

English Communication Problems and Strategies between Thai and Filipino

Teachers in Thai International Schools

ปัญหาและกลยุทธ์ที่ใช้ในการสื่อสารระหว่างครูชาวไทยและครูชาวฟิลิปปินส์ที่ทำงานในโรงเรียนนานาชาติ
ในประเทศไทย

*Somjai Mantarat**

*Rick Lynn Whisenand***

Abstract

The main concern of this research is to study the communication problems and strategies between Thai and Filipino teachers in Thai international schools. The purposes of this paper are threefold: to identify what the communication problems are between Thai and Filipino teachers when they speak English, to investigate the personal strategies they use to make communication more effective, and to determine whether the teachers are aware of cultural factors that influence their communication. One hundred fifty questionnaires were distributed to Thai and Filipino teachers who work in four Thai international schools; one hundred twenty five questionnaires were returned to the researcher. Analysis of data revealed that Thai teachers faced greater problems than their Filipino colleagues at different levels of agreement regarding several issues: their accent not being understood by their colleagues, thinking in their native language before switching to English, having weaknesses in grammar, not being able to choose the appropriate English words, not being understood by others, and being unable to understand different foreign accents. When miscommunication occurred, both Thai and Filipino teachers were able to use personal strategies to solve the problems. Moreover, both groups were aware that the communication errors were due to cultural diversity and they tried to learn more about one another's cultures to improve their communication.

Keywords: Communication Problems, Personal Strategies, Cultural Awareness

* นักศึกษาหลักสูตรศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสาร คณะมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยรามคำแหง

** Lecturer, Department of English and Linguistics, Ramkhamhaeng University

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาถึงปัญหาและกลยุทธ์ในการสื่อสารที่นำมาใช้เพื่อลดปัญหาการสื่อสารระหว่างครูชาวไทยและครูชาวฟิลิปปินส์ที่ทำงานในโรงเรียนนานาชาติ โดยศึกษาใน 3 ประเด็น คือ (1) ปัญหาการสื่อสารที่เกิดขึ้นระหว่างครูชาวไทยและครูชาวฟิลิปปินส์ (2) กลยุทธ์ที่ครูชาวไทยและครูชาวฟิลิปปินส์นำมาใช้ในการลดปัญหาและพัฒนากการสื่อสารระหว่างกันให้มีประสิทธิภาพมากยิ่งขึ้น (3) ความตระหนักถึงการสื่อสารต่างวัฒนธรรมของครูชาวไทยและครูชาวฟิลิปปินส์ ผู้วิจัยได้ส่งแบบสอบถามจำนวน 150 ชุดให้กับครูชาวไทยและครูชาวฟิลิปปินส์ที่ทำงานในโรงเรียนนานาชาติจำนวน 4 แห่ง และได้รับแบบสอบถามจำนวน 125 ชุดคืนจากผู้ตอบแบบสอบถาม การศึกษาพบว่า ครูชาวไทยและครูชาวฟิลิปปินส์มีปัญหาการสื่อสารในแต่ละด้านในระดับที่แตกต่างกัน เช่น สำเนียงการพูดภาษาอังกฤษ การคิดประโยคเป็นภาษาของตนเองก่อนที่จะแปลเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ ปัญหาการใช้ไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษไม่ถูกต้อง การเลือกคำที่เหมาะสมมาใช้ในการสื่อสาร ผู้ฟังไม่เข้าใจภาษาอังกฤษของผู้พูด และการปัญหาการฟังภาษาอังกฤษในสำเนียงที่แตกต่างกันไป แต่อย่างไรก็ตามเมื่อมีปัญหาการสื่อสารเกิดขึ้นครูชาวไทยและครูชาวฟิลิปปินส์ต่างใช้กลยุทธ์การสื่อสารเพื่อลดปัญหาและพัฒนากการสื่อสารระหว่างกันให้ดียิ่งขึ้น นอกจากนี้ทั้งครูชาวไทยและครูชาวฟิลิปปินส์ต่างตระหนักว่าปัญหาที่เกิดขึ้นระหว่างการสื่อสารเกิดจากการสื่อสารต่างวัฒนธรรม ทั้งสองกลุ่มจึงเรียนรู้วัฒนธรรมของกันและกันเพิ่มเติมเพื่อพัฒนากการสื่อสารให้มีประสิทธิภาพยิ่งขึ้น

