



Perception of International Tourists towards Local Vendors' Communication Skills: A Case Study of the Koh Kred Community in Nonthaburi Province

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Abstract

Communicating in English is proved to be a difficult task for local people in many local communities in Thailand including Koh Kred Community in Nonthaburi Province. This paper reveals how Koh Kred Community's vendors were assisted to enhance their communication skills in English when interacting with foreign tourists or customers. The main objective of this study was to examine the perceptions of foreign travellers towards the local vendors' communication skills and printed materials and media in English created to facilitate communication between the vendors and the tourists. Survey questionnaires were collected from 200 foreign tourists visiting the community. Data analyses reveal that the foreign tourists participating in this study were very satisfied with the way the vendors communicated using the printed media while trading their products. It can be concluded that communication techniques, accompanied by effective materials, contribute significantly to successful international communication.

Keywords: Communicative English Skills, Koh Kred Community, Needs Analysis, Perception Survey

Introduction

English plays an important role in global communication. In the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) era, the age of globalization, and internationalism, people are experiencing increasing mobility and attaining higher education. In addition, the growth of tourism industry has influenced the way international people interact with one another on a daily basis. English, therefore, has become a crucial means of communication for various purposes. Because English is not the official language of Thailand, Thai people need to learn and practice English to communicate with international people (Jantakut, 2014). To earn a livelihood successfully, local people also need to learn English for commercial or business purposes. They need to develop their listening and speaking skills necessary for communication in English.

Koh Kred, a small island in the Chao Phraya River in Nonthaburi Province, is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Thailand. It is well-known for villages where local food and local products such as hand-thrown terracotta pots are sold. Due to the increasing opportunities for local vendors in Koh Kred Community to use English to communicate with international visitors, they should be provided with some training to



use English in real situations through a customized course. Therefore, a needs analysis was conducted with a group of local vendors to determine the requirements of the English course to be prepared for them. After a course was developed on the basis of the actual needs of users, 50 local vendors attended the course so that they could improve their communication skills. Additionally, to enable the vendors to achieve communicative goals, a specific type of media was created to facilitate the communication process between local vendors and international tourists or customers. It would be interesting and insightful to learn how successfully the local vendors communicated with international visitors using the English language skills they learned from the course and the printed media that had been prepared to help them. Feedback from tourists visiting the island would yield solid data and evidence.

This study was conducted in response to the following research question:

What are the perceptions of foreign travellers towards the local vendors' communication skills and printed media created to facilitate communication?

Literature Review

Competency in Intercultural Communication

International communication competency has played a significant role in success in commercial transactions. Communication competency is regarded as an individual's or a group's natural or acquired aptitude that brings about understanding through either verbal or non-verbal exchanges (Ricard, 1993). Intercultural communication further defines competency in communication with regard to cultural factors such as cultural empathy and cultural variability (Redmond, 2000). Communication competency is also defined as "a person's ability to encode and decode meanings that correspond to those meanings in the other communicator's repository" (Beamer, 1992, p. 289). As local vendors need to interact with international tourists who are from diverse cultural backgrounds, they need to be aware of the influence of cultural factors that might affect their communication and understanding during the exchanges. Since cross-cultural communication in business is viewed as "the optimal way for a seller (buyer) from one culture to process a message from a buyer (seller) from another culture" (Sanchez, Pico & Comer, 2010, p. 1), local vendors might apply their own experience regarding the best way to communicate with tourists in an intercultural setting. Sanchez et al. (2010) investigated how salespeople use their communication competency for the optimal sales and found that salespeople viewed cultural backgrounds as significant communication competency factors.

Intercultural communication competence has become more important and complicated for communication in an international setting. Cognition, affection, and behavior are key factors in communication competence (Jingzi, Wenzhong & Dimond 2016). Gudykunst and Kim (1997) proposed that in intercultural communication, affective competence, cognitive competence, and behavior competence are interconnected and interdependent. Xu and Guo (2012) defined cognitive competence as individuals' communication skills, professional knowledge, and business operation skills; affective competence as an ability to understand various cultures' characteristics, establish relationships among different cultures, and ensure smooth and effective cross-



cultural operations; and behavior competence as practical problem-solving skills in communication through cross-cultural knowledge.

