

*An Analysis of English Communication: A Case Study of Thai Public Transport Operators' Communication with Foreign Tourists*

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**Abstract**

This paper was aimed at examining the communication ability and the need for English communication among local Thai public transport operators. This study was part of research in support of community engagement and sustainable development. Seventy public transport operators who provided regular service to foreign visitors in a tourist destination city in Thailand were randomly selected to participate in this study. The data were elicited through two main research instruments: a questionnaire surveying the need for English communication and an oral communicative test attempting to reveal their current ability to communicate in English. Percentage and mean scores were reported in the needs analysis, and their ability to communicate in English were analyzed descriptively. The overall findings revealed that the participants' opinions towards the need for English communication used at work were at a high level. In regard to their communication ability, a large area for improvement to help them communicate better was indicated. Furthermore, the participants' difficulties in English for communication were identified and reported. It was suggested that the participants be offered training in English for occupational purposes tailored to meet their communication requirements for an international setting.

Keywords: English for occupational purposes, English communication, English for international communication

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## Introduction

In a country like Thailand, which is popular among tourists from around the globe, English plays a crucial role in communication on a daily basis. It is used for various purposes of communication in international settings, especially in the hospitality industry. Thai people who are involved in the hospitality industry are among the key participants who can help boost and promote tourism in the country. For this reason, local Thai people, who speak Thai as their first language (L1), also need English skills essential for communication with foreign tourists. Those skills include speaking and listening since local people providing services in the hospitality industry deal directly with customers who speak English and come from different parts of the globe. English, therefore, is very important and has become a vital tool used in their work. However, exposure to English language communication in Thailand is often limited, due to the fact that English is not an official language in the country. In reference to the recent EF English Proficiency Index (EF Education First, 2017), the proficiency of Thai learners of English ranked 53 among 80 countries across regions. More specifically, in comparison among 20 countries in Asia, Thailand ranked 15 out of 20 countries. This indicates that the overall English proficiency is low (EPI score is 49.78).

Phranakorn Si Ayutthaya is a city that is a major tourist attraction in Thailand. Because of its fabulous ancient architecture, magnificent temples, and fascinating history, it attracts a number of visitors throughout the year. Moreover, the city was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1991). This gives rise to an increase and expansion of the tourism capacity in the city. Such expansion means the community has to be ready for the growing need for English communication in order to facilitate foreign tourists in the hospitality industries. According to the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2017), it was found that the number of foreign visitors, tourists, and excursionists to the city rises continuously each year as presented in Figure 1.

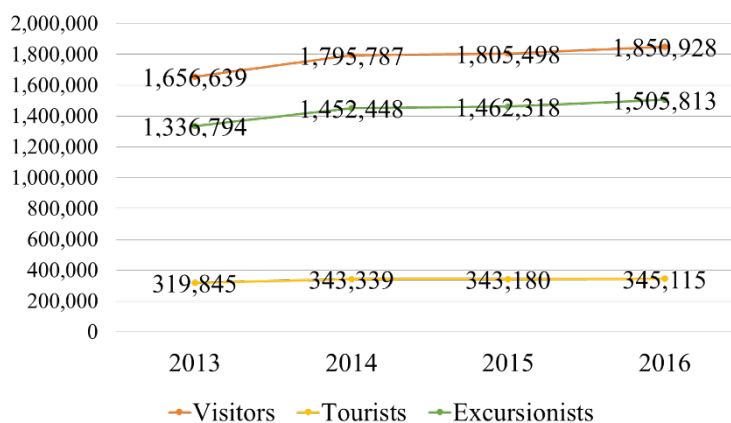


Figure 1: The number of foreign visitors, tourists and excursionists in Phranakorn Si Ayutthaya during 2013 and 2016