คำสำคัญ: ปัญหาการสื่อสาร, กลยุทธ์ที่ใช้ในการลดปัญหาการสื่อสาร, การตระหนักถึงการสื่อสารต่างวัฒนธรรม

1. Background

Because English is commonly used for communication, international schools have been established in many countries around the world to provide education without the limitation of nationalities, race, and religions. Indeed, English is used as a medium of instruction. The first international school in Thailand was established in 1951. There are now more than 126 international schools in Thailand (Office of Private Education Commission, 2014). Consequently, teaching English has become a good career choice for native and non-native English speakers. Additionally, working abroad brings opportunities, for example, to see the world, to take up a great challenge, to develop working skills and to learn a new culture.

There are many attractive countries all around the world that are great destinations for teaching, and Thailand is one of them. There are several reasons why Thailand is a good place to teach. First, the demand for English teachers is very high because of the numerous courses of English programs, schools and institutions. Thus, the opportunity to get a job is very possible. Second, salaries and cost of living is

very sensible. Salaries depend on teachers' experiences. If they are experienced teachers, they will receive higher pay. The cost of living is cheap, so it is easy to find affordable apartments, foods, clothes etc. Third, Thai people are very friendly, happy and peaceful people, thus these attributes make for a good environment to live and work. Lastly, Thailand is a very beautiful place to travel and get into adventures, with an interesting history and culture (Aragon, 2015).

Filipino teachers have been recognized as qualified in teaching English. The strong advantage of the Filipinos is that most of them have English skills because English is considered an official language in their country beside their mother tongue, Tagalog. Stevens (1999) stated that English began to be used as the official language when American occupation began in 1898. On the other hand, the National News Bureau of Thailand (2014) revealed that the Office of the Private Education Commission's survey shows that among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, Thailand ranks the lowest in English proficiency scores. PJ (2015) and Mitchell (2015) mentioned some points of poor English in Thailand. One of the principal reasons is that the Thai education system uses teachers as the center of learning, so they tend to order the students to copy whatever they write on the board in front of the class. As a result, Thai students understand English words, functions, and meanings but they have little practice applying the words in speaking and writing.

Although Filipinos have a higher English proficiency than Thais, when they move to Thailand, living in a foreign environment can cause many difficult communication problems. Even when speakers use English as their medium of communication, pronunciation and accent can still be a barrier. Furthermore, both Thais and Filipinos have a unique style of speaking English. Moreover, cultural diversity influences communication practices, traditions, and thought processing, therefore when people are unable to understand cultural differences it can lead to communication misinterpretation. Harris and Moran (1996, p. 19) wrote that:

[t]here are many problems when working or living in a foreign environment. Communication across cultural boundaries is difficult. Differences in customs, behaviors, and values result in problems can be managed only through effective cross-cultural communication and interaction.

Apart from cultural issues, nonverbal or body language also affect communication because each culture interprets meanings differently, such as facial expressions, eye contact, hand movements, touching and space. Peter F. Drucker, a well-known writer and management consultant, says that "The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said" (Pennington, 2009). For example, a smile is typically an expression of pleasure but Thais smile more often than others whether they are happy or in any other situation. Therefore, the foreigners call Thailand "The Land of Smiles." The other interesting

nonverbal cue of Thais is that Thais do not like to be touched on their heads as this is considered as the most sacred part of the body. However, the researcher discussed these issues with a Filipino colleague, who said that in the Philippines they do not consider these gesture in the same way. Pointing, between Thais and Filipinos, is also different. Filipinos typically point by using their lips rather than their hands; the tighter the lips come together in a compressed “o,” the further away the item being pointed out, whereas Thais typically point with index finger which is considered rude in the Philippines, especially pointing at someone.

