

Intelligibility: Japanese and Thai Tertiary Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

This article reports on Thai and Japanese university students' perceptions of intelligibility. This study found few students think variability is avoidable when using English. Instead, a majority of the students thought differences in pronunciation, intonation, and accents exist. More Thai than Japanese students tended to agree or strongly agree, and how the students viewed and deal with the variety was significantly different. The article discusses reasons for the students' beliefs before concluding with classroom implications.

Introduction

The question of how varied English pronunciation can be and yet still be phonetically intelligible to the interlocutor is not a new quandary. Catford (1950) expounded on intelligibility during an era in which the supposition was that at least one of the interlocutors would be a native speaker of English. Now, however, the English language is regularly perceived to be the leading global language; it enables people whose first languages differ to communicate. Although these interactions sometimes occur with native English speakers, they are more likely to occur between two non-native speakers. Crystal (2003, p. 69), for example, estimates that "approximately one in four of the world's population are now capable of communicating to a useful level in English," reflecting the fact that the number of second (third, etc.) language users of English far exceeds the number of first language speakers (McKay, 2002; Graddol, 2006).

As the number of users has increased, discussions about intelligibility in the context of World Englishes and varieties of English have also escalated. Field (2005, p. 400) noted that to be intelligible, an utterance must be understood through the recognition of word forms, suggesting “pronunciation, stress, intonation, and the vowel and consonant sounds of English” (Jung, 2010, p. 141) all contribute to, or hinder, intelligibility. As a result, “intelligibility has been recognized as an appropriate goal for pronunciation instruction” (Field, 2005, p. 399). In recent years, many specialists (e.g., Mesthrie, 2008) have gathered copious amounts of data to discuss the phonological features of the varieties of English that are found around the world. While informative, these details do not address learners’ attitudes toward intelligibility and beliefs about phonological variation, yet attitudes and beliefs have been shown to affect learning outcome (e.g., Wesley, 2012).

Interactions between Thais and Japanese

Two trends suggest Japanese people will interact with people from Asia, particularly Thais, more and more frequently. The first is the increasing importance of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN is a group of ten Southeast Asian nations that works not only to accelerate economic growth but also to promote social progress, cultural development, peace and stability in the region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). When it was established in Bangkok in 1967, English was the de facto language for all meetings, correspondence, and official documents. To those outside ASEAN, this may have been extraordinary considering English is not the native language of any of the member countries. After twenty years of actual practice, Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008, p. 29) officially established English as the only working language in the organization (Kirkpatrick, 2008).

The ASEAN Plus Three (APT) cooperation (ASEAN members and Japan, China, and South Korea) was created to strengthen political, security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation with East Asia (ASEAN Secretariat, 2014).¹ During his statement at the 2013 ASEAN Plus Three Summit, Prime Minister Abe reiterated that Japan

would continue to emphasize APT financial cooperation and food security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014). This is particularly pertinent to the relationship with Thailand since it was one of Japan's most important ASEAN trade partners in 2012, ranking second in imports and comprising over one-third of all of the ASEAN exports (Japan External Trade Organization, 2013). As previously discussed, the English language has served a pivotal function among the ten core member nations, and this reality will continue to present more opportunities for Japanese to use English while conducting business and trade with Thailand.

The second trend suggesting Japanese and Asians will interact more frequently is the change in the tourism industry. During Prime Minister Abe's ASEAN Plus Three Summit address, he also reiterated Japan's commitment to " 'people-to-people connectivity' with tourism and education at the core" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014, ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation par. 1). In the past, relatively few people traveled between distant countries because of the time and expense of long sea voyages or extended land travel, making sojourns impossible for all but the wealthy and those in trade and business. Today, however, modern international transportation has made travel more feasible for the general populace. Crystal (2003) asserted that the shift toward more international travel influences linguistic usage, and now that 74 percent of the world's travelers go from one non-English speaking country to another (Graddol, 2006, p. 26), English is regularly used by tourists as a lingua franca.

