

## ภาษาอังกฤษสำหรับเจ้าหน้าที่การรถไฟแห่งประเทศไทยในการเตรียมความพร้อมเข้าสู่ประชาคมอาเซียน

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### บทคัดย่อ

จุดประสงค์ของการศึกษานี้ เพื่อตอบสนองความต้องการในการใช้ทักษะภาษาอังกฤษของเจ้าหน้าที่การรถไฟแห่งประเทศไทยให้มีประสิทธิภาพมากยิ่งขึ้น โดยใช้แบบ สอบถาม การสัมภาษณ์ และการสังเกตการณ์ ข้อมูลที่ได้รับสามารถนำมาใช้เป็นพื้นฐานในการพัฒนาการออกแบบหลักสูตรการสอนทักษะภาษาอังกฤษ ให้มีประสิทธิภาพมากยิ่งขึ้น วิธีทางสถิติที่ใช้ในการวิเคราะห์แบบสอบถามคือ ค่าร้อยละ ค่าความถี่ ค่ามัธยฐานเลขคณิต และค่าเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน ผลวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่าทักษะการฟังและการพูด เป็นปัญหาที่สำคัญที่สุดในการติดต่อสื่อสารด้วยภาษาอังกฤษกับชาวต่างชาติ สำหรับทัศนคติของชาวต่างชาติแล้ว ทักษะการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษของเจ้าหน้าที่การรถไฟสามารถสื่อสารได้ในระดับที่เป็นที่เข้าใจ แม้จะมีอุปสรรคในเรื่องของการอ่านออกเสียงและการใช้คำศัพท์ที่ไม่ถูกต้องตามหลักไวยากรณ์ นอกจากนี้ยังพบว่า สาเหตุที่ทำให้การติดต่อสื่อสารกับชาวต่างชาติขาดประสิทธิภาพคือ ปัญหาในเรื่องขีดจำกัดในภาษาอังกฤษ ขาดความรู้ในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ และอิทธิพลของภาษาไทย ผลที่ได้รับจากงานวิจัยนี้ ได้นำมาเสนอเป็นแนวทางในการพัฒนาการออกแบบหลักสูตรทักษะการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ สำหรับเจ้าหน้าที่การรถไฟให้มีประสิทธิภาพมากยิ่งขึ้น

**คำสำคัญ:** การรถไฟแห่งประเทศไทย เจ้าหน้าที่การรถไฟ

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## English for the State Railway of Thailand Staff for the Upcoming ASEAN Economic Community

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find the needs required for more effective English communication skills for Thai railway staff by using five point Likert scale questionnaires, interview, and observation. Data obtained was used as a basis for designing a training course for more effective communication skill development. The statistical devices for data analysis were percentage and frequency distribution, standard deviation, and arithmetic mean. The findings revealed that the railway staff found speaking and listening skills to be the most problematic aspects of communicating in English with foreign passengers. The foreign passengers perceived that railway staff used English comprehensibly, even though some barriers in communication were found in terms of pronunciation, and inadequate vocabulary. The findings also demonstrated that the interplaying factors causing the railway staff to react to criticisms from foreign passengers incorrectly were their limited English communication skills, lack of English pragmatic knowledge, and influence of Thai language. This research also concluded with recommendations to provide some guidance for designing a training course for more effective English communication skills development for railway staff.

**Keywords:** State Railway of Thailand(SRT), Railway staff

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## Introduction

In 2015, ASEAN will launch the ASEAN Community (AC). Thailand, as a geographical center of this region, surrounded by Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Malaysia, is at an advantage in the area of logistics. Thailand could easily become ASEAN's logistics hub which is able to distribute passengers and goods to and from other countries in the 10-member bloc of nations and also in the global market. Thailand's government has also been in talks with China regarding a high-speed train project which would link Laos and Thailand via Nong Khai Province to the southern border and Malaysia (Runckel, 2013). In Thailand, English is regarded as a foreign language. It is thought that English is learned at school to ensure that Thais can all communicate with speakers of the language (Phillipson, 1992). However, most Thai people rarely use English in their daily lives, especially in listening and speaking, posing very serious problem for them when entering the AC. Many Thais cannot understand and speak English well in both face-to-face contact and through the media, and especially when using the telephone. As stated in Tubtintong (1993), these interactive and productive skills are difficult to fulfill because the medium of instruction of all subjects at all levels is in the Thai language, which is not conducive to the development of foreign language competence and capacity.