When travelling in the city, individual or small group, foreign tourists mostly use public transport services, such as hiring a motorized tricycle taxi, also known as a *Tuk-Tuk*. Therefore, these public transport operators are among those who use English more frequently in providing service to the tourists. However, communicating with

foreign tourists could be challenging for them. According to Luankanokrat (2011) and Thanasabkasem and Keadplang (2016), Thai people, especially those in the field of hospitality, tended to speak English at a very basic level

in their daily communication with English speakers from different countries, which might cause some communication problems with the tourists. As a result, they need to keep learning and enhancing their English communication, especially for occupational purposes, to meet their communication requirements and help increase the growth rate of tourism and outcome for the local community.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To survey Thai public transport operators' opinions towards the need for English communication.
2. To examine Thai public transport operators' difficulties in English communication.
3. To investigate Thai public transport operators' current ability to communicate in English.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are Thai public transport operators' opinions towards the need for English communication?
2. What are Thai public transport operators' opinions towards difficulties in English communication?
3. What are the problems in Thai public transport operators' English communication?

### **Review of Literature**

#### **The Roles of English for International Communication**

The purposes of English are dependent on the speakers' context. Some examples are: English used in everyday communication, English used for academic purposes, and English used for occupational purposes. However, the most common purpose of English is to communicate with one another in international communication. Generally speaking, English is considered an international language widely used in conversations among people whose mother tongues are different. It is used as a medium of communication among them. Understanding English used by speakers from different countries is beneficial for enhancing comprehension in communication.

According to Ellis (2008), English as a second language (ESL) refers to the situations where English is used among speakers with the ability to use their L1 and English at a relatively equivalent level. This means the speakers in the countries where English is used as a second language could be considered proficient in English as they are in their L1. English used in Singapore is an example of this scenario. Singaporeans use English in their everyday communication, but it is not their first language. Therefore, ESL countries normally consider English as one of their official languages. Not to be

confused with ESL, English as a foreign language (EFL) is used in the countries which do not consider it as an official language. The language is usually learned primarily in classroom settings in preparation for communication in the real world. This means the learners are not greatly exposed to language uses outside the classroom. Generally, there is little exposure to the language users for those EFL learners.

The countries where English is used as a foreign language include, for example, Japan, China, and Thailand (Ellis, 2008).

### **Process of Communication**

According to Hamilton (2008), communication in a broad sense can refer to messages disseminated within a certain context or situation. Communication is usually a process that involves a sender and an intended receiver of these messages. Specifically, the process is conducted by a person or group who is the sender of a message trying to convey the information or the message to another person or group. The means of the communication can be performed through both verbal and nonverbal communications (Hamilton, 2008). The processes of communication can be done through various channels of communication, for instance, face-to-face or verbal communication, telephone conversations, gestures or paralanguage used during a conversation or even written messages as in e-mail. The communication can, therefore, take place regardless of distance and time. To consider whether the communication is complete and successful, the message must be received and understood by recipients or receivers of the messages (Hamilton, 2008; Jandt, 2007; Morreale, Spitzberg & Barge, 2007).

### **Related Previous Studies**

Numerous studies stressed the importance of English used in communication. In particular, English for specific purposes such as that of hospitality.

Chan (2001) investigated the need of English skill improvement among students in tertiary level education. The participants were 701 students who studied English as a foreign language and 47 EFL teachers. The findings showed that the students expressed a need for speaking English to facilitate their learning and academic research, as well as for professions. The results indicated that the major difficulties the students found in their English use was that their mother tongue tended to interfere with the use of the second language, English. They indicated that they lacked confidence in their use of English; moreover, the students also pointed out that speaking and writing skills were important for their learning English. The study also suggested important ways for improving English language skills which were: 1) the development of speaking and listening skills, 2) the development of topic specific vocabulary, 3) the establishment of confidence for learners, and 4) the strengthening the learners' motivation in learning English.

