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THAI VENDORS' ENGLISH COMMUNICATION SKILL NEEDS

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to examine the needs and problems of Thai vendors in employing English in their workplace and their needs regarding English training, and subsequently to create an English training course to enhance their professional skills. The subject of the present study were 160 vendors selling food and drinks, clothes, accessories, souvenirs, and other things at the Indochina Market, Thailand. The data were collected by using a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data, involving frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The result revealed that respondents tended to have English communication problems with foreign customers. They found that low English language proficiency is a problem when communicated with foreign customers. Most of them were interested in attending English training, particularly learning English online. Speaking and listening skills were considered the most important skills for these Thai vendors. For an English

training course, they wanted to emphasize speaking, listening, writing, and reading, respectively. They desired to improve their English in everyday life and work.

Keywords

Thai Vendors, Thai Vendors' Needs, English Communication Problems, Indochina Market

1. Introduction

In Thailand, using English as an international language is a crucial tool to help improve business performance (Hiranburana et al., 2017). As pointed out by Pitsuwan (2012), English is used as the diplomatic, trading, entertainment, and political language of communication as well as the most universally used language by people all over the world. Most information that is available on the Internet is in English. Pitsuwan (2012) further states that the English language enables people to access information and provide handier information to make more accurate decisions, as well as help, gain more confidence in self-expression. Thailand will lag behind in the competitive world of business, education, science, and technology if the teaching and learning of English are not improved. As a result, Thais are encouraged and awareness has often been raised of the importance of English so as to serve both local and global marketplaces (Wiriyaichitra, 2002).

Communicative competence involves four types of competence (i.e., grammatical, strategic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence), all of which should be taken into consideration (Conale and Swain, 1980). In terms of grammatical competence, if one knows how to use words and rules, they will be able to convey their messages appropriately and accurately. Language learners can make use of strategic competence to overcome breakdowns in communication due to linguistic deficiency, and to negotiate meaning with interlocutors.

Obviously, communication barriers can occur among both native and non-native speakers. For ESL/EFL learners, they may face communication difficulties in terms of insufficiency of vocabulary, interlocutor's accents, lack of exposure to English, lack of speaking confidence, psychological factors (e.g., cultural differences, attitudes, and beliefs), and so on. Obviously, No one ever avoids communication problems.

Communication problems can be divided into different kinds based on the results of research works and researchers' experiences (e.g., Duta, 2015; Rani, 2016; Mittal, 2018; and Danish and Ramu, 2018). According to Smith (2013), barriers to effective communication consisted of 7 main types: physical, perceptual, emotional, cultural, language, gender, and interpersonal. Moreover, Duta (2015), Mittal (2018), and Danish and Ramu (2018) stated that

excessive verbalism, anxiety, vocabulary, background, and body language (non-verbal communication) can cause communication problems.

English for specific purposes (ESP) deserves a focused look. It is a language learning method based on the learners' needs. ESP is categorized into 2 main types: English for professional purposes (EOP) and English for academic purposes (EAP) (Munby, 1978). The former normally focuses on professions or occupations, for example, tourism, banking, air travel, and other commercial uses in a higher education setting. Meanwhile, the latter emphasizes training students for using English. Students tend to be taught vocabulary, grammar, and 4 skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing) according to the specific academic field.

Several past research works (e.g., Pruksanabal, 2006; Fahmongkolchai, 2011; Suwanpakdee, 2012; Yotimart and Wongchai, 2013; Nuemaihom, 2016; Suraprajit, 2017; Dabphetmanee, 2018; Lertchalermtipakoon et al, 2021; Thanamaimas, 2019; and Phuengpitipornchai et al, 2021) have been conducted regarding English communication problems of Thai people in various sectors (e.g. education, investment, and tourism). However, few past research works have been carried out on Thai vendors' English communication problems (e.g., Pruksanabal, 2006; Nuemaihom, 2016; and Nikornkitikosol, 2016). In a study by Pruksanabal (2006), Thai vendors have different English backgrounds. Some vendors have some knowledge of English, while others may have never studied English before. If vendors are able to fully understand what the foreigners want, they can serve them smoothly and the level of foreign customer satisfaction will increase. More importantly, vendors opined that two English skills, speaking and listening, were the most necessary. Also, vocabulary and English conversation for specific purposes along with Thai translation and Thai phonetics in their careers were mostly required for practising English (Nuemaihom, 2016; Nikornkitikosol, 2016).

It can be said that communication plays an important role in all facets of the business. The benefits of English are not only for communicating and receiving information but also for opening opportunities for career advancement as well as strengthening the relationship of trading among countries. Particularly, it creates a positive image of Thailand and plays an important role in tourism development. However, no past research works have investigated vendors' needs in English communication skills at the Indochina Market, Thailand. To fill this gap, the purpose of this present study is to explore Thai vendors' problems when communicating in English with foreigners as well as their English communication skills needs.