An examination of travel statistics demonstrates the increased possibility of Japanese and Thai people interacting. In 2003, just over 1 million Japanese visited Thailand for tourism or business, but in 2013 this number had risen to over 1.4 million, an increase of nearly 35 percent (Japan Tourism Marketing Company, 2014a). More importantly, during that same 10 year period, the number of Thai visitors to Japan increased more than fivefold (Japan Tourism Marketing Company, 2014b). In fact, only Asian tourists from Korea, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong exceeded Thailand (Japan Tourism Marketing Company, 2014b). It is also worth noting that the number of Thais traveling to Japan has increased almost every year since 1998 (Japan Tourism Marketing Company, 2014b), and so far in 2014, the year-on-year increase is 77 percent (Japan

Tourism Marketing Company, 2014c). As these trends demonstrate, there is more and more likelihood that Japanese citizens will use English to communicate with Thais in the future.

Method

Impetus for the Study

There is a dearth of comparative data examining Asian university students' attitudes toward the intelligibility of English. However, considering the ever-increasing possibility of interaction between citizens from Japan and Thailand, it is necessary to understand how interlocutors from the two countries perceive intelligibility so that potential barriers to miscommunication can be avoided.

Instrument and Procedure

A questionnaire exploring attitudes toward, among other things, the intelligibility of English was developed for a five-year, thirteen country study. The protocol specifies first language administration, thereby requiring a translation, back translation process before the questionnaire can be administered. Students were not required to complete the survey, and since the project focuses on the attitudes of university students in specific countries, international students were excluded from the data. In order to explore reasons for their responses and elicit additional detail, interviews were conducted with some of the students who completed the questionnaire.

Participants

This paper discusses data collected in Japan and Thailand, countries with many similarities in their education systems. English is, for example, most often taught as

a foreign language, with instruction facilitated by the local languages of Japanese and Thai. Furthermore, in both countries English is regularly tested for entrance to university (Darasawang, 2007; National Center for University Entrance Examinations, 2014a). English is also often tested during the job interview process as well as for advancement in some companies. In spite of this, English is generally not used on a daily basis.

In Japan, 1,141 first-year tertiary students (59.6 percent male, 40.2 percent female, 0.2 percent no response) completed the questionnaire. While 23.0 percent of the students said they were “19-20 years old,” the majority indicated they were “18 years old or younger” (74.5 percent). Approximately 30 percent of the students said they had traveled overseas. Interviews were conducted with 29 students.

In Thailand, the questionnaire was administered to university students who were studying in seven different areas of the country: Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Nong Khai City (near the Laos border), Nakhon Ratchasima City (in east central Thailand), Nakhon Pathom Province (central Thailand), Pathum Thani Province (central Thailand), and Nakhon Si Thammarat Province (southwest Thailand). Of the 1,193 students who completed the questionnaire (33.0 percent male, 69.6 percent female, 0.4 percent no response), 26 percent had been to another country. The Thai students were slightly older than their Japanese counterparts, with 18.4 percent indicating “18 or younger,” 76.9 percent saying “19-20 years old,” and the remaining students selecting other ages. Interviews with 107 of the students who had completed the questionnaire were conducted in either English or Thai with translation.

Both groups of students were similar academically. Students in both countries were studying various subjects, with no one major having a majority of the students. In addition, in both Japan and Thailand, the majority of the students were freshmen (100.0 percent and 95.1 percent, respectively).

Results and Discussion

To explore intelligibility, the university students were asked to use a five-point Likert scale (i.e., strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) to give their opinion about various statements. In order to compare the results between the two countries, the percent response was calculated. In addition, frequencies were used to calculate the chi-square statistic, which was used to determine the probability that the differences between the two groups of students were statistically significant.

Pronunciation Variety

Students were asked to show their degree of agreement to the statement, "East Asian's English pronunciation is different than the pronunciation of native speakers." The proportion of Thai students who agreed or strongly agreed to the statement was significantly larger than the number of Japanese students (Table 1).

