

Andragogy: A Workplace Business English Course

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Abstract

It has been complicated and protracted process to develop an English course for the specific purpose termed *andragogy* for adult learning. With the growing importance of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) in the ASEAN labor market, Thai employees have to develop themselves so that they can be compatible with new recruits and/or other ASEAN workers, suppliers and coordinators who arrive in Thailand with high English proficiency. At academic settings presently, not only professors but also personnel are encouraged to improve their English skills and demonstrate their high English proficiency. Likewise, at an enterprise with almost 20,000 people such as *Company A*, its employees need to adjust to handle such changes. This 1.5 year study was thus conducted in order to show how 19 employees at a leading Thai telecommunication enterprise struggled to achieve their English competence. The TOEIC score progress is shown and analyzed together with the respondents' answers to the questionnaire and participant evaluation form. The findings revealed a wealth of optimistic feedback, whereas their individual levels of success varied. From the 19 employees, only nine attained the course requirements and were permitted to take the real test at the Educational Testing Service (ETS) center. The highest score was 840/990, while the lowest score was 455.

Keywords: Business English, Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), Thai adult learners

บทคัดย่อ

การสร้างหลักสูตรภาษาอังกฤษเฉพาะทางสำหรับผู้เรียนรู้อย่างเฉพาะผู้ใหญ่วัยทำงานที่เรียกในภาษาอังกฤษว่า *andragogy* เป็นเรื่องที่ซับซ้อนและไม่สิ้นสุด ในขณะที่การสอบภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารระหว่างชาติหรือโทอิค (Test of English for International Communication – TOEIC) มีความสำคัญเพิ่มมากขึ้นเรื่อยๆ ในตลาดแรงงานของอาเซียน พนักงาน/ลูกจ้างชาวไทยจำเป็นต้องพัฒนาตนเองเพื่อจะได้สามารถมีคุณสมบัติที่สอดคล้องกับการว่าจ้างงานและ/หรือสามารถทำงานร่วมกับพนักงาน/ลูกจ้าง/ผู้จัดหาวัสดุ/ผู้ประสานงาน ฯลฯ จากประเทศอื่นในอาเซียนซึ่งมาพร้อมกับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษในระดับสูง ในปัจจุบันสถานศึกษา ทั้งอาจารย์และบุคลากรต่างได้รับการสนับสนุนให้พัฒนาและแสดงความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษให้เห็นเป็นที่ประจักษ์ เช่นเดียวกันในองค์กรที่มีพนักงานเกือบ 20,000 คนเช่นบริษัท A พนักงานจำเป็นต้องพัฒนาตนเองเพื่อให้เข้ากับการเปลี่ยนแปลงดังกล่าวข้างต้น ด้วยเหตุนี้ผู้วิจัยทั้งสองจึงได้ดำเนินการ

ศึกษาวิจัยเป็นระยะเวลาหนึ่งปีครึ่งเพื่อดูว่าพนักงาน ณ บริษัทชั้นนำด้านโทรคมนาคมแห่งหนึ่งได้เรียนรู้ที่จะพัฒนาภาษาอังกฤษของตนได้อย่างไร โดยพิจารณาจากพัฒนาการของระดับคะแนนโทอิคควบคู่ไปกับการวิเคราะห์แบบสอบถามและแบบฟอร์มการประเมินหลักสูตร การศึกษาครั้งนี้แสดงให้เห็นผลสะท้อนกลับเชิงบวกมากมาย ทั้งๆที่มีระดับความสำเร็จที่แตกต่างกัน จากนักเรียนทั้งหมดจำนวน 19 คน มีเพียง 9 คนที่ผ่านข้อกำหนดตามหลักสูตรและสามารถเข้ารับการทดสอบโทอิคของจริง ณ ศูนย์ทดสอบของ Educational Testing Service (ETS) ได้ คะแนนสูงสุดคือ 840/990 และคะแนนต่ำสุดคือ 455