The concept of communication competence was introduced so that language teachers are encouraged to cultivate active language users as their responsibility and so that they will not merely develop learners as grammarians (Hymes, 1972). Communication competence relates to grammatical knowledge and ability; psycholinguistic knowledge and ability; socio-cultural knowledge and ability; and practical knowledge and ability (Hall, 1976). Intercultural communication competence can be described as a distinctive attribute owned by an individual who wishes to meet his or her needs in character, goals, and expectations in a specific environment (Hall, 1990). Language communication is usually conducted in a particular context, and various communication functions determine the use of language. Clair (1991) introduced “three communication principles”, the essence of which is exhibited in the intercultural communication competence of language users. These principles include learning to visualize the surroundings, experiencing different things in the environment, and understanding the global situations. The concept of intercultural competence in international business is regarded as an individual’s ability to utilize a set of knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics to become successful in dealing with international and intercultural people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006).

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Curriculum Development

In this modern era, English serves as an international language mainly used for intercultural communication. There is a rapid growth in global demand regarding the learning of English skills. People from all walks of life including politicians, business leaders, academic professors, hotel receptionists, physicians, nurses, site foremen, and vendors need to communicate in English with international colleagues or clients (Harding, 2007). The rise in career-related training in many countries has led ESP to become more practical and application-oriented education. ESP teachers prepare and design courses and provide materials to cater for learners’ specific needs.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a procedure, not a product, derived from the identification of initial needs of learners (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). ESP is not directly involved with a specific discipline and is not targeted for a specific age group or type of capability. It is the procedure related to language teaching in which subject matter is designed in accordance with learners’ rationale for learning.

ESP has traditionally been divided into two main areas: English for Academic Purpose (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998) and utilizes relevant methodologies and activities of a particular discipline. ESP primarily involves English language teaching designed to meet specific needs of the learner (Strevens, 1988) and is related in content to particular disciplines, occupations and activities. The main reasons why ESP has emerged, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) include (1) the new demands of the changing society, (2) linguistic revolution, and (3) focus shift toward the learner. An ESP syllabus, therefore, should be customized to suit the various needs of different target groups. There are generally several factors and situations in which curriculums are designed. In any situation or context where an ESP curriculum is to be



designed, criteria need to be clear so that the design is appropriate for the learners (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

ESP curriculum development is one of the most practical parts of language teaching. A curriculum needs to be developed in a realistic manner so that the needs of learners are addressed and, in turn, the learners themselves are motivated. There has been an increasing demand in ESP curriculum development, and therefore the needs analysis for a particular group of learners must be more methodical and thorough. ESP curriculum designers need to make use of the data obtained from the needs analysis to develop a language course that is relevant and effective. As target needs analysis is intended to keep up with the concurrent needs of modern industries, recognizing the actual needs of learners regarding their occupations or professions can help ESP curriculum developers gain more accurate information necessary for an effective design of a language course. Chambers (1980) asserts that a needs analysis should be conducted in a way to cater for communicative needs and facilitate their realizations; this is usually possible through an analysis of the communication process in the target situation.

ESP courses are usually intensive and primarily meet employees' or companies' needs. After such courses, where certain skills or language skills are intensively concentrated on through instruction and practice, learners are expected to improve their performance in activities which require the use of English (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). To achieve this goal, needs analysis is the key factor to the creation of an effective ESP course or curriculum. Needs analysis is the means of understanding and determining the content and organization of a course. It is a process that allows us to learn more about our learners regarding the components of a curriculum, learners' backgrounds and goals, learners' levels of language proficiency, their teaching and learning preferences, and the situations in which they need to communicate. Needs can be interpreted and analyzed in many different ways to discover what learners already know, what they do not know, and what they want to know (Hyland, 2006).

