Needs Analysis on English Language Use in Tourism Industry

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Abstract

Needs analysis plays a vital role in developing English for specific purposes curriculum. This study surveyed the needs, functions and problems of English language use by 40 tourism employees. A questionnaire was used and data were analyzed by frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. Findings revealed that speaking is most important, then listening, reading and writing. The three most relevant functions in using English language were giving information, followed by providing services, and offering help. English use problems included: inability to understand foreigners' accents, inappropriate words and expressions, inadequate vocabulary, and lack of grammar knowledge.

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Keywords: Needs analysis; English language; Tourism industry; Tourism employee

1. Introduction

English language plays a very crucial role as the predominant tool for communication in the global community. Some people whose native language is not English use the language in their daily lives (Quirk [1]). Most of these people live in countries where English is required for external purposes: to communicate and do business with people in other countries, and to catch up with the advances in the field of business. In addition, English is used as a means to transfer thoughts and cultures and to create good relationships between people in different countries. As a result, English has become an international language and is widely used as a medium for understanding and exchanging ideas among people all over the world.

Nowadays, the role of English is important for tourism industry as a means to communicate, negotiate, and execute transactions with tourists by tourism employees. Since tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing...
businesses in Thailand, it plays an important role in the Thai economy. As the business earning the second
highest income compared to the other service industries (e.g., it earned about 100,000 million Baht in 2011) and
creating a variety of jobs in business activities (e.g., it created more than 145,000 positions in the service
industry) as reported by the Tourism Authority of Thailand : TAT [2], many education institutions both
government and private including Buriram Rajabhat University, offer undergraduate level English courses related
to tourism business for students who intend to work in tourism or hospitality industry after graduation. These
English courses are involved with the language as mentioned by Blue and Harun [3] who state that English,
which is associated with host-guest interaction in the service business, should be termed as the “language of
hospitality” which refers to all linguistic expressions related to and represented in hospitality concerns. The
language of hospitality is often formal, though it very much depends on the level of acquaintance among the
participants themselves. For example, when hosting an official dinner, international conference or wedding
ceremonies, the hosting arrangements are more formal as compared to encounters among neighbours and friends
which are more casual.

Due to TAT’s success in promoting tourism to increase the number of foreign tourists to Thailand, tourism
needs to be further developed. Due to its promotion, tourism industry can now be called ‘Amazing Thailand’,
‘Thai Extravaganza’, ‘Thailand Grand Festival’, and ‘Unseen in Thailand’. As a result, the role of tourism
industry in generating income and creating jobs could increase. To be good hosts therefore, Thai people who are
directly involved in tourism business should improve their English especially in terms of the language used in
hospitality industry.

At present, tourism employees who work in international tour companies around Thailand have more chances
to use English because of the number of foreigners who come to visit. Although these tourism employees are
trained to use English in real situations using the syllabus written by the experts of this field, a formal need
analysis to help determine the requirements of the English course for tourism employees has never been
conducted. English has so far been taught without systematical survey of needs. Therefore, the syllabus is not
based on the real needs of tourism employees as it should be. It seems inevitable to carry out a formal needs
analysis tourism employee in using English across Thailand. This study, therefore, attempted to investigate the
EL needs, functions and problems faced by tourism employees who work in the international tour companies in
Thailand. The findings of this study will then serve as a guideline to develop or expand the existing English for
tourism course at the universities across Thailand in order to develop a more effective English for tourism course
in the future.

2. Needs Analysis

Needs analysis has been one of the key factors and an integral part of English for specific purpose (ESP)
practitioners; i.e. researchers, course designers, material developers, testers, evaluators as well as classroom
teachers for many years [4]. It is the process of establishing what and how a course will run. Piyanapa [5] states
that needs analysis is a means to identify what a learner receives and helps to determine the ESP course they
require. It is noted that the word ‘needs’ has been used differently by several researchers. The following are the
ways in which ‘needs’ can be defined:

