

Implementing English as an International Language in EFL Contexts: A Qualitative Case Study of Teachers' Challenges in Thai Secondary Education

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Abstract

English as an International Language (EIL) emphasizes intelligibility, linguistic diversity, and intercultural communication. Yet in high-stakes secondary contexts, its integration often conflicts with examination-driven curricular structures. This qualitative case study investigates the challenges of implementing EIL in Thai secondary English classrooms, focusing on how curriculum and assessment requirements shape pedagogical practice. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes and structural tensions. The findings reveal that although national curricula promote communicative competence, classroom practice is strongly regulated by high-stakes examinations, prescribed textbooks, and limited instructional time. These institutional pressures restrict opportunities to integrate EIL-informed practices, such as engagement with diverse English varieties and intercultural communicative tasks. Teachers demonstrate increasing awareness of EIL principles but must negotiate these ideals within an assessment-oriented system prioritizing standardized norms. The study extends Global Englishes scholarship by showing that EIL implementation in Expanding Circle settings is mediated by systemic assessment constraints rather than teacher disposition alone. By conceptualizing teachers as pedagogical mediators, the study underscores the need for closer alignment among curriculum policy, assessment design, and teacher education to enable sustainable EIL integration.

Keywords: English as an International Language (EIL), high-stakes assessment, Thai secondary education, Global Englishes, qualitative case study

Introduction

English has become the primary global lingua franca, facilitating communication across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Traditionally, however, English language teaching (ELT) has been shaped by native-speaker norms-particularly British and American standards-with strong emphasis on grammatical accuracy and standardized pronunciation. As English increasingly functions as a medium of

international and intercultural communication, these assumptions have been challenged. The EIL perspective reconceptualizes English as a pluralistic and evolving resource, prioritizing intelligibility, flexibility, and intercultural competence over conformity to native-speaker models (Jenkins, 2015; Matsuda, 2012; McKay, 2018; Rose & Galloway, 2019; Seidlhofer, 2011).

Despite growing theoretical support, the integration of EIL into classroom practice remains uneven. A central tension lies between pluralistic language ideologies and institutional structures that continue to privilege standardized norms. In many examination-oriented systems, form-focused instruction and test preparation shape everyday pedagogical decisions, limiting opportunities to incorporate diverse English varieties or intercultural tasks. Thus, the challenge of EIL implementation is not merely pedagogical but structural. Thailand represents a particularly salient example of this tension. English education has historically followed English as a Foreign Language (EFL) paradigms that prioritize accuracy-based assessment and native-speaker standards (Baker, 2015; Hayes, 2016). Although national policies increasingly promote 21st-century competencies such as communication, intercultural awareness, and global citizenship (Ministry of Education, 2018; Office of the Education Council, 2018), classroom practice remains strongly influenced by high-stakes examinations and prescribed curricular materials. This creates a gap between policy aspirations aligned with EIL principles and the practical realities teachers face in secondary classrooms. Existing research indicates that teachers often recognize the relevance of EIL but encounter constraints including curriculum requirements, examination pressures, limited resources, and entrenched language ideologies (Tang, 2020; Phoocharoensil, 2020; Sung, 2023). However, much of the scholarship in Thailand has focused on higher education or learner perspectives, leaving secondary school contexts comparatively underexplored. Given the pivotal role of secondary education in shaping students' language development and examination trajectories, understanding teachers' experiences at this level is critical. Accordingly, this study investigates the challenges Thai secondary school English teachers encounter when attempting to implement EIL in classroom practice. By examining teacher perspectives and classroom realities through interviews, observations, and document analysis, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in ELT and Global Englishes by clarifying how institutional structures mediate pedagogical innovation in examination-oriented systems. The findings offer practical implications for English language teaching in Thai secondary schools and comparable EFL contexts by identifying areas where curriculum design, assessment frameworks, and teacher education programs require greater alignment with EIL principles. In doing so, the study aims to inform context-sensitive reforms that support teachers in translating global Englishes theory into sustainable classroom practice.

Literature review

EIL pedagogy

English has become a dominant global lingua franca, facilitating communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries in domains such as education, business, and technology (Selvi, Galloway & Rose, 2023). This global expansion has destabilized traditional ELT assumptions grounded in native-speaker norms, prompting the emergence of English as an International Language (EIL) as a reconceptualization

of English's role in contemporary communication. The intellectual foundations of EIL rest on the decentering of native-speaker ownership. Early work by Smith (1976) challenged the premise that successful language learning requires internalization of native-speaker cultural norms, arguing instead that an international language becomes de-nationalized and serves as a vehicle for expressing diverse identities. Building on this perspective, McKay (2002) further repositioned English as both a global medium of communication and a localized resource embedded in multilingual societies. Together, these foundational arguments shift the focus of ELT from imitation of Inner Circle norms toward communicative functionality across diverse contexts. Subsequent scholarship has refined this paradigm by articulating its pedagogical implications. While Sharifian (2009) frames EIL as a new conceptual lens for understanding global English use, Marlina (2014) emphasizes the legitimacy of all English varieties across Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles. Parallel developments in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) research reinforce these claims by demonstrating that intelligibility and pragmatic negotiation, rather than native-like accuracy, are central to successful communication (Seidlhofer, 2011). Despite differences in emphasis, these strands of scholarship converge on several shared principles: prioritizing intelligibility over native-like proficiency, fostering intercultural communicative competence, recognizing linguistic diversity, and developing learners' ability to negotiate meaning in multilingual interactions (Jenkins, 2015; Matsuda, 2012; Rose & Galloway, 2019).

