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English Oral Communication Problems and Strategies Used by Thai Reservation and Ticketing Agents

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Abstract:

In an international business environment, especially in airline business, it is apparent that employees are required to have a high level of English proficiency, especially oral communication skills. Although there have been many research studies on English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai employees in service industry, studies investigating problems experienced by airline employees in Thailand are still limited. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai reservation and ticketing agents of an international airline to communicate with native and non-native English-speaking airport and related airline agents. The participants were 74 Thai reservation and ticketing agents of an international airline based in Bangkok, Thailand. A set of questionnaires adapted from Jeharsae (2012) was employed to collect the data. The participants were asked to rate their problems and the strategies on a Likert scale. The research results showed that Thai reservation and ticketing agents had problems in English oral communication at different levels of agreement. The most common problems found were cultural awareness, grammar usage, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. Moreover, when communicating with non-native English speakers, they had more problems understanding different foreign accents. Although the reservation and ticketing agents encountered problems during their interactions with native and non-native English-speaking airport and related airline agents, they made attempts to achieve their communication goals as can be seen from several uses of oral communication strategies. Consequently, the results from the study can be implications for speakers or learners who need to improve their own English proficiency and for the airline or other organizations to design effective English training course for their employees.

Keywords: Oral communication problems, strategies, reservation and ticketing agents

1. Background/ Objectives and Goals

English is the language that is used worldwide and as an official language in many countries. According to Crystal (2004), about a quarter of the world's population is fluent or competent in English. English is used as both the common language of people and the official language of the state. English has also taken over as an official language in the areas of science, technology, commerce, tourism, and diplomacy, as well as popular culture, such as popular music, television shows, commercials, brand names, advertisements, sports, movies, and fashion (Jandt, 1995; McKinney, 2004). It is the most widely taught, read, and spoken language in the world. It has become accepted as the universal language and the language of international communication (McKay 2018; Boonkit, 2010; Ton & Pham 2010; Hurn, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Nickerson, 2005). Since the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, English has been promoted as the international business language and the standard workplace language for ASEAN countries and airlines business is one of the areas considered having primary roles of development in the program of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) besides online service, tourism, medical and logistics. The competitiveness of job-seeking among ASEAN countries has been increasing and so has the use of English as the communication tool in job setting, including in the airports and airlines companies. Therefore, having a good command of English is one of the job requirements (Cahyani & Drajadi, 2017). With the high demand for English in business communications and as a response to the development of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), Thai employees, especially those who work in airline industry, need to have good English proficiency, especially in oral communication.

Thailand is one of the Asian countries where the English language has been taught as a foreign language in schools and tertiary institutions for several decades and various approaches of teaching have been employed to promote learning. However, Thai people do not seem to be successful with their learning, especially when communicating in English. For non-native English speakers, English speaking or oral communication in English is considered difficult as English is not their mother tongue, particularly for those who have insufficient English knowledge, limited experience with English, or limited exposure to English interaction (Khamkhien, 2010; Myers, Penrase, & Rasberry, 2000).

Several studies have shown that many non-native English people seem to have difficulties with English oral communication. Such problems with communication or communication breakdowns in English interactions may not be related to only discrete grammatical features or the accents of the speakers but also general communicative competence and confidence in speaking. The main problems can be classified as (a) pronunciation, (b) grammar, (c) vocabulary, (d)

comprehension, (e) English accents, (f) fluency, (g) cultural awareness, and (h) self-confidence (Bloch & Starks, 1999; Forey & Lockwood, 2007; Boonkit, 2010; Jeharsae, 2012; Cahyani & Drajeti, 2017; Prachanant, 2018).

Communication strategies refer to devices or techniques employed by communicators either to solve communication problems or to enhance their communicative effectiveness. The adoption of communication strategies ensures smooth communication between the speaker and the listener. This is because smooth and collaborative communication is another main communicative goal (Kirkpatrick, 2007). These strategies may include paraphrasing, circumlocution (roundabout expression or indirect way of speaking), asking for repetition or emphasis, seeking clarification, avoidance of words, structures, or topics, appealing for help, code switching, literal translation, and substitution by first language (Savignon, 1993; Huang, 2010; Somsai & Intaraprasert, 2011).

