

English Listening Difficulty of Passenger Service Officers, State Railway of Thailand

ปัญหาการฟังภาษาอังกฤษของพนักงานฝ่ายงานบริการผู้โดยสาร การรถไฟแห่งประเทศไทย

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Abstract

This quantitative research aimed to investigate English listening difficulty of passenger service officers at State Railway of Thailand. The data-collecting instruments were questionnaires administered to 320 passenger service officers out of the total of 1,603 working in all provincial offices. Passenger service officers need to meet and communicate with international passengers in provincial stations. The quantitative data were analyzed using percentage, arithmetic mean, and standard deviation. The qualitative data from the open-ended question were categorized through thematic approach.

The results revealed that English listening as the officers' difficulty was classified into four problems. 1) Dealing with travel information ($\bar{x} = 3.46$). 2) Listening to unfamiliar words displayed high means scores ($\bar{x} = 4.03$). 3) Listening to fast delivered messages ($\bar{x} = 4.15$), and 4) Lack of capability to understand the message heard ($\bar{x} = 3.69$). The results could be beneficial for officers and the organization to implement appropriate resolutions to the problems. The organization, as well, could make use of the research result to come up with sustainable improvement.

Keywords: Listening problems, English skills, State Railway of Thailand

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจปัญหาการฟังภาษาอังกฤษของพนักงานฝ่ายงานบริการผู้โดยสารการรถไฟแห่งประเทศไทย โดยเก็บข้อมูลจากพนักงานการรถไฟจำนวน 320 คน จากจำนวนพนักงานฝ่ายงานบริการผู้โดยสารทั้งหมด 1,603 คนทั่วประเทศ ซึ่งโดยหน้าที่เป็นฝ่ายที่พบและสื่อสารกับผู้โดยสารต่างชาติตามสถานีรถไฟต่างๆ การศึกษาครั้งนี้เป็นงานวิจัยเชิงปริมาณโดยศึกษาข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณและเชิงคุณภาพใช้แบบสอบถามในการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูล สถิติที่ใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณคือค่าร้อยละ ค่าเฉลี่ยเลขคณิต และส่วนเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพใช้วิธีการจัดกลุ่มเป็นหัวข้อตามสาระในการวิเคราะห์

ผลจากการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่า ปัญหาของการฟังภาษาอังกฤษของพนักงานการรถไฟฯ สามารถจำแนกเป็นปัญหาหลักๆ ได้ 4 หัวข้อ ดังต่อไปนี้ 1) ปัญหาในระดับกลางจากการฟังในที่ทำงานซึ่งพนักงานการรถไฟฯ มีปัญหาเรื่องการฟังข้อมูลการเดินทางเป็นปัญหาหลัก ($\bar{x} = 3.46$) 2) ปัญหาการฟังภาษาอังกฤษที่เกิดจากข้อความ โดยพนักงานการรถไฟฯ ได้ให้ความเห็นว่าปัญหาข้อนี้อยู่ในระดับสูง ปัญหาหลักเกิดจากพนักงานเจอคำที่ไม่คุ้นเคยในการสื่อสาร ($\bar{x} = 4.03$) ทำให้ไม่สามารถตีความหมายข้อความนั้นได้ 3) ปัญหาที่เกิดจากผู้พูดที่พูดเร็ว ($\bar{x} = 4.15$) จนทำให้พนักงานไม่สามารถเข้าใจความหมายของประโยคได้ และ 4) ปัญหาสุดท้ายเกิดจากตัวผู้ฟังเอง โดยพนักงานไม่สามารถเข้าใจความหมายของผู้พูดจากการฟังประโยคครั้งแรก ($\bar{x} = 3.69$) ผลจากการศึกษาในงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้สามารถทำให้ตัวพนักงานและองค์กรทราบถึงปัญหาในการฟังภาษาอังกฤษและแนวทางในการแก้ไขปัญหาเบื้องต้นให้กับพนักงานหรือองค์กร รวมถึงการหาวิธีการแก้ปัญหาในระยะยาวต่อไป

คำสำคัญ ปัญหาการฟัง ทักษะภาษาอังกฤษ การรถไฟแห่งประเทศไทย

Introduction

English is a significant language due to the fact that it is included in the basic curriculum as a foreign language subject. Students are required to take English language subjects throughout their school years (Wiryachitra, 2002). Lumchan (2004) did not only view English as a subject but also a language for communication in all settings, e.g. workplace, social interaction, etc. Obviously, English is not mostly used by its native speakers but non-native ones. Consequently, English used at workplace is a significant problem for non-native speakers. One of the most problematic skills is writing. At work, English writing is vital as staff or officers always send emails and work on documents. English writing problems are mainly caused by lack of grammatical and vocabulary competence.