2. Methodology

The research methodology for the present investigation starts off with research questions, subjects, and a research instrument for the present study are then presented. Finally, it deals with how the data will be obtained, analyzed, and interpreted.

2.1. Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the communication problems as expressed by Thai vendors?
2. What do they say are their needs for English communication skills?

2.2. Participants

In this present investigation, there were 220 vendors. In order to get the correct number of participants, the formula of Yamane (1967) was used to calculate the sampling number. The number of participants of this study was decided to be 160 vendors, all of whom sold goods or provided services at the same market.

2.3. Research Instruments

For the present study, a questionnaire was used to gather data. The questionnaire was adapted from Pruksanubal (2006), Kuntaramongkul (2010). It consisted of two parts: the demography of the respondents and the opinions of the respondents according to communication problems between themselves and non-Thai shoppers at the Indochina Market.

2.4. Data Collection

One hundred and sixty questionnaires were purposively distributed to Thai vendors who sold goods or provided service at Indochina Market, Thailand. Data were collected by the end of 2019. Importantly, before administering the questionnaires, the respondents were informed to ensure that they know the objective of the study, the importance of the study, the organization in charge of investigating the study, stating there was no right or wrong answer, requesting honest answers, promising confidentiality, and expressing appreciation. Particularly, their responses did not affect their daily life as were kept confidential.

2.5. Data Analysis

To deal with the quantitative data, in part 1: Personal information, the frequency, percentage, and the data in this part were analyzed and presented using frequency and percentage. Meanwhile, mean, and standard deviation (S.D.) were employed to analyze Part 2: the needs and problems of Thai vendors in English communication. The degree of the needs and problems are presented in three ranges as follows: 'low (1.00-1.99), 'moderate (2.00-2.99), and 'high (3.00-4.00) based on the holistic mean scores of frequencies of needs and problems of the subject.

3. Results

This part consists of two sections. The first section presents the research findings on participants' personal information. In the second section, the findings on the needs and problems of Thai vendors in English communication are presented.

3.1. Personal Information

The first part of the questionnaire sought demographic data regarding the gender, age, education, type of goods they sell, selling experience, prior experience with English training courses for Thai vendors, experiences in learning English, the current level of English knowledge, and existing communication problems and communication strategies as expressed by local vendors. All information was shown in the form of frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation of the respondents as follows:

Table 1: Gender of Thai Vendors

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	108	67.50
Male	52	32.50
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

Table 1 illustrates that there were 160 respondents. The number of female respondents (67.5%) was higher than the number of males (32.5%).

Table 2: Age of Thai Vendors

Age	Frequency	Percentage
45 years old up	79	49.38
36-45 years old	24	15.00
26-35 years old	36	22.50
16-25 years old	21	13.13
Total	160.00	100.00

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

Table 2 shows that most respondents were over 45 years old (49.38%), followed by 26-35 years old (22.5%), 36-45 years old (15%), and 16-25 years old (13.13%), respectively.

Table 3: Educational Background of Thai Vendors

Educational background	Frequency	Percentage
Junior High School	75	46.88
Senior High School	45	28.13
Diploma	2	1.25
Bachelor degree	-	-
Master degree	-	-
Others	38	23.75
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

As shown in Table 3, the respondents had mainly graduated from junior high school, representing (46.88%) of the total, followed by senior high school (28.13%), other education (23.75%), and diploma (1.25%).

Table 4: Type of Goods Being Sold

Type of goods their sell	Frequency	Percentage
Clothes	60	37.50
Food and drinks	39	24.38
Accessories	31	19.38
Bags and shoes	30	18.75
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

As can be seen in Table 4, most respondents had been selling clothes (37.50%), food and drinks (24.38%), accessories (19.38%), and bags and shoes (18.75%).

Table 5: Experiences in Learning English

Experiences in learning English	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	71	44.40
No	89	55.60
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

As shown in Table 5, the majority of respondents had experiences in learning English

(55.6%) less than those with no experience in learning English (44.4%).

Table 6: *Level of English Knowledge of Thai Vendors*

Level of English knowledge	Frequency	Percentage
Poor	83	51.88
Fair	66	41.25
Good	10	6.25
Excellent	1	0.63
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

As shown in Table 6, the majority of the respondents reported that their level of English was poor (51.88%), followed by 66 respondents who said their level was fair (41.25%), good (6.25%), and excellent (one person).

