

MEASURING THE COMPREHENSIBILITY OF ENGLISHES WITHIN ASEAN AMONG ASEANS

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on designing a comprehensibility test and a questionnaire for spoken world Englishes in Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, and utilizing the test to investigate the comprehension of Burmese, Cambodians, Indonesians, Laotians, Thais and Vietnamese. We reviewed the demarcation of users of English based on Kachru's (1984, 1985) three concentric circles model within the bloc's context where two circles – Outer Circle and Expanding Circle are present. The findings established a moderate comprehensibility level of Expanding Circle listeners toward the speakers of the Outer Circle. The variations of comprehensibility scores paved way for the exploration of the comprehension scores' possible relationships with language proficiencies, attitudes toward speakers, familiarity of spoken variety, linguistic typology, and political ambiance between and among ASEAN nations.

KEYWORDS: ASEAN, comprehensibility, Englishes, Expanding Circle, Outer Circle

INTRODUCTION

This present paper has two main aims: to design a comprehensibility test and a questionnaire for spoken languages and then to use the test to investigate the comprehensibility of ASEAN's Outer Circle Englishes such as Bruneian English, Malaysian English, Philippine English and Singaporean English among the bloc's Expanding Circle citizens including Burmese, Cambodians, Indonesians, Laotians, Thais and Vietnamese.

Existing intelligibility studies within ASEAN focused on conversation analysis (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Kaur, 2010) and pronunciation (Jenkins, 2003; Leimgruber, 2011; Pakir, 2010). Although such studies established existence of intelligibility and/or comprehensibility among speakers within the bloc, the impending questions raised are: “What are the comprehensibility levels of spoken world Englishes, i.e. Bruneian English, Malaysian English, Philippine English and Singaporean English among Burmese, Cambodians, Indonesians, Laotians, Thais and Vietnamese?” and “How do the comprehensibility levels of Expanding Circle countries differ?” With the objective test and questionnaire conducted to both fulfill the quantitative and qualitative requirements of this study, the risk of Aseans becoming incomprehensible in 2015’s Single Community will be nullified.

This paper is divided into four parts: first, an introduction to ASEAN; second, the design of the study including definition of terms, structure of the comprehensibility test, sample population, test administration, and standardized comprehension levels; third, findings and discussions; and, fourth, possible conclusions and its implications toward the communication success among Aseans in 2015.

Participants in the present study included 201 students currently enrolled in the undergraduate and graduate levels in various fields of studies within the universities in the Expanding Circle, namely Assumption University, Chiang Mai University, Khon Khaen University, King Mongkut University of Technology North Bangkok, Mahapanya Vidyalai University, Mahidol University, Prince of Songkla University-Hat Yai Campus, Rajamangala University Srivijaya-Songkhla Campus, and Rajamangala University Srivijaya-Trang Campus in Thailand, and University of Riau in Indonesia.

THE TEN SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS

To understand ASEAN, we present a brief profile of the bloc. Founded in 1967 by virtue of Bangkok Declaration, five founding member countries - Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand joined an effort to promote economic co-operation and welfares of the peoples (Khoman, 1992). Subsequent member countries are Brunei Darrusalam (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999). In 2008, all member countries ratified the ASEAN Charter paving the way for realization of an ASEAN Community (Ten Nations, One Community) focusing on Political Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and ASEAN External

Relations as embodied in the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009-2015 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009).

Notable in the charter is the adoption of English as a “working language”, elevating the importance of the English language in the region. The proposition of adopting Bahasa Indonesia and French as official languages (Kirkpatrick, 2008) was never put into further discussion to pre-empt an embarrassing scenario of language quandaries within the bloc.

Following Kachru’s (1984, 1985) three concentric circles of English as a global language, Southeast Asia is represented in at least two circles of English users as shown in Table 1. The Outer Circle is composed of British former colonies such as Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore, and the sole American colony in the region, the Philippines. In the Expanding Circle are Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam (Pakir, 2010). The model also led to the delineation of English use within the mentioned circles into English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) respectively.