Choi (2005) conducted a study on English for specific purposes courses (ESP), designed especially for tourism students. The study was aimed at various contents, contexts, and methodologies in an EFL setting to meet the requirements or specific needs of the students. It was pointed out in the investigation that available ESP

courses should provide students with different proficiencies in tourism-related content in association with the practice of English skills. Moreover, it was also found that teachers' lesson plans should match the students' needs. It was suggested in this research that in designing an ESP curriculum, teachers should have a thorough understanding of their students' needs, perhaps even putting themselves in the students' places for the purpose of establishing a deeper understanding of how such courses should be devised.

In addition, Atibaedya (2010) examined English communication used in a self-directed learning model in eco-tourism in Thailand. The study concentrated on the problems of English communication, the need for English communication, and the policy of English communication. The data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. There were 60 research participants. They included Thai local vendors, native speakers of English, and speakers of English as a second language. The overall results indicated that the main problem was the unsuccessful communication in English among the foreign visitors and the Thai local vendors. It was reported in the findings that the vendors appeared unable to apply the knowledge and communication techniques they learned in English courses in their work. Furthermore, it was found that they had insufficient background knowledge and skills in English. As mentioned earlier, there is limited exposure to English used as a foreign language for use in such encounters. Hence, it was also found in this study that as the Thai EFL vendors lacked the opportunity to speak with foreign visitors, there was little practice of English in their everyday conversation. It was thus recommended that a tool to facilitate the learning of English communication for them could be printed media, such as leaflets, or other published materials encompassing information on products or other such information related to their communication needs.

An investigation on the perception of international tourists towards communication skills performed by Thai EFL vendors was conducted by Thanasabkasem and Keadplang (2016). The study was carried out at a tourist attraction in Thailand. There were 200 foreign visitors participating in this study. The questionnaire was used to collect the data on the satisfaction towards the communication skills used by the Thai local vendors using printed media to help facilitate their English communication. It was found that communication techniques they used accompanied by the printed materials were very satisfying and could facilitate the communication in an international setting.

The findings presented in these investigations as well as relevant recommendations from previous research studies were taken into account in the present research.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were 70 public transport operators in Phranakorn Si Ayutthaya. These were taken from a research population of about 500, taking part in training sessions given by the researchers and colleagues in cooperation with the Ayutthaya Transport Office from 10-14 July 2017. The seventy participants who reported providing regular service to foreign tourists were randomly recruited.

Furthermore, 22 of the participants voluntarily took part in the oral communicative test. Most of them were male whose age ranged from 30 to 60 years. They primarily learned how to communicate in English from their daily transactions with customers who are tourists from different countries.

### **Research Instruments**

Two research instruments were used in the present study.

#### 1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of three main parts. The first part was designed to collect the data on public transport operators' general information. In the second part, a 5-point Likert scale was employed with the aim of investigating public transport operators' opinions towards the need for English communication. The last part was designed to survey the public transport operators' opinions towards the difficulties in English listening and speaking in their communication with foreign tourists.

#### 2. Oral communicative test

This research instrument was designed to reveal the participants' current ability to communicate in English and to support the findings from the questionnaire. The test contained question-response test items in five main topics related to their everyday communication at work: greeting, giving directions, giving fare information, negotiation, and giving information on tourist attractions. In the test, each topic consisted of five questions orally read by a native speaker of English in a video. The test was validated by three experts, who currently work as university lecturers and hold masters degrees in the fields of English communication and English language teaching. The test was adjusted and piloted before the actual data collection.

### **Data Collection**

The questionnaires were administered to the participants during the 5-day training sessions, and only those data from the drivers who reported using English in their work were included for further analysis. Data collection on their English communication was conducted at the end of the training sessions. During the test, individual participants sat for an oral communicative test in front of a computer screen in a quiet room, watching as well as listening to the questions in the video read by a native speaker. After each question, they were allowed ample time to respond before proceeding to the next question. The responses were recorded by an MP3 voice recorder.

### **Data Analysis**

The data on the participants' general information from the first part of the questionnaire were analyzed and reported in percentage. The data on the participants' need for English communication and difficulties in listening to and speaking English were analyzed by using mean scores and standard deviations. The data from the oral communicative test were transcribed and analyzed descriptively through a rubric for oral English communication.