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาอังกฤษธุรกิจ, การทดสอบภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารระหว่างชาติหรือโทอิค (Test of English for International Communication – TOEIC), นักเรียนภาษาอังกฤษในวัยทำงาน

Introduction

Numerous state-owned companies in Thailand such as PTT, CAT Telecom, and TOT, as well as other state enterprises such as Bank of Thailand and Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) have increasingly used the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) as a prerequisite in recruitment. Similarly, many hospitals in Thailand, for example, Bumrungrad International, have used the TOEIC Listening and Reading test to evaluate their employees' English-language proficiency. Such tests are also used to assist these hospitals to identify staff in need of English training programs. Bumrungrad, LG Group and Siam Cement Group (SCG) for instance have used the same test to measure the English proficiency of their employees and to make informed training. For PTT, SCG, and LG Group, the test results are also used for making promotion decisions. These examples confirmed that such a demand for high English proficiency has driven not only new graduates but also existing employees to learn English in a more practical and purposeful way in the occupational realm. For more successful stories on TOEIC, visit the website: <http://www.ets.org/toEIC/successes>. However, Company A in this study does not use TOEIC score in their promotion policy. The score requirement for new recruits is only 450, which is quite low when compared to other smaller companies.

To cope with societal changes, Fishman (1972) stated that employment is one area in which multilingual competence is required and influenced by behavioral norms of people in a certain community. According to Fishman, multilingual usage depends on “sociolinguistic variation” rather than accounting for an individual’s personal interactions (p. 450). He discusses multilingual competence as a language choice with respect to “domains,” for example, family, friendship, education, religion, and *employment* (p. 445). Similarly, Tucker (1998) observed that foreign languages are usually taught at different stages in school for economic and occupational reasons (p. 8). As English education for employment is the target of this study, it is interesting to know whether or not the course is successful and how.

Countless academic institutions have offered courses such as academic writing, English for occupation, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and TOEIC, and so do in-house training centers. At Company A under observation in this study,

employees were trained to use English in business conduct with foreign customers, suppliers, and coordinators. As a consequence, they were enthusiastic to learn English for their occupational purposes. Despite their self-motivation, it is appealing to know their advancement and comments throughout the year and a half. Such comments can help educators, researchers, and instructors to learn more about adult learners, their underlying motives, and prospects. Before delving into the specifics of the study, it is worth discussing the definition and significance of andragogy.

Principles of “Andragogy”

“Andragogy” is a mixture of the Greek prefix “andro-,” which means “man,” and the Greek suffix “-gogy,” which means “teaching.” Combined, the word refers to the techniques and practices of instructing adult learners (Knowles, 1983; Crandall & Peyton, 1993). The word was spelt differently to “androgogy” in Nunan (1999, p. 15), which slightly deviated from that of Knowles (1983). Such methods were primarily found in the works of several theorists including Brundage and Macheracher (1980), Knowles (1983), Crandall and Peyton (1993), Savage (1993), and Nunan (1999). Brundage and Macheracher (1980) conducted numerous research studies on adult learners and proposed some principles about adult learning. Importantly, adult learners have their own cognitive style; therefore, they will not react to an experience as the teacher presents it, but as they personally perceive it. They will not learn under pressure or overstimulation, either. As a saying goes, “It is hard to teach an old dog new tricks.” Nonetheless, as adult learners tend to learn well only matter related to their past or life experiences, present concerns, and future hopes, it is the teacher’s duty to find the contents and materials that will help them develop their English competence. Andragogy must be related to adult learners’ real-life expectation and immediate needs in the situation or society they are in (Crandall & Peyton, 1993, p. 5). As it seems rigid for the instructors to set the standards and objectives for these adult learners to reach, the instructor in this course informed the students of the necessity of TOEIC in the current labor market. Newcomers at Company A, at the time when this study was being conducted, were required to have at least 450 TOEIC score. As a result, the TOEIC was discussed, a score of 450 was set as the minimum target, TOEIC success stories were exemplified (<http://www.ets.org/toEIC/successes>), and real test experiences were shared.