For Thai officers, English is considered a main working problem as many do not graduate with English language degrees. Some still cannot communicate in English even though they study English throughout their school years (Thaveeprayoon, 2011). Since English

instruction is mainly emphasized on the practice of students' reading and writing skills, most officers then cannot communicate orally with foreigners and need to learn more to enhance their communicative skills to be able to communicate in English in different English situations (Crosling and Ward,2002). River (1981), Khamkaew (2009), and Prachanan (2012) discovered that the most significant communicative skills were listening and speaking and listening is mostly used in daily activities.

Morley (1999) and Scarcella & Oxford (1992) stated that the essence of communication is listening. It is impossible for communication to be complete without the presence of a receiver. The message delivered will be useless if no one listens. Some may consider listening is similar to hearing; however, they are totally different. Hearing is processed by the ears, but listening is done by the ears, the brain, and the eyes. In listening, the ears are used for receiving the message; the brain is used for thinking and decoding the message; and the eyes are used for observing the speaker's acts and interaction as well as learning how the speaker feels when delivering the message (Stewart, Lanham, Zimmer, and Clark, 1985). According to Prachanan (2012), communication is vital; thus, allowing officers to learn and understand information given by foreign tourists is suggested.

Listening skill is an ability to acknowledge and learn information orally delivered. Listening is a complex psychological process of the listener for the comprehension of the meaning of the message (Lihua, 2002). Listening is also an important element in daily English language learning. Language experts always consider listening and speaking as key skills that could identify how well a person uses English. English learners need to improve their confidence to enhance their listening and speaking competence (River, 1981). Grant (1987) stated two reasons why listening is important. First, without listening, communication is not completely processed; and communication will be more successful if the message is understood by the listener. Second, listening is an essence for learning. If a student is skilled at listening, he can easily understand the lesson learned. According to Wenden (1998), whether a message is understood depends upon the receiver's listening ability. Howatt and Dakin (1974) viewed listening as an ability to decode the speaker's message and learn the speaker's intention as well as an ability to recognize accents, pronunciations, and vocabulary. Anderson (1995: p. 37) stated that, in listening, the listener needs to recognize segmenting phonemes the continuous speech stream carries. Therefore, the listener needs to have knowledge of the message. Without it, the listener cannot understand the whole message (Harmer, 2001). Listening comprehension is a complex process of the brain

(response and interpretation) so the listener needs to attentively listen to the message delivered orally, focusing on the use of language, vocabulary, and grammatical structures to segment the message into small units and interpret the meaning as well as store them in short-term memory (Brown, 1994; Guo and Wills, 2009; Underwood, 1989; Vandergrift, 2006).

English listening problems are most frequently discovered in comparison to those of speaking, reading, and writing. Most of them are caused by lack of vocabulary knowledge, word unfamiliarity, and inability to recognize accents. Obviously, most tourists are non-native English speakers; they have to rely on English while travelling (Meemak, 2002). This finding is also in line with Sternberg (1987) who found that unknown vocabulary used by foreigners could be problematic. When the listener experiences an unknown word, he or she cannot understand the meaning of the message as a word can mean differently depending upon the context it is used in. Thai people encounter a number of listening problems caused by different factors, e.g. the listener self, the speaker, or the message (Grognet and Van Duzer, 2003).

Regarding English learning, Thai people are trained to memorize grammatical rules and vocabulary which could enhance reading and writing skills. To practice listening and speaking skills, they mostly study with native teachers for correct pronunciation and delivery. However, this method does not improve students' understanding of the message given by non-native speakers (Yule, 1998). Rungchatupat (2002) found that Thais always put words in wrong order due to difference in grammatical structures between Thai and English. English statements delivered with wrong structures could lead to miscommunication.