The main purposes of this study are to investigate the occurrences of communication problems when Filipinos and Thais interact while communicating, as well as to determine the strategies used when communication problems occur when the two parties use English as a medium of communication. The study focuses on language use (only spoken language, not written language), cultural differences, and nonverbal behavior. However, some personal characteristics may also influence problems, such as gender, age, and teaching experience. It is very interesting to investigate causes and problems which lead to difficulties in communication between people who have different backgrounds, cultures, and native languages. Therefore, the purposes of this study are as follows: 1) to identify what the communication problems are between Thai and Filipino teachers when they speak English, 2) to investigate the personal strategies the Thai and the Filipino teachers use to improve communication more successfully, and 3) to determine whether the teachers are aware of cultural factors that influence their communication.

2. Methodology

The study attempted to find the communication problems between Thai and Filipino teachers in Thai international schools, the personal strategies that they used to prevent communication problems, and whether they were aware of cultural factors that influenced their communication. In relevance to these concerns, the subjects of the study were Thai and Filipino teachers who worked in Thai international schools and used English as a medium to communicate to each other.

Non-probability sampling was used in this research because the sampling frame was unknown. Therefore, the method used was the judgment sampling method, in which participants were selected according to the researcher’s or some other experienced individuals’ belief that they would meet the requirements of the study (Baxter and Babbie, 2004; Trochim, 2006).

The instrument used to obtain the answers of the research questions was a closed-ended questionnaire written in English. The questionnaire was developed from a previous related study

(Jeharsae, 2012) with assistance from an advisor. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part I concerned the participants' personal backgrounds, such as gender, age, and work experience. In Part II, the questions were divided into three sections: communication problems, personal strategies, and cultural awareness. The first section concerned communication problems, where the researcher aimed to find what communication problems occurred when the two groups of participants interacted with one another. The second section related to personal strategies being used when communication problems occurred, to avoid communication problems. The last section was cultural factors which affected communication between two groups who were from different cultures, personal backgrounds, and countries.

The 150 questionnaires were personally distributed to teachers in four Thai international schools within which the number of Thai and Filipino teachers was similar: 1) Anglo Singapore International School consisting of 20 Thai teachers and 30 Filipino teachers, 2) St. Andrews International School of 12 Thai teachers and 10 Filipino teachers, 3) Ascot International School of 14 Thai teachers and 10 Filipino teachers, and 4) Shrewsbury International School of 30 Thai teachers and 20 Filipino teachers. In each school, the participants were of different ages and working experiences. The ages of participants ranged between less than 25 years old, 25-30 years old, 31-35 years old, and more than 35 years old. Additionally, their working experiences were less than 1 year, 1-5 years, and more than 5 years. The researcher believed that the differences in nationality, gender, age, and experience might affect their responses, so they should represent the entire defined target population.

3. Findings

The results of the study can answer the research questions, as discussed in the following sections.

RQ 1: When they use English, what are the communication problems between Thai and Filipino teachers in Thai international schools?

The statistical significance about communication problems for Thai teachers. The results revealed that male Thai teacher ($\bar{X} = 2.37$) moderately agreed about having problems during communication as well as female Thai teachers did ($\bar{X} = 2.34$). When comparing by age group, the results found that Thai teachers of all age levels faced the same communication errors. However, the portion did not show any interesting significance between age groups. When comparing by working experience, the results found that all level of working experience significantly had communication errors. Therefore, table 1 shows the analysis of communication problems for Thai teachers by working experience. The results revealed that Thai teachers whose working experience was less than 1 year faced the most miscommunication with being unable to choose the appropriate words to communicate

($\bar{X} = 3.33$) and being unable to find the English words to support their conversation ($\bar{X} = 3.00$).

