

**Essential Oral Communication Abilities for Automotive Mechanics in ASEAN
Economic Integration**

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Abstract

English oral communication in the automotive and repair workplace is particularly necessary for automotive mechanics due to the frequent usage in regular nature of work. Since the integration of ASEAN Economic Community in Thailand, the number of foreign customers has increased remarkably. Regardless of this change, automotive mechanics cannot speak English with foreign customers effectively, even after they have completed four full English courses in their vocational education. After reviewing widespread oral communication courses taught in vocational schools, we have found that they only cover grammars and basic everyday conversation, leaving out specific contents for the automotive maintenance and repair industry. Based on perspectives from 119 automotive mechanical students and five stakeholders, this survey research determined the actual needs of English oral communication for the automotive maintenance and repair industry. The researchers employed a needs analysis in ESP framework of Brown (2016) in this study. The results from the questionnaire revealed that the automotive mechanical students and stakeholders agreed that grammatical structures are least required in the linguistic aspects. Additionally, the interview reported that five out of five stakeholders have similar views that suitable uses of technical terms and relevant phrases were adequately compelled to produce meaningful messages. Contrastingly, automotive mechanical students and stakeholders clearly had contradictions on the language functions that were the most important based on the questionnaire. Regarding the sociocultural aspects, four out of five believed that cultural sensitivities were one of the keys to prevent communication breakdowns.

Keywords: ESP, Needs Analysis, English Oral Communication, Automotive Industry

Introduction

Thailand's automotive industry is continually expanding and aims to be globalized in ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The country has become the hub of ASEAN's automotive industry which produces the largest number of automotive vehicles among Southeast Asian countries and one of the world's top automotive producers. According to the free labour movement in the integration of ASEAN countries, more foreign customers are residing in Thailand, consisting of native speakers of English and citizens of non-native speaking countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, including other countries in Europe, the Middle East, and vice versa (International Labour Organization in Thailand, 2016). The communication in the work environment has changed where English has become the lingua franca in the business. The Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states in the Article 34 that, "The working language of ASEAN shall be

English.” Each AEC member will gain benefits from each other's strengths to increase its competitiveness and opportunities for business development.

Oral communication is the most required form of communication in automotive maintenance and repair shops for interacting with customers and building a good relationship in providing services. Estep (2015) states effective communication improves customer service, because it builds a higher level of satisfaction and a strong relationship. However, the biggest challenge for the automotive engineers and mechanics is the English oral communication. Hart-Rawung & Li (2008) found that Thai automotive engineers and mechanics have good knowledge about technical terms. They can communicate well in written form, but they cannot express themselves in English, because they lack grammar and phonological knowledge to have a face-to-face conversation. Even though, the English curriculum under the Ministry of Education in Thailand has been adapted over many years, Thai students still lack of English fluency in all speaking, listening, reading and writing skill. Thai students' ranking in EF English Proficiency Index 2015 is at Very Low Proficiency. It seems likely that the English curriculum has not been effective in improving students' English oral communication. Thus, this study explores the requirements of current English oral communication abilities for automotive mechanics in their automotive maintenance and repair profession to improve ESP courses for automotive mechanical students.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To investigate how English oral communication is important for the automotive maintenance and repair profession.
2. To investigate the current needs of English oral communication abilities for automotive mechanics.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer two research questions:

1. How is English oral communication important for the automotive maintenance and repair profession?
2. What are current English oral communication abilities for automotive mechanics?

Theoretical framework

The concept of needs analysis in English for Specific Purpose (ESP) was adopted to survey the importance and English oral communication and the current needs of English oral communication abilities for the automotive maintenance and repair profession. This study followed the framework of needs analysis in ESP of Brown (2016), in the three phrases: (1) pre-analysis (development of research instruments), (2) analysis (data collection and data analysis), and (3) post analysis (defining importance and needs of English oral communication abilities). This needs analysis framework of this study aims to examine students' language competencies and needs of English oral communication. The scope of needs was based on two main language areas, consisting of *linguistic aspects and language functions*.

Methodology

The framework of needs analysis in ESP of Brown (2016) was adopted as a needs analysis process in this research including three phrases: (1) pre-analysis, (2) analysis, and (3) post analysis as mentioned in the theoretical framework.

