



## Challenges for Thai business people using English in ASEAN

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### Abstract

This study examined the challenges encountered by Thai business people working in various industries regarding their use of English in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) intercultural business communication in Thailand. Drawing on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the findings suggested that English proficiency is a key variable due to language differences. The findings also showed that context and communicative style are the most challenging factors encouraging ASEAN English users to acquire ASEAN cultural knowledge to achieve communication goals and to understand their ASEAN counterparts. Additionally, affirmation was required to clarify intended meaning due to indirectness and subtlety when communicating with others. This study encourages Thai and other business people and stakeholders to improve their English proficiency and to raise their cultural awareness to achieve effective business communication in ASEAN.

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### Introduction

English communication in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) context is considered as intercultural communication (Varner & Beamer, 2011) and is of great importance to all involved. As ASEAN is a united group, labor and business can move freely across the regional borders under ASEAN agreements. Citizens and businesses cooperate internationally with other members, dialogue partners, and others (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004), and English is a key to achievement as the ASEAN Charter states that it is to be the formal medium for all communications in ASEAN (Kirkpatrick, 2008).

Some members have advantages over the others in regard to English use. According to the ASEAN Secretariat (2012) and Wilang and Teo (2012a), Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, located in the Outer Circle of Kachru's three-circle model (1992), have an edge on English communication; they use English as a second language. Compared to Cambodia,

Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, they are located in the Expanding Circle where English is a foreign language and so they face more difficulties. Although they are improving their citizens' English skills, language comprehensibility challenges their members due to the variety of ASEAN "Englishes" (Suwannasri & Nomnian, 2017; Wilang & Teo, 2012a, 2012b) affected by each nation's composition such as its history, geography, ideology, politics, economics, and cultures (Qingxue, 2003; Wilang & Teo, 2012a). Consequently, English communication amongst different ASEAN people may generate ineffective communication.

To develop effective communication in the ASEAN business environment requires English to not only be the focus, but also the cultures need to be involved because ASEAN Englishes are influenced by the national compositions mentioned earlier. Therefore, when English is used in communication situations where it is not the first language (L1) and involves interlocutors of various cultures, English might be a communication barrier. Cultures have influence and are an integral part of communication and create more complexity when communication is taking place internationally (Deresky, 2002). The link between culture and communication means mere language competency is not enough to succeed with a business mission; businesses must be careful of different cultural patterns, social interactions, and communication styles (Bunchapattanasakda, Thitthongkam, &

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Walsh, 2011; Qingxue, 2003). According to Qingxue (2003), cultural differences raise possible challenges and problems for individuals and businesses who lack cultural knowledge. In sum, the combination of distinctive linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds makes ASEAN intercultural business communication challenging. Hence, the concept of intercultural communication plays a vital role in international communication among ASEAN businesses. For ASEAN integration, this survey focused on the challenges of English use for intercultural business communication in the ASEAN context and will be beneficial to international businesses, including English users in the business field, in their efforts to profit from a single ASEAN market.

## Literature Review

### Intercultural Business Communication

Culture, which is beliefs, norms, and values shared in one place, results in people having different perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, reactions, and communication methods (Cullen & Parboteeah, 2005; Deresky, 2002; Keles, 2013; Lung, 2010; Nomnian & Arphattananon, 2018; St.John, 1996). Intercultural communication is defined as an interaction between individuals with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Gudykunst, 2003). Since ASEAN people are involved with intercultural communication when they undertake international business with other ASEAN members, they must be careful of different interpretations and this may lead to apprehension when they are pushed to a more language-culture contact setting (Deresky, 2002; Gudykunst, 2003; Varner & Beamer, 2011).

Like others, ASEAN business people show dissimilarities in communication practice and behavior due to cultural patterns (Chen, Hsu, & Caropreso, 2006; Qingxue, 2003). The implication is that although English is a formal medium, they not only have to deal with language competency, but they must also focus on the distinctiveness of English that this variety produces and is affected by culture (Kirkpatrick, 2007, 2008). This fact has led to this review of the challenges of English use in intercultural communication.

