

A Survey of Customs Officers' Problems in Using English

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Abstract—The purpose of this study was to investigate problems and needs in using English at work. The participants of the study included 20 customs officers at Sungai Kolok Customs House in Narathiwat province. The instruments for data collection were questionnaire and personal interview. Data obtained were analyzed to get mean and standard deviation. It was found that the customs officer encountered problems in all four skills of English. They indicated that they needed effective training to improve their skills in using English.

Keywords—English using problems; Customs officer

I. INTRODUCTION

English is widely accepted as an important language in international communication (Crystal, 1997). People all over the world use it for different purposes: to access advanced technology, to facilitate their business, and to better their career opportunities. People whose first language is not English use it in their cross-cultural conversation. To use English successfully in such international interaction, an individual's English ability needs to be at least at a comprehensible level. However, a great deal of research (Chalardsit, 2007; Phanphruk & Mahaphunthong, 2007; and Sursattayawong, 2006) reveals that non-native speakers of English encounter difficulties when they have to use English.

For example, in her study about English using problems occurred at workplaces, Chalardsit (2007) found that the participants who were 192 Thai engineers working in car industry had problems in their English use. The information gained from the questionnaire was analyzed to get percentage, mean, standard deviation, t-test, and f-test. It was found that the opportunity to use English in the workplaces of the engineers was at a moderate level. Reading was the most frequent skill they used. Nevertheless, they faced problems when they had to listen, speak, and write English. Their problems were unfamiliarity with a speaker's pronunciation and a lack of vocabulary knowledge. They commented that they needed training on English for a workplace and further English study for their better English use.

Similarly, Sursattayawong (2006)'s study which surveyed problems in English speaking of some nurses at Ratchavithae Hospital showed the same results. The participants were twenty nurses working at the above-mentioned hospital. Questionnaire and personal interview were employed in data collection. The analysis of data revealed that this group of nurses had difficulties in speaking English. The obtained information also showed that their problems were rated at a moderate level because they had chances to use English 10-19

times a month when they spoke with their foreign patients. The problems they had were incorrect grammatical knowledge, inconfidence, lack of vocabulary knowledge, and incorrect pronunciation. They suggested that to overcome these problems, a training course on English speaking about health issues and other areas concerning with their career be conducted.

Another study on problems in using English was done by Phanphruk and Mahaphunthong (2007). The research focused on studying the competence, the problems, and needs of English use of postgraduate students from King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok. The participants were 224 students in Master's degree level and another fifteen students from Doctoral degree level. To collect data, questionnaire and standard test of English proficiency were employed. The data analysis showed that all of the students gained lower-than-standard score. A deep look into the students' information revealed that the main causes of their low scores were unfamiliarity with English use and limited vocabulary knowledge.

The above research studies confirm that problems in using English are still important matters that need effective solutions. Many people from various career fields faced problems when using English at their workplace although English has been their compulsory course since they were very young. This is the reason why the present study focused on investigating problems in using English at a workplace. Customs officers were chosen to be the participants because this group of people needs good command of English for their effective international communication. The present study, therefore, was conducted to investigate whether these customs officers encountered problems at their workplace.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of the study were twenty customs officers (18 males and 2 females) working at Sungai Kolok Customs House in Narathiwat province. Their age range was from 33 to 54 years old. Nineteen customs officers held a bachelor's degree. Only one had a high vocational certificate as the highest education level. Eleven officers had 2-5 year work experience. Five of them worked at the customs house shorter than one year. Three officers worked more than 10 years, and only one had 6-10 year experience in work.

B. Instruments

A questionnaire in a Thai language was used to collect data. It consisted of three parts. The first part aimed to obtain the participants' background information. The second part inquired about the frequency of the participants' English using at their workplace. The last part asked about the problems the participants had when they had to listen, speak, read, and write English. In addition, personal interview was conducted with all twenty customs officers to gain in-depth information about the participants' problems and needs in English use.

C. Procedure

Each participant was given a questionnaire. Once the questionnaire was completed, the participants were interviewed. Each participant's answers were recorded by a tape recorder for further interpretation. The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed to get mean and standard deviation. Moreover, the data from the interview were qualitatively analyzed.