In an international business environment, especially in airline business, it is apparent that employees are required to have a high level of English proficiency, especially oral communication skills. Although there have been many research studies on English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai employees in service industry, studies investigating problems experienced by airline employees in Thailand are still limited. There is no known study investigating the English oral communication difficulties experienced by reservation and ticketing agents of international airlines. Airline reservation and ticketing agents mainly rely on language abilities and oral communication skills to complete all ticketing functions, notify airport and related agents via email, phone, text message related to ticketing and check-in transactions, provide customer service and offer alternative solutions in case of irregularity situations. They have to ensure that all services are provided in accordance with airlines' quality standards including safety and security procedures, company guidelines, and regulatory requirements. Therefore, this study was designed to investigate the English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai reservation and ticketing agents of an international airline to communicate with native and non-native English-speaking airport and related airline agents. Consequently, the results from the study can be implications for speakers or learners who need to improve their own English proficiency and for the airline or other organizations to design an effective English training course for their employees. To be more specific, the present study sought to answer the following questions:

- What were the English oral communication problems encountered by Thai reservation and ticketing agents of an international airline when communicating with native and non-native English-speaking airport and related airline agents?
- What were the strategies used by Thai reservation and ticketing agents of an international airline when communicating with native and non-native English-speaking airport and related airline agents?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Problems in English Oral Communication of Non-Native English Speakers

Speaking English or English oral communication is deemed to be difficult for non-native English speakers as English is not their mother tongue (Khamkhien, 2010; Myers, Penrase, & Rasberry, 2000). A number of studies focusing on the issue of English communication problems have been carried out.

Bloch and Starks (1999) investigated the various types of English that are spoken throughout the world. From this study, the main four problems of non-native English speakers in English communication were (a) a total lack of understanding between speaker and listener (b) poor or insufficient vocabulary and use of idiom, (c) distortion or misunderstanding of the message, and (d) inappropriate formulation of the message. In order to overcome these problems, business people needed to have sufficient and practical English knowledge and communication skills, as well as a greater awareness of what conversation entails.

Forey and Lockwood (2007) analyzed the call texts of customer service representatives in the Philippines. The findings revealed that communication failure of non-native English employees were poor grammatical knowledge and poor English pronunciation. The problems were also related to an inability to understand a complex text, non-fluency in the interaction, and a lack of awareness of the country and the culture of their customers.

Cahyani and Drajeti (2017) investigated English communication problems and needs from social engagement perspective as experienced by airport passenger-handlers in Indonesia. The results showed that regarding responding or speaking, although they were quite accustomed to speaking based on procedures or routines, the staff still felt that they had low speaking ability in some aspects: problems in responding to the questions efficiently and comfortably, little skill in accuracy because of poor vocabulary, difficulty in pronouncing words (sometimes causing minor misunderstanding), failing to express idea dealing with the topics outside the routines, trouble in fluency (cannot perform smooth flow of speaking).

Different studies related to problems in English oral communication of Thai people were conducted. Jeharsae (2012) investigated the English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native and non-native English speaking customers in an international workplace. It was found that Thai employees communicating with native English speaking customers had problems with (a) listening comprehension and (b) grammar usage. Conversely, Thai employees communicating with non-native English speaking customers had a variety of problems with (a) listening comprehension, (b) grammar usage, (c) fluency, (d) accents, (e) producing word stress misplacement, (f) cultural awareness, and (g) quality of voice.

Suwanpakdee, 2012 explored the communication problems between Thai film crews and non-native English speaking film crews. The results of the study showed that Thai film crews reported two major problems when communicating with non-native English speaking film crews. These problems were prejudice on the part of both crews,

which had a negative impact on communication, and an inability to clearly understand the speech of non-native speakers, including accent, tone of voice, stress patterns, and pronunciation.

Prachanant (2018) studied problems on English communication of the hotel staff members in Buriram province. The findings revealed that the major problem the hotel staff members faced most when they communicated with the foreign customers was different foreign accents.

2.2. Oral Communication Strategies

English oral communication has become the most important skill of all workers and enterprises. It is not use to communicate only with native speakers, but also between non-native English speakers. In a situation where the message sender and the message receiver have different native languages, it is difficult for communicators to achieve their communicative goals (Somsai & Intaraprasert, 2011). As a result, communication strategies are often used to deal with these problems.

