THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL COMMUNICATION FACTORS ON ENGLISH COMMUNICATION IN AN INTERNATIONAL SERVICE INDUSTRY

Supawadee Nualsri
Master of Arts student, Communicative English Program, Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok, Thailand
supawadee_beebee@hotmail.com

Preeda Chaiya
Lecturer, Ph.D., Tourism and Hotel Management, Mahasarakham University, Bangkok, Thailand
preeda_chaiya@hotmail.com

Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between cultural communication factors and English communication and to examine the influence of cultural factors on English communication in the service industry in Thailand. The sampling method was convenience sampling; 202 participants were randomly chosen by the human resource managers from the 10 international hotels participating in this study. As part of their jobs, the selected participants had to have contact with other international service industries or overseas branches and to communicate in English in various ways in their daily work routine. The research instrument was a questionnaire specifically designed to investigate the influence of cultural factors on English communication in the international service industry. The participants were asked to

answer questions based on the concepts of body language, cultural awareness, cross-cultural communication, spoken communication, written communication, and nonverbal communication. The research findings can be summarized as follows:(1) cross-cultural communication factors were found to have an influence on English communication primarily whilst staff were using email, which was the most widely used form of communication in the industry; and (2) there were three cultural communication factors that affect English communication, which can be mapped into three significant groups: (a) body language, (b) cultural awareness, and (c) cross-cultural communication.

Keywords

English Communication, Cross-Cultural Communication Factors, Cultural Awareness, Internal Communication, International Service Industry in Thailand

---

1. Introduction

Working in the hospitality sector, staff members of companies and organizations come into contact, on a daily basis, with a wide variety of people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, we cannot underestimate the importance of communication skills when coming into contact with others. Internal communication not only means the few "official" channels that are available, but also means the "non-official" channels of communication within an organization, as well. When all members of the organization adhere to the same values, understand the policies governing work and follow the requisite procedures in the same way, then the prevailing organizational culture promotes a much more effective use of resources, and is focused on the same progressive goals and mission of the organization.

Tariszka-Semegine (2012) points out that in recent years the most important aspect of examining organizational communication for managers in large organization chastened to be in terms of formal upward and downward communications. Gudykunst (2001) writes, "Communication is only effective when both message senders and receivers perceive the meanings attached to messages in the same or similar ways."Dover (1964, as cited in Tariszka-Semegine, 2012) states that there have been three eras marking the phenomenon of internal communication. The first era, which was popular in the 1940s, was "dealing with the employee,"

the second, spanning the 50s, was characterized as "informing the employee," and in the 60s as "persuading the employee," while the next era, covering the 70s and 80s, was named by Grunig and Hunt (1984) as "starting a communication with the staff."

Therefore, international businesses and organizations today must understand how to communicate with people who are from different backgrounds, places, and cultures all over the world in order to fulfill customers' needs, meet the organization's goals and build value for their own business. So we attempt to understand the cultural differences by studying them. How can people communicate with each other or know how to solve/deal with problems when communication issues arise? Can communication via email help reduce barriers in cultural differences?

There is a limited literature on intercultural communication in organizations in Thailand, so it became the researcher's intention to find out how individuals who have different cultural backgrounds understand, receive, interpret, and respond to messages. Understanding these factors will assist people to better understand cultural influences on English communication in an international service industry AruneeNamamuti (1999).

2. Objectives and Research Questions

Because it is increasingly unlikely that we will live out our lives communicating only with those who speak the same language or who live in similar communities, given the global reach of modern communications technology, the researcher conducted this study with two specific objectives:(1) to investigate the relationship between the cultural communication factors and English communication in the international service industry and,(2) to examine the influence of cultural communication factors on English communication in an international service industry. The two research questions of this study are as follows: (1) "Is there any relationship between cultural communication factors and English communication in the international service industry?" and (2) "What effects do cultural communication factors have on English communication in an international service industry?"

