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Abstract

By adopting a pluralistic approach to Thailand's urban refugee shelters, this paper yields insights of contextualized factors that hinder Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy practices through English for communication purposes among non-native speaking urban refugees. Interviews, observations and surveys gathered from 80-100 urban refugees revealed that their most dominant second language uses are closely tied with their English medium communication instead of immediate contact of Thai language. That is to say, English for communication purposes among linguistic diverse urban refugees has become apparent, dominant and intensified over oral and written discourses in Thai. Predominantly Thai language environments outside urban refugee shelters have limited influence on participants, whereas English medium communication among linguistically heterogeneous urban refugees has tremendous influence on their second language learning. This study argues how Thai and English as two competing linguistic orientations to everyday language practices that foreground English language over Thai language across urban refugee communities in Thailand. However, these urban refugee shelters are depicted as contrary to the positive development(s) of English language, because confluence of Thai administrators, Thai social workers, refugee adults, children and adolescents speaking non-native and/or non-native like English resulted in mutually reinforced misguided uses of English language, underscoring the phonologically-, grammatically-, and pragmatically improper use of English one-word-, two-word-, and multiword-utterances the researcher has witnessed via instruments.

Key Words: English for communication purposes; English medium communication; bilingual; biliteracy; urban refugees



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1. Introduction

This present inquiry provides an empirical grounding, rigor, and update in English for communication purposes among urban refugee communities across Thailand and how English medium communication is in relation to discourage Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy developments. The intertwined role of linguistically diverse urban refugee population and the need for a common medium of communication can be understood by adopting English for communication purposes. The central argument throughout this paper has been the fact that reliance on English for communication purposes among non-native and/or non-native like speaking urban refugees reduces their likelihood to learn Thai language and misguide each other's uses in English L2 utterances, hindering their Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy developments—both their learning of Thai language and English language. This theme frames preceding and subsequent sections in this article.

Introducing transnational asylum seekers and urban refugees resettled in Thailand serves a background review for this study. An increasingly growing migratory trend is frequently through transnational asylum seeking. One of the most actively participating groups in this diasporic trend for decades has been urban refugees resettled in Thailand. A large body of studies in multidisciplinary fields of applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and general linguistic studies has yielded understandings into daily language activities among camp-based refugees (i.e., Burmese and Lao refugees) as well as urban refugees (i.e., Congo, China, North Korea, Pakistan, and Sri Lankan refugees) in Thailand. Nevertheless, very few studies have focused on urban refugees that to what extent their Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy learning might otherwise seem to be discouraged as a result of their English for communication purposes among non-native and/or non-native like speakers.

Two forces seemingly fuel emerging importance regarding urban refugees' second language learning in Thailand. First, local Thai communities demand urban refugees that



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acquire immediate use of Thai language that is much needed in communicating with them. Second, more and more refugees cannot accept the unequal socio-economic outcomes that have characterized some of them with advantaged English learning opportunities achieving more financial gains than others with fewer means to access English language. On the one hand, an increasingly transnational migratory trend among urban refugees presumably leads to heterogeneity and linguistic diversity in Thailand with regard to multilingual, multiliterate and multicultural developments. On the other hand, most probably, transnational refugees' exposure to a predominantly Thai language environment can facilitate their Thai oral discourse acquisition. However, this study has found otherwise in Thailand. Consistent with interviews, observations and responses from questionnaires conducted among urban refugee communities in Thailand, this paper discloses how urban refugees enacted and employed daily language activities resulted in 2 divergent and yet intertwined pattern termed Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy, which is evident from data in this study indicating its destined failure resulted from non-native and /or non-native like English medium communication.

1.1. Issues of English for communication purposes among urban refugees in Thailand

The rise of United Kingdom (UK) of Great Britain, followed by the rise of United States of America (USA), accompanied with other factors has jointly created English language to become the most widely-spoken lingua franca in our time (McCrum, 2010). It has replaced rivals such as French to become the language of diplomacy and defeated rivals such as German to become the language of science. Though many more people speak Mandarin-Chinese on the earth at this moment today, Mainland China itself has vast numbers of English as a foreign language learners. In India, likewise, the biggest English-speaking middle class is considered a big asset to help the country grow. Some assumed that English is the last lingua franca until the return of Babel (see Ostler, 2010). This biblical account documents a period of time prehistorically when all humans on earth were united with the same language. A common medium of communication not only influenced people's speech,



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but also their thoughts, ideas, cultures and so on during that time. This implies that one can more easily influence others, given the fact that they did not have communication barriers linguistically and culturally.

