



## Needs Analysis for English Communication Skills of Thai Officers, A Case Study: Department of Fisheries

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**Abstract** This case study investigates the need of English for intercultural communication for government officers, Department of Fisheries, Thailand. 50 respondents including 25 government officers, 16 government workers, and 9 contracted office temps were purposively selected based on their duties which directly handle with international activities relating to fisheries via questionnaires. The findings portrayed that respondents realized the importance of English however most training courses were available only for government officers and English training courses were arranged by some divisions due to their budget limitation. Speaking and reading were found to be the most two critical skills which participants wanted to improve. In terms of qualitative data half of the respondents wanted more opportunities to practice English and requested a training in General English (GE) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Factors related to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), cultural knowledge and communicative strategies should also be considered. Further suggestions are presented in the final part.

**Keywords** English for professional communication skills, ELF, Thai government officers

### INTRODUCTION

Department of Fisheries is a Thai official bureau under Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives which administers and monitors all related aquatic businesses within and outside of Thailand and it plays a vital role in aquatic animal business in Thailand. It consists of many divisions and offices around the country. The Headquarter, Bangkok, comprises of at least 27 different divisions. There are also the inland fishery offices in the provinces with no access to the sea, the coastal aquaculture research and development centers in the provinces with the access to the sea, research and development centers, law enforcement units and checkpoints. In sum, the department has two major responsibilities i.e. in academic aspect researching, developing, analyzing and experimenting to gain better knowledge in fishery issue and to pass the knowledge to Thai people via supporting and developing the fishery-related professions in the country (Department of Fisheries, 2019).

Regarding Kachru (1992), users of English worldwide are categorized into three different circles namely the Inner, the Outer and the Expanding Circle. Countries which English is used as the mother tongue like the US, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand are categorized in the Inner Circle whereas the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore are categorized in the Outer Circle which English is placed as a second language and plays a vital role in the countries. Besides countries like Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam are grouped in the Expanding Circle where English is perceived as a foreign language and is aimed to be used for communicating mainly with native English speakers. To deal with international issues, Thai government officers need to use English to communicate with countries from different Circles above. When looking at the linguistic reality, majority of the world citizens who use English nowadays are non-native English speakers (NNESs) and in comparison numbers of the native English speakers (NESs) which are around 350 million, numbers of NNESs are around one billion people (Jenkins, 2009). English usage among these NNESs is functioned as a lingua franca or "a contact language" (ELF) in at least two

contexts: within a country with multiracial citizens like Singapore or between people from different non-native speaking countries e.g. a Thai communicates with a Malaysian (Firth, 1990) and as a result of ELF, many studies are conducted to analyze how English functions in intercultural contexts and how it is used effectively to lessen communication breakdowns e.g. Nickerson (2005) illustrated how ELF has been used in international negotiations, correspondences and advertisements while the term “Business English as a Lingua Franca” or BELF portrays how English is “simplified, hybridized and highly dynamic communication code” for doing business internationally (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). As ELF is characterized as the way of using English for communication among countries in the European Union, a recent study by Modiano (2017) investigated the influences and functions of English after Brexit. Among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) membered countries, English is officially the working language of the community (ASEAN, 2008). Thus, in this study there are two related issues regarding needs analysis to focus on due to the international communication of Thai government officers and these two issues are 1) their English proficiency skills and 2) their knowledge and understanding about the intercultural communication, the characteristics, and usages of ELF. The term English for communication in this study refers to three abilities namely the English proficiency, the cultural knowledge (Myles, 2009) and the communicative abilities as Al-Mahrooqi (2012) stated that “communicative ability involves more than mere knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. It involves the ability to express oneself clearly and appropriately depending on the situation, interlocutors, topic, time, and place”. Besides, to be able to express oneself in ELF setting, the communication strategies in the conversation relies mainly on the communication accommodation (Giles, 2007) which both interlocutors try to adjust themselves to have a better understanding and code-switching (Jenkins, 2009).

Another point worth mentioning when talking about international communication is “culture”. As Scollon, Scollon, and Jones (2012) illustrated that culture is “a way of dividing people up into groups according to some feature of these people which help us to understand something about them and how they are different from or similar to other people”. In intercultural communication situations, a person from a country communicates with his interlocutor from another country and they both are confronting either with the “high context cultures” or the “low context cultures” situation. In the “high context cultures”, it is the culture that using less speaking or writing documents but the understanding is formulated from the members’ internal understanding whereas in “low context cultures” people are likely to follow the rules and communicate and deduce the meanings from verbal messages situations (Hall, 1977). Hall also categorized cultures in Asian, Latin American and southern European contexts as the “high context cultures” and cultures from North American and northern European are considered as the “low context cultures”. In the Thai context, English is used as a foreign language to communicate with foreigners who, in general, share different cultures from Thais. Scollon et al. (2012) stated that achievement in communication will happen when two interlocutors share a similar worldview and knowledge level. In the Thai context, there are chances that some mistakes might occur when two parties from different cultures have to use a lingua franca to communicate. Therefore, to be able to communicate effectively in the international context, the differences in these two context cultures should be carefully concerned. In this study, Thai officers include 1) full-time government officers, 2) government workers and 3) contracted office temps, who are working for the Department of Fisheries, Kingdom of Thailand and the department refers to the Department of Fisheries, Kingdom of Thailand.