Table 7: *Interested in Attending the English Training Course*

Interested in attending the English training course	Frequency	Percentage
Interested in	96	60
Not interested in	64	40
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

Table 7 indicated that 60% of vendors were interested in attending the English training courses; whereas, 40% of them were not interested.

Table 8: *Opportunity to Sell Goods to Foreign Customers*

Opportunity to sell goods to foreign customers	Frequency	Percentage
Have opportunity	133	83.13
Do not have any opportunity	27	16.88
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

Table 8 shows that most vendors tended to have more opportunities to sell goods to foreign customers (83.13%). Few of them found that they did not have any opportunity to sell goods to foreign customers (16.88%).

Table 9: *Frequency of Speaking English with Foreign Customers*

Frequency of speaking English	Frequency	Percentage
Sometimes	92	57.50
Never	46	28.75
Often	18	11.25
Always	4	2.50
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

Table 9 demonstrated the frequency and percentage of vendors who offered that they spoke English when communicating with foreign customers. A small majority of vendors spoke English with foreigners (57.5%), followed by a small number who never used English (28.75%). Only 2.5% of them claimed a high frequency of using English with customers.

Table 10: *Existing Communication Problems of Local Vendors*

Existing communication problems of local vendors	Frequency	Percentage
Have problems	135	84.38
No problems	25	15.63
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

Table 10 shows existing communication problems as claimed by this group of local vendors. It can be clearly seen that 84.38% felt that they had communication problems when selling goods to foreigners.

Table 11: *Local Vendors' Interests in Attending English Training Course*

Local vendors interested in attending an English training course	Frequency	Percentage
Interested in (for work)	93	58.13
No interest	44	27.50
Interested in (Personal interest)	23	14.38
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

According to Table 11, vendors wanted to attend English training because of their job and their personal interest, 58.13% and 14.38%, respectively. Meanwhile, 27.5% of them were not interested in attending an English training course.

Table 12: Local Vendors' Needs of English Skills Improvement

Skills	Mean	S.D.
Speaking	3.51	0.87
Listening	3.03	0.73
Reading	1.79	0.79
Writing	1.68	0.79

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

Table 12 shows vendors' needs for English skills improvement. The participants found that speaking and listening were the most important skills, with a mean score of 3.51 and 3.03, respectively. Reading and Writing were in the third and fourth rank with mean scores of 1.79 and 1.68, respectively.

Table 13: Local Vendors' Learning Styles

Local vendors' learning styles	Frequency	Percentage
Individual	65	40.63
Group	61	38.13
Class	22	13.75
In pair	12	7.50
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

This table illustrated vendors' learning styles. Participants preferred to learn English individually (40.63%), with a group (38.13%), and in a classroom (13.75%), respectively. Only 7.5% of them tended to desire language training in pairs.

Table 14: Local Vendors' Interests in Learning English Online

Local vendors are interested in learning English online	Frequency	Percentage
Like	94	58.75
Dislike	66	41.25
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

Table 14 illustrated data regarding local vendors' interests in learning English online. 58.75% of participants were interested in learning English online; however, 41.25% were not interested in it.

Table 15: Teaching Materials

Teaching materials	Frequency	Percentage
Pictures	50	31.25
Books	43	26.88
VDO/VCD	36	22.50
Others	31	19.38
Total	160	100

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

Table 15 showed vendors' opinions regarding teaching materials when learning English. 31.25% of the participants liked to learn English through pictures, followed by books (26.88%), and VDO/VCD (22.5%). The other teaching materials consisted of booklets and websites (19.38%).

3.2. Needs and Problems of Thai Vendors in English Communication

This part aims to present and describe the findings of the opinions of the respondents according to their needs and problems in English communication skills.

Table 16: Vendors' Communication Problems and Ways to Solve Problems

Communication Problems	Mean	SD
Having problems when giving information about products when communicating with foreign customers.	3.05	.79
Having translation problems when communicating with foreign customers.	3.03	.82
Different accents are a problem when communicating with foreign customers.	2.97	.76
Low English language proficiency is a problem when communicating with foreign customers.	2.91	.89
Mispronunciation leads to communication problems.	2.91	.72
Cross-cultural confusion leads to communication problems.	2.84	.93
Solving communication problems	Mean	SD
Solving communication problems, by using other devices such as maps, calculators, body language, etc.	3.04	.95
Using Thai words or phrases when one does not know the right words in English.	2.98	.79

By using these communication strategies, how often do you overcome communication problems when communicating with foreign customers?	2.73	.80
Making up new words if one does not know the right ones in English.	2.65	.94
Giving oneself a reward or treat when one does speak well in English.	2.62	.92
Trying to relax whenever one feels afraid of making a mistake.	2.55	.91
Explaining again when foreign customers do not understand.	2.49	.89

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

Table 16 illustrated vendors' communication problems and how they described solving them. The mean frequency scores reveal that the vendors reported that they tended to have communication problems when giving information about products, with a mean score of 3.05. This is followed by 'Having translation problems when communicating with foreign customers.' and 'Different accents are a problem when communicating with foreign customers.' with mean scores of 3.03 and 2.97, respectively.