### Challenges in Intercultural Communication

Drawing on previous research, several factors are considered as challenges to intercultural communication (such as listenership, anxiety, prejudice, and stereotypes), and these may interfere with communication between people from different cultures (Barna, 1997; De Vries, Baker-Pieper, Siberg, Van Gameren, & Vlug, 2009; Kramsch, 1993; Nomnian, 2018a,b; Tannen, 1984). From the review, researchers found that language, context; communicative styles, and indirectness are the four main challenges in international communication that primarily influence language use and interpretation. Thus, they are the focus of this current study.

*Language*, including vocabulary, syntax, and dialect, is a barrier to intercultural communication, and its differences among users who hold different levels of competency may cause problems when they stick to a certain meaning (Barna, 1997). Marschan-Peikkari, Welch, and Welch (1999) confirmed

that such differences can distort the content. Linguistic knowledge is not enough for intercultural communication, and interpretation needs an awareness of connotation.

*Context*, or the environment in which a communication takes place, influences the meanings and poses a constraint for word choices (Barna, 1997; Jackson, 2014; Kramsch, 1993). In this study, context includes socio-cultural factors influencing ASEAN business people's communication. In brief, it refers to the ASEAN socio-cultural context, where Thai business people interact with their ASEAN partners. The context partly constructs the meaning of messages sent to other partners and influences all parties' expectations and understanding of the content due to the different frames of reference (Kramsch, 1993; Varner & Beamer, 2011). This suggests that context correlates with English use in the international business context.

*Communicative style* is the way of sending messages and interacting with others (De Vries et al., 2009). The style can be expressed in many forms, such as pacing, pausing, and intonation, varying according to the interlocutors' culture (Tannen, 1984). Also, the different styles may make communicators feel more or less encouraged to interact, affect their response and the conclusion drawn, or even lead a person with a different cultural background, experience, or knowledge to be confused or misunderstand the message (Peltokorpi, 2007; Tannen, 1984).

*Indirectness*, a product of cultural differences, is one challenge appearing in intercultural communication. Tannen (1984) claimed that indirectness requires interlocutors to guess a real meaning of the messages that contain subtle meanings. Reviews associated with ASEAN imply that indirect messages are used to avoid conflicts and cultural insensitivity, and affirmative statements are sometimes needed to clarify contents (Asefeso, 2012; Bhasin, 2010; Curry & Nguyen, 2009; Francia, 1997; Lupo et al., 2011; Ondrejova, Rebrova, & Ondrej, 2013). In short, messages are sent implicitly and allusively in most communications in ASEAN; thus, indirectness is a factor that must be considered in intercultural communication.

All in all, intercultural communication concepts and the four challenges mentioned should be taken into account when engaging in international business communication, where diverse cultures are involved and English is the priority language used.

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach to examine challenges encountered by Thai business people working in various industries: construction (28.13%), electronics (14.06%), petroleum (12.5%), automobile (12.5%), food (9.38%), legal service (6.25%), event management (6.25%), and others (10.94%), in their use of English in ASEAN business communication in Thailand. They communicated with ASEAN partners in English and experienced intercultural communication. Based on the criteria, the data were obtained from 100 English-Thai questionnaires (Cronbach coefficient alpha value of .95) and 12 semi-structured interviews.

With purposive sampling, the Department of International Trade Promotion (DITP)'s list of Thai corporations investing in

ASEAN (as cited in Biothai, 2013) was utilized as the data had already been grouped based on the countries where they invested. DITP's online directory of Thailand's Exporters (2014) and a list of Thai exporters and importers (Ministry of Commerce, 2014) are the other sources for acquiring respondents. Still, the recruitment could not cover intercultural business communication in all ASEAN countries; the study missed some respondents who possibly represented those who communicated with Bruneians. Thus, a snowball sampling technique helped access potential respondents who had low visibility and it was hard to identify their location (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Hence, the researcher had sufficient collaboration and was reassured that English communication between Thai and other ASEAN business people was reflected via this investigation.

When the respondents had completed the questionnaire that had been scrutinized by scholars and trialed with 30 respondents with similar qualifications to the target respondents, they were asked about their willingness to be interviewed and their contact information. Even though 42 percent of them showed their willingness to join the interviews, only 12 respondents (28.57%) provided their contact information and were available for the interviews based on two main topics: (1) English use and skills affecting

ASEAN business communication; and (2) cultural influences on ASEAN English communication.

