ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE WITH CUSTOMERS IN BASIC ENGLISH: A CASE STUDY OF GUEST HOUSES EMPLOYEES IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Ability to communicate in basic English is an essential of job functions for many employees working in guest houses all over Thailand. The purposes of this research was to examine the ability of employees, working at guest houses in many important tourist destinations all over Thailand, to communicate with their customers in basic English and was to find out what kinds of English training do they need to improve their ability to communicate in basic English effectively. Survey questionnaire was collected from 400 foreign tourists who had been staying in the guest houses in many areas of major tourist destinations such as Bangkok, Chiang-Mai, Pattaya, and etc. Data analyses revealed that the majority of respondents were able to understand basic English from employees at the guest houses at a medium level. In addition, an in-depth interview with the focus group revealed that employees of the guest houses need a training in speaking and listening areas.

Keywords: Basic English, Guest Houses, Communication

INTRODUCTION

With the growth of tourism industry in Thailand for many decades, English plays an important role in communication with foreign tourists. The growth of tourism has influenced the need to get more training to improve the people who are working in tourism and service industry to be able to interact with customer effectively (Wongleedee, 2013). Even though English is not the official language of Thailand, it is the second important language of Thailand. In the Thai job market, candidates are always asked about their ability in English as well as the proof of their test score. This means it is common accepted that ability is a must and requirement of success in the job market. In comparison with the four or five stars hotels which have a proper training in communicate in English regularly, the employees in guest houses have to learn basic English by themselves and collecting more words from every day experience in the job.

The majority of students in primary schools and high schools often study English as a second language for many years. The focus of learning English is on the grammatical and comprehension reading, and less focus on writing, speaking and listening. In addition, the majority of teachers are not native English speakers or have a direct degree in the English teaching. In Thai society, the middle class and upper class families often require their children to study more English after school and in the weekend. However, the lower income families often have less learning opportunities than middle and upper income family. The fact is most of the middle and upper income do not work as employees for guest houses. These employees mainly come from lower income family and people from the villages of Thailand. Therefore, these employees often have a limited ability in communicating in basic English. This research put the focus on both sides of the communication which are employees of guest houses and foreign tourists. The author of this research was interested in studying the level of satisfaction of ability in communicating in English from the perspective of foreign tourists who were staying at many guest houses all over Thailand as well as the need for specific training from the perspective of employees who were working in the guest houses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of communication competency is one of the most important areas that many teachers, professors, academicians, and educational policy makers are interested and often appears in the national debate. Clair (1991) stated that there were three communication principles. This means learning to visualize
the surrounding and the nearby environment, learning to experience the different things in the environment, and learning to understand the global situation.

Communication competency includes grammatical and vocabularies knowledge, psycholinguistic knowledge, socio-culture knowledge, practical English usage knowledge (Hall, 1976). In the globalization era, ability to communicate in English serves as the ability to communicate in all over the world and intercultural communication. Obviously, there is a rapid growth in high demand regarding the learning of English skills. The high demand of employees with ability in English means the high demand for proper training curriculums. English for specific purposes (ESP) is a system to identify the initial need for English communication and it is important to design English training to match with learners’ specific needs and rational for learning (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). In fact, the need to develop specific training program that suits for a particular group who have specific need in order to motivate them to learn effectively and be able to use their training knowledge to use directly in their everyday working hours.

In fact, many experts in English communication agree that ESP courses are one of the best tailored English communication training courses designed primarily to meet with employees’ need. ESP courses are widely used and accepted in Thai academic training and Thai educational system. The most common courses are business English, tourism English, service industry English, technical English, and major based training for specific purposes. In fact, the foundation of EPS is an approach to language training in which all decisions as to specific contents, materials, and methods are based on the learner’s reasons for learning (Hutchison & Waters, 2001).

ESP courses should be designed to improve certain language skills that are required to perform during the process of doing their jobs. In addition, learners of ESP courses are expected to enhance their English communication skills by practicing, role playing, and modelling in activities which requires the use of certain English skills.

METHODOLOGY

The purposes of this research paper were to survey for information and to examine the ability of Thai employees, working at guest houses in many important tourist destinations in all regions of Thailand, to communicate with their foreign customers in basic English and also was to find out what kinds of English training do they need to improve their ability to communicate in basic English effectively. English survey questionnaire was designed and collected from 400 foreign tourists who had been staying in the guest houses in many areas of major tourist destinations such as Bangkok, Chiang-Mai, Pattaya, and etc. This was a case study of 400 guest houses, Thailand. The population of this study included all employees who were working in guest houses around Thailand during the first quarter of 2016. A Likert scale questionnaire was developed as the research tool. Based on 400 respondents who answered the questionnaire in detail of three parts, the data of their experiences and opinions was collected. Mean and Standard Deviation were utilized in analyzing the data.

FINDINGS

The demographic data revealed that most of the foreign tourists who were staying at guest houses in many different parts of tourist destinations in Thailand were men for 65 percent while the foreign tourists were accounted for 35 percent. Most of foreign tourists preferred to travel with their friends about 55 percent, with their families about 29 percent, and other about 16 percent. The majority of tourists from EU countries about 67 percent, 25 percent from ASEAN nations, the rest are from all over the world. Even though the Chinese tourists are a major group of tourists coming to Thailand, they tend not to stay less than one week at three star hotels, rather than guest houses, while the EU tourists often prefer to stay longer at guest houses. In terms of the motive to travel in Thailand, the study revealed that pleasure or relaxation was about 45 percent, business or work related about 34 percent, education about 7 percent, and other.
Table 1. Foreign tourists’ perception toward guest houses’ employee English communication skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Communication skills in</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Employees can understand your requests.</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>.893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Employees can greet you in English</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>.793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Employees can speak to you with basic English</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>.516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Employees can respond to you clearly</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Employees can explain about their activities and services</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>.873</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the results of table 1 regarding foreign tourists’ perception toward guest houses’ employee communication skills, the findings revealed that the foreign tourists agreed that the majority of guest houses’ employee can greet them in English with the highest mean. Second, the foreign tourists rated the ability of guest houses’ employees to understand their request as the second in the rank with the mean of 4.27. Third, the foreign tourists rated the ability of guest houses’ employees to speak to them with basic English as the third in the rank with the mean of 4.23. Fourth, the foreign tourists rated the ability of guest houses’ employees to respond them clearly as the fourth in the rank with the mean of 3.88. Finally, the foreign tourists rated the ability of guest houses’ employees to explain about the activities and services as the fifth in the rank with the mean of 2.45. From the in-depth interview with some of the guest houses’ employees, they were unable to speak to their foreign guests effectively at the level that they needed to communicate. They are in need of training to improve their English communication ability in order to provide more information about their activities, festivals, games, local products and services to foreign tourists. Moreover, they also need from experts to help them write some information in proper format of English such as menu, games, activities, including rules and regulations of using guest houses. Printed media can be created with the need to explain some detailed of activities and information in proper English to make sure that foreign tourists can understand by reading themselves which will help both senders and receivers of the communication to understand each other better and save time and trouble from miscommunication. Even though these guest houses’ employees had a limited English communication ability, they can offset by providing a high quality services and their attentive to serve and to make customers happy as much as they can which is one of their strengths.

**DISCUSSION**

The result is very easy to understand since greeting in English is very easy to practice or train, therefore, the guest houses’ employees can perform this task easily. Moreover, it is the friendly custom of Thai people to greet and try to make their guests happy. While the ability to explain about their activities and services requires these employees to explain large amount of information in English which require many long sentences of English. Therefore, it is hard for them to perform correct and try to explain effectively.

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**REFERENCES**

