Senior Flight Attendants' English Communication Needs:

A Case Study of Thai Airways International

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The study aims to identify English usage difficulties the senior Thai flight attendants encountered while performing on board services as well as important English communication needs in performing such services. A questionnaire was randomly distributed to 1,200 senior flight attendants mailboxes at Thai Airways International's Crew Center, Suvarnabhumi Airport. While 15 language skills were seen by the respondents as neutral in terms of problems encountered, 12 were considered important, and two were indicated as very important for improving English communicative skills. In addition, when classified by age and position, variances in perceived or identified areas of difficulty and concern became clearer. In addition, findings suggest that significant English usage difficulties are found in employing language associated with or needed for non-routine work. Additionally, it indicates that particular problems, for instance, "appropriate responses to avoid controversial topics regarding politics, religion, war, and social issues", and "suitable techniques for handling unanticipated and emergency situations" remain a concern for even the most highly experience flight attendant when asked to specify areas of linguistic concern they feel when needing to deal with non-Thais.

Keywords: ESP (English for Specific Purposes), flight attendants, language needs, conversational skills, Thais

Introduction

English has increasingly become the language of worldwide business (Hill, 2007). One main reason why it is employed in general communication is that over the last century, it has been associated with economic modernization, information technology, and industrial development (Wall, 2008). For communication in international service, non-native English-speaking countries need people who can compete with native English-speaking countries.

To ensure passenger satisfaction, Permtanjit (2003) stated that all flight attendants are trained to cater to all types of passengers and circumstances, to meet the needs of business travelers, VIP passengers, and children traveling alone. Moreover, they must be prepared to deal with handicapped passengers and sudden illnesses. Finally, they need to be able to deal with unanticipated problems due to delays, meal shortages, and passenger complaints. Along with these needs, the language conveyed must be appropriate to the context and situation with

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cultural awareness needed to avoid misunderstandings.

Statement of Problem

New Thai flight attendants need strong English skills, minimum 500 in TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or 5.5 on IELTS (International English Language Testing Service) to be considered for employment. In addition, they are provided English language training courses throughout their working lives to enhance communication competency. Despite the initial skills needed and on-going training being provided, problems concerning English arise.

According to interviews with Thai Airways flight attendants by Permtanjit (2003), some attendants cannot understand passengers' requests due to an unfamiliar accent; cannot reply to passengers' questions due to insufficient vocabulary; or employ inappropriate words or sentences that may seem impolite.

Raviyan (2004), a former In-Flight Services & Cabin Crew Development VP, indicated that some cabin crew could not communicate efficiently with passengers who needed information beyond a routine nature, and Skytrax research had suggested dialogue and interaction standards with passengers by First and Business Class staffs required improvement.

Literature Review

So-called "communication" is a two-way process involving both sender and receiver which can be completed only when the accuracy of the message received has been established. Efficient communication relies on how well speakers interact with one of the components in these interactions being the language used. Although statements may seem clear, misunderstanding may arise because of term usage, ambiguity problems occur, because others interpret language differently from speakers' intent. In customer service, successful communication with clients means to maximize clarity.

Apart from language used, communication can fail for a number of reasons—the message sent is not clear or the idea being expressed might be weak, wrong, or offensive. As M. J. Rouse and S. Rouse (2002) suggested, barriers to oral communication are usually human problems rather than technological obstacles.

The term "culture" can be identified as a shared system of behaviors, norms, symbols, beliefs, attitudes, values, and expectations that varies from society to society (M. J. Rouse & S. Rouse, 2002). Culture tells the way to prioritize what is crucial in life, what is appropriate in certain circumstances, the way to think, what ought to be, and how to behave. Culture is learned directly and indirectly through socialization from generation to generation.

In verbal intercultural communication, messages are encoded using the assumptions of one's own culture whereas the recipient decodes according to another cultural assumption. Misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and difficulties occur because of such dissimilarity with it being suggested that "the greater the difference between cultures, the greater the chance for misunderstanding" (Bovee & Thill, 2005, p. 66).

Stress, rhythm, and intonation are significant characteristics of English pronunciation to convey accurate meaning of a spoken message. In other words, part of speaking competence is the ability to produce sounds that are intelligible to listeners. Whether it is formal or conversational, appropriate responses to cultural conventions, proper formality in style of speech as well as level of politeness are significant in service business contexts.

Adler and Elmhorst (2008) pointed out that business experts agree that listening is an important skill in a global work place and that listening to customer needs and wants can generate success. According to Adler and

Elmhorst (2008), listening is more than an art and can be improved if the listener makes an effort to concentrate on key elements including focusing on the message, paraphrasing the speaker, understanding nonverbal meaning, and providing positive feedback.