Kachru’s representation, however, is continuously questioned to date (Michieka, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2003, Yano, 2001). Within ASEAN, Wilang and Teo (2012a) argued that it is impossible to demarcate ASEAN users of English within the three circles due to the following scenarios given Singaporeans use English among four official languages, should they be recognized as native users of English and the country be elevated into the Inner Circle?; Myanmar (Burma) is under the British rule until 1948, for a historical point of view, should it belong to the Outer Circle?; Thai researchers are establishing the emerging varieties of Thai English, would this emergence elevate Thailand up to the Outer Circle?; and, most Aseans are either bilingual or multilingual, the historical categorization is simply not applicable.

Table 1 shows the categorization of ASEAN countries using Kachru’s model, the status of English and the Englishes within ASEAN. Using Kachru’s model, Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore are in the Outer Circle while Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam are in the Expanding Circle. The Outer Circle countries used English as a second language while the Expanding Circle countries used English as a foreign language.

Table 1: Circles, English status and Englishes within ASEAN

Country	Kachru's model	Status of English	Englishes
Brunei	Outer Circle	ESL	Bruneian English
Malaysia	Outer Circle	ESL	Malaysian English
Philippines	Outer Circle	ESL	Philippine English
Singapore	Outer Circle	ESL	Singapore English
Thailand	Expanding Circle	EFL	Thai English
Cambodia	Expanding Circle	EFL	-
Indonesia	Expanding Circle	EFL	-
Laos	Expanding Circle	EFL	-
Myanmar	Expanding Circle	EFL	-
Vietnam	Expanding Circle	EFL	-

Related to the above exemplified functional weakness of Kachru's model, Graddol (1997) exposed the shifting of the status of English in the 21st century solely on users' language proficiencies. Berns (1995) revealed that European Union falls under the Expanding Circle; however, the users are not all at the same proficiency level but fall into a continuum. Ustinova's (2005) investigation supported Berns' findings and found out some Russian users become "functionally native" fitting better into the Outer Circle or even the Inner Circle. Michieka (2009) detailed the existence of Expanding Circle in the rural Kisii, Kenya, a country that falls under Outer Circle. Meanwhile, Yano (2001) predicted the high possibility of ESL becoming ENL, and also EFL to ESL, and gradually to ENL. These changes lead to creation of circles within Kachru's concentric circles.

The ambiguities seen in the model by linguists led Crystal (2003), Jenkins (2003, 2009), McArthur (2004), and McKay (2003) to define English as an international language, global language, lingua franca, among others. This led to Kirkpatrick's (2008) assertion that within Southeast Asia, English is used as a lingua franca.

These two propositions, two circles in Kachruvian's model and today's usage of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) within ASEAN, are merging. While it is our belief that English is currently the lingua franca among over 500 million Aseans, it is also a fact that each ASEAN member country recognized English differently - a second language in Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines (except Singapore) and simply no status for the rest of the member nations. In other words, the spoken varieties presented are emancipated from the world Englishes discourse while ELF depicts the communication process between two NNS interactants. This integration, however, will not provide discussions to support an emerging debate as to whether world Englishes and English as Lingua Franca have separate tracks of focus on intelligibility issues (Berns, 2008) but rather to use both frameworks to deduce a method to measure comprehensibility (WE) and possibly explain the unintelligibility using an ELF paradigm based on Jenkins (2003) well-publicized studies on New Englishes' common features such as variations in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary/idiom and discourse style.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The data in this study comprise results of eight comprehension tests and information obtained from a questionnaire¹. Recent studies of intelligibility in ELF primarily focused on conversation analysis and pronunciation features (Jenkins, 2003; Kaur, 2010; Kirkpatrick and Deterding, 2006). The methods adopted by previous studies reviewed in Van der Walt (2000) include recording of monosyllables, words and sentences, the reading of texts, interviews, rehearsed interviews, and rehearsed verbal monologues. In this study, we used the paradigm of World Englishes speaker-listener matrix (Levis, 2005) where the speakers are from the Outer Circle and listeners stay in the Expanding Circle. The design of this study is outlined in the succeeding paragraphs.