## **OBJECTIVES**

This study aims to investigate English for communication skills of Thai government officers who work at the Department of Fisheries and to observe English for specific skills required by these Thai officers to achieve the goals in their duties.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What skills in English that the respondents feel that they have a problem with?
2. In what aspects that English for communication skills are used to achieve Thai government officers' goals in their duties?

## METHODOLOGY

This present study comprised of two sections; quantitative and qualitative. The questionnaire was adapted from Luankanokrat (2011) and an online questionnaire from [www.ideasneed.com](http://www.ideasneed.com), where learners need to complete a needs analysis form before entering into their English language training. Questionnaires are distributed to officers who are now working in different divisions in the Department of Fisheries. Sixty questionnaires were distributed and 53 were returned and 50 questionnaires were usable. The questionnaire consists of 5 parts; 1) General information of the respondents, 2) The importance of English, the respondents usage of English and their English training courses, 3) Needs of English for communication skills and 4) The necessity of English communication skills and 5) An open-ended questions asking the respondents opinions about their problems in using English for communication in their professions and how their organization can help them solve these problems.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents comprised of 14 males and 36 females. 4 gained vocational diplomas and vocational certificates, 33 gained bachelor degrees, 12 had Master degrees and 1 had a Ph.D. Twenty-five of them were government officers, 16 were government workers and the other 9 were contracted officers. The importance of English to their careers, 26 placed English at the “very important”, 19 people stated that English was “important” while 5 people suggested that English was “moderately important”. Almost half (n=21) claimed that they sometimes used English, the other 20 were frequent users of English and 9 did not have many chances or never used English in their jobs. Later respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire, the results were illustrated in Table 1

**Table 1 English Language Skills that caused the problems based on respondents' opinions (can choose more than one skill)**

Problems	Frequency (n = 50)	Percent
Listening	9	18
Speaking	33	66
Reading	17	34
Writing	12	24

Speaking seemed to be the most serious problem when respondents claimed that they were unable to speak with correct grammar (96%), confused with word choices (90%), pronunciation accuracy (86%). The second most serious problem was their reading when they were unable to understand the various meaning or idioms when reading (92%), their grammar weakness that directly affected their interpretation when reading (74%) and unable to understand a complicated message (70%). The third serious problem was their writing. 96 percent of the respondents claimed that they had a problem when conveying their message according to their intention and the complexity of English grammar. They also could not choose the right vocabulary or idiomatic expressions when writing (88%) and unable to compose the sentences that meet their intention (70%). The listening was the skill that respondents claimed to have the least problem. Still, it was found that they were unable to understand slangs, idiomatic expressions or colloquialisms (92%), unfamiliar with the accents and pronunciation (88%) and unable to catch words or conversation (68%). Later the necessities of English communication skills were investigated. In this part, respondents were requested to rate their necessities of using English in their duties. The Likert- 5 point scale was applied to gather the data and the outcomes are illustrated in Table 2.

English skills for reading reports/ corresponding via letters, the reading skills for reading handbooks and technical articles and the skills for informal or small group discussion were three necessary aspects for performing duties at the department ( $\bar{x} = 2.58$ ), ( $\bar{x} = 3.08$ ) and ( $\bar{x} = 2.56$ ). The fifth and eighth comments that S.D values were over than 1 were also observed. Training course on negotiation and presentation in the conference may be needed for some groups of officers (S.D. = 1.0398), and the document and e-mail composing skills may be required for some officers who deal with the international organization only (S.D. = 1.4033). From open-ended questions, the lack of opportunities to practice English was mentioned as the cause of their ineffective usage of English and there were requests for more frequent training courses in General English and English for specific purposes for staff. Officers should be encouraged to use more English in their daily lives via having a small group discussion for practicing English conversation.

