

A Study on the Needs of English Skills of Airline Ground Staff

การศึกษาความต้องการด้านทักษะภาษาอังกฤษ
ของพนักงานสายการบิน

Theethat Phithakphongphan (ธีทัต พิทักษ์พงศ์พันธุ์)¹

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความต้องการด้านทักษะภาษาอังกฤษของพนักงานต้อนรับภาคพื้นดิน สายการบินแอร์เอเชีย ประจำท่าอากาศยานนานาชาติภูเก็ต โดยมุ่งเน้นทักษะภาษาอังกฤษทั้งสี่ด้าน คือ ด้านการฟัง, ด้านการพูด, ด้านการอ่าน, และด้านการเขียน ที่พนักงานต้อนรับภาคพื้นดินใช้ในการปฏิบัติหน้าที่ พนักงานต้อนรับภาคพื้นดินจำนวนสามสิบคนทำการตอบแบบสอบถาม และให้สัมภาษณ์เป็นรายบุคคลเกี่ยวกับทัศนคติต่อภาษาอังกฤษ การวิจัยนี้ไม่เพียงแต่แบบสอบถามในการศึกษาระดับความต้องการด้านทักษะภาษาอังกฤษ แต่ยังใช้การสัมภาษณ์เพื่อทราบข้อมูลเกี่ยวกับทัศนคติของพนักงานต้อนรับภาคพื้นดินที่มีต่อภาษาอังกฤษอีกด้วย ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ในทักษะภาษาอังกฤษทั้งสี่ด้านนั้น พนักงานต้อนรับภาคพื้นดินมีความต้องการทักษะด้านการพูดในระดับ “มากที่สุด” ตามมาด้วยทักษะด้านการฟังในระดับ “มากที่สุด” เช่นเดียวกัน โดยทักษะด้านการอ่านและการเขียนมีความต้องการอยู่ในระดับ “มาก” นอกจากนี้ ผลจากการสัมภาษณ์พบว่าพนักงานต้อนรับภาคพื้นดินส่วนใหญ่มีความเห็นตรงกันว่าภาษาอังกฤษมีความสำคัญต่อทั้งอาชีพปัจจุบันและอาชีพในอนาคต โดยทักษะด้านการพูดภาษาอังกฤษเป็นทักษะพนักงานต้อนรับภาคพื้นดินส่วนใหญ่สามารถใช้ได้ที่สุด

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¹ อาจารย์, สาขาวิชาภาษาต่างดialect คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยทักษิณ สงขลา 90000,
e-mail : theethat.p@live.com

Abstract

This study examines the needs of English skills of Air Asia ground staff at Phuket International Airport base. The study focuses on the needs of English four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which the ground staff use in their job areas. A total of 30 ground staff were randomly asked to complete the questionnaires. After completed questionnaires, they were interviewed on attitudes towards English. This study aims to investigate the level of the needs of English skills from the questionnaire and explore the ground staff's attitudes towards studying English from the interviews. Interestingly, the results show that, among four English skills, the ground staff needed the speaking skills most at 'extremely' level followed by listening skills at the same level. Reading and writing skills were reported at 'mostly' level. The findings from the interviews reveal that most ground staff agreed that English was important for their current and future careers. In addition, they mentioned that speaking was the skill they could perform best.

Keywords : Needs analysis, English skills, English communication,
Airline ground staff

Introduction

Internationally, English is accepted as a vital medium in the world business communication, notably in airline businesses. Apart from safety systems, for airline industries, it can be said that airline staff are one of the factors that can build up good images for the airlines. Not only their proper grooming and service mindedness can impress passengers, but their English skills are also required in servicing passengers. According to Akkakoson (1994), English is an important tool for business communication and it is very useful for employees. Undeniably, to achieve the airlines' goals, English competence is the important tool for those