Nonverbal communication refers to "the interpersonal process of sending and receiving message, both intentionally and unintentionally, without using written or spoken language" (Bovee & Thill, 2005, p. 53). Many nonverbal expressions are culture-bound. While some nonverbal communication seems to convey universal meanings, such as facial expressions that reflect happiness, sorrow, surprise, fear, or contempt; some differ from culture to culture. The nod that means "yes" in some cultures, means "no" in others while in still other cultures it only means the other person has understood the question (Adler & Elmhorst, 2008, p. 114).

The very goal of intercultural nonverbal communication awareness is to enable communication as a whole to succeed. Even people who are not alike in cultures, but almost everywhere, they are warm, hospitable, and forgiving. As M. J. Rouse and S. Rouse (2002) said, "As long as you demonstrate a sincere interest in and make a sincere effort to understand others' cultural ways, most people will be polite and helpful and will not take offence if cultural mistakes are made" (p. 269).

For many centuries, Buddhism has greatly enriched the lives of the Thais. Indeed, Buddhism has been the underlying cause of the flow of culture and value, its art and literature, its ethics and morality, as well as many of its traditional ways of life (Kusalasaya, 2009). Buddhist teaching places the most importance on the avoidance of social confrontation. To the Thais, "Confrontation is socially unacceptable, emotionally uncomfortable and to be avoided" (Klausner, 1993, p. 254). This behavior is reinforced by the belief in karma or the results of your deed as well as by the culture of respect.

According to Welty (2005), "everywhere in Thailand—in government, the military, in the monk-hood, in academic, at home, with friends, and in business—saving face is supreme" (p. 170). To avoid confrontation and to avoid making the person lose his or her sense of dignity is the approach of keeping face (Kislenko, 2004).

Welty (2005) expressed his opinion in this fascinating value that "you will be seen as a very honorable person if you learn to give respect (and therefore face) to status inferiors while maintaining your own status and remaining aware of your own place in the social hierarchy, as well" (p. 171).

Permtanjit (2003) investigated language problems and difficulties Thai Airways flight attendants encountered during flight in terms of language functions and English usage. The findings revealed that unfamiliar passenger accents and flight attendant accents and pronunciation were two major difficulties. In addition, five essential language skills were recognized as crucial—speaking, listening, pronunciation, polite language, and correct grammar.

Kulchol (2007) suggested factors leading to problems could be divided into proficiency level, cultural differences, and other factors such as personal attitudes, religion, nationalism, and discrimination. The findings determine that to perform effectively in a multicultural environment, it requires competency in intercultural communication.

Research Methodology

A survey questionnaire was used as it is more efficient in collecting information on a broad scale (Brown, 1995). The participants were asked to rate their English usage difficulties, English communicative skills needed as well as influencing factors that affect their desire to improve. Such self-rating is particularly helpful for

acquiring insights into individuals' self-images (Brown, 1995).

English communication difficulties and needs of senior flight attendants were initiated through preliminary interviews with a number of first class attendants as well as a company language instructor before classifying possible concerns into 15 categories.

The questionnaires were distributed to 25 respondents to test reliability. Cronbach's alpha method was utilized in this pre-test process. The value, as per coefficient's alpha result, was 0.887, which indicated a high degree of reliability. The questionnaire was prepared in English and Thai to ensure understanding.

Questionnaires were placed at random into 1,200 mailboxes of Thai senior flight attendants. The respondents were requested to drop completed questionnaires into a mailbox provided at the same place before July 31, 2010. The study was designed to explore demographic data, most common English usage difficulties, and most important English communication needs. Data obtained were analyzed using Descriptive Statistic Analysis, including frequency distribution, percentages, mean score, and SD (standard deviation) to identify quantitative survey results.

Research Analysis and Results

The statistical analysis is based on data obtained from 251 returned questionnaires. Most respondents, 178 or 70.9%, were female; age was largely 41-50 with 56.6% or 142. Interestingly, 216 or 86.1% hold a bachelor degree. Lastly, most are Cabin Attendant First, which means they have been with Thai more than eight years (see Table 1).