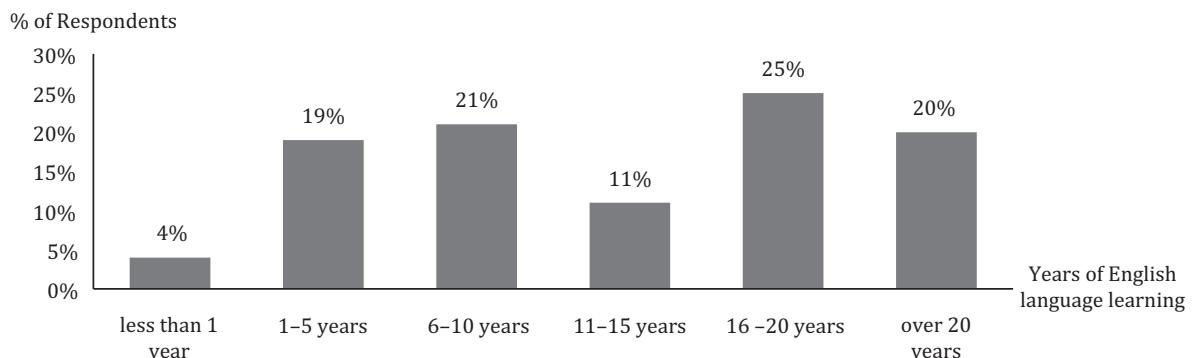
### Respondents

Of all respondents, 68 graduated with a bachelor's degree (68%), 25 with a master's degree (25%), and 7 respondents obtained a vocational certificate (7%). Interestingly, most of them had studied English for a long time: 25 percent of them for 16–20 years, 21 percent for 6–10 years, and 20 percent for over 20 years (see Figure 1).

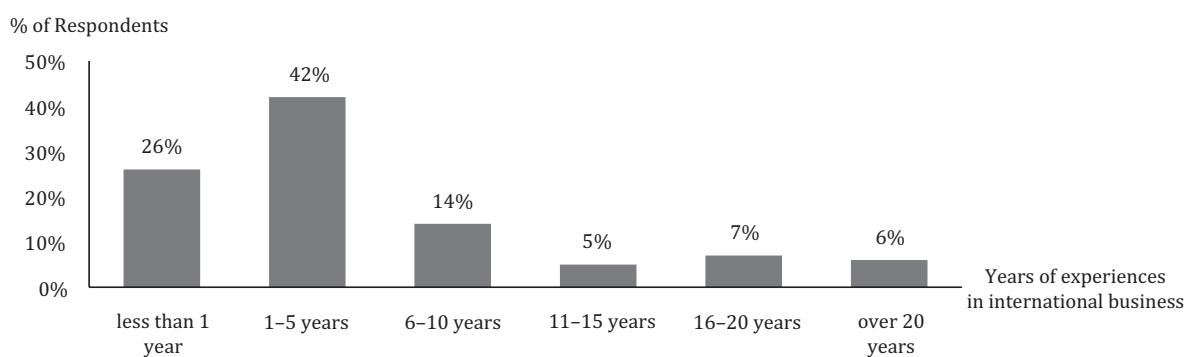
Nearly half of the respondents were subordinates (49%) while the others worked in first-line management positions (22%), middle management (24%), or top management (5%). Furthermore, 42 percent had 1–5 year's international business experience (see Figure 2).

Their main business partners in ASEAN were: Singapore (16.47%), Malaysia (16.08%), Myanmar (16.08%), Indonesia (11.37%), the Philippines (10.59%), Vietnam (10.2%), Laos (9.02%), Cambodia (6.67%), and Brunei (3.53%).

Twelve respondents were interviewed and their details are summarized in Table 1. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain their privacy.



