

The Challenge Facing Thai Graduates and Their Potential for English-Required Workforce

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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study were (a) to examine whether the subjects' English proficiency, measured by TOEIC scores, is qualified for most working positions in the Thai workforce, to which English is required, and (b) to investigate how the subjects' English language learning motivation and motivational variables are related to the attainment of their English proficiency.

The subjects were 80 fourth-year Management Sciences students at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai Campus. The instruments used for data collection were the subjects' TOEIC scores and a questionnaire on subjects' motivation and motivational variables in English language learning.

The findings revealed that, first, the average English proficiency of the subjects was classified as an "intermediate" proficiency level (462 out of the 990 TOEIC score) with some limited career prospects for Thai workforce, to which English is required. Second, the positive and significant relationships were found among the subjects' attitudes, intrinsic motivation, and their English proficiency at $p < .05$.

It was therefore suggested that any possible English teaching techniques and learning activities should be utilised to create and develop learners' positive attitudes and intrinsic motivation for their success in English language learning and subsequently their higher level of English language proficiency.

Key words: relationships, motivation, motivational variables, English proficiency, Prince of Songkla University

INTRODUCTION

English has spread into many countries, including Thailand, as the main language of globalization which is bringing about a major transition in business and education in Thailand. Obviously, in both domestic and multinational corporations in Thailand, *English language proficiency* has been considered as one of the most important criteria for staff recruitment and promotion. One of the most reliable measures of English proficiency is the Test of English for International Communication

(TOEIC). Many jobs in Thailand require varying TOEIC test scores (Table 1).

There seems to be a contradiction between the relative great demand placed on English proficiency and the inadequate English proficiency of Thai learners. Currently, inadequate English proficiency is a significant problem for Thai learners trying to meet the requirements of employers for staff to possess adequate English language skills. Based on the 2005 TOEIC test results, Thai test takers did not do well when compared with test takers in neighboring countries like the Philippines, Singapore and Cambodia.

Table 1 TOEIC-required positions in domestic and multinational companies in Thailand.

Minimum score requirements	Positions
300-400	hotel waiter/waitress/bartender, hotel room-service order taker, airport information clerk, bookkeeper, hotel head waiter, operations officer, shipping and receiving clerk
500	aircraft maintenance engineer
550	business service center agent, customs agent, customer service representative
600	assistant hotel manager, flight attendant, and sales manager
650-750	accountant, engineer, system analyst, sales coordinator, cooperate secretary officer, and logistics engineer
800	executive manager, executive secretary, general manager, logistics coordinator, marketing manager, senior accountant

Source: The Nation ('Jobs', pp. 4-10), Bangkok Post ('Classified', pp. 1-5), TOEIC Examinee Handbook (p. 39), and the Internet <http://www.jobbkk.com>; <http://jobstone.blogspot.com>; <http://www.jobpub.com/articles/showarticles.asp?id=500>.

Table 2 The 2005 average TOEIC scores.

Average TOEIC scores (2004-2005)	
Country	Average score (maximum possible score: 990)
1. Philippines	751
2. Singapore	628
3. Cambodia	606
4. Thailand	524
5. Indonesia	471
6. Vietnam	446

Source: The Weekly Manager ('Education', p. D6); ETS, 2005; and http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2005/08/10/headlines/data/headlines_18305734.html.

The average score of Thai TOEIC test takers was at 524 which came fourth among six Asian countries in 2005 (Table 2).

The average TOEIC score of Thai test takers in 2005 was at 524 (Table 2) which met only the requirements for some positions of hotel waiter/waitress/bartender, hotel room-service order taker, airport information clerk, or bookkeeper (Table 1). There are also many studies revealing the low levels of Thai learners' average English proficiency measured by TOEIC (Wilson and Chavanich, 1989; Wilson and Stupak, 2001; Wilson *et al.*, 2004; ETS, 2005; Anonymous, 2005a).

