensibility. The responses were obtained from the participants' answers to questions with the multiple-choice format including (1) True, (2) False, and (3) I don't know. For each question, there was only one correct answer which was either true or false. The data were analysed and interpreted as follows: 1) the correct answers indicated that the participants understood Thai English; 2) the incorrect answers indicated that they misunderstood Thai English; and 3) I don't know indicated that they didn't understand Thai English. Understanding was interpreted as comprehensibility of Thai English, while misunderstanding and not understanding were combined and interpreted as incomprehensibility of Thai English since the participants were not able to grasp certain specific ideas and information from the speakers and failed to provide correct answers to particular items in the questionnaire.

Concerning how to determine the linguistic features that affected Thai English comprehensibility, each speech sample contained different Thai English linguistic features. In case the participants answered the question incorrectly, it meant that the speech was not comprehensible. There was a probability that the linguistic features in that particular speech sample might intervene the participants' ability to understand certain messages of the speech sample. For instance, the speech "for safety, don't leave you stuff (stɑ:f--) on the island (aɪs-land)" contained two phonological

features in the segmental level of Thai English. After listening to the speech, the participants were asked whether the statement in Item 4 "You cannot leave your belonging for the safety" was true or false. In case the participants answered incorrectly or chose "I don't know", the data were analysed into percentages and indicated that the phonological features were the issues of Thai English comprehensibility as the participant could not construe the meaning of the word stuff in the speech. After analysed, the score of each item was accumulated according to the linguistic features.

Analysis of Data from the Semi-Structured Interviews. The interview data were used to add depth to the quantitative finding. Therefore, the interview acted as a tool for "discovering". For the purpose of discovering, the participants were asked to extend and illustrate the points they had made in the questionnaire. After the interview was transcribed, the data were summarized to find the key points by the use of content analysis. The qualitative results served as the means not only to support the quantitative data, but also to explain the phenomena found in the present study. Moreover, they helped enlighten the researchers about the factors that impeded Thai English comprehensibility more accurately, since certain speeches contained more than one linguistic feature.

Results and Discussions

Overall Comprehensibility of Thai English

Research question one addressed the extent that Thai English is comprehensible to foreign tourists. To secure the answer, the data obtained from the second part of the questionnaire were analysed and presented in percentages. Figure 1 illustrates the percentages of the participants' responses to the comprehensibility of Thai English as a whole including all four linguistic features, namely phonological, morphological, syntax, and discourse components.

Figure 1. The participants' responses to the overall comprehensibility of Thai English
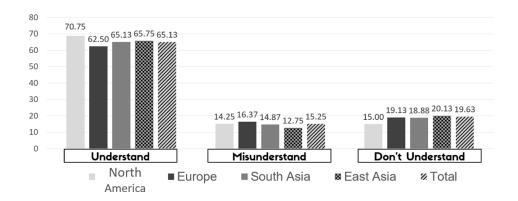
Figure 1 shows the understanding result was 65.13%, meaning that Thai English was comprehensible to most of the participants. On the contrary, the misunderstanding result was 15.25%, and the not understanding result was 19.63%, totalling 34.88% of the participants who found Thai English incomprehensible. When the data were analysed by the participants' regions of origin, it was found that Thai English was comprehensible the most to the foreign tourists from North America at 70.75%, and the least to those from Europe at 62.50%. Even with the lowest percentage, the result from the European group shows the overall positive tendency toward the comprehensibility of Thai English at above 60%. It might be the case that being an English native speaker, and using English as a first language plays a great role in better comprehending other English varieties including Thai English. To investigate on this assumption whether language nativeness affected the comprehensibility results, the three participants who were an English native speakers in the European group were excluded. The new data was analysed, and it revealed that the comprehensibility results of the European participants who were not native English speakers were lower than the previous ones by 1.50%, from 62.50% to 61%. The other factors that probably also affected comprehensibility of Thai English were regional proximity which also impacted linguistic proximity (Jiirattikorn, 2018) and familiarity with Thai English. The background information of the participants supported this explanation, as 36% of the combined East and Southeast Asian tourists reported that they were somewhat familiar with English spoken by Thais. Meanwhile, 45%

of European participants reported that they were not familiar with English spoken by Thais at all. From the results, it can be seen that the second and third highest percentages of the participants understanding Thai English were those from Southeast Asia and East Asia which are located near Thailand. On the contrary, European participants understanding Thai English accounted for the lowest percentage.