Although the Thai students gave various reasons for agreeing to the statement, two were given much more frequently. The first was the influence of the speaker's first language. A Thai freshman studying law provided an illustration. "It's very different, when you and I speak. Why is it different? It's the mouth, tongue. I practice speaking the same as you." When asked if she wanted to speak like a native speaker, she replied, "Yeah. Sometime I can't speak same as you. It's everything. You're from America, I'm from Thai. You have American language, I have Thai language, and it's different... When I was student I said to teacher, 'veketable.' Teacher said no, and correct me [vegetable]. In the past I said this way, it is how to say in Thai."

The second most common explanation was the belief that the variances can cause miscommunication. The Thai students often drew on their personal experiences, such as the first-year business student who recounted the following story. "My teacher taught me *car* [said *ka, ka*]. When I started with a foreigner teacher who came from USA, the first time, *have you ever seen a car* [using her impression of American pronunciation],

no one understand. So he drew a picture. ‘Ohhh! A car!’ Something like this [shows how miscommunication is possible].”

In contrast to the Thai students’ examples, the Japanese students tended to be less specific during the interviews. For instance, a Japanese student who agreed to the statement explained, “Japanese don’t have rhythm and accent.” She went on to discuss the fact that Japanese lack the ability to use word emphasis in the same way as native speakers. Another student pointed out that since sounds such as *r*, *l*, and *th* do not exist in the Japanese language, differences occur.

Table 1: Participants’ Attitude toward East Asians’ English Pronunciation (percent response)

Student	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No response
Thailand ¹	27.8	48.6	20.5	1.8	0.4	0.8
Japan	24.8	29.3	35.7	3.3	1.1	5.8

¹Sums to 99.9 percent due to rounding.
 Statistically significant difference. $p < .0001$, $df=4$, $\chi^2=113.8438$

In both countries, discussions about the influence of the speaker’s mother tongue were not limited to distinctiveness between people with different first languages but also included variation within the English language, as demonstrated by a Thai student’s observation, “I have heard a lot of Thai people speak English but my friends’ and teacher’s, everyone’s pronunciations are very different, so different.” Similarly, a Japanese student noted, “Within English there are differences in dialects and differences in intonation, accent, and other things. In Japanese, too, even though it is the same Japanese language, there are differences by area of the country. Even though it is the same word, the pronunciation, accent, intonation are different.” Likewise, a Japanese student explained, “There are differences in pronunciation by country, for example, *can* in the United States and *can* in Britain. The origins were the same; the differences are little but exist.”

Variance in Intonation and Accents

Another questionnaire item focused on intonation and accents; it is worth noting that the statement was broader than the previous item, focusing on Asians rather than only East Asians. As Table 2 shows, in response to the statement, “When Asians communicate in English, their intonation and accents are not all the same,” more Japanese students strongly agreed. However, when the strongly agree and agree responses are combined, more Thai students agreed to the idea.

When explaining why they agreed, both groups of students, but particularly the Thai students, tended to start from the perspective that differences exist. As with the discussions about pronunciation, the Thai students tended to focus on the possibility of miscommunication that arises because of different cultures and first languages. For instance, a Thai business major agreed to the statement, noting, “I speak Thai English, and you speak Singlish or you speak Indian English. It’s not easy to understand each other. Thai people have Thai English, Singlish have Chinese, Indian have Indian English.” A few of the Thai students also talked about the influence of accent on their communication. As a case in point, a pre-med student noted that because of differences, when she spoke with people from other countries, she sometimes tried to minimize her accent.