As English proficiency leads to employment opportunities, it is obvious that low English language proficiency must be considered a barrier to Thai

university graduates' career prospects, since more and more jobs demand an ability to communicate in English, particularly in the workplaces where English is a required language. This requirement for English communication ability in the Thai workforce challenges Thai educational institutions to produce graduates who can meet the intense demands of proficiency in English. However, in the survey researching employers' career satisfaction conducted by the Planning and Development Division, Prince of Songkla University (PSU) in 2005, employers of the graduates from PSU in 2003 ranked the graduates' English language proficiency as the third most unsatisfactory job qualification, after leadership and management ability (PSU, 2005).

It appears that the English proficiency of Thai test takers is relatively low and that of PSU graduates might not meet employers' requirements and stated job qualifications. This low or insufficient English proficiency must be considered a serious problem for the career opportunities of Thai graduates and other job applicants, since one of the most important job requirements is proficiency in English.

There could be several factors in English language learning that are related to learners' English language proficiency such as motivation, attitudes, and anxiety about using English. It should be pointed out that there have been a relatively small number of studies on Thai university fourth-year students' English proficiency with relation to career opportunities and on motivation and motivational variables towards the students' English language learning.

Purposes of the study

The purposes of this study were to investigate: 1) whether the subjects' English proficiency can be regarded as sufficient for most working positions in the Thai workforce to which the subjects' fields of study are relevant, and 2) whether and how the subjects' English language learning motivation and motivational variables are related to the attainment of their English proficiency.

Research questions

1. What is the English language proficiency of the subjects?
2. What are the relationships among motivation, motivational variables, and English language proficiency of the subjects?

RELATED LITERATURE

The significance of English proficiency was stated in a chapter of the Educational Reform Act – Thai learners should have global literacy which means that they must know and understand English to be qualified as world citizens. Moreover, one of the standards for English proficiency in the Basic

Education Curriculum 2001 is the ability to use English as a tool for learning, for further study, and for career (Ministry of Education, 2002).

English language proficiency is defined as the degree of a learner's skill with which a learner can use a language, such as how well a learner can read, write, speak, or understand the language. English proficiency may be measured through the use of a proficiency test such as TOEIC (Richards et al., 1992; Davies et al., 1999).

There have been many studies by researchers using standardized TOEIC (Wilson and Chavanich, 1989; Wilson et al., 2004; and ETS, 2005) in their studies of Thai learners' English proficiency, and its relationship with learner variables. Most of these studies revealed the inadequacy of Thai learners' English proficiency. The problems of inadequate proficiency in English among Thai learners have so far been presented in many studies. Most of Thai school students who study English at every level neither reach the school criteria of their particular levels nor have their satisfactory abilities in using English in all four skills (Ruksasut, 1985 and Sukamolson, 1990; cited in Thongpinit, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2002). Moreover, Thai learners' English proficiency, as their average scores in TOEIC, was lower than that of other nationalities such as Burmese, Cambodian, Filipino, Indonesian, Laotian, Singaporean, and Vietnamese (ETS, 2005).

The English proficiency of the subjects in the present study is measured by the standardized Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) examination which is a test of proficiency in English as a foreign language (EFL) of non-native English speakers. A TOEIC score is used to evaluate non-native English speakers' communicative English proficiency (Woodford, 1982; Wilson and Chavanich, 1989; and Wilson et al., 2004). In the present study, in order to facilitate the analysis of data concerning the subjects' English language proficiency, the criteria for the interpretation of TOEIC scores as English proficiency are summarized in Table 3.

To better understand the variety of levels of

English proficiency among non-native English learners, factors relating to English language learning, such as motivation and motivational variables, relevant to such proficiency levels are then studied.