However, a recurring tension emerges between ideological advocacy and institutional practice. While EIL scholarship calls for pluralistic pedagogies and assessment aligned with communicative effectiveness (McKay, 2018), classroom realities in many contexts remain shaped by standardized curricula, high-stakes examinations, and entrenched native-speaker ideologies (Lu & Buripakdi, 2020; Potisuan, Methitham & Rungrueng, 2020). Thus, the central issue is not merely theoretical acceptance of EIL but the structural conditions that constrain its enactment. It is within this gap between EIL principles and institutional realities that the present study is situated. By examining how Thai secondary school teachers interpret and negotiate EIL within assessment-driven educational structures, this study moves beyond conceptual discussion to explore the practical dynamics that enable or restrict EIL-oriented pedagogy.

EIL in Global and Thai context

EIL conceptualizes English as a shared global resource used by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Rather than positioning native-speaker norms as the primary benchmark of proficiency, EIL emphasizes communicative effectiveness, mutual intelligibility, and intercultural understanding-competencies increasingly required in global education, mobility, and professional communication (Canagarajah, 2013; Seidlhofer, 2011; Rose, McKinley & Galloway, 2021). From this perspective, effective communication is not defined by adherence to a single "standard" variety, but by speakers' ability to negotiate meaning across linguistic and cultural differences.

A substantial body of research highlights the pedagogical value of exposing learners to diverse English varieties, including Indian, Nigerian, Singaporean, and other regional Englishes. Such exposure broadens learners' perspectives, reduces linguistic bias, and enhances intercultural awareness and communicative flexibility (Ambele,

2022; Selvi et al., 2023; Huang & Ambele, 2025). At the same time, EIL scholarship acknowledges that pluralistic views of English must operate within existing curricular and assessment frameworks. Thus, intelligibility and adaptability are framed not as replacements for linguistic accuracy but as complementary competencies aligned with communicative effectiveness (Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2015; Jenkins, 2015, 2020).

Across Asia, however, English education remains strongly influenced by standardized testing systems and native-speaker norms. English is frequently positioned as a gateway to global opportunity, reinforcing traditional teaching approaches and marginalizing pluralistic understandings of English use (Jenkins, 2021). Empirical research from Indonesia, Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan demonstrates a recurring pattern: teachers often express conceptual alignment with EIL but face institutional constraints—including curriculum mandates, high-stakes examinations, and parental expectations—that limit classroom implementation (Manan, 2020; Ziaabadi et al., 2023; Çetinkaya & Kayaoğlu, 2024). These findings suggest that the challenge of EIL integration is not merely ideological but structurally embedded in assessment-driven systems.

Within the ASEAN region, English functions as a regional lingua franca supporting mobility and integration. Kirkpatrick (2008, 2020) underscores the communicative relevance of ASEAN Englishes in higher education and professional contexts. Nevertheless, the incorporation of regional varieties and intercultural dimensions into formal curricula remains uneven, as high-stakes assessment structures often prioritize standardized forms over communicative diversity (Baker, 2015).

Situated within this regional and global landscape, Thailand represents a high-stakes, assessment-driven Expanding Circle setting in Kachru's (1992) framework. English use in Thailand is shaped primarily by educational policy rather than widespread societal bilingualism, positioning English as an academic and economic resource rather than a community language (Boonsuk & Fang, 2023). National standardized examinations—including the O-NET and GAT—evaluate students largely according to native-speaker norms, reinforcing standard language ideology and privileging grammatical accuracy and test performance (Jindapitak, Teo & Savski, 2022; Liu & Lee, 2025). As a result, English language teaching in Thailand has historically emphasized form-focused instruction aligned with British and American standards (McKenzie, Kitikanan & Boriboon, 2016; Rattanavich, 2019). Although recent scholarship indicates growing awareness among Thai teachers of Global Englishes perspectives, including EIL and ELF (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2021, 2023; McKinley, 2021), classroom implementation remains mediated by institutional expectations, examination pressures, and limited instructional time. Textbooks and assessments rarely incorporate explicit criteria related to intelligibility, pragmatic competence, or intercultural communication (Phoocharoensil, 2020). Consequently, teachers often negotiate between conceptual recognition of English diversity and systemic demands for standardized performance. The literature thus suggests that in high-stakes Expanding Circle contexts such as Thailand, EIL implementation is shaped less by teacher disposition alone and more by structural alignment among curriculum, assessment, and teacher education. This framing situates the present study within a broader pattern observable across similarly examination-oriented educational systems, enhancing its relevance beyond the Thai context.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative case study design to investigate the challenges faced by Thai secondary school English teachers in implementing EIL. A case study approach is appropriate for examining a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its institutional environment are closely interconnected. Because EIL implementation is shaped by curriculum policies, assessment structures, and classroom practices, a context-sensitive design enables in-depth analysis of how these factors interact within a bounded Thai secondary school setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than treating beliefs or instructional practices as isolated constructs, this study conceptualizes challenges as emerging from the dynamic interplay between teacher cognition and structural constraints. Teachers' beliefs and classroom practices were therefore examined as situated responses to institutional expectations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted across multiple sessions for each participating teacher to capture routine instructional patterns rather than isolated events. An observation protocol guided field note documentation, focusing on lesson objectives, instructional materials, teacher–student interactions, language use, and references to assessment requirements. Field notes were expanded immediately after each session to ensure descriptive accuracy and analytic depth. Relevant institutional documents, including curriculum guidelines and assessment materials, were reviewed to contextualize observed practices. To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to established qualitative criteria of credibility and dependability. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation, comparing interview accounts, observational data, and documentary evidence to identify convergence and divergence across data sources. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary thematic interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of representation. Dependability was addressed through systematic coding procedures, maintenance of a detailed audit trail documenting analytic decisions, and reflexive memo-writing to monitor researcher positionality and ensure interpretive consistency. Together, these strategies enhance the rigor and transparency of the study's findings.