**Table 2 The Necessity of English Communication Skills**

Necessity	Levels of necessity					$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Level of necessity
	Most	High	Moderately	Slightly	Least			
1. For reading reports and corresponding via letters	13 (26%)	10 (20%)	17 (34%)	5 (10%)	5 (10%)	2.58	1.2631	Moderately
2. For reading handbooks and technical articles	8 (16%)	5 (10%)	21 (42%)	7 (14%)	9 (18%)	3.08	1.2752	Moderately
3. For telephone conversation	6 (12%)	23 (46%)	17 (34%)	4 (8%)	0 (0%)	2.38	0.8053	Slightly
4. For informal and small group discussion	9 (18%)	13 (26%)	21 (42%)	5 (10%)	2 (4%)	2.56	1.0333	Moderately
5. For attending formal conferences	20 (40%)	14 (28%)	12 (24%)	3 (6%)	1 (2%)	2.02	1.0398	Slightly
6. For welcoming speech and presentations	25 (50%)	16 (32%)	8 (16%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	1.70	0.8144	Slightly
7. For recording minutes of meetings/seminar	26 (52%)	12 (24%)	11 (22%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	1.74	0.8762	Slightly
8. For composing official documents/ e-mails	21 (42%)	9 (18%)	10 (20%)	4 (8%)	6 (12%)	2.30	1.4033	Slightly
9. For writing reports	24 (48%)	10 (20%)	14 (28%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	1.88	0.9613	Slightly
10. For traveling (use at hotels and airports)	7 (14%)	18 (36%)	22 (44%)	2 (4%)	1 (2%)	2.44	0.8609	Slightly
11. For staying abroad and for socializing	27 (54%)	10 (20%)	10 (20%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	1.78	0.9750	Slightly
12. For taking care of foreign visitors who use English to communicate	12 (24%)	21 (42%)	15 (30%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	2.14	0.8332	Slightly

English is an asset for Thai workers as every respondent had shown their perceptions and expressed their intention to improve their English proficiency skills. Problems occurred by the lack of English proficiency among Thais mostly presented in the educational contexts and it is inevitably affected the learners when they go to the workforce after their graduations. Findings from this study agreed with Piamsai (2017) which conducted a needs analysis to develop different English training courses at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) that 321 learners comprising of students, government officials and employees of private organizations expressed their needs to improve their four skills particularly in speaking for their daily activities, they also needed to have reading skill to find the main ideas and searching for the information when reading and wanted to attend English for Specific Purposes courses to improve their English for their occupations. A study conducted by Jindathai (2015) also portrayed that motivation and attitude toward English were not the cases when the Thai learners learned to speak English but what caused problems to master a speaking skill was the class management, the lack of opportunity for learners to expose to English and the learners' personality. The study from Chitpupakdi (2014) also illustrated the needs to improve English speaking and listening skills among executives in a private

company. In writing skill, findings also agreed with Malathong (2015) that grammar and language barrier were two main problems when respondents could not write as they intended to. Other findings from the survey portrayed that reading and speaking were two key skills that were needed to succeed in working at the department. Reading skill was required mainly for handling reports and corresponding via letters and to read handbooks and technical articles as the department's responsibility to deal with fishery-related researches and development and the communication with foreign institutions are mainly through the document forms. The speaking skill was needed for the informal and small group discussion. Findings also clearly illustrated the working contexts of Thai government officers in Thailand which they do not have enough opportunity to expose to English at work when everything is done in Thai. Some duties i.e. attending a formal conference abroad, releasing the welcoming speech, presenting in English, traveling and staying abroad and taking care of foreign visitors may be seen as the administrators' duties, besides, these duties that involving speaking skill are not in Thai government officers' routine in general. A study conducted by Jeharsae (2012) also portrayed that Thais employed similar communicative strategies when using English to communicate with NESs and NNESs which is rather contradicted to the reality that NESs and NNESs shared different cultures and beliefs as mentioned earlier about the high and the low contexts, English that is strictly followed the western norms and usage may not fully suitable for communicating with NNESs.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the needs of English for communication for Thai government officers at the Department of Fisheries, Bangkok, Thailand. Findings showed that reading and speaking were required to achieve the duties at the department. Reading was used for the research and development duties and to receive the messages from the official documents in the forms of paper and email. The speaking skill was needed to fulfill a small group discussion mainly. Even though respondents had realized the importance of English in general but there were also other factors that govern their usage of English in their workplace i.e. their duties, the available training courses and their opportunity of using the language in real situations. Problems relating to speaking, reading and their concern with grammar were the key obstructions to be successful in English. The point that should be made here is to adjust their mindsets about that concentrating too much on grammar and increasing more opportunity for practicing the speaking skill. Another point is that in ELF context, the two interlocutors differ in cultures and native languages are using English as the communication tool in this regard, they must accept the fact that mistakes and miscommunication sometimes occur. Additionally, apart from English proficiency, they also need to have the cultural knowledge and ability to apply communicative strategies to communicate successfully. In terms of training arrangement for speaking, a course in English presentation and daily activities should be arranged and supported by having in-house activities e.g. knowledge sharing presentation from the officers who have experience doing the presentation in English. For listening, different varieties of English from both NESs and NNESs should be introduced in the training, trainees can familiarize and tolerate when they face with various accents. For writing, an online correspondent course needs to be arranged to help improve writing skill. In the future, a survey should be conducted to investigate the English skill that requires for each job position in the organization to provide more precise training for the government staff.

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