who need to contact face to face and communicate with passengers. Therefore, the ground staff need to use English for their careers in conjunction with career knowledge to complete the services. Davidoff (1994) states that ground staff are customer-contact employees or passenger service agents for an international airline industry. English is a major medium of communication among them and it is clear that English is important for them. Generally, the ground staff are known to be able to perform in English well but English can be complicated for many of them too. From previous conversations with some ground staff at Air Asia, some indicated that they were not always able to say what they wanted to say when using English. What is more, some claimed that they lacked confidence when conversing in English because they were not confident about their grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, they were looking for some improvements of English skills that they needed to use in their jobs areas. For this reason, a study on the 'Needs' of English skills of airline ground staff was later conducted.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the functional needs of English skills of Thai Air Asia ground staff for using in their check-in areas during delivering services to passengers.

Research Questions

1. What is the English skill Thai Air Asia ground staff need most while performing duties?
2. What is the task Thai Air Asia ground staff have the most difficulty in using English while performing duties?

Significance of the Study

It was anticipated that the results of the study could be used as a guideline for the researcher, as a university lecturer, to develop a more effective course of English for Airline Staff for students at Thaksin University and to improve or expand the future English training courses for ground staff of Thai Air Asia.

Literature Review

English Communication for Airline Ground Staff

Communication is absolutely critical to the success of any service encounter. Service, after all, is mostly just the movement and processing of information. Without communication, either excellent or poor service cannot be delivered. An act of communication comes in different forms: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Davidoff (1994) states that the ground staff are customer-contact employees or passenger service agents for an international airline industry. They need to use appropriate English language communication with passengers from all over the world in order to offer services and interact with them properly. Moreover, English language functions used are also derived from job activities in the domain of the airport. This is to say the features from job activities and communication purposes together with social relationships between passengers and ground staff are utilized to develop all items in the four main skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) of the questionnaire used in the main study. In short, the consideration of all concerned features finally results in the appropriate English language use for ground staff in performing their jobs.

Need Analysis

It has been widely accepted as a principle of program design that needs analysis is an important prerequisite to the specification of language learning objectives. Many researchers defined needs analysis in various ways and from different viewpoints. Mackay (1978) divides the needs of students into academic needs, where English is required for further academic study, e.g. medical students requiring English in order to understand lectures and read textbooks in English and job needs, where English is required to perform a particular practical job, e.g. technicians requiring English for working on a project in which English is used. Richards (1985) cites that needs analysis is the requirement of fact-finding or the collection of data from various sources, for example, the data about

the learners, the materials, and so on. When it comes to English learning, Richard cites that the goals of the needs analysis for course planning are to determine for what a particular group of learners expect to use English in any situations and what their present levels of competence are, in order to achieve effective communication in international environments. Ellis and Johnson (1994) view that needs analysis is a method of receiving a description of learner's needs. It concerns the specific purposes for which the learner will use the language, the kind of language to be used, the starting level, and the target level, which is to be achieved. The information is collected from a wide range of different people including company staff, trainers, and the learners themselves. It will have implications for the approach to training that will be taken. In Wongsothon's (1982) study, a survey of societal needs for using English was conducted. Questionnaire and interview techniques were used to collect data from government agencies, state enterprises, and business sectors. The results revealed that government agencies and state enterprises moderately used English while business sectors used more English. Reading and writing were most used followed by listening, speaking and translating respectively. Moreover, it shared the same results with Akkakoson (1994), Ketkeaw (1997), Aunreun (2005) that English was used more for working purposes than for social and personal purposes and the use of English was highly important among staff who worked in international workplaces.

Methodology

Respondents

The respondents of the study were 30 ground staff (check-in) of Thai Air Asia (Phuket International Airport base) with not over two-year experience. With not over two-year experience, the respondents still had difficulties and needs in using English when performing their duties. If the respondents had over two-year

experience, there was a high chance that they were able to cope with the English skills problems in their jobs. The results may be distorted. Therefore, the respondents in this study were appropriate and in line with purpose of the study which was to investigate the functional needs of English skills of the ground staff.