To provide support for the above results, Excerpt 1 from the interview with a participant from North America revealed that Thai English was easy to understand despite the speaker's thick accent and inadequate grammar.

Excerpt 1

"I think it is totally fine. It is not that difficult to understand. I think they all speak clear enough even the lack of grammar and with their thick accents."

---- P1, North America

Comprehensibility of Thai English Based on Linguistic Features

Further analysis of the participants' responses to the comprehensibility of Thai English based on linguistic features was carried out. The results were presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The participants' responses to the comprehensibility of Thai English based on four linguistic features
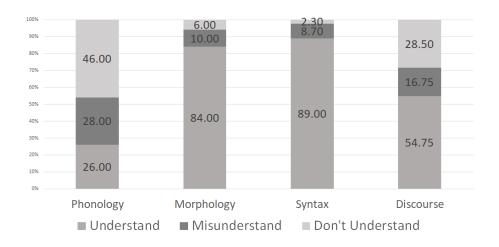
Figure 2 presents responses of the participants to Thai English comprehensibility based on four linguistic features. With regard to morphology and syntax, it was found that over 80% of the participants understand Thai English with morphological and syntactic features. On the contrary, 74% of the participants found Thai English containing phonological features incomprehensible. This includes 46% and 28% of those indicating not understanding and misunderstanding Thai English respectively. In terms of Thai English with discourse features, the responses appeared to be quite equally split into two tendencies, 54.75% of the participants thought Thai English discourse was comprehensible, while 45.25% felt it was incomprehensible. As there were a number of sub-components in each linguistic feature, the findings related to comprehensibility of Thai English based on linguistic features will be discussed individually to elaborate the results as well as to provide supportive justification from the qualitative data.

Phonology

Concerning the phonological features of Thai English, as can be seen in Figure 2, the majority of the participants (74%) found that Thai English with phonological features at segmental levels incomprehensible, but only 26% of them were able to comprehend it. What is particularly striking is that there was no difference among the four groups of the participants. They appeared to share the similar response to the comprehensibility of Thai English containing phonological features.

The results undoubtedly indicate that the phonological features of Thai English concerning the segmental level (e.g., three /θriː/ was pronounced / triː /, and kaffir /ˈkæfər/ became /ˈkæfeɪ/) were a crucial hurdle for the foreign tourists in this study to understand Thai English.

Excerpts 2 and 3 provide evidences for the participants' difficulties with understanding Thai English containing phonological features.

Excerpt 2

"Yeah, I meant their pronunciation of some words confused me. I don't even understand what they tried to say."

---- P2, Europe

Excerpt 3

"To be frank, his pronunciation is the key point of my answer. I sometimes cannot understand what he was talking about."

---- P3, East Asia

The above comments by the interviewees support the quantitative data asserting that Thai English phonology produced some difficulties for them to understand the speeches, and it was a key factor for them to determine whether Thai English is comprehensible.

Excerpt 4

"Accent doesn't matter. Pronunciation does. Even if you speak with a thick accent but you pronounce the important words correctly."

