

## English Communication Problems between Passengers and

### Flight Attendants: A review

### ปัญหาด้านการสื่อสารเป็นภาษาอังกฤษระหว่างผู้โดยสาร

### และพนักงานต้อนรับบนเครื่องบิน: ทบทวนวรรณกรรม

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#### **บทคัดย่อ**

ในประเทศไทยอาชีพพนักงานต้อนรับบนเครื่องบินเป็นอาชีพที่ถูกต้องว่ามีทักษะการสื่อสารเป็นภาษาอังกฤษที่ดี ซึ่งเป็นเรื่องที่น่าอัศจรรย์ใจสำหรับคนไทยส่วนใหญ่ เนื่องจากคนไทยได้ใช้เวลาจำนวนมากถึงอย่างน้อยสิบสองปีในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษในโรงเรียนประถมศึกษาและมัธยมศึกษา รวมถึงมหาวิทยาลัย แต่ยังคงไม่สามารถเข้าใจหรือสื่อสารเป็นภาษาอังกฤษได้อย่างคล่องแคล่ว โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในทักษะการพูดและทักษะการฟัง อย่างไรก็ตาม การศึกษาที่มีมาก่อนนี้ค้นพบว่าพนักงานต้อนรับบนเครื่องบินยังคงมีปัญหาด้านการสื่อสารเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ บทความนี้เน้นหนักที่ปัญหาด้านภาษาศาสตร์ที่พนักงานต้อนรับรวมถึงพนักงานต้อนรับอาวุโสพบเจอเมื่อสื่อสารกับผู้โดยสารเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ สำเนียงและการออกเสียงเป็นส่วนสำคัญหลักในด้านความสามารถทางการฟังและการพูด การออกเสียงนั้นเป็นพื้นฐานของทักษะการฟังซึ่งนำไปสู่ทักษะการพูด หากไม่สามารถออกเสียงได้อย่างถูกต้อง ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษอาจมีปัญหาด้านทักษะทั้งสี่ (การพูด การฟัง การอ่านและการเขียน) อย่างไรก็ตาม สามารถพูดได้ว่า การออกเสียงได้ถูกมองข้ามไปในการศึกษาไทย

**คำสำคัญ:** พนักงานต้อนรับบนเครื่องบิน ภาษาอังกฤษ การสื่อสาร การออกเสียง

#### **Abstract**

In Thailand, flight attendants are considered good at English communicative skills, which is an amazing thing to most Thais. This is because, after spending at least 12 years learning English in primary and secondary schools and universities, they still cannot understand or communicate in English fluently, especially with listening and speaking skills. However, previous studies found that flight attendants did

have English communication problems. The paper focuses on linguistics-related problems that Thai flight attendants, including senior flight attendants, encountered while communicating with passengers in English. Accents and pronunciation play some of the major parts in terms of listening and speaking proficiencies. Pronunciation is the basics of listening skill which leads to speaking skill. Failing to pronounce correctly, the English learners could have problems with all four English skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Nonetheless, it could be said that pronunciation has been overlooked in Thai education.

**Keywords:** flight attendant, cabin crew, English, communication, pronunciation

## 1. Introduction

Flight attendant is believed to be a fancy career for applicants who are good at English as most Thai people cannot communicate with foreigners in English. The examination to get into the position is highly competitive and high scores of TOEIC are required. However, the English communication problems still do exist.

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks

### 2.1 English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

According to Rahman (2015), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been identified as a distinct part of English Language Teaching (ELT) since 1960s. It is different from General English (GE), as it focuses on learners and their needs. Most of the time, ESP learners are adults who want to use English for their professional-related needs. They have their specific goal. ESP is a goal-oriented English teaching and learning approach, and its courses are designed according to the learners' academic and professional requirements. As a result, ESP contents, teaching and learning methods and environment are different from GE. Moreover, Needs Analysis is used to find out the language needs of ESP learners. It is literally the heart of ESP. There are quite a number of ESP needs analysis models, but the one that is the most common is Munby's.

