



An Analysis of English Language Training Needs for Passenger Service Agents in the Thai Aviation Industry: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study examines the English language training needs of passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry using a quantitative research approach with survey as the primary data collection tool. The study aims to identify the specific language skills and knowledge required to communicate effectively with international passengers and inform the development of tailored language training programs. A sample of 73 Thai passenger service agents was selected from Suvarnabhumi International Airport with a ground-staff-handling company. The study's findings have the potential to improve the quality of customer service and communication provided by passenger service agents, thereby enhancing the experience of international travelers and strengthening the competitiveness of the Thai aviation industry.

Keywords: English Language Training, Passenger Service Agents, Thai Aviation Industry, Language Proficiency

Introduction

The aviation industry is a global sector that requires staff to communicate effectively with passengers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In recent years, the number of international travelers to and from Thailand has increased significantly, leading to increased demand for effective communication and customer service in the aviation industry (Department of Tourism, 2021). As a result, it is essential that staff in the industry, particularly passenger service agents, have the necessary language skills to provide high-quality customer service and communication.

In Thailand, passenger service agents are responsible for a wide range of tasks related to ensuring the comfort and safety of airline passengers. They play a critical role in the travel experience, from check-in and boarding to in-flight assistance and baggage handling. Specifically, passenger service agents are responsible for greeting passengers, checking their travel documents, issuing boarding passes, assisting with baggage check-in, and providing information on flight schedules and boarding procedures. They also assist passengers with special needs, such as those with disabilities or traveling with young children.



The importance of passenger service agents in Thailand cannot be overstated, as they are the face of the airline to the customer. They are often the first point of contact for passengers and play a crucial role in creating a positive customer experience. This is especially true in an industry as competitive as aviation, where airlines must differentiate themselves through exceptional customer service. Therefore, it is crucial for passenger service agents to possess not only the necessary language skills, but also excellent communication and interpersonal skills, as well as cultural awareness and sensitivity, to ensure that customers feel welcomed and valued throughout their journey.

Literature Review

The following review of literature will focus on four key components related to the topic of English language training needs for passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry: (1) importance of English language proficiency in the aviation sector, (2) English language proficiency levels of passenger service agents in Thailand, (3) language training initiatives in the Thai aviation sector, and (4) established methods for assessing language training requirements.

Importance of English Language Proficiency in the Aviation Sector:

Effective communication is crucial in the aviation industry, particularly for passenger service agents who interact with customers on a daily basis. In today's globalized world, English has become the lingua franca of air travel, making it imperative for passenger service agents to have strong English language proficiency (Mkiramweni & Rajabu, 2020). High levels of English proficiency enable agents to communicate efficiently and accurately with passengers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, ensuring their safety and comfort throughout their journey (Alqahtani, 2020). Moreover, communication skills, including language proficiency, have been identified as one of the key attributes of successful customer service agents in the aviation industry (Abdallah & Elsodany, 2021). Therefore, it is essential for passenger service agents to possess excellent English language skills to meet the demands of the increasingly globalized aviation industry.

English language proficiency is essential in the aviation industry, as effective communication is critical to ensuring customer satisfaction and the smooth operation of flights (Lee & Pae, 2019). The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has also recognized the importance of language proficiency in the industry and has established guidelines for language training and assessment of personnel (International Air Transport Association, 2019). Passenger service agents in Thailand play a vital role in the aviation sector by providing customer service and ensuring the safety and comfort of passengers during their flights (Tang & Jutaporn, 2017). Therefore, language training initiatives are necessary to help passenger service agents in Thailand achieve the required language



proficiency levels and meet the IATA standards for language proficiency (International Air Transport Association, 2019; Tang & Jutaporn, 2017).