Firstly, needs can be considered as the learner’s study or job requirements; that is, what they have to be able
demonstrate at the end of their language course. Widowson [6] views this type of needs as a goal-oriented
definition; whereas, Berwick [7] perceives it as ‘objective’. Secondly, needs can be defined as what the learner
has to actually do to acquire the language. According to Widowson [6], this is a process-oriented definition of
needs and is related to transitional behaviour, the tool for learning. Thirdly, needs can refer to what the learners
themselves would like to gain from the language course. This implies that learners may have personal aims, in
addition, to the requirements of their study or job; in other words, wants or desires [7]. Finally, need may be
interpreted as lacks, that is, what the learners do not know or cannot do in English [8].
In addition, Graves [9] mentions that needs analysis involves finding out what the learners know and can do, and what they need to learn or do. In other words, needs analysis involves seeking and interpreting information about learners’ needs. However, Munby [5] defines the needs in different viewpoint which focuses on learners’ needs at the end of a language course, and can be called a target situation analysis (TSA). This is the best known framework for a TSA type of needs analysis which concentrates on communication purposes, communication settings, the means of communication, language skills, functions, and structure. In addition, in terms of types of needs, Mackay [10] divides the needs into two types. The former is academic needs where English is required for further academic study. For example, medical students requiring English in order to understand the lectures or read medical textbooks in English. The latter is job needs where English is required in order to perform a particular job, such as, technicians requiring English in order to work on a project in which English is used. In the present study, the needs of language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) based on job needs defined by Mackay are investigated. The functions and problems in using English skills are also included in the investigation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study comprised 40 tourism employees who work in five international tour companies located in tourist attractions across Thailand. These tourist attractions are located in five main places, namely; Bangkok, Chiangmai, Phuket, Samui and Pattaya. Each company is located in each mentioned place. There were 22 males and 18 females, 24-46 years of age. They have been working in the hospitality industry for 4-20 years.

3.2. Instrument

The research instrument was a set of questionnaires which was used to gather data concerning the needs, functions and problems of English use in tourism industry. The questionnaire included three parts, namely a checklist, a 5-rating scale, and an open-ended form. The questionnaire was written in Thai language in order to minimize problems related to ambiguity and misinterpretation. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, the draft version constructed by the researcher was modified and revised based on the suggestion of the two English instructors and one statistics expert. After that, a pilot study was carried out to test the effectiveness and to improve the language appropriateness of the questionnaire. The 15 subjects of the pilot study were requested to fill out the questionnaire, to give their comments on the content and wording, and to give suggestions on items that should be added or excluded. Lastly, the final draft of the questionnaire was revised and administered to the target tourism employees working in 5 international tour companies located in tourist attractions across Thailand. For the reliability of the questionnaire, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated. The result revealed a .9538 alpha reliability coefficient which was considered high. Therefore, it could be justifiable to claim that the data collecting instrument of the present study had both validity and reliability.

3.3. Data collection

After sending the official letter to request for permission and cooperation to gather the data, the researcher distributed the questionnaires to the target subjects in each tour company located in the tourist attractions in Thailand. The data collection was carried out by the researcher himself with the help of two former ex-students of the researcher who work in the tour companies. The questionnaire was administered to the target group from February to May 2012 for a total of 4 months.
3.4. Data analysis

After checking the completion of each questionnaire, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. The statistical devices employed in this study were as follows:

1) Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used to calculate the reliability of the questionnaire.
2) A 5-point Likert scale was used to score the levels of the English language needs of tourism employees based on the following criteria:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Mean range</th>
<th>Need level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.50-5.00</td>
<td>The highest need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.50-4.49</td>
<td>High need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.50-3.49</td>
<td>Moderate need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.50-2.49</td>
<td>Low need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.00-1.49</td>
<td>The lowest need</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3) Mean ($\bar{x}$) and Standard Deviation (S.D.) were used to calculate the average level of English skill needs of tourism employees. The highest mean score ($\bar{x}$) reflected the more needs in English for tourism employees. By the same token, the lowest mean score showed the needs for that activity. The standard deviation (S.D.) depicted the spread or dispersion of the scores of the respondents within the group.

4) Frequency (f) and percentage (%) were used to calculate the functions and problems of English language use of tourism employees in their work.

4. Results

Based on the research purposes, the results of data analysis were as follows:

4.1. The English language skills need of tourism employees

When the tourism employees were asked to rate their need for English language skills in operating their work, they rated all macro four English language skills as shown in table 1.

