

ปัญหาการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรมที่เกิดขึ้นระหว่างชาวไทยและชาวต่างชาติในสถาบันอุดมศึกษาในประเทศไทยในมุมมองของชาวต่างชาติ

Intercultural Communication Problems between Thais and Foreigners at Higher Educational Institutions in Thailand from Foreigners' Perspectives

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาปัญหาการสื่อสารระหว่างชาวไทยและชาวต่างชาติที่ศึกษาหรือทำงานในสถาบันอุดมศึกษาโดยศึกษาจากมุมมองของชาวต่างชาติ ในการทำงานวิจัยนี้ ผู้วิจัยเก็บข้อมูลจากแบบสอบถามที่ส่งให้แก่ชาวต่างชาติที่ศึกษาหรือทำงานในสถาบันอุดมศึกษาสามแห่งในประเทศไทย ผลการวิจัยพบว่า สำเนียงและการออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษของชาวไทยเป็นอุปสรรคที่สำคัญต่อการสื่อสารด้านวัจนภาษาที่สัมพันธ์ระหว่างชาวไทยและชาวต่างชาติ ในขณะที่การสลับไปใช้ภาษาไทยทั้ง ๆ ที่มีชาวต่างชาติร่วมอยู่ในระหว่างการสื่อสาร/ปฏิสัมพันธ์ถือเป็นพฤติกรรมการสื่อสารของชาวไทยที่สร้างความงุนงงและสับสนให้กับชาวต่างชาติมากที่สุด

คำสำคัญ: การสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม ปัญหาการสื่อสาร พฤติกรรมการสื่อสาร

Abstract

The objective of this study is to investigate communication problems between Thais and foreigners, who are studying or working at higher educational institutions, from the foreigners' viewpoints. The instrument used to collect the data was a questionnaire. The sample size consisted of foreigners who are studying or working at three higher educational institutions in Thailand. The results showed that Thais' English accent and pronunciation were considered to be a major problem to communicate with foreigners. Thais' code switched to their mother tongue while talking with foreigners was considered to be the most confusing communicative behavior.

Keywords: intercultural communication, communication problem, communicative behavior

1. Introduction

In this globalization age, global communication can be made easily thanks to the advent of the communication technology. However, one problem arising from the global communication is cross-cultural misunderstanding, i.e. when people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds interact with one another, they may interpret actions, postures, or words of their interlocutors based on their own cultures which can be different from those of their interlocutors, and this can lead to misunderstandings or communication breakdowns. Given the widespread of this phenomenon and the need to communicate more effectively, it is crucial to acquire intercultural communication competence. According to Chen and Starosta (1996, as cited in Jandt, 2010, p.53), intercultural communication competence is “the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and to execute appropriately effective communication behaviors that recognize the interactants’ multiple identities in a specific environment.” This definition shows that intercultural communication competence does not involve only linguistic ability, but also cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Presently, numerous studies have been conducted on intercultural communication but on diverse perspectives. Intercultural communication has gained attention in business context where it has been regarded as one crucial key to successful business negotiation (Kobayashi & Viswat, 2011). A large number of studies dedicated to intercultural business communication are good evidence of its significance in this context. With regard to Thailand where English

is the main medium for intercultural communication, there are empirical studies on intercultural communication issues, but conducted primarily in business setting (e.g. Sriussadaporn, 2006 and Anantawan, 2010). Nevertheless, because intercultural communication occurs in other settings as well, it is worth exploring intercultural communication problems beyond those emerging in the business setting.

2. Objective

This study attempts to investigate problems of communication in terms of the use of the English language (verbal language) and behavior (non-verbal language) between Thais and foreigners studying or working at higher educational institutions in Thailand from the foreigners’ perspectives in order to find out whether this study would yield similar or different findings from previous studies carried out in the business context.