Instruments

A quantitative approach by survey technique was mainly used to identify the English needs for Thai Air Asia ground staff. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was used as the instrument for this study. It was adapted from Tangnium's "The needs in using English skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing" questionnaire (2006) to gather information on participants' needs. The questionnaire consisted of two main parts.

Part 1 consisted of general demographic information such as gender, age, and educational background.

Part 2 consisted of questions relating to the English functional needs of all four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The respondents were asked to rank their needs of English according to the 5-point Likert scale. The questions were categorized into four skills as follows:

Listening Skill

1. Listening to passengers' personal details and information.
2. Listening to passengers' requests.
3. Listening to different accents (e.g. British, Indian, and Singaporean).
4. Listening to English slang words.
5. Listening to conversations by phone.

Speaking Skill

6. Welcoming and greeting.
7. Providing and explaining information about flight itineraries and other services.
8. Offering assistance to passengers.
9. Explaining the reason for mistakes.

10. Suggesting travel information (e.g. accommodation, tourist attractions).

Reading Skill

11. Reading passengers' travel documents.

12. Reading any English manuals (e.g. Passenger Handling Manuals).

13. Reading e-mails, telexes, faxes.

14. Reading airline codes and aviation technical terms.

15. Reading additional passengers' documents (e.g. map, itinerary).

Writing Skill

16. Writing messages for passengers.

17. Writing daily reports.

18. Writing e-mails, telexes, faxes.

19. Writing airline codes and aviation technical terms.

20. Issuing airline documents.

However, a qualitative approach, interview, was also employed in this study in order to gain more in-depth information from the respondents. The interview consisted of two main questions: Attitudes towards English, and The English skill that the respondent can perform best.

Data Collection

Thirty copies of questionnaire were handed out to the target ground staffs at Phuket International Airport. After the respondents completed all the items, the questionnaires were collected by the researcher. The questionnaires were checked and cross-checked for certainty of data. At the end of the procedures, all respondents were interviewed orally about their attitudes towards English and the English skills that they could perform best. The data from the interviews was collected in the written form by the researcher. As the respondents were not native English speakers and the researcher wanted to avoid misunderstanding, the interviews were conducted in Thai.

SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program was used to analyze the data obtained from the questionnaires. A 5-point Likert scale was used to rate the respondents' levels of needs. The criteria for the rating scale were as follows:

Scale	Level of Needs	Mean Range
1.	Extremely	4.21 - 5.00
2.	Mostly	3.41 - 4.20
3.	Moderately	2.61 - 3.40
4.	Slightly	1.81 - 2.60
5.	Least	1.00 - 1.80

Results

General Information

The respondents involved in this study were both male (40%) and female (60%). Most of them (73.37%) were between 26–30 years old. The majority of the respondents (93.33%) received a bachelor's degree.

The Needs of English Skills

1. Listening Skill

For the needs of listening skills, the respondents had the 'extremely' level ($M = 4.35$, $S.D. = 0.53$). This means that the majority of the respondents extremely needed the skill in listening to passengers' requests ($M = 4.83$, $S.D. = 0.37$), the highest mean score regarding the needs of listening skills at the 'extremely' level. At the same time, they extremely needed the skill in listening to passengers' personal details and information ($M = 4.77$, $S.D. = 0.42$), and in listening to different accents such as British, Indian, and Singaporean ($M = 4.63$,

S.D. = 0.55). However, there were two items where the level of the needs of listening skills was at the 'mostly' level. The responses showed that the respondents mostly needed the skill in listening to conversations by phone ($M = 3.63$, S.D. = 0.66), which was the lowest mean score for the needs of listening skills. The responses also showed that the respondents mostly needed the skill in listening to English slang words ($M = 3.90$, S.D. = 0.65).