Methodology

A. Nature of the Business English Course at Company A

At the company where the present study was conducted, the Business English course was provided for company’s employees. The course was divided into three levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced, totaling 330 hours. The Basic Business English course lasted 15 weeks or 90 hours. The class ran every Thursday between 9 am and 4 pm. The Intermediate and Advanced course lasted 20 weeks each (120

hours/course). There were 26, 23, and 19 participants at the basic, intermediate, and advanced series, respectively.

The Basic Business English course in the present study was provided between October 3 and March 6, 2014. The Intermediate Business English course ran from June 12 to November 27, 2014. The Advanced course started on February 15 and finished on July 16, 2015. The three-series course took approximately 1.5 years in total.

B. Nature of the Textbook

For the basic course, the participants were assigned three books to read as follows: *English for Business Studies* (3rd edition) by Ian MacKenzie (2010); *Grammar for Business* by Michael McCarthy, Jeanne McCarten, David Clark, and Rachel Clark (2009); and *Business Vocabulary in Use: Elementary and Pre-intermediate* by Bill Mascull (2010). *Intelligent Business Coursebook: Upper intermediate Business English* by Tonya Trappe and Graham Tullis (2006) and *Business Vocabulary in Use: Intermediate* by Bill Mascull (2010) were chosen for both intermediate and advanced levels. The difficulties and complication of the two latter books allowed the participants to learn and read for almost a year. Furthermore, to familiarize the students with TOEIC, they were asked to read *Essential Words for the TOEIC* by Barron (4th edition) during the intermediate and advanced levels.

Each day, students read the main textbook *English for Business Studies* for the basic class and *Intelligent Business Coursebook: Upper intermediate Business English* for the intermediate and advanced classes. They must actively participate in all class activities including listening to the audiotape accompanying the textbook, speaking by giving a presentation or meeting, reading the textbook, and writing an essay or email or press release according to the textbook.

C. Nature of the Participants

All the informants were working for a telecommunication company at the time of the investigation. The company has provided its in-house English courses at its training center for over 30 years. The participants in the study could access the free course by applying for a seat online via the company website, however, the applicants need permission from their manager to attend. Their manager's signature must be included in the application form. For the 19 informants at the advanced level, ages ranged from 31 to 56, with an average of 48.5 years.

As the number of participants in each course varied primarily due to their job schedules, the number decreased from 26 at the basic level to 23 in the intermediate and 19 in the advanced course. The questionnaire was administered during the intermediate level; as a result, there were 23 respondents at the time. From 23 students, there were 4 males and 19 females. Their fields of studies included public administration, international business, business administration, general management, economics, information technology management, electrical communication engineering, telecommunication management, marketing, business computer, laws and management, accounting, public and private administration, finance, as well as banking and finance.

Among these informants, 19 had obtained their master's degree, while the other four held their bachelor's degree.

D. Nature of the Questionnaire

As the participants would be given an evaluation form at the end of each course, the researchers decided to distribute the questionnaire on November 6, 2014—after the basic course and during the last month of the intermediate course. There were two parts of the short questionnaire. The first part garnered the demographic information of each participant, i.e., gender, age, highest education, and field of studies. In the second part (open-ended question part), they were asked whether or not they felt the course (after 210 hours at the time) was useful to them. After that, they were asked to provide some more explanations. Prompts were provided to encourage them to think in an all-around manner. For instance, they were asked “What benefits did they get from the courses, e.g., grammatical rules, vocabulary words?” They should explicate more about whether or not, for example, they could read faster. They were also asked how the two courses applied to their jobs and to provide examples to support their answers and opinions. The results are presented and discussed in detail in *Findings and Discussion*.

E. Nature of the Student Evaluation Form

Students were asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of each course. They had to assess the five factors in the course comprising: (1) course objective, (2) design and duration, (3) facilities, (4) textbooks and materials, and (5) instructor. Each factor is further divided into sub-topics. For instance, for course objective, the score is derived from three areas: (1) Is the course objective clearly explained? Are the course contents consistent with the course objectives? Are the course contents as expected?