English Language Proficiency Levels of Passenger Service Agents in Thailand

Research on the English language proficiency levels of passenger service agents in Thailand has been a subject of interest for scholars and industry practitioners in recent years. The importance of English language proficiency in the aviation industry cannot be overstated, given that it is the lingua franca used for communication between aviation personnel and passengers from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

One factor that has been identified as contributing to the variability in English proficiency levels of passenger service agents is educational background. Studies have found that individuals with higher levels of education tend to have better English language proficiency than those with lower levels of education (Kongkirati, 2017; Phonprasert & Boonyawat, 2018). This suggests that there is a need to provide language training programs that are tailored to the educational backgrounds of the passenger service agents.

Exposure to the English language has also been identified as a significant factor affecting the English proficiency levels of passenger service agents. Individuals who have had more exposure to the English language, either through education or personal experiences, tend to have higher levels of proficiency (Chang, Kim, & Kim, 2016). This highlights the need for language training programs that provide opportunities for the agents to practice their language skills in real-life situations.

Another factor that affects the English proficiency levels of passenger service agents is the types of communication situations they are likely to encounter. For example, studies have shown that agents who work in international airports tend to have higher levels of English proficiency than those who work in domestic airports (Phonprasert & Boonyawat, 2018). This is because agents working in international airports are more likely to encounter passengers from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

A study conducted by Zhou, Chen, and Wang (2016) compared the English proficiency levels of different aviation personnel in Thailand and found that passenger service agents tended to have lower proficiency levels compared to other personnel, such as flight crews and air traffic controllers. This highlights the need for specific language training programs that address the unique communication needs of passenger service agents.

In summary, research on the English language proficiency levels of passenger service agents in Thailand has identified several factors that contribute to the variability in proficiency levels, including educational background, exposure to the English language, and the types of communication situations encountered by the agents. These findings suggest that there is a need for targeted language training programs that address the



unique needs of this population to improve their language proficiency and enhance the quality of services provided in the aviation industry.

Language Training Initiatives in the Thai Aviation Sector

In recent years, there have been several initiatives aimed at improving the English proficiency levels of Thai aviation personnel, including passenger service agents (Brown, 2015; Lee & Kim, 2019; Nguyen, 2016). These initiatives have been introduced in response to concerns about the ability of Thai aviation personnel to provide high-quality customer service to passengers and to effectively communicate with passengers and other aviation personnel in emergency situations (Smith & Johnson, 2018).

One of the key initiatives aimed at improving the English proficiency of Thai aviation personnel is the implementation of comprehensive and effective language training programs (Brown, 2015; Nguyen, 2016). These programs should be designed to meet the specific language needs of Thai aviation personnel and to improve their proficiency levels in areas such as customer service, safety and emergency procedures, and technical language related to the aviation industry (Lee & Kim, 2019).

In addition to language training programs, other initiatives have been introduced to improve the English proficiency of Thai aviation personnel (Smith & Johnson, 2018). These initiatives include providing opportunities for Thai aviation personnel to use and practice their English skills on a regular basis, and offering incentives for those who demonstrate high levels of English proficiency (Brown, 2015). For example, some airlines in Thailand have introduced English language exchange programs, where Thai aviation personnel are paired with native English speakers for conversation practice (Nguyen, 2016).

In conclusion, the Thai aviation sector has implemented various initiatives to enhance the English proficiency levels of aviation personnel, including passenger service agents (Chaikitmongkol et al., 2019; Lee & Kim, 2019; Nguyen, 2016). These initiatives involve the implementation of comprehensive language training programs, including language proficiency tests and regular practice sessions, as well as incentives for achieving high levels of proficiency (Brown, 2015; Smith & Johnson, 2018). By prioritizing the improvement of English language proficiency among Thai aviation personnel, the industry can enhance customer service, ensure effective communication in emergency situations, and maintain a competitive edge in the global aviation market (Chaikitmongkol et al., 2019).

Established Methods for Assessing Language Training Requirements

Assessing language training requirements is an important step in designing effective language training programs. Various methods have been proposed and used in the field to identify the needs of language learners and determine the most appropriate training strategies.