Motivation can be defined as an internal state or condition of need, impulse, or desire that initiates, directs, and maintains a learner's behavior to move to a particular performance (Brown, 1994). Based on Brown's study (2000), motivation can be viewed from both learner and language learning perspectives. In terms of learner aspects, motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic. *Intrinsic motivation* refers to a learner's desire to learn a foreign language for personal reasons due to feelings of competence and self-determination when s/he is free to choose to perform a learning task. *Extrinsic motivation* refers to the learner's desire to learn a foreign language in anticipation of an apparent reward (money, prizes, grades, or certain types of positive feedback) from outside and beyond the self (parents, peers, or teachers). Students would have intrinsic motivation towards English language learning when they

experience a feeling of achievement on their English language learning or feel English language learning to be more meaningful and enjoyable to them (Deci and Ryan, 1985, cited in Noels et al., 2000, Ellis, 1989; Brown, 2000; Noels et al., 2000). Olgren (2000, cited in Oz, 2005) differentiates intrinsic and extrinsic motivation by virtue of intrinsic motivation being relevant to the reasons for English skill (listening, speaking, reading and writing) development, intellectual achievement, and self-satisfaction. In contrast, extrinsic motivation is related to the reasons for grades, academic requirements, and educational advancement.

In terms of the language learning aspect, motivation can be integrative or instrumental. *Integrative motivation* refers to the learner's desire to learn a foreign language to integrate into the target language community whereas *instrumental motivation* refers to the learner's desire to learn a language for such instrumental goals or functional purposes as getting a job or passing an examination (Ellis, 1989; Brown, 2000). In EFL settings, integrative motivation

Table 3 Criteria for the interpretation of TOEIC scores as English proficiency.

TOEIC score range	Proficiency level	Proficiency description	Position
200-395	Elementary	Able to satisfy basic survival requirements.	hotel room-service order taker, hotel waiter/waitress/bartender
	Proficiency	Can initiate and maintain face-to-face conversations; satisfy limited social demands.	airport information clerk, bookkeeper, business service center agent, customs agent, hotel service representative, operations officer, head waiter, customer shipping and receiving clerk
400-595	Intermediate		
	Proficiency		
600-795	Working		
	Proficiency	Able to satisfy limited work requirements and routine social demands.	accountant, assistant hotel manager, cooperate secretary officer, coordinator, engineer, flight attendant, logistics engineer, sales manager, system analyst
800-990	Advanced	Able to satisfy most work requirements with acceptable and effective language usage.	executive manager, executive secretary, general manager, logistics coordinator, marketing manager, senior accountant
	Working		
	Proficiency		

Source: Rogers, 2003: 5, Rymniak, 1997: 11, and TOEIC Examinee Handbook (p. 39), The Nation ('Jobs', pp. 4-10), Bangkok Post ('Classified', pp. 1-5), and the Internet.

was previously overlooked in most Asian countries where English is necessary only for career and business purposes; therefore, instrumental motivation appears more dominant (Lukmani, 1972; Kachru, 1992; Warden and Lin, 2000; Runmei, 2002; Krieger, 2005; Rahman, 2005). However, with the advent of the era of globalization, there has been more focus upon the role of integrative motivation (Lamb, 2004). Similarly, Benson (1991) also discovered that integrative and personal reasons (intrinsic motivation) for learning English in the globalizing world were equally important with instrumental reasons. In his study, the majority of Japanese learners needed to use English not only to interact with English speakers, but also to communicate with other non-native English speakers who used English for international communication.

Although language learners may be equally motivated to learn the target language, the sources of their motivation may differ and thereby result in different levels of language proficiency. Studies on *motivational variables* – factors impacting language learning motivation – have been conducted by many researchers and scholars. In this study, motivational variables were classified into two factors: attitudes and anxiety.

METHODS

The population of the study was 95 fourth-year PSU Thai students in the Faculty of Management Sciences (Hat Yai Campus) in the second semester of the 2005 academic year, who took the official TOEIC examination at PSU, Hat Yai Campus, from January 30 to February 1, 2006. However, only 80 subjects returned their validly-completed questionnaires, representing 88.89% of the voluntary subjects, and 84.21% of the population of the study. Thus, a total of 80 subjects were used in this main study.