Course design that meets the needs of various learners involves tradition, choice of textbooks, or ministerial decrees (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Starting from the questions *Why?* *Who?* *Where?* *When?* *What?* and *How?*, course designers need to contemplate on the questions under the three main headings: language descriptions, theories of learning, and needs analysis. This might represent the relationship which leads to the subsequent processes of a program of study's design, equipment for teaching and learning, classroom activities, and evaluation.

Previous Studies

This section consists of related research in ESP, needs analysis, publicity and marketing of tourism, mobility of tourism, and language in use.

Atipad (2010) studied English communication based on a self-directed learning model used in eco-tourism in Ampawa District, Samutsongkram Province. The aims of research were to study English communication problems, analyze English communication needs, and the policy of English communication in Samutsongkram Province. The research study used the semi-structured, in-depth interview as the main instrument. The study consisted of 60 participants including tourists who were English native speakers and those using English as a Second Language, and Thai vendors. The results revealed that the main problem was the failure in communication among the international tourists and Thai vendors. This was primarily because the vendors, although



having taken some English courses, were not able to apply the knowledge or techniques to their daily routine or business. The vendors lacked adequate background knowledge and skills in the English language, their memorization was quite poor. With limited exposure to English communication, the vendors did not have an opportunity to speak with foreigners and thus rarely practiced English in their daily life. This led to a lack of confidence when they communicated with foreigners. The researcher suggested a way of helping the vendors communicate with the foreigners: using leaflets, published information which contained prices, local products or services, and a brief local history.

Choi (2005) investigated ESP courses which were developed from the needs analysis of tourism students. Designing a course for English as a Foreign Language is mainly based on contexts, contents, and methods so that the needs of students or learners in specific places or situations are met. The study found that the courses should include contents relating to English for Tourism suitable for students' levels of English proficiency, skills that need improvement, and teacher plans which match students' needs. To design such an English curriculum more effectively, according to the researcher, the teacher should imagine themselves as students and anticipate as clearly as possible what they would need as learners.

Molina, Gomez, and Martín-Consuegra (2010) studied images or printed media that could promote tourism or attract more tourists. The images or printed media were found to be able to facilitate international tourists' choices of destinations or other purchase options. Using different methods in image processing plays an important role in increasing reliable images and media. The research study presented various categories of tourism image processing and provided data regarding the appropriate tourism formation mix. The result revealed that images and media exerted influence on tourists' decisions to purchase products or services.

Cohen and Cooper (1986) investigated verbal sociolinguistic encounters in touristic situations and examined communication between foreigners and local residents. Whereas local people generally accommodate to almost all touristic situations, their levels of proficiency vary considerably resulting in the extent to which tourists are forced to accommodate linguistically.

These previous studies have shown various data regarding intercultural communication. In the present study, an attempt was made so that local vendors in a particular local community were assisted through the development of an ESP curriculum and printed media that enhanced their skills and confidence in communication with international tourists.

Research methodology

Course and Materials

Based on the needs analysis, an ESP course was developed to enhance English communication skills for local vendors on Koh Kred. The main objective of the course was to enable the learners to interact with international tourists using basic English in relation to their work. The learners were also expected to gain more confidence in communicating with foreign tourists or customers after completing this course. The course, which lasted for 12 hours, included topics for conversations such as describing products, discussing prices, and giving directions.

Apart from the ESP course, printed materials were created to facilitate the vendors in while communicating with foreign visitors. In this study, signs, pictures, tags,



and menus were produced with English descriptions to facilitate communication between the vendors and the tourists (See Appendix A.).

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 200 international tourists who visited Koh Kred during 7-15 February, 2015.

Sampling

Convenience sampling or accidental sampling was used in this study. This type of sampling is considered the most appropriate method for this non-probability study and is a common sampling method in tourism studies (Veal, 2011). As the entire population of the study included all international tourists travelling on Koh Kred, the sampling procedure in this study involved 200 foreign customers visiting the island during a particular period of time. This number of participants is assumed to be representative of the population as it is large enough for the results to be generalized (Robson, 2011).

