
THE NEEDS OF INTELLIGIBILITY FOR REGISTRAR OFFICE PERSONNEL IN ENGLISH AS A LINGUAL FRANCA FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES CONTEXT

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Abstract

Apparently, the growth of internationalization in universities in Thailand does not match the qualifications of the current personnel in registrar office who have been long employed since English skills were not relatively required. As having a high frequent contact with international students in providing academic services in English throughout their study, registrar office personnel need a well-designed in-house English training urgently. This study investigated work-related needs in English for registrar office personnel. Data collected from registrar office personnel revealed that intelligibility, not fluency in English, is the achievable goal for their work. They specifically needed to improve their listening and speaking skills with sufficient knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structures related to students' academic enquires. Besides, it has been revealed that their perceived social identity influences their communication with international students. Thus, knowledge of communicative strategies, awareness of politeness, and intercultural communication need to be implemented. The training course reflected from work-related needs of Thai registrar office personnel is expected to develop in order to help them accommodate the changes of being 'internationalization' in Thai universities where international programs have been offered.

Keywords: Registrar Office Personnel, ESP, ELF, intelligibility

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of academic mobility of undergraduate and graduate students has become normal these days. Academic mobility is not a new phenomenon because of a wave of internationalization or globalization (Mauranen, 2012). Students look for opportunities to study outside their own countries. A number of universities throughout East and Southeast Asia, are offering courses and programs through English. (Brown, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2014). In Thailand, the number of universities offering international programs has grown rapidly since the 1990s, and there are now 344 international bachelor degree courses available in Thailand. (Maxwell, 2015). Due to the phenomenal growth of internationalism in education in Thailand, Chiang Mai is considered one of the competitive locations where international programs have been offered in higher education. Payap university has offered international program since 2003. Currently, the number of international students is nearly 300. (Registration Office of Payap University, 2015). The number includes international students who enrolled for Thai programs in undergrad level due to the financial resources. Considering their home countries, one out of fourth are from countries where English is their native language (i.e. United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) while the rest are mainly from South East Asia, East Asia, and Middle East respectively. It appears that the registrar office personnel (ROP) have high frequent oral communication with the international students, including foreign teachers, parents, and guardians because they have to offer academic services throughout the period of study until they graduate. Besides, the alert of using English as a working language decided by Associate of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Deterding and Kirkpatrick, 2006) has immensely impacted educational and economic sectors in Thailand. Nowadays, the requirement of English communication for non-teaching staff in Thai universities has been considered for recruitment as well.

Apart from the need of having effective English communication for the ROP, universities in Thailand have promoted themselves to be internationalized and globalized due to the

requirement from the government and its policy on the educational quality assurance. One of the factors that ultimately signifies the internationalization is mutual understanding in communication in the community through English. Consequently, English training courses have been offered as a compulsory from the institution in order to enhance English communication and meet the university's mission to be 'truly international university' to all teaching-staff and non-teaching staff, including ROP. However, little attention has been paid to work-related needs analysis for specific context of each department or sector.

More notably, English now serves as a global lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2005; Jenkins, 2006) due to the ever-expanding use of English in various settings. The framework of needs analysis in this study is based on the domain of English for specific purposes (ESP) and English as a lingua franca (ELF). According to the domain of ELF, Takagishi (2012) asserts that a key factor in successful ELF communication is intelligibility, not the norms of native English speakers or any particular linguistic standards. Intelligibility is as "appropriate response to purpose in speaking" and "the apprehension of the message in the sense intended by the speakers" (Nelson, 2008: 299). Thus, this study attempts to investigate the work-related language needs for communicative goal for English as an Lingua Franca for Specific Purposes for the ROP.

As such, the use of English as a medium of interaction of the non-teaching staff is considerably one of the factors that could attract international students to fulfill their learning and life experiences while they are away from their home countries. Regarding to the business term, the investigation of ROP's needs in this study is regarded as 'consumer oriented' (DeMarco, 2011) as it specifies to the need of a particular group of learners who will be attending the well-prepared training course in the future. Thus, it is expected that the effective-on-the-job communication in English of the ROP will be able to equip the impressiveness in learning experience of international students and to serve the growth of mission of being internationalization in many universities in Thailand.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES

2.1 Needs analysis

Needs analysis is a systematic and ongoing process of gathering information about students' needs and preferences, interpreting the information, and then making course decisions based on the interpretation in order to meet the needs (Graves, 2000). Duley-Evans and St. John (1998) state that need analysis is the cornerstone of well-designed effective ESP course. Some models of curriculum design consider needs analysis part of environment analysis which involves the consideration of the factors that will have strong effects on the curriculum design such as the goals of the course, what to include in the course, and how to teach and assess it (Nation and Macalister, 2010).