2. Speaking Skill

The responses to most of the items showed that the respondents had extreme needs ($M = 4.62$, S.D. = 0.44). The majority of the respondents extremely needed the skill in providing and explaining information about flight itineraries and other services ($M = 4.87$, S.D. = 0.34). This item had the highest mean score in the needs of speaking skills at the 'extremely' level. Also, they extremely needed the skill in explaining the reason for mistakes ($M = 4.83$, S.D. = 0.37), in suggesting travel information such as accommodation and tourist attractions ($M = 4.53$, S.D. = 0.50), in offering assistance to passengers ($M = 4.47$, S.D. = 0.50), and in welcoming and greeting ($M = 4.40$, S.D. = 0.49).

3. Reading Skill

Considering the responses to the questionnaire surveying the needs of reading skills, the majority of the respondents expressed the 'mostly' level ($M = 4.13$, S.D. = 0.49). The respondents extremely needed the skill in reading passengers' travel documents ($M = 4.47$, S.D. = 0.50), the highest mean score in the needs of reading skills at the 'extremely' level. At the same time, they extremely needed the skill in reading any English manuals such as Passenger Handling Manuals ($M = 4.77$, S.D. = 0.42). However, there were three items that the level of the needs of reading skills was at the 'mostly' level. The responses showed that the respondents mostly needed the skill in reading airline codes and aviation technical terms ($M = 3.87$, S.D. = 0.67), which was the lowest mean score in the needs of listening skills. The responses also showed that the respondents mostly needed the skill in reading additional passengers'

documents such as map and itinerary ($M = 3.97$, $S.D. = 0.42$), and in reading e-mails, telexes, faxes ($M = 4.03$, $S.D. = 0.41$).

4. Writing Skill

The respondents had the needs at the 'mostly' level ($M = 4.00$, $S.D. = 0.53$). From the results, the respondents needed the skill in writing airline codes and aviation technical terms ($M = 3.50$, $S.D. = 0.50$). This item had the lowest mean score in the needs of writing skills at the 'mostly' level. Also, they mostly needed the skill in writing messages for passengers ($M = 3.90$, $S.D. = 0.65$), in issuing airline documents ($M = 3.97$, $S.D. = 0.42$), and in writing e-mails, telexes, faxes ($M = 4.10$, $S.D. = 0.54$). However, there was only one item that the level of the needs of writing skills was at the 'extremely' level, item 17. The responses showed that the respondents extremely needed the skill in writing daily reports ($M = 4.57$, $S.D. = 0.56$), which was the highest mean score in the needs of writing skills.

5. Interview

There were two main questions asked in the interviews regarding the attitudes towards English, and the English skills that the respondents could perform best. The majority of the respondents agreed that English was very important for their jobs. Some of them said that English proficiency provided them better chances to get good jobs and it would be beneficial for their future careers. Some of them mentioned that co-workers who performed better in English inspired them to study and practice more. Most of the respondents mentioned that they did best at speaking because they needed to speak with passengers a lot although there were some grammatical errors during the conversations. Many of them said that they were good at listening because they usually listened to English songs and watched movies with English original soundtrack. Regarding reading and writing, they said that they were quite good at these skills.

The Summary of the Needs of Four English Skills

The average mean score of all four English skills showed that the respondents

had the needs at the 'extremely' level ($M = 4.27$, $S.D. = 0.49$). From the results, the respondents needed the speaking skills most ($M = 4.62$, $S.D. = 0.44$). This skill had the highest mean score among the needs of four English skills at the 'extremely' level followed by listening skills ($M = 4.35$, $S.D. = 0.53$) at the same level. However, reading and writing skills are reported at the 'mostly' level. The average mean of reading skills was at 4.13 ($S.D. = 0.49$) and the average mean of writing skills was at 4.00 ($S.D. = 0.53$). The latter skill had the lowest mean score among the needs of four English skills.

Discussion

Among the four main English skills, the ground staff agreed that they extremely needed to use listening and speaking skills while writing and reading skills are mostly needed. This is similar to the findings of Ketkaew (1997) who surveyed the cabin attendants' needs of English and revealed that listening and speaking skills were the most needed which were at the highest level of rating in Ketkaew's study. It can be seen that the job fields concerning customer services especially face-to-face communication tend to use listening and speaking skills as medium of communication most. This can be said that the ground staff need to communicate face to face with passengers most. That means the skills most used in face-to-face communication are listening and speaking.