With respect to solving communication problems, the vendors tended to use other devices such as maps, calculators, gestures, etc., with a mean score of 3.04. They use Thai words or phrases when they do not know the right words in English, with a mean score of 2.98. Also, they overcome communication problems when communicating with foreign customers by using communication strategies, with a mean score of 2.73.

Table 17: English Conversations

English conversations in daily life	Mean	SD
Telling prices, receiving money, and making change	3.60	.59
Telling about the product's usage	3.57	.56
Giving suggestions and mentioning sales promotions	3.57	.53
Thanking and apologizing	3.56	.51
Giving information about products and services	3.53	.54
Greeting and saying goodbye	3.53	.56
Offering help	3.42	.65
Giving location	3.21	.72
English in the workplace	Mean	SD
Conversation in restaurants	3.38	.90

Conversation in clothes shops	3.32	.87
Conversation in souvenir shops	3.17	.90
Conversation in coffee shops	3.11	.78
Conversation in toy shops	3.09	.95
Others	1.13	.62

(Source: Authors' Own Creation)

As can be seen in Table 17, the participants were interested in 7 out of 9 topics with a mean score of at least 3.00. Those are 'Telling prices and receiving money and making change'; 'Telling about the product's usage'; 'Giving suggestions and mentioning sales promotions'; 'Thanking and apologizing'; 'Giving information about products and services'; 'Greeting and saying goodbye'; and 'Telling prices of products. Meanwhile, 'offering help' and 'Giving directions' have the least frequency with mean scores of 3.42 and 3.21 respectively. With regard to English in the workplace, the participants reported that they wanted to learn English conversation in restaurants, clothes shops, and souvenir shops with mean scores of 3.38, 3.32, and 3.17, respectively.

4. Limitation of the Study

The generalization of the study's outcomes would be very limited due to the resources of only 160 vendors participating. This group was the limited number of vendors selling goods at Indochina Market, northeast Thailand.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is useful for different groups of people with different communication needs. In this present study, Thai vendors at Indochina Market also have both Thai and foreign customers. Inevitably, they had to speak with their foreign customers in English. They found that they had limited language knowledge. This leads them to have communication difficulties. According to the results, they reported that they wanted to use English to speak with their foreign customers. They found that English was important for their job so they wanted to learn how to deal with their foreign customers when selling goods.

For the results of the present study, respondents reported that they wanted to learn both English in daily life and English in the workplace. Telling prices, receiving money and making change, telling about the product usage, and giving suggestions and sales promotions were the

top three ranked topics. In terms of English in the workplace, five settings where English should be taught were conversations in clothes shops, souvenir shops, toy shops, restaurants, and coffee shops, respectively. It was also found that most respondents reported that they never practised English in their daily lives, but some of them practised English by surfing the Net. They reported that they were interested in attending online English learning as they wanted to make use of it in their jobs. They tended to desire to learn English in individual and group settings. Pictures, books, and VDO/VCD were needed to be used as teaching materials, respectively. This is consistent with Pruksanubul (2006), Nuttayakul (2011), Nikonkittikason (2016), Thai vendors wanted to learn ESP because they wished to make use of it in their job. Hence, in order to know which topics or contents the target learners want to learn, language learners' needs and problems should be taken into consideration.

As reported by Kuntaramongkul (2010), Nutthayakul (2011), Nikonkittikason (2016), the innovation of English communication has proved to be workable for Thai local vendors. Anyone can learn English anywhere, anytime because of the rapidly changing online world. Internet usage plays an important role in many sectors such as tourism, investment, and education. It not only changes one's lifestyle but also learning style. People can learn things through the internet. New curricula are now provided on the internet. Many lessons have been taught online. Teachers are able to design and choose learning activities that are suitable for learners; meanwhile, learners are more likely to be motivated to learn more and get more enjoyment of the material and are more actively involved in their learning because of a variety of media with immediate feedback (Yelkur, 2005; Meyer, 2008; van Rensburg, 2018; and Hanafy and Arafa, 2021;).

In summary, types of teaching and learning activities are crucial for language learners as they can help language learners to learn things better and easier. It is suggested that the contents of English training should focus on vocabulary and language expressions, ESP for local vendors. Moreover, online learning is another way for local vendors to practice English. Thus, these issues should be further examined in future research.

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