2.2 English as a lingua franca (ELF)

Seidlhofer states the term English as a lingua franca is "a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages" (Seidlhofer, 2005: 339). Jenkins (2006) extends the definition of ELF that it involves communication in English between participants who have different "linguacultures" of those who are categorized as native speakers, second language users, or foreign language users (p. 164). To affirm this, Baker (2009) mentions that lingua franca languages are traditionally associated with communication between people who have different first languages from the language being used to communicate. The norms of communication are not driven by native English speakers or the perspectives in exocentric and monolithic language. Thus, a plurality of forms are acceptable. In relation to the perspectives of ELF in this study, ELF is emerging in the ten countries belonging to the ASEAN (Deterding and Kirkpatrick, 2006). According to ASEAN context, Kirkpatrick (2008) states that ELF is not a single variety as it is used among speakers from different language backgrounds. Then, lingua franca should be more considered as a functional rather than a linguistic one. Park and Wee (2011) state that language is a product from social interaction that emerges out of the engagement with things, ideas, and other people in interaction. It should not be viewed as a set of rules with a fixed structure. This view has been affirmed by Pennycook (2010) who regards language as local practice that involves with social, material, and ideological ones, not only

linguistic ones. So the outcome is expected to be more flexible appropriations of resources rooted in people's practices. Thus, the concern of language use in social interaction highlights ELF to hold the perspective as a practice-based perspective which does not treat language as a fixed system but as an emergent product of speakers' practices (Canagarajah, 2007). Since English is used in international and intercultural contexts by non-native speakers, so it should not be predefined as a fixed system but as "constantly brought into being in each context of communication" (Canagarajah, 2007:926). Corresponding to Park and Wee (2011), the pedagogical goal of ELF is the adaptability of ELF in the non-native speakers that focuses on speakers' own linguistic practices which does not be dominated by the norm of the Inner Circle English mode, where are the countries that have English as the native language.

2.3 The relations of ELF and ESP

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), English for specific purposes/special purposes or ESP is "an approach to language teaching in which all decision as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" (p. 19). Paltridge and Starfield (2013) refer ESP as the teaching and learning of English where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain. Schneider (2013) states that English used in ESP is a goal-oriented or 'target-oriented' which is specially tailored to customer specifications. Schneider (2013) also argues that the nature of ELF and ESP are overlapped and points out the conceptual similarities and theoretical parallels between ELF and ESP. The two approaches are interrelated in notions of; 1) the definition of the two terms relate to specific usage contexts and conditions, 2) both represent a 'function, not a variety' and do not relate to language properties, and 3) both approaches focus on their 'applied' nature which strongly emphasizes on teaching needs and strategies. Regarding to the perceptions in practice, ELF and ESP are viewed as 'communities of practice' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). Seidlhofer (2005) agrees with the notion of 'communities of practices' and with its relevance to ESP, which is defined by language use focused on some special purposes and shared topic.

Theoretically, both ELF and ESP have a lot of common ground connecting to each other. Concerning to the studies in this field, Mauranen (2012) states that traditional orientation of native English speakers that has been used as the model for ESP has to be reconceptualized in the era of globalization where English becomes the language of the world. Schneider (2013) posits that the needs for ESP interaction importantly motivates the usage of ELF because the speakers who are involved in the interactions are from different linguistic backgrounds. Besides, English becomes increasingly important as a means of international communication, and the features of English lingua franca have been recognizing to be more practical and effective (Canagarajah, 2007). Thus, it should not be too concerned in language patterns of native speakers while the developing of ELF exists in practice of English (Deterding and Kirkpatrick, 2006).

2.4 Intelligibility

According to Nelson (1982), he defines the term of intelligibility as "appropriate response to purpose in speaking" and "the apprehension of the message in the sense intended by the speaker" (p. 63). Intelligibility happens in the successful communication between the speakers (the producer of a speech) and the listeners (the receivers) in understanding the linguistic elements and some appropriate responses, reflecting from clear and purposeful interaction (Nelson, 2008). According to Reid (2011), the degree of intelligibility depends on a particular context of participants and situation; "who is speaking to whom, when, where, why, and so on" (p. 66). The degree of achievement can only be assessed while spontaneous interaction between the participants is taking place. Smith and Nelson (1985) have distinguished the concept of intelligibility under three basic components of intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretation. First, intelligibility is word recognition that refers to the recognition of the level of sound and parsing utterances. Second, comprehensibility is the conventional basic sense of 'understanding'. It is the recognition of meanings to utterance which may be reasonably assigned to words and phrases within a specific context. Third, interpretability is the understanding of the utterance or text in relation to particular goals or intentions which is the most difficulty level of communication.