As shown in table 1, most tourism employees rated all four skills as important ($\bar{x} = 4.12$, S.D. = 1.32). When considering each English skill needed, it was found that speaking is considered the most important for their work ($\bar{x} = 4.46$, S.D. = 1.06), followed by listening ($\bar{x} = 4.38$, S.D. = 1.41), reading ($\bar{x} = 3.87$, S.D. = 1.64) and writing ($\bar{x} = 3.68$, S.D. = 1.57), respectively.
4.2. Functions of English language use of tourism employees for their work

When the tourism employees were asked to choose three functions of English language skills that are mostly used in their work, the results revealed as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Functions of English language use of tourism employees for their work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. General conversations</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Giving information</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Providing services</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Offering help</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Asking for cooperation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Answering questions and solving problems</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in table 2, the three most relevant functions of English language for tourism employees at the workplace were giving information (f=40, 33.33%), followed by providing services (f=27, 22.50%), and offering help (f=23, 17.17%), respectively. In contrast, the function of general conversations was reported as the lowest function being used.

4.3. Problems encountered by tourism employees at the workplace

This section presents the problems encountered by tourism employees when they escort the foreign tourists to visit the tourist attractions all over Thailand. The tourist employees were asked to choose only one serious problem faced the list provided. The results were illustrated in table 3-6 below.

Table 3. Listening problems encountered by tourism employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening problems</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Foreign tourists speak too fast</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Being unable to know the meaning of words</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lacking a chance to listen to English</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Being unable to understand foreign accents</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>65.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 depicts the listening problems encountered by tourism employees in their work. It was found that being unable to understand foreigners’ accents was rated as the most serious problem (f=26, 65.00%) while lacking a chance to listen to English was reported as the least serious problem (f=2, 5.00%).

Table 4. Speaking problems encountered by tourism employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaking problems</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Being unable to pronounce words and expressions correctly</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Using inappropriate words and expressions in speaking</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lacking knowledge of grammar and structure</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 depicts the speaking problems encountered by tourism employees in their work. It was found that being unable to pronounce words and expressions correctly was the most significant problem (f=2, 5.00%) while using inappropriate words and expressions in speaking was reported as the least significant problem (f=21, 52.50%).
4. Lacking confidence in speaking

The above table demonstrates the speaking problems encountered by tourism employees in their work. It was found that using inappropriate words and expressions in speaking was rated as the most serious problem \((f=21, 52.50\%)\); whereas, being unable to pronounce words and expressions correctly was reported as the least serious problem \((f=2, 5.00\%)\).

### Table 5. Reading problems encountered by tourism employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading problems</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reading too long passages</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reading unfamiliar passages</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Having inadequate vocabulary in reading</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Unable to understand the vocabulary</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in table 5, the tourism employees agreed that having inadequate vocabulary in reading was the most serious problem \((f=18, 45.00\%)\) while reading unfamiliar passages was reported as the least serious problem \((f=5, 12.50\%)\) in terms of reading skills.

### Table 6. Writing problems encountered by tourism employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing problems</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Lacking grammar knowledge</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Having inadequate vocabulary</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lacking opportunity to write</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Being unable to know how to write</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table indicates that the tourism employees’ most serious problem was lacking the grammar knowledge for writing \((f=16, 40.00\%)\). On the other hand, lacking a chance to write was rated as the least serious problem \((f=5, 12.50\%)\).

To sum up, when considering the problems of English use among tourism employees, the inability to understand foreign accents, inappropriate use of words and expressions, inadequate vocabulary in reading, and the lacking of grammatical knowledge in writing were regarded as the major problems.

### 5. Discussion

The findings from this present investigation can be discussed in the following points.

#### 5.1. English language skills need of tourism employees for their work

The findings showed that the majority of the tourism employees in this study rated all four skills as highly needed. This may be explained by the fact that since tourism industry has been promoted for many years, there are many foreigners who visit Thailand and as a result of this, tourism employees have had a great deal of opportunity to use English when guiding the foreign tourists to visit the tourist attractions, festivals and events all over Thailand. Therefore, it could be said that they tend to use English more to communicate with the foreign tourists. This finding is consistent with Ketkhew’s study [11] which indicated that English was highly important to air stewards, air stewardesses, air pursers and flight managers. The results also showed that most tourism...
employees perceived speaking as the most important skill, followed by listening, writing and reading, respectively.

Speaking is needed for tourism employees to function in their routine work. It is perhaps explained by the fact that speaking is important because they need to guide, escort, interact or communicate with others, especially, with the foreign tourists who visit the tourist attractions all over Thailand. This finding clearly supports Reinsch and Shelby’s [12] claim which stated that the respondents perceived face to face oral events mostly often required them to function in their routine works. In addition, the result parallels with Chaikitkosol [13], Keyoonwong[14] and Pingyao’s studies [15] in which the learners believed that speaking was their greatest need.