In reporting problems and frequency in using English, SILL developed by Oxford (1990) was adopted to provide the basic framework in order to understand the mean scores which has a scale range of 1-5.

Interpretation data of frequency in English use

High	Always use	4.5 to 5.0
	Usually use	3.5 to 4.4
Medium	Sometimes use	2.5 to 3.4
	Generally not use	1.5 to 2.4
Low	Never or almost never use	1.0 to 1.4

Interpretation data of the problems in using English

Low	Always have problems	1.0 to 1.4
	Usually have problems	1.5 to 2.4
Medium	Sometimes have problems	2.5 to 3.4
	Seldom have problems	3.5 to 4.4
High	Never have problems	4.5 to 5.0

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings

The Frequency of English Use at the Workplace of Customs Officers

The information elicited was calculated and interpreted as follows:

TABLE I. FREQUENCY OF THE CUSTOMS OFFICERS' USE OF ENGLISH AT WORKPLACE

English Skill	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
Listening	3.05	0.69	Medium
Speaking	3	0.79	Medium
Reading	3.1	0.85	Medium
Writing	3	0.86	Medium
Total	3.04	0.08	Medium

Table I shows that the customs officers sometimes used English when they worked. All four skills of English were used at the same frequency rate which is at a medium level.

Customs Officers' Problems in Using English

The data in part 3 of the questionnaires were categorized and interpreted as displayed in Table II.

TABLE II. MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS INDICATING PARTICIPANTS' PROBLEMS

Problems	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
Listening	3.11	0.05	Medium
Speaking	3.21	0.11	Medium
Reading	3.00	0.07	Medium
Writing	3.14	0.06	Medium
Total	3.12	0.07	Medium

As shown in Table II, the descriptive statistics for overall problems ($\bar{x}=3.12$, S.D.=0.07) indicate that the participants' problems are at a moderate level. It can be interpreted that they sometimes had problems with listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

B. Discussion

Overall, the results from the study revealed that at the workplace, the customs officers had a moderate chance to use English. Furthermore, the data showed that they sometimes had difficulties in using English. It was also noticeable that there was no significant difference among the four skills of English.

Regarding to listening, the causes for their lack of great success were unfamiliarity with foreigners' accents and long message produced by those foreigners ($\bar{x}=3.6$ and $\bar{x}=3.45$), respectively. For speaking skill, their lack of vocabulary knowledge and limited exposure to real English use were the main causes ($\bar{x}=3.5$ and $\bar{x}=3.4$). Reading problems which seemed to be the least frequently occurring were caused by their limited grammar and vocabulary knowledge ($\bar{x}=3.3$ and $\bar{x}=3.15$). However, they could overcome these difficulties by using a dictionary. In a similar way, their lack of English words and incompetence in grammar use ($\bar{x}=3.65$ and $\bar{x}=3.4$) also led to problems in their writing.

The results from the present study were in accordance with the results from other research studies focusing on the same areas (Chalardsit, 2007; Phanphruk & Mahaphunthong, 2007; and Suesattayawong, 2007) which displayed that the subjects' difficulties in using English at the workplace were at the moderate level. Moreover, it also revealed that those subjects' problems were caused by a lack of knowledge about vocabulary, grammar and limited exposure to English in a daily life.

The qualitative analysis of the customs officers' answers from the in-depth interview reinforced the information obtained from the questionnaires. The customs officers indicated that they sometimes had a chance to use English at

the workplace because most of the foreigners contacting the customs house were Malaysian who spoke Malay. Therefore, Malay was the main language in their communication. They had no problems with using Malay because they all were able to speak the language, and sometimes they used body language to help better the understanding when they needed to use English.

Last but not least, all of the customs officers expressed that they needed an effective training on English use to improve their English ability.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated the problems and needs in using English of the customs officers. The findings showed that they sometimes had a chance to use English at their workplace, and their problems in English use were rated at a moderate level. It was also found that the opportunity and the problems in using the four skills of English were rather similar. Two major reasons for their lack of great success in English use were limited grammar and vocabulary knowledge, and limited exposure to real-life English. The findings also suggested that this group of customs officers needed a training course in order to improve their English competence.

Future research focusing to explore problems and needs in using English of other people in other career fields may be considered. Further, research aims to study the needs to

improve the English use of people in various fields may be conducted.

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