Context

The study was conducted at a large public secondary school in northeastern Thailand, serving approximately 3,500 students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The school follows the 2017 Revised Basic Education Core Curriculum, which emphasizes communicative competence, intercultural understanding, and global citizenship. English is a compulsory subject and is taught as a foreign language across lower and upper secondary levels. The school provides a rich EIL-oriented environment through initiatives such as the Mini English Program (MEP), collaboration with foreign teachers from various linguistic backgrounds, and participation in the American Field Service (AFS) intercultural exchange programs. These initiatives expose both teachers and students to diverse English varieties and intercultural communication contexts. At the same time, national examinations and curriculum requirements continue to emphasize grammatical accuracy and native-

speaker norms, creating tensions that form an important backdrop for the challenges examined in this study.

Participants' selection Participants' Information

Table 1

Teacher Participants' Background Information Source: From Semi-Structured Interview Results

Pseudonyms	Grade Level	Gender	Teaching Experiences	Exact Age	Professional Training (EIL / PD)	Overseas Experience
Zandy	7	F	9	32	EIL Workshop	None
Rooney	8	F	9	34	EIL Training	1 year
Si	8	M	29	59	EIL Seminar	1 year
Su	9	F	8	31	PD Program on Intercultural EIL	None
Ploy	10	F	7	30	EIL Training	3 months
Kat	11	F	7	30	PD on 21st Century Skills	None
Ae	11	F	18	50	EIL Training	3 months
Pla	12	F	25	56	EIL Workshop	6 months
Nok	12	M	21	54	EIL Workshop	3 months
Nan	12	N	22	51	EIL Workshop	1 year

The study involved ten Thai secondary school English teachers, teaching across grades 7-12 in a large secondary school in Northeastern Thailand. As shown in Table 1, seven of the participants were female and three were male, with ages ranging from their mid-20s to late 50s. Teaching experience varied considerably, from 7 years to nearly 30 years, which provides a valuable spread of perspectives from novice to veteran teachers.

This diversity is important because prior research indicates that teachers' professional histories, training backgrounds, and generational outlooks significantly shape their beliefs about EIL (Borg, 2011; Matsuda, 2020). For example, younger teachers may be more open to incorporating digital resources and multiple English varieties, while older teachers may be influenced by more traditional ELT norms rooted

in grammar-translation or native-speaker benchmarks (e.g., Jenkins, 2020; McKay, 2018; Selvi, Galloway & Rose, 2024).

Instruments and data collection

Data collection was conducted over one academic semester and employed multiple qualitative instruments to capture teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing EIL in secondary classrooms. This qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring complex pedagogical phenomena situated within specific institutional and classroom contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Dörnyei, 2007). Ethical approval was obtained prior to the commencement of data collection. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's aims, procedures, and ethical considerations and gave written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and all identifiable information was removed from the data.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection instrument to elicit in-depth insights into teachers' perceptions and lived experiences of EIL implementation. Interviews were conducted in two phases: pre-observation and post-observation. The pre-observation interviews focused on teachers' initial understandings of EIL and their anticipated challenges in implementing EIL-oriented practices, including curriculum constraints, assessment demands, and student expectations. The post-observation interviews explored teachers' reflections on their actual classroom practices, with particular attention to challenges encountered during implementation and the strategies employed to negotiate or adapt to these constraints. This two-phase interview design allowed for a comparison between teachers' stated beliefs and their enacted practices (Bryman, 2016). Each interview lasted approximately 40-45 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