**Figure 1** English language learning background



**Figure 2** Experiences in international business

**Table 1** Lists of interviewees

Name	Educational background	English language learning	Industry	Years in ASEAN business	ASEAN partners
Amy	Bachelor in Arts	6–10 years	Construction	2 years	Myanmar
Bee	Master in Business	> 20 years	Education	3 years	Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam
Dech	Bachelor in Engineering	1–5 year(s)	Construction	1 year	Myanmar
Ink	Master in Law	16–20 years	Legal service	2 years	Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Singapore, Vietnam
Lin	Master in Business	> 20 years	Food	1 year	Brunei
Nat	Bachelor in Fine Arts	1–5 year(s)	Food	3 years	Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore
Nuch	Master in Business	11–15 years	Publishing	4 months	Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam
Pat	Bachelor in Business	> 20 years	Electronics	2 years	Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Vietnam
Plai	Master in Hospitality Management	> 20 years	Food	3 years	Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore
Prin	Bachelor in Accounting	16–20 years	Accounting	1 year	Malaysia, Singapore
Ta	Master in Law	> 20 years	Construction	1 year	Philippines
Vin	Master in Business	1–5 year(s)	Finance	3 years	Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam

## Data Analysis

Based on the descriptive statistics and content analysis, the data were interpreted in terms of intercultural communication concepts and the challenges discussed earlier. The statistics came from data obtained from questionnaires, classified into groups by a basic formula for interpretation.

**Table 2** Interpretation of quantitative responses

Scale	Score range	Mean rating	Challenging level
4	3.26–4.00	Strongly agree	Very high
3	2.51–3.25	Agree	High
2	1.76–2.50	Disagree	Moderate
1	1.00–1.75	Strongly disagree	Low

The qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and sent to the interviewees for verification. After getting feedback, the research followed the data coding procedure of Kumar (2005). The scripts were analyzed in four stages: (1) understanding the meaning of responses and developing themes, (2) identifying the themes through data coding, (3) classifying the responses into the different themes, and (4) integrating the themes and responses to present the findings.

## Results and Discussion

The result showed that Thai business people encountered language and/or cultural challenges when doing business internationally. Nearly half respondents faced both types of challenge (47%) while some faced challenges in language (37%) or culture (16%). This result matched with the interview findings that language and culture were a challenge when communicating with their ASEAN counterparts.

*Extract 1: Language and culture are challenges if we aren't good at them. (Nuch, 17/1/2015)*

Prin added that culture influences language use and may cause negative outcomes.

*Extract 2: Culture's a challenge. Our language may conflict*

*with another culture. It probably causes some bad effects to a business. (Prin, 29/12/2014)*

Extract 2 implies that mistakes or errors in language use caused problems if they went against another's culture. Thai business people should understand their partners' culture to avoid problems.

*Extract 3: We must understand their culture. Then, we can adjust to their community and communicate with them. (Vin, 13/1/2015)*

This extract shows how culture, including language, is important to international business communication. Vin explained, he could interact well with his partners due to cultural understanding that helped him tune his business counterparts.

To sum up, language and culture are two challenges in ASEAN business communication. With a lack of linguistic and cultural understanding, messages might produce unfavorable effects. In contrast, the challenges could be overcome by sufficient language skills and cultural knowledge.

### Intercultural Communication Challenges in an ASEAN Business Context

The bonding of language, culture, and communication created challenges: in language, context, communicative style, and indirectness, in English use. The respondents focused on answering *What challenges do international businesses encounter using English in ASEAN communication?* (Table 3).

Table 3 indicates that Thai business people faced all the challenges: language ( $\bar{x} = 2.96$ ), context ( $\bar{x} = 3.20$ ), communicative style ( $\bar{x} = 3.01$ ), and indirectness ( $\bar{x} = 2.95$ ). Although the mean scores shows that their levels of challenges were high ( $2.51 < \bar{x} < 3.25$ ) and not very different, context seemed to be the highest challenging factor in communication with their ASEAN counterparts in English. In other words, context was as a key to successful ASEAN intercultural business communication. The next section discusses these challenges individually.