## Major Findings

The findings from the survey were divided into three parts.

### Part I: Thai public transport operators' general information and their self-rated English abilities

The first part of the questionnaire contained three main questions about the public transport operators' general information. The results of each question are presented as follows:

Question 1: How long have you been a public transport operator?

It was found that 61.4% of the participants worked as a public transport operator for more than 5 years, and 30% of them revealed that they were public transport operators for 1-5 years. There were only 8.6% of them who worked as a public transport operator for less than one year.

Question 2: How would you rate your English-speaking ability?

47.1% of the public transport operators indicated that their speaking ability was at a fair level, and 28.6% of them reported their speaking ability was at a very poor level. Additionally, 20% believed their speaking ability was at a poor level. Only 4.3% reported that their speaking ability was at a good level.

Question 3: How would you rate your English-listening ability?

It was found that half of the public transport operators indicated that their listening ability was at a fair level, whereas 22.9% reported that their listening ability was at a very poor level. Similarly, 21.4% indicated that they had a poor listening ability, while only 5.7% stated that their listening ability was at a good level.

### Part II: Thai public transport operators' opinions towards the need for English communication

**Table 1.** Mean scores of Thai public transport operators' opinions towards the need for English communication

Questionnaire Item	M	SD	Level
1. I need to communicate with foreign tourists on greeting.	3.74	0.88	High
2. I need to communicate with foreign tourists on giving directions.	3.80	0.93	High
3. I need to communicate with foreign tourists on giving fare information.	4.00	0.92	Very High
4. I need to communicate with foreign tourists on negotiation.	3.97	0.92	High
5. I need to communicate with foreign tourists on giving information on tourist attractions.	3.99	0.86	High
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.90</b>	<b>0.92</b>	<b>High</b>

(Note.  $n = 70$ )

The overall findings revealed that Thai public transport operators' opinions towards the need for English communication on the five main topics were at a high level. The average of the mean scores and the standard deviations were at 3.90 and 0.92 respectively. As shown, all of the areas of communication related to their service were needed at a high level, except for the need for English communication relevant to giving fare information with a mean score of 4.00, which was at a very high level.

**Part III:** Thai public transport operators' opinions towards the difficulties in English listening and speaking

**Table 2.** Mean scores of Thai public transport operators' opinions towards the difficulties in English listening

Questionnaire Item	M	SD	Level
1. I have difficulties in English listening because I have limited English vocabulary.	3.91	0.85	High
2. I have difficulties in English listening because of the foreigners' pronunciation.	4.03	0.87	Very High
3. I have difficulties in English listening because of the different accents of foreign tourists.	4.04	0.94	Very High
4. I have difficulties in English listening because I do not know English structures.	4.00	0.92	Very High
5. I have difficulties in English listening because the foreigners speak too fast.	4.07	0.86	Very High
<b>Average</b>	<b>4.01</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>Very High</b>

(Note.  $n = 70$ )

Table 2 shows that the opinions of public transport operators on their difficulties in English listening was at a very high level. The average mean score was at 4.01, and the standard deviation was 0.88.

**Table 3.** Mean scores of Thai public transport operators' opinions towards the difficulties in English speaking

Questionnaire Item	M	SD	Level
1. I have difficulties in English speaking because I have limited English vocabulary.	3.94	0.88	High
2. I have difficulties in English speaking because I cannot pronounce words correctly.	3.97	0.82	High
3. I have difficulties in English speaking because I do not know English structures.	3.97	0.88	High
4. I have difficulties in English speaking because I do not know what words, phrases or expressions I should use.	3.94	0.90	High
5. I have difficulties in English speaking because I am always nervous when I speak with foreigners.	3.81	0.98	High
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.92</b>	<b>0.89</b>	<b>High</b>

(Note.  $n = 70$ )



Table 3 exhibits Thai public transport operators' opinions towards the difficulties in English speaking. It was found that most participants indicated they had problems with speaking in English in all five aspects shown in the table. The average mean score was 3.92, and the standard deviation was 0.89, which could be interpreted that they had difficulties in their speaking at a high level.