Classroom observations were conducted to examine how challenges related to EIL implementation emerged during authentic instructional practices. The researcher adopted a non-participant observer role, focusing specifically on constraints shaping pedagogical decision-making, such as limited instructional time, reliance on prescribed textbooks, student resistance to non-native English varieties, and assessment-driven instruction (Mackey & Gass, 2021). Observations were guided by a structured observation protocol adapted from EIL-focused frameworks (Selvi et al., 2023) and were documented through detailed field notes. These observational data provided contextualized evidence of how institutional and classroom-level factors influenced the enactment of EIL principles in practice. In addition, document analysis was employed to examine institutional and instructional constraints related to EIL implementation. The documents analyzed included textbooks, lesson plans, assessment tasks, and curriculum guidelines. The analysis focused on identifying features that either constrained or supported EIL-oriented pedagogy, such as the prioritization of native-speaker norms, limited representation of global English varieties, and assessment criteria emphasizing linguistic accuracy over communicative effectiveness. Document analysis complemented the interview and observational data by revealing how broader curricular and policy-related structures shaped teachers' classroom practices.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012; Dörnyei, 2007). The analysis proceeded through iterative stages of data familiarization, coding, and thematic development. Initial codes were generated from interview transcripts, observation field notes, and documents, with a primary focus on institutional, pedagogical, and sociocultural challenges. Beliefs and teaching practices were coded only when they directly contributed to explaining these challenges. Through constant comparison across data sources, recurring patterns were grouped into broader themes representing key challenges, such as curriculum constraints, assessment pressures, limited resources, and student-related factors. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents strengthened the credibility of the findings by allowing cross-validation of themes.

Results

This section presents the findings derived from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, addressing the study's objective of examining the challenges Thai secondary school English teachers encounter in implementing EIL. The analysis identified three interrelated themes: (1) curriculum and high-stakes assessment pressures, (2) limited pedagogical resources and professional preparation, and (3) sociocultural expectations surrounding standard English norms. Each theme is supported by representative excerpts from teacher interviews, observational field notes, and institutional documents to provide triangulated empirical evidence. The findings indicate that while teachers demonstrate growing conceptual awareness of EIL principles-particularly regarding intelligibility and linguistic diversity-their classroom enactment is constrained by structural and contextual factors. Interview data reveal teachers' explicit recognition of tensions between communicative goals and examination demands, while observational data illustrate how exam-oriented instruction shapes lesson structure and task selection. Document analysis further corroborates this pattern, showing alignment between assessment criteria and native-speaker-oriented benchmarks. Together, these data sources deepen understanding of how institutional structures mediate EIL implementation in Thai secondary classrooms.

Interview Accounts

Interviews revealed that while teachers expressed growing enthusiasm for EIL principles, they also faced multiple challenges in embedding these into practice. Their accounts highlighted systemic, pedagogical, and affective barriers that limited the translation of beliefs into classroom realities.

Curriculum and Examination Pressures

A dominant theme was the influence of the national curriculum and exam system. Kat admitted that these structures constrained her ability to move beyond the textbook:

Excerpt 16

“I want to use more varieties of English in listening practice, but the exam only tests grammar and vocabulary. Students and parents want high scores, so I must focus on the textbook and test drills.” (Kat)

Nok expressed a similar frustration, pointing to the high-stakes nature of testing and parental pressure:

Excerpt 17

“Parents complain if their children don’t do well in exams. So, even if I want to add Global Englishes content, I cannot. I have to prepare them for the exam first.” (Nok)

Both excerpts highlight the systemic prioritization of accuracy over intelligibility, reinforcing the “standard language ideology” described by Holliday (2006).

Resource Limitations and Lack of Training

Teachers also cited difficulties accessing appropriate materials and the lack of professional preparation for EIL. Ae commented:

Excerpt 18

It is difficult to find listening materials with ASEAN accents or from expanding-circle countries. We mostly get British and American clips from the textbooks. I sometimes search YouTube, but it takes time, and I am not trained how to use them effectively.” (Ae)

Nan echoed this concern, linking it to gaps in teacher education:

Excerpt 19

“We never learned about world Englishes or digital English in our teacher training. So I feel unsure how to teach these things properly.” (Nan)

These accounts underscore how teacher readiness remains underdeveloped, consistent with Thai research showing inadequate professional development in Global Englishes (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2022; Euanorasetr & Suwanarak, 2023).

Student Resistance and Attitudinal Barriers

Teachers also noted that students often resisted or devalued non-inner-circle Englishes. Rooney recalled student reactions when she introduced diverse accents:

Excerpt 20

“Some students say, ‘Teacher, this accent is strange. Is this really English?’ They believe American or British English is the only correct English. At first, they don’t want to listen or they laugh.” (Rooney)

Su similarly described heightened student anxiety:

Excerpt 21

“Students get anxious when they hear unfamiliar accents. They think it will confuse them for exams. So they prefer only the textbook listening.” (Su)

These reflections illustrate how learners’ deeply embedded expectations, shaped by native-speakerist ideologies, can undermine teachers’ attempts to diversify input (Baker, 2015)

Workload and Time Constraints

Finally, teachers emphasized the heavy workload that limited their capacity to innovate. Nan admitted:

Excerpt 22

“I want to do more projects like analyzing TikTok comments, but honestly, it takes too much preparation. With many classes and paperwork, it is not possible every week.” (Nan)

This statement underscores the tension between pedagogical aspiration and institutional reality, where innovation is often constrained by time limitations and administrative demands.

