

PERSPECTIVES ON DIVERSITY OF ENGLISH AND ITS CURRENT USE AS A LINGUA FRANCA IN THAILAND

มุมมองต่อความหลากหลายของภาษาอังกฤษกับการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษากลาง
ในบริบทปัจจุบันของไทย

Bair Pittpunt¹

แบร์ พิตต์พันธุ์¹

(Received: June 10, 2022 ; Revised: January 3, 2023 ; Accepted: January 24, 2023)

Abstract

In globalization, English plays a vital role in many areas such as politics, economy, education, and tourism. Due to the expansion of English, definitions of the English language are challenging because it is diversely used by people from around the world. Many definitions of English language have been proposed such as English as an International Language, World Englishes, and English as a Lingua Franca (EFL). These proposals suggest that English nowadays cannot be reserved as the language for native English speakers (NES) only since English has been used by a various group of people. English is diverse and unique in its own context of uses. In Thai context, English language is perceived as the most important foreign language of the country. Thai people nowadays access to the diversity of English used by people from different first-language backgrounds through various channels. With the current uses of Thai people of English, Thailand may be appropriately characterized as a lingua franca context, which English is used as the main language for intercultural communication. Therefore, EFL should be taken into consideration for English teaching and learning as well. This might need to focus more on the intelligibility of conversational contexts instead of the accuracy of English grammar and NES accents and adjusting it into their own practical and acceptable manners. This article also offers recommendations which might contribute usefulness to the English teaching and learning in Thailand in the modern world.

¹ Lecturer, Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Thaksin University, e-mail: bair@tsu.ac.th

อาจารย์สาขาวิชาภาษาตะวันตก คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยทักษิณ

Keywords: Diversity of English, English as a lingua franca, current use of English in Thailand, English teaching and learning in Thailand

บทคัดย่อ

ในยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ ภาษาอังกฤษมีบทบาทสำคัญในหลายด้าน เช่น การเมือง เศรษฐกิจ การศึกษา และการท่องเที่ยว ด้วยความแพร่หลายนี้ทำให้เกิดข้อถกเถียงในแง่ค่านิยมของภาษาอังกฤษ ค่านิยมใหม่ถูกเสนอขึ้น เช่น ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาสากล ภาษาอังกฤษของโลก และภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษากลาง ค่านิยมใหม่เหล่านี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่าภาษาอังกฤษไม่ได้เป็นภาษาเฉพาะของกลุ่มคนที่มี ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาแม่อีกต่อไป เนื่องจากภาษาอังกฤษถูกใช้แพร่หลายโดยคนจากทั่วโลก มีความ หลากหลายและเป็นเอกลักษณ์ตามบริบทการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ สำหรับบริบทการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษใน ประเทศไทยนั้น ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศที่มีความสำคัญมาก โดยปัจจุบันชาวไทยเข้าถึงความ หลากหลายของภาษาอังกฤษที่ใช้โดยกลุ่มคนที่มีภาษาแม่ที่แตกต่างกันผ่านช่องทางต่าง ๆ ทั้งนี้ ด้วย บริบทการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในปัจจุบันของชาวไทย ทำให้ประเทศไทยมีความเหมาะสมที่จะใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ ในฐานะภาษากลางในการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม ดังนั้นการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษากลางจึงควร ถูกนำไปพิจารณาในแง่การสอนและการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษในไทยด้วยโดยจำเป็นต้องให้ความสำคัญกับ ความเข้าใจของบริบทการสื่อสารความมากกว่าเน้นเพียงความถูกต้องของไวยากรณ์และสำเนียงแบบเจ้าของ ภาษาอังกฤษ และปรับเปลี่ยนให้เป็นที่ยอมรับร่วมกัน บทความนี้ยังได้เสนอแนะแนวทางที่อาจเป็น ประโยชน์ต่อการสอนและการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษใน ประเทศไทยในโลกสมัยใหม่อีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ: ความหลากหลายของภาษาอังกฤษ, ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษากลาง, การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษใน ประเทศไทยในปัจจุบัน, การสอนและการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทย

Introduction

It cannot be denied that English is one of the languages widely spoken by a considerable number of people from all over the world. The worldwide spread of English was influenced by two dominant factors which are the colonialism of the British empire in 19th century and the economic and political power of the United State of America in 20th century (Crystal, 2003). English, then, has been globally used by people from different languages and cultural backgrounds across the world for many different objectives, such as politics and economy. People who use English include not only native English speakers (NES) but also speakers of other languages, non-native English speakers (NNES), who use the language for different reasons, such

as tourism, education, and migration. In a particular setting such as Southeast Asia, English also plays its role in this region. There are over 800 million people that use English in the region (Bolton, 2018). On the roadmap of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) community, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was established in 2016. English is selected to be the main language for communication among ASEAN members, including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam (ASEAN, 2011). Even though some other languages, such as Chinese, Bahasa Melayu, and French were once proposed for consideration as optional languages for communication among members of ASEAN countries, they were rejected (Kirkpatrick, 2012). The English language, then, has never been replaced and has remained as the official language of the ASEAN community. To the author, this brief account has led to some challenging questions. Does English still belong to only British and American people? Should non-native English speakers stick only to standards of NES norms? Is it acceptable for NNES to adapt English to their own ways?

This article, therefore, aims to discuss the ideas regarding the use of the English language in this globalisation era, revisit the notion of ELF in Thailand while there have been various perspectives on characteristics of the English language use in NNES settings, and shed light on different perspectives of the English language used by NNES. This article discusses three main relevant topics including English in the world, English as a lingua franca in Thailand, and implications of ELF in Thai context. It also highlights the diversity of English in NNES setting such as Thailand. It proposes the ideas why diversity of English and moving beyond the NES norms should not be ignored. The discussion of this article is based on various sources of data including related literature, previous classrooms observations, and daily life experiences. However, it should be noted that this article is not making a judgment on moving beyond English Native-speaker norms. This article, on the other hand, aims to shed light on different perspectives of English teaching and learning in Thailand and introduce the ideas that might have been overlooked for further discussion which might be beneficial for English language teaching and learning in Thailand and relevant contexts.

English in the world

English, nowadays, plays a crucial role in many areas such as education, economy, tourism and hospitality, and publication and the Internet. The roles of the English language have been well documented. In the education area, there has been a large number of English books and textbooks in many subjects published for students in all educational levels from all over the world. At higher education level, a lot of students from many non-English speaking countries, such as China, Japan, and Thailand tend to study English more in order to pursue their further studies in English speaking countries. In the economy area, English is also perceived as an important tool for communication. Eighty percent of businesses in the world are carried out in English and they require staff who can communicate in English, regardless to their mother tongues, in order to have more advantage and compete in the global market. In the area of tourism and hospitality, the English language is crucial as a means to communicate and negotiate with tourists, guests, and passengers since the tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing industries in recent decades and English is mainly used in the industry in every part of the world. In Thailand, the Tourism Authority of Thailand encourages that Thai people who are directly involved in tourism business such as hotels and airlines should improve their English. In publication and the Internet area, the majority of print media and websites are written, published, and created in English. Generally, it is obvious that English is used more in newspapers and textbooks, magazines, reference works, and supplementary materials than any other language since they have been produced by major British and American publishers, such as Cambridge, Oxford, Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Macmillan, and Longman. On the Internet, social media sites with over 10 million users such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn provide the English language as the main language alongside with many other languages for their users to create and share contents and participate in social networking sites with other users. This shows how English is globally spread and used nowadays.