### **Thai Public Transport Operators' English Communication**

From the oral communicative test, the problems most commonly found during the test could be broadly divided into three main aspects. English structures and vocabulary were the two main problems concerning English speaking experienced by Thai public transport operators. Another major problem regarding their listening skills was the ability to understand spoken English. The following descriptions are some excerpts from the data collected from the oral communicative test.

*Excerpt 1:* Foreign Tourist: I think it's too expensive. Can you lower the price?

Driver: *Not expensive. Same same. People Thai this price.*

*Excerpt 2:* Foreign Tourist: Can you tell me a little bit about Ayutthaya?  
Driver: *Have temples, Wat Chai Wattanaram and Wat Phra Ram.*

*Excerpt 3:* Foreign Tourist: Is there a hospital near here?  
Driver: *Hospital near the temple.*

From the excerpts above, it was relatively obvious that the participants had very basic English structures for their communication. They were likely to speak on a word by word basis rather than in full, meaningful, and grammatical sentences. Consequently, they tended to lack the skills to convey their ideas and reply with appropriate responses to the questions. For instance, in excerpt 2, 'Have temples' was used instead of a full statement of 'There are temples.' Their responses tended to reflect the structures appearing in their mother tongue (Thai) by directly translating their answers into English. This usually resulted in ungrammatical utterances.

In addition, the participants were found to have limited vocabulary necessary for English communication, as can be seen in these examples from the oral communicative test.

*Excerpt 4:* Foreign Tourist: I think it's too expensive. Can you lower the price?

Driver: *For you, I load price 50 baht.*

*Excerpt 5:* Foreign Tourist: Where is the best place to have dinner in Ayutthaya?

Driver: *Sorry. I not understand.*

From the excerpts shown above, it is obvious that the participants' vocabulary to respond to the foreign tourists is limited. For example, in excerpt 4, the participant's

response to a question relevant to fare negotiation showed that the phrase ‘*load price*’ was wrongly used and was open to misinterpretation. Such a statement could potentially pose difficulties or even cause a communication breakdown. This problem could be attributed to their inadequate vocabulary knowledge for their work-related communication in English.

Based on the participants’ ability to listen to and comprehend work-related English used for transport service for foreign tourists, the questions spoken in English proved problematic for them. Below are some excerpts of commonly found problems resulting from the participants’ listening.

*Excerpt 6:* Foreign Tourist: Hello. How are you?  
Driver: *Mr. Pramote Lertrit. My name is Pramote Lertrit.*

*Excerpt 7:* Foreign Tourist: How is it going?  
Driver: *I working. I drive Tuk-Tuk.*

*Excerpt 8:* Foreign Tourist: How long does it take to get to Wat Chai Wattanaram from the train station?  
Driver: *By Tuk-Tuk*

*Excerpt 9:* Foreign Tourist: Where is Wat Yai Chai Mongkol?  
Driver: .....

These excerpts illustrate the participants’ difficulties comprehending questions spoken in English. These routine questions were among those relevant in communication between public transport operators and English-speaking tourists. Some participants attempted to respond to the questions; nevertheless, it was revealed that they did not fully understand the questions. Moreover, some did not reply to the questions at all, indicating a lack of understanding. Regarding the public transport operators’ ability to listen to English, it was evident that they held a generally poor understanding of English used for providing service to foreign tourists. They might not have enough vocabulary and structures in English to be capable of responding to the questions, resulting in their misinterpretation of the questions. From the findings, their overall general understanding in English was most likely to prevent them from successful communication.