Table 1

Communication Problems of Thai Teachers by Working Experience in Each Statement

Working Experience	\bar{X}	SD	Working Experience		
			1	2	3
I cannot choose the appropriate English words to communicate.					
1. Less than 1 year	3.33	0.58	-		*
2. 1-5 years	2.59	0.76		-	
3. More than 5 years	2.08	0.73			-
I cannot find the English words to support my conversation.					
1. Less than 1 year	3.00	1.00	-		*
2. 1-5 years	2.28	0.77		-	*
3. More than 5 years	1.92	0.55			-

Regarding the teachers from the Philippines, the findings found that male Filipino teachers ($\bar{X} = 2.22$) moderately agreed about facing miscommunication. On the other hand, female Filipino teachers ($\bar{X} = 1.98$) disagreed that they did have communication misunderstanding. Therefore, table 2 indicates communication problems between male and female Filipino teachers comparing by gender. The results showed that male Filipino teachers moderately agreed that they faced the problem of their colleagues not understanding their accent ($\bar{X} = 2.95$) more than females did ($\bar{X} = 1.94$).

Table 2

Communication Problems of Filipino Teachers by Gender in Statement

Communication problems	Gender	Filipino teachers (N = 54)			
		\bar{X}	SD	t	Sig.
Sometimes my colleagues do not understand my English accent.	Male	2.95	0.51	1.16	0.00*
	Female	1.94	0.63		

When comparing by age, the findings found that the Filipino teachers, whose age groups were different, significantly experienced communication errors differently. Table 3 reveals the statistical

significance for communication problems of Filipino teachers generated by age group. The results indicated that the Filipino teachers whose ages were less than 25 years old, experienced communication problems more than the other age groups. The ages less than 25 year olds many thought in their native language before switching into English ($\bar{X} = 3.40$), their English grammar was not very good ($\bar{X} = 3.00$), they were unable to understand different foreign accents ($\bar{X} = 2.40$), they were unable to choose the appropriate words ($\bar{X} = 2.40$), and they were unable to find the English words to support their comments ($\bar{X} = 2.20$). However, the ages over 35 years old felt the main communication errors about their English not being understood by others ($\bar{X} = 2.15$).

Table 3

Communication Problems of Filipino Teachers by Age Group in Each Statement

Age	\bar{X}	SD	Age			
			1	2	3	4
I do not understand different foreign accents.						
1. Less than 25 years old	2.40	0.55	-	*	*	*
2. 25-30 years old	1.86	0.52		-	*	
3. 31-35 years old	1.40	0.52			-	
4. More than 35 years old	1.77	0.44				-
My English is not always understandable.						
1. Less than 25 years old	2.00	0.00	-			
2. 25-30 years old	1.79	0.42		-		*
3. 31-35 years old	1.60	0.52			-	*
4. More than 35 years old	2.15	0.55				-
My English grammar is not very good.						
1. Less than 25 years old	3.00	0.00	-	*	*	*
2. 25-30 years old	2.00	0.67		-	*	
3. 31-35 years old	1.40	0.52			-	*
4. More than 35 years old	2.31	0.48				-
I have to think in my native language before switching into English						
1. Less than 25 years old	3.40	0.55	-	*	*	

Table 3 (continued)

Age	\bar{X}	SD	Age			
			1	2	3	4
2. 25-30 years old	2.29	0.81		-		*
3. 31-35 years old	2.00	0.94			-	*
4. More than 35 years old	3.15	0.69				-
I cannot choose the appropriate English words to communicate.						
1. Less than 25 years old	2.40	0.55	-		*	
2. 25-30 years old	1.86	0.52		-		
3. 31-35 years old	1.60	0.84			-	*
4. More than 35 years old	2.23	0.44				-
I cannot find the English words to support my conversation.						
1. Less than 25 years old	2.20	0.45	-		*	
2. 25-30 years old	2.07	0.77		-	*	
3. 31-35 years old	1.20	0.42			-	*
4. More than 35 years old	2.15	0.69				-

When comparing by working experience, the results found that Filipino teachers, whose working experiences were different, faced miscommunication. However, the portion did not state interesting significantly. In general, it believed that Filipino teachers with more working experience might face less miscommunication than those who had less working experience. However, the results found that different working experiences did not influence communication problems.