3. Literature Review

3.1 English communication problems in Thailand

Based on Kachru’s (1985) classification of English speaking countries, Thailand is classified as belonging to the Expanding Circle group where English is used as a foreign language (EFL), not English as a second language (ESL). Presently, while the standard Thai variety enjoys its status as an official language, English is the first foreign language taught at all levels of education in Thailand (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Based on this fact, it is possible to assume that anybody completing a formal basic

education in Thailand which is provided for a period of twelve years (Office of the National Education, 2003) had studied English for approximately twelve years. Nevertheless, such period of study does not always guarantee a good command of English of learners (Noom-ura, 2013). Holmes and Tangtongtavy (2003) stated that most Thais had difficulties in their English listening and speaking skills due to the facts that English is mainly taught by Thai teachers in Thailand and the teaching primarily focuses on reading and writing skills. Additionally, such difficulties can be attributed to Thais' rare opportunities to use English in their daily lives (Noom-ura, 2013).

Holmes and Tangtongtavy also presented a procedure employed by most Thais who do not study abroad when they have to communicate in English: "(1) translate it [English] into Thai; (2) think of the response in Thai; (3) translate the response into English; (4) finally speak it out in English" (2003, p. 97). Apparently, translation plays a key role in the above procedure; however, Sechrest, Fay and Zaidi (1972, as cited in Jandt, 2010, p. 135-137), argued that translation can cause numerous problems in intercultural communication and these problems can be categorized into five groups: "(i) no vocabulary equivalence; (ii) no idiomatic equivalence; (iii) no grammatical-syntactical equivalence; (iv) no experiential equivalence and (v) no conceptual equivalence." Holmes and Tangtongtavy's statement about Thais' difficulties in English communication corresponds to Sriussadaporn's (2006) finding that English language deficiency was one principal cause

of communication problem at work between Thais and foreigners; that is, Thai local staff could not express their ideas in English very well and their English was incomprehensible. To be more specific, Anatawan (2010) found that accent was the main communication barrier between Thai and foreign flight attendants of Thai Airways International Plc.

In addition to accent, incorrect pronunciation can cause misunderstanding in communication. According to Yangklang (2006), pronunciation is one common problem of English learners around the world and many studies (Prachanborian, 1958; Lakhawatana, 1969; Chanyasupab, 1982; Malarak, 1998; and Mano-im, 1999, as cited in Yangklang, 2006) reported that English mispronunciation of Thais derived from their use of Thai consonant sounds to pronounce English. Similar to pronunciation, grammatical structures of Thai and English are not totally identical and the discrepancy between grammatical structures of these two languages can lead to communication problems. This point was supported by the statement that "languages do not necessarily have the same grammar" (Jandt, 2010, p.137). All the above issues were considered major obstacles to successful verbal English communication between Thais and foreigners.

3.2 Thailand as viewed by intercultural communication theories

In 1980, Hofstede proposed a four-dimension theory to describe cultural factors influencing the way people communicate and interact with one another. Hofstede's four-dimension theory as summarized by Luan (2012, p. 1208) consists of

“large vs. small power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. feminism and strong vs. weak uncertainty avoidance.” According to Luan, the large vs. small power distance dimension “examines how societies handle inequalities in power and wealth, that is to say, to what extent the less powerful members of organizations and institutions within a society accept this inequality as normal and desirable” (ibid). In other words, a society with large power distance is the one whose people expect and accept that there is social inequality and that power comes with privileges. On the contrary, people of small power distance society are likely to view each individual as equal and their acceptance of social inequality is lower than that of the large power distance society. The second dimension of individualism vs. collectivism is about how people relate themselves to others in the society. Jandt (2010, p.164) stated that “in an individualist culture, the interest of the individual prevails over interest of the group.” On the contrary, collectivist culture emphasizes on group’s interest and “people are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups that continue throughout a lifetime to protect in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (ibid). The third dimension of masculinity vs. feminism primarily concerns the social roles of male and female. In a masculine culture, masculine traits such as assertiveness, competition and material success are highly valued and social roles of male and female are obviously separated (ibid). On the contrary, in a feminine culture, the feminine traits such as forming interpersonal relationship with others and providing

