ปัญหาและกลยุทธ์ในการแก้ไขปัญหาการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาไทยที่เข้าร่วมค่ายนวัตกรรมทางสังคม 2019

Problems-solving Strategies in English Communication of Thai Students in a Social Innovation Camp 2019

เดชาธร พจนพงษ์* และ พัชรา มูลปัญญา

Dechathorn Pojchanaphong and Phatchara Munpanya*

คณะบริหารธุรกิจและศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีราชมงคลล้านนา เชียงใหม่ จ.เชียงใหม่ 50300

Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts, Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna Chiang Mai,
Chiang Mai 50300, Thailand

*Corresponding author: E-mail: ndechathorn@gmail.com

Abstract: This research aims to find out English communication problems of Thai students who participated in the Learning Express program 2019 at Rajamangla University of Technology Lanna Chiang Mai, and the strategies they used in communicating with their foreign peers in English. The students were selected by the program committee using an English proficiency test as part of the selection process. The research was conducted by using a 5 Likert Scale questionnaire adapted in relation to the communication problem-solving strategy concept. The questionnaires were distributed to the students and then collected for analysis. There were also open-ended question items for them to express their opinions together with interviews with four selected students for in-depth details. It was found that the problems that the Thai students encountered most were limited vocabularies ($\bar{x}$ = 3.19, S.D.=0.962), incompressible pronunciation, or accent ($\bar{x}$ =3.07, S.D.=0.958), and the lack of proper English grammar ($\bar{x}$ =2.78, S.D.=1.013) respectively. For the strategies, the students reported using body language or facial expression the most at ($\bar{x}$ = 4.11, S.D.=1.188), followed by asking friends with better English for help at ($\bar{x}$ =4.00, S.D.=1.074), and using fillers to allow them to think before speaking at ($\bar{x}$=3.93, S.D.=0.829). The researchers noticed that a broader range of vocabulary was vital for these students, and non-verbal communication helped fulfill their limited words. It is suggested that a preparation course for the program next year emphasize strengthening students' vocabulary and their pronunciations.

Keywords: English communication, communication problem-solving strategies, English language skills development

บทคัดย่อ: งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ในการหาปัญหาด้านการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษที่นักศึกษาซึ่งเข้าร่วมโครงการเลิร์น
นิ่งเอ็กเปรส 2019 ณ มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีราชมงคลล้านนาได้ประสพ และกลยุทธ์การสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษที่
นักศึกษาใช้ เมื่อต้องสื่อสารกับเพื่อนชาวต่างชาติเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ นักศึกษาได้รับการคัดเลือก จากคณะกรรมการ
โครงการโดยใช้ระดับความสามารถทางด้านภาษาอังกฤษเป็นเกณฑ์ แบบสอบถาม ลิเคิร์ท สเกล 5 ระดับได้ถูก
นำมาใช้ในการวิจัยครั้งนี้ โดยได้ปรับให้สอดคล้องกับหลักการ ปัญหาและกลยุทธ์ในการแก้ปัญหาด้านการสื่อสาร
โดยได้แจกแบบสอบถามให้แก่นักศึกษาทั้ง 27 คน เพื่อนำข้อมูลมาวิเคราะห์ ซึ่งในแบบสอบถามยังมีคำถามแบบ
ปลายเปิดเพื่อให้นักศึกษาได้แสดงความคิดเห็น นอกจากนี้ยังได้มีการสัมภาษณ์โดยการสุ่มนักศึกษาจำนวน 4 คน
เพื่อสอบถามข้อมูลในเชิงลึก จากการศึกษาพบว่าปัญหาที่นักศึกษาไทยประสพมากที่สุดได้แก่ 1) คำศัพท์ที่จำกัด
($\bar{x}$= 3.19, S.D.=0.962) การออกเสียงและสำเนียงที่ไม่คุ้นเคย ($\bar{x}$=3.07, S.D.=0.958) และ การขาดความรู้ด้าน
ไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษที่ดี ($\bar{x}$=2.78, S.D.=1.013) ตามลำดับ สำหรับกลยุทธ์ที่นักศึกษาใช้มากที่สุดนั้นได้แก่การใช้
อวัจนะภาษาและการแสดงออกทางสีหน้า ($\bar{x}$= 4.11, S.D.=1.188) ตามด้วยการขอความช่วยเหลือจากเพื่อนที่เก่ง
ภาษาอังกฤษมกว่า ($\bar{x}$=4.00, S.D.=1.074) และการใช้คำเติมเพื่อประวิงการพูด ($\bar{x}$=3.93, S.D.=0.829) ตามลำดับ
ผู้วิจัยให้ข้อสังเกตว่าคลังคำศัพท์ที่มากพอมีความจำเป็นต่อนักศึกษากลุ่มนี้ และการใช้อวัจนะภาษาได้ช่วยเติมเต็ม
ข้อจำกัดทางด้านคำศัพท์ ผู้วิจัยจึงเสนอให้มีการจัดคอร์สเตรียมความพร้อมให้กับนักศึกษาที่จะเข้าร่วมโครงการในปี
ต่อไปเช่นเดิม แต่ต้องมุ่งเน้นไปที่การเพิ่มคลังคำศัพท์และการฝึกออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสำคัญ
คำสำคัญ: การสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษ กลยุทธ์ในการแก้ไขปัญหาด้านการสื่อสาร การพัฒนาทักษะภาษาอังกฤษ

