

## Foreign Visitors' Satisfaction towards English Oral Communication with Thai Vendors in Khon Kaen Province

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### Abstract

The objectives of this study were: 1) to determine the level of satisfaction foreign visitors have with the English oral communication skills of Thai vendors in Khon Kaen province; and 2) to identify the difficulties foreign visitors encounter when communicating in English with Thai vendors in Khon Kaen province. The study included 52 respondents who had experience communicating in English with Thai vendors while visiting Khon Kaen province. They were selected by the convenience and availability sampling method. This study utilized a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview as research instruments. The collected data were analyzed using the computer program and the interview information was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

The findings revealed that the majority of foreign visitors were male, aged 21 to 40 years, and from countries where English is not the official language. Respondents reported being moderately satisfied with the English-speaking proficiency of Thai vendors, resulting in a mean score of 2.75 on the overall communication proficiency scale. In addition, the findings revealed that respondents were moderately content with the English listening proficiency of Thai vendors, as indicated by a mean score of 2.96. According to respondents, the most significant barrier to effective communication with Thai vendors is their lack of vocabulary, which is essential for effective communication.

**Keywords:** English, Foreign visitors, Oral communication, Satisfaction, Thai vendors

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## Introduction

The tourism industry has emerged as an important mechanism for global socioeconomic sustainability. In many developing countries, this industry has increasingly become an essential source of income and employment. According to the World Tourism Organization (2010), modern tourism has become a critical mechanism of socioeconomic progress due to the increasing number of destinations. Tourism enables the creation of new employment opportunities and businesses, the further development of infrastructure, the preservation of heritage and cultural values, and the exportation of earnings. According to the economic impact report from the World Travel and Tourism Council (2015), the tourism industry generated US\$ 7.5 trillion (9.8% of the global GDP) and created approximately 277 million jobs worldwide in 2014. In addition, the report forecasts that the industry will generate more than US\$ 11,300 billion (10.5% of the global GDP) and create 357 million employment opportunities for the global economy by 2025. The tourism industry is also the largest and most diverse business sector in the world, as it is the primary source of income and employment for many countries. According to Lee and Chang (2008), tourism development not only stimulates the growth of the industry, but also motivates overall economic growth. In most developing countries, stimulating economic growth by promoting the tourism industry has become an essential economic development strategy (Chen & Chiou-Wei, 2009).

## Literature Review

The Thai government also considers the tourism industry to be one of the most significant industries to generate income for the country. The influx of funds generated by tourism-related activities resulted in the creation of approximately 2.4 million jobs in 2015, or 6.8 percent of all jobs (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2014). Thailand's annual tourism revenues amount to approximately THB 2 billion, making it the tenth largest source of revenue for the tourism industry worldwide (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2016). The number of foreign visitors travelling to Thailand increased by 5.59 percent in August. This resulted from the significant increase of Chinese visitors. The number of Chinese visitors increased by 15.6% year-over-year to 1 million in August, following a 5.81% increase in July after a decline of five months (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2019).

Globally, English is the primary language used to communicate with foreign visitors. It is also used as a communication tool by foreign tourists in Thailand. Numerous government agencies associated with the tourism industry have recognized this significance. Nationally, they have been coordinating English training for the tourism industry in collaboration with schools, colleges, and universities. Thai people continue to have difficulty communicating and listening to foreigners. To eliminate misunderstandings in oral English communication, Thais must strengthen and develop their English language skills, particularly those who regularly interact with foreigners. Effective oral communication with foreigners can promote international trade

and investment in the business sector. In addition, it promotes a positive image of Thailand and plays an essential role in the development of domestic tourism (Leelaviriyawong, 2015).