The passenger service officers of State Railway of Thailand who provide service, guidance, and assistance to passenger in all railway stations throughout Thailand include station masters, station master assistants, ticket officers, information officers, luggage service officers, etc. They do not serve only Thai passengers but also foreigners travelling by train. They, then, need to be skilled at English, especially listening, in order to provide services.

Statement of the Problem

According to the information from State Railway of Thailand, its officers could not communicate in English with foreign passengers and provide services as expected. This problem led to the underlying background of this research with an aim to find out causes and propose sustainable resolutions to the problems in order to upgrade the capability of the Thai officers.

Purposes of the Study

This research aimed to investigate English listening difficulty of passenger service officers at State Railway of Thailand as well as factors influencing their listening competence.

Research Questions

- 1) In what level were the officers' listening difficulties?
- 2) What factors influenced their listening competence?

Methodology

The research applied the purposively sampling method. The population was 1,603 officers (Human Resource Department, 2018) who worked in Passenger Service Unit in all railway stations throughout Thailand as they needed to use English in their communication with foreign passengers. Through Yamane formula, a sample size of 320 officers was determined. The sampled subjects were passenger service officers working at railway stations which were popular destinations among foreign tourists (Bangkok, Surat Thani, Chiang Mai, Hua Hin, Chachoengsao, Hat Yai, etc.) were selected.

Though this research was quantitative, the data were collected in a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology. The data were collected from the questionnaires, each of which was comprised of 31 questions aimed to gather information in two parts: demographic information and listening difficulties. The questions in the part of listening difficulties were answered on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from least (1) to most (5). The interpretation of the mean scores of 1.00-2.33, 2.34-3.66, and 3.67-5.00 were low, moderate, and high, respectively. The questions were adapted from Khamprated (2012), Charunsri (2011, and Anandapong (2011); and some were modified to suit the subjects. To obtain qualitative data, a set of open-ended questions about possible resolutions to listening problems were included in the questionnaires.

The questionnaires were distributed to the officers working at various railway stations including Bangkok, Surat Thani, Chiang Mai, Hua Hin, Chachoengsao, Hat Yai, Ayutthaya, etc., and the station master of each station distributed them to the subjects. The completed questionnaires then reached Hualamphong Station. After the consideration of the returned questionnaires, incomplete ones were sorted out and the total of 320 questionnaires was completed. The data obtained from the 5-point scales responses were then statistically

analyzed to discover percentage, mean, and standard deviation, and the open-ended responses were thematically analysed.

Results

320 subjects were 67.5% males and 32.5% females. Most respondents were 40 years old and older, held bachelor's degrees, and had English knowledge in undergraduate level. Most of them worked at railway stations in Bangkok and had 5-10 years of work experience. 37.8% realized the significance of English at work. 55.3% had listening difficulty at a moderate level.

Table 1: English Listening Problems in Workplaces

Items	Problems					
	High		Medium		Low	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Travel information			3.46	1.10		
Reservation information			3.40	1.12		
Baggage information			3.27	0.99		
Money exchange			3.06	1.05		
Food and shopping information			2.81	1.05		
Hotel information			2.80	1.13		
\bar{x}			3.13	1.07		

In Table 1, the overall English listening difficulty was at a moderate level. The highest score was displayed by Travel information ($\bar{x} = 3.46$), followed by Reservation information ($\bar{x} = 3.40$), and Baggage information ($\bar{x} = 3.27$), respectively.

Table 2: English Listening Problems Caused by Messages

Items	Problems					
	High		Medium		Low	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Unfamiliar words	4.03	1.11				
Slang words	4.01	1.11				
Complex grammatical structures	3.93	1.07				
Long connected speech	3.83	1.07				
Unorganized messages	3.67	1.09				
\bar{x}	3.89	1.09				

Table 2 displays listening problems related to delivered messages. The average mean of all problems ($\bar{x} = 3.89$) was at a high level. Unfamiliar words displays the highest mean ($\bar{x} = 4.03$), followed by Slang ($\bar{x} = 4.01$) and complex grammatical structures ($\bar{x} = 3.93$).