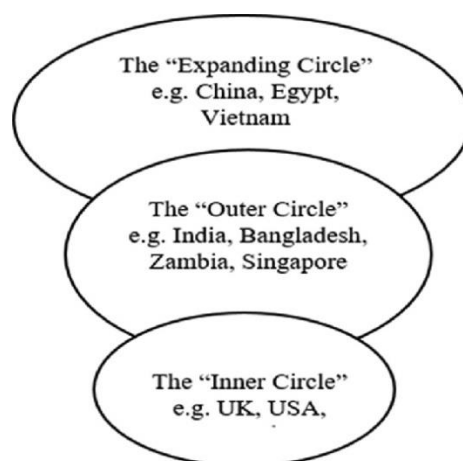


Figure 1: Theory of The Three Circles (Kachru, 1985)

With the spread and roles of English in various areas as presented earlier, definitions of the English language are challenged because it is diversely spoken by people from around the world. Due to this notion, with the intention to define speakers of English who come from different first-language backgrounds, the theories of three concentric circles were proposed by Kachru (1985). The circles include the inner, outer and expanding circles. See Figure 1 showing theory of the three circles. According to Kachru, the Inner Circle refers to speakers who use English as their mother tongue, such as British, Americans, and Australians; the Outer Circle refers to speakers who use English as a second language, such as Indians, Malaysians, and Singaporeans; and the Expanding Circle refers to speakers who use English as a foreign language, such as Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Thais.

However, Kachru's proposal of three concentric circles has been challenged by many scholars. Various definitions of the English language have been proposed such as English as a Global Language, World Englishes, and English as a Lingua Franca. English as a Global Language (Crystal, 2003) as the main focus of this definition is on the spread of English used for communication rather than on the countries of speakers. "Of course, English is a global language, they would say. You hear it on television spoken by politicians from all over the world. Wherever you travel, you see English signs and advertisements. Whenever you enter a hotel or restaurant in a foreign city, they will understand English, and there will be an English menu" (Crystal, 2003). World Englishes (Kirkpatrick, 2007) in order to define the phenomenon of the language

based on its communication purposes since there has been a wide variety of the English language used across the world. He adds that “by World Englishes I mean those indigenous, nativised varieties that have developed around the world and that reflect the cultural and pragmatic norms of their speakers” (Kirkpatrick, 2007). In addition, English as a lingua franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2009) as the main focus is on the use of English among people who do not have the same mother tongues, or as a lingua franca. ELF involves “a good deal of local variation as well as substantial potential for accommodation - the scope for its users to adjust their speech in order to make it more intelligible and appropriate for their specific interlocutor(s)” (Jenkins, 2009).

The proposals by scholars above suggest that English nowadays cannot be reserved as the language for the British, Americans, or Australians only. That is to say, due to the spread and diversity of the language in globalisation, English has been adopted, transformed into various forms, and used by various groups of people with different purposes. It can be said that the English language nowadays is unique in its own context of uses.

English as a lingua franca in Thailand

Historically, during 1868-1960 in the reign of King Rama V, English became important in Thailand since the king perceived that it was a useful tool to modernise the country. At that time, the English language teaching was limited only to the royal family members and nobilities. However, he later founded schools for Thai commoners where English was introduced to primary and secondary education (Boriboon, 2011). During 1921 in the reign of King Rama VI, the king decided to promote the English language as a compulsory subject in the fifth grade of schools throughout the country. English, then, has integrated itself into Thai education since (Boriboon, 2011). The role of English has been stressed in many parts of the country, such as education, tourism, business, and media. English, therefore, is no longer a symbol of privilege but the essential element in the modern world for all Thai people. According to the theories of three concentric circles, Thailand has been classified as a periphery English country in the Expanding Circle where English is not a mother tongue but it is used and taught as a foreign language. In Thailand, although other languages such as Chinese, Lao, and Malay are also spoken by minority groups

of people in Thailand, the English language is still treated to be the most important foreign language of the country. Kirkpatrick (2010) highlights the importance of English in Thailand by reporting that there was a proposal to position the English language as “an official second language of Thailand” in order to increase opportunities and encourage Thai people to use English on a daily basis. However, the proposal was later declined by a group of Thai scholars as they strongly agree that promoting English as a second language (ESL) might lead to disagreements and misunderstandings which imply that Thailand was once a colonised country in the past.