Listening skills

The ground staff extremely need listening skills in listening to the requests from the passengers because they have to meet the passengers face to face at the check-in counters. The requests can be varied from simple information including passengers' personal details and information to seat allocations. If there is any misunderstanding at this stage, it leads to negative consequences for both passengers and the airline such as complaints, and client loss. The study

shares the same results with the study of Chimroylarp (1998) that the most needed situation of English listening skills was at the check-in counters when passengers arrived. At the same time, they experience passengers with different accents such as British, Indian, and Singaporean, unavoidably. Therefore, they should have frequent opportunities to listen to a wide variety of different accents while giving services or to experience general conversations with foreigners so that they can be more familiar with different accents that the passengers use as suggested by Sucompa (1998). This indicates that the ground staff extremely need listening skills. To avoid any misunderstanding that can occur, slang words are not always used in communicating between the staff and passengers although there are chances that slang words are used. In addition, because the ground staff usually communicate with their passengers face to face, telephone conversation is not extremely needed but they need to perform the task appropriately. For those reasons, listening skills involving slang words and telephone conversations are still necessary.

Speaking skills

In this study, among the four English skills, speaking is the greatest needs of the ground staff. It shares similar results with Aunruen's (2005) study that speaking skill was the greatest need for the travel agents in Chiang Mai when they communicated with foreign customers. The majority of the ground staff extremely need speaking skills in providing and explaining information about flight itineraries and other services because those functions are in their daily routine operations. Speaking skills are most needed at this stage. They have to give the correct information to the passengers by using clear pronunciations and understandable English. The accuracy of the flight itineraries is very important in travel by plane. Therefore, the information must be transmitted correctly and clearly to the passengers. Also, explaining the reasons for mistakes to the passengers when mistakes occur is extremely needed. That is to say, the ground staff need to use English speaking skills to explain in case of flight

irregularities such as a flight delay or cancellation. Suggesting travel information such as accommodation and tourist attractions, offering assistance or options for passengers, and welcoming and greeting are also extremely needed. During performing those functions, they need to pronounce English consonant and vowel sounds correctly and they must speak with appropriate word intonations and word stress. They need to learn how to use polite language to impress passengers. This could build good images for the airline and fulfill the passengers' satisfaction. These findings support Ketkeaw's (1997) findings that the use of English speaking skills was highly important among cabin attendants and the appropriate communication, as a consequence, increased more passengers' satisfaction.

Reading skills

Reading skills are needed at the mostly level among the ground staff. They need to read to obtain the information from passengers' travel documents such as air tickets, passports, and visa. Regularly, they cannot skim these kinds of documents before they decide to move to next service procedures. The details appearing on those documents must be valid so that passengers are allowed to fly. That is to say, this stage requires careful reading skills in order to avoid any mistakes. Furthermore, they read the Passenger Handling Manuals as their sources of job procedure references. The ground staff might need to use them just for a period at the beginning of the employment. After that they might learn by their experience or from senior staff about job procedures. They might use them again when they feel unsure about the procedures. This is supported by Mackay (1978), who mentioned in his study that English was needed in order to read textbooks in English and job needs, where English is required to perform a particular practical job. For reading airline codes and aviation technical terms to be read as well as reading e-mails, telexes, faxes, the codes, terms, structures and language used must generally be understood among the personnel working in airline business. It means these stages require reading skills, memory skills,

and familiarity. The results, therefore, show that the ground staff in this study mostly needed reading skills in reading airline codes and aviation technical terms as well as e-mails, telexes, faxes. In addition, their jobs also involve reading additional passengers' documents such as map and itinerary.

