Discovering the Language Needs
of Hotel Workers in Thailand

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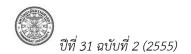*Language Institute, Thammasat University*

ABSTRACT

The following report aims to explore the language needs of a specific groups of learners situated in a specific occupational context. Beginning with a back ground to the broad and expanding area of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the reader is given an insight into the problems with traditional English classes for learners with particular language needs. The language requirements of employees working in the hotel and tourism industry are explored with relation to relevant literature in the field of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), and suggestions are made for effectively setting up a curriculum of study. Finally, a number of issues are raised for any educators concerned with teaching or organizing classes for students with specific purposes.

Keywords: *Language learning, English proficiency, Thailand, Hotel workers, English for Occupational Purposes, EOP*

INTRODUCTION

The need for a common language particularly in the international, academic and business communities has lead to the adoption of English as the present global language (Crystal, 1997: 10). This is a rather recent phenomenon which has largely been driven by the economic power of America and developments in technology since the end of the Second World War (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 6). As the demand for English language learning increases the demand for different kinds of English to suit the different needs of individual learners also increases. Business

people working in international markets, doctors who want to keep up with developments in their field, students and people working in the tourism industry all require English for particular functions. This has subsequently lead to the development of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as a separate discipline and the use of specific methodologies to suit a group of students specific needs (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 19). It has become more apparent that the general teaching of English is insufficient to suit the needs of all language learners. Long (2007: 1) states; "A one size-fits all approach has long been discredited by research findings on the *specificity* of the tasks, genres and discourse practices that language learners encounter in the varied domain in which they must operate" (Long, 2007: 1). ESP has been traditionally divided into two main areas: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Within these areas there is a growing demand for a course to meet the needs of a very specific homogonous group of individuals, which is often relevant to only one particular group or even company, for example an ESP program exclusively for professionals working in the beer industry in Argentina (Orsi & Orsi, 2002).

In this paper I will investigate the language requirements of a particular group of workers within the hotel and tourism industry in Thailand. Although there are materials available in the area of English for Tourism Professionals (ETP), for example Adamson (1989) it seems evident that; "the professional literature has not adequately defined or addressed the topic of ESP in the tourism industry" (Magennis, 2002: 57). I aim to review the process of obtaining the needs of workers in a very specific context, and to propose the steps that I would take to develop a program of study if I was given the opportunity to do so. Although there is a hypothetical nature to this paper it hopes to make implications for the teaching of ESP at the local level that should benefit a wealth of teachers that are concerned about the needs of their learners.
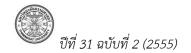
CONTEXT

1. Tourism in Thailand

My interest in this area of EOP has arisen as a result of intensive travel within South East Asia. According to my own observations many local people adopt English as a way of doing business with visiting tourists. Tourism is now one of the largest sectors of the Thai economy (Bindloss & Taylor, 2004: 32) and as a way of generating an income the use of spoken English has become invaluable to many people, not only the educated elite, but local people from all sorts of backgrounds trying to make a living from the influx of foreign travellers. The requirements for English varies greatly, from perhaps a taxi driver just needing to understand directions, numbers and polite greetings to business people involved in international markets and the linguistic interactions these will entail.

The language abilities of Thai hospitality workers varies significantly within hotels and guest houses and in my view constitutes a mixture of the demands for English and the educational history of the workers. A small family run business renting out bungalows on a quaint paradise island may only require one person who can speak a basic level of English in order to succeed; indeed this may actually be part of the charm for tourists! On the other hand, the staff at a large more luxurious hotel in Bangkok will certainly need an English competence that will allow most of the staff to be able to interact with foreign guests, in a polite and informative manner. Nevertheless, I would argue that despite the differences in quality offered a greater command of English and in particular hospitality English will enable the host's greater scope in making guests feel comfortable and welcome at their various establishments. As Blue and Harun (2003: 77) maintain; "in many parts of the world, the art of greeting, soliciting information, thanking and bidding farewell requires some measure of familiarization with the relevant English expressions before a person can serve effectively as a receptionist, telephonist or in other guest-contact capacities."