care for the underdog are valued and “men and women are allowed to take the same social roles” (Luan, 2012, p.1208). The last dimension, strong vs. weak uncertainty avoidance, is about “the extent to which people in a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations” (Jandt, 2010, p. 179). People from culture weak in uncertainty avoidance tend to be more tolerant of uncertainty or ambiguity than those from culture strong in uncertainty avoidance. Among these four dimensions, the large vs. small power distance and individualism vs. collectivism dimensions were selected as a theoretical framework for data analysis of the present study.

Apart from Hofstede, E. T. Hall is the other scholar proposing a context theory and a time theory to explain cultural aspects that lie behind people’s communication and interaction. According to Hall (1976, as cited in Jandt, 2010), in a low context culture, people value explicit communication; thus, during communication, they tend to give a lot of details and say things directly to avoid ambiguity and context does not play crucial role in enhancing communication. Conversely, in a high context culture, people do not explicitly convey their messages, but prefer to say things indirectly and this requires listeners to rely much on context and other communication cues such as non-verbal signs to understand the message sent by the speakers (ibid).

In addition to the context theory, Hall (1990, as cited in Luan, 2012, p.1209) posited that people of diverse ethnic backgrounds view time differently and people’s viewpoints on time can be categorized into two groups: monochronic and polychronic.

Individuals from monochronic culture believe that time is important and must be managed systematically in order to make the most of it. On the contrary, people from polychronic culture reckon that time can be manipulated and stretched and many things can happen simultaneously. Also, in a polychronic culture, human relationships prevail over schedule or deadline; as a result, punctuality is not as important as in a monochronic culture (ibid).

Based on the above theories of Hofstede and Hall, Thailand has been classified as a large power distance, collectivist and high context culture (Hofstede, 2001; Knutson, Komolsevin, Chatiketu & Smith, 2003). The classification of Thailand as a large power distance culture can be seen from Thai cultural values that require young people to be quiet and submissive to the elderly as reported by Knutson, Hwang and Vivantanukul (1995, as cited in Komolsevin, Knutson & Dattuyawat, 2010). Also, the classification of Thailand as a collectivist and high context culture is strongly supported by Rojjanaprayon's (1997) study (as cited in Jandt, 2010:167) in which he found that when it comes to express any negative feelings or comments on someone or something, Thais preferred to employ an indirect communication style through an avoidance of mentioning name(s) of the person(s) subject to such comments or a use of words or phrases expressing probability such as "maybe," "probably," "I would say so but I am not sure."

Apart from being classified as a collectivist and high context culture, one finding of Sriussadaporn's (2006) study, i.e. Thais' punctuality,

makes it possible to classify Thailand as a polychronic society where time is not so important and can be flexible. In the aforesaid study, all expatriates unanimously stated that Thais did not care much about meeting deadlines and "punctuality is a major problem of Thais" (p.336).

All the above information provides an overview of English communication problems between Thais and foreigners as well as how Thailand and Thai people are considered and classified under well-grounded intercultural communication theories. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned information was largely drawn from business setting. In order to provide additional insights into the issues concerning intercultural communication between Thais and foreigners, this study focuses on communication problems between Thais and foreigners studying or working at higher educational institutions from the foreigners' perspectives. To accomplish the study's objective of investigating verbal and non-verbal communicative problems between Thais and foreigners within educational context, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the main problems concerning the Thais' use of English language during communication?
2. What is the Thais' communicative behavior that confuses foreigners?

4. Methodology

The participants in the present study consisted of foreign students and instructors studying and working at three higher educational institutions in

Thailand. These three institutions were selected because they have offered international programs of study which are taught by both foreign and Thai teaching staff with English as the medium of instruction. Similarly, students of such programs are comprised of both foreign and Thai students.

