Ethnocentrism and English Language Proficiency among High School Students at a Private School in Thailand

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Abstract

This study attempted to shed light on the correlation between ethnocentrism and English language proficiency among M.4 (Matthayom 4) and M.6 (Matthayom 6) students at a small private high school in Thailand. A standardized instrument (Generalized Ethnocentrism Scale) was used to measure the level of ethnocentrism among the research population and a standardized national English proficiency test (O-NET) was used to measure English language proficiency. The results showed that M.6 students had high levels of ethnocentrism along with low English proficiency scores. M.4 students were less ethnocentric compared to M.6 students; however it appeared that ethnocentrism levels were not correlated with English proficiency scores for M.4 students. With respect to gender differences, there were no significant differences in ethnocentrism level among male and female students. These findings indicated a definite correlation that students with higher levels of ethnocentrism are more likely to have lower English language proficiency scores than those students with lower levels of ethnocentrism. Therefore, in order to lower the level of ethnocentrism of students, schools should create intercultural activities and projects to enhance students' understanding and appreciation for other culture.

Keywords: Ethnocentrism, culture, high school, O-NET exam, English language proficiency, second language

1. Introduction

Thailand has always been a country with one official language, Thai. "Thais are proud that Thailand has never been colonized. Another reason for having been a country with one language is the concept of national stability. There have been proposals to make Thailand a country with two languages, Thai and English, but this has never materialized due to the abovementioned

reasons. English can; therefore, be at most the first foreign language that students must study in schools" (Wiriyachitra, 2002).

Unlike many other countries Thailand was not colonized by the British or any other European powers. This has meant that Thailand had comparatively a short history of involvement with the English language (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

Despite the growing importance of English in Thailand, its place is not ubiquitous and its spread has been uneven, particularly regarded to poorer communities (Baker, 2012).

It has been considered that the Thai economy is rapidly growing as Thailand is moving closer to AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) and later on being a member country of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations). Moreover, Thailand has become one of the leading countries in South East Asia where international companies are interested in investing. As a result, it has become a must for Thai workforce who works in these companies to be able to use English as a medium of communication.

Although English has become a required course for Thai students, one has to keep in mind the barriers of acquiring a second language (L2).

There are various factors affecting the L2 proficiency such as age, gender, culture and ethnocentrism. Age and gender being the former factor of determining the proficiency, later on the culture of a person living in a particular society becomes the latter determiner of L2 proficiency.

Ethnocentrism is a phenomenon which people believe that their cultures and ideas are superior to others and it prevails in every society.

There are many arguments and researches on biological barriers such as age and gender. Considering the age of a learner there have been always a question as to what age is appropriate for mastering a second language. It is believed that children will have higher language proficiency than adults.

"Some feel adults may have an initial advantage in L2 acquisition, but children take over in the long run, also viewed as the "tortoise and hare effect" (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994).

The rise in the number of publications in recent years that focus on language and gender is a growing area of study among researchers.

It was reported that females are more aware of their use of strategies to facilitate their learning. As a result, their overall performance in language acquisition is generally better than that of males. Further evidence for female dominance in language learning has been observed in other disciplines as well, including neurology and sociolinguistics (Tam, 2013).

Culture is another important factor in the acquisition of second language proficiency.

Gunderson (2000) aptly describes language and culture: "Language and culture are inextricably linked. Unlike the Gordian knot, nothing comes from separating them because they have little or no meaning apart from each other".

Through the study of other languages, students gain a knowledge and understanding of the cultures that use that language; in fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996).

As culture is an important tool to shape a person to be what he or she wants to be, ethnocentrism being deposited by the culture plays an important role in L2 proficiency. The culture that one is exposed to determines the proficiency of a language as motivation factor arises from the culture itself. The process of language-learning involves the creation of new individuals and cultural identities (Girvan, 2004). Generally, the above mentioned conclusions may not be able to apply for Thai students. Therefore this study is aimed to focus on Thai students' English proficiency and ethnocentrism level and their correlation.

The objective of this study is to explore how the age, gender and ethnocentrism have an effect on English language proficiency of high school students in a small private high school in central province of Thailand.