Nonetheless, can English for communication purposes in the 21st century unite linguistically diverse population(s) on the earth back to the Tower of Babel? One problem with such bold vision is that data from English medium communicators among ethnically and linguistically diverse non-native speakers in this paper show discouraging results. Evidenced by data, this study claims that deficiency in learning Thai L2 and failure in learning English L2 is resulted from English medium communication among nonnative- and/or non-native like English speakers who are heterogeneous urban refugee adults in Thailand. In other words, convincing arguments derived from data in this article asserted limits and boundaries to the ideal of effortless English for communication purposes among linguistically diverse groups. To claim that English medium communication can solve communication problems among linguistically diverse people such as urban refugee groups in Thailand is actually to neglect constrains created by non-native and/or non-native like speakers that not only hinder their English language learning, but also prevents them from learning Thai language.

This study gave a sobering observation in following accounts particularly in regard to difficulties in learning Thai and English language faced by transnational urban refugees in Thailand. In addition to their unspeakable trauma fleeing home countries and resettling in a strange country they never knew before, language and communication issues add more obstacles to unwilling migrants such as urban refugee communities in Thailand. Thai and English language are much needed for transnational urban refugees in Thailand. Nonetheless, Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy developments among urban refugees are at risk. Mainly through English for communication purposes, urban refugees are socialized into an isolated language boundary. This relatively isolated language boundary via English medium communication within urban refugee communities in Thailand greatly reduces their opportunities for their social- and daily use of Thai language, hindering both urban refugees'



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efforts to learn Thai language for immediate use and their possibilities to learn English from native and native-like English speakers outside their constrained shelters.

However, there are some exceptions when very few urban refugees marry Thai wives and attempt to settle in Thailand for good. In addition, exceptions too are urban refugees/illegal migratory workers brought into Thailand from bordering countries such as Burma, Cambodia and Laos by human traffickers to beg money through team works and engage in more language contacts with Thais. Without learning to speak Thai and English language with adequate learning resources, there is no way urban refugees can express themselves clearly unless they only hang out with their homogenous groups of refugees fleeing from the same countries of origin.

Multiple field-site experiences in this study also asserted that some urban refugees are not able to use English for communication purposes and thus cannot communicate clearly to receive medical benefits they are entitled with. When urban refugees go to hospitals and clinics for medication, they may not understand instructions explaining to them a proper use of prescription drugs and medicine in Thai or English language unless they can go with volunteer interpreters/translators. However, duties of volunteer interpreters/translators usually exclude translation assistances in hospitals and clinics for urban refugees who do not speak Thai or English language. Grass-root religious organizations in collaboration with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) fall short to provide resources and services necessary to maintain a permanent team of bilingual/biliterate interpreters and/or translators for linguistically diverse urban refugees resettled in Thailand.

But for most urban refugees, the problem of translation/interpretation is usually solved informally by using bilingual urban refugee family members or friends to interpret/translate for those who cannot speak Thai and English language. This informal bilingual/biliterate interpretation and/or translation practice can lead to serious



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communication problems as data from this study pointed out. Frequently urban refugee children and adolescents become bilingual speakers in their native or heritage languages and non-standard English in Thailand after receiving non-formal humanitarian based educational assistance taught by local refugee English teachers instead of native speaking English teachers. After urban refugee adults bring bilingual children or refugee friends' children to a hospital or a clinic, urban refugee children may not understand what medical doctors say and may not have an adult level understanding beyond language competencies to translate and/or interpret things accurately.

1.2. Issues of non-native and/or non-native like English medium communicators

Literature document an unbridgeable division in English language competencies and proficiencies between native speakers and non-native speakers (Medgyes, 1992). A disadvantage of linguistic globalization through English medium communication is that somehow English language is liberated from its owners of UK and sub-variants are created from Estglish spoken in Estonia to Singlish spoken in Singapore: the key words are recognizable; nevertheless, many novel words dot the lexicon, idiosyncratic language rules, and sentence structures to make these English variations hard to understand (McCrum, 2000). English language spoken by non-natives is dissimilar to each other. The nuanced-, daily life rooted-, and colloquial English of Singaporeans, Filipinos and Indians can be incomprehensible to Americans, Australians, British, Canadians and South Africans. Spoken English language is thus fractured by differences and variations in pronunciation, intonation, pragmatics, politeness strategies and syllable stresses. As non-native speakers of English are contrasted with their native speaking counterparts in demonstrating their competencies and proficiencies performed in English language, the difference is striking because the former has unbreakable constraints and inabilities created by their late bilingual and/or late biliteracy developments in regard to phonological-, grammatical-, syntactical-, pragmatic- and other different areas of English language than the latter. In sharp contrast, non-native pronunciations of English tend to carry their pronunciations and intonations from their native