Table 3: English Listening Problems Caused by Speakers

Items	Problems					
	High		Medium		Low	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Stammering with occasional pauses			3.39	0.99		
Fast speech	4.15	3.07				
Unclear pronunciation of words	3.94	1.09				
Intonation and stress			3.53	0.97		
Different accents of different speakers			3.32	1.14		
Speakers' non-verbal language			3.02	1.30		
Pronunciation of final sounds			2.99	1.28		
Communication/conversation characteristics determined by culture			3.00	1.32		
\bar{x}			3.42	1.39		

Table 3 presents listening problems related to speakers. The average mean of all problems ($\bar{x} = 3.42$) was at a moderate level. Fast speech displays the highest mean ($\bar{x} = 4.15$), followed by Unclear pronunciation of words ($\bar{x} = 3.94$). The rest problems were found to be moderate.

Table 4: English Listening Problems Caused by Listeners

Items	Problems					
	High		Medium		Low	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Difficulty in understanding the message from first listening	3.69	1.10				
Difficulty in answering questions after listening			3.63	1.10		
Problems related to physical conditions (e.g. Noisy setting)			3.44	0.94		
Lack of listening skill practice			3.57	1.11		
Lack of exposure to different kinds of listening materials			3.54	1.06		
Psychological factors (e.g. uncomfortable when communicating with foreigners)			3.24	1.17		
Lack of knowledge in vocabulary			3.55	1.16		
Lack of knowledge in grammar			3.64	1.13		
Lack of understanding of correct pronunciations			3.34	1.04		
Feeling excited and nervous			3.39	1.15		
Feeling embarrassed			3.30	1.19		
\bar{x}			3.48	1.10		

Table 4 shows listening problems related to listeners. The average mean of all problems ($\bar{x} = 3.48$) was at a moderate level. Difficult to understand the message from first listening displays the highest mean ($\bar{x} = 3.69$), followed by Lack of knowledge in grammar ($\bar{x} = 3.69$). The rest problems were found to be moderate.

Discussion

1. English Listening Problems in Workplace

Most passenger service officers realized the importance of English at work, yet their English proficiency was at a moderate level. They still had some listening problems. The biggest problem was listening to travel information displayed by a mean score of 3.46. Travel information included railway routes, places around the railway station, tourist attractions, etc. This finding was consistent with that of Hatem (2014) who discovered that English is important as a tool for communication in general topics, dealing with enquiries, and giving travel information. In addition, what Hatem (2014) discovered was quite similar to Khamkaew (2009)'s study stating that giving travel information and offering help were the most necessary. Their second biggest was listening to reservation information ($\bar{x} = 3.40$) as they could not understand when asked about schedules and routes or service classes in each railway trip and when listening to foreign tourists' inquiries about the availability of seat or bed types or booking process.

2. English Listening Problems Caused by Messages

Listening to unfamiliar words displayed the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 4.03$). This finding revealed that most passenger service officers had difficulty in dealing with the words they heard. This problem might be caused by the fact that Thai people do not use English as a native language and hardly use it in their daily activities. In addition, use of unfamiliar words in communication could cause confusion. For example, the word 'taxi' is more popular in use among Thai people compared to the word 'cab'. More examples include 'apologize' instead of 'sorry', 'reserve' instead of 'book', 'tube' instead of 'subway.' According to Brown (1994), the most difficult part of English listening, for beginners, is listening to new or unknown words. Encountering a number of such words, they have to understand their meanings in the time of listening. If they waste time on finding out their meanings, they will not understand the whole message. This is also supported by Stenberg (1987) who considered vocabulary very important because vocabulary is acquired by the study of texts. Knowing a lot of vocabulary could contribute to successful communication. Likewise, Charunsri (2011) considered lack of vocabulary knowledge causes listeners many problems. Knowing only little vocabulary, the listener could not understand the message intended by the speaker. Though they know the vocabulary meaning, they sometimes still cannot understand the message as a word can mean differently upon the context it appears in.

