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Deficiency of Communication in English a Major Hindrance for Tourist Police in Thailand

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ABSTRACT:

This paper describes a qualitative and quantitative study that sought to investigate the problems Tourist Police officers encounter whilst communicating with foreign tourists in English language in their work. Foreign tourists' perceptions of Tourist Police officers' English language competency were explored. Moreover, the language learning strategies that Tourist Police officers usually use were examined, and the administrators and Tourist Police officers' requirements for a suitable training program were identified. The findings are discussed and analysed. The outcomes from this study will be considered in the review and development of the professional development programme for Tourist Police.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism plays a major service sector role in Thailand, and it has potential to continue growing every year which contributes to the country extensive economic growth. Thailand, as a tourist destination, has become more popular worldwide since the "Visit Thailand Year" campaign was launched in 1987. The successful promotion created a 23.59% increase in foreign tourists in that year (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2002) and the numbers of visitors has continued to increase. After the Tsunami disaster in December 2004, Thailand has speedily recovered from a slump in the tourist industry and has gradually regained the confidence of the tourists with an increase in arrivals. According to The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2005), 13.38 million foreign tourists travelled to Thailand in 2005 and another 15.12 million were targeted in 2006 which would make a huge estimated income of over five hundred thousand million baht to the country (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2006). The government has an ultimate goal to make Thailand the tourist centre of Asia, and by the year 2008 approximately twenty million tourists are estimated to visit (Tourist Police Division, 2005). Many tourists are either native English speakers or speakers of English as a second language. The Royal Thai Police has a Tourist Police Division, whose officers assist tourists in various ways, and English is a dominant means of communication in this role. The status of English as the language for trade and communication has gained more importance in the Thai tourism industry (Vatcharasakunee, 2000). Enhancing effective communication between Tourist Police officers and foreign tourists is, therefore, a worthwhile goal because that quality of communication may result in increased satisfaction on the part of the tourists. Increased tourist satisfaction is likely to result in more tourist arrival and longer visits by tourists, that is, a stronger tourism industry.

BACKGROUND

The Tourist Police Division (TPD) was initially established and named "Tourist Security Support and Help Centre (TSSHC)" in 1976 and at that time TPD was under the jurisdiction of The Police Department. The Police Department later (1998) became the Royal Thai Police (Tourist Police Division, 2005). The TSSHC was responsible for receiving complaints from tourists, protecting and maintaining security for tourists in the community and tourist locations in Bangkok Metropolis. Since the rapid growth of the tourist industry, numbers of tourists, tourist attractions and relevant businesses all over the country, it was found that the TSSHC was unable to fully carry out their mission. Accordingly, the TSSHC, was transformed into The Tourist Police Headquarters in 1982, and then The Tourist Police Division (TPD) in 1991 (Tourist Police Division, 2005). The powers and

major responsibilities of the TPD were prescribed in the Royal Gazette as the following: to assist, facilitate, provide security, and protect the well being of tourists; and to make contact and coordinate with relevant organizations and agencies. In addition, the TPD's work includes investigation of criminal offences related to Thailand's Immigration Laws.

To deliver good service and to provide the utmost safety for the tourists, especially for the foreign tourists, English language is important for effective communication between Tourist Police (TP) officers and foreign tourists. The knowledge of English and the ability of TP officers to use it to communicate with the tourists effectively is, therefore, extremely important. Recent research (Meemark, 2002; Pornpetcharat, 2001; Promrat, 1998), conducted on the ability of TP in using English, has demonstrated that there is a need for intensive English courses to improve TP officers' proficiency. These research findings support Horey's statement that English proficiency of Thai tourism workers needs to be improved, particularly in speaking and listening skills (Horey, 1991). The TPD has occasionally provided English language courses for their officers however this is largely determined by annually allocated budgets and managerial administration. Tourist Police officers' proficiency in English remains a source of concern (Tansrisawat, 1991).

Purpose of the study

This paper provides insights based on the findings from the preliminary project into English language proficiency of TP officers. This focus is viewed from various angles, and there are a number of key facets involved. Main concerns identified from this study include: 1) problems experienced by TP officers when communicating with foreign tourists in English and vice versa; 2) the language learning strategies usually employed by TP officers; and 3) the need for suitable training courses for TP, as suggested by TP officers and administrators.