Intelligibility and Comprehensibility Defined

Intelligibility and comprehensibility are two intertwined terms often confused until Smith and Nelson (1985: 274) came up with their notable tripartite definition of intelligibility; whereas, intelligibility deals with word and utterance recognition, comprehensibility as word and utterance meaning, and interpretability as the perception and understanding of the speaker's intentions. While it is possible to attain intelligibility without comprehension, it is impossible to achieve comprehensibility

exclusively (Sewell, 2010). And, while there are no finite boundaries on how the intelligibility and comprehensibility are separated absolutely (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Jenkins, 2000), this study will interchangeably use both terms to mean “both intelligible production and felicitous interpretation of English” (Nelson, 1995, p.274).

The Design of the Comprehensibility test and Questionnaire

To live in both worlds of qualitative and quantitative study, this research designed Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQs) and a questionnaire survey focusing on the factors related to the comprehensibility of Englishes within ASEAN. While the sole purpose of this study is to measure the comprehensibility of the spoken language produced by the Outer Circle speakers, the concept of intelligibility was instituted as a pre-requisite in the selection of audio-video stimulus. Two native speakers of each of the four countries in the Outer Circle were asked to identify the spoken varieties of their own country, followed by experts’ check and voice quality control mechanisms (Jindapitak, 2010). The video clips range from 54-64 seconds and the spoken topics are food and everyday life. Also, the video clips contain intermediate varieties of spoken Englishes eliminating extreme and too standard varieties. The use of audio-video is supported by Van der Walt’s (2000) studies as it reflects the clues in aid of comprehension observed in an actual communication process.

The MCQs were based on eight video clips; two clips for each variety of Englishes; namely, Bruneian English, Malaysian English, Singaporean English and Philippine English. Five questions were asked based on each clip – three literal and two inferential questions. The number of MCQs was adjusted from 20 to 40 questions after the suggestions of two linguists to satisfy statistical requirements. Moreover, the background survey was revised to include the subjects’ first language backgrounds and their proficiencies in all the official languages in the Outer Circle. The separation of Bahasa Malaysia (Malaysia), Malay (Singapore), and Melayu Brunei (Brunei), instead of collapsing them into one - Malay language, is done for political reasons and to avoid controversies that may arise. Other languages include Chinese, English and Tamil (Singapore), and Filipino (Philippines). The main reason for their inclusion is to detect if the sample population’s knowledge of Outer Circle’s languages affect their comprehensibility (Kachru & Smith, 2008).

In designing a balanced objective test, literal and inferential questions were included. By literal questions, understanding of the text was explicitly measured, and by inferential questions, understanding beyond the text was gauged. This is to complement Faerch and Kasper's (1983) tolerance testing idea of communication in context and communication above sentence level. Moreover, Smith and Nelson's (1985) definition of comprehensibility as word and utterance meaning is the main point of departure of this study.

For example, a literal question taken from the first speaker (Bruneian) asked about a straightforward fact of time. In this question, respondents are given points by encircling the correct choice *c*.

How long does it take to walk to the market?

- a) Three minutes
- b) Four minutes
- c) Five minutes
- d) Six minutes

For an inferential question, a sample question taken from the seventh speaker, Singaporean, asked the meaning of putting five tissue packs on the table. Here, the respondents needed to combine their literal understanding of the text with their own knowledge and intuitions to arrive at an appropriate answer. It is impossible to choose *b* because we don't put tissues on a dirty table or choice *c* otherwise we put six tissue packs and *d* not just a possible answer but a good distractor. The setting of the spoken text seen in the video, which is in the restaurant, will make *a* the right choice.

