

**English as an International Language : Implications
for English Teaching in Thailand.**

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English is now firmly established as an international language. It has taken over from French as the language of international diplomacy. It is the language in which most scientific and technological research is published. It is the language in which business is conducted in many parts of the world and it is the official language and lingua franca in a number of countries where English is not a native language.

The reasons for the spread of the English language are all historical. They in no way imply the superiority of English over other national languages as a system of communication.

The reasons stem from British colonialism, the influence of the United States of America in world affairs, and the interdependence of countries in commerce and trade which makes an international language essential.

With the spread of the English language throughout the world has come the development of many different varieties of English, and a preoccupation with what constitutes "correct" English, or standard English.

Not many years ago it was common, at least in Britain, to talk of "the King's English" as if this represented the true standard. However, although there might have been a general consensus of opinion as to what was acceptable in this variety and what wasn't, the term itself provided no definition of the variety since it was never clear which particular King was being referred to.

Again in Britain, the term RP, standing for received pronunciation, has been used to describe a variety of English that many people accepted as standard. However, as the term suggests, this only refers to the way the language is spoken. It represents a social rather than geographical or regional variety and its "correctness" is one of social acceptance. It is not intrinsically clearer or easier to understand than any regional variety. It has, of course, enjoyed greater diffusion than most regional varieties because of its use by the BBC. But as society changes so the acceptance

of a particular standard of pronunciation changes. To-day RP has less prestige in Britain than it had twenty years ago. If problems exist in defining a norm of correctness of the way English is spoken in a country where it is the native language, then problems are likely to be far greater if there is any attempt to establish a norm for the use of English internationally by speakers of other native languages.

Yet if there is no accepted norm it will become impossible to know which variety of English to teach in countries where it is neither a native nor official language. And although the problem is mainly confined to the pronunciation of the language, the increased use of English internationally particularly among speakers for whom it is not a native language will inevitably lead to interference from the mother tongue to the grammatical structure of the international language. Let me give one example of this from a paper by ML Boonlua Debyasuvarn. "International communication through English takes place at many levels, from between tourists and bellhops, to between high ranking officials of different countries. I once sat in a place where I could hear every word of a conversation between one quite important Thai official and a specialist consultant who was a native speaker of English. On every occasion the Thai official should have said "we would like to", he said "we will". The specialist consultant came out of the room beaming and told me that all his proposals had been accepted. I was not in a position to discourage him and left the knot to be disentangled or more entangled depending on the luck of the official and the consultant."

An example of an attempt to deal with some of the problems of English as an International Language in language teaching courses in Thailand is provided by a course entitled "Interaction" recently produced by Sukothai Thammathirat Open University. "Interaction" attempts to develop spoken communication skills by distance learning and is based on research carried out at the East West Centre of the University of Hawaii by Ajarn Mayuree Sukwiwat and Mr John Fieg into the types of problem encountered by Thai speakers of English in international gatherings.

A number of decisions were made in planning this course which relate to the consideration of English as an international language. One was that the learner should be presented (on the tapes that form an integral component of the course) with different varieties of native speaker English, (American, British and Australian) and also examples of English spoken by people from Singapore, Hong Kong, India and France as well as Thai speakers. However, in the exercises that aim at practising the learner's pronunciation, stress and intonation patterns, a carefully articulated non-regionally marked British pronunciation was used consistently throughout the course, although exemplified by different speakers.

Another decision was that the language content of the course should focus on specific problems of Thai speakers when communicating in English caused by both linguistic and cultural differences. The contexts of spoken exchanges were to be those thought most likely to occur in Thailand with Thais speaking English to non Thais.

It was also decided to emphasise the regional importance of English. Thus contexts deal with ELT seminars in Singapore and business meetings in Hong Kong, for example.

In the text that accompanies the tapes, American English spelling has been adopted. Where there are any major differences of expression, e.g. sales clerk (AmE) shop assistant (Brit E), the American form is used with an explanation given of the British Variety. The intention is to maintain a consistent variety of English but to draw attention to national variations. Probably the greatest gain in language teaching in emphasizing the international use of English, rather than adopting a particular national variety is that the learner is more likely to be motivated through being able to maintain his own national identity while learning and using the language. Perhaps also the opportunities for applying what is learned will appear less remote.