Taken together, these interview accounts reveal four interconnected challenges: (1) curriculum and examination pressures, (2) limited resources and insufficient professional training, (3) resistant student attitudes, and (4) workload and time constraints. Although teachers express motivation to embrace EIL principles, these structural and contextual barriers help explain why classroom practices remain partial and inconsistently enacted.

Observation Evidence

The classroom observations provided concrete illustrations of the challenges teachers faced in implementing EIL principles. While some lessons reflected attempts to embed pluralistic and intercultural practices, others revealed how systemic and attitudinal barriers curtailed these efforts.

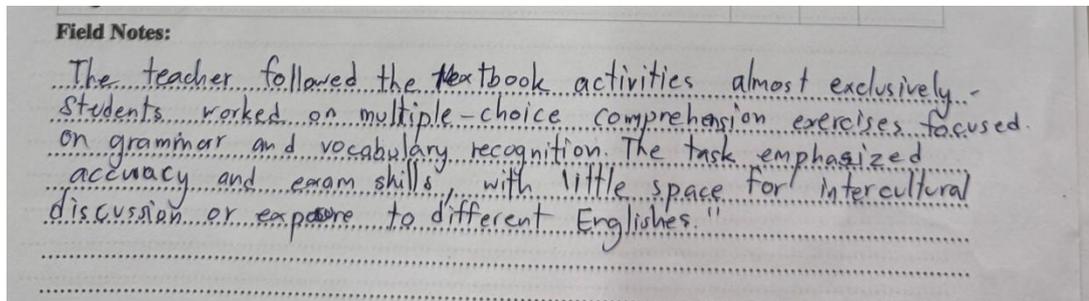
Exam-Driven Instruction

Several observed lessons demonstrated how national exam preparation overshadowed EIL-oriented goals. In Kat’s Grade 10 class, nearly the entire lesson was devoted to grammar drills and multiple-choice exercises from the Ministry-issued textbook:

“The teacher followed the Ministry’s prescribed textbook activities almost exclusively. Students worked on multiple-choice comprehension exercises focused on grammar and vocabulary recognition. The tasks emphasized accuracy and exam skills, with little space for intercultural discussion or exposure to different Englishes.” (Field Note 9, 7 August 2025)

Figure 1

As illustrated in Figure 1, the field note excerpt demonstrates an instructional emphasis on grammar and examination preparation rather than intercultural and EIL-related competencies



This observation confirmed Kat's interview account (Excerpt 16), where she admitted prioritizing exam preparation despite her interest in world Englishes. It underscores how structural assessment demands limit teachers' freedom to implement innovative approaches.

Figure 2

As shown in Figure 2, the observational data capture the teacher's instructional practices and classroom interactions



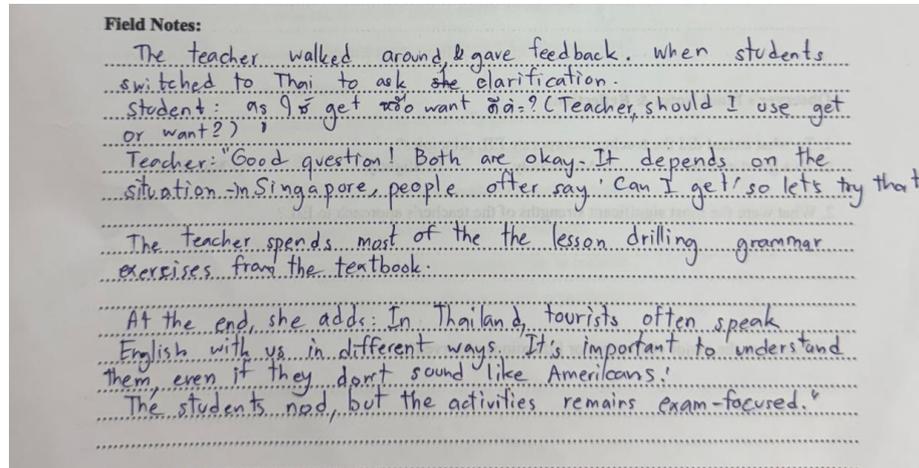
Exam-Driven Instruction Marginalization of Intercultural Content

Su's Grade 9 class provided another example of how EIL principles were sidelined:

"The teacher spends most of the lesson drilling grammar exercises from the Ministry of Education textbook. Near the end, she adds: 'In Thailand, tourists often speak English with us in different ways. It's important to understand them, even if they don't sound like Americans.' The students nod, but the activity remains exam-focused." (Field Note 3, 26 July 2025)

Figure 3

Figure 3 presents a field note excerpt illustrating teacher actively de-centering the native-speaker model



Although Su's comment acknowledged the legitimacy of diverse Englishes, it was framed as a brief aside rather than a central instructional goal. This illustrates how EIL awareness is often treated as supplementary rather than integral to lesson design (Matsuda, 2017; Jenkins, 2020; McKay, 2018; Rose & Galloway, 2019).

