ENGLISH ORAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AMONG THAI UNIVERSITY STAFF

ปัญหาการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษและกลยุทธ์การสื่อสารของเจ้าหน้าที่
มหาวิทยาลัยชาวไทย

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Abstract

This study aimed to 1) identify the language functions commonly used by university staff when serving international students and instructors, 2) examine English oral communication problems encountered by Thai university staff, and 3) explore strategies used to overcome these problems. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 60 staff from 13 departments across one public and one private university in Bangkok. The Google Forms questionnaire was used as the main tool for providing and collecting data and was distributed to all 60 participants. The questionnaire covered demographic information, English language functions, oral communication problems in listening and speaking, and communication strategies. Upon completion of the questionnaire, twelve participants were purposively selected for in-depth semi-structured online interviews focusing on their roles, frequency of English use, communication challenges, and strategy use. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings indicated that 1) explaining and clarifying were the most frequently used language functions. 2) Major listening difficulties stemmed from unclear pronunciation and varied non-native accents, while speaking problems were mainly related to grammar and sentence structure, often due to direct translation from Thai. 3) Commonly adopted strategies included asking speakers to slow down, repeating key points, paraphrasing, and occasionally using translation tools. These results suggest the need for targeted

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English training programs tailored to real-world communication needs. The findings also provide valuable insights for university administrators seeking to enhance international communication and support staff development in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Thai University Staff, English Oral Communication, Communication Strategies

บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อ 1) ระบุหน้าที่ของภาษาที่เจ้าหน้าที่มหาวิทยาลัยชาวไทย ใช้บ่อยในการให้บริการนักศึกษาต่างชาติและอาจารย์ชาวต่างประเทศ 2) ศึกษาปัญหาการสื่อสารด้วย การพูดภาษาอังกฤษที่เจ้าหน้าชาวไทยพบเป็นประจำ และ 3) สำรวจกลยุทธ์ในการแก้ไขปัญหา เหล่านี้ โดยใช้วิธีวิจัยแบบผสมผสาน (Mixed-methods) เก็บข้อมูลผ่านแบบสอบถามและการ สัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งมีโครงสร้างกับเจ้าหน้าที่ 60 คน จาก 13 หน่วยงาน ในมหาวิทยาลัยของรัฐและ เอกชนแห่งละแห่งในกรุงเทพฯ ใช้แบบสอบถาม Google Forms เป็นเครื่องมือหลัก โดยเนื้อหา แบบสอบถามครอบคลุมข้อมูลประชากร หน้าที่ของภาษา ปัญหาด้านการฟังและพูด และกลยุทธ์การ สื่อสาร จากนั้นคัดเลือกผู้ตอบแบบสอบถาม 12 คน เพื่อสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกออนไลน์ โดยเน้นบทบาท หน้าที่ การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ ปัญหาที่พบ และกลยุทธ์ที่ใช้ ข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณวิเคราะห์ด้วยสถิติเชิง พรรณนา ส่วนข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพใช้การวิเคราะห์เชิงประเด็น ผลการวิจัยพบว่า 1) การอธิบายและการ ชี้แจง เป็นหน้าที่ของภาษาที่ใช้บ่อยที่สุด 2) ปัญหาการฟังเกิดจากการออกเสียงไม่ชัดเจนและสำเนียง ที่หลากหลาย ส่วนปัญหาการพูดมักเกิดจากโครงสร้างประโยคที่แปลตรงจากภาษาไทย 3) กลยุทธ์ที่ ใช้ได้แก่ การขอให้พูดช้าลง การทวน การถ่ายทอดความหมายใหม่ และการใช้เครื่องมือแปล ผลวิจัยชี้ ถึงความจำเป็นในการฝึกอบรมภาษาอังกฤษที่ตอบโจทย์การสื่อสารจริง และเป็นประโยชน์ต่อการ พัฒนาศักยภาพบุคลากรในระดับอุดมศึกษา

คำสำคัญ : เจ้าหน้าที่มหาวิทยาลัยชาวไทย การสื่อสารด้วยการพูดภาษาอังกฤษ กลยุทธ์ในการสื่อสาร

Introduction

As the world becomes more interconnected, English has emerged as a crucial lingua franca (ELF), enabling communication between people from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Characterized by its focus on intelligibility and functional flexibility rather than native-speaker norms, ELF plays a crucial role in academic and professional settings worldwide. In response to globalization, Thailand's higher education sector has expanded international programs to attract students and

faculty from various countries, aligning with national policies to enhance competitiveness and internationalization.