Thus, the result of needs analysis in this study is considered as data from insiders' perspectives, which will be utilized to design training course aiming at increasing the degree of intelligibility based on the situations occurred at the registration office. Proficiency of language users will not be considered as Reid (2011) argues that it is so misleading to consider intelligibility as equal to proficiency.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

All eighteen ROP from a private university located in northern part of Thailand were the subjects of the study. Survey questionnaires were used to get data of ROP's profile including personnel data and learning experiencing background as the starting point. Questionnaires were distributed to ROP. Their names were asked to be given in order to do face-to-face interviews based on the attributes asked in the questionnaires. The purpose of conducting follow-up interviews was to encourage them to give more insightful information on their prior language learning experiences and their views regarding to what they really needed and expected from the English training course in the future. The semi-structure interview relating to the terms intelligibility and internationalization were also asked in order to examine how ROP perceived the two concepts based on the framework of ELF and the spread of internationalization associating with the international students in their registrar office work.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are reported and discussed in relation to the two research questions. They were 1) what are the work-related needs in English for Thai registrar office personnel? and 2) how do Thai registrar office personnel perceive the concept of intelligibility and internationalization? The findings shown in Table 1 are the percentage reported of the attributes given and the responses from the interview were further clarified correspondingly.

Table 1: Summary of demographic information and experiences in English of the ROP

Attributes		Number	Percent
Gender	•Male	5	27.8
	•Female	13	72.2 *
Age	•31-40	1	5.6
	•41-50	5	27.8
	•50 up	12	66.7 *
Job responsibility	•General office task	1	5.6
	•Curriculum Structure	1	5.6
	•Office Information System Administrator	1	5.6
	•Admission and Student Records	2	11.4
	•Educational Documentation and Graduation Qualification Unit	5	27.8
	•Student and New Student Registration	7	38.9 *
	Levels of education	•Below bachelor degree	2
	•Bachelor degree	12	66.7 *
	•Higher than bachelor degree	4	22.2
Major of graduation	•Management	3	18.7
	•Others	13	81.3 *
Working experience	•1-5 years	4	22.2
	•6-10 years	2	11.1
	•11-15 years	0	0.0
	•More than 15 years	12	66.7 *

Table 1: Summary of demographic information and experiences in English of the ROP (Cont.)

Attributes		Number	Percent
First employed sector	•Registrar Office Personnel	11	61.1 *
	•Transferred from other sectors	7	38.9
Experience in English training	•Yes	18	100 *
	•Never	0	0.0
Chances to use English	•Outside workplace	6	33.3
	• Only in workplace	12	66.7 *
Using English outside work place	•Communication with friends, cousins, family members	1	16.7
	• Contact with other universities	3	50.0*
	• Traveling	2	33.3
Necessity in using English in registrar office	• Very necessity	8	44.4*
	• Necessity	5	27.8
	• Rather necessity	1	5.6
	• Less necessity	3	16.7
	• Unnecessary	1	5.6
English competency self-rate	• High	0	0.0
	•Intermediate	1	5.6
	• Pre-intermediate	11	61.1 *
	•Beginner	6	33.3

Note: * = highest result of each attribute

Data represented in Table 1 showed that 72.2% of participants were female, and all ROP were considered as adult learners. Most ROP were more than 50 years old (66.7%). As being known it is difficult for adults to learn a second or foreign language comparing to younger learners due to critical period hypothesis or the lack of elasticity of the brain (Gass and Selinker, 2008), regardless of workload and stressful life. But in ESP, course designers need to be aware that adult learners come to the class with decision-making ability and they need clear goals in learning situation (Belcher, 2004). In relation to their responsibility, ROP worked for different units. Some units could be handled by only one staff while some enquires needed more staff to handle such as Student and New Student Registration Unit (38.9%), Educational Documentation and Graduation Qualification Unit (27.8%) and Admission and Student Records Unit (11.4%). Regarding to education levels, the majority had bachelor degree (66.7%); however, none of them graduated from the fields related to English. They learned English as a foreign language in their previous schools and universities. From the interview, the ROP revealed that they rarely learned English in a communicative and authentic way. Grammar translation method and rule memorization were typically focused. In regard to ROP's working experience, twelve (66.7%) worked at registrar office for more than 15 years, and eleven (66.1%) were first employed at registrar office. From their working experiences, it can be said that ROP thoroughly understand their work content and job descriptions, but not English skills. However, since the university has offered international programs, English skills have become part of their work. There was an attempt from the university to enhance non-teaching staff's English skills in order to be a truly international university. They were assigned to attend several English trainings for their career development. All ROP answered 'yes' to attend the training, and some revealed that they attended more than six times. However, majority revealed that previous compulsory trainings failed to help them to better their English communication. Failures came from various factors, but most drastic cause was the trainings were offered without a needs analysis. In addition, non-communicative functions such as gap filling or completing the slot of conversation dialog were practiced. Besides, some trainers who were English speakers did not allow the use of the