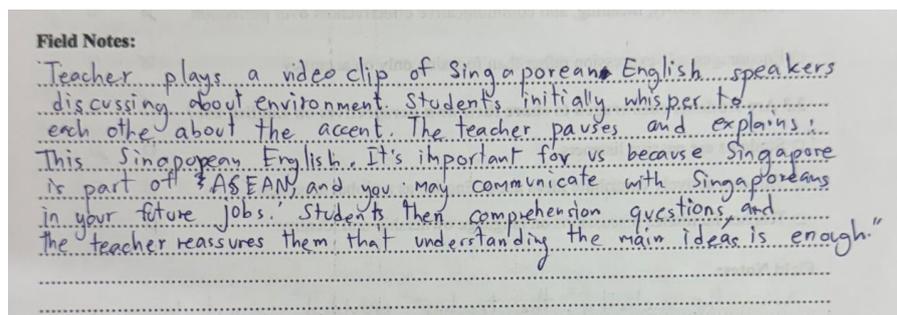
Student Resistance and Anxiety

Other challenges emerged from student reactions. In Ae's Grade 11 listening activity with a Singaporean English speaker, learners showed discomfort:

'The teacher plays an audio clip of a Singaporean English speaker discussing technology. Students initially whisper to each other about the accent. The teacher pauses and explains: 'This is Singaporean English. It's important for us because Singapore is part of ASEAN, and you may communicate with Singaporeans in your future jobs.' Students then answer comprehension questions, and the teacher reassures them that understanding the main ideas is enough.' (Field Note 4, 28 July 2025)

Figure 4

As depicted in Figure 4, the field note excerpt illustrating resistance to non-native English accents in listening practice



While Ae attempted to legitimize the accent and contextualize its importance, the students' initial resistance reflected entrenched expectations of standard English. Their whispers and hesitation suggest that exposure alone is not sufficient—teachers must also invest time in reshaping learners' attitudes (Miao & Ambele, 2023).

Innovation Undermined by Practical Constraints

Even when teachers designed creative tasks, practical constraints remained evident. For example, Nan's TikTok analysis activity engaged students actively, but she acknowledged in interviews (Excerpt 22) that such tasks required more preparation time than she could sustain regularly. Similarly, Rooney's debates, while successful in fostering intercultural competence, demanded careful scaffolding to keep students engaged and respectful, which added to her workload. The observation data confirm that teachers' attempts to enact EIL were often constrained by systemic factors (exam preparation, textbook dominance) and sociocultural factors (student resistance to unfamiliar accents). Even innovative lessons required significant effort to overcome these challenges, making them difficult to sustain consistently. These findings reinforce the interview accounts that highlighted exams, student expectations, and workload as major obstacles to fully integrating EIL into Thai classrooms.

Document Analysis (Institutional/Policy Constraints)

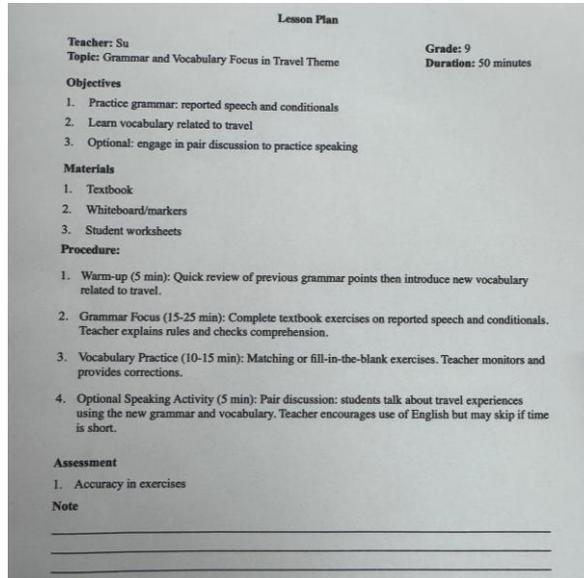
The analysis of teaching documents, lesson plans, and assessment materials reinforced the picture emerging from interviews and observations: teachers' attempts to incorporate EIL principles were often constrained by institutional demands, textbook structures, and assessment frameworks.

Textbook Dependence and Grammar Orientation

Ministry-issued textbooks, which formed the backbone of most teachers' lesson planning, emphasized grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension drills aligned with national exams. Su's weekly Grade 9 plan illustrates this:

“Lesson objectives: Grammar focus (reported speech, conditionals); Vocabulary focus (travel); Speaking activity (optional, 5 minutes, pair discussion).” (Lesson Plan Extract, Su, August 2023)

Figure 5
Grammar-Focused Instruction in Su’s Grade 9 Lesson Plan



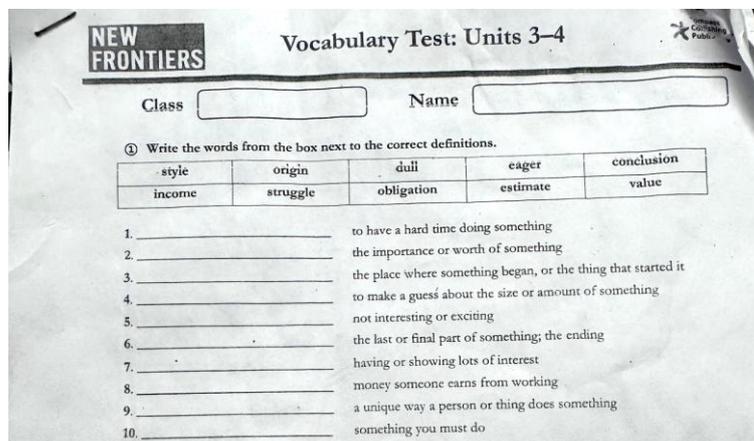
The intercultural element—an optional five-minute discussion was easily marginalized or skipped, reflecting how EIL content is peripheral rather than central in mandated materials.