Communication strategies are techniques used to sustain communication. Communication strategies are classified differently by a number of researchers according to the way one views them. However, most literature on communication strategies embodies similar and overlapping taxonomies. To conclude, communication strategies can be categorized into two major types: 1) Avoidance or reduction strategies including avoidance of words, topics or message abandonment 2) Achievement or compensatory strategies including: (a) making messages explicit by paraphrasing, (b) approximation / using a word that means approximately the same, (d) word coinage / making up a word to substitute for the unknown word, (e) circumlocution / talking in an indirect way of speaking, (f) generalization or use of all purpose words, (g) language or code switching / using a term from another language without bothering to translate, (h) literal translation / translating word for word from another language, (i) asking for repetition, seeking for clarification or emphasis to confirm understanding, (j) asking to spelling out the word, and (k) appeal for assistance / asking for the correct item, meaning, or structure (Savignon, 1993; Nakatani 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Chanawong, 2007; Ting & Phan, 2008; Huang, 2010; Somsai & Intaraprasert, 2011; Jeharsae, 2012; Mirzaei & Heidari, 2012; Suwanpakdee, 2012; Prachanant, 2018; Inkaew & Thumawongsa, 2018).

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 74 Thai reservation and ticketing agents of an international airline based in Bangkok, Thailand. Their major function was oral communication with native and non-native English speaking airport and related airline agents over the phone. There were 19 males (25.7%) and 55 females (74.3%), 20-47 years of age. They ranged between 21-35 years of age. 69 participants (93.2%) had a bachelor's degree and 5 participants (6.8 %) had a master's degree. Most of the agents had one to three years of experience (74.3%), followed by three to six years (12.2%), less than one year (8.1%), and over six years (5.4%).

3.2. Instruments

The research instrument was a set of questionnaires addapeted from Jeharsae (2012) to collect data concerning English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai reservation and ticketing agents of an international airline to communicate with native and non-native English Speaking airport and related airline agents. The questionnaire included three parts. Part I was the participants' biographical data. Part II was concerned with their English ability while communicating with native and non-native English Speaking airport and related airline agents, and Part III asked about the strategies they used to overcome the problems they experienced during the conversations. The participants were asked to rate their problems and the strategies they used to overcome these problems by choosing one of five items on a Likert scale – strongly agree, agree, moderately agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. An open-ended questionnaire was added to Part II and III to gather more in-depth information on English oral communication problems encountered by the agents and the strategies they used during communication with native and non-native English Speaking airport and related airline agents. The questionnaire was designed in English and translated into Thai language in order to minimize problems related to ambiguity and misinterpretation.

3.3. Data Collection

After sending an official letter to request for permission and cooperation to gather the data, the researcher distributed the questionnaires to the target subjects with the help of a former student of the researcher who was working for the airline. The questionnaire was administered to the target group in October 2019.

3.4. Data Analysis

After checking the completion of each questionnaire, the data collected were statistically analyzed by using Statistic Package for Social Science (SPSS) mainly focusing on the descriptive statistics analysis i.e. frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. A five-point Likert scale used in the questionnaire to specify the level of agreement or disagreement based on the criteria of Rensis Likert (1932) was as follows:

Scale	Level of Agreement	Mean Range
5	Strongly Agree	4.51 – 5.00
4	Agree	3.51 – 4.50
3	Moderately Agree	2.51 – 3.50
2	Disagree	1.51 – 2.50
1	Strongly Disagree	1.00 – 1.50

Table 1

4. Results and Discussion

The findings indicated that the majority of the non-native English speaking airport and related airline agents that the reservation and ticketing agents most communicated with were from Germany (66.2%), followed by China (18.9%), Singapore (6.8%), India (1.4%), Spain (1.4%), Brazil (1.4%), Thailand(1.4%), and Hong Kong(1.4%). For those from English speaking countries were the United States (83.8%) and the United Kingdom (16.2%).

4.1. Results of Research Question 1

What were the English oral communication problems encountered by Thai reservation and ticketing agents of an international airline when communicating with native and non-native English speaking airport and related airline agents? The A five-point Likert scale is employed in the questionnaire to specify the level of agreement or disagreement of the participants, based on criteria established by Rensis Likert (1932). A mean score rating of 4.51-5.00 reflects strong agreement, a mean score rating of 3.51-4.50 reflects agreement, a mean score rating of 2.51-3.50 reflects moderate agreement, a mean score rating of 1.51-2.50 reflects disagreement, and a mean score rating of 1.00-1.50 reflects strong disagreement.

