

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Hospitality industry, one of the most important tourism industries in Thailand, has contributed significantly to the growth of the country's income. The hotel business is very competitive in both the country and on the international stage. Currently about 20 percent of hotel rooms in Thailand are operated by international chains in order to increase their competitive advantages (Maysa Chanikornpradit and Sukanya Sirikeratikul, 2005). This fact supports the report of Diethelm Travel's Thailand Tourism Review (2008) in that 80% of Thailand five-star hotels have manipulated by foreign investors. However, Thai hotel development has not met international standards even though its development has been expanded rapidly (Wangpaichitr, 2007). This view corresponds to the concern of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) who has urged the Thai Hotel Association (THA) to raise the "Thailand Hotel Standard" in order to achieve the international benchmark and compete with the world-class hotels properties (TAT, 2005). The major criteria in considering the Thailand Hotel Standard are physical aspects, construction aspects, service quality and the ability to maintain quality, and the maintenance of the hotel and facilities (TAT, 2005). Apparently, the concern of service quality and quality maintenance are directly related to the hotel staff at the operational level. Besides, the need to raise the quality of service, Blue and Harun (2003) emphasize that there is also a growing worldwide need for the front-line staff who are able to communicate with the guests effectively in the hospitality industry. Diethelm Travel affirms that Thai tourism industry, including hotel business, still needs qualified hospitality and tourism workers who have better English skills (Diethelm Travel's Thailand Tourism Review, 2008). This concern is relevant to Wangpaichi's (2007) point of view that developing Thai educational institutions to serve for the front-line staff is a very important factor contributing to the high quality in hotel business. So,

there is a call for education across the country to prepare students for further productive careers in hospitality industry.

Many Thai universities, both in the public and private sectors have produced qualified graduates for hotel and tourism industries. According to the record of Office of Tourism Development (2007), currently 89 institutes including universities and colleges in Thailand offer courses and curricula related to hospitality and tourism management. Thus, it is essential that the government and universities should concentrate on English skills on the hospitality oriented program in order to meet the increasing demand of hospitality industry and improve the overall service quality. To put this into action, the Thai government has established the English Language Development Center (ELDC, 2005) in order to encourage people in different career paths to be well equipped with skills, knowledge, and competencies in English in order to compete with the world economy. Initially, English benchmarks for 25 occupations have been proposed and the standard of English for hotel Front Desk is one of them (ELDC, 2005).

In hotel business, English is used as a lingua franca and the most commonly used in the hotel industry worldwide (Blue & Harun, 2003; Ruiz-Garrido & Iborra, 2006). Thai hotel staff use English as a major medium to communicate with foreign guests. Moreover, English skills are regarded as a prerequisite for economic success (Vandermeeren, 2005). It is known that English communication skills are essential for hotel Front Office staff since they have the highest frequency of interactions with guests and they are centrally concerned with guests' satisfaction. However, Ruiz-Garrido and Iborra (2006) and Vandermeeren (2005) stress that those professional staff in hospitality industry need not only communicative competence, but also pragmatic competence. This claim agrees with Blum-Kulka (1982) who concludes that effective communication in any given language requires more than linguistic knowledge, but it also includes the ability to appropriately produce and understand utterances in that language. More importantly, Vandermeeren (2005) states that business interaction is often affected by limited sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge. In terms of the corporate world, Vande Berg (1997) points out that communication breakdown either at the linguistic or pragmatic level in any business could damage customer relations or lose a contact. Thus, an effective and appropriate communication in hotel business does not depend only on grammatical competence, but also on the awareness of pragmatic knowledge.

In addition, politeness, a part of pragmatic competence, plays a very crucial role in the hotel staff-guest communication. Blue and Harun (2003) emphasize that hospitality in hotel business is 'commercial' hospitality. The interaction between the hotel employees and guests is business transaction which aims for costs and benefits. Thus, the relationship between the hotel staff and guests cannot be mutual or friendly as it occurs in the private life. Social distance, power, and the rank of imposition, reflected at the level of politeness, have to be considered seriously in the hotel staff-guest interaction. Accordingly, the hotel employees have to use politeness strategies in their communicative acts or speech acts in order to maintain positive relationships with the guests and enhance the prospect of repeating business. Consequently, the loss of business opportunity can happen if the hotel employees fail to convey the appropriate level of politeness.