2. Research Hypotheses

There are three hypotheses in this study.
1. Higher the level of ethnocentrism scores the lower the level of English proficiency.
2. Younger students would be less ethnocentric compared to older ones.
3. Female students would be less ethnocentric than male students

Scope of the study

The study was among Matthayom 6 students (Grade12) and Matthayom 4 student (Grade 10). The total population for this study was 40 students. Matthayom 6 students were 20 and Matthayom 4 was 20.

The research site is located in the central region of Thailand. It is located about 75 km. away from Bangkok. The school consists of classes from Kindergarten to Grade 12. There are about 300 students who have enrolled from kindergarten to Grade 12. The duration of this study was 6 months.

3. Methodology

To ensure the level of ethnocentrism among the research population, a standardized questionnaire (GENE) was used. Quantitative method was employed in this study. The standardized national English proficiency test (O-NET) scores were used to measure the English language proficiency.

3.1 Research Population

High school students at a private school in Ayutthaya Province were selected as the ideal school for this study because of the following reasons. Firstly, all the subjects were taught in English by both foreign and Thai teachers. The students enrolled in the English courses at the private school were expected to be able to use English both communicatively and academically. Secondly, the researcher is working in the same school as a homeroom teacher for Matthayom 6 (Grade 12) students and Matthayom 4 (Grade 10).

3.2 Research Instrument

The GENE (Generalized Ethnocentrism Scale) was created by Neulip and McCroskey (1997) to measure an individual's tendency to feel that her or his culture is the center of the universe. The revised version of the scale used in the research consists of 22 statements concerning the feelings about one's culture and other cultures. The respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which the statement applies to her or him by marking whether she or he

(5) strongly agree [score=2],

(4) agree [score=1],

(3) is neutral [score=0],

(2) disagree [score=-1], or

(1) strongly disagree [score=-2] with the statement. In this study, the third choice (being neutral) was removed from the original questionnaire as to make it a forced choice questionnaire. Only 15 of 22 statements are scored; the remaining items are used as distracters.

3.3 Interpretation of the GENE

To determine an ethnocentrism score, the following steps are applied.

Step 1: Add scores of statements 4, 7, and 9 together.

Step 2: Add scores of statements 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 18, 20, 21, and 22 together.

Step 3: Subtract the sum from Step 1 from Step 2.

This sum is the generalized ethnocentrism score. Higher scores indicate higher ethnocentrism.

4. Result

Table 1 displays the data collected from M.4 students. A close inspection of the data shows that the ethnocentric scores of M.4 students should be within the range of -6.80 to 6.60. Therefore, students A04 and A16 in the M.4 group are anomalies and accordingly were not included in the final analysis as displayed in Table 2.

Table 3 displays the data collected from M.6 students. In the case of M.6, the acceptable range of ethnocentric score is between -4.98 and 9.58. A close inspection of these data shows student B11 to be an anomaly. Accordingly that student's data were not used. Table 4 displays the corrected results.

Table 1 Characteristics of Data for M.4

No.	Ethnocentric Score	English Score	Age	Sex
A01	1	40	14	F
A02	-3	30	14	F
A03	1	46	14	M
A04	7	64	14	M
A05	-4	36	14	M
A06	1	44	14	M
A07	2	32	14	M
A08	-5	78	14	M
A09	0	26	14	M
A10	-1	40	14	F
A11	0	68	14	F
A12	1	62	14	M
A13	0	46	14	F
A14	0	30	14	M
A15	-3	50	14	M
A16	8	66	14	M
A17	2	60	14	F
A18	2	42	14	M
A19	-4	54	14	F
A20	-3	20	14	F
Average	0.10	46.7		
Std. Dev.	3.35	15.8		
Acceptable Range	-6.60 to 6.80	15.1 to 78.3		

Table 2 Characteristics of Adjusted Data for M.4

No.	Ethnocentric Score	English Score	Age	Sex
A01	1	40	14	F
A02	-3	30	14	F
A03	1	46	14	M

No.	Ethnocentric	English	Age	Sex
A05	-4	36	14	M
A06	1	44	14	M
A07	2	32	14	M
A08	-5	78	14	M
A09	0	26	14	M
A10	-1	40	14	F
A11	0	68	14	F
A12	1	62	14	M
A13	0	46	14	F
A14	0	30	14	M
A15	-3	50	14	M
A17	2	60	14	F
A18	2	42	14	M
A19	-4	54	14	F
A20	-3	20	14	F