Geographically, Khon Kaen province is in an optimal location. The airport is connected to Bangkok, Phuket, and Hat Yai, and a new service to U-Tapao Pattaya will shortly be added. Also, the intersection of the East-West and North-South Economic Corridors. Over the next three years, it will be a part of the new high-speed rail connecting Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima, with connections to Laos and Yunnan. The governor emphasized that it is increasingly recognized as the transportation center for the entire Isan region. Despite the fact that the location of Khon Kaen province is an asset, it is now the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau's enormous responsibility to devise strategies for transforming Khon Kaen province into a desirable tourist destination. In 2017, the total number of foreign arrivals was close to 77,000. Surprisingly, European markets account for the majority of international visitors, with France generating 5,500 arrivals in 2017, followed by Germany and the United Kingdom, each of which generated over 3,300 passengers. Japan, the United States, and Laos also generate a relatively high number of visitors to the province of Khon Kaen (Citrinot, 2019).

Due to the large number of foreign visitors, oral communication in English is deemed essential for the exchange of products and services between purchasers and vendors. To effectively communicate with immigrants, vendors should have a solid foundation in English. If they are able to completely comprehend the desires of foreign customers, they will be able to serve them efficiently and the level of satisfaction among foreign customers will rise.

Consequently, the researchers would like to conduct a survey to investigate the foreign visitors' satisfaction with the English oral communication of Thai vendors in Khon Kaen province. The findings of this study can be used as the guideline for improving the English communication competency for the vendors in Khon Kaen province.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To survey the satisfaction of foreign visitors towards English oral communication proficiency of Thai vendors in Khon Kaen province
2. To find out the problems that foreign visitors faced when communicating in English with Thai vendors in Khon Kaen province

### **Methodology**

#### *1. The Respondents*

This study surveyed 52 foreign visitors to the province of Khon Kaen who had prior experience communicating in English with Thai vendors. There were both native and non-native English speakers present. To select the respondents, the method of convenience and availability sampling was used.

## 2. The Research Instruments

The research instruments in this study were: quantitative and qualitative method.

### 2.1 Quantitative Method

This study employs a quantitative methodology to determine the level of satisfaction that foreign tourists have with the English oral communication of Thai vendors in the province of Khon Kaen. The questionnaire contains both closed- and open-ended questions, as well as a five-point Likert scale.

It was adapted from Jitienkarn (2011), who examined the level of foreign consumers' satisfaction with the English oral communication skills of Bank of Ayudhya PCL staff. The questionnaire for this investigation was divided into the following three sections:

#### Part 1: General information

The participants were requested to answer questions to provide personal information including gender, age, educational background, country, first language, and current position.

#### Part 2: Foreign visitors' satisfaction towards English oral communication.

The participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction on English oral communication of Thai vendors. The criteria and interpretation are described in the following table:

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Rates of Satisfaction and Level of Satisfaction*

Rates of satisfaction	Level of satisfaction
5	Highest
4	High
3	Moderate
2	Low
1	Lowest

#### Part 3: Suggestions

This part the participants would share their suggestions for improving Thai vendors' English oral communication skills or any other opinions.

### 2.2 Qualitative Method

By conducting interviews with foreign visitors to the province of Khon Kaen, the researchers aim to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. A qualitative technique necessitates a more complex method of data processing for increased reliability. The researchers conducted

interviews with foreign visitors using a semi-structured format. Among the circumstances that favor qualitative research is the following:

1. The nature of the approach.
2. The significance of establishing personal contact.
3. The nature of the data collection questions.
4. The length of time required and the completeness of the process.

There are four main questions for the interviewees. The researchers included of the all critical factors that could impact foreign visitors' satisfaction and formed the following questions:

1. In communicating with Thai vendors in Khon Kaen province, do you often have the problems?
2. What is the main problem for you to communicate with them?
3. How do you or your interlocutor try to do to get through those problems?
4. Do you have any other suggestions?

### **Research Design**

In this study, a descriptive cross-sectional survey was used to determine the level of satisfaction of foreign tourists with Thai vendors' oral English communication in Khon Kaen province. Researchers administered the questionnaire and interview, which served as the research instruments for this study, to foreign visitors. After the respondents had completed the questionnaire and interview, the researchers double-checked their compliance with the instructions. Then, the computer program was used to analyze the data from the completed questionnaires, and the interview analysis process was used to analyze the interview data.