Assessment Practices Reinforcing Accuracy

Teachers’ assessment documents also reflected the persistence of standard language ideology. Nok’s Grade 11 midterm exam, for instance, included only grammar-based multiple-choice items and cloze tests:

“Section A: Choose the correct verb form; Section B: Fill in the blanks with the correct vocabulary word; Section C: Rewrite the sentences with accurate grammar.” (Exam Paper, Nok, 2023)

Figure 6
The field Note Excerpt Illustrating Grammar-centric Assessment Practices



There were no assessment criteria related to intelligibility, communicative strategies, or intercultural awareness. This reliance on discrete-item testing reinforced the focus on linguistic correctness, directly at odds with the pluralistic and communicative goals of EIL (Rose & Galloway, 2019)

Isolated EIL Innovations

Some documents revealed individual teacher efforts to push beyond these constraints, though these remained exceptions. For instance, Zandy's Grade 10 worksheet featured listening comprehension tasks using Indian and Malaysian speakers, accompanied by reflection questions such as: *"What strategies can you use if you don't understand the speaker?"* (Worksheet Excerpt, Zandy, July 2023). Similarly, Rooney's debate lesson plan explicitly listed "intercultural communication skills" as a learning objective, with reflective prompts like: *"How do people from different countries express politeness differently?"* These documents demonstrated alignment with EIL pedagogy but were framed as supplementary rather than systemic, often designed by teachers on their own initiative rather than supported by institutional policies (Matsuda, 2017).

Institutional Pressures and Performance Metrics

Teachers also noted that school-level performance indicators, tied closely to standardized exam scores, limited their ability to deviate from mandated curricula. Ae explained in her lesson notes:

"Focus on grammar for test preparation. Parents and administrators expect students to score well. Innovative tasks are good, but exams come first." (Lesson Reflection Note, Ae, 2023)

This documentation reveals how institutional accountability systems reinforce exam-driven teaching, leaving little space for experimentation with pluralistic Englishes or intercultural pedagogy (Jenkins, 2020; McKay, 2018).

Document analysis confirms the systemic challenges teachers reported in interviews and that were visible in classroom observations. Textbooks and lesson plans largely prioritize grammatical accuracy, while assessment papers exclude intelligibility or intercultural dimensions. Although some teachers designed innovative materials aligned with EIL, these remained isolated and optional rather than embedded in policy or curriculum. The evidence underscores the disconnect between teachers' EIL aspirations and the structural realities of Thai education, where institutional constraints continue to privilege exam success over communicative competence in diverse global contexts.

Discussion

This study examined the challenges Thai secondary school English teachers face in implementing EIL in classroom practice. The findings reveal a persistent gap between teachers' conceptual alignment with EIL principles and their ability to enact these principles in sustained and systematic ways. While prior research has documented similar tensions in Expanding Circle contexts, this study extends existing scholarship by demonstrating how such tensions operate specifically within a high-stakes, assessment-driven secondary school system. Rather than attributing limited EIL implementation to teacher resistance or insufficient awareness, the findings show that

structural alignment-particularly among curriculum, assessment, and teacher education-plays a decisive role in shaping pedagogical possibilities. A central contribution of this study lies in conceptualizing teachers as pedagogical mediators. Participants did not simply accept or reject EIL principles; instead, they selectively adapted, negotiated, and reframed EIL-informed practices within institutional constraints. Although teachers expressed support for intelligibility, diversity, and intercultural competence, classroom practice remained strongly influenced by high-stakes examinations emphasizing grammatical accuracy and textbook coverage. This mediation reflects a strategic balancing act rather than a belief-practice inconsistency. Teachers navigated competing demands by integrating EIL elements episodically-such as exposure to diverse English users or intercultural tasks-while maintaining alignment with assessment expectations. This reconceptualization shifts the focus from a deficit-oriented “belief-practice gap” toward a structurally embedded negotiation process. In doing so, the study refines Holliday’s (2006, 2020) critique of native-speakerism by illustrating how standard language ideology is institutionalized through assessment systems rather than solely internalized by teachers. Similarly, while previous studies have highlighted curriculum and resource constraints (Manan, 2020; Çetinkaya & Kayaoğlu, 2024), the present findings demonstrate how these constraints interact dynamically in secondary school contexts where examination performance determines academic progression. The study also contributes to EIL scholarship by situating implementation within the broader logic of high-stakes assessment cultures. In Thai classrooms, assessment priorities narrowed pedagogical space, limiting sustained engagement with pluralistic English varieties and intercultural reflection. Teachers’ efforts to justify non-native Englishes and reframe students’ language ideologies further illustrate that EIL enactment requires ideological negotiation alongside instructional adaptation. Thus, the challenge is not conceptual acceptance but institutional coherence. The findings suggest that EIL implementation in Expanding Circle settings is best understood as a mediated process shaped by systemic alignment rather than individual disposition. By foregrounding teachers as pedagogical mediators operating within structurally constrained environments, this study moves beyond confirming prior research to offer a context-sensitive conceptualization of how EIL is negotiated in high-stakes secondary education. Sustainable integration of EIL, therefore, requires coordinated reform across curriculum design, assessment practices, and teacher education, rather than relying solely on individual teacher initiative.