Over the past decade, international student enrollment in Thailand has significantly increased, with Chinese and Burmese students constituting the largest groups. This growing diversity demands proficient English communication skills from university staff, who are responsible for delivering quality services and maintaining institutional reputation. Despite the increasing number of international students and institutional support such as training programs, language assessments, and various incentives, many Thai university staff continue to experience difficulties in using English effectively, particularly in listening and speaking, often due to differing levels of language proficiency, limited exposure, a limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, reliance on direct translation from Thai, and problems understanding various non-native English accents (Memon, 2020; Wiriyachitra, 2002). However, there is still very limited research that specifically explores English language functions, listening and speaking problems, and communication strategies among Thai university staff, as most studies tend to focus on the four general language skills (Boonyachokanan & Sappapan, 2017).

To address these challenges, employees typically rely on communication strategies (CSs), which are problem-solving behaviors consciously employed to overcome difficulties in conveying or understanding messages (Tarone, 1980; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Dörnyei, 1995). These strategies are particularly critical in multilingual workplace settings, where speakers may have limited fluency but still need to ensure intelligibility and clarity of meaning. This study adopts a synthesized taxonomy based on the classifications proposed by Tarone (1980), Faerch and Kasper (1983), and Dörnyei (1995). This approach was selected due to its wide recognition and proven relevance in EFL contexts. These frameworks have been extensively applied in research on non-native speakers, especially among learners and users of English in international academic and professional environments, making them well-suited for analyzing the communication strategies used by Thai university staff when interacting with international interlocutors.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the English language functions, problems encountered, and strategies employed by staff at Thai private and public

universities when interacting with international students and instructors, with the goal of providing insights that can inform targeted training programs and support mechanisms to enhance effective communication in increasingly internationalized higher education environments.

Objectives of the study

1. To identify the language functions frequently used by the staff when serving the international students and foreign instructors.

2. To investigate the English oral communication problems encountered by Thai universities staff in communicating with the international students and instructors.

3. To explore the strategies used by Thai universities staff when encountering communication problems in communicating with international students.

Methodology

Participants

The total population of academic and non-academic staff in both universities was 1,211, 39 from private university and 1,172 from public university. The participants in this study were 60 Thai university staff from 13 departments at both University A and University B. In addition, 12 participants were purposively selected, 6 from the public university and 6 from the private university, to participate in a semi-structured interview, which was conducted in Thai.

Instruments

Following a mixed method research design, the research instruments of the study are a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

The questionnaire was adapted from Boonyachokanan and Sappapan (2017) and Jeharsae (2012) and comprises four parts: participants' demographic data; English language functions used in the work context with 13 statements; oral communication problems consisting of 17 statements adapted from Boonyachokanan and Sappapan (2017); and communication strategies including 14 items adapted from Jeharsae (2012).

The semi-structured interview consisted of two parts: Part A, English language functions used at work, which contained four questions; and Part B, English oral communication problems and communication strategies, which consisted of four questions.

Data collection

All participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the research objectives, their voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and assurances of confidentiality. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Thammasat University Institutional Review Board (IRB). A consent form and the researcher's contact details were also included to facilitate any further inquiries. The Google Forms questionnaire was used as the main channel for providing and collecting data and was distributed to all 60 participants. Upon completion of the questionnaire, 12 participants were purposively selected to participate in semi-structured online interviews. These interviewees were contacted via email and informed of the interview's purpose and format. Interview appointments were scheduled according to each participant's availability. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, with prior consent obtained for audio recording.

Data analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires, particularly from parts 2 and 3, were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Descriptive statistics, including mean, frequency, and standard deviation, were calculated to determine the prevalence and severity of English language functions, English oral communication problems, and the usage of various communication strategies among participants. In addition, qualitative data from Parts A and B of the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach.

Results

I. Results from questionnaire

This section summarizes the participants' demographic data, providing context for their experiences and problems in using English for workplace oral communication.