Participants and research methodology

A brief overview of the recruitments of participants and the research methodology is provided in this section. This project was recently conducted in Bangkok, Thailand. Three main groups of participants involved in to provide various perspectives on the issue. The participants were drawn from :

- eighty TP officers working in Sub-Division 1 and Sub-Division 2
- six TP administrators from the Headquarters
- eighteen English speaking foreign tourists who were visiting Bangkok

The recruitments of respondents were undertaken once the TPD Commander provided permission and access to TP names, a sample of TP officers. The researcher used odd-even selection of TP officer names. Sixty TP officers were asked to complete written questionnaires and an additional ten were selected for two focus group sessions. One focus group included five TP officers who had been in service for more than five years and the second focus group included five officers who had been in service for less than five years. Other ten officers were observed in action on site at the Tourist Police stations. Six TP administrators who were taking charge of work relevant to this research were specifically selected by the Commander. The English speaking tourists who were contacting with the Tourist Police stations were recruited after the completion of communication with a TP officer. An extra number of tourists were collected from tourist attractions in Bangkok over a three month period. There were no other guiding criteria for selection of foreign tourists than their occasions to communicate with Thai TP and their willingness to be involved in the interviews.

With regard to data collection, three types of research techniques - questionnaire, interview, and observation- were employed. A set of survey questionnaires about the use of language learning strategies was completed by sixty TP officers. The source of qualitative data undertaken in this study were the interviews and the observations. Six individual interviews with the administrators were conducted to obtain the information about TP's problems and of the nature of a desirable English training program for TP. Two focus group interview sessions each of which consisted of five TP officers were carried out with the same questions as those enquired the administrators. As well as eighteen individual interviews with the English speaking foreign tourists were conducted to explore their perceptions of English competency of Thai Tourist Police. In addition, ten observations in actual settings were administered using checklists along with brief conversations

between the researcher and the TP officers who were delivering services to the foreign tourists, in order to gather information on the English language used by the TP officers while communicating with the tourists and on what occasions the tourists contacted with the Tourist Police stations.

The following table represents the respondents and the research instruments.

Table1: The respondents and the instruments in the preliminary project

| The respondents | The instruments |
|--|--|
| 1. Tourist Police officers | - 60 questionnaires - 10 interviews (2 focus groups of 5/group) - 10 observations |
| 2. TP administrators | - 6 individual interviews |
| 3. Foreign tourists (non-Thai, English speaking) | - 18 individual interviews |

Data analysis

A quantitative analysis centred upon descriptive measures with the gathered data from the questionnaires by using the SPSS statistical package to figure out means, standard deviations and percentages. Frequencies of the data from the checklists of the observations were examined. Whereas the transcribed data from the interviews were analysed by means of content analysis.

Problems of TP in communicating in English with tourists

The daily work of Tourist Police is not exactly the same as that of police in other departments where there is very little contact directly with foreign visitors. Rather, the main duties of TP are related to delivering good service and protection of tourists. Effective use of the English language is paramount in fulfilling TP's tasks as well as satisfying tourists' expectations. At the moment, TP officers have experienced some deficiencies in English vocabulary whilst dealing with the foreign tourists (Promrat, 1998), and their listening skill is indicated as the most serious problem (Meemark, 2002). This study aimed to explore the extent of the TP officers' English problems as perceived by both administrators and TP officers. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 TP officers in two focus groups and 6 individual interviews with administrators. The findings will be discussed in relation to, the language skills of TP, their work experience, and observation of TP in workplace locations.

Most administrators believed that TP officers who are in direct contact with foreign tourists have problems in communicating in English at a moderate level and administrators believed that listening and speaking can be serious problems for TP. A wide diversity of tourists from different nations present many language challenges such as different accents, colloquialisms, and speed of utterance. These variables are likely to impact on the listening skills of TP officers. Likewise, the majority of TP officers reported that they found their listening skills to be the most difficult. The listening situations they identified as most problematic and most frequently encountered included telephone conversations, receiving complaints, and precision of numbers.

Most of the administrators had a strong opinion with regard to the speaking skills of TP officers. They were concerned that TP officers could not respond to foreigners effectively due to insufficient vocabulary, especially legal terminology, and knowledge of grammar. Similarly, TP officers reported this inadequacy as they revealed the problems they usually encountered when communicating with foreigners. TP officers gave some examples such as, face-to-face discussion, giving information, conducting inquiries, and gathering identification details. However, speaking skills were perceived by TP officers to be less problematic than listening skill.

Reading and writing skills, were considered less problematic by most of the interviewees because these are used less than listening and speaking skills in communication with tourists. The reading and writing skills are routinely used in reading complaint forms, writing daily case reports, and writing letters or e-mails.