**Table 3** Thai businesspersons' challenges in ASEAN intercultural communication

Intercultural communication challenges in ASEAN business context	Number of items	$\bar{x}$	Range		SD	Level of challenge
			Min.	Max.		
1. Language	4	2.96	1	4	.456	High
2. Context	3	3.20	1	4	.421	High
3. Communicative style	3	3.01	1	4	.422	High
4. Indirectness	4	2.95	1	4	.496	High

### Language

The findings (Table 4) revealed that language strongly challenged Thai business people using English in ASEAN, even though they had learnt English for many years. The respondents could understand their partners' English ( $\bar{x} = 2.84$ ), but different interpretations remain at a high level ( $\bar{x} = 2.84$ ). They perceived that cultures made ASEAN Englishes different ( $\bar{x} = 3.16$ ) but still hardly understood their partners with regard to unique meanings or connotations ( $\bar{x} = 3.00$ ).

*Extract 4: Words they used are difficult. Tenses are involved. At first, the content indicated that an event is going to happen but I get confused after they switched to another tense. (Amy, 14/1/2015)*

Amy coped with the different vocabulary and grammar used by her ASEAN partner. She revealed that the differences led to confusion. This was like Ta's situation.

*Extract 5: An obstacle is in terms of not understanding each other.. Each country uses different words to refer to the same thing... I was confused when they talked about them. (Ta, 2/1/2015)*

This implies that different language skills and use generated challenges in international business communication. Different words referred to the same thing in different contexts although both parties used the same language. This shows that culture affected language uses and created different interpretations.

Based on the data, cultural influence meant that ASEAN business people used English differently, which might cause confusion. Thus, Thai business people were challenged when communicating with their ASEAN partners. They sometimes could not fully understand their partners by relying only on their English skills; they needed to consider also how culture influenced language use.

To deal with language differences better, the study presented the percentage of each English skill that was regarded as challenging Thai business people in ASEAN intercultural communication. According to the findings, the most challenging skills were speaking (39.01%), listening (31.91%), writing (21.28%), and reading (7.09%) in that order. Some respondents added vocabulary (0.71%) as another challenge in English use for their international work. The statistics were correlated with the interviewees' responses; speaking was the most challenging skill because it supported businesses to achieve goals.

*Extract 6: It's the speaking because success comes from how well we can make them understand. There have been many times I failed because they didn't understand what I said. (Ta, 2/1/2015)*

Speaking was a part of business success, but it was doubled edged. When messages could not be conveyed properly through speaking, they might cause problems. Another interviewee agreed that speaking was the most essential skill for communication in ASEAN.

*Extract 7: It's the speaking. I want them to understand me and want to impress them because business must start with intimacy. We have to pass on them our thoughts and plans to get the intimacy. If the words we deliver are misinterpreted; it's sometimes terrible. (Lin, 9/1/2015)*

As Lin said, speaking was utilized to impress others. It was a tool for building a relationship with partners and making business fruitful. However, problems might rise when both sides had different interpretations. Therefore, business people had to be concerned with the way they spoke with their business partners to prevent miscommunication that could possibly result in business failure.

All in all, English differences, such as words, structures and usage, were one challenge for ASEAN intercultural communication. Thai business people knew about cultural effects on ASEAN Englishes but could barely understand their business partners and often had a different interpretation. Speaking was the most challenging skill to communicate with ASEAN people. As a result, they required linguistic and cultural knowledge and had to deliver their message with care to overcome negative effects.

### Context

To focus on context, cultural knowledge, socio-cultural factors, and learning about culture were studied. Based on Table 5, the respondents highly agreed that cultural knowledge brought them to their goals ( $\bar{x} = 3.21$ ), and socio-cultural factors strongly influenced their communication with ASEAN partners ( $\bar{x} = 3.16$ ). They believed cultural learning would greatly help them understand their business partners' messages ( $\bar{x} = 3.17$ ).

The qualitative data confirmed these conclusions; cultural knowledge was a must for ASEAN intercultural business communication, and Thai business people with cultural knowledge of their business partners avoided or faced less conflict with other culture's nuances in their business dealings with them.