---- P1, North America

However, as shown in Excerpt 4, the interviewee pinpointed an interesting issue, explaining that the difficulties of comprehending Thai English were not caused by accent which also concerns the suprasegmental level (e.g., relaxing /rɪˈlæksɪŋ/ was pronounced /ˈrɪ-ˈlæk-ˈsɪŋ/, and beautiful /ˈbjuːtɪfl/ becomes /ˈbjuː-ˈtɪ-ˈfl/). As the suprasegmental level was not the target linguistic variation in the research questionnaire, the interviewee's remark on pronunciation was interpreted as the segmental level which is related to the sounds of consonants and vowels of Thai English phonology. Even with a distinctive accent, a speech with an accurate pronunciation of consonants and vowel sounds could be understood. This explains why correct pronunciation is more important than an accent in order to communicate effectively. The non-Thais and Thais' viewpoints on Thai English phonology seemed to be congruent. The previous study by Nattheeraphong (2004) revealed that the majority of the teachers agreed that correct pronunciation in English should enable students to produce language intelligible to others, although their pronunciation may

not be native-like. The results of Nattheeraphong (2004) and the present study show empirical evidence of how Thais and non-Thais consider phonological elements a crucial factor affecting both intelligibility and comprehensibility of Thai English.

Morphology

In terms of the morphological features of Thai English, Figure 2 demonstrates a strong tendency toward understanding Thai English containing morphological features. A total of 84% of the participants were able to comprehend Thai English with morphological features including loanwords and loan translation. Only 16% of the participants were not capable of comprehending Thai English with these features. Moreover, among all four groups of the participants, their responses were relatively similar in that there were high percentages of those understanding Thai English with morphological features. The result probably indicates that Thai English loanwords (namely Panang) and loan translations (namely long-tailed boat) did not impede Thai English comprehensibility. In fact, they were quite well understood by the foreign tourists in Thai tourism context. These morphological features can be considered minor elements in the speech sample which did not greatly hinder the comprehensibility of the speeches as a whole. This explains why there was no mentioning of the incomprehensibility of Thai English due to its morphological features by the participants during the interview.

Syntax

Regarding the syntactic features of Thai English, like morphology, Thai English syntax including omission (big chili not spicy), restructuring (pineapple, watermelon eat free), overgeneralization (when you making chili paste) and literal translation yielded a very high percentage of participants (89%) understanding it. Only 2.30% and 8.70% of the participants respectively showed not understanding and misunderstanding resulting in a total of 11% who found Thai English with syntactic features incomprehensible. It was also noted that the participants' responses across the four groups were relatively similar. Hence, the result strongly suggests that the mentioned syntactical features of

Thai English were not a critical factor of the comprehensibility of Thai English. According to Bunsom and Trakulkasemsuk (2015), Thai English appeared to possess the least grammatical proximity to the English native norm among 10 countries in ASEAN. Despite being the most different from the English native norm, Thai English syntax features slightly hindered Thai English speakers from getting their intended meanings across in their study. The following excerpt supports the point.

Excerpt 5

"They use the words that is easy to understand and simple grammar so I think it is also good for someone who are not native like me."

---- P4, East Asia

Excerpt 5 from the interview with a Taiwanese participant elaborates how Thai English syntax did not impede its comprehensibility from the viewpoint of a non-native English speaker. The interviewee's comment corresponds with the quantitative data in that the participants from East Asia and Southeast Asia contributed the highest percentages of the understanding result. Probably, the non-native English speakers may not be as expert as the native English speakers in English syntactical features such as tenses, subject -verb agreement, and so many more. In fact, most non-native speakers learn English as their second language. Hence, the difference in grammatical patterns and principles between their mother tongue and English may put them in the same position as Thais whose first language also does not exhibit exactly the same syntactical features as those of English.

The following excerpt illustrates a perspective of a native English speaker toward Thai English with syntactical features.

Excerpt 6

"You know, I didn't mean that to understand them, their grammar needs to be perfect like a native, but like I said, ungrammatical and unstructured English make the speakers sound like their English is broken."

---- P5, Europe

In the above excerpt, the participant asserted that although Thai English syntax was not a factor of incomprehensibility, it affected how he viewed an English variety. This response strongly shows that some native English speakers still value the importance of keeping the syntax of their own language despite the relatively low impact of the syntactic features on the comprehensibility of Thai English.