The data were collected through an administration of questionnaire which was designed based on the study's research questions including compelling information emerging from the literature review. The questionnaire consisted of four main sections; each of which contains both close-ended and open-ended questions as shown in Appendix. A total of 65 questionnaires were distributed to foreign students and instructors at the three institutions by hand and via e-mail from mid-February to early March 2013. Thirty-eight completed questionnaires, representing 58.46% of the total distributed questionnaires, were returned.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Questionnaire respondents' demographic information

The questionnaire respondents consisted of 27 males and 11 females, representing 71.05% and 28.95% of the total respondents, respectively. Most of them were from Asia (60.52%) while the rest were from North America (18.42%), Europe (10.53%) and Africa (10.53%). Twenty-eight respondents (73.68%) were students while the other ten (26.32%) were instructors. Twenty-three respondents (60.52%) have stayed in Thailand for longer than one year while ten (26.32%) and five (13.16%) respondents have stayed

in Thailand for 1-6 months and 7-12 months, respectively.

5.2 Problems concerning Thais' use of English language during communication

The findings in relation to problems concerning Thais' use of English language during communication were presented in Figure 1.

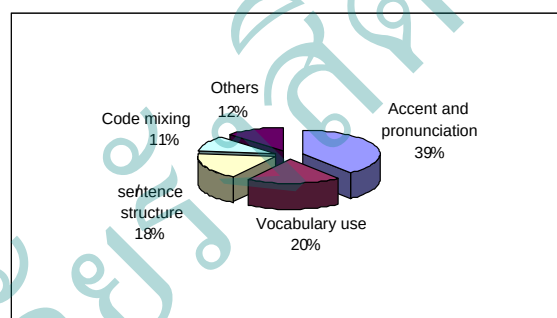


Figure 1 Problems Concerning Thais' Use of English Language During Communication

Based on Figure 1, accents and pronunciations were indicated by more than one-third of respondents (39%) as a major hindrance to successful verbal communications between them and their Thai interlocutors. This was evidently supported by one respondent's comment that *"learning only words' [meanings] was not enough, but words have to be pronounced properly."* The other respondent affirmed this point by stating that *"Thai teachers' pronunciation is very difficult to understand, especially their tones and pronunciation of some letters (e.g. /l/ for /r/)."* Compared to the previous research, this finding accords with Anatawan's (2010) finding that accent was the main communication problem between Thai and foreign flight attendants.

Following the accent and pronunciation were vocabulary use and the issue concerning sentence

structure which were reported as problem by 20% and 18% of the respondents, respectively. Some respondents stated that Thais cannot communicate well because of their limited vocabulary and that *“inaccurate grammar makes [it] hard to understand what they exactly want.”* This finding of vocabulary use and sentence structure apparently affirms the suggestion of Sechrest, Fay and Zaidi (1972, as cited in Jandt, 2010) that there is no vocabulary nor sentence structure equivalence between two different languages.

5.3 Problems concerning Thais' communicative behavior during interaction

The findings in relation to problems concerning Thais' communicative behavior during interaction were presented in Figure 2.

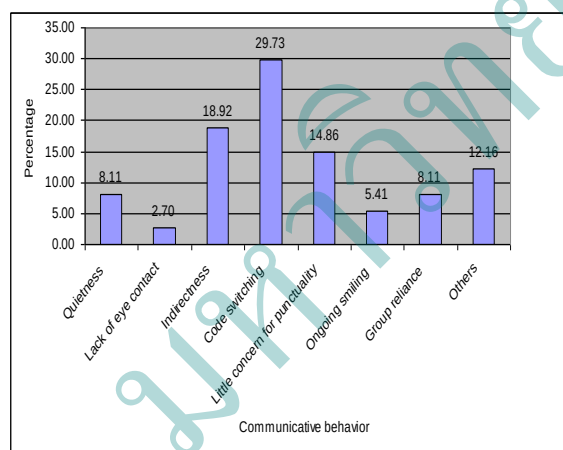


Figure 2 Problems Concerning Thais' Communicative Behavior during Interaction

Figure 2 revealed that code switching to the Thai language despite the presence of foreigners confused most foreigners (29.73%) while indirectness and little concern for punctuality were reported as the second and third confusing behavior of Thais during interaction (representing 18.92% and 14.86%,