Table 1 General Demographic Data

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	8 (13.3%)
	Female	51 (85%)
	Prefer not to say	1 (1.7%)
Age	Under 25	1 (1.7%)
	26-35	39 (65%)
	36-45	17 (28.3%)
	Over 45	3 (5%)
Education	Bachelor's	50 (83.3%)
	Master's	9 (15%)
	Other	1 (1.7%)
Workplace	Public University	30 (50%)
	Private university	30 (50%)
Department	Academic Affairs	6 (10%)
	International Relations	4 (6.67%)
	Human Resources	4 (6.67%)
	Financial Department	6 (10%)
	Registration Department	4 (6.67%)
	Admission Department	8 (13.33%)
	Office of information and communication technology	6 (10%)
	Library Department	6 (10%)
	Faculty of Liberal Arts	2 (3.33%)
	Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy	6 (10%)
	Faculty of Logistics and Aviation Technology	4 (6.67%)
	Faculty of Law	2 (3.33%)
	Faculty of Science and Technology	2 (3.33%)

Table 1(Continue)

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Working Position	Secretary of faculty	7 (11.67%)
	Academic and non-academic	
	Staff	49 (81.67%)
	Teaching Assistance	2 (3.33%)
	Director	2 (3.33%)
Duration of the Working Position	Under 5 years	32 (53.33%)
	5 – 10 years	23 (38.33)
	More than 10 years	5 (8.33%)
Frequency of Using English for Communication at Work	Never	0
	Rarely	3 (5%)
	Sometimes	37 (61.67%)
	Often	18 (30%)
	Usually	2 (3.33%)
	Always	0
Interlocutor	International Students	43 (71.67%)
	International Instructors	11 (18.33%)
	Other	6 (10%)
Type of English Speakers	Native	15 (25%)
	Non-native	45 (75%)
English training background	No	22 (36.67%)
	Yes	38 (63.33%)
English proficiency test background	No	15 (25%)
	Yes	45 (75%)
Types of English language tests	TOEIC	23 (38.33%)
	TOEFL	1 (1.67%)
	Other	19 (31.67%)
	Unspecified	17 (28.33%)
English proficiency self-evaluation	Very good	0 (0%)
	Good	12 (20%)

Table 1(Continue)

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
	Fair	23 (38.33%)
	Poor	23 (38.33%)
	Very poor	2 (3.33%)
English necessity evaluation	Very necessary	13 (21.67%)
	Necessary	25 (41.67%)
	Quite necessary	22 (36.67%)
	Not necessary	0 (0%)

Table 1 reveals that the majority of participants in this study were female staff aged between 26 and 35, most of whom held bachelor's degrees and were employed at both public and private universities. The respondents comprised nonacademic and academic support staff working in administrative units such as admissions offices and faculty departments. Most participants reported relatively limited work experience. English was used intermittently in their professional roles, typically, when necessary, particularly in interactions with international students and foreign instructors. While a considerable number had participated in workplace English training programs and undertaken proficiency assessments, most commonly the TOEIC, they generally self-assessed their English proficiency as fair or poor.

2. Language functions

Table 2 Language functions

Language Functions	$\bar{x}$	sd.	Frequency of Use
1. Offering assistance	3.08	0.65	High
2. Welcoming and greeting	2.85	0.73	High
3. Explaining and clarifying	2.80	0.84	High
4. Requesting and questioning	2.78	0.61	High
5. Apologizing	2.07	0.90	Low
6. Cautioning and reminding	1.98	0.89	Low
7. Refusing politely	1.95	0.83	Low
8. Persuading	1.87	0.79	Low

According to table 2, The findings revealed that the most frequently used language functions by Thai university staff were offering assistance ($\bar{x}$ = 3.08), followed by welcoming and greeting ($\bar{x}$ = 2.85), explaining and clarifying ($\bar{x}$ = 2.80), and requesting and questioning ($\bar{x}$ = 2.78). These reflect their service-oriented roles in supporting international students and foreign instructors. In contrast, less frequently used functions included apologizing, cautioning and reminding, persuading, and refusing politely, which were typically associated with more sensitive or formal situations. These results highlight the importance of developing practical communication skills tailored to real workplace interactions in international university settings.

3. English oral communication problems

Table 3 Listening problems

Listening Problems	$\bar{x}$	sd.	Problem Level
1. Difficulty with understanding non-native accents	3.25	0.73	High
2. Difficulty with recognizing correct pronunciation	3.17	0.69	High
3. Difficulty with comprehension of fast speech	3.13	0.75	High
4. Difficulty with vocabulary knowledge	2.95	0.75	High
5. Difficulty with understanding English grammar knowledge	2.73	0.66	High

Table 3 illustrates that the results indicate that Thai university staff face several significant challenges related to listening. The most prominent difficulties include understanding non-native accents ($\bar{x}$ = 3.25), pronunciation issues ($\bar{x}$ = 3.17), and comprehension affected by fast speech ($\bar{x}$ = 3.13). Additionally, staff reported challenges with vocabulary knowledge ($\bar{x}$ = 2.95) and English grammar ($\bar{x}$ = 2.73). These findings underscore the need for targeted support to improve listening comprehension and overall language proficiency in professional university settings.