2. Local Context

The hotel I will consider in this paper is a small, averaged priced hotel in a popular tourist resort in Thailand, which prides itself on providing the atmosphere and the attitude of a luxury hotel with a much more reasonable price tag. There are 26 rooms and 16 members of staff involved in the running of the hotel all with different positions and perhaps slightly different language requirements. On the whole, the front of house staff have studied a general English course, but there has not been any specific course for hospitality purposes. Any additional language requirements are learnt in house, which may mean that certain circumstances may challenge the concept of an "atmosphere and attitude of a luxury hotel" as linguistic requirements may be lacking especially for new workers. Those members of staff that do not work at the front of the hotel, for example the cleaners, tend to be at a very low level, although they may only need a very limited level of English. For instance, Jasso-Aguilar (1999: 45) found in her study on Waikiki hotel maids that; "the language necessary for the current tasks that these hotels maids must perform in their job is very limited, and the lack of English Language skills does not affect their performance". However, despite these findings it seems apparent in my view that the process of providing a professional feel to the service offered can only be aided by an increase in English language ability by all members of staff. Therefore, I suggest that a small course in ETP would be very beneficial for the staff of this particular hotel and many others like it. In addition, it would also satisfy the stakeholders by improving the professionalism and hospitality offered.

WHAT DO ME MEAN BY NEEDS ANALYSIS?

> "ESP should properly be seen not as any particular language product, but as an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning." (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 19)

In the minds of Hutchinson and Waters, the ESP approach to language learning is firmly based on learner need. Likewise, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 122) affirm: "needs analysis is the corner stone of ESP and leads to a very focused course." Long (2005: 1) draws parallels with the medical profession; "Just as no medical intervention would be prescribed before a through diagnosis of what ails the patient, so no language teaching program should be designed without a thorough needs analysis." For this reason we need to explicitly ask: What exactly are the language needs of workers in this particular hotel?

When considering the target needs of a group of learners, Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 55) suggest that we look at the target situation in terms of "necessities, lacks and wants." Necessities comprise what the learner's need to know in order to function effectively within the target situation, whereas lacks tell us their present abilities. A course can, therefore, be designed to fill the void made up between these two elements. It may however be naïve to base a needs analysis solely on what educators and the institutional representatives feel the students want or need without actually considering their opinions. "Bearing in mind the importance of learner motivation in the learning process, learner perceived wants cannot be ignored" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 57). Therefore to undertake a thorough needs analysis we should complete what Dudley Evans and St John (1998: 123) term a target situation analysis (TSA), in which the objective and perceived needs of the learners are established in addition to a present situation analysis (PSA), in which we can discover the learners' present abilities or lacks. Additionally, it is also very important to view the learners as emotional human beings, with different feelings, attitudes as well as having work-based commitments. An analysis of learning needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 60) or a learning situation analysis (LSA) (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998: 123) will enable us to fully complete the picture of a needs analysis shedding light on how the students learn a language, the environment in which learning will take place and what will motivate them to learn more effectively.

A FRAMEWORK FOR A NEEDS ANALYSIS

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 21) designing a course for ESP is a matter of asking questions. In the next section, I will consider the process of obtaining the information for a needs analysis based upon these questions, as well as speculating on what I envisage a possible course comprising based on studies from the literature.

- **Why are they studying?**

Blue and Harun (2003: 86) in their study conclude "that proficiency in hospitality language is important and ought therefore to be included in hospitality management programmes regardless of whether trainees are operating through their mother tongue or a second or foreign language or both." Consequently, I recommend that members of the hotel staff take a course in hospitality English to improve their communication with customers not only to enable a greater standard of hospitality service from the hotel, but also for their professional development as second language users within the tourism industry and beyond.