Dibakanaka and Hiranburana (2012) proposed that Munby suggests that syllabi and materials of ESP courses come up after prior Needs Analysis of ESP learners. There are three characteristics of ESP. First, ESP is created to meet learners' specific needs. Second, ESP contents are about the "...particular

disciplines, occupations and activities it serves”. Third, ESP puts an emphasis on linguistic descriptions which are grammar, lexis and register. Other than the descriptions, ESP also focuses on skills, discourse and genres analysis which are related to the activities. ESP learners can be divided into 3 groups, namely; beginners, intermediate and advanced. In addition, the learners could be adults who are in professional situation. In other words, ESP approach is based on “the learners’ reasons of learning”. The ESP courses are designed to equip the learners with certain English proficiency that can be used by the learners in situations. Not only ESP teachers must know the natures of learners and their needs (especially their professional needs), but also the teachers must understand other requirements of the situations such as job descriptions or study situations. In this study, specific needs of flight attendants will be looked at.

## 2.2 Needs Analysis

Rahman (2015) also proposes that Needs Analysis is “the process of establishing “what” and “how” of a course”. Needs Analysis is also a fundamental part in course designing. It is the necessary first step of developing a language course, and prior to other steps (syllabus design, selecting materials, teaching and learning methodology and evaluation). It should be repeated in order to be a formative process and an informative database. Needs Analysis should be conducted with various sources, such as learners, people working in the field, or ex-students etc. The main instruments of Needs Analysis include questionnaire, structured interview, observations, analysis of authentic spoken and written texts, discussions and assessments. Needs Analysis mainly consists of three components, which are Target Situation Analysis (TSA), Learning Situation Analysis (LSA), and Present Situation Analysis (PSA) Dibakanaka and Hiranburana (2012) clarified more about the above components. TSA is what learners are expected to know after attending the course. PSA is what learners already know before taking the course. (LSA is what the learners want to learn in this course–Rahman (2015)).

## 3. Previous studies

This part consists of three parts, namely; English teaching in Thailand, English communication problems of flight attendants and chief flight attendants, and pronunciation problems.

### 3.1 English teaching in Thailand

Noom-ura (2013) suggested that Thailand's English education is a failure. After studying English for 12 years in junior and high school, Thai students still ranked far behind other ASEAN countries in Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). In 2010, the Test showed that Thailand ranked only 116<sup>th</sup> out of 163 countries. In fact, Thailand was even the world's second-lowest rank in 2012 Education First English Proficiency Index, and was also considered 'very low proficiency'. There are four causes of the failure: incompetent teachers, students are not well-inspired, students with various proficiency in large classes, and students rarely have opportunity to use English outside classroom.

### 3.2 English communication problems of flight attendants

#### 3.2.1 Flight attendants

Permtanjit (2003) stated three kinds of problems regarding English communication of flight attendants. They are problems concerning language functions (situational English), problems concerning English usage, and areas of language difficulties encountered by flight attendants.

##### A) Problems concerning language functions (situational English)

There are five items in this kind of problems, namely;

##### 1. Boarding, welcoming passengers and farewells

This function was considered as *rarely* a problem by the respondents. There are five items in this function. The item that the respondents worried about the most was "Taking care of passengers who are assigned to the same seat number".

##### 2. Safety checks before taking off and landing

This function was also considered *rarely* a problem by the respondents. There are six items in this function. The item that the respondents worried about the most was "Asking passengers to turn off any electronic devices that might interfere with the navigation system of the aircraft"

##### 3. In-flight services (Drink and Meal services)

Both drink and meal services were considered *rarely* a problem. There are five items in drink service function, and the item that the respondents worried about the most was "Dealing with passengers who request many drinks at a time". Regarding meal service function, there are six items in this function and "Responding to passengers who request meals which are not available on board", and "Asking passengers to accept another kind of meal when one kind of meal is not available" were considered the items that the respondents worried the most.

#### 4. Form distribution

This function was considered *rarely* a problem by the respondents. There are three items in this function. The item that the respondents worried about the most was “Explaining customs, immigration, and quarantine regulations to passengers”

#### 5. Unanticipated and emergency situations

This function was considered a *moderate* problem by the respondents. There are eight items in this function. The items that the respondents worried about the most were “Dealing with passengers’ complaints” and “Dealing with passengers who consume too much alcohol”

(Interestingly, Chenaksara (2005) did a research on levels of English proficiency regarding listening and speaking skills of flight attendants and found that the respondents thought that their listening– skill level of proficiency was *good*, while the speaking– skill level of proficiency was *fair*. Chenaksara (2005) also found non routine–related conversational topics that the flight attendants thought that their listening and speaking skills concerning those topics were *fair*. The 11 topics were out of total 14 non routine–related topics. There are only 3 topics that the respondents thought that their levels of listening and speaking skills regarding these topics were *good*. The 11 topics included hotel information, tourist information, ingredients of food, up to date information such as news, capability to solve the problem, seat facility, seat arrangement, flight schedule information, connecting flight information, immigration information, immigration formality and customs formality.)