Listening is rated as the second most used skill. This clearly explains that listening to the foreign tourists’ enquiries is the most important because it is the key factor that leads tourism employees to understand the things that the foreign tourists would need and want when they ask for tourism information. The result supports the studies of Currie [16] and Piyanapa [5] which stated that the ability to identify and comprehend the information from communication was crucial.

With regard to reading skill, it is ranked as the third most used skill. This may be because tourism employees must look for and read the tourist information when foreign tourists ask for more in-depth information about the tourist attractions. Moreover, tourism employees must read information that are often requested by foreign tourists, such as, the price and characteristics of souvenirs, foods and facilities. This finding supports that of Lee and Hatesol [17], and Boonyawattana’s studies [18] which ranked reading as the third important skill.

Compared with the other three skills, writing was viewed as the least important by tourism employees. This is perhaps explained by the fact that writing is only used when tourist employees prepare and outline the information that they give to the foreign tourists. This result is consistent with several studies which are found that writing was ranked as less important than the other skills (i.e., [17], [19], [20]) and lesser than oral communication (Swenson, [21], Waner, [22]; Maes, Weldy and Icenogle, [23]).

5.2. The functions of English language use of tourism employees in their work

With regard to the use of the main functions, the tourism employees employed English for information, followed by providing services, and offering help. This clearly explains that all three types of functions are crucial and requires specific language use in the tourism industry. Often this happens when tourism employees escort their foreign tourists to visit tourist attractions. Based on Blue and Harun’s [3] notion, these functions are viewed as the hospitality language that are frequently used in the hospitality industries like the tourism industry. In addition, the finding supports Boonyawattana’s study [18] shows that providing services, giving information and offering help are frequently used by the personnel in the tourist business.

5.3. Problems encountered by tourism employees in their work

It is generally accepted that English is regarded as a foreign language in Thailand. Thai people study English only at schools to communicate with speakers of the language or read texts using the target language (Phillipson cited in Meemark [24]). In fact, most Thai people rarely use English in their daily life. As a result, Thai people face problems when communicating with foreigners who speak English. Similarly, the tourism employees in Thailand face a major problem when they are in contact with foreign tourists. Their usual problems are using inappropriate words and expressions in speaking, being unable to understand foreign accents, having inadequate vocabulary in reading, and lacking grammar knowledge in writing.

This may be explained that not all tourist employees can speak English fluently. Some may use English like a native speaker while others may be able to use a little English or cannot communicate with the language at all. Therefore, it is possible that the tourism employees cannot comprehend and listen to a variety of English accents
accurately, choose the appropriate words and expressions, use correct grammar when they speak, read and write about tourism. This finding supports Suwana-long’s study [25] indicated that the problems of each English language skill included: listening skill – speaking fast and speaking with a different accent by native and non-native English speakers, speaking skill – vocabulary shortage, reading skill – having a shortage of vocabulary words including technical words, and writing skill – poor grammar usage.

However, the open-ended form of the questionnaire indicated that since tourism service is one of hospitality industry, most tourism employees in Thailand try their best to when they faced problems concerning communication with the foreign tourists by using gestures or by asking tourists to write down what they needed. Hence, they are still able to assist the foreign tourists with the limited language skills they have. This assistance could be explained that, besides the serviced-minded characteristics, Thai people are generous, modest, peaceful and helpful [26].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study is carried out in order to provide an insight into the needs, functions and problems of English use among tourism employees who work in the international tour companies located in the tourist attractions across Thailand. It is hoped to provide a baseline for obtaining a wider range of input into content, design and implementation of an English programme by involving such people as learners, teachers, course developers and employees in the planning process. Although the present investigation does not intend to represent all tourism employees, the researcher does believe that the sampling frame might give a relatively good representation of tourism employees working in the tour companies located in the tourist attractions in Thailand. Needs analysis is part of the curriculum development and is basically required before a syllabus development for English language teaching. The findings from this study can be used as guidelines for developing a tourism English syllabus that could lead to the improvement of the employees. It is anticipated that the conclusion of the present investigation could be utilized by those who are responsible for policy and planning as well as the related organizations in order to have a clearer understanding of English needs for tourism employees who plan to work in the international tour company in Thailand.

References