The mean score at the level of agreement was used to identify that the question items were problem or not problem. Therefore, when the mean score was in agree level or more than 2.50, it identified the question item was a problem, and when the mean score was in disagree level or less than 2.50, it identified that question item was not problem to the participants.

The major English communication problems experienced by Thai reservation and ticketing agents are divided by category in terms of English communication problems and based on the level of agreement as rated on the questionnaire. The results revealed that Thai reservation and ticketing agents communicating with native and non-native English speaking airport and related airline agents moderately agreed that they encountered only four critical problems out of the 21 problems (19%) listed in the questionnaire. The problems encountered at moderate level of agreement included (a) lacking or having insufficient cultural background or knowledge of the native and non-native English speaking airport and related airline agents ($M = 2.69$), (b) producing grammatical errors when speaking ($M = 2.66$), (c) producing word stress misplacements when speaking ($M=2.64$), and (d) having trouble with listening comprehension when native and non-native English speaking airport and related airline agents spoke too fast ($M = 2.57$). The participants disagreed with most of the items ($M = 2.20$). Therefore, this disagreement with the majority of the items indicated that they did not have critical or serious problems with the rest of the items.

In addition, the results revealed that when communicating with non-native English speaking airport and related airline agents, Thai reservation and ticketing agents had more problems understanding different foreign accents.

4.2. Results of Research Question 2

What were the strategies used by Thai reservation and ticketing agents of an international airline when communicating with native and non-native English speaking airport and related airline agents?

The results revealed that Thai reservation and ticketing agents employed only achievement strategies ($M = 3.08$) when communicating with native and non-native English speaking airport and related airline agents. The strategies with highest mean score at agreed level included directly asking the airport and related airline agents about what they did not get ($M = 4.42$), asking the airport and related airline agents to repeat themselves in a louder voice ($M = 3.93$), using general words or terms ($M = 3.88$), paraphrasing or talking in a different way with equivalent to or the same meaning to confirm their understanding ($M = 3.69$), making a clarification request ($M = 3.68$), asking the airport and related airline agents to spell words that they did not catch ($M = 3.59$), and asking the airport and related airline agents to speak more slowly ($M = 3.57$).

The reservation and ticketing agents indicated a moderate level of agreement regarding the use of other strategies, which included repeating words or phrases with a system of tones (Rise, Fall) ($M = 3.28$), using a dictionary to translate unfamiliar words ($M = 3.19$), using another word that means almost the same with what the airport and related airline agents said ($M = 2.93$), asking the airport and related airline agents to use easy words ($M = 2.86$), and using indirect words or roundabout expressions to get the messages ($M = 2.70$).

The rest of the strategies, appealing for help from colleagues, word coinage, literal translation, and using another language for words or expressions that they did not know how to say in English, were rated at disagreed level. In terms of avoidance strategies, all of them were rated at disagreed level ($M = 2.35$).

5. Conclusions

The research results showed that Thai reservation and ticketing agents had problems in English oral communication at different levels of agreement. The most common problems found were cultural awareness, grammar

usage, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. Moreover, when communicating with non-native English speakers, they had more problems understanding different foreign accents. Although the reservation and ticketing agents encountered problems during their interactions with native and non-native English speaking airport and related airline agents, they made attempts to achieve their communication goals as can be seen from several uses of oral communication strategies. The most commonly used achievement strategies were directly asking the airport and related airline agents about what they did not get, asking the airport and related airline agents to repeat themselves in a louder voice, using general words or terms, making something explicit through paraphrasing, making a clarification request, asking the airport and related airline agents to spell out a word, and asking the airport and related airline agents to speak more slowly. These findings showed that in English oral communication situations with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, Thai speakers used oral communication strategies in order to establish effective communication. The findings from this study might be used as a guideline for the related airlines to organize an effective English training course for their employees. The conclusion of the present investigation might be also utilized by those responsible for policy and planning as well as related organizations in order to have a clearer understanding of English needs of college and university students who plan to work in a reservation and ticketing agent position or in the airline industry.

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