3. Research Methodology

The research instrument used in this study is a questionnaire specifically designed to investigate the influence of cultural factors on English communication in an international service industry. This research relies for its approach on quantitative methods. The quantitative data from the questionnaires was analyzed in accordance with the concepts and procedures associated with the quantitative method in order to fulfill the purposes of the study. The population of this study comprised employees who work in 10 international hotels registered with the Thai Hotel Association and the Tourism Authority of Thailand in Bangkok. There is no record of the exact number of the total population; the study used the "convenience sampling" selection criteria, which was deemed the selection method most suitable for this study.

The final sample was composed of 202 participants, randomly chosen by the human resource (HR) managers from the selected ten international hotels participating in this study. All the selected participants had to have contact with other international service industries or overseas branches and had to have been using the English language in various communication tasks in their work, on a daily basis.

The following are the types of variables identified in this study; the independent variables in culture and international communication are (1) body language, (2) cultural awareness, and (3) cross-cultural communication, and the dependent variables are (1) spoken communication, (2) written communication, and (3) non-verbal communication.

In the process of constructing the questionnaire, there were eight steps the researcher followed: (1) study the related literature; (2) determine the scope of the content of the questionnaires; (3) study how to construct an instrument for the research based on the data collection using the rating scale by Likert, including data analysis and treatment; (4) construct a trial questionnaires for distribution to a test group of participants; (5) amend the questionnaire according to suggestions from the advisory committee; (6) submit the completed questionnaire to a research panel to examine the content's validity (native English speakers, editors and professors at Ramkhamhaeng University edited the questionnaire in order to make sure all statements were clear and correct and to ensure accuracy and consistency in wording and content); (7) test the questionnaire for reliability (Cronbach's Alpha was applied to measure the reliability of each section in the questionnaire; a Cronbach's Alpha level of 0.7 and above, as

proposed by Ryan (1995), was used in the study to validate the reliability of the instrument); and finally (8) send the finished questionnaires to be completed by the participants in the selected ten hotels in Bangkok.

4. Findings

The data from the questionnaire were analyzed using data screening in order to identify what types of language skills and communication forms employees use who have different cultural backgrounds, and what influences their English communication in the working environment. The information from the topic questions provides the marks given by the participants, which were used to identify the areas that the participants considered significant. All of the data from all the sources were analyzed and correlated in order to identify factors that influence communication in English. The participants claimed that the English communication skill of "writing" (3.95) and the communication form "emailing" (4.11) were the skill and form most frequently used in their work (Table 1). They also pointed out that "listening" (3.95) and "emailing" (3.92) had the most impact on their work when they communicated, as shown in (Table 2).

Table 1: *English communication skills and forms used in an international service industry*

Communication Skill and Form Attributes	Mean	Std. Dev.	Meaning
English Communication Skills			
Writing	3.95	.988	Much
Listening	3.90	.946	Much
Reading	3.89	.966	Much
Speaking	3.80	1.004	Much
English Communication Forms			
Emailing	4.11	.915	Much
Spoken announcements	3.28	1.126	Neutral
Letter correspondence	3.28	1.174	Neutral
Short note taking	3.21	1.220	Neutral
Memo writing	3.15	1.185	Neutral
Notices	2.97	1.259	Neutral

Table 2: *Impact of English communication skills and forms on participants in an international service industry*

Communication Skill and Form Attributes	Mean	Std. Dev.	Meaning
English Communication Skills			
Listening	3.95	.958	Much
Writing	3.89	.973	Much
Speaking	3.83	1.063	Much
Reading	3.79	.928	Much
English Communication Forms			
Emailing	3.92	1.036	Much
Spoken announcements	3.39	1.120	Much
Letter correspondence	3.35	1.124	Much
Memo writing	3.29	1.097	Much
Short note taking	3.12	1.252	Much
Notices	3.00	1.295	Much
Valid N (listwise)			

With regard to the activities that help participants improve their English skills (Table 3), the participants could select (1) practicing or/talking to English natives and/or foreigners speaking English, (2) reading English books or newspaper, magazines, or grammar books, (3) listening to a radio program or music in English or watching English movies and videos, and (4) taking English courses. The activity that they believed would help them the most with their English skills is "practicing or/talking to English natives and/or foreigners speaking English" (35%), whilst "taking English courses" was chosen by the fewest (only 8%).