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languages to interfere with their English speech (MacDonald, 1989, p. 224). Speaking English language with a slightly different accents and intonations may lead to speech that is not understandable to ears of its native speakers and thus obscures meanings. For example, when you listen to a Malaysian businessman negotiating with a Thai businessman from Bangkok in Malaysian English language and Thai English respectively, you will hear the differences: the entire conversation sounds a mix of Cantonese, Southern-Min and Central Thai; the English parts are abrupt, emphatic, last syllables omitted, and stripped-down.

However, just because non/native and/or non-native like English language speaking teachers are different in competency and proficiency level does not mean that they cannot benefit English as a foreign and second language learners. But when the division between native and non-native is treated as rigid rule and policy to recruit English language teaching staffs, non-native and/or non-native like English speaking teachers might have little room for them to contribute their knowledge of English and pedagogical skills that can have potentially helped English as foreign and second language learners (Medgyes, 1992, pp. 340-349; Moussu, 2000).

Note that the scope and aim of this present inquiry has been limited to not include formal analysis on what non-native English teachers and peers can do to help English as a foreign and second language learners in urban refugee shelters in Thailand develop their English competencies and proficiencies. This will be the next inquiry. This current study, however, allows data to speak and defend for themselves regarding disadvantages and negative effects of English medium communication among non-native speakers of English.

2. Methods

2.1. Research question and instrument

This work on English for communication purposes among non-native- and non-native like speakers that discourage urban refugees' developments in Thai-English bilingual and



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biliteracy presents recent theoretical and empirical-based findings that have been generated by pursuing this question: what is the current state of English for communication purposes in relation to Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy developments among transnational urban refugees in Thailand and what are contextualized factors that affect its developments. This study is aimed to help construct bridges between English for communication purposes in relation to bilingual and biliteracy theory and their grass-root practices among urban refugee communities at multiple sites across Thailand. Participants were measured by their proper uses of one-word, two-word and multiword English utterances linguistically, grammatically and pragmatically during interviews and spontaneous conversations occurred in natural- and non-manipulated settings under observations, assessed and evaluated by a Ph.D. holder in English as a foreign and second language education from a leading research-based university in USA, accompanied with a certified assistant in the highest level of English language proficiency from a leading research university in Australia.

2.2. Multiple urban refugee sites across Thailand

Thailand is a prominent refugee receiving country in almost world-wide scale. Throughout Thailand's history, immigrants and refugees, in searching of opportunities and liberations, have settled in this kingdom with little more than their ambitions and hopes. Some illegal human traffickers promised some urban refugees to bring them to Europe, but dropped them in Bangkok, said by an anonymous administrator in an urban refugee shelter. Other urban refugees fled from cruel political- and religious persecution in their home countries to Thailand, because they can meet tourist visa or visa on arrival requirements easier in Thailand than some other countries (Jesuit Refugee Service, n.d, online).

Urban refugee communities in Thailand have maintained their many unique features. Data in this study were gleaned from a wide variety of data sources including administrators, social workers and religious groups that organize urban refugee shelters, local refugee English teachers who provide humanitarian based educational assistance for urban refugee



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children and adolescents, and urban refugee individuals as well as urban refugee families that fled Congo, Mainland China, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka to resettle in Thailand. Many groups of 80 refugees from multiple urban shelters participated in this study. However, multiple research sites in this study constantly have new urban refugee members coming in and leaving out from time to time, so the total urban refugee population is fluctuating.