*Extract 8: I rarely have a problem with them because we know each other's culture. We know what can be discussed and what should be avoided. (Amy, 14/1/2015)*

**Table 4** Language challenges

	Language	$\bar{x}$	SD
1. ASEAN Englishes are easily to understand.		2.84	.634
2. ASEAN Englishes are different due to culture of each ASEAN country.		3.16	.621
3. Words, phrases, and sentences with a unique meaning or use in each ASEAN culture cause difficulties in understanding them.		3.00	.639
4. There are different interpretations of communication contents among ASEAN business people.		2.84	.666

**Table 5** Context challenges

	Context	$\bar{x}$	SD
1. Knowledge of ASEAN partners' culture is vital to business success.		3.21	.662
2. Socio-cultural factors (e.g. social status, distance, relationship) influence ways of communicating with ASEAN business partners.		3.16	.566
3. Learning cultures helps to better understand verbal and non-verbal messages of ASEAN business partners.		3.17	.515

Amy avoided conflicts because she knew her business partner's culture and how to communicate properly. Hence, she conducted business more smoothly than those who had limited cultural knowledge.

Socio-cultural factors should not be ignored. As shown in extract 9, the respondent mentions a hierarchy in Thailand that is incorporated into the English used by Thais.

*Extract 9: Thais pay elders respect by referring to them with the word "khun". I also use it. Others, like Singaporeans, may not have a seniority system. (Nuch, 17/1/2015)*

Although Nuch communicated in English, she still insisted on using "khun". This might confuse her partners who had a lack of Thai cultural knowledge.

Context affects the meaning and understanding, but cultural learning and understanding could reduce this challenge. With context, Thai business people could properly adjust themselves to ASEAN people although their socio-cultural environment was not as familiar.

The findings indicated that Thai business people could achieve their goals when they knew and understood their ASEAN partners' culture because cultural knowledge and understanding helped them handle particular socio-cultural factors better and then they could conduct smoother communication.

#### Communicative Style

Besides pace and pausing and intonation, accent and pronunciation were included. Table 6 shows that communicative style affected communication between Thai and their partners. Based on the mean scores, Thai business people highly perceived and were aware of different communicative styles between them and their ASEAN business partners. The styles differed from each other due to culture ( $\bar{x} = 2.95$ ), so they had to use proper ways to communicate ( $\bar{x} = 2.97$ ). Most respondents stated that their way of communicating relied heavily on their business partner's personality ( $\bar{x} = 3.11$ ).

Most interviewees agreed that an English accent and pace were the top challenges. According to Prin's experience, he felt that accent and pace made him pay closer attention to ASEAN partners.

*Extract 10: Challenges in using English are about listening to different accents, pace and pausing, and nasal twang.... It's hard to catch their words. (Prin, 29/12/2014)*

Regarding communicative style included ordering and delivering ideas, Vin talked about his challenges.

*Extract 11: How to communicate is the challenge. That's*

*their ideas ordering. Some start with a cause and end with an outcome, but others focus on the outcome first. It's culture. (Vin, 13/1/2015)*

From Vin's statement, how ASEAN business people communicate was as a cultural product influenced by cognitive processes and message delivery. To be successful, Thai business people needed to consider ways to deliver the message and interact with ASEAN partners appropriately.

#### Indirectness

Indirect messages were used to avoid cultural sensitivity. Practically, a challenge may exist in ASEAN, so the study included this issue as indicated in Table 7.

The mean scores of each item were high and this could imply that indirectness existed in the ASEAN context and affected business communication. Most respondents confirmed that their business partners' communication was indirect due to social norms and values such as seniority and face-saving ( $\bar{x} = 2.97$ ), and non-verbal language supported their success in ASEAN intercultural communication ( $\bar{x} = 2.82$ ). Indirectness in the communication might generate communication hitches, but it was eliminated at a high level by checking mutual understanding ( $\bar{x} = 3.14$ ). This was the reason why most of the interviewees saw less hidden meaning in their ASEAN business partners' messages ( $\bar{x} = 2.88$ ). The findings agreed with the qualitative data below.

*Extract 12: When my business partner dealt with me, she didn't say directly. I gave options and suggestions, but she kept being silent. Regretfully, she rejected it later. (Ta, 2/1/2015)*

Not only did ASEAN business people apply indirectness, but also did Thais. To deal with indirectness, it was better to check whether the other party understood and got the right messages.

*Extract 13: My ASEAN partners didn't understand when they simply nodded. They're confused and couldn't respond when I asked. This happened after a business trip to Myanmar. After that, I always check their understanding. (Nat, 14/1/2015)*

Nat said that confirming mutual understanding helped to avoid wasting time and opportunities. Similarly, Plai claimed that being direct was enough for doing business in ASEAN.