It is apparent from the interviews that workplace location is another factor that influences TP's ability in English use. It is believed that TP officers working in cities with several tourist attractions seem to be more fluent in English than those working in cities with less tourist features. Moreover, unsurprisingly, TP officers who work in Patrol and Service Bangkok Airport section where they are interacting with many thousands of foreign visitors, are considered to be more fluent and to use more English than those who work in the other sections of Tourist Police Division. Public Relations and IT, Administration, Investigation and Inquiry sections use English more often respectively. Working in such workplaces definitely provided good opportunities for TP officers to learn and practice from real life situations. Using English every day improved their communication skills.

Additionally, some of the administrators indicated that TP officers working for more than ten years tended to be less fluent in English than those who have less duration of service. Administrators provided a possible explanation for this. The TP officers who have worked for more than ten years were recruited or transferred from other divisions in the Royal Thai Police where English is rarely used, and so is not a compulsory qualification for the police force whereas recently recruited Tourist Police require English competence. On the other hand, most of TP officers disagreed that work duration can be an indicator of ability in using English, they believed that work experience and frequency in communication in English can be influential in Tourist Police's competence.

Tourists' perception of English competency of TP

This section reports the findings of the English competency of TP officers as perceived by foreign tourists. This part of the study sought to determine the satisfaction and the perception of foreign tourists of the TP officers' use of English. Eighteen foreign tourists were randomly interviewed about their communication experiences with TP officers. They were asked their opinions about TP officers' use of English in relation to speaking skills, listening skills and overall communication effectiveness. Speaking skills were discussed in terms of pronunciation accuracy, appropriate use of vocabulary, comprehensible sentence structure, and use of compensatory strategies to overcome any communication difficulties. Listening skills were considered in terms of idea recognition, understanding of details, and compensatory strategies used to overcome limitations in comprehension. Finally, tourists were asked how satisfied they were with their interactions and communication with TP officers.

The following tables represent the responses of the tourists to the TP officers' English communication skills based on interviewed tourists' responses.

Table 2: Tourists' perception of the speaking skills of Tourist Police

| TP's speaking skills | Tourists' responses (N=18) |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Pronunciation accuracy | - difficult to understand (12) (66.67%) - understandable (7) (38.89%) - fairly good (5) (27.78%) |
| 2. Vocabulary use | - easy and simple (14) (77.78%) - appropriate (12) (66.67%) - inadequate (8) (44.45%) - unable to retrieve (5) (27.78%) |
| 3. Comprehensible sentence structure | - grammatical mistakes (16) (88.89%) - simple and comprehensible (11) (61.11%) - good (7) (38.89%) - slight confusing (4) (22.22%) |
| 4. Compensatory strategies | - circumlocution (12) (66.67%) - gesture/ body language (10) (55.56%) - synonym (6) (33.33%) - getting help (5) (27.78%) - avoiding communication partially (3) (16.67%) - coin words (1) (5.56%) |

The findings suggest that in regard to speaking skills, more than half (66.67%) of the tourists found the TP's pronunciation to be difficult to understand. Most tourists agreed that the TP officers generally used simple (77.78%) and appropriate words (66.67%). Noticeably, almost all tourists (88.89%) recognised that there were some grammatical mistakes the TP officers had made even though they spoke in easy and comprehensible structures. However, the TP officers could overcome the difficulties in speaking by using gestures (55.56%) or circumlocutions (66.67%)—roundabout expressions involving several words to describe or explain a single concept (Oxford, 1990) — or a synonym (33.33%) to convey the intended meaning.

Table 3: Perception of tourists listening skills of Tourist Police

| TP's listening skills | Tourists' responses (N=18) |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1. Idea recognition | - getting main ideas quickly (10) (55.56%) - somewhat confused (8) (44.45%) - unable to comprehend (2) (11.11%) |
| 2. Detail understanding | - understand somewhat (14) (77.78%) - understand almost all (9) (50.00%) |
| 3. Compensatory strategies | - asking for repetition/clarification (13) (72.22%) - guessing intelligently (12) (66.67%) - asking for help (7) (38.89%) - avoid communication partially (5) (27.78%) |

In relation to listening skills, it was found that slightly more than half (55.56%) of the tourists believed that the TP officers could quickly understand the main idea of the messages the tourists communicated. Normally, effectiveness of communication depended on the complexity of the matters presented by the tourists. Most tourists (77.78%) perceived that the TP officers were able to understand some details presented by the tourists whereas half of them (50.00%) reported that the TP officers could understand almost all details. Sometimes it seemed to the tourists that the TP officers could understand to a certain degree but they were hindered in responding quickly due to either their vocabulary limitation or hesitant retrieval skills. Compensatory strategies used by the TP officers to overcome these listening obstacles mostly involved asking for speech repetition or

clarification (72.22%), guessing intelligently (66.67%) along with gesture, drawing or writing details, asking someone else to help (38.89%), and partially avoiding communication (27.78%).