Table 3 Characteristics of Collected Data for M.6

No.	Ethnocentric Score	English Score	Age	Sex
B01	0	51	17	M
B02	2	27	17	M
B03	-2	54	18	M
B04	5	19	18	M
B05	5	28	17	F
B06	0	28	17	M
B07	0	43	17	F
B08	5	31	17	F
B09	4	20	18	M
B10	-1	35	17	M
B11	12	11	18	M
B12	0	42	17	M
B13	1	44	17	F
B14	1	27	17	M

No.	Ethnocentric Score	English Score	Age	Sex
B15	-2	37	17	F
B16	3	17	18	F
B17	5	26	17	F
B18	-3	45	17	M
B19	7	19	17	F
B20	4	26	18	M
Average	2.30	31.5		
Std. Dev.	3.64	11.9		
Acceptable Range	-4.98 to 9.58	7.7 to 55.3		

No.	Ethnocentric Score	English Score	Age	Sex
B16	3	17	18	F
B17	5	26	17	F
B18	-3	45	17	M
B19	7	19	17	F
B20	4	26	18	M

Test of the first hypothesis

The first hypothesis of the study was that high levels of ethnocentrism would be correlated with lower levels of English proficiency. Thus, if a student scored high in ethnocentrism, then it would reflect on that student's English score. In order to determine whether there is a correlation, the adjusted ethnocentric scores were plotted along the X-axis against the adjusted English scores along the Y-axis. Below are the results for M.4 and 6 in Figure 4.1 and 4.2 respectively.

Generally, the coefficient of correlation must lie between -1 and +1. The correlation +1 expresses a perfect direct linear relationship between the two variables, while the correlation -1 expresses a perfect inverse linear relationship. The closer the coefficient is to either -1 or 1, the stronger the correlation between the variables. If the variables are independent, the correlation coefficient is 0.

In Figure 1 (M.4), the straight line

Table 4 Characteristics of Adjusted Data for M.6

No.	Ethnocentric Score	English Score	Age	Sex
B01	0	51	17	M
B02	2	27	17	M
B03	-2	54	18	M
B04	5	19	18	M
B05	5	28	17	F
B06	0	28	17	M
B07	0	43	17	F
B08	5	31	17	F
B09	4	20	18	M
B10	-1	35	17	M
B12	0	42	17	M
B13	1	44	17	F
B14	1	27	17	M
B15	-2	37	17	F

representing the correlation between ethnocentrism and English score has the coefficient of correlation (R^2) of -0.0067 that means they are seemingly uncorrelated. Therefore the first hypothesis for M.4 must be rejected. It means that the ethnocentrism levels of M.4 students are not correlated with their English proficiency scores.
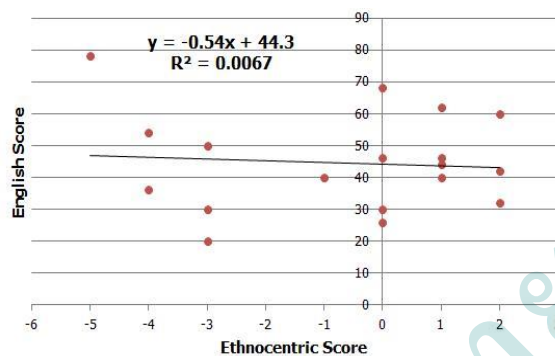

Figure 2 Correlation between ethnocentrism and English score of M.6 students.

Figure 1 Correlation between ethnocentrism and English score of M.4 students

In Figure 2 the straight line represents the correlation between ethnocentrism and English proficiency scores for M.6 students. The coefficient of correlation (R^2) was -0.57. The relatively high value of the minus correlation coefficient means both variables tend to have relatively strong inverse linear relationship, also called an anti-correlation. Thus, it can be concluded that the first hypothesis has been accepted for M6.
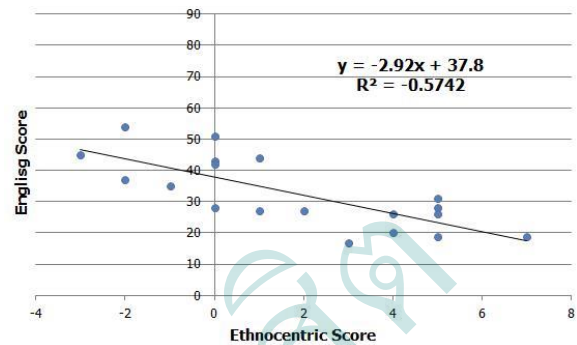
It should be noted that overall M.6 students had higher levels of ethnocentrism than M.4 students. And, M.6 students had, overall, lower English proficiency scores than M.4 students (M.6=31.5; M.4=46.7).