What does it mean to put five tissue packs on the table?

- a) Five seats taken
- b) Five tables to clean up
- c) Five friends of yours to share the table
- d) Five people to share your food

Subjects

A total of 201 subjects took part in the test. They represented the following first language backgrounds:

Aceh (.5%)	English (3.5%)	Khmer (11.4%)
Bahasa Malaysia (.5%)	Filipino (.5%)	Lao (5%)
Bahasa Indonesia (35.8%)	Javanese 3%)	Thai (36.3%)
Burmese (6%)	Karen (.5%)	Vietnamese (6%)

Notable in the above data is that some of the subjects can actually speak second languages such as Filipino, English, and Bahasa Malaysia, all official languages adopted by Outer Circle countries. This is interesting since none of their parents are from the Outer Circle countries. We can only assume that their first language is learnt or taught rather than naturally acquired.

Table 2: Biographical details of the subjects

Nationalities							
	Burmese	Cambodians	Indonesians	Laotians	Thais	Vietnamese	Total
N	12	21	76	12	68	12	201
Gender							
Female	7	1	39	5	58	3	113
Male	5	20	37	7	10	9	88
Age							
21-30	5	19	72	9	63	5	173
31-40	6	2	3	2	2	5	20
41-50	1	0	1	1	2	2	7
Over 51	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Current degree							
H1*	0	12	55	0	59	1	127
H2**	12	9	21	12	9	11	74

**H1 = Undergraduate studies **H2 = Graduate studies*

Most of the subjects can speak Thai followed by Bahasa Indonesia. Although there were fewer Thai subjects than Indonesians as shown in Table 2, it is possible that Laotians used both Thai and Khmer while Indonesians preferred to use their regional languages - Javanese and Aceh than Bahasa Indonesia. The above representations complement research findings that Aseans are becoming bilingual or multilingual (Kirkpatrick, 2003; Jenkins, 2000).

Further, Table 2 captures the distribution of the subjects based on nationalities, gender, age and current degree. There are 12 Burmese, 21 Cambodians, 76 Indonesians, 12 Laotians, 68 Thais, and 12 Vietnamese. The 201 subjects were all students, 127 studying in the undergraduate level and 74 graduate

students. There were 113 females and 88 males, and the youngest age group, 21-30 is the highest represented with 173. A lone respondent represented the age group of over 51.

Administering the test

The test was piloted at Rajamangala University Srivijaya-Songkhla Campus, Prince of Songkla University-Hat Yai Campus, and Mahapanya Vidyalai University. The alpha reliability co-efficient is .85 and the standardized item alpha is .85 respectively. The figures showed that within Cronbach's alpha scale, the test is considered good.

The final test was conducted at Assumption University, Chiang Mai University, Khon Khaen University, King Mongkut University of Technology North Bangkok, Mahidol University, and Rajamangala University Srivijaya-Trang Campus in Thailand, and University of Riau in Indonesia.

Comprehensibility levels

The standard statistical formula was used to gauge the comprehensibility levels set in Table 3. Where 5 is the highest score based on the number of questions in each spoken variety and 0 is the lowest score, the range was calculated divided by 3 intervals, which is *1.66*. The same formula was used in the calculation of interval *3.33* within 10, the summation of combined questions in two spoken texts of each variety.

Table 3: Comprehensibility scales and levels

Scales		Set of comprehensibility levels
0 - 5	0 - 10	
0 – 1.66	0 – 3.33	Low comprehensibility
1.67 – 3.33	3.34 – 6.67	Moderate comprehensibility
3.34 – 5.00	6.68 – 10.0	High comprehensibility

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this present study details the following: comprehensibility levels of Outer Circle speakers' utterances; summation of comprehensibility levels of Outer Circle Englishes;

comprehensibility levels based on nationalities; comprehensibility and language proficiencies; and, general discussions on comprehensibility results.