Thai language which is the trainees' first language in the trainings. ROP admitted that they were not comfortable and felt stressed when Thai was not allowed as they sometimes understood what it was meant, but did not know how to say in English. Thus, their unpleasant or unsuccessful prior experiences in English trainings had brought negative effects to their confidence in using English.

In regard to chances of using English in everyday life, nearly all ROP used English only in their workplace. Six (33.3%) had chances to use English out of their work context. However, the situations were apparently for temporary purposes only, such as for traveling and contacting with other institutions. Only one used English with his acquaintance. It is clear that English is not used for their everyday lives; however, they agreed that English was necessary in their work even some units did not have face-to-face communication with students directly such as a computer programmer or an officer whose job responsibility is only on managing class schedule. Nearly all ROP (72.2%) admitted that English becomes part of their work unavoidably. Currently, English proficiency has been used a criteria for promotion as well. In addition to self-rating English proficiency, six (33%) rated themselves as beginners, and eleven (61.1%) were pre-intermediate learners. These findings corresponded with the results of the lack of English exposure, unrelated fields in English when graduating, and failures of English learning experience. These factors have brought great effects to their proficiency levels.

Table 2 below further shows degrees of the importance of English and social skills. The responses from the interview were clarified to get more reflective information of skills needed.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics to degree of important of skills needed for ROP

Skills	M	SD	Degree of Opinion
Listening	4.22	1.46	Very important
Speaking	4.22	1.44	Very important
Reading	3.33	0.69	Somewhat important
Writing	3.11	1.02	Somewhat important
Grammar	3.11	1.08	Somewhat important
Pronunciation	3.39	1.33	Somewhat important
Appropriate gestures	3.39	0.78	Somewhat important
Politeness	3.67	1.03	Somewhat important

As shown in Table 2, it shows that most vital and relevant skills for ROP are listening and speaking. They revealed that they helped each other in listening whenever the visitors approached to the counter service. More often, they had to listen to key words in order to guess the purpose of the enquiries. This confirms to Jenkins (2006) that speakers at lower level of proficiency use bottom-up processing when listening. They heavily rely on the actual sounds rather than using contextual clues to interpret what he/she had heard. However, they indicated that it was unnecessary to construct complete sentences in spoken English. They all agreed that listening and speaking were very important with knowledge of vocabulary related to their work. For vocabulary, they expected to have list of words related to a particular request. They believed that acquiring words came before constructing sentences. Thus, they preferred to know vocabulary and sentence structures that can be used in their work units. Unsurprisingly, they wished to have the 'ready-made set of expressions' or formulaic expressions for common or predictable enquiries. They thought those expression patterns could help them 'pick' and 'use' them promptly.

Comparing to the moderated degree of importance in reading (M=3.33), writing (M=3.11) and grammar (M=3.14), most of ROP indicated that they needed some grammatical knowledge to help them construct sentences in speaking. Surprisingly, they expressed that their English proficiency was in the level of "*ngungu, plaaplaa*" (*snake snake, fish fish*) – Thai proverb which means having little knowledge. This can be meant either their English was very poor or they rated their ability in a humble way as a typical Thai norms of being indirect and low in self-assertiveness. However, they expressed that grammar knowledge depends on the complexity of enquiries. Some common requests such as requesting for new student identification card were

seem predictable and uncomplicated. Students could fill in the request form and hand to ROP with very minimal conversation. So they felt less problems in grammar if the interaction did not require long time to engage. On the contrary, if students came with problems regarding to their enquires, the need of grammar knowledge to elaborate or explain information was required. They confined that the lack of grammatical or syntactical knowledge prevented them from elaborating their information given to the students.

For pronunciation, only few felt they did quite well. They revealed that some sounds were not easy to pronounce such as 'r' and 'l' sound in 'help', 'write', and 'like' or words 'receipt' and 'receive'. The ROP were realized that, for some words, mispronunciation could lead to misunderstanding. Nevertheless, they confirmed that they did not have to sound like native speakers. They expressed that they needed to listen and speak in the intelligible level. This findings agree with Nelson's (2008) definition on intelligibility which means understand the message and give appropriate responses in spoken communication.