Conclusion

This study highlights a central lesson: the challenge of implementing EIL in Thai secondary education is not primarily a matter of teacher awareness, but of structural alignment. While teachers demonstrate growing recognition of English as a pluralistic global resource, their pedagogical decisions are shaped decisively by high-stakes examinations, standardized curricula, and entrenched language ideologies (Baker, 2015; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). In this assessment-driven context, EIL cannot be sustained through individual teacher initiative alone.

A second key contribution of this study is the conceptualization of teachers as pedagogical mediators rather than passive implementers of policy. Teachers selectively adapt and negotiate EIL principles within institutional constraints, producing hybrid practices that reflect strategic mediation rather than resistance or

compliance (Holliday, 2006, 2024; Phoocharoensil, 2020). By focusing specifically on the secondary school level—an underexplored yet high-stakes stage of education—the present research extends existing EIL scholarship beyond higher education contexts and provides empirically grounded insight into how systemic pressures shape everyday classroom practice. The triangulated qualitative design further strengthens the reliability of these findings by corroborating teacher perspectives with observational and documentary evidence. These findings carry important implications. At the policy level, clearer alignment between communicative goals and assessment frameworks is essential if EIL principles are to be meaningfully enacted. At the curriculum level, assessment criteria must move beyond grammar-based benchmarks to include intelligibility, pragmatic competence, and intercultural communication. For teacher education, both pre-service and in-service programs should integrate EIL-oriented pedagogical training that equips teachers with practical strategies for navigating high-stakes environments. Ultimately, without coordinated reform across policy, curriculum, assessment, and teacher education, EIL is likely to remain aspirational rather than operational in high-stakes Expanding Circle settings such as Thailand (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2023; Rose & Galloway, 2019; Marlina, 2025).

Recommendation For implication

Building on its focus on Thai secondary education—an underexplored yet high-stakes context in EIL research—this study offers empirically grounded implications derived from triangulated interview, observation, and document data. The findings demonstrate that sustainable EIL implementation depends not merely on teacher awareness, but on systemic alignment across institutional structures.

At the classroom and teacher education levels, the findings highlight the importance of equipping teachers with adaptive pedagogical strategies that balance examination demands with communicative and intercultural goals. Rather than positioning EIL as an alternative to assessment-oriented teaching, professional development programs should provide practical models for integrating intelligibility-focused tasks, exposure to diverse English varieties, and intercultural reflection within exam-aligned curricula (Jenkins, 2017; Sung, 2023). Pre-service and in-service training should therefore incorporate EIL-informed materials design, critical language awareness, and strategies for negotiating institutional constraints in context-sensitive ways.

At the curriculum level, clearer articulation of communicative competence is needed. Curriculum frameworks should explicitly integrate intelligibility, pragmatic competence, and intercultural communication as assessable learning outcomes rather than peripheral ideals. Textbook development can further support this shift by including regional and international English varieties, authentic multilingual interaction scenarios, and reflective tasks that legitimize pluralistic English use. At the policy and assessment levels, stronger coherence between curriculum objectives and examination systems is essential. Revising high-stakes assessments to value communicative effectiveness alongside grammatical accuracy would reduce the structural tension identified in this study (Baker, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2008). Without such reform, teachers' EIL-oriented efforts are likely to remain selective and episodic. System-level

coordination would therefore help move EIL from aspirational discourse to operational practice within Thai secondary education (Galloway & Rose, 2019).

For future studies

Given the bounded case study design, future research should extend beyond a single institutional context to examine how regional, socioeconomic, and school-type variations shape EIL-related challenges across educational settings. Comparative studies spanning secondary and tertiary levels would further clarify how differing assessment cultures influence implementation across stages of schooling. Longitudinal and intervention-based research is particularly needed to explore how sustained professional development initiatives and assessment reforms affect teachers' capacity to integrate EIL more systematically over time, thereby providing stronger evidence of the relationship between policy reform and classroom practice (Sifakis & Bayyurt, 2020). Additionally, incorporating student perspectives and learning outcomes would deepen understanding of how EIL-oriented instruction shapes engagement, language attitudes, and communicative competence. Expanding inquiry in these directions would strengthen the empirical foundation of EIL as a context-responsive framework for English education in Thailand and comparable Expanding Circle settings (McKay, 2018; Jenkins, 2015).

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