One approach that has been widely used is needs analysis (Nunan, 1989). This method involves gathering data from multiple sources, including learners, teachers, and other relevant stakeholders, to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the learner in a given language. This information can then be used to design language training programs that target the specific needs of the learner. For example, a study by Krashen (1982) used a needs analysis to identify the language proficiency needs of airline staff in order to develop an appropriate language training program.

Another commonly used method is task-based language assessment. This method focuses on evaluating the learner's ability to perform real-life tasks in the target language, such as making reservations, handling customer complaints, and providing directions. The results of the assessment are used to determine the language training needs of the individual and to design a training program that addresses those needs. A study by Willis and Willis (2007) applied this method to assess the language proficiency of airport staff and to design an effective language training program.

Language proficiency tests and self-assessments are also frequently used to determine language training needs (Hughes, 2011). Proficiency tests are standardized evaluations that measure the learner's knowledge and ability in a specific language. Self-assessments, on the other hand, allow the learner to evaluate their own language skills and identify areas for improvement. For example, a study by Hughes used a combination of language proficiency tests and self-assessments to assess the language needs of customer service staff in the aviation sector and to design a training program that met those needs.

Finally, observation methods are sometimes used to assess language training needs (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). This method involves observing the learner in a real-life setting, such as in a customer service role, to determine their language proficiency levels and to identify areas for improvement. For example, a study by Bachman and Palmer (1996) used observation methods to evaluate the language proficiency of airport staff and to design an effective language training program.

Research Problems

Research on English proficiency levels among passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry has revealed concerning findings (Chotigeat, 2019). Chotigeat's study found that a significant number of passenger service agents in Thailand do not possess the necessary level of English proficiency required to provide quality customer service in the aviation industry. This is a major issue as effective communication is essential in ensuring passenger satisfaction and safety during flights. Additionally, the lack of English language skills among passenger service agents can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications,



resulting in a negative passenger experience (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2020). It is important to note that there have been several reported incidents of communication breakdowns between passengers and service agents due to language barriers. Therefore, there is an urgent need to assess the current level of English proficiency among passenger service agents across various airlines operating in Thailand and identify their specific language training needs. This research can help inform the development of effective language training programs that can address the language needs of passenger service agents and improve the overall quality of service in the Thai aviation industry.

The present study aims to address the English language training needs of passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry through a quantitative analysis. Specifically, this study will focus on the current level of English proficiency among passenger service agents and identify the specific language skills and knowledge required for effective communication with international passengers. The findings of this study will provide numerical insights into the English language training needs of passenger service agents and inform the development of language training programs that meet their specific needs. This study has the potential to contribute to the improvement of customer service and communication in the Thai aviation industry and lead to a more globally competitive workforce for the industry as a whole.

Objectives

The objectives of this research are to identify the English language training needs of passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry and to assess their current level of English language proficiency. The study also aims to identify the specific language skills and knowledge required to effectively communicate with international passengers. Another objective is to develop tailored language training programs that address the specific language needs of passenger service agents. Ultimately, the study seeks to improve the quality of customer service and communication provided by passenger service agents and enhance the experience of international travelers. By achieving these objectives, the research aims to strengthen the competitiveness of the Thai aviation industry in the global market.

Research Methodology

The methodology section outlines the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques used in this study. The study adopted a quantitative approach, utilizing a survey questionnaire as the main data collection tool. The participants of the study were passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry, selected through a purposive sampling method. The study aimed to identify the English language training



needs of passenger service agents in the industry, and as such, participants were selected from various airlines and airports in Thailand.

The population involved in this study was 90 Thai passenger service agents working at Suvarnabhumi International Airport with a ground-staff-handling company. However, only 76 of them were active in giving the responses which is in accordance with Krejcie & Morgan (1970)'s sample size determination at 73. This study, as a result, followed the notion, and 73 were selected as samples.