Introduction

In this 21st century, international communication has become vital since the world is easily and rapidly connected. Interactions among people happen within seconds, so miscommunication will only bring about problems. Unlike a slower and less reliable process of translation when communicating with several groups of people, a common language can be a better solution (Crystal, 2019).

Recently, the English language has spread out and become crucial because it is used as a medium of communication internationally. Consequently, its learners are expected to communicate with people of different languages and cultures, making the number of non-native English speakers outnumber those who use it as their first language (Baker, 2012; Jenkin, 2007).

As in many countries worldwide, English has been used as a medium of instruction, business, social interaction, and negotiation in Thailand (Rattanaphumma, 2011). Thai students nowadays have to study English for approximately 12 years in their primary and secondary education. Because Thailand is a permanent member of the ASEAN communities where various languages are spoken, a common language, especially

English, is undeniably essential for communication within the region.

To enhance teaching and learning English in Thai schools to keep up with their neighbors, extra curriculum activities have been implemented, such as English skills competitions, international exchange programs, and language cultural camps. In these camps, students typically have an opportunity to meet friends with different native tongues, and they have to use English as a means of mutual understanding. Moreover, they have to interact with one another, which brings language communication to be used in a real situation.

During the conversation, specific communication problems may arise. Thus, the communication strategies will be used to help the students overcome these problems in order to express their intended meaning. Some commonly used strategies may include circumlocution, semantic avoidance, word coinage, language switch, asking for clarification, non-verbal strategies, and avoidance.

Several studies have been conducted on English communication among Thai students, some of which emphasized communication strategies used to overcome their language obstacles when interacting with foreigners. Sutthinaraphan and Wasanasomsithi (2017) researched on "A study of English communication strategy use of undergraduate students majoring in science" in order to examine the communication strategies that the science students at Chulalongkorn University used. They asked 87 first-year students to complete questionnaires. It was found that most of the participants used a non-verbal strategy, whereas the least used strategy was attempting to think in English. The study suggested that students be trained with other strategies, for instance, English thinking, accuracy oriented, and fluency oriented strategies.

Moreover, Wahyuni and Ilyas (2017) investigated English communication problems and strategies in their study on an investigation of Thai students' English language problems and their learning strategies at the English study program of teacher training and education Faculty of Riau Islamic University. A survey was conducted among 10 Thai students who enrolled in an English study program of teacher training and education Faculty at Riau Islamic University. The study revealed that their major problem was listening and writing skills, whereas reading is the least problematic skill. Time restraint contributed to the difficulty when they wrote an essay in

English. The most frequently used strategy was to ask lecturers and classmates for help, and the least frequently used strategy was not to try to guess if not fully understand.

Last but not least, Boonpanya and Pojchanaphong (2018) hammered into similar problems in English communication of Thai students. The researchers studied "communication problem-solving strategies of Thai students in an exchange program in Singapore" to find out what English communication problems the participants encountered and what strategies were used to overcome the obstacles. A set of Likert scale questionnaires was distributed and completed by 23 Thai students who joined the student exchange program called the TFI scale in 2017. It was found that the students' three major communication problems were a lack of listening comprehension, limited vocabulary size, and environmental factors. The most frequently used communication strategies were the use of body language, asking the interlocutors, and the use of general words to avoid the unknown words. The researchers recommended that the Thai students joining the program in the following years seek an opportunity to interact with English speaking people to better their listening and pronunciation skills. Moreover, pre-program training should be conducted, focusing on increasing students' vocabulary

size together with other language drills such as watching soundtrack movies before their departure to Singapore.