3. Results and discussion

Things in local contexts may not always go the way leading scholars have speculated. Bilingual and biliteracy studies have been significantly expanded by Nancy Hornberger's continua model of biliteracy (Hornberger, 1989, 2003, 2004). Conversely, urban refugees in Thailand have challenged existing notions of biliteracy developments advanced by Hornberger's model by revealing that urban refugees show little hard evidence to draw on linguistic resources from native languages in facilitating acquisition of Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy, because they fail to develop Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy to a great extent. In other words, it has become evident from data in this paper that English for communication purposes among heterogeneous and linguistically diverse urban refugees, non-natives of English language, enormously hinders both their English language learning and Thai language learning.

Bilingual and biliteracy studies, models and theories that document urban refugee learners are by no means one-size-fits-all. These above fields need to be tailored to fit socio-cultural- and political- contexts in which urban refugees learn and develop bi/multilingual and bi/multiliteracy in their dynamic political, socio-cultural, multilingual and multicultural settings. A well-established model that is a great success in accounting for bilingual and biliteracy might fail in some local contexts. Urban refugee communities in Thailand might be one of these worst cases. Transnational urban refugees in Thailand typically have a wide range of goals they intend to achieve in their second language learning. However, evidenced by empirical data they are frequently not skilled at developing their English language



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competencies and often fail to acquire their immediate needed Thai language. Though most participants were excited to learn English language and some are of interest to learn Thai language, when it came to examine their Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy learning outcomes, almost 90% of them admitted that they cannot do both well. In discussing with informants, the researcher discovered that several contextual factors are at play.

Two main themes emerged from data analysis are examined in detail: failure in acquiring English language and failure in learning Thai language. That is to say, failure in acquiring Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy is occurring to urban refugee communities at multiple shelters across Thailand. The explanations this paper would like to advance lies in the fact that it was primarily a consequence of non-native and/or non-native like English speaking Thai administrators, Thai social workers, multi-linguistic refugee teachers and refugee peers that hinder their Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy learning among and within themselves. Most of their local urban refugee English teachers never get certified in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and/or ESL/EFL pedagogy. Neither do they study overseas before in English speaking countries, i.e., USA, UK, Canada and Australia. Non-native and/or non-native like English uses by fellow urban refugees and Thais who provide humanitarian based services are effective in forcing worse changes onto mixed non-native accents and mistaken utterances among English speaking refugees. Though an individual urban refugee can surely affect his/her Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy learning in isolation, there is more powerful to hindering bilingual and biliteracy acquisition among linguistically diverse refugees living together as a whole linguistic community. Thus, rather than draw on available linguistic resources from native languages to develop toward independent Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy, suggested by Hornberger's influential continua model of biliteracy, participants from this study show their evidence of counter effect against both Thai and English language learning.

Evidently, non-native and/or non-native like speaking refugee English teachers have the most direct impact on their students' English language learning. Urban refugee children



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and adolescents' English learning depends on their local refugee English teachers' competencies in English and their teaching skills. This study shows that it is unfortunate but true that no native- and/or native-like English speaking teachers are available for urban refugee children and adolescents who are entitled with humanitarian based language education assistance.

Thai language immersion might be an intensive second language learning experience for transnational refugees in Thailand. Nevertheless, data from this study show otherwise. Thai language courses are provided occasionally for urban adult refugees, but not regularly in these shelters. Urban refugee children and adolescents are entitled with non-formal humanitarian based education assistance in English language learning taught by non-native English speaking refugee teachers. However, no Thai language courses are regularly offered in their non-formal educational programs.

It is impossible to underestimate the impact of linguistic cultures on urban refugee communities in Thailand. Linguistic cultures in Thailand and in global level figures heavily in the selection of second language learning among urban refugee communities. Urban refugees determine which second languages they use to speak, read and write. Their desire to speak, read and write in English language are encouraged, fostered and supported by fellow urban refugees, Thais and linguistic cultures in Thailand.

The degree of language contact between refugees and Thais enhances urban refugees to see a need in learning Thai language. Nonetheless, when linguistically diverse urban refugees become English medium communicators—employment of English for communication purposes, they skip their immediate need of learning Thai language for communication and their reliance on English language learning to a great extent suffer from their non-native and/or non-native like English speaking Thai administrators, Thai social workers, refugee teachers and refugee peers.