Table 4 Speaking problems

Speaking problems	$\bar{x}$	sd.	Problem Level
1. Difficulty thinking in English before responding	3.33	0.75	High
2. Difficulty with sufficient knowledge of English grammar	3.07	0.78	High
3. Difficulty with sufficient vocabulary knowledge	3.05	0.79	High
4. Difficulty with clear pronunciation	2.93	0.76	High
5. Difficulty with effective communication due to speaking English with a Thai accent	2.65	0.92	High
6. Difficulty with confidence in speaking English	2.82	0.87	High
7. Difficulty feeling comfortable when speaking English	2.73	0.92	High

As shown in table 4, the findings reveal that Thai university staff experience several significant challenges in speaking English. The most prominent difficulty is thinking in English before responding ($\bar{x}$ = 3.33), followed by insufficient knowledge of English grammar ($\bar{x}$ = 3.07) and vocabulary ($\bar{x}$ = 3.05). Staff also reported challenges with clear pronunciation ($\bar{x}$ = 2.93), speaking with a Thai accent ($\bar{x}$ = 2.65), low confidence ($\bar{x}$ = 2.82) and lack of comfort when speaking English ($\bar{x}$ = 2.73) when speaking English. These results highlight the need for comprehensive language training that addresses both linguistic competence and affective factors to enhance English speaking skills among university staff.

5. Communication Strategies

Table 5 Communication Strategies

Communication Strategies	$\bar{x}$	sd.	Level of Agreement
1. Use of translation apps or tools	3.47	0.68	High
2. Appeal for assistance	3.32	0.75	High
3. Stalling or time-consuming strategies	3.28	0.69	High
4. Nonlinguistic signals	3.25	0.70	High
5. Circumlocution	3.25	0.57	High
6. Approximation or Generalization	3.07	0.80	High
7. Word coinage	2.87	0.78	High
8. Literal translation	2.38	0.92	Low
9. Code switching	2.37	0.92	Low
10. Foreignizing	2.37	0.90	Low
11. Use of a dictionary for word translation	2.23	0.95	Low
12. Topic avoidance	1.78	0.78	Low
13. Message abandonment	1.70	0.81	Low

According to Table 5, the results indicate that Thai university staff predominantly use several effective communication strategies to overcome English language difficulties. The most frequently employed strategies include the use of translation apps or tools ($\bar{x}$ = 3.47), appeals for assistance ($\bar{x}$ = 3.32), stalling or time-consuming strategies ($\bar{x}$ = 3.28), circumlocution ($\bar{x}$ = 3.25), and nonlinguistic signals ($\bar{x}$ = 3.25). Approximation or generalization ($\bar{x}$ = 3.07) and word coinage ($\bar{x}$ = 2.87) were also used with moderate frequency. Conversely, less frequently used strategies include message abandonment ($\bar{x}$ = 1.70), topic avoidance ($\bar{x}$ = 1.78), foreignizing ($\bar{x}$ = 2.37), literal translation ($\bar{x}$ = 2.38), code switching ($\bar{x}$ = 2.37), and dictionary use ($\bar{x}$ = 2.23). These findings highlight staff' s preference for proactive strategies that facilitate communication and minimize breakdowns in interaction.

II. Results from interview

To answer Research Question 1 regarding frequently used English language functions, the interview results showed that explaining and clarifying were the most

commonly used functions among both university staff, as supported by quantitative and qualitative data, when assisting international students and foreign instructors. These functions were essential in delivering accurate information, solving service-related problems, and ensuring mutual understanding.

> "I clarify the registration process for each semester and assist
>
> with resolving registration issues." (Staff 4)

This reflects the service-oriented responsibilities of staff in academic settings, where communication must be both clear and adaptable. These functions demand not only language proficiency but also cognitive skills such as analyzing and interpreting. The findings support the need for professional development that strengthens both linguistic and strategic communication abilities.

In addressing Research Question 2 on English oral communication problems, the interviews revealed two main areas of difficulty: listening and speaking. Listening difficulties included understanding different English accents and rapid speech, both of which often disrupted communication.