When considering tourists' satisfaction with the English communication of TP officers, almost all tourists expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the cultural aspects of communication, such as the warm welcome, friendliness, hospitality and willingness to help. Tourists overlooked or ignored the linguistic mistakes the TP officers had made. However, it is noteworthy from the interviews that a tourists' expectation be addressed that TP officers speak English more fluently and precisely, regardless of grammatical accuracy.

Language learning strategies employed by Tourist Police

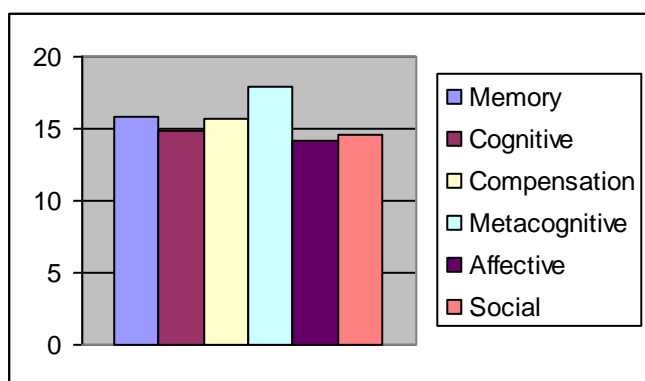
To enhance their ability in language, learners are encouraged to employ learning strategies. Language learning strategies (LLS) are considered especially important as they are tools for active, self-directed involvement which is essential for developing communicative competence. LLS can be classified into two major groups: Direct Strategies (Memory, Cognitive, and Compensation) and Indirect Strategies (Metacognitive, Affective, and Social strategies) (Oxford, 1990).

The data analysis and the results in this section reveal the frequent use of English learning strategies that TP officers usually use to learn language or apply to their daily work. A Likert- 5 point scale questionnaire adapted from the SILL Version 7.0 (Oxford, 1990) was undertaken with sixty TP officers working for Sub-Division 1 and 2 in Bangkok Metropolis. The questionnaire contained the six categories of LLS, as mentioned above in the "Direct Strategies" and "Indirect Strategies" groups. The results can be described as follows in Table 4.

Table 4: The distribution of scores of different strategies

| The strategies | N | Minimum - Maximum (range of scores) | | Mean | SD |
|---------------------------------|----|--|-------|-------|------|
| items 1-5 (Memory) | 51 | 8.00 | 25.00 | 15.86 | 3.35 |
| items 6-10 (Cognitive) | 51 | 8.00 | 23.00 | 14.92 | 3.12 |
| items 11-15 (Compensation) | 50 | 8.00 | 21.00 | 15.76 | 2.88 |
| items 16-20 (Metacognitive) | 49 | 10.00 | 25.00 | 17.93 | 3.31 |
| items 21-25 (Affective) | 51 | 5.00 | 20.00 | 14.19 | 3.74 |
| items 26-30 (Social strategies) | 52 | 7.00 | 20.00 | 14.59 | 2.91 |

Figure 1: The six strategies employed by TP officers



The graph reveals that Metacognitive learning strategies were reported by TP officers as the most frequently used. Memory, Compensation, Cognitive, and Social strategies were used moderately whilst Affective strategies were reported as being used the least. A possible explanation is that Metacognitive strategies, which allow learners to control their own cognition by using functions

such as centring, arranging, planning, and evaluating (Oxford, 1990), were used the most frequently because TP officers had their personal goals for learning a new language, English, to fulfil their work. Consequently TP officers planned and organised their language tasks, sought practice opportunities, and self-evaluated. On the other hand, Affective strategies, which refer to such concepts as self-esteem, attitudes, motivation, anxiety, culture shock, and risk-taking (Oxford, 1990), were employed the least. This possibly suggests that TP officers are influenced by high anxiety, negative feelings, or underestimated their own ability which can restrict progress of learning or their English language development. The evidence from this investigation shows that TP officers have self-doubt in their proficiency and also lack of self-confidence and self-encouragement. Oxford (1990) recommended the following three ways to overcome this hindrance by:

- changing the social structure of the classroom to give learners more responsibility;
- providing increased amount of naturalistic communication; and
- by teaching learners to use Affective strategies.