Table 3: *Activities that help participants improve their English language skills*

English Skill Items	N	Percentage
Practicing/talking to English natives and/or foreigner speaking English	70	35%
Reading English books or newspapers/ magazines/ grammar books	62	31%
Listening to a radio program or music in English/ watching English movies/videos	53	26%
Taking English courses	17	8%
Total	202	100%

The problems associated with nonverbal communication and aspects of nonverbal behavior that have an influence on communication in an international service industry are displayed in Table 4: (1) the problems in English communication via written communication modes, e.g., emails, memos or letters, etc., occur much more often than they do in spoken communication (problems in vocabulary use, writing sentences and grammar use); (2) the spoken and written English communication skills are very important at work; (3) nonverbal behaviors will help communication to be better; and (4) the English language is an important means of communication in an organization.

Table 4: *Aspects of nonverbal behavior that influence communication in an international service industry*

No.	Nonverbal Communication Attributes	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level of Importance
1	You think that problems in English communication via written communication modes (e.g. emails, memos or letters, etc.) occur much more often than they do in spoken communication.	4.00	.892	Very important
	1.1 Problem in vocabulary use	3.79	.873	Very important

	1.2 Problem in writing sentences.	3.70	.860	Very important
	1.3 Problem in grammar use	3.66	.895	Very important
2	You agree that spoken and written English communication skills are very important at work.	3.95	.774	Very important
3	You think that nonverbal behaviors such as gestures, posture, facial expressions, eye contact, body language, and so on, will help your communication to be better.	3.92	.911	Very important
	3.1 Volume of your voice	3.90	.801	Very important
	3.2 Eye contact	3.88	.828	Very important
	3.3 Space	3.86	.831	Very important
	3.4 Posture	3.83	.853	Very important
	3.4 Facial expression	3.80	.829	Very important
	3.5 Tone of your voice	3.69	.751	Very important
4	You agree that the English language is important to your organizational communication.	3.67	.806	Very important

In Table 5, the cultural problems that participants face when communicating via writing or speaking in English are given. In descending order, the five most important items of cultural problem attributes are as follows: (1) differences in English accents spoken where it is difficult to understand while communicating with those with strong accents; (2) complicated question, could not understand clearly; (3) the colleagues speak too quickly for me to understand, I can't understand it; (4) underlying language assumptions; and (5) not understanding questions because of the selection of words used. The least serious problem they had concerned eye contact during fact-to-face encounters.

Table 5: *Cultural problems that participants face when they use spoken and written English communication at work*

No.	Cultural Problem Attributes	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level of Problem
1	Differences in English accents spoken where it is difficult to understand while communicating with those with strong accents.	3.67	.855	Much
2	Complicated questions, could not understand clearly.	3.58	.970	Much

No.		Mean	Std. Dev.	Level of Problem
3	The colleagues speak too quickly for meto understand, I can't understand it.	3.56	.951	Much
4	Underlying language assumptions.	3.51	.824	Much
5	Do not understand the questions because of the selection of words used.	3.50	.926	Much
6	English as a second language.	3.49	.994	Much
7	Different versions of English speaking/writing/meaning.	3.49	.953	Much
8	Difficult to give a response/ explain/cannot use the correct words to explain.	3.46	.931	Much
9	Lack of confidence while having face-to-face conversation as opposed to writing e-mails.	3.44	.992	Much
10	Facing unexpected question(s).	3.42	.955	Much
11	Feeling under pressure.	3.42	.965	Much
No.	**Cultural Problem Attributes**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**Level of Problem**
12	Direct and indirect communication.	3.40	.921	Much
13	Verbal and nonverbal communication issues.	3.39	.898	Much
14	Feeling nervous.	3.39	.997	Much
15	Acronyms/abbreviations.	3.39	.892	Much
16	Background noises.	3.36	.964	Much
17	Speaking face to face versus side by side.	3.33	.978	Much
18	Having problems with eye contact during face-to-face encounters while speaking or listening to others.	3.32	1.021	Much

5. Answers to Research Questions

These findings help answer the two research questions, as discussed below.

5.1 Is there any relationship between cultural communication factors and English communication in the international service industry?