Table 1

Language Usage Difficulties Analysis by Age

Item	Age 21-30		Age 31-40		Age 41-50		Age over 50	
	Mean	Difficulty	Mean	Difficulty	Mean	Difficulty	Mean	Difficulty
Grammar								
(A) Language structure	3.19	Neutral	3.27	Neutral	3.16	Neutral	3.23	Neutral
Vocabulary								
(B) Job-related vocabulary	3.00	Neutral	2.93	Neutral	2.89	Neutral	2.69	Neutral
(C) Necessary terminology	3.38	Neutral	3.32	Neutral	3.25	Neutral	3.00	Neutral
(D) Idioms/collocations	3.00	Neutral	3.44	Difficult	3.37	Neutral	3.31	Neutral
Speaking skill								
(E) Correct pronunciation	3.00	Neutral	3.29	Neutral	3.06	Neutral	3.00	Neutral
(F) Correct stress/intonation	3.24	Neutral	3.32	Neutral	3.17	Neutral	3.15	Neutral
(G) Polite/correct language	3.14	Neutral	3.05	Neutral	2.87	Neutral	3.00	Neutral
(H) Polite/correct apology	3.10	Neutral	3.15	Neutral	2.97	Neutral	2.77	Neutral
(I) Avoid controversial topic	3.76	Difficult	3.29	Neutral	3.11	Neutral	3.15	Neutral
(J) Appropriate sympathy	3.19	Neutral	3.19	Neutral	3.06	Neutral	2.92	Neutral
(N) Emergency situations	3.38	Neutral	3.20	Neutral	3.20	Neutral	3.46	Difficult
Listening skill								
(K) Familiar with accents	3.33	Neutral	3.29	Neutral	3.07	Neutral	3.00	Neutral
(M) Cross-cultural com	3.52	Difficult	3.21	Neutral	3.08	Neutral	3.00	Neutral
(O) Body language	2.76	Neutral	2.75	Neutral	2.54	Easy	2.46	Easy
Reading								
(L) Reading instructions	2.62	Neutral	2.95	Neutral	2.75	Neutral	2.85	Neutral

If only raw numbers are reviewed, 103-108 respondents or nearly half of the total have problems with vocabulary regarding "idioms and collocations", "appropriate responses to avoid controversial topics… ", and "suitable techniques for handling unanticipated and emergency situation".

In addition, 30% have problems with eight areas of language—grammar, terminology, pronunciation, stress, intonation, expressing sympathy for passenger discomfort, handling unanticipated and emergency situations, and familiarization with accents and cultural differences.

The most frequent difficult language usage, "appropriate responses to avoid controversial topics regarding politics religions, war, and social issues" was mentioned by 41%. The next problem was "suitable techniques for handling unanticipated and emergency situations" which 34% deemed as difficult. For the age group of 21-30, 15 out of 21 considered "appropriate responses to avoid controversial topics regarding politics, religion, war, and social issues" as difficult.

Another problem was "expressing appropriate sympathy for passenger discomfort or family emergency" with nine people believing it was difficult. When looking at the age group of 31-40, "appropriate responses to avoid controversial topics regarding politics, religion, war, and social issues" was the largest concern, followed by "idioms and collocations" and "familiarization with various accents".

For the largest group (41-50), "idioms and collocations" was most frequently stated as difficult. Lastly, 46% of the respondents over 50 listed "suitable techniques for handling unanticipated and emergency situations" as difficult, which is noticeably higher than other age groups.

In conclusion, the findings strengthen results from previous research that significant English usage difficulties are not found in the language needed for routine work but with the language associated with or needed for non-routine work. Additionally, it indicates that particular problems, for instance, "appropriate responses to avoid controversial topics regarding politics, religion, war, and social issues", and "suitable techniques for handling unanticipated and emergency situations" remain a concern for even the most highly experience flight attendants when asked to specify areas of linguistic concern when dealing with non-Thais.

Recommendations for Research Implication

Presenting flight attendants with linguistic skills to avoid controversial topics, aspects of politeness, and methods to extricate oneself from an unpleasant conversational situation are required. The key to any training is to ensure attendants not only have acceptable phrases and expressions to employ, but also more importantly, employ intonation patterns that remain polite.

For safety's sake, flight attendants, especially those over 50, expressed a need for more training in handling emergency and unanticipated situations. As found in this research, senior flight attendants expressed the highest level of concern with problems related to dealing with emergencies.

The key in this area is to examine the language employed in the initial emergency training and subsequent follow-up courses. In addition, flight attendants need to have an improved ability to discuss with some measure of knowledge, potential problems that could lead to emergencies. This could range from food poisoning to a heart attack to more serious events including terrorism and plane malfunction.

An area of concern for a course designer will be to find ways for attendants to remain calm and confident regardless of their inner turmoil and fear through role-plays and other training techniques. This training should be

repeated regularly and without warning so they can be observed and provided with training to handle emergencies with confidence.

To construct a successful communicative program, further effort could be focused on desired content, most wanted learning process, preferable tasks and activities, and characteristics of course instructors. Similarly, the preferable course for each level of flight attendants might be different. The language course therefore should be tailor-made for particular group to serve the purpose at its best. Another further study recommended is to find out language difficulties and needs of other positions.

Conclusions

While this research has highlighted a number of potential areas of concern expressed by flight attendants, the fact that scenarios mentioned and linguistic skills needed vary depending on length of service is particularly noteworthy.

This would suggest that employees working in a second language, and perhaps even those working in their native language, should be consulted on a regular basis throughout their careers as to what communication scenarios they believe they are most likely to encounter for which they consider their linguistic and communication skills as being inadequate. Although these scenarios may, in fact be infrequent, this research has found that many of the Thai flight attendants surveyed would welcome language training to meet their perceived needs and, as such, reduce their job-related stress.

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