This research studied what English communication problems Thai students from Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna encountered and what language strategies they used to reach a mutual understanding while joining a 2019 social innovation camp collaborated by Singapore Polytechnic. It is hoped that the research findings will be beneficial for English language teaching (ELT) and a deeper understanding of using English as a common language in international communication.

Scope of the Research

This research focused on English communication problems and strategies used by 27 Thai students who enrolled in the Learning Express 2019 program. The students were in their first, second, and third years from three different faculties; the Faculty of Business Administration, the Faculty of Engineering, and the faculty of Fine Arts and Architecture, Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna.

Materials and Methods

Research Period

This research was conducted from March – June 2019. The researchers created the questionnaires in March to be distributed

in April. The program was from March 29th – April 9th. After collecting the questionnaires and interviewing participants, the researchers analyzed the data in May. The completed research is then finished in June.

Population and Sample

The participants were 27 Thai students with 13 males and 14 females from three different faculties of the university, namely the Faculty of Business Administration (18 students), the Faculty of Engineering (5 students), and the Faculty of Fine Arts and Architecture (4 students). These students were selected by the committee using English proficiency as part of the selection process. Their English ranged from 'fair' to 'good.'

Research Tools

The study was based on the questionnaires and the focus group interview. The self-reported questionnaires consisted of four sections, including demographic information and questions related to communication problems and strategies used in coping with English communication problems of Thai students in the Learning Express Program 2019.

For the first section, the participants were asked to give information regarding their personal information, including an educational background of studying abroad and English. In this part, the participants chose the answer that best described them. In the second section, six items portrayed the communication problems the participants had during the program. The questions in this section were adapted from the studies of communication problems by Dornyei (1995), Gudykunst (2004), Thornbury (2005), and Hybels and Weaver (1995) frameworks. In the third section, 11 items described the communication strategies used in overcoming communication problems. This questions section was developed from Dornyei's (1995) communication strategies framework. In the last section, there were two open-ended questions to observe the participants' opinions about the communication problems and strategies in this program. A Likert-scale questionnaire was designed to evaluate the frequency of their English oral communication problems and strategies use.

The researchers designed the questionnaires in relation to the objectives and examined by two experts for its content appropriateness. The data are collected from the questionnaires was distributed to the students to complete after the camp had finished. Moreover, the researchers interviewed some selected participants.

Thus, the data obtained were analyzed in both quantitative and qualitative manners.

Data Collection

The researchers contacted the target participants in order to ask for their participation to do the questionnaires and ensured that the personal information would be strictly confidential. The questionnaires were distributed to 27 Thai students in the Learning Express Program 2019. The completed questionnaires were returned within one week.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data from the questionnaires in terms of frequency distribution, mean, and standard deviation. One of the significant data analyses is the mean score. In response to a five-point Likert scale, the interpretation of the mean scores is as follows: 4.51 to 5.00 (strongly agree), 3.51 to 4.50 (agree), 2.51 to 3.50 (moderately agree), 1.51 to 2.50 (disagree), 0.00 to 1.50 (strongly disagree). Percentages were calculated to avoid some results which might regress to the norm since the mean scores of some items are similar after calculating. The SPSS program was employed to identify the frequency of individual communication problems and strategies use and categorization of communication problems and strategies.

Results

The finding of this study will be reported into three parts comprising demographic data, English language problems, and strategies use. The first part is the students' demographic data. Based on the demographic data of participants, the participants were 27 Thai students with 13 males and 14 females from three different faculties of the university namely the Faculty of Business Administration (18 students), the Faculty of Engineering (5 students), and the Faculty of Fine Arts and Architecture (4 students). Almost one-fourth of the participants had experience in overseas exchange programs before the Learning Express Program 2019 (25.9%). A majority of the participants have been studying English for more than ten years (66.7%), while nine of them (33.3%) responded that they had studied English for less than ten years. The second part is the data related to English communication problems that the Thai students faced the most and the least problematic. This part is the answer to the first question of this research, that is, "What English communication problems did the Thai students enrolling Learning Express

program 2019 have to encounter?" The final part is the data related to the most frequent communication-solving strategies use by Thai students in Learning Express Program 2019. This part is the answer to the second question of this research, which is, "What

English communication strategies did they use to tackle the problems in order to reach a mutual understanding among students of different nationalities?" The researchers precisely present the data in Table 1.