Stated differently, M.4 students with lower levels of ethnocentrism had higher English proficiency scores than M.6 students.

Age hypothesis

The second hypothesis of this study was that the younger students would be less ethnocentric as compared to older ones. The t-Test was used to verify whether the differences in the mean scores between M.4 and M.6 are statistically significant (Null hypothesis).

$$H0: \mu_{M.6} - \mu_{M.4} = 0$$
$$H1: \mu_{M.6} - \mu_{M.4} > 0$$

Table 5 indicates the results for t-Test of the second hypothesis.

Table 5 t-Test of the Second Hypothesis Comparing Ethnocentric Scores between Groups of Different Ages (t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances)

		M6	M4
Mean		1.789	-0.722
Variance		8.509	5.389
Observations		19	18
Hypothesized	**Mean**	0	
Difference			
Df		34	
t Stat		2.906	
P(T<=t) one-tail		0.003	
t Critical one-tail		1.691	
P(T<=t) two-tail		0.006	
t Critical two-tail		2.032	

The > sign in the alternative hypothesis (H1) indicated that the test is right-tailed (one-tailed). The significance level is 0.025. Generally, if t Stat > t Critical one-tail, the null hypothesis must be rejected. From Table 4.5, it can be verified that 2.906 (t Stat) > 1.691 (t Critical one-tail). Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. This means M.4 students are significantly less ethnocentric compared to M.6 students. Thus the second hypothesis is accepted.

 Gender hypothesis

The third hypothesis was that the female students are less ethnocentric than male students.

Again, the t-Test was used to test the null hypothesis showed that the means of ethnocentric scores for both male and female are not different, at a 5% level of significance (a = 0.05) and by assuming that the population variances are unequal. Table 6 indicates the results for t-Test of the third hypothesis.

$$H0: \mu_{male} - \mu_{female} = 0$$
$$H1: \mu_{male} - \mu_{female} > 0$$

Table 6 t-Test of the Third Hypothesis Comparing Ethnocentric Score between Groups with Different Genders (t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances)

	Male	Female
Mean	0.783	1.000
Variance	9.632	10.800
Observations	23	16
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	31	
t Stat	-0.208	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.418	
t Critical one-tail	1.696	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.837	
t Critical two-tail	2.040	

The > sign in the alternative hypothesis (H1) indicates that the test is right-tailed (one-tailed). The significance level is 0.025. Table 6 shows that t Stat is -0.208, while t Critical one-tail is 1.696. Since t Stat < t Critical one-tail, it cannot be rejected the null hypothesis. This means the average ethnocentric score

between female and male students are not significantly different. Therefore, the third hypothesis must be rejected.

5. Conclusion

The research findings revealed that M.6 students showed a higher level of ethnocentrism as compared to M.4 students. Moreover, M.6 students showed lower English proficiency compared their younger counterparts. However, there was no correlation of ethnocentrism and English language proficiency among M.4 students. Finally, according to the t-test there was no significant difference in ethnocentrism among male and female students.

6. Discussion

This study indicated that ethnocentrism is a barrier for English language acquisition for Thai students. The findings showed a definite correlation between ethnocentrism and English language proficiency scores, especially for M.6 group. Students with higher levels of ethnocentrism are more likely to have lower English language proficiency scores those students with lower levels of ethnocentrism.

The levels of ethnocentrism among teenage Thai students can possibly be lowered simply through intercultural classroom-based studies and projects, and if one of the goals of a school were to foster greater proficiency in English language studies, then it is

recommended that schools incorporate into their weekly/monthly activities various projects that would enlarge students' understanding and appreciation of cultures other than their own.

For further research, a similar study should be carried out in other school settings, such as government schools in urban areas.

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