respectively). The finding of code switching can be justified with recourse to Holmes and Tangtongtavy's explanation that Thais perform this behavior because they strongly observe a hierarchical system through language use; that is, Thai language (especially an array of addressing terms) allows Thais to show respect to the Thai seniors joining the conversation much better than “you,” the only second pronoun reference in English (2003, p. 38). This finding was supported by two respondents' similar comments that *“[Thais are] rather unwilling to speak in English though they know how to speak [it]”* and *“They don't speak English or at least try not to even if they know how to.”* These two comments, by and large, imply the respondents' resentment against this behavior of Thais during interaction.

Consistent with the classification of Thailand as a high context culture, indirectness was reported as the second most confusing behavior of Thais during interaction. This finding was evidently supported by one respondent's strong comment that *“[Thais] will not tell you what they really think about. [They] smile to you then stab you in the back.”* This comment illustrates that Thais' indirectness during interaction was negatively viewed by the respondent. The negative viewpoint toward Thais' indirectness was further affirmed by the following comments *“ongoing dishonesty/lying,”* and *“fake attitudes and behaviors.”* These negative viewpoints toward indirectness should be solemnly taken into account by Thais because such viewpoints can adversely affect communication, relationship and image of Thai people

or can even result in misunderstandings or communication breakdowns.

Another point worth discussing here was that indirectness which was reported as the second confusing behavior (not the first) may partly be attributed to the fact that most respondents are of Asian ethnics (60.52%) who have similar background of high context culture where indirectness is preferred. As a result, they are likely to be more familiar with indirect style of communication of Thais. On the contrary, if most of the respondents were from a low context culture where direct communication is valued, the finding concerning indirectness may be different.

The finding concerning punctuality (14.86%), the third confusing behavior, accords with the finding from Sriussadaporn. This finding strongly supports the view that Thailand is a polychronic culture. One point worth noting here is that this finding was mainly derived from American and European respondents whose culture is categorized as monochronic culture. The findings pertaining to indirectness and punctuality affirm the scholars' report that similar and diverse cultural backgrounds play crucial roles in an individual's judgment of others.

Similar to other studies, this study is not exclusive of limitations. The first limitation was the size of its sample, i.e. number of the questionnaire respondents, which was quite small. As a result, the study's findings cannot be generalized to foreigners working or studying at other higher educational institutions in Thailand. Another issue concerning the sample size was that it mainly consisted of male,

instead of equal distribution between male and female. Also, given that the data were collected through a questionnaire per se, in-depth data were not obtained. Notwithstanding the aforesaid limitations, it is believed that this study would provide additional insights into communication problems between Thais and foreigners working or studying in Thailand, especially the findings pertaining to problematic use of English language by Thais during verbal communication. These findings shed some light on the pressing issues that need to be tackled by educational practitioners in Thailand who are in charge of English language teaching so as to enable Thais to communicate in the international arena more effectively.

6. Conclusion

This study presents communication problems between Thais and foreigners working or studying at higher educational institutions in Thailand from the foreigners' perspectives. Most findings conform to those of the previous research conducted in business setting and well correspond to the well-grounded intercultural communication theories. It was found that Thais' accent and pronunciation of English were a major hindrance to successful verbal communication between Thais and foreigners at higher educational institutions while Thais' code switching to their mother tongue despite the foreigners' presence was regarded as confusing communicative behavior during interaction by most respondents. The present study's findings are believed to offer insights into the behavior Thais should avoid

during their communications with foreigners as well as insights for Thais who plan to work or study in international context. The study's findings are also expected to help Thailand and Thais to effectively participate in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) which will be officially launched in 2015.

7. Acknowledgment

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