For the design and duration, students had to evaluate the methods used in the course. They had to assess how interesting and appropriate the instructional methods, the activities, the lessons, and duration are. For facilities, respondents had to evaluate six domains: the course convenience, environment, location, equipment availability and performance, public relations, and registration facilitation. For the materials and textbooks, participants had to show their satisfaction level in terms of content and clarity. Lastly, instructors had to be able to clearly delineate the course objectives and efficiently transfer their knowledge and experiences. Also, they had to correctly sequence the lessons, precisely answer students' questions, strongly encourage students to participate in class activities, wisely manage time, and succinctly summarize the contents.

The full score of each factor is 5.00. The meaning of each score range is as follows:

1.00 – 1.50 means Least / Need Improvement,

1.51 – 2.50 means Less / Need Improvement,

2.51 – 3.50 means Neutral / Fair,

3.51 – 4.50 means Much / Good, and

4.51 – 5.00 means Very Much / Very Good.

Findings and Discussion

A. Qualitative Results Based on the Questionnaire

The questionnaires were distributed to 23 students and all were returned. All respondents agreed that they gained some benefits from the 210-hour basic and intermediate courses. Unfortunately, most of them discussed the benefits overall, not separately. Therefore, it is quite difficult for the researchers to separate the answers into grammatical, vocabulary, organizational, etc. domains as they wished. As the overall picture of the feedback appeared in much the same vein, an abundance of positive feedback found in the open-ended question can be roughly divided into three advantages: (1) English skill development, (2) beneficial impact of their English learning upon their work, and (3) impact on the scores, as follows:

English skill development

- I can understand English movies on YouTube, read newspaper articles, and translate from Thai into English and vice versa. I can write without thinking for a long time.
- I learn to develop and enhance all four English skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Particularly, writing lesson gives me interesting techniques, such as grammar, sentence structure, revision, etc.
- I know that all improvements come from me. Thanks to the instructors' patience and encouragement, I move on bit by bit. Now my vocabulary and grammar become better.
- I think the most important benefit I got from these classes is guilt. If I cannot do anything, I feel guilty and want to work harder to be able to do it better. In addition to the feeling to learn more, I become more orderly in my daily life. I try to use English every day. I feel thankful to my instructor as she is a good driver and encourager. Without her, I could not have come thus far.
- I can practice all the four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. I have been always encouraged to learn more and more English.

Indeed, all the four skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—must be taught in a meaningful way. Of course, vocabulary and grammar must be taught simultaneously. Others went beyond merely their English proficiency enhancement to the effect on their career progress.

Beneficial impact of their English learning upon their work

- The greater grammatical understanding enabled me to write and read better. Giving the presentation in English benefits my work. My listening skills are also better. I have a good chance to enhance my vocabulary repository.
- My listening and reading skills are getting much better. I gain more confidence in my writing and my work. I can talk with foreigners with more confidence than I used to be. I can understand English-language news and can sing English songs along. I can read with proper pauses. The sound-track movies become more

understandable to me. I can read English-language newspapers in a more understandable manner.

- I know more vocabulary words used in daily life. I can translate English documents for my boss. I can read and understand English articles better. I can even give some suggestions about English usage to other colleagues. I have more confidence in my English proficiency. I am so proud of myself and my English skills.
- My knowledge of business vocabulary and grammar has been improved. I can write email in English in an effective manner.
- I'm responsible for writing English specifications and Term of Reference (TOR). My English skills—e.g. grammar, writing, reading, and speaking—become much better than before. I become more confident in my work compared to what I had done before. Sometimes, I even want to improve my previous work. Despite my good progress, I think there are more areas of English that I need to improve, especially when AEC becomes more powerfully effective.
- These courses do not only allow me to gain vast varieties of English skill improvement, but also enable me to know how to apply the knowledge to my company's business. I can write good English emails, understand English-language programs, and communicate with foreigners. Group work also encourages me to learn together and to help each other.
- I can use the knowledge for my work such as the company's websites by searching and reading English-language websites.
- Before I join these classes, I knew nothing about English. After taking the business courses, I know more vocabulary and grammar. Now I can use such knowledge in my job at my company. Learning here encouraged me to want to know more about English. Even though I can move on slowly, I promise to try harder.