RQ 2: What personal strategies do they use to prevent communication problems?

The findings revealed that both groups of Thai and Filipino teachers used personal strategies to avoid communication problems. Regarding gender, both male and female Thai teachers used personal strategies to prevent communication problems as well as male and female Filipino teachers did. When categorized by age, Thai teachers in the lowest age group used the personal strategy of repeating what they heard to ensure their understanding more than the others. Additionally, the middle age group used the personal strategy of using simple words to explain difficult content more often than the others did. In

contrast, Filipino teachers at all age levels used the same personal strategies (such as choosing simple words, using nonverbal language, and listening more instead of paying attention to emotional attitudes) to deal with miscommunication. Regarding working experience, the findings indicated that both Thai and Filipino teachers with all level of working experience handled miscommunication problems by using personal strategies like those previously mentioned.

RQ 3: Are the teachers aware of cultural factors in communication?

The findings showed that, for the most part, both groups of Thai and Filipino teachers were aware of cultural factors in communication. The study also revealed that both male and female Thai teachers were moderately aware of cultural differences. On the other hand, both male and female Filipino teachers were strongly aware of cultural factors. Regarding to age group, Thai teachers of all age levels were aware of cultural factors at the same level of agreement. On the other hand, the younger Filipino teachers were the most strongly aware that persons from different cultures had different viewpoints and backgrounds. Additionally, the oldest group of Filipino teachers more often understood that cultural differences caused miscommunication. And Thai teachers at all levels of working experience were as aware as the Filipino teachers were about cultural diversity.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

It can be concluded from the above findings that the Thai and Filipino teachers in Thai international school perceived that both parties faced communication problems, at the different levels of agreement. Fortunately, both Thai and Filipino teachers tried to use personal strategies to solve problems and both parties were aware of cultural factors which could lead to miscommunication. The language used did seem to be a major problem in communication. However, there were also nonverbal language cues and the diversity of cultural factors in communication that should not be overlooked.

The plausible reasons for the communication problems of Thai teachers could be divided from insufficient practice in oral communication, limitation of English learning skills, and lack of practice. Because of limited English knowledge, Thai teachers often think in their native language and then translate word by word to English. Also, the Thai way of speaking English, which is called Tenglish, is a mixture between Thai and English, and this could lead to miscommunication.

The most likely reasons for the problems for Filipino teachers could be language use and accent. Even though English is used as an official language beside the native Tagalog, English in the Philippines is often used alongside Tagalog. Therefore, Filipinos mix English with Tagalog, which is commonly called Taglish. It could be said, in general, that Filipino teachers' English skills are better than Thai

teachers' skills. However, the study revealed that Filipino teachers faced the same communication problems of thinking in the native language before reverting to English as the Thai teachers did. Moreover, the Filipino accent has been influenced by Spanish. As a result, there are some problematic sounds that listeners may find challenging.

Therefore, it may be concluded that gaining more language knowledge in areas such as pronunciation and accent, grammar, and vocabulary could help both parties to communicate effectively. Furthermore, both Thai and Filipino teachers should have good English oral communication skills and have sufficient knowledge in the school-related topics that they are normally talking about. Moreover, two-way communication is required for being an effective communicator. Both Thai and Filipino teachers should pay attention to the speaker as well as repeat what they heard to make sure the understanding and ask the question to clarify their understanding. While communicating, both groups should reduce the speaking speed and make sure their voice and tone are polite enough and not too loud or soft. Additionally, avoiding barriers such as finding an appropriate place, learning one another's mindsets, and being aware of emotional expression, cultural diversity, and gender differences might be useful for making communication run more smoothly.