There were three cultural communication factors that were shown to have a relationship with English communication, which can be categorized into three significant groups: (a) body language, (b) cultural awareness, and (c) cross-cultural communication (Table 6).

Table 6: *Correlation between independent variables (cultural communication factors) and dependent variables (English communication factor) – Correlation matrices*

Variables	English Communication	Body Language	Cultural Awareness	Cross-Cultural Communication
English communication	1.000	.882	.913	.929
Body Language	.882(Sig.=.000)	1.000	.967	.942
Cultural Awareness	.913(Sig.=.000)	.967	1.000	.984
Cross-Cultural Communication	.929(Sig.=.000)	.942	.984	1.000

Body language factors include two important features: (1) being clear and concise in both verbal/ nonverbal messages, especially in different cultural speech acts, and (2) being able to communicate with different use of words, voice, pitch and nonverbal (body language) when communicating with persons from different cultures.

Cultural awareness factors include the following: (1) showing openness, care, and mutual respect for others, (2) considering the person's cultural background, and (3) emphasizing that cultural awareness becomes central and necessary when one is communicating with others in a different environment or in a business context.

Cross-cultural communication factors are as follows: (1) good communicators will adjust their message based on the people that they are talking with or writing to; (2) they can be flexible in communication style; and (3) they employ the "mirroring" technique. Another factor involves how quickly the speakers or writers are able to shift their communication style (i.e., adjust their message, be flexible, and "mirror"); immediately shifting one's communication style to fit others is an important aspect of ability.

5.2. What effect do cultural communication factors have on English communication in an international service industry?

The analysis of multiple regressions of employees for determinants in English communication in an international service industry, shows that only the cross-cultural communication factor was found to have an influence on the dependent variable - English communication (Table 7), with a beta value of .929 at the significant level of .05 (F = 1.252E3, t =35.381, p< .001), and the independent variable explained 86.2% of the variance in English communication. Other factors of body language and cultural awareness were not found to have an effect on English communication at the significant level of .05.

It is possible that the main factor that would influence positive change in English communication in an international service industry would be primarily to improve employees' cross-cultural communication ability. Therefore, three cultural communication factors affecting English communication in an international service industry are (1) body language, (2) cultural awareness and (3) cross-cultural communication. However, cross-cultural communication factors were found to have an influence on English communication primarily whilst staffs were using email (Table 1 and Table 2), as above, which was the most widely used form of communication in the industry.

Table 7: *Multiple Regression Analysis of Employees: Stepwise*

Independent Variable: Cultural communication factor	Dependent Variable: English communication					Collinearity Statistics
	B	SE. B	Beta	t	p	VIF
Constant	-.770	.122	-	-6.330	.000	-
Cross-cultural communication	1.122	.032	.929	35.381	.000	1.000

Note: Two Tail Probability *p*< 0.05, Adjusted R Square = .862, F= 1.252E3,

6. Discussion

According to the findings of this research, the participants who have much more experience in working and using English in their communication will have better English communication skills and be able to communicate better than the ones who do not, for experience in communication enables staff to work efficiently, communicate smoothly with colleagues, and fulfill both the requirements of their work and the demands of the organization. The four English language skills and the ability to use them in communication skills are critical needs in the working environment in the modern world.

The participants' responses show that various English communication skills (writing, listening, reading and speaking) and forms (emailing, spoken announcement, letter correspondence, memo writing, short note taking and notices) are highly important in the working environment. Most of them consider "writing" and "listening" the skills they use most. This shows that people in the service industry realize how English skills play an important role in their self-development, in improving cross-cultural understanding, career advancement, smoother working relationship with others and chances of success in their chosen career.

This confirms the idea of Schmidt(2014) suggesting that communication is an important skill that should be taught by specialists in the field because it plays such an important role in a person's development, in improving cross-cultural understanding, and in enhancing people's chances of success in their careers and in business. In a study of English communication between a hotel's front-desk staff and guests from ASEAN nations, Arunee Namamuti (1999) states that people employed in many sectors of the economy are aware that they need to improve their English skills because they seek advancement in terms of their chosen career, and that it will result in a smoother working relationship with others.