Table 4: Comprehensibility of Outer Circle Speakers' Utterances

Speakers	Comprehensibility		Comprehensibility		Overall	
	of literal questions		inferential questions		Comprehensibility	
	<i>M</i>	Remark	<i>M</i>	Remark	<i>M</i>	Remark
Bruneian 1	1.46	Moderate	.87	Moderate	2.33	Moderate
Bruneian 2	1.41	Moderate	1.15	Moderate	2.56	Moderate
Malaysian 1	1.23	Moderate	.93	Moderate	2.16	Moderate
Malaysian 2	2.17	High	1.23	Moderate	3.40	High
Philippine 1	1.54	Moderate	1.15	Moderate	2.69	Moderate
Philippine 2	1.47	Moderate	.86	Moderate	2.51	Moderate
Singaporean 1	1.66	Moderate	1.04	Moderate	2.70	Moderate
Singaporean 2	1.50	Moderate	.56	Low	2.06	Moderate

Table 4 captures the moderate comprehensibility of the Outer Circle speakers to the point of dissecting the comprehensibility test results of each spoken text and segregating literal and inferential outcomes. Results show that Malaysian speaker 2 got the highest comprehensibility remark while Singaporean speaker 2 received the lowest comprehensibility rank. Also, Malaysian speaker 2 received the highest comprehensibility rank of all the literal and inferential questions asked. This result predicted the results of the comprehensibility outlined in Table 5.

Table 5 collates the total mean scores of the two spoken texts in each variety. Singaporean English, although the most researched variety in Southeast Asia, received the lowest comprehensibility mark when all mean scores of the respondents were combined. While this paper cannot exactly identify the possible reasons, Date (2005) and Kirkpatrick and Saunders (2005) implied that Singaporean English may be problematic for listeners from other parts of Asia, namely China and Japan. While we can

assume that it is the linguistic effect of the spoken text, we cannot also discount the listener's limitations discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

Table 5: Summation of Comprehensibility Scores and Levels

Overall Comprehensibility scores	Overall Comprehensibility levels	
<i>M</i>	Remark	
Bruneian English	4.90	Moderate
Malaysian English	5.57	Moderate
Philippine English	5.01	Moderate
Singaporean English	4.76	Moderate

Comprehensibility based on nationalities and/or country of origin

Figure 1 and Table 6 summarize the comprehensibility levels of the Expanding Circle citizens towards the spoken Englishes in the Outer Circle. Singaporean English got the highest comprehensibility rating among the Burmese participants but got the lowest moderate mark with a mean score of 3.76 among the Cambodians. Burmese respondents had the highest comprehensibility level in all spoken Englishes as tabulated in Table 6.