- **Who will be involved in the needs analysis?**

All of the staff at the hotel will come in contact with English on a daily basis, although the back of house staff will have a significantly reduced amount of exposure. For this reason, I believe that all 16 members of staff could benefit from further study. Interviews and observations will help to establish exactly what is required for the different job positions within the hotel, and give me a basis for completing a TSA.

At this point, I would predict splitting the group into two language requirement levels. In this way, reception and management can be trained separately to back of house and bar staff. This will reflect the additional interactions which are associated with front of house staff.

- **Where and when will the needs analysis and course take place?**

A big limitation to the implementation of the course will be money. The hotel is in direct competition with many others and doesn't have much money or time to invest in language courses or take time out of the staff's working day. With this in mind, it seems reasonable that the training would take place in-house in a room set a side for this purpose. My expectation is that the timing of classes should reflect periods of relative inactivity, for example periods of shift changes in which more members of staff are around. Interviews with managerial staff will help to establish
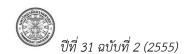
suitable times and classes. The time scale will always be a limitation as the course will have a direct affect on the general running of the hotel. With this in mind I would suggest that the course takes place during the low season (May-November) consisting of perhaps two 1 hour sessions per week. The course, therefore, will be somewhere in the range of between 30 and 40 hours in total.

- **What will be involved in the course?**

There are a number of text books which address the area of hospitality language; nevertheless, in the opinion of Blue & Harun (2003: 89) "most are very basic; the language is often simplified and does not always seem to reflect authentic hotel encounters." Although Magennis (2002: 65) alleges modern text books are beginning to improve, Blue & Harun (2003: 89) maintain that course designers should take a comprehensive approach which goes beyond the "stereotypical" for hospitality language and includes many aspects of general purpose English. Downey Bartlett (2005: 307) emphasizes the use of a task-based approach, in which "communicative tasks should be the basic unit of teaching syllabi, where tasks approximate a real world use." I envisage tasks based on the everyday interactions of staff members comprising a large part of the course for the hotel staff in Thailand. Interviews with individuals will help to establish a better idea of what the learning situation is (LSA) and what materials could be used as well as bringing validity to the other data collected.

- **How will the needs be collected?**

To obtain information about the learners present situation (PSA) and what their language needs are (TSA) we can use questionnaires interviews, observations, document analysis (e.g. service guides, recordings and handbooks) or tests. According to the literature multiple sources and methods should be employed and triangulated for reliability (Downey, 2002; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Long, 2002). Triangulation is a way of cross-examining results using two or more sources to add validity (Long, 2002: 28) Jasso-Aguilar (1999) found that the use of multiple sources and triangulation were useful in determining the most reliable methods in obtaining a needs analysis. In her study Jasso-Aguilar (1999: 44) used participant observations, unstructured interviews, and questionnaires and discovered that observations were by far the most useful in

developing an understanding of the participants needs and for identifying further sources. Blue and Harun (2003: 78) used a micro-cassette to undertake a direct Language analysis, which presented the researchers with an understanding of the most frequent language structures, vocabulary and functions used in daily interactions. Recordings from the hotel reception desk and observations can provide a picture of the language items that should be featured in the course and provide an indication of the workers 'lacks'. With these techniques in mind, I propose a mixed method of data collection using interviews, observations and recordings to collect the language needs of the hotel workers.

ISSUES IN DETERMINING THE NEEDS OF HOTEL WORKERS

In this final section I wish to draw on current literature regarding ESP needs analysis to further explore factors which I believe have a large influence on the learning needs of workers in tourism and hospitality.

