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Needs Assessment of English Communication Skills Used by Shop Assistants, Food Sellers, and Service Providers in Muengthongthani

Krittika Ma-in¹
Mayuree Sawatmuang²
Pransak Thonyeam³

Business English Department of Faculty of Business Administration
Rajamangala University of Technology Rattanakosin
Borhit Phimuk Chakkrawat, Bangkok, Thailand

¹Corresponding author

¹Email: krittika.ma-@rmutr.ac.th

²Email: mayuree.saw@rmutr.ac.th

³Email: pransak.rmutr@gmail.com

Abstract

The objectives of the research were to (1) assess the needs of English communication skills used by shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani [City of Gold], (2) study the extent to which the respondents use the needed skills with foreign customers, and (3) identify their interest in contents and activities needed for practice in communicating with foreign customers. It was expected that the obtained information could be used for academic service programs to be initiated by the university in the vicinity. The researchers used a questionnaire and a set of interview questions with 100 voluntary persons--shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani. Frequency and percentages were used to analyze the obtained data. The findings pointed to: (1) the respondents needed language functions of greeting, problem solving in transactions/services, asking and giving discount, bargaining, accepting and refusing transaction/services, giving directions, and recommending/suggesting dishes/restaurants, changed coupon and accommodation; (2) they ranked the most needed skills as listening, speaking, followed by reading; (3) they were interested in training in class rather than actual communication situations. They preferred a training course once a week, especially during holidays.

Keywords: *Shop assistants, food sellers, service providers, foreign customers, service users*

1. Introduction: Background

According to the policy of academic services to nearby communities prescribed by Rajamangala University of Technology Rattanakosin, the Business English Department, Faculty of Business Administration has planned to provide free academic services in English language communication to those communities in need. Hence, the researchers conducted a survey on needs assessment with the target groups of shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, there were many foreign tourists as customers of various shops or stores in the business district of Muengthongthani. Many international events were organized there, such as football matches, badminton matches, concerts, conferences, and trade displays. Muengthongthani also provided outlets, such as Nike, Adidas, Lacoste, and other well-known brands. Muengthong Football Club and Tennis Club attracted foreign players speaking English to communicate in purchasing products or using services in this area.

On the side of shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers, they feel limitation in their English communication skills as experienced in frequent miscommunication at work. Consequently, foreign customers might not understand or give up their buying products/ services. They are not happy with the results of their communication skills and wish to make transactions effective. Listening and speaking skills at the functional level are what they need most. As known, speakers who are less proficient tend to convey the meaning rather than paying attention to the rules of the language. Therefore, speakers try to use many strategies to explain their purposes (Nakatani, 2006). Learning language can be successful if the learners enhance their skills by practicing in various activities (Johnson & Morrow, 1981)

The researchers considered language training for shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani to improve their four English skills--listening, speaking, reading and writing for their business success. The researchers decided to do a needs assessment via survey to understand what these sellers need most in communicating with their foreign customers.

It was expected that free academic services should cater for the target groups who need specific contents, practices, conversational conventions, vocabulary, language activities in the schedule suitable to them (Eggly, Musial & Smulowitz, 1999). The researchers as staff members of the Business English Department at a university in the nearby vicinity wished to integrate such academic services into the teaching English program for trainee students to gain training experience before graduation.

2. Research Objectives

There were three research objectives:

- (1) To assess the needs of English communication skills used by shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani,
- (2) To study the extent to which the respondents use the needed skills with foreign customers, and
- (3) To identify their interest in contents and activities needed for practice in communicating with foreign customers.

3. Research Questions

The researchers had the following questions in mind to obtain the needed data:

- (1) How many shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani are interested in being trained for English conversation and communication with foreign customers?
- (2) What topics are needed in training English conversation and communication with foreign customers?
- (3) What contents, language styles and activities are needed in training English conversation and communication with foreign customers.

4. Scope of Study

The study investigated the needs for English language communication as an academic service program for 100 voluntary persons as accessible--shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani. The researchers only examined the contents, language styles, and activities needed most in training. A survey was followed by interviews about the participants' problems encountered on the job.