*Extract 14: It needs nothing special apart from being direct and polite. (Plai, 27/1/2015)*

Business people might feel uncomfortable when they deal with indirectness, but checking mutual understanding could help them. They should also get to the point and be clear; they happily completed business activities then.

**Table 6** Communicative-style challenges

Communicative Style	$\bar{x}$	SD
1. Your culture and communication style are different from those of your international business partners.	2.95	.460
2. Different ways to communicate must be considered for partners from different ASEAN nations.	2.97	.579
3. ASEAN business partners' personality affects your ways of communicating with them.	3.11	.604

**Table 7** Indirectness challenges

Indirectness	$\bar{x}$	SD
1. Most ASEAN business partners mean what they say or write with no hidden meaning.	2.88	.659
2. Thai business people have to confirm mutual understanding or agreement with ASEAN business partners	3.14	.606
3. Most ASEAN communication is indirect due to social norms and values.	2.97	.646
4. Non-verbal or body language is a key to success.	2.82	.837

As part of the challenges in using English for ASEAN intercultural communication, different language skills, including connotations, make communication difficult due to their influences on the understanding and interpretation of words, phrases, and sentences that are affected by certain cultures (Barna, 1997). The findings confirmed that Thai and other ASEAN business people have different linguistic backgrounds and competencies. They used different words and sentence structures that led to different interpretations and loss of message content. This makes language a challenge for Thai business people.

Context also links to English use in ASEAN intercultural business communication in both verbal and non-verbal messaging, and it is vital to understand content because it helps to interpret messages correctly (Varner & Beamer, 2011). The findings indicated that Thai business people and their ASEAN counterparts use different words to discuss the same items. With a lack of cultural knowledge, a similar frame of reference, and awareness of cultural differences, the communicating parties get confused and the communication is ineffective and consumes a lot of time (Barna, 1997; Jackson, 2014; Krämer, 1993). This was the case for Nuch whose English was influenced by socio-cultural composition and expressed through her English use (see Extract 9).

According to Tannen (1984), communicative style refers to pacing and pausing (speed) and intonation; it affects the response and interpretation. With dissimilar cultural backgrounds or knowledge, Thai business people do not understand their ASEAN interlocutors due to their different ways of communicating and interacting. The style creates confusion and misunderstanding among the Thai participants in the communication, and, at the same time, they need to consider and use appropriate ways to communicate with their ASEAN business partners. Based on the findings, accent and pronunciation are also parts of this challenge.

The last challenge is indirectness, which can be seen in spoken and/or written content and is culturally bonded. In Asia, indirect messages are used to avoid conflicts and cultural sensitivity (Inphoo & Nomnian, 2019). Hence, messages are conveyed implicitly and allusively in most communication in the region including the ASEAN community. In practical terms, the challenge exists within ASEAN and may generates discomfort for both Thai and other ASEAN business people. However, it can be minimized to cause less or no negative impact if verification of each party's understanding of the content takes place. Business people should also be direct when it comes to business: get to the point and be clear. As a result, they will be able to complete business activities with satisfactory outcomes.

Language and culture play roles in ASEAN intercultural communication. Noticeably, Thai business people faced all the challenges—language, context, communicative style, and indirectness—in different situations and aspects. Their language use was different and affected by cultural differences. Although they perceived the differences, they still needed more cultural knowledge to understand ASEAN Englishes, to be aware of the context, to be familiar with different communicative styles of ASEAN people, and to properly deal with indirectness in ASEAN intercultural business communication.

## Conclusion

Cultural influences generate challenges in terms of language, context, communicative style, and indirectness; thus, Thai business people need to make an effort to improve their English skills due to very limited English proficiency. Having only the language skill is not enough to handle the variety of ASEAN Englishes and diverse cultures. Thais have to be realistic and flexible in dealing with ASEAN Englishes, cultures, and business counterparts. This means that a variety of ASEAN English usages in different contexts and ASEAN cultural knowledge, particularly involving communication, should be included in English training programs and course materials. By following these guidelines, Thai business people can conduct better intercultural business communication and, in the end, achieve their business goals.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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