Since appropriate language use to meet the clients' needs in a certain business can decisively optimize the profits, the hotel personnel's English communication skills cannot be overlooked. Apparently, some Thai hotels use their own in-house English tests to examine their employees' communication skills in order to offer special training courses to develop their hotel personnel's English skills while many consider the scores of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) reliable for an application process or for placing employees in language classes. However, the TOEIC result is an indirect measure of speaking and writing skills. The scores cannot tell specific actions or behaviors the candidates can perform in real situations. Moreover, Lui (2006) states that the scores from other large-scale proficiency tests like TOEFL and IELTS do not correlate with pragmatic ability. Those who have higher scores do not seem to have correspondingly high pragmatic ability. A number of studies also point out that learners of English as a second or foreign language who have excellent grammatical and lexical competence of the target language still fail to convey their message or communicate effectively (Beebe & Commings, 1996; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Trosborg, A, 1987; Wolfson et al., 1989). This is because of the lack of social appropriateness rules as well as necessary pragmatic or functional communication rules to communicate their intent. Above all, those proficiency tests do not reveal the level of an examinee's pragmatic ability and the appropriateness of language use in the politeness aspect which are essential in business communication.

To date, only a small number of studies have examined pragmatic competence for English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) or pragmatic ability at the workplace. Most available studies in pragmatics are cross-sectional studies which compare pragmatic competence between English native speakers and nonnative English speakers (Rose, 2000). For foreign language learners, the assessment of pragmatic ability is generally assumed to be investigated under the communicative competence. Liu (2006) and Roever (2006) point out there may be a lack of pragmatic issues in language testing and constructing valid pragmatic tests is not an easy process. To our knowledge, there are not many studies that assess pragmatic ability in the context of hotel Front Office Department. As mentioned above, the need to design a test to assess Thai students' pragmatic ability in business communication particularly in hotel business is urgent. The English proficiency test alone may not be sufficient to indicate one's pragmatic knowledge. Serious misunderstanding generally occurs at the pragmatic level (Thomas, 1983). In addition, it is necessary to shift from the test of language functions for all purposes to focus on the pragmatic ability of English for Occupational Purposes for Thai students in hospitality oriented programs. Moreover, in order to provide qualified hospitality workers who have better English skills in the hotel staff-guest communication, there is an urgent need to concentrate on the awareness in pragmatic ability of Thai students who are likely to be hotel employees to produce pragmatically appropriate utterances in English in their future career.

1.2 Objectives of the study

1. To assess pragmatic ability of Thai students in hospitality oriented programs by using the Front Office Pragmatic Test based on the speech acts and politeness.
2. To study whether the levels of English proficiency have a significant effect on the students' pragmatic ability and investigate similarities and differences of linguistic features related to pragmatic ability produced by the students with different levels of English proficiency.
3. To investigate the errors that interfere with the students' pragmatic knowledge.

1.3 Research questions

1. Can the Front Office Pragmatic Test (FOP-Test) differentiate the students' pragmatic ability into different levels?
2. Do levels of English proficiency affect the students' pragmatic ability and what are the similarities and differences of linguistic features produced by the students with different levels of English proficiency?
3. What are the errors that interfere with the students' pragmatic knowledge?

1.4 Statement of hypotheses

1. The Front Office Pragmatic Test (FOP-Test) can significantly differentiate the students' pragmatic ability related to hotel Front Office Department context into different levels.
2. The students' pragmatic ability of the high, average, and low levels of English proficiency differ significantly.

1.5 Scope of the study

1. The samples of the study are the fourth-year Thai students majoring in the hotel and tourism management from Bangkok University, Dhurakit Pundit University, and Kasetsart University.
2. The Front Office Pragmatic-Test (FOP-Test) is developed to test the students' pragmatic ability based on the five speech acts which have been considered problematic for Thai hotel staff of four and five starred hotels in Bangkok. Therefore, the other speech acts that are not considered problematic are beyond the scope of the study.
3. The hotels selected in the needs analysis are four and five starred hotels classified by the criteria of Thailand Hotel Standard (TAT, 2005). The key factor considering only four and five starred hotels in this study, apart from the criteria of their luxuries and quality of services defined in the Thailand Hotel Standard, is positions offered in those hotels that employ specific personnel to perform different services in the Front Office Department. Besides, those are only hotels in Bangkok. The respondents' answers cannot therefore be generalized to the hotels that are ranked below four starred hotels inspected by the Thailand Hotel Standard and the hotels in other regions.

4. The test items focus only on the situations in which the in-service staff of the Front Office Department have the high number of interactions with the guests. Thus, the situations which generally occur in other major departments like Housekeeping or Food and Beverage Department are not included in this study.

5. Due to the major concern of speech production in the effectiveness and appropriateness in language use, grammaticality and nonlinguistic components like pause, tone of voice, pitch, and intonation are not examined in this study.

6. Cross-cultural aspects in communications are not included in this study. The study is based on the dimensions of speech acts and politeness only.

1.6 Limitation of the study

The test method of the Front Office Pragmatic-Test (FOP-Test) is typically an oral discourse completion test (ODCT). This elicitation test has a limitation in collecting elaborated behaviors found in oral speech. Thus, the FOP-Test is considered as a semi-direct speaking test, not a direct interactive speaking test.