### **Data Collection**

The researchers conducted the investigation between the 8th and 10th of February 2020 and collected the data. Using the convenience sampling method, 52 questionnaires were disseminated to the target population of foreign visitors to the province of Khon Kaen, and a semi-structured interview was conducted with four foreign visitors using the information provided. After respondents completed the survey and interview, the researchers double-checked to ensure that they had correctly followed the instructions. It took participants approximately 10 minutes to answer all questionnaire and interview queries. In the province of Kalasin, 10 respondents were instructed to complete the questionnaire as a pilot test. The results demonstrated that respondents correctly followed instructions. They comprehended every word in each query. They all had the same interpretation of the questions, and it took the majority of them approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire and interview.

## Data Analysis

### 1. The Quantitative Data Analysis

Statistical package was used to analyze the quantitative data from the questionnaire. Each section's data was analyzed as follows:

Part 1: General information. This part consists of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The data were analyzed by the computer program in order to find percentage.

Part 2: The contentment of foreign visitors towards oral English communication. This section contains closed-ended queries using a 5-point Likert scale. The computer program was used to analyze ordinal data in order to calculate the percentage, mean, and standard deviation. As shown in Table, the mean (average) score for each item was interpreted as the level of satisfaction.

**Table 2**

*Comparison of Level of Satisfaction and Mean*

Level of Satisfaction Mean	Mean Highest
Highest	4.21 – 5.00
High	3.41 – 4.20
Moderate	2.61 – 3.40
Low	1.81 – 2.60
Lowest	1.00 – 1.80

### Part 3: Suggestions

Since this part use an open-ended question format, the gathered data were then qualitatively analyzed via the content analysis.

### 2. The Qualitative Data Analysis.

The qualitative analysis was conducted in 3 steps of Coding Technique (Corbin& Strauss, 1990) as described below:

#### Step 1: Open Coding

This step separates the data into discrete parts and create “codes” to label them.

#### Step 2: Axial Coding

In the second step, the established codes will be read over to find the shared similarities to be grouped into categories.

#### Step 3: Selective Coding

This process connects all identified categories into one core category which represents the central idea of the phenomenon.

## Results

### 1. Quantitative Part

#### 1.1 General information of respondents

Respondents were required to answer eight questions regarding their gender, age, nationality, education, occupation, first language, purpose of their voyage, and frequency of visits to Khon Kaen province. Using percentages, the general information was computed and analyzed.

**Table 3**

*Gender of the Respondents*

Gender	Percentage
Male	67.3
Female	32.7
Total	100.0

From table 3, the total number of respondents was 52. The respondents accounting for 67.3%, were male and the rest, 32.7% of respondents, were female.

**Table 4**

*Age of the Respondents*

Age	Percentage
Under 20	1.9
21-40	44.2
41-60	30.8
Over 60	23.1
Total	100.0

Among the 4 age groups in table 4., the largest group in this study was between 21-40 years old 44.2%, followed by 41-60 years old 30.8%, over 60 years old 23.1%, under 20 years old 1.9% respectively.

**Table 5**  
*Nationality of the Respondents*

Nationality	Percentage
Bhutanese	3.8
British	17.3
Dutch	3.8
Norwegian	5.8
Swiss	1.9
French	5.8
Colombian	3.8
English	1.9
German	5.8
Filipino	19.2
American	7.7
Indonesian	7.7
Spanish	1.9
Canadian	3.8
Belgian	1.9
Australian	3.8
Malaysian	1.9
Irish	1.9
Total	100

According to table 5, respondents were of numerous nationalities. 19.2% of respondents were Filipino; 17.3% were British; 7.7% were American and Indonesian; 5.8% were Norwegian, French, and German; 3.8% were Bhutanese, Dutch, Colombian, Canadian, and Australian; and 1.9% were Swiss, English, Spanish, Belgian, Malaysian, and Irish.

**Table 6**

*Education of the Respondents*

Education	Percentage
High School	9.6
Vocational College	9.6
Bachelor's	63.5
Master's	17.3
Doctorate	0.0
Total	100.0

According to table 6, 63.5% of respondents held a bachelor's degree, followed by 17.3% with a master's degree, 9.6% with a high school diploma or equivalent, and none with a doctorate.