The results of this investigation provide support for including more Affective strategies into the curriculum framework of the proposed programme in the next stage of the project.

An ideal training course to enhance of English competency of Tourist Police

According to the current TPD policy on human resource development, language training courses must be organised annually to enable TP officers to upgrade their competency in their work. Previously, some language courses were provided only occasionally depending on the administrative management and affordability of available courses (Tourist Police Division, 2005).

To determine the nature of an English training course that the TPD really needs for TP officers, six individual interviews were conducted with TP administrators and semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the focus groups of 10 TP officers from different sections. The questions covered five areas: course type, contents, teaching methodology, course duration, and instructor. From the findings it can be concluded that with regard to the type of the course, a Communicative English Course seems to be preferable due to the TP job description which relates to speaking and listening to the foreigners daily. The TP officers need to be knowledgeable about the effective use of English for communication. As one of the interviewees strongly declared:

- What we need is English for communication, real English for real communication, not just the course named “Communicative English” but the learners never have opportunities to practice communicating in English.

The course description will determine exactly the most suitable content. As regards the respondents’ opinions, the majority of them called for the content to be useful for the tourist police’s work. Thus, the relevant content should be conversation, commonly used expressions, colloquialisms, specific vocabulary related to socio-cultural aspects, current events, politics, and history. More importantly, legal terminology and proper words or sentences about civil suits or criminal cases in the inquiry stage are considered necessary for effective TP work. Moreover, content based on real cases would certainly be advantageous to the learners and beneficial. There were some additional general learning strategies suggested by administrators and TP officers as being useful for inclusion in the training course — for example the use of rhyme for memorisation of vocabulary. These suggestions will be considered when the training programme is developed.

Related to teaching methods, a dynamic classroom along with interactive activities, such as role-plays, practice, games, simulations and so on, was found to foster the TP’s interest. These activities can build up the lessons and make them lively and enjoyable. In addition, an effective teaching method incorporating teaching aids or multimedia can make the lesson more interactive rather than lecturer centred.

Regarding preferences for course duration, the TPD preferred courses to be intensive of 30 hours — due to work shifts and emergency cases occasionally causing major interruptions to attendance.

In respect to the instructor, almost all respondents preferred both qualified native English speakers and Thai teachers for the simple reason that learning with a native English speaker can improve the learners' pronunciation and at the same time familiarises them with foreigners, whilst the Thai teachers can help them increase their confidence in using English correctly. Furthermore, the Thai teachers can make the lessons more understandable grammatically and contextually. To sum up, Table 5 below, presents major considerations in developing a training course that addresses the needs of TPD.

Table 5: A desirable English training course for TP officers

| Course components | Desirable features |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1. Type of the course | - Communicative English Course |
| 2. Content | - conversation - commonly used expressions - colloquialisms - specific vocabulary - legal terminology - learning strategies |
| 3. Teaching methodology | - collaborative teaching - dynamic classroom - interactive activities - using teaching aids/multimedia |
| 4. Course duration | - 30 hours (intensive) |
| 5. Instructor | - both Thai and English native speaker |

These reflections and findings have been gathered as part of the initial stage of a larger project. These findings will be helpful and support the researcher in designing a relevant course that fulfills the needs of the TPD.

CONCLUSIONS

Thailand is experiencing a growth in tourism and it is anticipated there will be continued growth with estimates of twenty million foreign visitors by 2008. One of the special features supporting this industry is the Tourist Police whose main role is to ensure the safety and well being of the tourists, mainly English speaking. This research study was the first stage of a larger project to review and develop training programmes for Tourist Police in English communication. To determine the perceived current levels of English communication skills of Tourist Police information was obtained through in-location observations, focus groups and individual interviews using a sample of administrators, Tourist Police and foreign tourists. Respondents were asked to determine the perceived current English communication skills of Tourist Police and also suggestions for improved and more effective professional training programmes for Tourist Police. Communication skills of Tourist Police were found to be limited in speaking and listening abilities however these limitations were compensated by cultural communication attributes that helped to overcome problems. It was suggested by some respondents that the younger members of the TPD were more effective in English communication and there were some reasons suggested for this. All respondents agreed that there was scope to improve on the training provision of Tourist Police to increase their English communication. Suggestions were made for the improvement of English communication training programmes for Tourist Police. Suggestions for training programme improvement covered: the background of the instructor, course duration and format, teaching methods and the content. These suggestions will be considered and incorporated into the next stage of this project — the development of the English training programme for Tourist Police.

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