Instrument

The research instrument employed in this study was a set of questionnaire for the tourists to complete. Designing questionnaire is an important part that provides the guidelines involving collecting data.

Procedure

There were two phases for this research study: the pilot test and the actual study.

Phase 1 (Pilot test)

Questionnaires were administered to 20 tourists on Koh Kred in January, 2015. This process was aimed to examine the participants' understanding of the questions in the questionnaires. Subsequently, the questionnaires were edited for the actual study.

Phase 2 (Actual study)

The improved version of the questionnaire was distributed to all participants in the Koh Kred Community during 7-15 February, 2015. (The final version of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix B.)

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to analyse the data. Percentages, means, and standard deviations were obtained as findings for this study.

Results

This section presents the results obtained from 200 copies of survey questionnaire. The results of this study revealed perceptions of the foreign tourists towards to the local vendors' communication skills and the usefulness of printed media.

Demographic data

The demographic data showed that most of the foreign tourists participating in this study were men (64%), while female tourists accounted for 36%. Most of the tourists travelled with their friends (65%), with their families (30%), with only 5% travelling by



themselves. The most number of tourists came from China (35%), followed by Japan (27.5%), England (25%), Australia (7.5%) and other countries (5%). The majority of the tourists were travelling in Thailand for relaxation (65%). The others were travelling for business or work (20%), for pleasure (10%), and for education (5%).

Usefulness of printed materials media

Table 1 presents results regarding the tourists' perception towards the local vendors' communication skills. The findings have revealed that the international tourists mostly agreed that the local vendors were able to communicate effectively while they were using some materials to help them ($\bar{x} = 4.22$). The tourists moderately agreed that the local vendors were able to speak to them clearly ($\bar{x} = 3.14$) and that the vendors could understand them well ($\bar{x} = 3.01$). However, the tourists somewhat agreed that the local vendors could respond to their questions clearly ($\bar{x} = 2.98$).

Table 1. Tourists' perception toward local vendors' communication skills

Statements:	Mean	S.D
1. Vendors can speak to you.	3.14	.593
2. Vendors understand what you say.	3.01	.593
3. Vendors can respond to you clearly.	2.98	.515
4. Vendors communicate with you effectively using some materials or media to help them.	4.22	.740

Based on the above results, the foreign tourists were very satisfied when they communicated with the local vendors using printed media or materials to facilitate communication. Although the vendors understood the tourists well and could speak to them in general topics, they were not able to respond to the tourists' questions effectively enough.

Regarding the usefulness of printed media that were created to help the foreign tourists to understand more when they communicate to the vendors, Table 1 shows that the tourists found the printed media very useful. The most useful printed material for the foreign tourists was shop menus ($\bar{x} = 5$). They found tags and pictures very useful ($\bar{x} = 4.95$ and 4.90 respectively). Signs were found to be moderately useful ($\bar{x} = 4.70$).

Table 2. Printed media and materials

Printed Media/ Materials	Mean (\bar{x})	S.D	Meaning
1. Signs (signage, map)	4.70	.642	moderately useful
2. Pictures (products)	4.90	.301	very useful
3. Tags (price tag, products tags, etc.)	4.95	.218	very useful
4. Shop menus	5	.0	most useful

(Note: The frequencies and percentage range were adapted from Veal, 2011.)



Discussion

The findings revealed the strong usefulness of the printed materials and media which had been developed for the local vendors in the Koh Kred community to be used during their communication with international tourists or customers. Based on the results, the foreign tourists understood more when the vendors used the printed media while communicating with them. This is in line with Molina et al. (2010), who proposed that printed media could promote effective communication in touristic situations. Communicating without assistance from media, local vendors might not be successful in selling their goods or services. This can be seen from the findings of the questionnaire regarding the level of agreement in terms of the local vendors' communication skills. As they lacked adequate English language skills, they were unable to accommodate sufficiently to the linguistic needs of the foreign tourists as they responded to their questions (Cohen & Cooper, 1986). In addition, since most Thai local vendors in various communities throughout the country lack adequate English communication skills, it is very difficult for them to interact with other international people successfully or effectively even though they have completed an English training course (Atipad, 2010). A needs analysis would be a very useful tool that could provide information for ESP course developers to customize an English course that most relevantly meets their needs (Choi, 2005).