> " Sometimes, I can't understand the accent because they
>
> come from different countries." (Staff 9)
>
> "Sometimes, international students and lecturers speak too
>
> fast, and I can't keep up." (Staff 3)

In speaking, staff commonly struggled with constructing sentences, especially under time pressure. A common cause of this difficulty was the tendency to think in Thai before responding in English.

> " Before speaking, I always think in Thai first, which makes
>
> me slow because I have to process my thoughts before
>
> speaking." (Staff 3)

These challenges reflect a lack of opportunities for spontaneous English conversation and reflect an education system that emphasizes grammar over communicative competence.

For Research Question 3, the interviews explored the communication strategies that Thai university staff used to manage oral communication challenges. The most frequently mentioned strategy was asking for repetition or clarification. The results from both the questionnaire and the interviews were consistent in this regard.

> "I would ask them to speak more slowly, or I might indicate
> that I'll speak slowly to make it easier for both of us to
> understand." (Staff 11)

In addition, staff, particularly those at private universities, reported using translation applications such as Google Translate to support communication when dealing with fast speech or unfamiliar vocabulary.

> "The most convenient and frequently used strategy is Google
> Translate." (Staff 6)

On the other hand, staff at public universities used such tools less frequently due to concerns over reliability and had greater access to formal English training. Notably, message abandonment was rarely practiced, as staff viewed it as inappropriate in a service setting.

> "The one thing I would never do is ignore the conversation.
> I can't do that because it would be rude." (Staff 10)

These findings demonstrate that staff strategically employ communication strategies to maintain politeness and professionalism, while also highlighting disparities in institutional support between public and private universities.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings indicate that university staff most frequently use the language functions of explaining and clarifying when interacting with international students and instructors. These functions support the communication of detailed, service-related information and reflect the cognitive demands of the job. Despite the importance of these skills, research into the specific language functions used by Thai university staff remains limited, highlighting an area that warrants further exploration. However, to date, there has been limited or no research specifically investigating the English language functions employed by Thai university staff.

In terms of oral communication problems, staff experienced significant listening problems, mainly due to unfamiliar accents and rapid speech. These findings align with Boonyachokanan and Sappapan (2017), who identified pronunciation issues as a major barrier in English communication among Thai professionals. For speaking problems, staff reported difficulties with grammar and sentence structure, particularly when

organizing their thoughts in English quickly. This often led to hesitation or errors in sentence construction. This finding aligns with those of Boonyachokanan and Sappapan (2017), as both studies identified vocabulary and grammar as the main challenges in speaking skills. These difficulties suggest that many staff have not had sufficient opportunities for spontaneous English use, which negatively affects their fluency and confidence. The findings highlight the need for targeted training programs that focus on listening and speaking in authentic workplace contexts.

As for communication strategies, staff frequently relied on repetition and clarification, along with the use of translation tools, especially in private university. These findings were similar to Jeharsae (2012), which also showed that asking for repetition and paying more attention to keywords were the main strategies used to manage communication problems. These strategies were effective in maintaining communication despite linguistic barriers. Importantly, avoiding or abandoning conversations was considered inappropriate, reflecting a professional attitude towards service delivery.

Overall, the findings correspond closely with the research objectives, demonstrating that while Thai university staff actively employ practical communication functions and strategies, they nonetheless encounter persistent challenges in oral English communication, particularly during spontaneous or complex interactions. These insights underscore the urgent need for targeted English language training programs that emphasize listening and speaking skills within authentic workplace contexts.

Research Recommendations

Significance of the study

1. Identifies common English communication challenges and strategies used by Thai university staff in real-time interactions.

2. Fills a research gap on English communication in Southeast Asian universities, focusing on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

3. Highlights the need for training aligned with ELF principles instead of native-speaker norms.

4. Provides practical insights for staff to improve oral communication by focusing on mutual understanding and adapting to diverse accents.

5. Informs university administrators and HR to design targeted training emphasizing real-time communication and intercultural skills.

6. Encourages trainers to create courses centered on real-life tasks, integrating ELF to boost confidence and effectiveness.

7. Offers data for ESP researchers to develop context-specific communication models.

8. Stresses the importance of ELF-based training to support inclusive communication in multicultural university settings.

Recommendations for further research

1. Future research should include more diverse participants, such as lecturers and support staff, to better understand communication challenges.

2. Future research should explore how technology, like translation apps and video conferencing, affects communication.

3. Future research should assess the effectiveness of English training programs for university staff.

4. Future research should examine gaps in translation and interpretation training for administrative personnel.

5. Future research should develop and evaluate targeted training for specific staff groups to improve communication skills.

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