Discourse

With regards to the discourse features of Thai English, the comprehensibility data of Thai English with discourse features including Thai particles (e.g., khrub, and na kha), and reduplication (e.g., This temple is very very beautiful, and more boat coming, more boat coming.) were quite equally split into two tendencies. First, 54.75% of the participants showed their understanding of Thai English speeches with discourse features, while the remaining 45.25% misunderstood and did not understand it.

Excerpts 7 and 8 show the interviewees' comments on the comprehensibility of Thai English with the discourse features of reduplication and Thai particles respectively.

Excerpt 7

"They use the simple words and keep repeating some words just to make sure the listeners understand them."

---- P2, Europe

The interviewee from the Netherlands elucidated the reason why he thought Thai English was understandable with regard to repetition of the speakers. The response shows that this discourse feature did not cause incomprehensibility. In fact, it helped the participant to comprehend Thai English even more easily.

Excerpt 8

"There are some words in her talk that I know right away they're Thai words. I've heard them many times. I'm pretty sure it's Kha, and Khrub. I've heard them from the hotels and many places since I was here."

---- P6, Southeast Asia

In Excerpt 8, not only did the interviewee from Southeast Asia justify that Thai English discourse features scarcely affected the comprehensibility; she was also aware of the Thai particles that were used in the speech samples. The response demonstrated that Thai particles were likewise not an issue of Thai English comprehensibility in tourism context.

Interestingly, it was found that the speech samples with discourse features that yielded the high percentages of incomprehensibility data were those occurring in conjunction with Thai English phonological features while those not containing them were highly comprehensible to the participants. With this detection, it could be affirmed that it was the Thai English phonological features that hindered the participants' understanding of the speech samples, not the Thai English discourse features. This supports the results of the incomprehensibility of Thai English with phonological features reported earlier.

Conclusion and Implications

The comprehensibility of Thai English to the foreign tourists was explored in the present study. Overall, the results revealed that Thai English in tourism context was comprehensible to most of the foreign tourists from East Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. The majority of the tourists (65.13%) in this study can understand Thai English. In addition, the study found that the North American participants who were from those Inner Circle countries based on Kachru's (1985) Three-circle Model understood Thai English the most at 70.75%. The results of this study suggest that language nativeness and regional proximity are probably key factors of Thai English comprehensibility. This may explain why the participants from Europe where only 13% of its citizens speak English as their native language (Eurobarometer, 2006) understood Thai English the least in this study. Moreover, with regard to the effect of regional proximity on linguistic skills (Ufier, 2014), the European tourists, who live at a greater distance from Thailand,

probably were not as familiar with Thai English variety as those from Asian regions.

In terms of linguistic features affecting the comprehensibility to Thai English, the phonological features in the speech samples turned out to be the main factor impeding the comprehensibility of Thai English by the foreign tourists in this study, as 74% of them found Thai English phonological features incomprehensible meaning they either misunderstood or didn't understand the speeches. Meanwhile, the other three linguistic features of Thai English including morphology, syntax, and discourse were well understood with only few issues. Thus, Thai English speakers should take the segmental level of pronunciation into consideration if they want to deliver a meaningful conversation and intended message to non-Thais.

As being able to carry a meaningful communication in English is considered an initial goal for every single English language learner/user, the results of this study suggest that English teachers, learners, and users prioritize the linguistic features that greatly hinder Thai English speakers from being understood by others. This being so, Thai English phonological features should be the primary concern for English classrooms in Thailand. Unfortunately, in reality, it is commonly known that most English classrooms in Thailand still pay excessive attention to grammatical rules rather than correct pronunciation.