## **Discussion**

This study investigated Thai public transport operators’ opinions towards the need for and difficulties in English communication. In addition, their current ability to communicate in English was explored. As the findings revealed, their need for English communication in relation to their work was at a high level. The survey on their self-rated ability to understand and speak English relevant to their work showed that they had problems in listening comprehension at a very high level. Similarly, the results showed that they had problems in their speaking at a high level. Moreover, in the oral communicative test, the descriptions of their uses of English communication indicated a number of communication problems in English used for their work.

The participants' limited ability to communicate in English could be the results of several factors. First are English structures. Participants appeared to lack knowledge of English structures and English abilities both in speaking and listening to communicate with foreign tourists. Chan (2001) also found that the speakers' mother tongue could interfere with the use of their target language. This became apparent in the findings from the oral communicative test in which the participants were prone to use basic or ungrammatical English structures to convey meaning with little awareness of the English grammatical features.

The second factor which might cause communication problems is limited vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge is one of the most essential parts in English communication. Vocabulary knowledge enables language uses, and the uses of the language can increase the speakers' vocabulary knowledge (Alqahtani, 2015). According to Hasan (2016), a lack of vocabulary could pose serious obstacles and impede successful communication when communicating in English. Without adequate vocabulary knowledge, it could be difficult for the participants to express their opinions or ideas. This could also cause them to become incapable of comprehending utterances made by the tourists and unable to respond to them properly. Vocabulary is crucial for them in order to express and comprehend the messages to meet their communication requirements.

Another explanatory factor could be self-confidence. Chan (2001) found out that learners' lack of confidence in the use of English was likely to pose difficulties in their English learning. From the observations during the test, Thai public transport operators appeared to have little confidence in English communication. They might be worried about their mistakes when communicating, which could lead to their unsuccessful communication.

Finally, limited exposure to English language also potentially hampers effective communication. The interpretation of the findings in the present study is in line with Atibaedy (2010) in that the lack of opportunities to use the language and insufficient practice of English communication on a daily basis could hinder success in communication. From the findings, it was seen that the Thai public transport operators lacked the ability to speak English and were unable to understand the spoken language commonly used in their work. According to Matusevych, Alishahi and Backus (2017), listening is fundamental to speaking. If the participants were exposed to various listening activities relevant to English used in the hospitality industry, they might be able to conduct a simple conversation with foreign tourists.

With respect to the results and the communication problems found in this study, improvements are necessary in Thai public transport operators' English communication for occupational purposes. It was suggested that they be offered training in English that is aimed to specifically help them develop their English communication in order for them to communicate better in English. In addition, responsible organizations in the field of hospitality might provide them with some printed material for self-study or create a mobile application for e-learning with which they can regularly practice their English communication.

## **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to examine Thai public transport operators' need for and difficulties in English communication as well as explore their ability to communicate in English relevant to their work routine. The recruited 70 public transport operators participating in English training sessions held by the Ayutthaya Transport Office responded to the questionnaire, and 22 of them voluntarily participated in the oral communicative test. It was found that Thai public transport operators had a limited ability to communicate in English, and they expressed a high need for English to help them communicate with English speaking tourists in their work. They need to develop their English skills, especially in speaking and listening, in order to better communicate with foreign customers. Responsible organizations and government sectors in association with the hospitality industry should continue working on developing English courses that particularly serve the need of the occupation. Furthermore, the operators should be provided with assistance to help them become more competent in English communication,

such as regular English training for individuals at the beginner level, or a self-study handbook for higher-proficiency individuals.

## **Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies**

Since this study was primarily initiated to explore the need for and ability of Thai public transport operators' English communication, it would be informative to conduct experimental research to examine the participants' ability to communicate in English before and after providing English training to them. Moreover, the oral communicative test featured an interlocutor in a video with a limited range of English communication specific to the research participants' contexts. This test task may not take other factors involved in authentic communication into account, such as non-verbal communication, which could also play an important role in the participants' communication. Having speakers of English involved in the test in real-life situations would therefore yield more natural data. Lastly, it is suggested that other kinds of research instruments, e.g. in-depth interviews, be developed to specifically examine particular language uses in different careers, particularly in the hospitality industry.

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