Two research instruments used to collect data for this study were the standardized TOEIC examination (ETS, 2006) and a questionnaire. The

official TOEIC examination was administered by the Bangkok Educational Testing Service (ETS) representative from January 30 to February 1, 2006 at the TOEIC test center, Prince of Songkla University (PSU), Hat Yai Campus. The subjects' TOEIC scores were taken as indicators of their English language proficiency. The total TOEIC score of 990 are derived from the 200 multiple-choice items (100 listening items and 100 reading items).

The second instrument was the 38-item questionnaire developed by the researcher to elicit the data of the students' motivation and motivational variables in English language learning. In addition to the content validity of the designed questionnaire, the reliability of the questionnaire statistically analyzed, using the formula of Cronbach alpha coefficient (α -coefficient), was at the high level of .85.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

English language proficiency of the subjects

Out of the 990 total TOEIC score, the subjects' average score was 462 ($SD = 117.90$) with a range of 250 and 880. The relatively low level of the subjects' English proficiency could be a limiting factor to their career prospects since their level of English proficiency might only qualify them for some working positions such as hotel room-service order taker, hotel waiter/waitress/bartender, airport information clerk, bookkeeper, or shipping and receiving clerk. Table 4 shows the ranges of TOEIC scores and their interpretation of all the subjects' English language proficiency.

Relationships among motivation, motivational variables and English proficiency of the subjects

Table 5 shows the relationships of each aspect of motivation (intrinsic, extrinsic, integrative, and instrumental motivation) and motivational variables (attitudes and anxiety) to English proficiency.

From Table 5, the subjects' attitudes and intrinsic motivation in English language learning

Table 4 The subjects' English proficiency and score interpretation.

Subjects (N = 80)	TOEIC score range	Proficiency level	Position
25(31%)	200-395	Elementary proficiency	Hotel room-service order taker, hotel waiter/waitress/ bartender
47(59%)	400-595	Intermediate proficiency	Airport information clerk, bookkeeper, business service center agent, customs agent, shipping and receiving clerk
6(7.5%)	600-795	Working proficiency	Accountant, assistant hotel manager, cooperate secretary officer, coordinator, engineer, flight attendant, logistics engineer, sales manager, system analyst
2(2.5%)	800-900	Advanced working proficiency	Executive manager, executive secretary, general manager, logistics coordinator, marketing manager, senior accountant

Table 5 Correlations among motivation, motivational variables and English proficiency.

Factors	Motivation						English proficiency	(N = 80)
	Intrinsic	Extrinsic	Integrative	Instrumental	Attitudes	Anxiety		
- Intrinsic		.592**	.861**	.570**	.738**	.253*	.286*	
- Extrinsic			.581**	.884**	.481**	.095 ^{NS}	.158 ^{NS}	
- Integrative				.585**	.453*	.037 ^{NS}	.080 ^{NS}	
- Instrumental					.400**	-.041 ^{NS}	.160 ^{NS}	
- Attitudes						.296**	.254*	
- Anxiety							.115 ^{NS}	

* p < .05; ** p < .01; NS = Non-significant

were significantly related to their English proficiency at .286 and .254 respectively (p < .05). That is, the subjects, who liked to learn English (positive attitudes) for their personal interest (intrinsic motivation) in order to communicate with people from other countries in their daily lives, possibly achieved higher levels of English proficiency than those who did not like English or did not learn English as a result of their intrinsic motivation. In the present study, the subjects' intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes were also demonstrated by the elective English courses they enrolled in and their reasons for choosing the courses (Tables 6 and 7).

From Table 6, the subjects' enrollment in these elective English courses (English Conversation,

Consolidating Listening and Speaking Skills, or English Grammar for Real Life Communication) could explain that besides the subjects' personal interests in the courses, they also considered the courses useful to their studying or daily lives.

Additionally, in Table 7, some of the main reasons for choosing elective English courses were in order to develop English language skills and because they preferred English to other subjects. The results of the present study were consistent with the studies of intrinsic motivation conducted by Ellis (1989), Oxford and Shearin (1994), Deci and Ryan 1985, cited in Noels *et al.*, 2000 and Vallerand *et al.* (1992, 1993, 1997, cited in Noels *et al.*, 2000). Their studies reveal that intrinsic motivation consists

Table 6 Elective English courses.