Table 1. The most frequently used strategies

Problems	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
I have difficulty with English communication because of my limited vocabularies	27	3.19	0.962	Moderately agree
I am not used to their pronunciation or accent	27	3.07	0.958	Moderately agree
I have difficulty with English communication because I lack proper English grammar	27	2.78	1.013	Moderately agree
I think the environmental factors such as loud noise, music, and the crowds affect my communication with foreign students	27	2.63	1.006	Moderately agree
I do not understand their English	27	2.48	0.893	Disagree
I have difficulty in English communication because I cannot pronounce an English sound; for example, R and L sounds	27	2.48	1.014	Disagree

From Table 1, it was found that a limited vocabulary problem was the most frequently reported communication problem at the mean score of 3.19. Additionally, the results of the participants' opinions on the most prominent communication problems in the open-ended section were also reported that most of the participants were likely to have vocabulary problems, including their limited vocabulary range. For example, one of the participants

stated that "*Besides the level of language, vocabulary is my problem.*" Moreover, another participant mentioned that "*I don't know some English words that I want to explain, so it is hard to communicate.*" One student revealed that "*My list of vocabularies is limited to my daily life so I can't understand the academic and difficult words,*" while another stated that "*Technical term is my problem in this camp. I've heard a lot of new vocabularies that I've never*

heard before." Pronunciation or accent problems showed as a close second at the mean score of 3.07 and grammar problems at the mean score of 2.78, respectively.

However, from the open-ended section and the focus group interview, some of the participants claimed that *"I didn't concern about the grammar while I was in the camp because I focused only on the meaningful conversation. Grammar can only*

hinder my fluency." On the other hand, the English usage and English sound pronunciation; for example, R and L sounds were the least frequent problems perceived at the mean score of 2.48. The fluency, translation, accent, confidence, and excitement problems were also mentioned as their communication problems in the open-ended section.

Table 2. The most frequently communication-solving strategies used

Strategies	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
I use body language or facial expressions	27	4.11	1.188	Agree
I ask my friends who I think can speak English well for help	27	4.00	1.074	Agree
I use fillers or say some words when I need more time to think; for example, by saying "well" or "um…"	27	3.93	0.829	Agree
I use general words when I lack a specific word; for example, by saying "thing" for materials that are being referred to	27	3.85	0.770	Agree
I describe the object I do not know; for example, by saying "fruit that monkeys like to eat" for banana	27	3.67	1.038	Agree
I ask my interlocutor (the other speaker) for more explanation when I do not understand what they say; for example, terms or phrases that I do not know	27	3.63	0.884	Agree
I use synonyms when I do not know the target word; for example by using the word 'boat' for 'yacht'	27	3.59	0.931	Agree
I create a new word based on a supposed rule; for example, by saying "engineerer" for "engineer"	27	3.52	1.014	Agree
I translate from Thai to English directly	27	3.44	0.847	Moderately agree
I leave messages incomplete and change the subject	27	3.19	0.786	Moderately agree
I avoid topics that are difficult to communicate; for example, the topic with technical terms	27	3.04	0.940	Moderately agree

As displayed in Table 2, the three most frequent communication-solving strategies used by the participants in the current study was using body language and facial expressions at the mean score of 4.11, followed by asking for someone help at the mean score of 4.00 and fillers using or saying some words to have more time to think; for example, by saying "well" or "um…" at the mean score of 3.93 respectively. The result from the focus group interview showed that most of the participants stated that "*I use the easy words when I can't recognize the specific words or technical term. Most of the time, I try to describe the meaning of the words that I don't know*". However, some of them reported that "*I ask the interlocutor directly for more explanation. Moreover, I search for the meaning of the words I don't know from the internet*".

On the other hand, the three least communication-solving strategies frequently used by the participants in the current study were translating from Thai to English directly at the mean score of 3.44, followed by leaving messages incomplete and changing the subject at the mean score of 3.19 and avoiding the problematic communication topics at the mean of 3.04 respectively.

According to the opinions of the participants on overcoming the English communication barrier strategies in the open-ended section and the interview, it was found that the most common strategy used to overcome the communication problems was to provide more English language practice at the mean score of 77.8%. Besides, some of the participants commented that trying to memorize and using unfamiliar vocabularies more often could help recognize problematic words. Furthermore, a minority of interviewees (11.1%) agreed that being confident could be another strategy that can help them overcome language problems.