**Table 7**

*Occupation of the Respondents*

Purpose of their trips	Percentage
Student	11.5
Businessperson	11.5
Employee	26.9
Other	50.0
Total	100.0

According to table 7, 50.0% of respondents work in occupations such as retirees and freelancers, followed by 26.9% as employees and 11.5% as businesspeople and students.

**Table 8**

*First language of Respondents*

English is respondents' first language	Percentage
Yes	44.2
No	55.8
Total	100.0

From table 8, 55.8% of respondents used English as a second language, and 44.2% of them used English as a first language.

**Table 9***Purpose of their Trips*

Purpose of their trips	Percentage
Business	3.8
Seminar	-
Holiday	48.1
Other	48.1
Total	100.0

According to table 9, the majority of respondents came to Khon Kaen province for vacations (48.1%), while the same percentage came for other reasons (48.1%), such as retirees, exchange students, and employment. No respondent came to the province of Khon Kaen for seminars.

**Table 10***Frequency of the Respondents' Visiting Khon Kaen Province*

Frequency of the Respondents' Visiting	Percentage
1 time	19.2
2-3 times	9.6
4-5 times	32.7
Other	38.5
Total	100.0

As shown in table 10, the majority of respondents visited the province of Khon Kaen for other purposes, such as living there, or visited the region multiple times. 38.5%, followed by 32.7%, of respondents visited Khon Kaen province 4-5 times, 19.2% visited the province once, and 9.6% visited two to three times.

*1.2 Foreign visitors' satisfaction towards English oral communication of Thai vendors*

This section measures respondents' contentment with Thai vendors' oral English communication in Khon Kaen province. Using closed-ended questions and a 5-point Likert scale, the degree of opinion was determined. The results are presented in percentage, mean, and standard deviation formats.

**Table 11***The respondents' Satisfaction towards English Speaking Skills of Thai Vendors*

Speaking Skills	Level of Satisfaction					M	SD	Level of Satisfaction
	Highest	High	Moderate	Low	Lowest			
Fluency	0	5	23	23	1	2.61	0.69	Moderate
Accuracy	0	7	25	20	0	2.75	0.68	Moderate

**Table 11 (Continued)**

Speaking Skills	Level of Satisfaction					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Level of Satisfaction
	Highest	High	Moderate	Low	Lowest			
English Grammar	1	1	20	26	4	2.40	0.74	Low
Pronunciation	1	6	16	26	3	2.53	0.85	Low
English Vocabulary	1	2	24	23	2	2.55	0.72	Low
Rate of Responsiveness	1	10	26	15	0	2.94	0.75	Moderate
Overall Speaking Skills	1	7	22	22	0	2.75	0.76	Moderate

As shown in table 11, the respondents' satisfaction with the English-speaking abilities of Thai vendors in Khon Kaen is depicted in Table 4.9. Respondents were moderately content with the English-speaking abilities of Thai vendors ( $x = 2.75$ ), based on their overall proficiency. In terms of responsiveness ( $x = 2.94$ ), accuracy ( $x = 2.75$ ), and fluency ( $x = 2.61$ ), respondents were moderately satisfied with the English-speaking abilities of Thai vendors. Low levels of satisfaction were also reported for English vocabulary ( $x = 2.55$ ), pronunciation ( $x = 2.53$ ), and grammar ( $x = 2.40$ ).

**Table 12**

*The respondents' satisfaction towards English listening skills of Thai vendors*

Listening Skills	Level of Satisfaction					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Level of Satisfaction
	Highest	High	Moderate	Low	Lowest			
Understanding your request	2	10	25	15	0	2.98	0.80	Moderate
Understanding your long sentences	1	3	16	26	6	2.36	0.84	Low
Guessing at unknown words	2	8	20	17	5	2.71	0.97	Moderate
Understanding your difficult words	0	2	14	26	10	2.15	0.77	Low
Catching up with your speed speech	1	1	21	22	7	2.36	0.81	Low
Overall listening	3	8	26	14	1	2.96	0.86	Moderate