The significance of the TOEIC as the driving force.

Impact on the scores

- With the knowledge and techniques given by the instructor, I have more chances to read, listen to, and write. My English skills have developed without my noticing. When being evaluated, I can feel that my scores get better. I also learn my gap and try to fill it so that I can apply all the knowledge to my work.
- The two courses made me improve my English skills in all four domains: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. I received the knowledge of both vocabulary and grammar. An experience in taking the TOEIC test made me know my real English proficiency level. This made me know how and in what area I need to improve. I can apply the knowledge gained from these two courses to my work well and appropriately as I need English in working.

These comments apparently support the andragogy theorists, e.g., Brundage and Macheracher (1980), Knowles (1983), Crandall and Peyton (1993), Savage (1993), and Nunan (1999), that adult learners can make good learning progress if the circumstances fit their needs and the topics are of interest or benefit to them. By their nature, adult learners tend to learn when relevant to their current situation or distant, unfulfilled wish.

As Nunan (1999) put it, “Adults learn best when the content is personally relevant to past experience or present concerns and the learning process is relevant to life experiences” (p. 15). Likewise, for adult learners, “...learning should be directly related to application” (Savage, 1993, p. 19).

In this study, the course contents were of interest to the participants because they, more or less, could be beneficial to the tasks at hand. In the researchers’ opinion, the course can be assessed “Very Good” because, based on the respondents’ answers reported above, the course places a great emphasis on how to apply theories into practice. In other words, students are taught how to incorporate vocabulary and grammar into their four skills—speaking, reading, listening, and writing—at work.

B. Quantitative Results Based on the Student Evaluation Form

At the end of each course—basic, intermediate, and advanced—students were asked to fill in an evaluation form. The results were then calculated based on the system of 5.00 full score. As mentioned earlier, students had to perform the course evaluation in five areas: (1) course objective, (2) design and duration, (3) facilities, (4) textbooks and materials, and (5) instructor. The summary of the results of the three-course series is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the Course Evaluation Results

Description Course	Course Objective	Design & Duration	Facilities	Textbooks & Materials	Instructor	Average
Basic	4.71	4.78	4.17	4.75	4.92	4.67
Intermediate	4.88	4.88	4.57	4.89	4.93	4.83
Advanced	4.80	4.82	4.15	4.94	4.97	4.74
Average	4.80	4.83	4.30	4.86	4.94	4.75

Overall, the three course were assessed as *Very Good* based on the score averages. From the open-ended questions, however, there were some explanations for the score above.

At the *basic* level, the students were of the opinion that the contents were very good. There should be some manuals or handbooks for other employees as well. The course duration and facilities were appropriate. However, as the textbooks needed to be returned to the company library, it would not be easy for them to review, reuse, or refer to the books in the future. The instructor was nice and approachable, and took good care of her students. With good knowledge transfer ability and lecture skills, the students were able to enhance their knowledge and understanding of business English well. They also had some complaints about the microphones; there should have been a technician to check the audio-visual equipment before class commenced, resulting in the lower score for *facilities* compared to the other factors. The satisfaction level achieved 4.67/5.00 for the intermediate course.

At the intermediate level, students were of the opinion that the contents, lessons, and duration were appropriate. Specifically, the lessons could be applied to their duties

and responsibilities. The instructor could transfer their knowledge well, enabling participants to gain more knowledge and understanding. The facilities were properly provided, though the visualizer and projector did not work well and sometimes the air-conditioner did not work effectively. The textbooks should be given to participants rather than returned to the library. The satisfaction level achieved 4.83/5.00 for the intermediate course.

At the advanced level, participants commented that the course was a good and could be applied to their daily interactions. The instructor could lecture well, was knowledgeable, and enabled students to understand English better. The facilities were appropriately provided. The mentioned that the course then should be continued further. Some respondents asked the Academy to improve the air-conditioning, notebook, toilet, and refreshments. The satisfaction level for the advanced course achieved 4.74/5.00.