In light of English as a lingual franca, English serving for business, studying, trading, socializing, or tourism is nowadays a truly international language (Snowden, 2012). Hence, the use of Thai English prevails in various contexts. As English is used for wider communicative purposes with diverse groups of people, it is essential that leaners be aware of what really matters to achieve their communicative goals. While some always interact with native English speakers, others communicate with non-native English speakers in their work routine. In this respect, the results of this study seem to highlight three important messages. First, Thai English speakers should be aware of and learn from the feedback of foreign tourists in this study on the comprehensibility of their Thai English since they are the potential future interlocutors of those Thais working in tourism industry. Second, it is

recommended that English teachers in Thailand enlighten their students on the problematic linguistic features, particularly phonological features, in their speeches that they should heed when communicating with non-Thai interlocutors, and prioritize these linguistic features in their curriculum for the better outcomes of English language teaching in Thailand. Last but not least, as the previous studies revealed that Thais appeared to anchor themselves to the accent priority and the native-like accent idealism (see e.g., Naratip & Teo, 2012; Nattheeraphong, 2004), this present study suggests a reconceptualization of these assumed notions, and hopes to unlock some anxieties of Thai people who are afraid that they would not be understood when using English to communicate with other non-Thais, just because they do not acquire a native-like accent, a set of advanced vocabulary, or perfect grammar. In fact, with the cautiousness in pronunciation, Thai English speakers can take the results of this study as an encouragement to break the wall of doubt by confidently using their English to convey messages, express identities, develop career growth, and spread great ideas to people from other nations.

Recommendations for Future Research

Beside tourism, there are several other professional contexts in which Thai English comprehensibility has not yet been explored. Moreover, this survey study was limited in the number of speech samples from speakers in tourism workforce and did not cover a full scope of Thai English phonology because the suprasegmental level was not one of the target features. Therefore, it is recommended that future study employ more speech samples to represent the Thai English variety with a wider range of linguistic features in various contexts, as well as take Thai English stress (accent), linking, and pitch (tone and intonation) into consideration when conducting a comprehensibility study.

Furthermore, this study adopted a deductive approach which used the naturally occurring speeches as the test stimuli with no control over linguistic feature distribution. Accordingly, it will be an interesting idea for future researchers to take a different approach which involves the control of the speakers' English

proficiency profiles and equal distributions of the target linguistic features. Apart from equal linguistic features, an equal number of participants is also recommended.

Last but not least, as interesting as comprehensibility, it is also important to investigate the perception of non-Thais toward Thai English in professional contexts to gain multidimensional insights into Thai English.

About the authors

Kukiat Phuengpitipornchai is a student of the Master of Arts Program in Teaching English as an International Language at Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand. He is passionately interested in world Englishes.

Adisa Teo is an associate professor of English at Prince of Songkla University, Thailand. Under Fulbright scholarship, she completed her Ph.D. in Education with emphasis on Second Language Acquisition and Teacher Education from University of Illinois, U.S.A. Her interests include second language acquisition, global Englishes, EIL, ELT, course/materials development, and teacher education.

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APPENDIX 1: THE SPEECH SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT AND TARGET LINGUISTIC FEATURES

Scripts of Speech Samples	Thai English Linguistic Features in Speech Samples	Comprehensibility Check	
		Question Item	Target Thai English Linguistic Features
Speech 1 The tour goes smooth, safety ah. We have like three three simple rules. First one, when we riding please, yes, stay in a one one single line. Yeah, one line each other like snake, ok? Follow me is easy. And then, ah, try to keep left when you riding the bike. Then, another rules, pay attention when you riding the bike, as I tell you in the small alley people that doing activity on the street. And last one, picture time, picture and video taking. **(1).**<u>So you can stop and take a picture everywhere that you like.</u> Just call our name to stop for take a picture because I don't know where you, where you like to stop the picture, but for me, myself, I gonna stop somewhere, some part and give you the information.	Syntax • Omission • Literal Translation • Overgeneralization Discourse • Reduplication	1	(Syntax: Literal Translation) – "you can take a photo everywhere"
Speech 2 The five-hour tour we called Co-Combo. Yeah, five hours include bicycle and **(2).**<u>long-tail boat</u> Start two time**.** In the morning, start at 7 o'clock, and in the afternoon start at 1 o'clock. We cross the river to the other side of Bangkok to see the plantation in Bangkok. And uh like the **(2).**<u>long-tail boat through the canal</u> to see the people living along the canal.	Syntax • Literal Translation • Omission Morphology • Loan Translation	2	(Morphology: Loan Translation) - "long tail boat"