Thai railway staff have been trained to reset their attitudes in preparation for work in a new era of AC; that is, to be ready to communicate with passengers with a service-oriented mind, hospitality and generosity. They should be able to adapt themselves readily to be able to come

into contact with people from other countries. As mentioned in Sucompa (1998), because Thai people are generous, modest, peaceful, and helpful, whenever railway staff encounter problems concerning communication with foreign passengers, they themselves must seek ways to solve the problems by using gestures first, followed by asking foreign passengers to write down or draw what they need to express. Otherwise when mutual understanding is to be achieved, railway staff will need to ask for help from interpreters. However, railway staff will neither avoid answering any questions nor refuse to help foreign passengers. Consequently, they attempt to communicate with foreign passengers using whatever language resources they have at their disposal.

## Objective of the Study:

The objective of this research is to find out about the English language used required by Thai railway staff. It is hoped that the research results will reveal language skills and functions that are useful for railway staff.

## Therefore, this research attempts to:

1. Survey the functional needs of English for railway staff,
2. Survey the needs of English communication of foreign passengers who use the railway services,
3. Study railway staff's general difficulties or problems in using English,
4. Conduct a linguistic analysis of Railway English language according to the needs of railway staff and foreign passengers, and

5. Develop an English handbook for railway staff and foreign passengers.

### Literature Review

#### English for Specific Purpose (ESP)

ESP has a long history in the field of English teaching. It started in the 1960s when general English courses did not meet learners' needs. There are three reasons common to the emergence of all ESP courses: the demands of a Brave New World, a revolution in linguistics, and a focus on the learner (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). There are two key historical periods of life in relation to ESP. First, when the end of the Second World War came in 1945, it brought with it an "...age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale for various reasons, most notably being the economic power of the United States in the post-war world, and the role of an international language fell to English". English became the accepted international language. It created a new generation of learners who knew specifically why they were learning a language. Second, the oil crisis of the early 1970s resulted in western money and knowledge flowing into oil-rich countries. English suddenly became by business and commercial pressures able to apply an influence (Hutchinson & Waters, 2006, p. 105).

English for Specific Purposes is a movement based on the proposition that all language teaching should be tailored to the specific learning and language use needs for identified groups of students. It is also sensitive to the socio-cultural contexts in which these students

will use English (Celce – Murcia, 2001). English for Specific Purposes is known as a learner-centered approach, since it meets the needs of (mostly) adult learners who need to learn a foreign language for use in their specific fields of study, such as in science, technology, medicine, leisure, and in academic learning. ESP programs are developed because there is a demand for language courses in which certain contents, skills, motivations, processes, and values are identified and integrated into specialized, often short-term, courses.

#### English for Occupational Purposes

English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) is more general compared to ESP because it does not focus on the specific job disciplines but it is more based on general basic skills required by students in order to be prepared for the workforce. Examples of basic skills of EOP are the same as those of ESP: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. "English for Specific Purposes is a term that refers to teaching or studying English for a particular career (for example law or medicine) or for use in business" (International Teacher Training Organization, 2005). Robinson (1989) describes ESP as a type of ELT (English Language Teaching) and defines it as being a "goal-oriented language learning", which means that students have to attain a specific goal in the process of learning. According to the same author, "Students study ESP not because they are interested in the English language as such but because they have to perform tasks in English. Their command of the English language must be such that they can

reach a satisfactory level in their specialist subject studies”.

### Data Collection

Data collection employed the following procedure:

1. The information in relation to conducting the research was obtained by the researcher from the public relations officers of SRT.

2. The Inter-office Communication letter introducing the researcher and the objectives of this research was submitted to the governor and several executives of the State Railway of Thailand to request permission and their cooperation to collect data from the staff.

3. One week after sending the letter, questionnaires were handed out to targeted railway staff and also to foreign passengers from major popular tourist railway stations, and were then collected by the researcher one week later.

4. After checking the completed questionnaires, they were then prepared for data analysis by use of a statistical program.

5. In addition to the questionnaires, the researcher used qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews to gain further in-depth information beyond the survey questionnaires and to clarify quantitative evaluation findings. In this research, a total of 15 railway staff were interviewed. The interview time varied in length from 20-30 minutes. It was necessary to ask permission from some subjects to have a follow up interview, as more information was required. The interview was recorded by a phone recording upon receiving the consent of the interviewees. In cases where interviewees were not comfortable

with phone recordings, note taking was used instead.