5. Expected Benefits

The researchers expected that the results of this research can be used as a training model for improvement of English conversation and communication of Thai service providers in contact with foreign customers. In addition, it would be an opportunity to identify language styles and contents for language appropriateness.

6. Literature Review

The literature review section covers (1) Concepts of Training, (2) English Language Learning, (3) English Communication Strategies, and (4) Communicative Language Teaching.

6.1 Concepts of Training

Training is one of processes which is used for many objectives: (1) developing skills and capabilities of work performance, (2) developing quality in work place, (3) reducing costs, (4) reducing accidents at work, and (5) reducing transferring in work place. Moreover, pros of training are: (1) improving work efficiency, i.e., skills and knowledge, (2) reducing work errors, (3) reducing time spent on job learning, (4) less work loaded on supervisors, and (5) encouraging motivations for career path. In order to provide the highest profits of training, the process for training should be prepared as follows: (1) needs analysis, (2) examining each need, (3) designing training programs, (4) proposing program to upper management, (5) managing issue regulations on training, (6) organizing training, (7) finding evaluation, and (8) following up (Basturkmen 1998; Nakatami, 2006).

6.2 English Language Learning

English Usage and English for Specific Purpose

English usage can be divided into two purposes which are English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Both EAP and EOP are used for communication with different purposes. Therefore, contents used for communication should meet people's needs accurately and properly as well as give the maximum profits for users. Moreover, vocabulary usage can be interpreted in the same way even it is used in different situations; therefore, it depends on skills of communication. English learners will use English more efficiently, especially for work or career by being motivated in learning English. Learning English usage should be considered from current situations, objectives or purposes, era, careers or needs of users, such as English for daily life (Carter, 1983; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Anthony, 1998; Eggly, Musia & Smulowitz, 1999). English for Specific Purposes can be divided into three: (1) English for Science and Technology (EST), (2) English for Business and Economics (EBE), and (3) English for Social Studies (ESS).

Hutchinson & Waters (1987) suggested that a survey should be conducted for investigating English learning needs whether for Academic Purposes or for Occupational Purposes. The survey should ask learners the following: (1) objectives of learning (why), (2) characteristics of learners (how), (3) sources for improving learners (what source), and (4) learners (who). Almulhim (2001) investigated needs of learning English by considering proficiency of four English skills. The results showed that listening is the most important skill, followed by speaking, reading and writing respectively.

English Language Improvement

Ledwach (2014) suggested nine ways to improve English skills: (1) learners should listen to English from media or social media every day; (2) learners should set up or install devices in English, such as smartphones or tablets; (3) learners should receive English news from radios or television; (4) learners should practice English by listening to English songs or soundtrack movies; (5) learners might read English articles, such as cooking or travelling; (6) learners can write diary by using English language; (7) learners can practice vocabulary by using online dictionary; (8) learners can practice English speaking by repeating clips or offering foreigners assistance; and (9) learners can plan to practice depending on their purposes, such as testing, studying, communicating, or trading.

The ways to improve English skills are also reinforced by many methods. Firstly, motivation which is based on strategies of instructors. Secondly, positive attitudes of learners which affect while they are studying. Thirdly, enhancing knowledge and developing of learners (more knowledge and more skills) by practicing English with native speakers or foreigners. Fourthly, English learners should have more confidence in using English from the real-life situations. Lastly, learning styles which should be interesting designed by instructors (Jakobovits, 1971; Woothiwongsa, 2014).

6.3 English Communication Strategies

Many speakers who are not English native speakers have to deal with problems of fluency. Therefore, learners use their strategies to improve their English communication or enhance their communicative ability. Nakatani (2006) categorized English communication strategies into two groups: (1) strategies for coping with speaking problems, and (2) strategies for coping with listening problems.

Strategies for Coping with Speaking Problems

These strategies are behavioral when used during communication. There are eight groups: (1) social affective strategies, (2) fluency-oriented strategies, (3) negotiation for meaning while speaking, (4) accuracy-oriented strategies, (5) message reduction and alteration strategies, (6) nonverbal strategies while speaking, (7) message abandonment strategies, and 8) attempt to think in English strategies.