Nowadays, in the age of globalisation, Thai people tend to expose themselves to a variety of English through various channels such as face-to-face communication, online platforms, and social media in order to communicate with foreigners. With this wide-spread use of the English language within Thailand, the variety of Thai-English has been identified. A term for the unique features of English mixed with Thai in local sociocultural context has been created and known as ‘Thinglish’ (Thai-English). (Chamcharatsri, 2013) as “a local variety with Thai flavor, somewhat mixed and weird, with the use of particles in speaking (Thai accent), reading (Thai accent), writing (use of particles and mixed between English and Thai), and listening”. Although the features are subtle and need to be developed, the existence of Thinglish is acknowledged in a similar manner as Singlish (Singaporean-English) and Indian-English. However, Thais should also be aware of the use of Thai-English features when they communicate internationally for their specific purposes since it might cause misunderstanding.

Given the current uses of English nowadays, the rejection of ESL, and the existence of Thinglish, Thailand, in the author’s opinion, may be appropriately characterised as a lingua franca context, in which English is used by Thais as the main language for intercultural communication. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) defined by Jenkins (2009, p. 200) is “the common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds”. ELF “is indeed the process of language dynamics whereby the language is adapted and altered to suit changed circumstances of its use”. (Seidlhofer, 2011) The appropriation of the language as a lingua franca necessarily focuses attention not on what is proper English in reference to standard or native-speaker norms, but what is appropriate English for new and

different communicative and communal purposes” . Jenkins (2011) adds that ELF users, “skillfully co-construct English for their own purposes by treating the language as a shared communicative resource within which they have the freedom to accommodate to each other, code-switch, and create innovative forms that differ from the norms of native English and do not require sanctioning by native English speakers” . These characteristics well reflect the current English language use in Thailand making ELF a frequent term used when categorizing Thailand. Therefore, in such intercultural and diverse setting, it is reasonable and appropriate to categorize the use of English in Thailand’s context as English as a lingua franca (ELF).

Implications of ELF in Thai context

Due to the discussion presented earlier, it seems that the notion of ELF in English language teaching and learning in Thailand has been challenged. It has been observed that most Thai English teachers often focus on student’s grammatical competence, accuracy, and sentence memorization (Boriboon, 2011). Therefore, in such classes, listening or speaking is less focused on. Even in English listening-speaking classrooms, teachers often put emphasis on the accuracy of English grammar and NES accents instead of the intelligibility of conversational contexts. It can be said that they seem to neglect the variety of English where the language is not only used by the British or Americans. This could lead to the fear of making mistakes among Thai students when they have to speak English in classrooms since they do not to lose face, be laughed at, or humiliated in front of their friends and teachers. That is to say, English language teaching in Thailand, at all levels, pays more attention to the accuracy of NES grammar, and mainly recognises the English accents of the British and Americans.

Therefore, the norms of NES models as a standard for teachers in teaching English need to be questioned in the lingua franca setting like Thailand since the language is being used in multilingual societies by speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In other words, it is not appropriate and necessary to stick to a single target norm, in this case the NES norm. The point that the author made here is not to refute that Thai teachers should not teach the English language based on NES norms but the contexts where English is used in Thailand, as a lingua franca, should

be taken into consideration for English teaching and learning as well. Due to the current position of ELF in the world, English has become interconnected as it is associated with globalisation. Therefore, in the author's opinion, English should be considered as fluid, hybrid, diverse, and deeply intercultural. The notion of 'Plurilithic English' (Hall, 2013) also seems to fit in an ELF context like Thailand since paying attention to accuracy of NES grammar to assess students' English proficiency implies a monolithic view denying the plurilithic view of the language which, in the modern world, incorporates shifting and diverse forms of English.