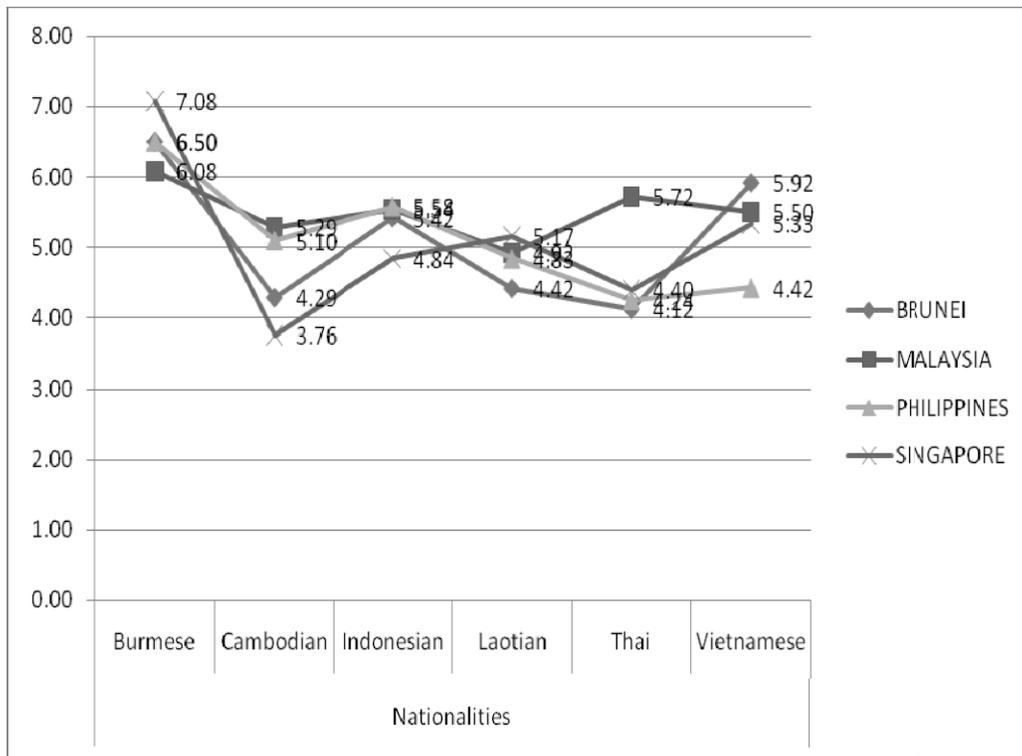


Figure 1: Comprehensibility of ASEAN Englishes

It is interesting to note here that all Burmese and Laotians are currently enrolled in the graduate school (as shown in Table 2) but had differing outcomes. For instance, there is a difference of 2.08 for Bruneian English, 1.16 for Malaysian English, 1.67 for Philippine English, and 1.91 for Singaporean English. And while 87% of the Thai respondents are undergraduates, their level of comprehension for Malaysian English and Bruneian English outrank Vietnamese’ comprehension scores where 92% are graduate students.

Table 6: Comprehensibility levels based on nationalities

Nationalities/Englishes		Bruneian	Malaysian	Philippine	Singaporean
		English	English	English	English
Burmese	<i>M</i>	6.50	6.08 (Least)	6.50	7.08 (Most)
	<i>SD</i>	2.09	1.88	2.03	1.92
Cambodians	<i>M</i>	4.29	5.29 (Most)	5.10	3.76 (Least)
	<i>SD</i>	2.51	2.15	2.28	1.73
Indonesians	<i>M</i>	5.42	5.54	5.58 (Most)	4.84 (Least)
	<i>SD</i>	1.64	1.86	1.52	1.86
Laotians	<i>M</i>	4.42 (Least)	4.92	4.83	5.17 (Most)
	<i>SD</i>	2.54	1.56	2.21	1.75
Thais	<i>M</i>	4.12 (Least)	5.72 (Most)	4.24	4.40
	<i>SD</i>	1.97	1.79	1.98	1.74
Vietnamese	<i>M</i>	4.90	5.57 (Most)	5.01	4.76 (Least)
	<i>SD</i>	2.15	1.73	1.51	1.97

While Malaysian English was the least comprehensible among the Burmese, it was the most comprehensible variety among Cambodians and Thais. This can be explained by geographical proximity of the three countries, especially for Malaysian tourists' influx in the Southern part of Thailand where both countries share borders.

The findings denote Singaporean English as the least comprehensible among Cambodians (also shown in Figure 1) and Indonesians. Also, Philippine English got the highest moderate rating with a mean score of 5.58 among the Indonesians, .04 and .16 higher than Malaysian English and Bruneian English respectively. For Bruneian English, Laotians and Thais exhibited least comprehensibility while the least comprehensible variety among the Vietnamese subjects is Singaporean English.

Above all, it is important to note in the findings the constant moderate comprehensibility of spoken Englishes. The representations of the statistical outcomes did not show extremely high and low comprehensibility.