Regarding to politeness, it is interesting to know that the concept of politeness for ROP was to avoid confrontation. Polite spoken words, to them, meant '*pudmai haijeb chum num jai*' (roughly translated as do not harm one's feeling). This agrees with the concept of face derived from Goffman's (1967) notion of face saving. It defines that face represents self-image that everyone wants for himself. According to House and Kasper (1987), face-saving is the act to save other person's face and feeling into account so that no threat should be involved either to the speaker or the hearer. However, in spoken English, ROP were not certain how politeness can be represented by words. Most of them said they used 'Please' or 'Kha' and 'Krap' at the end of a sentence to mark the politeness. As being an observer for some points, it can be said that the social relationship between the ROP and students was more like between seniors and juniors. Moreover, those who were more than 50 years of age perceived students as their children. This shows that seniority of Thai system and relations of members in the family influence language behavior in intercultural communication as well. From their reflection, they knew '*May I help you?*' is a polite expression, but when they talked to students, they used '*What do you want?*' instead. Additionally, it is surprising to know that avoidance strategy of not using English was applied in their interaction too. They explained if they produced fabricated form such as '*May I help you?*', students would use more complicated sentences as they assume that ROP were equip with their fluency. Thus, ROP used greetings in Thai '*Sawasdee Kha/Krap*' instead of greetings and offering help in English. Apart from the politeness in language use, all ROP were also aware of appropriate gestures or social manners. Since they did not know or get along with foreigners in their daily life, they applied giving distance and considerably behave in appropriate social manners.

Moreover, the interview pointed out that students' ignorance of the regulations lead to communication difficulties as well. ROP revealed that, many students intended not to follow the regulations or timeline of academic calendar for completing particular requests. These students made requests based on their convenience. They expected having a 'short cut' by using their advantages in English fluency to accelerate the process of enquires. Moreover, problems were also occurred when students did not study or did not know how to do. Many requests need the approvals from authorized administrators, but students failed to do so. Even bilingual forms are provided, students came and asked for help without paying attention to the information given in the forms. Thus, the need of face-to-face communication comes with problem-solving.

In response to the question what intelligibility in English means to them, all ROP confirmed that as long as they and international students can understand each other and students completed their requests, it was intelligibility. Their clear and concise answer in Thai to the term intelligibility was '*pud tohtobruueng*' (roughly translated as understanding what it is said and response understandably). In short, intelligibility, to them, means how to get their message across by any means of communication strategies.

In regard to the questions how they perceived the concept of internationalization relating to their work, all ROP associated this term with English communication only. They perceived in a sense that English is a language for global communication. Warschauer (2000) confirms that the globalization will result in the future spread of English as an international language.

Nevertheless, the researcher had to instruct them into other aspects; then, the issue of culture was shared and reflected. ROP revealed that they did not comprehend foreign cultures even though the university has attempted to set activities to promote a sense of internationalization. For them, familiarity was the key concept that helps people from different culture backgrounds accept and respect each other. Interestingly, they also addressed that Thai culture must be recognized as part of the internationalization context as well. One ROP expressed that if they used only English to communicate with international students, students will never want to use Thai as a contact language even though many of them have learned Thai from Thai courses and experiencing with Thai people. They also felt that, in fact, foreigners should accommodate to Thai norms and learn how to communicate in Thai to some degree. In order to build mutual understanding, ROP said there should be 'see half half' (actual response from ROP), which means the need for negotiation or adjust behavior while interacting. This idea agrees to the concept of language accommodation derived by Giles (1980) which describes how people adjust their language and communication patterns to their interlocutors. ROP also revealed that achieving in communication should not be based on one's norm. This conforms with the concept of ELF that the goal of ELF is the adaptability which must not be dominated by the norms of countries that have English as the native language (Park and Wee, 2011). ROP also suggested that patience and empathy should be practiced in intercultural communication as well. They revealed that the use of one's fluency or knowledge in English upon those who were incompetent was regarded as disrespect. So far, the word internationalization was beyond their realistic perception. To them, the recognition of human being was simply described by the term internationalization.

5. CONCLUSION

ROP needs an English training course that helps them improve their listening and speaking skills in registrar work. Besides linguistic skills, knowledge of communicative strategies, politeness strategies, and intercultural communication need to be addressed as well. In addition, as being adult learners, their general profile must be taken into consideration. Also, course designers need to be aware of the aspect of social identity which influences Thai ROP's language behavior when interacting with international students. More importantly, the merge of ELF within ESP should be implemented in English for ROP as it could lead to achievable communication goals in order to serve the changes of mobilization in education for all international programs offered in Thailand.

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