Discussion

Based on the results, it is evident that the students who participated in this social innovation camp found a limited range of vocabulary (3.19) and unfamiliar pronunciations and accents (3.07) most problematic. The problem of insufficiency in vocabulary may arise because of their limited knowledge of the English language (Dornyei and Scott, 1995). To confirm this, Kaur and Zulkurnain (2014) revealed from their study on "Oral English communication difficulties and coping strategies of diploma of hotel

management students at UiTM" that the lack of English language knowledge was the most problematic for their students. Thus, this should be taken into account by EFL teachers, as Ting and Lau (2008) mention that learners can face the problem of sentence structure deficiency if their vocabulary range is limited.

On the other hand, grammatical accuracy, which is one of the main focuses in English language teaching, was viewed by the students as less troublesome than the other two. Although a short English training course was provided to the students before joining the camp, the course focused on language patterns and structure and the design thinking process. The English preparation course lasted only two days, which might not be sufficient. Therefore, the English preparation course might not meet the precise students' needs and more training days might be required to prepare a practical course.

In terms of the strategies used to tackle their English communication problem, the use of non-verbal communication, body language, and facial expressions are viewed as the most effective strategy (4.11). They often used gestures and facial expressions to compensate for what they want to say. This is correlated with the study of Phonhan (2019) on "Strategies in oral communication

employed by Thai engineering students across majors and types of academic programs," which suggests that the nonverbal strategy is most frequently implemented. His research resembles this study in that the populations were Thai undergraduate students. The researchers then argue that non-verbal communication is a vital part of English language teaching in Thai institutions.

Additionally, Syamsudin (2016) also pinned that non-linguistic strategies which can be referred to non-verbalism is helpful and needed for her students in Malaysia, especially in improving their speaking skill. Moreover, the students tended to use the social strategy by asking other friends for help with the language problems (4.00), followed by using compensatory strategy, the use of fillers to have more time to think (3.93). The result is quite different from that of Kaur and Zulkurnain (2014), which showed that their students liked the idea of participating in English listening and speaking activities and negotiated meanings with the interlocutors. This can be implied that their students were more exposed to active learning rather than relying on their peers with better English or using fillers to wait for thoughts to be spoken.

Interestingly, when the researchers interviewed some of the participants, who majored in English, the message reduction and alteration strategies are employed. The

participants mainly used familiar words and simplified their utterances when they were incapable of executing the original message and described the meaning of the words, or they used social strategy by asking the interlocutor directly for more explanations besides asking help from others. The interview indicated that non-verbal strategies were the commonly used strategy for the students to tackle their communication problems. The non-verbal strategies might be the most direct method for the students. Using these strategies seems to reflect that their English competency level is not efficient enough to solve the language problems. Thus, it is necessary to provide a productive English preparation course.

The social innovation camp also helped the students to engage with the local people and the needs to improve their community. The students not only learned how to think critically but also how to collaborate with unacquainted people who spoke a different language and had a different cultural background. On the other hand, the community had an excellent opportunity to embrace new ideas from outsiders, which might be applicable to solve their local problems. They perceived fresh ideas from a different angle and a different generation. Last but foremost, the educational institutions, which opened doors for their students to expose themselves in the new environment, also achieved their goal of enhancing extra curriculum activities. In this camp, the students had an opportunity to practice their language skills, as Bailey (2005) suggested that one can master a language if he or she is motivated to speak as much as possible. Examples of productive communicative activities are such as group works and projects. Moreover, the institutions will get useful information and ideas for community service, which is said to be one of the missions of a higher educational institute.

Conclusion

Learning Express program has put an effort to prepare students before joining the activities. However, the preparation process may include insufficient language training. It is recommended that the Learning Express facilitators provide the essential preparation for students who may join the program or the usual extra curriculum activities. The preparation should include more vocabulary range needed for the activities, the pronunciation, and listening drills to let the students get familiar with different Englishes.

Last but not least, the use of language should not be ignored. Practical

English structures and expressions which fit the context of each activity should be reviewed, for example, making questions, the use of tenses, and giving opinions. Moreover, communication strategies, as appeared in the research framework, should be addressed and practiced more in the training so that the students will be well equipped for their self-improvement through the program.

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