Table 12 displays respondent satisfaction with Thai vendors' English listening abilities in Khon Kaen province. Respondents were content with the English listening skills of Thai vendors to a moderate degree ( $x = 2.96$ ). The results indicated that they were moderately satisfied with the English listening skills of Thai vendors when it came to comprehending visitors' requests ( $x = 2,98$ ) and guessing at unknown words ( $x = 2,71$ ). In addition, the level of satisfaction was low when it came to comprehending visitors' lengthy sentences and catching up with their rapid speech ( $x = 2.36$  and  $2.15$ , respectively).

## 1.2 Qualitative Part

The qualitative data was collected from foreign visitors in Khon Kaen province which classified by three categories including:

- Problems
- Solutions
- Suggestions

Part 1: This type of group is called “the problems of communication” which including both foreign visitors and Thai vendors.

Principal concerns of foreign tourists. First, the accents of visitors from abroad. Every country has its own distinct dialect, which varies by region. Non-native English speakers were unable to communicate English as clearly and fluently as native English speakers, resulting in communication difficulties. Second, the word usage of international visitors. In America, "soda" refers to soft drinks; however, the merchants believed they were selling "soda water." Some foreign visitors had difficulty communicating with their interlocutor because the majority of Thais are accustomed to the British English manner.

The primary difficulties of Thai vendors in terms of communication. First, the limited vocabulary available when speaking English. It was difficult for the guests to order or inquire for something. Without vocabulary, purveyors could not adequately describe their products. Second, Thai merchants lacked self-assurance. Many vendors feared speaking with foreign customers, and some of them did not even attempt to communicate; they blocked their minds because their English education background did not motivate them to speak. Thirdly, the vendors had poor pronunciation, particularly with the letter R. In addition, they had great difficulty pronouncing certain English consonant sounds because they were dissimilar to Thai consonant sounds. This could lead to confusion when communicating with foreign visitors. Foreign tourists concurred that vendors could not keep up with their rapid speech. Particularly with fluent English speakers, they spoke quite quickly. Fifthly, one of the obstacles was English grammar. The visitors disclosed that they used the past tense in conversation, however, the vendors were unable to comprehend and were readily confused.

Part 2: This type of group is called “communicative solution techniques” foreign visitors used many different ways of solution.

The first prevalent solution consisted of translating applications and displaying images. It took less than a minute to access the internet, and Google Translate has become significantly more advanced in recent years, so this was the most convenient option for foreign visitors. The second technique they decided to employ was body language or gestures; foreign visitors used their hands and fingertips to indicate what they desired. The third solution technique was to prepare some Thai words, even if they were a mixture of Thai and English, as the majority of vendors were willing to assist and attempted to comprehend. The fourth solution technique consisted of speaking slowly and repeating the words to capture an important word. However,

short sentences made it easier for the vendors to perceive, and the final technique involved requesting assistance from their partners.

Part 3: This type of group is called “suggestion for improvement” foreign visitors gave some suggestions to the vendors in order to improve their English oral communication skills.

Foreign visitors recommended that vendors continue to practice and improve their English skills. To attract more foreign visitors and to be able to describe their menus fluently, businesses must improve their product-related vocabulary and expressions. They thought it would be wonderful if the vendors could make foreign friends or immerse themselves in an English-speaking environment so that they could practice their English speaking and listening skills. Observing English films, melodies, news, and other channels on YouTube was another suggestion made by foreign visitors. Furthermore, Thais should study English as soon as possible because it is easier to acquire a second language at a young age and to concentrate on phonics and letter sounds.

### **Discussion**

The results of the study revealed that most foreign visitors visiting Khon Kaen province are from non-English-speaking countries; they do not use English as their first language. This can be inferred from the moderate level of satisfaction of both speaking and listening abilities of the vendors in Khon Kaen province reported by the respondent. This corresponds with the study of Chaiyapornnangkul (2013), who investigated the foreign tourists' satisfaction towards English oral communication with Thai vendors in Bangkok which found that most foreign tourists were male from non-English-speaking countries, and they had the moderate satisfaction regarding English speaking skills and English listening skills of Thai vendors with a mean score of 2.62 and 2.69 respectively.