6. The semi-structured interviews for foreign passengers were conducted on individual foreign passengers at major popular tourist railway stations in six regions of Thailand. First of all, participants were questioned regarding their personal data. After that, they were asked how well railway staff used English irrespective of their overall communication skills. Speaking skills were discussed in terms of pronunciation accuracy, appropriate use of vocabulary, comprehensible sentence structure, and use of compensatory strategies to overcome any communication difficulties. Listening skills were considered in terms of idea recognition, understanding of details, and compensatory strategies used to overcome limitations in comprehension. Finally, foreign passengers were asked how satisfied they were with their interaction and communication with railway staff. Either audio recordings or note-taking was employed, of course with the prior permission of all participants.

7. This investigation checklist sought to observe the way railway staff used their English skills in communicating with foreign passengers at HuaLampong Railway Station which is more frequently visited by foreigners than any other railway station in Thailand. The objective of the observations was to obtain more information to supplement the data gained from interviews and questionnaires regarding railway staff's competency of English communication while dealing with foreign passengers. The location and work at this station provided railway staff with more opportunities to use English with foreign passengers than those working at other stations.

Therefore, this was seen as a purposeful sampling of the location of the railway's workplace and the nature of the railway's work. This selected site was believed to be an information-rich case and was studied in depth (Wiersma&Jurs, 2005). Railway staff whose shifts were in operation at this station during the two-week observations were involved inevitably in the research.

8. The researcher consistently attended the railway station over a period of two weeks. Observations were undertaken at settings by the researcher using the checklist. The procedure that the researcher employed for recording data was frequency-count recording (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

9. The researcher recorded each time the target behavior occurred while observing railway staff interacting with foreign passengers who visited the railway station for varying reason, such as reporting lost documents, asking for information, and asking for help.

10. After completing part A in the checklist, the researcher asked foreign passengers to give their opinions regarding railway staff's English communication skills. The researcher then recorded their responses in part B in the checklist. Data from the checklists were analyzed for frequency and percentages.

### The Results of the study

Importantly, all railway staff absolutely agreed that English is essential for their present jobs and 80% of them viewed that attending an English course is necessary for them. The majority of them realized that an English training course helps them improve their English skills in order

for them to be able to communicate with passengers more fluently.

In terms of English proficiency, railway staff perceived their own English proficiency as being moderate in all four skills which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As for their difficulties in communicating in English listening, speaking, writing and reading skills are seen as being moderately difficult respectively.

In terms of the needs of English language functions in all four main skills, railway staff identified their needs as follows:

In relation to listening skills, the most needed functions are listening to conversations face to face. Regarding speaking skills, the English language functions mostly needed are welcoming, greeting and saying goodbye to passengers. As regards to reading skills, all English language functions are deemed as being moderate. With regards to writing skills, all items were considered to be moderate.



## The levels of English language skills difficulties

Skills	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Meaning
Listening	3.25	1.19	Moderate
Speaking	3.25	1.21	Moderate
Reading	3.18	1.21	Moderate
Writing	3.22	1.22	Moderate
Total	3.22	1.21	Moderate

In terms of the difficulties with English language functions in all four main skills,

railway staff clarified their difficulties as being at a moderate level.

## The railway staff's problems in English language listening skill in their jobs

Problems of listening skill	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Meaning
Listening to the suggestion, explanation	3.10	1.24	Moderate
Listening to conversations face to face	3.07	1.23	Moderate
Listening to conversation by phone	3.06	1.29	Moderate
Listening to various English accent	3.14	1.25	Moderate
Listening to the technical terms, idiomatic expressions, slang	3.10	1.33	Moderate
Listening to the ticket booking	2.97	1.26	Moderate
Listening to personal details and information	3.01	1.24	Moderate
Listening to the railway information	2.91	1.24	Moderate
Others (please specify)...	-	-	-
Total	3.04	1.26	Moderate

Thai stress and accents were the most difficult for foreign passengers to understand when railway staff were using English.

## The difficulties of understanding English speaking of the railway staff

Factors causing difficulties to the participants to understand when the railway staff speak English	Frequency	Percentage
Thai stress and accents	124	34.64
Lack of vocabulary	61	17.04
Pronunciation	63	17.60
Speaking rate (such as too slow, too fast)	17	4.75
Sentence intonation	31	8.66
Choice of word	11	3.07
Grammar	17	4.75
Initial sound (such as <u>sh</u> rimp)	15	4.19
Final sound (such as ma <u>sk</u> )	19	5.31

From a random interview with fifteen of the railway staff, they showed that they needed to practice their listening and speaking skills. They think their own English proficiency is insufficient for work and they needed to improve their English skills. They would like the SRT to arrange English training courses for them as this would be useful for them in their job.