6.4 Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced into discussion of language use, and second language learning is used for processes

and goals in classroom learning (Jakobovits, 1971). Communicative Language Teaching also refers to a “communicative competence.” The competence can be considered in terms of the *expression*, *interpretation*, and *negotiation* of meaning. Jakobovits (1971) indicated that factors which should be included for communicative competence are teaching or quality of teaching, learners or language skills of learners, and cultures of learners.

Theory of Learning

Johnson & Morrow (1981) described the theory of learning of CLT into four points: firstly, communication is used and taken from social interaction. People try to use good communicative skills during social interactions. Secondly, people use communication for achieving their goals because they have their purposes. Thirdly, people use appropriate or suitable language in communication depending on discourse and sociocultural contexts. Finally, communication is used between at least two people in order to share information by using verbal or non-verbal communication.

7. Methodology

7.1 Participants

The participants in the study were 100 persons as accessible--shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani. Their participation was on a voluntary basis.

7.2 Variables

The dependent variables consist of age, gender, education and experience in selling.

The independent variables are needs of academic in using English conversation and communication regarding contents, language styles, activities, days, times, places and number of learners.

7.3 Instruments

The study used a survey questionnaire and interview in collecting data.

The questionnaire was in two parts:

- 1) Personal information of participants (filling information): gender, age, education, and experience.
- 2) Needs of academic services in using English based on contents (rating scale and filling information): content needs, skills needed

for improvement, activities, language styles, media, days, times, places.

The interview part covered the following (by note-taking):

- 1) Needs of English improvement and needs of academic services in using English,
- 2) Problems and misunderstanding in English communication,
- 3) English skills needed for improvement,
- 4) Activities, language styles, media, days, times, places needed for a free academic service course,
- 5) Work hours, and
- 6) General information.

7.4 Procedure

The researchers collected data from personnel in the shops around Muengthongthani. They were expected to respond to the questionnaire. Then, they were also interviewed based on the planned guideline and note-taking was used during the interviews.

7.5 Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the obtained data by frequency and percentage of responses.

8. Findings

8.1 Results of Parts 1 and 2

The participants' responses to the questionnaire were divided into two parts:

Part 1: Personal information

Part 2: Needs of academic services in using English conversation and communication with foreign customers

Parts 1 and 2 were supported by interview data given by the participants.

The participants' personal information is given in Table 1 on their gender, age, education, and experience.

Table 1 indicates that of 100 participants, 57 participants were female and 43 male. The largest age group was 31% at 31-40 years old. As for Education, the majority obtained High School or Vocational (39%). Their average experience was 1–3 years (30%).

Table 1: Personal Information of Participants

| Description | N = 100 | |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 43 | 43.00 |
| Female | 57 | 57.00 |
| Total | 100 | 100.00 |
| Age | | |
| Under 20 years | 3 | 3.00 |
| 21 – 30 years | 20 | 20.00 |
| 31 – 40 years | 31 | 31.00 |
| 41 – 50 years | 27 | 27.00 |
| 51 years and up | 19 | 19.00 |
| Total | 100 | 100.00 |
| Education | | |
| Primary | 15 | 15.00 |
| Secondary | 24 | 24.00 |
| High School/ Vocational | 39 | 39.00 |
| Diploma | 3 | 3.00 |
| Bachelor's degree | 18 | 18.00 |
| Higher Bachelor's degree | 1 | 1.00 |
| Total | 100 | 100.00 |
| Experience | | |
| 1-3 years | 30 | 30.00 |
| 4-6 years | 25 | 25.00 |
| 7-9 years | 17 | 17.00 |
| 10-12 years | 17 | 17.00 |
| 13-15 years | 7 | 7.00 |
| More than 15 years | 4 | 4.00 |
| Total | 100 | 100.00 |

Part 2 Needs of Academic Service in Using English Conversation and Communication with Foreign Customers

Table 2 shows three topics most frequently used by the participants in English conversation and communication: (1) greeting foreign customers (81%), (2) problem-solving strategies during transactions and services (77%), and (3) asking & giving discount and bargaining (73%). Meanwhile, recommending transportation was the lowest (8%).