According to the results, there are some crucial points which can be discussed to explain these phenomena:

The first point is the results of the low satisfaction regarding the English grammar of the vendors. This point was also presented in the study of Tipmontree (2007) which studied the use and the problems of English and intercultural communication skills of Thai tourist police officers and found that the weak English grammar was the primary issue for Thai staff communicating with foreign visitors. This shows that not only the Thai vendors in Khon Kaen, but also most Thai individuals appear to have significant issues that must be solved.

The second point is about the low level of satisfaction with pronunciation of the Thai vendors. This issue was also reported in the study of the research of Jitjenkarn (2011) who studied the foreign customers' satisfaction with the level of oral English communication of staff working at the Bank of Ayudhya PCL. The study revealed that the respondents had difficulty understanding how bank employees pronounced English words. In addition, this finding is also similar the study of Ampaipisut (2007) who studied the communication problems of foreign

travelers towards travel services in Thailand and found that the pronunciation of Thai travel service personnel was incorrect. This might be because Thai language has the different sound system comparing to the English system. Some English sounds, such as the –th (ð) and –z (z), do not exist in Thai. This might be the reason why pronunciation problems were found in many studies.

Thirdly, the findings of this study revealed that most respondents struggled with English vocabulary problem of Thai vendors in terms of lacking vocabulary knowledge to effectively communicate with customers. This is confirmed by the study of Witchaiyutphong (2011) who studied the English barriers for Thai employees working in an international context, a study conducted at Thomson Reuters Company in Thailand and found that the limited vocabulary was the primary problem for Thai employees. This, consequently, implies that the lack of English vocabulary appears to be the primary obstacle for many Thais throughout the country, and not only in Khon Kaen province.

The results of this study also explicated the 2 important points of satisfaction for the foreign tourists for Thai vendors in Khon Kaen province. This study revealed that respondents were most satisfied when the request of a foreign visitor was comprehended. This study was correspondent to the study of Thongchai (2015) who studied the foreign customers' satisfaction of Thai smile's ticketing officers' communication skills and found that the listening skills of THAI Smile's ticketing agents were rated as highly satisfactory by costumers. However, when considering in detail, the Thai people always attempted to concentrate on the conversations with the foreigners. With these unique manners of the Thai, it might help create good attention and emotion during communication for both sides leading to the successful comprehension of communication.

Moreover, the findings of this study also indicated positive feedback of the respondents that they were moderately satisfied with the oral English communication abilities of Thai vendors in Khon Kaen. This was supported by the study of Hirunthet (2011) who investigated the foreign tourists' satisfaction with the service of tourist police on Khaosan Road and found that the foreign tourists were moderately satisfied with the English communication skills of tourist police. As considering in detail, both positive issues reported by the foreign tourists related to the effort and success of communication of Thais. Although they do not completely understand the interlocutors, they will try to continue to communicate until the communication will be successful. This might be supported by the point that the researcher mentioned earlier about the characteristic of the Thai. Moreover, this might be explained by the reason of their occupation, i.e., vendor or seller, they must do everything to be successful in communication with customers to sell their goods to get income.

## Conclusion

Respondents were moderately satisfied with the English-speaking and English-listening abilities of Khon Kaen's Thai vendors. Regarding speaking abilities, they rated the vendors' responsiveness the highest. On the other hand, they ranked the vendors' English grammar the lowest. Regarding listening, they placed the highest value on comprehending the request of foreign visitors. In contrast, they ranked comprehension of their difficult terms lowest.

## Recommendations

1. Due to the fact that this survey was limited to foreign visitors to Khon Kaen, the results may not be representative of other major provinces in the Northeast of Thailand, such as Buriram or Nakhon Ratchasima. The next study should expand its scope in order to improve its accuracy and reliability.
2. Since the researchers only examined the English oral communication of Thai vendors, other groups involved in the tourism industry, such as taxi drivers and travel agents, must also be investigated.

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