Student	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No response
Thailand	33.5	50.2	13.0	2.0	0.8	0.5
Japan	42.0	23.4	24.8	2.5	1.9	5.4
Statistically significant difference. $p < .0001$, $df=4$, $\chi^2=172.7904$						

The vast majority of the Thai students asserted that these differences in intonation and accents cannot be judged as good or bad. One male law student expressed his feeling

that “it is charming to have different accents.” Others focused on the core element of communication, including the male psychology major who said, “I think language is made for communication. I don’t believe you have to speak like this, you just can make you understand me, that is OK.” Similarly, an English major concluded, “It doesn’t matter if you have different intonation or pronunciation, as long as you can communicate. That’s the point.” Jenkins (2000, p. 160) asserted that second language “speakers tend to be rather less judgmental over each other’s pronunciation of English provided it is intelligible,” and Bamgbose (1998, p.118) observed, “It is people, not language codes, that understand one another, and people use the varieties they speak for specific functions.” The results of the current study indicate that rather than focusing on “errors” during communication, many of the Thai students had a desire to try to communicate with one another.

Studying Various Accents and Intonation

On the questionnaire, students were also asked to respond to the statement, “I want to study differences in the English accents and intonation of people from different Asian countries.” Significantly more Thai students agreed or strongly agreed to the statement while the Japanese students were more evenly divided between the choices other than “strongly agree” (Table 3).

Students who agreed to the statement once again emphasized differences because of the number of cultures. This was not, however, always perceived negatively. This can be seen in the Japanese student’s assertion, “I want to study those differences. Each country is different, but they are all English with different groups of English—the Japanese English, the Korean group, like that. The Korean and Japanese pronunciation is different, and I can try hard to see the differences. The differences show the flavors of those countries and I’m interested in those.”

The Thai students indicated that their primary motivation to study Asian accents and intonation was to enable them to have more communication in the future and decrease

the chance of miscommunication during those interactions. An English major from Chiang Mai explained, "If I have opportunity to study, I want to learn. Intonation can tell emotion and intended meaning of the speaker." Speaking through a translator, a law student asserted, "English is a kind of language that is flexible language. If you change a little bit the tone or accent the meaning could be different and lead to miscommunication." Similarly, a Thai environmental science major concluded, "I really want to learn this...Whatever country you come from, communication is important. If you don't know English you are like blind. You can't say anything. We should know English to have chances to communicate with people around the world. Whenever I see foreigners I want to ask them where they are going. I want to be their guide." Graddol (2006, p. 91) suggested that focusing on international intelligibility will allow speakers to function in a wide range of situations while maintaining some of their national identity. The results suggest that many, although not all, of the Thai students have begun to place importance on international intelligibility and communication with interlocutors who are not only native speakers, and this may provide another reason for students' reluctance to judge accents and intonation variation as "bad."

During the interviews, students who indicated they would like to study various accents and intonation were asked how they would study. The Japanese students tended to focus on communication and study in native-speaking countries. For example, while explaining why she did not want to study Asian accents and intonation, a Japanese noted (emphasis added), "*Because if I go to the US and my pronunciation is difference, I can't communicate.*" Another student indicated she wanted to go to Canada to study, although when queried, she admitted that if there were many Asians in Canada she would pay attention to their accents and intonation for a better understanding of their English. These students' focus on native-speaker countries reflects the realities of Japanese education. Matsuda (2003) found that English is still being taught as an inner-circle (native speaker) language, and Weir and Ozasa (2007) noted the exclusive use of American English in Japanese English textbooks. In addition, Lieske's pilot study (2006) found most Japanese tertiary students believed they would use English with native speakers, particularly Americans, rather than second language speakers from Asia.

In contrast to the Japanese, only one Thai student suggested the opportunity to go to another country would help him understand others’ accents, and when queried about which countries, he replied, “China, India, many many countries.” Instead of focusing on experiences outside of Thailand, some students felt they would seek out their teachers, and one student thought she would study phonics. Other students discussed informal opportunities to notice differences while talking with friends, chatting on the Internet, and using social media. In addition, Thai students mentioned using tools such as movies, music, and books to help them better comprehend a variety of accents and intonation patterns. These methods of study reflect not only intrinsic motivation but also a variety of techniques including personal interaction, formal studies, and heightened awareness.