Scripts of Speech Samples	Thai English Linguistic Features in Speech Samples	Comprehensibility Check	
		Question Item	**Target Thai English Linguistic Features**
Speech 3 And for safety of your stuff (stɑːf--), let (les) you know something. This island (aɪs-land), do you know? Not only our boat to come here. You can see many boat parking here, and many people, they are come here. And do you know? **(3).**Later, more boat coming, more boat coming. And more people on this island (aɪs-land). And, **(4).**not safety for your bag, you stuff (stɑːf--), you belonging, everything. If you leave your bag on the beach and go to swim, nobody take care anything for you, nobody watching anything for you. For safety, this island (aɪs-land), they have chair beach for rent. Coca-Cola, drinking water, I have for you. Mask and snuggles (ˈsnɑːɡl), I bring for you. Life jacket, I have for you too. Please everybody in this boat, let (les) me time two minute. I want to take everyone in this boat. We are stop here one and a half hour. Now fifteen past two. **(5).**This boat leaves at three (triː) forty five, three (triː) forty five this boat leaves. Please everybody come back on my time.	Phonology • Segmental level Syntax • Omission • Literal Translation • Restructuring Discourse • Reduplication	3 4 5	(Discourse: Reduplication) – "more boat coming, more boat coming" (Syntax: Omission) – "more boat (is) coming, more people (will be) on this island" (Phonology: Segmental level) – "this island (aɪs-land)" -------------------- (Phonology: Segmental level) – "stuff (stɑːf–)" (Syntax: Restructuring) – "not safety for your bag" ------------------------ (Phonology: Segmental level) – "three (triː) forty five" (Syntax: Restructuring) – "three forty five this boat leaves"

Scripts of Speech Samples	Thai English Linguistic Features in Speech Samples	Comprehensibility Check	
		Question Item	Target Thai English Linguistic Features
Speech 4.1 Chili in Thailand as you can see we have many size of chili. **(6).** Spicy it depend on the size. Big chili not spicy. Medium size, medium spicy, ok. Small size, very spicy. And if you see the tiny one, be careful naka, super spicy, very hot naka. Ok, when you make red curry, we use only medium size of dried chili. When we do curry, we don't use the fresh one. **(7).**<u>The fresh one, when you making chili paste (peɪd), color not strong. Use only dried chili when you make curry today naka. This is for red curry like Panang, this is for green curry.</u> Green chili we don't have dried. If become dried, color not beautiful naka.	Phonology • Segmental level Syntax • Omission • Literal Translation • Restructuring • Omission Morphology • Loan Word Discourse • Particles	6. 7.	(Syntax: Restructuring) "Spicy it depend(s) on the size" (Syntax: Omission) – "Big chili (is) not spicy. Medium size medium spicy. Small size very spicy" ------------------------ (Morphology: Loan Word) - "Panang" (Syntax: Overgeneralization) - "when you making" (Syntax: Omission) "color not strong" (Discourse: Participle) – "naka" (Phonology: Segmental level) - "paste (peɪd)"

Scripts of Speech Samples	Thai English Linguistic Features in Speech Samples	Comprehensibility Check	
		Question Item	Target Thai English Linguistic Features
Speech 4.2 Lemon, you know very well, right? I pass. This is lime. This is ugly lime. This is kaffir (kæfeɪ) lime nakha. Lime and kaffir (kæfeɪ) lime same family, but different type. **(8).**<u>When you use lime, only use squeezing. Kaffir (kæfeɪ) lime, use only the skin, only the skin.</u> When you press it on skin, you see aroma oil (ɔɪ) on skin. We put kaffir (kæfeɪ) lime skin inside green or red curry paste (peɪd) today.	Phonology • Segmental level Syntax • Omission • Literal Translation • Restructuring • Omission Discourse • Reduplication	8	(Phonology: Segmental level) - "Kaffir (kæfeɪ) lime" (Discourse: Reduplication) – "only the skin, only the skin"