There have been studies regarding ELF context like Thailand. In 2015, Baker conducted a study regarding ELF among Thai university students. The study shows that there were needs for incorporating ELF into language teaching in order to move beyond NES norms and be suitable with Thailand's lingua franca context. He recommended the use of English combined with local cultures, the media and arts both online and offline, and the engagement in intercultural communication both face to face and electronically. These methods would allow students to have broader visions towards the global English language use and become more open to diversity of the language. English speaking skill of non-English major students is developed in an English speaking course at a Thai private university by integrating Thai-English speaking styles with various English situations. The study shows that a majority of participants performed better in English speaking skills when they spoke English in their traditional ways, in this case Thai-English. The participants also reported that they were comfortable to use Thai accent in speaking English and their interlocutors were still able to understand them. Abdzadeh and Baker (2020) integrate Thai-English based teaching in an English speaking classroom. The students in this study were allowed to speak English freely ignoring the norms of NES. The study reveals that this course has a positive effect in developing students' levels of English speaking skills although the ungrammatical English sentences were used. The results from this study also suggest that it is necessary not to strongly focus on the accuracy of English grammar as it plays roles in the development of students' confidence in speaking English. That is to say it is necessary to create teaching pedagogy and materials which are relevant to communicative practices of ELF learners.

Based on the foregoing discussion regarding the diversity of English, this article, therefore, proposes recommendations to incorporate ELF into English language teaching and learning in a lingua franca setting like Thailand through engaging in intercultural environments, both online and face-to-face platforms. For the online platform, the use of social media is recommended for workshops in order to allow teachers and learners to discuss and get the ideas of how English is used globally. They can access to the knowledge through online channels such as YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok. There are video clips about movies, music, travels, and lifestyle which are created in English by both foreign and Thai content creators. Through the online platform, teachers and learners can expose themselves to different English accents and English grammar structures and compare them to the way English is used in their own setting. This help raise awareness of diversity of English among them. There are also online seminars and conferences outside classrooms where they can attend so that they can virtually be parts of intercultural environments. For the face-to-face platform, English workshops and English camps are still the essential tools to help Thai teachers and learners to get real-life experience of diverse English accents and multiple use of English grammar since these activities allow them to expose themselves to intercultural environments where English is spoken by people from different cultural backgrounds with different English accents and grammars. In such intercultural situations, teachers and learners may tend to be focusing more on intelligibility than accuracy of grammar or native-English accents. The understanding, awareness, and appreciation of cultures are also shared through these activities.

To the proposed ideas above regarding the engagement of English in intercultural environments, both online and face-to-face platforms, there are recent studies conducted in ELF contexts. Jailani (2020) conducted a study on the use of YouTube videos in English language teaching among Indonesian undergraduate students. The study shows that the using YouTube videos were relevant to the needs of the students because of its convenience, affordability and accessibility. It also helped motivate students to study well and encourage them to use English more. Similarly, using social media such as YouTube and TikTok in English language teaching and learning significantly improved students' English speaking skills in

Malaysia and Indonesia. (Zulkflee et al., 2022). It also helped raised awareness among them since there are various English accents spoken in the countries so that they were able to focus more on intelligibility than the English accent in communication. Moreover, Thai students in a private university revealed that social media boosted up students' self-confidence, competence, and language skills since the students were exposed to different types of English accents and structures spoken by both native English and non-native English speakers such as Thai, Indian, French and Mexican. The study also recommended the integration of face-to-face platform such as English workshop since it created great potential for the English language acquisition and strengthening of English pronunciation, phrases, and idiomatic expressions in diverse English communication in real-life situations. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that English language teaching and learning in Thailand should focus more on diversity of the language and current uses of English in globalisation era.