Student	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No response
Thailand ¹	29.8	51.8	12.3	3.9	1.4	0.7
Japan	7.5	20.1	20.3	24.0	22.4	5.7

¹Sums to 99.9 percent due to rounding.
 Statistically significant difference. $p < .0001$, $df=4$, $\chi^2=732.4475$

Students’ arguments against studying Asian accents and intonation can be better understood by considering one Thai’s observation that there are too many different accents in Asia, making the study of them impossible. Considering this variety, some English learners might agree with another Thai student who wanted “people in Asia [to] use the same standard so they have the same intonation and accents.”

Of the students who disagreed, the Japanese were much more likely to believe studying a native accent and intonation would be better. These conclusions were sometimes practical, such as the Japanese freshman who said, “I thought that my English would become a dialect rather than native speaker-like if I studied Asian English, and I

wondered if that had value. We don't study Tohoku-ben [a Japanese dialect], we study standard Japanese, so I thought it's a similar kind of thing." Reflecting the Japanese National Board of Education's tendency to promote American pronunciation, a student explained, "American pronunciation is particularly emphasized in school, especially in the listening. My junior high school ALT [Assistant Language Teacher] was an American."

The Japanese National Center Examination's English test includes a section which requires students to determine the primary accent of words (National Center for University Entrance Examinations, 2014b), and this type of testing may give students the impression that there are correct and incorrect accents. When a model is viewed as "a linguistic ideal which a teacher and a learner keep in mind" (Kachru, 1986, p. 117), it can provide learners with a target by which to measure their progress. However, when "correctness" is not tempered with lessons on intelligibility, the result can be a belief that there is only one correct accent rather than a range of intelligible accents. This type of narrow focus may explain the Japanese education major's belief that "those [Asian] accents aren't the real thing, so I don't want to really study them."

Pedagogical Implications and Conclusions

This study found that a majority of the Thai and Japanese university students believed that variability is unavoidable when using English. This suggests that many of the students may be interested in learning how to overcome potential barriers to communication that occur because of differences in pronunciation, intonation patterns, and accents. There are four practical implications for preparing students for real-world interactions using English with speakers from around the world.

First, because potential communication breakdown was a consistent concern of the students, there is a need to continue to teach communication strategies such as rephrasing, the use of context, and body language to help students be better prepared when they meet people with unfamiliar accents.

Second, native-speaker norms were sometimes mentioned during the interviews. These standards provide learners around the world with a common target, but the results of the current study indicate some students need to be more aware of the statistics that indicate they are more likely to interact with other non-native English speakers. Students should be introduced to the concepts of English as an international language and English as a lingua franca. As the students become more aware of how people around the world use English, their affective barriers (e.g., emotional response to “wrong” pronunciation) may slowly decrease.

Third, students consistently agreed that varieties of English can be difficult to understand. The study also found the Thai students were more willing to study various Asian accents and intonation patterns, suggesting many of the students may have a more international view of intelligibility. Consequently, in Japan in particular, more international speakers (rather than only native speakers) should be incorporated into listening and video activities. Because the activities do not require real-time English production, they are less demanding and allow students to focus on the essence of communication without having to think about how they will respond. By including more kinds of speakers, the students will be able to “train their ears” to better comprehend other speakers.

Finally, during the interviews, more Thai students related personal experiences with miscommunication in English. In contrast, the Japanese students discussed fewer communication mishaps, suggesting they may have had fewer cross-cultural interactions in English. International relations are not limited to governments and the entities within them; they start with ordinary people who interact with each other and build human relationships. As a result, students, particularly those in Japan, need to be encouraged to take every opportunity to use English as a lingua franca and communicate with foreigners, even in their home countries.

As learners become more aware of what actually inhibits understandability, they may move toward more acceptance of international intelligibility. With time, they may even

join their contemporaries in enjoying the “charm” of various accents and the “flavors” of the various countries.

Footnote

¹The ASEAN Plus Three group is particularly important for Japan, which is the most developed nation in the group. While Japan's real GDP forecast stands at 0.9-1.2 percent (Japan Center for Economic Research, 2013), the ASEAN countries are projected to have real GDP growth of 5.4 percent for the next five years (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] Development Center, 2013).

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