1.7 Definition of terms

1. **Thai hotel management and tourism students** : They are the fourth-year Thai students from Bangkok University, Dhurakit Pundit University, and Kasetsart University from the faculties related to hotel management and tourism. The students have to complete all English courses required from their curriculum and have internship programs with hospitality business which is a requirement of being graduated. The determined number of 30 students of each university is selected by the stratified random sampling technique. Therefore, there are 90 students divided equally into three language ability groups of the high, average, and low based on their English achievement in English language courses (GPA) taken from both fundamental and elective courses.

2. **Hotel Front Office Department**: The hotel sector in a large hotel where public contacts between the hotel staff and guests and face-to-face communication occur. The operational staff in this sector involves those who perform routine front office duties such as handling check-in and check-out procedures, assigning rooms, providing information about hotel facilities and policies, handling incoming and outgoing mails or messages, and handling complaints or guest requests. The positions in this sector include front office receptionists, guest relation officers,

concierges, bell staff, and front cashiers. Those operational staff who generally have no personal contact with the guests such as reservation staff and telephone operators are not included in this study.

3. **Pragmatic ability:** In this study, “pragmatic ability” is the ability of Thai students in hospitality oriented programs who are expected to produce appropriate speech acts given in the Front Office Pragmatic-Test (FOP-Test) and select linguistic forms to respond to a simulated hotel guest to the given specific situations happened in the hotel front office context appropriately and effectively. In terms of testing, pragmatic ability in this study therefore refers to scores based on the analytical scale of rating adapted from Hudson et al. (1995) which consists of four components: 1) correct speech acts; 2) expressions and vocabulary; 3) amount of information; and 4) degree of appropriateness concerning formality, directness and politeness with five level bands of the effectiveness in language use.

4. **The Front Office Pragmatic Test (FOP-Test):** The Front Office Pragmatic Test (FOP-Test) is an oral production elicitation test to assess the pragmatic ability of English of Thai students in hospitality oriented programs, focusing on problematic speech acts reflected from Thai hotel front office staff from four and five starred hotels in Bangkok, and on the politeness dimension in the context of hotel Front Office Department. The test was designed by the presentation computer program called Adobe Captivate which can facilitate the test face with audio-visual simulation. Each test item appears with a slide consisting of three captures: 1) prompted scenarios; 2) the speech of a simulated hotel guest; and 3) a slot provided for the test takers’ speech to a simulated hotel guest. The test takers listen to the audio narration of a prompted scenario and the speech of a simulated hotel guest along with the written script. They say aloud what they would respond to a simulated hotel guest related to the given specific situation and content. The test takers’ speeches are recorded, transcribed and finally rated.

5. **Pragmatic knowledge:** It is the test takers’ recognition in pragmatics reflected from a questionnaire which examines the test takers’ pragmatic background knowledge in general and observes how Thai students in hospitality oriented programs interpret the hotel guests’ utterances and select appropriate linguistic forms to respond to the given specific situations in the context of hotel Front Office Department.

1.8 Significance of the study

1. In terms of theoretical contributions, the FOP-Test can initiate the test development for English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) assessment in hotel Front Office Department. The pragmatic test method used in the test can be applied to other occupational areas. The test constructs can yield more insightful information about the EOP assessment, especially in the hotel Front Office Department.

2. In terms of practical contributions, the FOP-Test can be used to accompany other standardized tests in recruiting hotel Front Office personnel. It also can be used in in-service training to help Thai hotel personnel to be aware of aspects in pragmatics when communicating with the foreign guests. More importantly, the FOP-Test can help English teachers in the hospitality field to prepare their students to be pragmatically competent and be qualified hotel staff in language use in their future career.

Overview

Chapter one provides the background of the study. It includes the objectives of the study, research questions, hypotheses, scope, limitation, definition of terms and significance of the study.

Chapter two presents a review of related literature in eight major concerns which are: 1) definitions of pragmatics; 2) pragmatic competence; 3) theories of speech acts; 4) theories of politeness; 5) the selection of speech acts; 6) methods of testing pragmatics; 7) the studies in pragmatic competence and assessment of pragmatic ability; and 8) linguistic speech acts and politeness strategies in hotel communication.

Chapter three focuses on research methodology. The population and sample of the study are presented. The procedures employed in constructing the research instruments are also described. Finally, data collection and data analysis are included in this chapter.

Chapter four reveals the findings of the study, which are presented according to the research questions. A discussion of each research question is presented, based on the literature review and theoretical background.

Chapter five provides a summary of the research and conclusions from the findings. The implications from the study as well as recommendations for future research are also included.