Conclusion

The argument in this article has been that the English language used in Thailand is characterised as ELF due to the notion of the current use of English in Thai context, the hybridity of English, and the association with globalisation. These can also reflect the diversity of the English language which has been used by people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds such as Singlish, Indian-English, and Thinglish. It can be said that the English language is fluid, hybrid, diverse and deeply intercultural. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that those whose mother tongues are not English, might consider moving beyond the native-speakers' norms and adapt the language into their own appropriate ways. In other words, the English language has transformed itself into different forms used by various groups of people with various purposes and is unique in its own context of uses. In Thai context, if we are to view the English use in Thailand as part of the ELF paradigm, we might also need to consider moving away from a NES baseline. We might raise awareness on the diversity of English among students and education practitioners and learn to accept the difference of English accents. This notion has been supported by relevant studies conducted by Baker (2015), and Abdzadeh and Baker (2020) on ELF in Thai context

which reflect the significance and needs of ELF integrated in Thai education and highlight how Thai-English speaking styles help boost up Thai learners' confidence in speaking English. Also, there are recommendations from recent studies such as Jailani (2020), Zulkflee et al. (2022), and Akpan and Chayanuvat (2022) in integrating the engagement of intercultural environments, both online and face-to-face platforms. However, the essence of the English language should be maintained such as pronunciations and grammar in order to be mutually and universally accepted. This might be beneficial for educational practitioners to see another aspect of the English language as we can be able to move beyond native-speakers norms and adjust it into our own practical and acceptable manners which might contribute to English language teaching and learning in Thailand. There might be possible routes of an integration of local and Standard English which it may be possible to translate into pedagogic practice and courses for English language teaching and learning in Thailand. Finally, the characterisation of English in Thailand presented here also offers a contribution to the growing debate about English language teaching and learning in ELF settings.

References

- Abdzadeh, Y., & Baker, W. (2020). Thai-English Speaking in an English Language Classroom: a Teaching in an ELF Setting. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 9(1), 57-80.
- Akpan, S., & Chayanuvat, A. (2022). The Impact of Social Media on Motivation Toward Learning English as a Global Language. *APHEIT International Journal*, 11(1), 1-19.
- ASEAN. (2011). *Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity*. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat.
- Baker, W. (2015). *Culture and Identity Through English as a Lingua Franca: Rethinking Concepts and Goals in Intercultural Communication*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Bolton, K. (2018). English in Asia, Asian Englishes, and the Issue of Proficiency. *English Today*, 24(2), 3-12.
- Boriboon, P. (2011). Language, Ideology and Domination: Problems of English Language Teaching in Thailand and Solutions. *Songklanakarin Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 17(6), 23-59.
- Chamcharatsri, P. B. (2013). Perception of Thai English. *Journal of English as an International Language*, 8(1), 21-36.

- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Canto.
- Hall, C. J. (2013). Cognitive Contributions to Plurilithic Views of English and Other Languages. *Applied Linguistics*, 34, 211-231.
- Jailani, A. (2022). The Use of YouTube Videos in English Language Teaching: A Perspective of Indonesian Undergraduate Students Majoring in English Language Education. *J-SHMIC: Journal of English for Academic*, 9(2), 13-24.
- Jenkins, J. (2009). English as a Lingua Franca: Interpretations and Attitudes. *World Englishes*, 28(2), 200-207.
- Jenkins, J. (2011). Accommodating (to) ELF in the International University. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43, 926-936.
- Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, Codification and Sociolinguistic Realism: The English Language in the Outer Circle. In R. Quirk & H. G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the World: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 11-30). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (2007). *The Communicative Strategies of ASEAN Speakers of English as a Lingua Franca*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (2010). *English as a Lingual Franca in ASEAN: A Multilingual Model*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (2012). English as the Official Working Language of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): Features and Strategies. *English today*, 24(2), 27-34.
- Seidlhofer, B. (2011). *Understanding English as a lingua franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zulkflee, Z., Azmi, N. N., Kamaruzaman, S. S. S., Prakas, J., Saputra, S., & Maniam, M. (2022). Students' Perceptions in Using YouTube to Improve Their Speaking Skill: A Cross-National Study of Malaysia and Indonesia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(10), 3240 – 3260.