The English communication skills and forms used have an effect on participants' communication, particularly when they use emailing, which is the most widely used form of communication in the industrial and business sectors. Vile & Collins (2004) show that more than 60% of respondents saw emails as critical or extremely important for internal communication within the organization: "We all take email for granted, but rarely have time to consider how much we have come to rely on it for both business and personal communications."

In addition, Shachaf (2005) shows that "team members overcome intercultural communication problems arising from differences in verbal and nonverbal styles and improve language accuracy by the use of email." Moreover, the work by Dube& Pare(2001) and Gimenez (2005) reveals that team members who are forced to speak a foreign language resort to using email in communication; they are better able to show different views and severalperspectives, which enables them to gain both a sense of equalization and increased participation.

Finally, Sproull & Keisler (1986), Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey (1988), and Jackson, Dawson& Darren(2003) point out that the rich variety of emails used reduces intercultural miscommunication caused by body language and other non-verbal cues and potential distractions. Non-verbal miscommunication does not occur in messages sent via email, and even though differences in verbal style can both correct communication or can lead to miscommunication between team members, interaction via email takes on a significant role and expands both the organization's and the team's productivity.

7. Conclusion

The findings in this research show that three cultural communication factors influence English communication in an international industry; they are (1) body language, (2) cultural awareness and (3) cross-cultural communication. But cross-cultural communication factors were found to have an influence on English communication primarily whilst staff were using email. Even though there are some cultural communication factors that obstruct communication between people who have different cultural backgrounds, miscommunication is reduced when using email, when compared with face-to-face communication (which is relevant to the cultural awareness factor). Also, email reduces intercultural miscommunication because of differences in styles of speaking (relevant to the cross-cultural communication factor). Lastly, intercultural miscommunication is minimized via email because email does not support nonverbal communication (relevant to the body language factor).

8. Recommendations

The researcher has come up with a few recommendations for further study. First, if researchers apply the same research methods and a similar approach in selecting sampling

groups or participants, further study could be conducted on a larger scale, and the selected samples could consist of participants who are non-native English speakers and those whose first language is not English. Second, qualitative data could be obtained (through interviews or observation) and analyzed to determine the English communication skills or difficulties encountered. Third, conversations could be conducted and video-recorded; the recordings can be used for reference with regard to any related findings about an individual's view concerning his or her English language ability and communication skills.

References

AruneeNamamuti (1999). A Study of English Communication between hotel frontdesk staff and ASEAN Guests. Master of Arts thesis, Ramkhamhaeng University.

Dube, L., & Pare, G. (2001). Global virtual teams. *Communications of the ACM*, 44(12), 71-73.

Gimenez, J., C. (2005). The language of business e-mail: An opportunity to bridge theory and practice [Electronic version]. *ScriptaManent*, 1(1).

Grunig, J., & Hunt, T. (1984). Managing Public Relations. New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, Inc.

Gudykunst, W. B., & Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). *Cultural and Interpersonal Communication*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Gudykunst, W. B. (2001). Asian American ethnicity and communication. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Jackson, T. W., Dawson, R., & Darren, W. (2003). Understanding e-mail interaction increases organizational productivity. *Communications of the ACM*, 46(8), 80-84.

Ryan, C. (1995). *Researching Tourist Satisfaction: Issues, concepts, problems*. London: Routledge.

Schmidt, S. (2014). An analysis of English writing ability and style of Germans [Electronic version]. *Humanities and Social Sciences Review*, 3(2).

Shachaf, P. (2005). Bridging cultural diversity through e-mail [Electronic version]. *Journal of Global Information Technology Management*, 8(2), 46-60.

Sproull, L., &Kiesler, S. (1986). Reducing social context cues: Electronic mail in organizational communication. *Management Science*, 32 (11), 1492-1512.

Tariszka-Semegine, E. (2012). Organizational internal communication as a means of improving efficiency [Electronic version]. *European Scientific Journal*, 8 (15), 86-96.

Vile, D., & Collins, J. (2004). The "Sharp End" Series. Email: Business or pleasure? Mission criticality meets personal interest [Electronic version]. Quocirca Ltd.