Comprehensibility scores and language proficiencies

Table 7: Self-perceived Outer Circle language proficiencies

Languages	Perceived proficiencies		
	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
Bahasa Malaysia	32.8%	9.5%	4.5%
Chinese	31.3%	8.0%	.5%
English	22.4%	66.7%	7.0%
Filipino	33.3%	3.0%	-
Malay	30.3%	8.0%	2.5%
Melayu Brunei	29.4%	5.0%	-
Tamil	33.8%	-	.5%

The data in Table 7 indicates that many subjects are beginners. The prompt the subjects had to respond was “Please indicate your proficiency in each of the following languages.” It was found that most Indonesians ticked Bahasa Malaysia, Malay, Melayu Brunei, and Tamil. This can be explained by the Malay language’s evident similarities, however need to be renamed for language identity and ownership. Historically, all the above languages (Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia, Malay, Melayu Brunei) including Filipino fall under the Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian language group.

It is also noted that most Thais ticked Filipino and Chinese languages most probably due to the influx of Filipino English teachers, Thais with Chinese origins, and the thousands of government sponsored Chinese language teachers spread even in the remotest areas of the kingdom. In the same table can be found the highest percentage of language proficiencies, which is English in the intermediate level.

However, this does not mean Singaporean English (otherwise becoming Englishes) but generally English being used as an international or global language (McKay, 2003).

Table 8: Correlation coefficients between scores and Outer Circle language proficiencies

Outer Circle Languages	Overall Comprehensibility Scores
Bahasa Malaysia	-.014
Chinese	-.231**
English	.074
Filipino	-.190**
Malay	-.111
Melayu Brunei	-.183**
Tamil	-.196**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

In an attempt to get an overall understanding of the possible relationships between language proficiencies of the Expanding Circle citizens towards the languages officially spoken by the Outer Circle nationals (as shown in Table 7) and comprehension scores, a correlation matrix was calculated and shown in Table 8. It is evident that there are significant negative correlations between the subjects' knowledge of the spoken languages in the Outer Circle and their scores such as Chinese ($r = -.231$, $p = .000$); Filipino ($r = -.190$, $p = .003$); Melayu ($r = -.183$, $p = .005$); and, Tamil ($r = -.196$, $p = .003$). However, only English had a positive correlation on the respondents' perceived proficiencies of the spoken languages by the Outer Circle speakers. It justifies the same outcome in Table 7 where 66% percent of the respondents' perceived English proficiency is intermediate. Thus, the higher proficiency the sample population has in English, the more comprehensible the Outer Circle speakers become.

The exit interview, a casual talk with the subjects after the test, revealed mixed reactions as follows. To some, the speaker's speech was too fast but *so-so* for others; in terms of the distinctive

features of spoken varieties, subjects knew Singaporeans often say *lah* but wondered why the Filipino speaker mispronounced 'f' into 'p' like kopi (coffee). The schema of the subjects was activated; some tried to recall eating in the restaurants similar to the one described as *Mamak* by Malaysian speakers. The unfamiliarity of words included in each spoken variety like *masilamak*, *masichampor* however did not impede their comprehensibility of the whole text by matching spoken text to the contextual clues; and, some subjects asked where Brunei is located in the region. Overall, the subjects were amazed to know new information about the spoken Englishes (*why -es?*) and gained an experience in this kind of study.

While we can control the audio-visual stimulus input to a certain degree in terms of speed, sound and illumination, it was impossible to quantify the listeners' ability to perceive the listening input. This could be attributed to the listeners' unfamiliarity and limited exposure to the variety, and their English language proficiency. However, it could also be an individual's problem rather than a problem with the spoken variety. Although parameters were set in the methodology, the difficulty of finding a truly representative speaker of a variety and quantifying the listeners' perception was a very challenging task (Van der Walt, 2000). For example, the familiarity and exposure to Bruneian English and Philippine English affected the results of the test. When the test results of Thai respondents from the southernmost part of Thailand were examined, Malaysian English was the most comprehensible while Philippine English was the least comprehensible. However, when the data from the central and northern parts of Thailand were merged, Philippine English was replaced by Bruneian English while Malaysian English remained in its spot. Although it was not explicitly asked in the questionnaire if the subjects were familiar with the spoken varieties, it is possible to resort to outside circumstances for explanations – the influx of Malaysian tourists and Filipino teachers. In effect, familiarity and exposure to the spoken varieties partly explains the differing comprehensibility scores of the subjects.