#### B) Problems concerning English usage

Permtanjit (2003) proposed that there are three kinds of problems, including;

##### 1. Problems regarding the vocabulary use

This kind of problems was considered *rarely* a problem by the respondents. The item that they thought was the most serious was “...technical terms concerning food”. Other items in this category were “...technical terms regarding airline–service language”, “technical terms concerning beverages”, and “...incorrect or inappropriate expressions or words”. The respondents had the most trouble when they had to explain a range of foods and their cooking processes.

##### 2. Problems regarding language structure

This kind of problems was considered *rarely* a problem by the respondents. The items that they thought were the most serious were “use incorrect tenses”, and “use incorrect sentence

patterns”. Other items in this category were “use pronouns improperly”, and “use prepositions of place and position incorrectly”.

### 3. Problems concerning pronunciation

There were four items in this category. Two of them were considered *moderate* problems by the respondents. They were “Unfamiliar with passengers’ accents”, and “Speak with incorrect stress or intonation”. The other two were “pronounce specific consonants incorrectly”, and “Pronounce specific vowels—*a, e, i, o*, and *u* incorrectly”

#### C) Areas of language difficulty that flight attendants came across

Permtanjit (2003) revealed that there are also seven main areas of language difficulty, including;

1. Flight attendants had to communicate with passengers with unfamiliar accents. The most difficult accents to the respondents included the accent of people from Australia, Singapore, India, Bangladesh, and Japan

2. Flight attendants had to communicate with passengers whose English proficiency was very low, and passengers who cannot speak English at all. The flight attendants and the passengers could not communicate properly because the flight attendants could not speak the passengers’ native language and the passengers did not understand English.

3. Flight attendants could not speak appropriately and politely. This could make passengers get angry.

4. Flight attendants could not answer passengers’ questions correctly when asked about information that the flight attendants had not studied in the basic training course before. The information included ticketing, connecting flights, VAT refunds and ground services.

5. Flight attendants had to use technical terms and vocabulary on food (including ingredients, cooking terms, and cooking processes), diseases (including symptoms and medicines), drinks (liquor and mixtures), and politics.

6. Flight attendants did not know how to pronounce words correctly. Due to their strange accents, the passengers and their colleagues did not understand them. Moreover, they sometimes spoke too fast.

7. Flight attendants had a limited vocabulary bank. They always used the same words when they spoke to passengers and they thought they needed to know a variety of words and phrases. This was especially true when they could not think of words to use.

Chenaksara (2005) noted that there were accents that were considered difficult to understand to the flight attendants who were the respondents. Those were Australian and Indian accents. They were rated a *moderate* problem. Other four accents were rated *fairly* problem, namely; American, British, European, and Asian.

Nunta (2008) did a research on public announcement of Thai Airways Executive Class Flight Attendants, and revealed that their accent and pronunciation is the major area of difficulty. In addition, Nunta also said that pronunciation was the area that was most to change. This is because they had developed their style of pronunciation for years and they were not aware of the problems. Other than flight attendants' accent and pronunciation, there are seven areas of difficulties that were also observed, including;

1. Non-Shared sounds

Some sounds in English language do not exist in Thai language such as 'th' sound in 'three'. Thai flight attendants may confuse and pronounced as 'tree'. /l/ and /r/ are also mixed up and some flight attendants could differentiate the sounds.

2. Vowel, initial and final sounds

Flight attendants made mistakes in consonant level. For example, they tended to mix up /v/ and /w/. They pronounced 'life vest' and /v/ was unclear. It sounded like 'life west'. They also said the words ending in letter 'l' with 'n' sound, such as the word 'central'. Also, they tended to drop /s/ in plural words. The reason for this was that they do not pronounce final sounds when they speak Thai language. They then pronounced 'seatbell' instead of 'seat belt', and 'upride' instead of 'upright'.