With regard to strategies for more effective communication, using body language could help make communication clearer. Sometimes, verbal communication cannot be the only source of communication because most communication is nonverbal (ericberne.com, 2016). When facing communication problems between cultures, Thai and Filipino teachers tried to find appropriate ways to deal with those problems and make their communication more successful. Using nonverbal communication could help express what the speaker is trying to tell, and doing so is recommended. However, since both Thai and Filipino teachers are from different cultures, sometimes nonverbal cues that were used did not have similar meanings. Therefore, it is very important to understand the meaning of nonverbal cues of each culture. Additionally, learning more about different communication style, attitudes, approaches, perspectives, and decision-making style could also help improving communication between different cultures.

Finally, for cultural awareness, it can be concluded that having cultural awareness would help reduce communication problems. Therefore, Thai and Filipino teachers should learn more about one another's culture, so that might improve communication effectiveness. However, understanding one's own culture deeply might also be another key of building successful communication.

5. Recommendations for further research

On the subject of further research, the researcher would suggest that more Filipino participants should be included due to the Filipino teachers in this study is less than the Thai teachers. Moreover, doing research in English reading and writing skills would be beneficial for further research. Additionally, selecting other Thai educational institutes with different nationalities of participants would also be interesting.

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APPENDICES

Research Questionnaire
English Communication between Thai and Filipino Teachers
in Thai International Schools

The purpose of this survey questionnaire is to investigate English communication problems and strategies between Thai and Filipino teachers in Thai international schools. The information that you provide will be used just for the purposes of this study and will not be provided for anyone else.

Please complete this survey questionnaire regarding your English communication problems and the strategies used to prevent miscommunication. Your kindness in completing the survey questionnaire is highly appreciated.

Should you have any further information according to the questionnaire or this study, please contact me at 085-099-7902. Thank you for your kind cooperation.

Sincerely yours,
 SomjaiMantarat

Directions: Please ✓ mark the space in front of your answer.

I. Personal Information

1. Nationality
 Thai Filipino
2. Gender
 Male Female
3. Age
 Less than 25 years old
 25-30 years old
 31-35 years old
 More than 35 years old
4. Working Experience
 Less than 1 year
 1-5 years
 More than 5 years

II. Communication Problems

Directions: Please ✓ mark in the box which best represents your experience about each statement.

Issues	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Communication Problems.				
1.1 I do not understand different foreign accents very well.				
1.2 My English is not always understandable to others.				
1.3 Sometimes my colleagues do not understand my accent when I speak English.				
1.4 My English grammar is not very good.				
1.5 I have to think in my native language first, and then translate it into English.				
1.6 I cannot choose the appropriate English words to communicate with others.				
1.7 I cannot find the English words to support my ideas or comments.				
2. Personal Strategies.				
2.1 I use body language during the communication.				
2.2 I use the same communication style with all persons.				

Issues	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2.3 I stop, slow down, or think of what went wrong and the cause of misinterpretation when communication seems to have gone badly.				
2.4 I try to control my gestures and word use when I communicate with others.				
2.5 I carefully listen to others and pay less attention to their emotional attitude.				
2.6 I repeat what I heard to make sure I understand it correctly.				
2.7 I can use simple English words to explain difficult content.				
3. Cultural Factors.				
3.1 I am aware of cultural differences during communication.				
3.2 I am familiar with foreign use slang and idioms.				
3.3 I do not make generalizations about an individual based on his/her nationality.				
3.4 I learn about another culture for improving successful communication.				
3.5 I understand that a person who is from a different culture has different points of view and background.				

Issues	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3.6 Whenever there is a communication breakdown, I am patient and I forgive because I understand that there are cultural differences.				