Another factor associated with comprehensibility is the attitude toward the speakers of the variety. The territorial disputes between Malaysia and Indonesia hampered some Indonesian subjects to purposely leave some Malaysian variety test questions unanswered. Some Indonesians studying in Thailand explicitly expressed their disinterest to the Malaysian speakers during the data collection. In fact, Malaysian English was the least comprehensible variety among them. However, with the data from University of Riau merged, the overall comprehension score of Indonesians improved, second to

the Philippine English, their most comprehensible variety.

Next, is it possible to negotiate the meaning of a one-way communication (speaker input) and gauge comprehensibility? This can be answered by reviewing the input stimulus and the results itself. The core reason of using audio-visual input is that it contains clues in aid of comprehension, as discussed in the previous section of this paper. In the literature review, there was no mention of non-verbal gestures exhibited by Aseans that impede comprehensibility.

However, this caution must be highlighted on a case to case basis of NNS-NNS interaction. The question above can be best explained by the Bruneian speaker who has the highest frequency of spoken native words such as *Gerai Gadong* (a place), *masichampor* (a kind of food), *masilamak* (a kind of food), *rote jon* (a kind of desert), *bundong* (a kind of drink), among others. Having in mind that all Englishes are moderately comprehensible, further results revealed that only Laotians and Thais had Bruneian English as the least comprehensible variety – 4.42 and 4.12 respectively. However, Vietnamese score showed Malaysian English as their most comprehensible variety. Besides, their overall comprehensibility mark of Bruneian speakers was 4.90, second to Singapore which was the least comprehensible variety.

To this purpose, we can argue that listeners can negotiate meaning based on contextual clues in the stimulus input. If Aseans' comprehension can be negotiated in this scenario, how much do we expect them to understand each other during face-to-face interactions? Obviously, there is higher comprehension between and among the interactants as we cannot underestimate the positive results of negotiation of meaning (Kaur, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

Although there are variations on the most and least comprehensible Englishes among the subjects, the total mean scores indicated moderate comprehensibility of the Expanding Circle citizens to Outer Circle speakers. While we cannot specifically elaborate the *whys* of disparities when it comes to the comprehension scores of each nationality, we can determine the comprehension level based on their scores.

This study positively reflects the result of previous studies as follows: the positive correlation of English language proficiency and the comprehension scores, Singaporean English is the least moderate

variety partly due to linguistic variables, and above all, Levi's (2005) Outer Circle-Expanding Circle paradigm reflects comprehensibility levels similar to the findings of studies where conversation analytic method was used.

The comprehensibility objective test that comprised literal and inferential questions can be used safely by carefully plotting a design that considers authentic listening inputs intelligibly identified and validated by experts, piloting the test to satisfy standard testing procedures, environmental considerations of the testing rooms, using a questionnaire survey to balance the qualitative results, and the test can be utilized for a wider sample population.

In 2015's integration, there is no doubt that English becomes the lingua franca of the bloc. Expanding Circle citizens may need to adjust their ears to spoken Englishes in the Outer Circle. By knowing the factors related to the comprehensibility toward the above varieties of English, it is important to encourage more research to achieve the highest form of comprehensibility among Aseans.

NOTES

The findings in the questionnaire – factors that relate to the comprehensibility of Aseans such as exposure to English through education, exposure to English through work experiences, exposure to English outside the classroom (non-educational setting), exposure to English through social media, and exposure English through travel and stay abroad will be presented in an upcoming paper.

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