Writing skills

Regarding writing skills, the ground staff agree that they extremely need the skill in conducting their daily reports. The reports must be sent to their supervisors. All details such as work procedures, problems, and suggestions must be included and those should be written in understandable English. English grammar and writing organizations are necessary. Importantly, writing reports seems to be the most important task since they have to produce the reports daily and it is necessary that the details in the reports will serve them well in conveying meaningful messages about their services. This is similar to the study of Wongsothon (1982) which showed that English writing skills were needed most for working purposes in order to report work progress. Writing e-mails, telexes, and faxes is also mentioned. It shares the same reason with the above mentioned tasks. Unavoidably, writing airline codes and aviation technical terms, and issuing airline documents are also needed. They regularly perform those tasks and they must be certain of the codes and terms because misspelled codes can lead to wrong issuing airline documents or causing passengers to have wrong flights. In addition, the ground staff may have to write messages for passengers when needed, for example, assisting passengers with hearing problems or passengers who are unable to speak English well. They can pass the messages from the ground staff on to another airline staff. Therefore, the written messages need to be understandable. This is supported by Davidoff (1994) who suggested that understandable English language communication with passengers, in a written form, had to be used.

Interviews

All of the respondents agreed that English was the most needed tool for their jobs to communicate with passengers, mostly, in face-to-face manner.

It is supported by Akkakoson's study (1994) that in business communication, all four English skills were required. In addition, according to Davidoff (1994), the ground staff communicated face to face with foreign passengers. English, therefore, was a main language of communication among them. The ground staff stated that to be able to perform better in English gave them better opportunities to get better job positions later. This inspired them to study and practice more English. Co-workers who performed better in English were reported to be another factor inspiring them to learn more about English. Most of them mentioned speaking was the skill they performed best. This is because their jobs extremely require them to orally communicate with passengers. Although during the conversations, there were some grammatical errors, they thought that their speaking skills were acceptable. Many of them said that that listening to English songs and watched movies with English original soundtrack boosted up their listening skills. Regarding reading and writing, they mentioned that they were quite good at these skills. This might be because reading and writing are less used than listening and speaking in their daily lives when they are not working.

Conclusion

In this study, the respondents extremely needed English skills in improving their jobs. This is supported by Richards (1985) who defined that English was needed in learners' circumstances in order to achieve in international communications. Speaking skills are the highest need for the ground staff. In fact, speaking and listening skills should be integrated since the ground staff speak to passengers as much as they listen to them in their daily routine jobs. This is in line with Aunruen's (2005) study which found that speaking and listening skills were the greatest needs for the travel agents in Chiang Mai when they communicated with foreign customers. On the other hand, reading and writing

skills are mostly needed by the ground staff. The fact that reading and writing are less used than speaking and listening in their job areas indicates why the average mean scores of reading and writing skills are at the mostly level. Moreover, reading and writing in some job tasks require more memory and familiarity than English skills, for example, reading and writing airline codes. The findings from the study provide useful sources for course contents from which a training department or course developer could benefit. English courses development would serve the real needs of the ground staff in using the English language for their current jobs. This will increase the proficiency of ground staff in conversing in English for handling all cases and performing their job duties. Since the ground staff perceive that English, as a global language, is very important, they need to use English as the main medium to communicate with passengers and to complete working procedures. As a consequence, the English training courses will bring about the staff's confidence in conversing in English and enhance their conversational and other skills. This leads to passenger satisfaction and improves the level of service and competitive ability of the company.

Recommendation

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made for future research. This study used a questionnaire and interviews as the primary instruments. Therefore, it might not cover all the aspects of the respondents' attitudes and opinions. To obtain more in-depth information, other instruments such as daily-task observations, or English tests should be used so that the respondents can provide clarification on their answers. This would help the researcher collect more in-depth information. Although it has been found that the ground staff need English speaking skills most, listening, reading and writing are essential elements of success in communicating too.

Finally, as the number of the staff in this study was limited, the inferences that can be drawn are limited and the results cannot be much generalized. Further study of other airline staff in different contexts may generate more varied results.

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