Table 2: Topics of Conversation and Communication

| Topics | N = 100 | |
|---|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Greeting foreign customers | 81 | 81.00 |
| Problem-solving strategies during transactions and services | 77 | 77.00 |
| Asking & giving discount and bargaining | 73 | 73.00 |
| Recommending changed coupon | 31 | 31.00 |
| Lost and found objects | 30 | 30.00 |
| Giving directions | 50 | 50.00 |
| Accepting and refusing transactions and services | 60 | 60.00 |
| Recommending accommodation | 32 | 32.00 |
| Suggesting food, menu and restaurants | 50 | 50.00 |
| Recommending transportation | 8 | 8.00 |

Table 3 shows most needed skills: greeting foreign customers (73%), problem-solving strategies during transactions and services (70%), and asking & giving discount and bargaining (68%). Only 18 participants (18%) indicated recommending transportation.

Table 3: Topics of Conversation and Communication Needed in Free Academic Services

| Topics | N = 100 | |
|---|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Greeting foreign customers | 73 | 73.00 |
| Problem-solving strategies during transactions and services | 70 | 70.00 |
| Asking & giving discount and bargaining | 68 | 68.00 |
| Recommending changed coupon | 38 | 38.00 |
| Lost and found objects | 37 | 37.00 |
| Giving directions | 65 | 65.00 |
| Accepting and refusing transaction and services | 67 | 67.00 |
| Recommending accommodation | 46 | 46.00 |
| Suggesting food, menu and restaurants | 58 | 58.00 |
| Recommending transportation | 18 | 18.00 |

The most needed English skills identified by the participants for improvement were listening (61%), speaking (32%), and reading (11%). The participants left out writing skills (0%). See Table 4 below.

Table 4: English Skills Needed for Improvement

| Skills | N = 100 | |
|-----------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Listening | 61 | 61.00 |
| Speaking | 32 | 32.00 |
| Reading | 11 | 11.00 |
| Writing | 0 | 0.00 |

Of 100 participants, 74 preferred training in class (74%), and 26 selected training in real situations (26%), as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Activities for Free Academic Services

| Activities | N = 100 | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Training in class | 74 | 74.00 |
| Training in real situations | 26 | 26.00 |

As for training schedule preference, 62% of the participants preferred training in one day; 57% would like to have their training on the national holidays (57%) or weekend morning (26%). The participants were not positive about weekday training, either morning or afternoon, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Duration, Days and Time needed for Free Academic Services

| Durations/ days and times | N = 50 | |
|------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Duration | | |
| 1 day/ week | 62 | 62.00 |
| 2 - 3 days / week | 29 | 29.00 |
| 3 - 5 days / week | 8 | 8.00 |
| More than 5 days/ week | 1 | 1.00 |
| Days and time | | |
| Monday – Friday/ morning | 10 | 10.00 |
| Monday – Friday/ afternoon | 2 | 2.00 |
| Saturday – Sunday/ morning | 21 | 21.00 |
| Saturday – Sunday/ afternoon | 10 | 10.00 |
| National holidays | 57 | 57.00 |

The participants preferred Muengthongthani area as a convenient location for training (85%), outnumbering 15% of the participants who were able to be trained at RMUTR at Borphit Phimuk Charkkawat. See Table 7 below.

Table 7: Places for Free Academic Services

| Place | N = 100 | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage |
| Muengthongthani area | 85 | 85.00 |
| RMUTR (Borhit Phimuk Charkkawat) | 15 | 15.00 |

8.2 Interview Results

As for the interview results, the researchers found that shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani have to sell or provide service seven days a week. Work hours depend on location.

- Those who work at Cosmo start their work by 10:00 a.m. and finish by 10:00 p.m.; however, some start before 8 a.m. if working for coffee shops.
- Those participants who sell at Romjai Market start their work at 5 or 6 a.m. and close their shops around 6–8 p.m. every day.
- The participants who have their own outlets tend to work from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.
- Shops or stores located nearby condominium building have different opening and closing hours; for example, some Thai massage salons open 10:00 a.m.–8 p.m., some hair salons at 9:00 a.m.–7 p.m., while other miscellaneous goods stores at 9 a.m.–9 p.m.

The participants have encountered communication problems with non-Thai buyers. They do not feel confident in starting the conversation, greeting, or asking questions to foreign customers standing in front of their shops.