Slang words were the officer's problem ($\bar{x} = 4.01$) since, by its nature, it is specially used by specific groups. Among English native speakers, sometimes, slang becomes problematic. Kridalaksana (1982: 156) stated that slang tend to be used by young speakers. Keraf (1994: 108-109) also identified slang as a group of non-standardized words which are colloquially and informally used among specific groups of speakers. Some slang words mean differently. Some passengers used slang words like *ride* (car), *bro* (friend), *gotta* (have got to), *gimme* (give me), etc. in their communication with the passenger service officers, so they sometimes did not understand their real meanings.

Listening to complex grammatical structures was another problem for the officers ($\bar{x} = 3.93$). Some passengers delivered an oral message through long sentences with complex grammatical structures. Some officer could not deal with this problem due to their lack of grammatical knowledge. Hampton (1989) stated that grammar is the most essential foundation of English as it strings all the words together to make a meaningful sentence. If the sentence is made up with grammatical errors or mistakes, communication may not be effective. That is why the listener should prioritize the importance of grammar (Hamouda, 2013).

3. English Listening Problems Caused by Speakers

Many English listening problems are caused by the speaker's delivery. According to the findings, the biggest problem found was fast speech ($\bar{x} = 4.15$). According to Esther (2003), the speed of natural speaking is faster than the speed intended by the speaker. Native speakers speak English naturally and pronounce words in a connected series. Their natural speech delivery, therefore, sounds very difficult for non-native English speakers to recognize the words they pronounce. That is why listening to words not pronounced clearly displayed a mean score of 3.94. The main reason is that foreign tourists maintain stress and intonation as well as weak and strong forms in their English delivery. This fact was found to be the cause of the problem for the officers. According to Weber-Fox and Neville (1996), English learners should emphasize pronunciation, evaluating the pronunciation of the speaker as well as reviewing the pronunciation when the speaker mispronounces a word. This finding was found consistent with two studies conducted by Hatem (2014) and Prachanan (2012) that the biggest problem was fast speech delivery.

4. English Listening Problems Caused by Listeners

According to the findings in this part, the passenger service officers did not understand the message in their first listening ($\bar{x} = 3.69$) and they could not answer the questions immediately ($\bar{x} = 3.63$). Anderson & Lynch (1988) considered the problem to be caused by the listener's lack of knowledge of the culture, facts, and contexts of the target language which leads to limitation as language represents culture. Likewise, Yagang (1993) stated that learners always waste most of their time on reading rather than listening. They, hence, are not familiar with vocabulary and word order making them unable to recognize missing words or phrases and unable to understand the whole statement.

To deal with those problems, the officers should hunt for key words in each sentences heard to find out what foreigners are talking about. Some officers used an attraction map to facilitate their communication with foreigners. Some tried to memorize necessary words, e.g. platform, train, car, dining car, sleeper car, etc. Some were found to asked foreigners to speak more slowly and repeat the statement until they could understand it. In addition, it was found that State Railway of Thailand had their officers receive English training provided by Wall Street English, a private English training institution. Those interested in studying English offered by the institution were required to do pre-tests and post-tests. It was also found that the organization provided training to interested officers once or twice a year, inviting trainers or speakers from other institutions to conduct training programs divided into three levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced.

Recommendations

1. For State Railway of Thailand and its officers

To improve their listening skill, passenger service officers were suggested to practice listening English from a variety of sources, e.g. songs, movies, news reports, TV programs, etc. They should learn more vocabulary, especially passenger service and railway terminology, since it could help them understand their foreign passengers. For State Railway of Thailand, there should be more training programs and assess their officers' ability through pre-tests in order to provide appropriate training programs that meet their needs. To improve enhance officers' English knowledge and skills, recommendations are as follows:

- 1) Officers should practice their listening skill from a variety of sources.
- 2) They should learn more vocabulary, especially terminology related to their work.

3) State Railway of Thailand should provide training programs based on officers' levels of competence.

2. For further research

This study could be beneficial for further studies on English listening problems in other companies or organizations related to communication, transportation, and tourism and hospitality, etc. Further specific questions about causes of listening problems may be included in the investigation. It is also possible for further researchers to conduct studies on other English skills including reading, writing, or speaking as well as attitudes towards those skills. Other research methodology for data collection, such as interviews, could also be applied to further studies.

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