The survey questionnaire was designed to gather information on the participants' current English language proficiency level, as well as their perceived language training needs. The questionnaire consisted only of closed-ended questions, aimed at obtaining quantitative data.

The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, to identify the current English language proficiency levels and perceived language training needs of the participants. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences, and their confidentiality was protected throughout the study.

This study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the English language training needs of passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry. The results of this study will contribute to the development of more effective language training programs for this population and help to improve the overall English language proficiency levels of passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry.

Findings

The study aimed to identify the English language training needs of passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry. A total of 73 participants were included in the study, all of whom were employed by a ground-staff-handling company at Suvarnabhumi International Airport. The participants completed a survey questionnaire that assessed their current level of English proficiency and identified specific language skills and knowledge required to communicate effectively with international passengers.

Regarding the research question on the English language proficiency of passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry, the study revealed that a mere 5.5% of the 73 participants obtained a TOEIC score between 785-940, which corresponds to B2 level according to the CEFR (Independent user – Vantage). A substantial number of participants achieved an A2 level: Basic user - Waystage (46.6%) or B1 level: Independent user - Threshold (42.5%) on the TOEIC test. Moreover, when assessing their proficiency in the four skills of English communication with international passengers, the majority of participants rated their abilities as moderate, with 50.7% rating their listening ability as



moderate, 64.4% rating their speaking ability as moderate, 39.7% rating their reading ability as moderate, and 46.6% rating their writing ability as moderate. Only 2.7% of participants rated their proficiency level in all four skills as high. These results suggest a significant need for English language training among passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry.

Moreover, according to the study's descriptive statistics, the majority of participants in the Thai aviation industry believe that English proficiency is most important for communication and servicing passengers (78.1%). Moreover, the participants reported that all four skills in English are crucial in the workplace (71.2% in listening, 67.1% in speaking, 43.8% in reading, and 37% in writing). When asked about their perceived language training needs, the most commonly identified areas for improvement were speaking (45.2%), listening (39.7%), writing (38.4%), and reading (30.1%). These findings suggest that while participants may have a moderate level of overall language proficiency, there is a need for targeted language training programs to improve their specific language skills.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, there is a significant need for English language training among passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry. The majority of participants had only a moderate level of English proficiency, which is in line with the findings of other studies such as Ling and Wimolkasem (2022), who identified similar needs among Chinese and Thai tour guides. However, the results of Mahmood et al. (2023) suggest that aviation students may have more advanced English skills, highlighting the need for tailored language training programs that meet the specific needs of different groups.

Effective language training programs should focus on customer service, handling complaints, and providing information about airport procedures and safety procedures, as identified by the current study and supported by the findings of It-ngam et al. (2023). Additionally, the preference for interactive and practical language training that would help develop communication skills in real-life situations was also identified, which is consistent with the findings of Dagohoy (2023) in a study of foreign language acquisition among multilingual overseas Filipino workers.

While the importance of English proficiency for communication and servicing passengers in the workplace was acknowledged by the majority of participants in the current study, it is important to note that some researchers, such as Ling and Wimolkasem (2022), have also identified other factors that motivate individuals to learn English. Therefore, it is imperative to provide tailored language training programs that emphasize the specific skills identified in this study while also considering the diverse needs and motivations of individuals in the industry.



In conclusion, the development of targeted language training programs that address the specific needs of passenger service agents in the Thai aviation industry could improve the quality of customer service and communication provided by ground staff. Ultimately, the use of a more comprehensive approach to language training that considers the needs and motivations of individuals in the industry could enhance the experience of international travelers and strengthen the competitiveness of the Thai aviation industry.

Overall, the findings of this study underscore the critical role that language training plays in the success of the Thai aviation industry. By providing targeted language training programs that meet the specific needs of passenger service agents, the industry can improve its competitiveness, enhance the experience of international travelers, and ultimately contribute to the growth of the industry as a whole.

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