3. Cluster sounds

A consonant cluster comes up when two or more sounds are pronounced together. Each sound in each cluster should be pronounced. Flight attendants were inclined to skip the cluster sounds, such as 'travel', 'declaration', or 'pressure'. In the word 'spell', the consonant cluster /sp/ should be pronounced, while the consonant cluster /st/ in the word 'must' should also be pronounced.

4. Word stress

This is weakest area of the respondents. They pronounced unstressed words incorrectly. In Thai language learning, students were taught to stress on all syllables. So they did not obscure unstressed syllables when they pronounce English words. Moreover, they made mistakes on stress placements such as the words “passengers”, “continuing”, “electronic”, “injury”, “allowance” and “automatically”.

#### 5. Intonation

As they had never been taught intonation before, they tended to do the public announcements monotonously. There were two kinds of mistakes. The first was when the voice stayed level when it should rise or fall. The second was when the voice rose when it should fall.

#### 6. Pausing and Speed

Most respondents, or 81% , did not have this problem. However, they tended to read much faster when they were working.

#### 7. Rhythm and Linkage

38% of the respondents had rhythm and linking. English is a stress-timed language, while Thai is a syllable-timed language. The English nature of word stress and sentence stress, which create rhythm, means that the vowels and syllables are reduced when pronounced. This is to harmonize the rhythm of with the sentence.

Permtanjit (2003) also stated that speaking and listening skills were the most important language skills for flight attendants and pronunciation and using polite language were also crucial for in-flight service. The reasons for the difficulty areas are that English was not the flight attendants' native language, their English was influenced by Thai language, and the limited flight time. They had to work quickly so they did not have time to monitor the pronunciation.

Cornwall and Srilapung (2013) did a research on senior flight attendants' English Communication Needs. They pointed out that 30% of the experienced flight attendants had problems with eight areas of language. The eight areas were grammar, terminology, pronunciation, stress, intonation, expressing sympathy for passenger discomfort, handling unanticipated and emergency situations, and familiarization with accents and cultural differences. 41% of them mentioned “appropriate responses to avoid controversial topics regarding politics, religions, war, and social issues” as the most frequent area of difficulty. It was followed by “suitable techniques for handling unanticipated and emergency



situations”. In addition, for the age group of 21–30, most of them deemed “appropriate responses to avoid controversial topics regarding politics, religions, war, and social issues” as *difficult*. It was followed by “expressing appropriate sympathy for passenger discomfort and family emergency”. In fact, apart from “appropriate responses to avoid controversial topics regarding politics, religions, war, and social issues”, the age group of 31–40 thought that “idioms and collocations” and “familiarization with various accents” were their concern. For the age 41–50, “idioms and collocations” was the most frequent mentioned as *difficult*. Most of the group thought that “suitable techniques for handling unanticipated and emergency situations” was *difficult*. They concluded that the respondents had problems with English language usage regarding non-routine work.

Permtanjit (2003) suggested ten language skills and structural knowledge that are important for flight attendants and they ranked the skills according to frequency, namely;

1. Speaking and listening
2. Pronunciation
3. Using polite and appropriate language
4. Problem-solving skills
5. Using correct and appropriate grammar
6. Writing

This is because sometimes passengers asked flight attendants to write down some information.

7. Everyday language and conversation

This included social English and everyday conversation.

8. Reading

Sometimes passengers asked flight attendants about entry documents, or texts and magazines that they did not understand.

9. Communicative skills

10. Being able to use various sentence patterns and words

The structural English knowledge and job-related knowledge that Permtanjit (2003) suggested were divided into three groups, which were vocabulary knowledge, cultural differences, and cross

cultural communication. The respondents thought that job-related vocabulary (technical terms) was essential.