The participants found it difficult to describe or explain their products, food or beverages to their foreign customers. Sometimes, foreign customers ask for direction to get to downtown of the city but the participants do not have enough English to give assistance and they simply keep quiet. Some participants solve the problems by using body language and gestures; for example, the participants point to the menu of food or drink shown in front of the shops or stores. It should be noted that the participants who sell goods at the condominium buildings are rather familiar with foreign residents in communicating with foreign customers with basic conversation.

As for English skills most needed for improvement, the participants want to improve their listening skill in the first place to understand their foreign customers and respond correctly. They preferred training in class first to be able to handle real-life situations they have to encounter daily at work.

9. Discussion of Results and Recommendations

9.1 Discussion of Results

The researchers surveyed the needs of shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani in using English conversation and communication with foreigners in order to custom-make free academic service courses. It was found that all 100 participating shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani need language training as expected. The participants showed their interest in free academic service courses and specified what they want in terms of the most needed skills, language styles, contents, activities, and preferred schedule and location for the target training.

The findings from the questionnaire pointed to the need to greet foreign customers properly to attract their attention to products or services. They want to have sufficient English language to communicate with foreign customers in the situations they have encountered at work (Sukhphan, 2018). The finding on the most needed skills in listening and speaking was not a surprise to the researchers because these two skills are work-based (Almulhim, 2001). Almulhim's survey reported listening as the first skill followed by speaking, reading, and writing, respectively. Ledwach (2014) also suggested that English learners should use English every day for fluency. One of the techniques of improving English skills is daily listening practice. Learners should also be advised to use the language in different social contexts with awareness of language accuracy and appropriateness. In the work of Johnson & Morrow (1981), learners can ask for direction to the places they want and they need strategies in coping with limitations in speaking. As the participants explained in their interviews, they used gestures to cope with speaking limitations by pointing to the menu or display board of the shop. Nakatani (2006) asserted that 'nonverbal strategies' are naturally used while speaking to explain or describe information. with limited vocabulary or language expressions. Another strategy of 'message abandonment strategies' was also mentioned in case of language difficulty. Certainly, speakers may ask for assistance from other people or abandon their conversation when they cannot understand the conversation or respond properly. As seen in the interview results of the researchers' study, some participants left out words and kept quiet; and those who do not give up communicating resort to body language or gestures.

It was obvious that food sellers and service providers showed their enthusiasm in improving their English skills to deal with foreign customers. Those shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers in Muengthongthani would be well responsive to the free academic service courses to be offered by the university in the vicinity. Moreover, custom-made training courses should

be able to assist them to improve their communication for business gains. The university concerned therefore has to make sure that the contents, language styles and practice activities be relevant to the identified needs. As Petchroj (2022) emphasized, urgently needed is research into relevant teaching materials and community involvement in providing good courses that are responsive to the learners' needs as provided in free academic services. This is the goal the university wants to attain in benefiting those who work in the business communities of Muengthongthani.

9.2 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the researchers would like to recommend as the following:

(1) A further survey to include other businesses, such as gym staff and trainers and supermarket assistants to have a complete picture of business personnel who need to deal with foreign customers.

(2) Free academic service courses should provide intensive practice in language functions used in the required situations. The trainees should be exposed to simulated problem-solving tasks. Both verbal and non-verbal strategies should deserve a serious attention to set the right atmosphere in attracting customers to buy products or use services. Drills of words and formulaic expressions should be provided for shop assistants, food sellers, and service providers to help them communicate with more confidence. After training, there should be an onsite follow-up to evaluate the impact of the given training on the trainees' language performances as feedback to the university. Listening and speaking skills authentic assessment should also be taken seriously to ensure accountability of the training host.

10. The Authors

The three authors--Krittika Ma-in, Mayuree Sawatmuang, and Pransak Thonyeam—are full-time lecturers in the Business English Department, the Faculty of Business Administration, Rajamangala University of Technology Rattanakosin, Borphit Phimuk Chakkrawat, Bangkok, Thailand. They share research interest in the areas of language needs assessment, English language teaching for communication, and skills required in English for Occupational Purposes in the service industry.

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