Elective English courses	Number of subjects	%
1. English conversation	6	26
2. English for job application	5	22
3. English in the workplace	2	9
4. Consolidating listening and speaking skills	2	9
5. English for tourism business	2	9
6. English for business	2	9
7. English for hotel business	1	4
8. English grammar for real life communication	1	4
9. Improving reading in english	1	4
10. Study skills in english for higher studies	1	4
total	23	100

Table 7 Reasons for studying elective English courses.

Reasons	Number of subjects	%
1. Using the obtained English knowledge in career	31	45
2. Developing English language skills	21	26
3. Liking the English language	17	24
4. Improving the English subject grade/s	2	2
5. Others (no reason/s specified)	2	2
6. Following friends	1	1
7. Being required by family	-	-
total	74	100

of innate needs for competence and for the development of knowledge which exist when learners are free to choose their own courses of learning.

It is also notable that, in Table 6, the highest level of the significant relationship, among factors under investigation, was found between the subjects' extrinsic and instrumental motivation in English language learning at .884 ($p < .01$). This result seems to support that of Noels *et al.*'s (2000) notion that extrinsic motivation is related to the motivation to achieve some instrumental goal such as reasons for grades, academic requirements and educational advancement. Additionally, Lukmani's (1972), Dörnyei's (1988, cited in Takakubo, 2002), Kachru's (1992), Warden and Lin's (2000), Runmei's (2002), Rahman's (2005), and Krieger's (2005) studies pointed out that

in countries where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL), instrumental orientation is the dominant motivation for learners.

Moreover, there was also a significant relationship between the subjects' integrative and instrumental motivation at .585 ($p < .05$). This result was quite similar to Lamb's (2004), Brown's (2000) and Benson's (1991) studies. Their studies reveal that since the era of globalization and its influence on people's lives, learners' integrative and instrumental motivation have become closely related because English has become more relevant to learners' studying, and learners are unavoidably influenced by media and information technology (e.g. the Internet, English newspapers and magazines) which enable them to communicate in English. In fact, it seems that the interaction of all four aspects of motivation

is more complex since the advent of the era of globalization in the middle of the 20th century. The roles of intrinsic, extrinsic, integrative, and instrumental motivation have become more inter-related (Table 5).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study may have useful implications for language learners and teachers in the development of English language learning and teaching to keep pace with the highly competitive era of globalization.

The overall proficiency in English of the subjects in this study was at “intermediate” level, a relatively low level in terms of the overall results achieved internationally on the TOEIC. As English language proficiency is an indicator of career opportunities in the Thai workforce, such an attained level of English proficiency may limit the choice of career open to the subjects of this study. The subjects might only be able to work in some positions such as airport information clerk, bookkeeper, hotel head waiter/waitress/bartender, or shipping and receiving clerk in the Thai workforce. The average level of the subjects’ English proficiency suggests that students generally need to improve their English proficiency to widen their chances for future careers. Therefore, teachers, related departments of the university, and the university need to raise students’ awareness of the significance of English proficiency and its importance in the Thai workforce, and assist the students to realize the necessity and advantages of having high levels of English proficiency, particularly, those students who plan to work for companies or organizations where English is required.

A significant relationship between the subject’s English proficiency and their intrinsic motivation and attitudes was found, though at a relatively low level. The implication of this relationship is that

teachers should find any possible teaching techniques and/or interesting English learning activities that develop students’ intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes towards English language learning to encourage higher levels of English proficiency. Utilising the authenticity of English learning activities by providing English learning tasks which are related to the students’ daily lives and requiring them to use English could be among the potential means. In addition, the significant relationship between the subjects’ integrative and instrumental motivation in the present study could challenge teachers to adapt their teaching techniques or to create English learning tasks capable of exploiting the extensive role played by learners’ motivation and the way in which this affects learners’ proficiency of English.

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