### 3.2.2 Chief flight attendants

Dibakanaka and Hiranburana (2012) conducted a research on English language needs of chief flight attendants (CFA) and found that CFA still encountered similar situational English problems as well as the above previous studies. They found that CFA would like to attend English language training that consisted of 5 main competencies that the flight attendants thought they still lacked of. The competencies consisted of “... 1) Explain bulletins, service and safety manuals, work-related and company documents and follow the company’s policy 2) Conduct fluent and appropriate conversation with passengers and foreign staff 3) Respond to enquiries and give information about airline products, services and special promotions 4) Make decisions and solve dynamic problems, including handle passengers’ health problems, handle passengers’ complaints, deal with difficult/unruly passengers, handle unanticipated technical and emergency situations 5) Familiarize with cultural differences and cross cultural communication...”. When CFAs were asked which competencies that they were worried the most, “Dealing with difficult/unruly passengers” was rated highest, and closely followed by “Handling unanticipated and emergency situations” and “Handling passengers’ health problems”, while “Familiarize with cultural differences and cross cultural” was rated the lowest.

Regarding the above problems with situational English, Rajprasit, Pratoomrat and Wang (2015) conducted a research on Perceptions and Problems of English Language and Communication Abilities, with a case study of Thai Engineering Undergraduates and suggested that English training courses should integrate “...the realistic communicative situations...” into the courses.

### 3.3 Pronunciation problems

Khaghaninejad (2015) pointed that pronunciation teaching has been neglected in traditional English teaching in Thailand. However, his study suggested that listening and pronunciation teaching contribute to each other. In fact, pronunciation is very important in English language teaching. Regarding the teaching of pronunciation, Khamkhien (2010) conducted a research on Thai learners’ English pronunciation competence: Lesson learned from word stress assignment. He proposed that students

who could not pronounce English words correctly might have difficulties when conducting four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). He encouraged teachers to ask students to use recorders to record their lessons at home.

In addition, Wei and Zhou (2000) proposed more details on English pronunciation problems. They conducted a research on Insights into English Pronunciation Problems of Thai students and revealed that there are three kinds of Thai students' pronunciation problems, namely;

#### A. Consonants and vowels

1. In Thai language, all consonants in final position are unvoiced, while in English the sounds should be voiced. For example, the word “picnic” is pronounced by Thai students without the last sound which is /k/. Also, they always omit the /s/ sound at the end of words such as “deeds”.
2. Consonant clusters  
Thai students are not used to pronounced consonant clusters (which are a pair or a group of consonants). For example, /sp/ in the word “spade”.
3. Words with the sound /ei/ are pronounced as /e/.  
For instance, in the word “tail”
4. Words with /r/ are pronounced as /l/  
For example, in the word “Jerry”
5. Words with// or // are pronounced as /s/ or /Z/  
For example, in the word “thin”
6. Words with /v/ are pronounced as /f/  
For example, in the word “Steve”
7. Words with /z/ are pronounced as /s/ or voiceless)  
For example, in the word “buss”
8. Words with / ʒ/ are pronounced as /s/  
For example, in the word “television”

#### B. Intonation

Intonation is a part of English language. However, there is no intonation in Thai language. In English, intonation in English is used to make a difference between statements and questions. However, Thai

students are not used to intonation. Actually, rising intonation is for Yes/No questions, while falling intonation is for Wh-questions. However, Thai students use rising intonation for all questions.

#### C. Stress patterns

Thai students are likely to put stress on the last syllable, which is incorrect. For example, the word “pretty” is supposed to be stressed on the first syllable, but Thai students put a stress on the last.

#### 4. Conclusion

In Thailand, flight attendant is a respectful career and it is considered a career with high proficiency in English. Nonetheless, there are still problems when they communicate with passengers in English. They have been learning English since they were young and spent a lot of time studying English for more than twelve years. In addition, they also attended training courses provided by their airline employer. This could be the implications of Thailand’s English teaching loopholes.

The problems that the flight attendants encountered included problems concerning language functions or situational English, problems concerning English usage, and other seven areas of language difficulties. Accents and pronunciation were considered essential problems. Pronunciation was considered the hardest part to change (Nunta, 2008). Linguistically speaking, there were also other seven linguistic points relating to the problems. The English communication problems were founded in senior flight attendants as well as younger ones. In fact, speaking and listening skills were considered the most important skills for the career. Pronunciation was mentioned as a problem in most previous studies that were referred to in this paper. In fact, pronunciation has been neglected in general English teaching in Thailand, although it is a basic step for listening and speaking skills. There are three kinds of problems in terms of pronunciation. They are consonants and vowels, intonation, and stress patterns. The study on the English communicative problems should be further investigated in terms of the importance of pronunciation teaching for flight attendants.

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