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the perception of international tourists regarding the communication skills of local vendors on Koh Kred. The study suggests that the most important point of teaching English communication in this particular context was to help local vendors achieve their business goals through the development of their communication skills. Teachers and/or course designers should investigate local vendors' specific needs before starting the course. In addition, teachers and/or course designers need to design or select appropriate teaching and learning materials suitable for learners' levels of language proficiency. To help low-proficiency learners like vendors in local communities, teachers and/or course designers should also create printed materials or media related to the products or services they offer so that local vendors can use them while communicating with foreign tourists or customers. Further research might address vendors in other local communities, other specific needs that language learners might have, and the effects of a training course on learners' language proficiency development.

Limitations of the study

Due to the time and budget constraints, this study administered the questionnaire only to 200 respondents; this number might not be adequate for the generalization of the results to the entire population of the study. In addition, for fear that the tourists would not be willing to respond to a longer questionnaire, only eight items were included, and no interview was conducted in this study. As a mere survey study, this project does not include other aspects of ESP such as needs analysis, course development, and language training.



Recommendations for further research

This study reveals the perception of international tourists towards local vendors' communication skills and printed media. A further study should investigate local vendors' needs regarding their interactive skills and strategies in various communicative situations. That is, a comprehensive needs analysis should be conducted to find out what is lacking in vendors' skills as effective communicators. Then a training course should be developed and implemented in an experimental study to see how the vendors would be able to improve their communicative skills while using printed media to facilitate communication with clients. Moreover, further research should involve a higher number of respondents for the generalizability of the results and employ some qualitative research methods such as an in-depth interview so that more detailed information would be obtained. Additionally, printed media to be used in a future study should include more types of materials with more vocabulary items related to a broader range of products available on the island.

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Appendix A Printed media





Appendix B

Questionnaire

Instruction: Please tick ✓ in the box .

Part I: Demographic Data

1. Gender Male Female
2. Where do you come from?
3. Who are you traveling with?
 Individual family friends others (Please specify) ...
4. Can the local vendors communicate with you?
 Yes No
5. Can the printed media help you to understand when you communicate with the local vendors?
 Yes No

Part II: Purpose of travelling

Instruction: Please tick ✓ in the box(es) related to your purpose(s) of travelling to Thailand.

The reason(s) why you came to Thailand

Purposes:	
1. Education	
2. Entertainment e.g., music, events, sports, concerts, celebrations	
3. Relaxation	
4. Business/job/work	
5. Others (please specify)...	

Part III: Usefulness of printed media

Instruction: Please tick ✓ in the box related to your opinion about the printed media (Signs, Pictures, Tags, shops' menus, etc.) which are used on Koh Kred.

There are 5 degrees that indicate how satisfied you are when you see the printed media.

Strongly disagree	= 1
Disagree	= 2
Moderately agree	= 3
Agree	= 4
Strongly agree	= 5

Printed media/ Materials	1	2	3	4	5
1. Signs (signage, map)					
2. Pictures (products)					



3. Tags (price tag, products tags, etc.)					
4. Shops' menus					
5. Others (please specify)...					

Part IV Satisfaction regarding local vendors' communication skills

Instruction: Please tick in the box related to your opinion about satisfaction towards the local vendors' communication skills.

There are 5 degrees that indicate how satisfied you are when you communicate with vendors on Koh Kred.

Strongly disagree = 1
Disagree = 2
Moderately agree = 3
Agree = 4
Strongly agree = 5

Statements:	1	2	3	4	5
1. Vendors can speak to you.					
2. Vendors understand what you say.					
3. Vendors can respond to you clearly.					
4. Vendors communicate with you effectively using some materials or media to help them.					
5. Others (please specify)...					