Even though the average score of the three courses were 4.75, at the *Very Good* level, this does not mean that the course was without imperfections. There were many dimensions that could be improved, especially the classroom and its facilities.

Of course, the student questionnaire in combination with student evaluation form allows for the betterment of the course. Furthermore, such resources enable the instructor to raise the students' TOEIC scores. With regard to the greater significance of TOEIC, the findings can help other instructors to increase their students' TOEIC scores and thus increase participants' job opportunities and aid in their career development.

C. Quantitative Results Based on the Students' TOEIC

For the development of a course, results must be measurable. For the current study, the course was not assessed only by the student evaluation form, but also measured by their TOEIC scores. The Business English course at the training center of Company A is a mixed-ability class. In other words, students joined the class with different levels of English proficiency. There were insufficient students—not over 30—to divide the students into smaller classes according to their English proficiency. To encourage them to learn, a rewarding system was applied. For more information regarding the rewarding system, see Chanseawrassamee (2012), and for effects of in-class feedback, see Jaturongkachoke and Chanseawrassamee (2013 & 2014).

Furthermore, any student who could exceed 700 points in their TOEIC practice in class would be fully funded to take a real TOEIC test at the ETS center on Asoke-Dindaneg Road in Bangkok. Throughout the three courses taking place from June 12, 2014 to July 16, 2015, there were nine students out of 19 (the number at the end of the course) who took the test with the following scores. For students who took more than one test, whether before or after, their scores are shown in Table 2 for comparison.

Table 2. Comparison of TOEIC Scores of TOEIC Test Takers

Student No.	1 st Test Date	Score	2 nd Test Date	Score
1.	Nov 5, 2013	785	Dec 3, 2014	840
2.	Nov 5, 2013	635	Oct 25, 2014	755
3.	May 9, 2014	720	Aug 21, 2015	715
4.	Nov 5, 2013	530	-	-
5.	Nov 5, 2013	620	-	-
6.	Nov 5, 2013	530	-	-
7.	Nov 5, 2013	505	-	-
8.	Nov 5, 2013	530	-	-
9.	Nov 5, 2013	455	-	-

Four students had scores over 600 TOEIC. Of those who took the test twice, their scores remained stable or improved. Based on Company A's rules for newcomers who must pass A TOEIC score OF 450, the nine students' from this class were deemed "Pass." Students numbered 4 to 9 are still studying (at the time of writing), as a consequence, it will be interesting to learn whether or not these students can improve their scores.

There were two males out of these nine test takers; consequently, gender was not deemed a significant variable in this study and no gender differences were further examined. Interestingly, all test takers had received their master's degree.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Limitations

The study can show the benefits of adult learning and the importance of English competence. In terms of academic values, the findings could support lifelong learning and how a person could attempt to achieve a difficult but positive goal such as learning the English language. Moreover, the results are valuable in terms of both the helping the employer develop future plans and increasing the company's productivity.

To teach students to make progress in their English studies requires a great deal of support. Textbooks, materials, facilities, and instructors should be well prepared for the betterment and success of the course. Teaching adults can be useful and productive if the lessons closely relate to the learners' expectations and jobs. Handling changes in terms of standardized tests such as TOEIC should be supported with a reward system that has clear goals. In this case, several respondents asserted that the TOEIC scores encouraged them to learn, be more enthusiastic, and try harder.

The English course should become more content-based. The textbook does not only present grammar and vocabulary lessons in a meaningful manner but also enables learners to apply the contents into their daily interactions in the English language. With good insertion of grammar and vocabulary lessons, learners can make significant

progress. In these classes, grammar and vocabulary teaching and learning was not considered by the students to be boring.

The holding of a degree may be a factor in the progress made in English by students during the course, as master's degree graduates may have higher self-motivation than those with only a bachelor's degree. As the number of informants is small, there should be more studies conducted with different and larger groups.

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