The English course currently provided is not sufficient to their needs. They also reasoned that an English training course is important for them because it helps them improve their ability and fluency in English communication skills when dealing with foreign passengers. Participants expressed their strong desire to concentrate on content related to their field of work. They suggested more flexible and developed teaching aids such as language laboratories to have the opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills. They expressed their wish to have

more qualified EOP teachers. They also suggested listening as much as possible to native speakers.

From a random interview with fifteen foreign passengers, it was found that all of them have never had a serious problem during conversations with staff. It was found that there were only minor problems found in real life situations; for example, railway staff could not grasp the whole message when foreign passengers spoke using long statements. In addition, foreign passengers found that railway staff avoided having a conversation with long statements or that railway staff avoided taking part in general conversations with foreign passengers instead, they only answered questions. Foreign passengers suggested that railway staff should try to have general conversations with foreign passengers in order to practice and enhance their English communication skills.

The researcher observed conversations between both railway staff and foreign passengers. The findings were as follows.

- Grammar uses of some railway staff were incorrect. They omitted the auxiliary verb to be. They also repeated the same words and their sentence structures were incorrect.

- The skills which railway staff need during their duties were speaking and listening skills.

- Most of the foreign passengers were satisfied with the railway staff's English communication skills.

- The communication between railway staff and foreign passengers were concerned with greeting and asking about railway services and information.

- Railway staff avoided having conversations with long statements and avoided having general conversations with foreign passengers. There were only 5 or 6 staff who felt confident enough to have a long conversation and discussion with foreign passengers.

- The researcher found that some staff would not ask foreign passengers directly if they did not understand what the foreign passengers said or misunderstood something; instead they would ask for help from colleagues to clarify problems for them.

Therefore, the findings from the present study provide useful sources for course contents from which a syllabus designer or course developer could benefit. The results are analyzed from data collected from railway staff. Consequently, the result is that further English language development is required for their current duties. This would help increase the

confidence of railway staff in conversing in English and for handling all cases and performing their job duties in English. As a consequence, increased English language proficiency in staff will lead to a greater level of passenger service satisfaction and to potential competitiveness and success as a business when joining the AC.

### Discussions

It is indicated in the results of the study that all railway staff are qualified in better position in general English communication skills but they do require further training in English for a specific context. All railway staff agreed on the fact that knowledge of the English language is very useful in increasing their performance levels at work. Most railway staff thinks that speaking and listening are an integral part of their jobs but in the specific domain. For example, asking questions about some railway information is the main function including requesting something, giving information, and listening to conversation. Regarding reading and writing, eighty percent of learners think that these skills are useless for them in general purposes but these skills have an important role on their work because they have to read ticket details, memos/bills, reports and letters. In the case of writing, this is seen as being not too different from reading where they have to write railway details, notes, and fill in related work forms. It is clear that all of the railway staff deal with their work over the phone and also through use of the internet. Thus, both of these functions, the four skills of English language are used primarily for specific purposes.

## Conclusion

It is clear that railway staff have an urgent need for English in this service. Cultural differences, differences in background knowledge, shyness, and a lack of confidence are some of the conditions that prevent railway staff from interacting with foreign passengers. Some important features of the needs analysis questionnaire captured the researcher's attention. The railway staff who were selected by head railway staff to answer questionnaires were railway staff who required English for work. The majority of railway staff was from HuaLumphong, which is a station that all foreign passengers are required to pass through. For that reason, an important portion of the course must cover specific topics related to railway staff's needs and requirements at that specific railway station. Another important aspect was the concern about railway staff's lack of time for studying English since they mostly all answered that they do not have much time to practice English outside of work.

With regards to railway staff's lack of confidence and shyness, when observing Thai railway staff interaction with foreign passengers, the researcher realized that they do not talk much. They simply go about doing their job without explaining a lot in detail. However, railway staff should also know the importance of

the differences between various cultures when explaining details and to make sure that foreign passengers understand.

Combining the interviews of railway staff and foreign passengers, there were several aspects that need to be included in any syllabus. According to the results, there were important topics to be addressed, such as question formation used to collect foreign passengers' information. The biggest issue there might be railway staff's lack of confidence in using English for communication and their lack of knowledge relating to cultural differences.

In conclusion, there were several important aspects which came from the needs analysis questionnaires, interviews, and observations that helped to shape the course. These are: the skills most needed for their jobs are listening and speaking, and the context of the course should be designed mostly for practical situations. Topics should be related to railway staff's field and the course should also cover educating foreign passengers, telephone skills, giving advice, giving instructions, checking for understanding, explaining details and interactions. Only a few cultural topics were addressed. Finally, based on their preferences, most of the activities during the course were to be conducted in pairs, groups of 3 or 4, and also as a whole class.



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