- **Intercultural Competence**

Long (2005: 4) mentions a variety of studies that have suggested that it is often not a lack of linguistic competence that limits learners' language performance; "Rather, it is learners' inability to accomplish the tasks required of them, for which language use is often highly differentiated and both field- and context-specific, and for which much more than L2 linguistic knowledge is needed" (Long, 2005: 4) Marriot and Yamada (1991 cited in Long, 2007: 4) studied an Australian salesman in a duty free shop and concluded that although the man knew sufficient specialized Japanese lexical items relevant to selling opals to tourists, sales were missed because of a lack of awareness of cross-cultural pragmatic differences. Interactive and intercultural competences are essential in making a sale in a situation like this, and will almost certainly also feature in providing customer satisfaction within the hotel. Hence, I would insist that an element of the course focuses on intercultural competence (Hyde, 1998) which centres on differences within international users of English. Many

of the English conversations in the hotel will not involve a native speaker, and this is set to increase as the spread of global English continues (Graddol, 1997).

- **Appropriateness**

Another key element is the use of appropriate politeness with customers. So-Mui and Mead (2000) in their study on the communication needs of textile and clothing merchandisers found that there were numerous examples of inappropriate and impolite forms of language use in communications with customers. Awareness of the impact of negative and accusative language as well as appropriate use of formality should be incorporated in any course regarding hospitality language. What became a need in the opinion of institutional representatives in Jasso-Aguilar's study (1999) was the use of 'chit-chat' (small talk) amongst the working maids and customers to establish a level of rapport. The idea is that encountering friendly, intelligible staff will make your stay in the hotel more pleasant. Additionally, the correct use of informal language with regular or familiar customers can help make the guests feel more welcome and valued as a guest in the hotel (Blue & Harun, 2003: 84).

- **Perceptions of Needs**

There is a whole wealth of information surrounding any given language learning situation and it is easy to over look very important components. Uvin (1996: 43) carried out a target situation analysis on Chinese health-care workers in an American nursing home in which he learned all about the technical aspects of the job, read all the manuals, interviewed workers and spoke with the residents. However, it was soon apparent after the language course had begun that he had only addressed the work related needs of the learners and forgotten about the cultural aspects of working in an American nursing home. The language needs went beyond those for the job, although they did directly affect work related tasks. Downey Bartlett (2005) discovered that ordering a coffee was no longer a straight forward process, and in her study revealed that features found in native to native speaker conversations while ordering a coffee, reflected a number of specialised and semi-specialised domains of language use. Interestingly, the word 'Coffee' was rarely encountered, but instead replaced with a sparing list of alternatives. Along with many other discourse analysts she feels that these types of conversations are poorly reflected in ESL course books which do not include language models and activities based on an analysis of real interactions (Downey Bartlett, 2005: 330).

Another very interesting point is the variation in perceptions depending on whether the sources are from "insiders or outsiders" (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999: 41). In her study the maids themselves actually reject the need for English; "good in cleaning is what is important", while the human resources person perceives a need for all staff to be able to converse in English so they can all "be a host to each guest" (ibid: 41). In a needs analysis for the Hotel it will be important to obtain information from all levels of workers including management and to consider what the workers actually want in terms of language. There may be institutional pressure for linguistic competence in specific areas, but if the workers are unable to agree with the same need it may lead to difficulties in terms of motivating them to study.

CONCLUSION

The following paper has explored the factors involved in a needs analysis for hotel workers in a resort in Thailand as well as to make predictions regarding the elements which may feature in such an ETP course. I feel that the process of obtaining needs and planning a course for the hotel and many others like it has been greatly assisted by the above process. While this paper has approached needs analysis in a hypothetical way it has helped to highlight some very important elements of hospitality language and needs analysis. In particular it has drawn attention to the importance of third-party information and the dangers of relying solely on TSA for predictions of language needs. As the international movement of people continues to increase around the world a greater demand will arise for competence in hospitality language and an understanding of cross-cultural communication. In relation to the numerous discussions regarding English as a global language it is important to encourage creativity amongst language users and to provide a place for the expression of what Blue & Harun (2003: 90) term "local colour". This will enable hospitality workers to fully develop their second language identities and provide tourists with an enriched cultural experience as well as a pleasant stay.
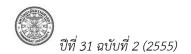
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