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Table 1: Daily language practices claimed by urban refugee informants

Infor- mant	Age 2011	Ethnicity of informants	1	2	3	4	5	6
A		Cambodia	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
B		China	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2T	L2E
C		Congo	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
D		Congo	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
E		Congo	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2T	L2T
F		Congo	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
G		Congo	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
H		Lao	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
I		Middle East	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2T	L2T
J		Middle East	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
K		Nepal	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
L		Nepal	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
M		North Korea	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
N		North Korea	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2T	L2T
O		Pakistan	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
P		Pakistan	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2T	L2T
Q		Pakistan	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
R		Pakistan	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
S		Pakistan	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2T	L2T
T		Sri Lanka	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
U		Sri Lanka	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
V		Sri Lanka	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
W		Sri Lanka	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2T	L2T
X		Sri Lanka	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
Y		Vietnam	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2E
Z		Vietnam	L1	L2E	L2E	L2E	L2T	L2T



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No. of informants=26

1=communicate with homogenous urban refugee peers	L1=Native languages L2T=Thai L2
2=communicate with heterogeneous and linguistically diverse urban refugees	L2E=English L2 N=No opinion/unclear/neutrality
3=communicate with Thai administrators	
4=communicate with Thai social workers	
5= communicate with Thais in public language domains, i.e., grocery stories.	
6= communicate with Thai medical doctors in hospitals or clinics	

Note that due to space constrain, table 1 only reports responses from 26 informants. Information about informant's age(s) does not reveal in this report to keep their confidentiality. There are more than 10,000-20,000 urban refugees coming in and out several urban refugee shelters across Thailand daily. Though the researcher is aware of more variations that could have been occurred from a larger sampling size, this study has been limited to document a smaller sample size of 80-100 urban refugees.

4. Conclusion and suggestions

Though the researcher is open to alternative explanations to interpret data, any insights and comments other than non-native and/or non-native like English speakers utilizing English for communication purposes that lead to unsuccessful Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy developments will go beyond the scope and aim of this present



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inquiry. This study does not encompass formal analysis of what exactly makes non-native English speaking urban refugees different than their native speaking counterparts with regard to English phonological processes, intonation variations, and pragmatics and so on. More future inquiries are much needed to undertake in a variety of urban refugee sites to ensure more comprehensive understanding. As for now, limited salient findings emerged from analysis in this study reported in this paper is included in this contribution.

Data from this study would conclude that one main factor causes unsuccessful learning in Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy—both English language learning and Thai language learning—among transnational urban refugees in Thailand. Deficiency in learning English and Thai language is not brought by English for communication purposes alone, but also accompanied with non-native and/or non-native like English speaking Thai administrators, Thai social workers, refugee English teachers and refugee peers. Despite other scholarly works might document positive effects on non-native English teachers and how they improve English as foreign and second language learners' achievements, competencies and proficiencies (Moussu, 2000), data gathered for this study do not show any explicit messages and convincing arguments to support non-native speaking English teachers and English medium communicators. Data cannot go beyond themselves to claim any positive effects on non-native and/or non-native like English medium communicators, because analysis shows discouraging results that nearly all participants (>95%) failed English language assessments and evaluation regarding proper uses of their one-word-, two-word- and multiword-English L2 utterances in phonological, grammatical and pragmatic levels.

But as far as basic communication and mutual understanding are concerned, linguistically diverse urban refugees seem to be content with their varied English competencies and proficiencies.



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To avoid above pitfalls, several implications and suggestions surface. This article adds to literature and advances our current understanding regarding a dynamic relationship between Thai and English language in transnational trajectories by focusing on multiple and context-specific discourses in urban refugee shelters. Several research results yielded from this article are that Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy development(s) is an unrealistic goal unless heterogeneous urban refugees stop non-native and/or non-native like English for communication purposes, outsourcing more qualified native and/or native-like English language teachers and entitled with regular Thai as a second language education. Nevertheless, to stop non-native and/or non-native like English for communication purposes among heterogeneous and linguistically diverse urban refugees is not feasible at the moment, due to the fact that there is lack of an existing common medium of communication but English—even they are non-native speakers. Taking stock of the English for communication purposes among non-native and/or non-native like speakers as in relation to failing Thai-English bilingual and biliteracy developments, interventions are recommended to take initiatives in meeting needs of English as a foreign language teaching by filling in native speaking English teaching staffs, jointly with Thai as second language teaching programs provided on regular basis within urban refugee shelters. Perhaps possible implications and contributions from this inquiry is to inform us that we at least are aware of the limitation of non-native English medium communication that could potentially lead to unsuccessful developments in bilingual[ism] and biliteracy.



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