PHRASE I: PRE-ANALYSIS

Step I: Defining needs analysis in ESP. The researcher employed documentary analysis and discovered that oral communication was the biggest problem for automotive mechanics in communicating with foreign customers. The study's objectives were defined: (1) to investigate how English oral communication is important for the automotive maintenance and repair profession, (2) to investigate the current needs of English oral communication abilities for automotive mechanics. Additionally, the following terms were identified for the present research.

English oral communication refers to the ability to produce and comprehend speeches that are used for talking with others effectively in circumstances where a spoken language occurs. The process of oral communication includes speaking and listening which is developed from three important aspects: (a) linguistic aspects (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and sociocultural context: social etiquettes, cultures, non-standard English, formal and informal language), (b) functional aspects (expressions).

Needs refers to a necessity or a must which pertains to a specific group of people to achieve a certain goal and/or objective.

Automotive mechanical student refers to an occupation which performs automotive maintenance and repair jobs required in a certified automotive maintenance and repair shop in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area. Regarding the certified maintenance and repair shop, it provides automotive services, for example ordering and selling spare parts, identifying mechanical problems, examining parts and systems, performing basic care and maintenance (Truity Psychometrics LLC, 2016).

Stakeholders refers to an owner of a certified automotive maintenance and repair shop who is working and has at least five years of experience in the automotive maintenance and repair profession in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area.

Automotive maintenance and repair profession refers to an occupation which performs automotive maintenance and repair jobs required in a certified automotive maintenance and repair shop in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area. Regarding the certified maintenance and repair shop, it provides automotive services, for example ordering and selling spare parts, identifying mechanical problems, examining parts and systems, performing basic care and maintenance (Truity Psychometrics LLC, 2016).

Step II: Specifying the scope of needs analysis in ESP. Field observation was conducted with 3 automotive mechanics in 3 different services to define the scope of work for designing research instruments. The first participant group was 119 automotive mechanical students, selected by cluster sampling, who passed a training program in the vocational certificate level or higher vocational certificate in two government institutions under the Office of the Vocational Education Commission (OVEC) of the Ministry of Education (MOE) in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area. The second participant group was stakeholders, selected purposively, who were owners of certified automotive maintenance and repair shops in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area and working at their shops during the research with at least 5 years of business experience.

Step III: Selecting research instruments and defining data collection procedure. Needs Analysis Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from the automotive students and stakeholders, and the interview questions were used to collect qualitative data.

PHRASE II: ANALYSIS

Step IV: Data collection procedure. The two research instruments were designed. The Needs Analysis Questionnaires were developed based on the field observation, language theories by Bachman & Palmer (1996) and Carter & Nunan (2001), and the job

description of automotive mechanics regarding the automotive maintenance and repair job functions by Truity Psychometrics LLC (2016). It consists of three sections: background information, importance of English oral communication, and comments and suggestions. Semi-structured interview questions were developed from the Needs Analysis Questionnaires to collect high in-depth information of the needs and importance of English oral communication for the automotive maintenance and repair profession. The research instruments were used in two procedures of data collection: distribution of Needs Analysis Questionnaires and interview protocol.

Step V: Data analysis. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to analyze the quantitative data and content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

PHRASE III: POST ANALYSIS

Step VI: Defining students' English proficiency, importance of English oral communication, and perceived needs. The students' English oral communication abilities were determined, and the importance and needs of English oral communication were defined for the automotive maintenance and repair profession.

Step VII: Reporting. The researcher evaluated and reported the procedures and results.

Literature Review

Oral communication

Oral communication focuses on a spoken language. Celce-Murcia (1995 & 2007) states that oral communication is the ability to comprehend and produce speech acts based on cultural knowledge, linguistic competence, language functions, and strategic competence. In professional views, English oral communication is defined as a person's ability to use spoken English to communicate effectively and interact confidently with a range of audiences such as his or her clients, media, supervisors and colleagues (Pattanapichet, 2009). Additionally, "oral communication takes place in face-to-face conversations, group discussions, telephone calls and other circumstances in which spoken word is used to express meaning" (Griffin, 2003). In English language assessment, the area of language competence includes the following aspects of communication of Bachman (1990): organizational competence, grammatical competence, rhetorical knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, functional knowledge, sociocultural knowledge, and communicative strategies. Additionally, Globalization has made English as an International Language (EIL) a lingua franca for oral communication as stated by Tomlinson (2016). Crystal (1997) added that in EIL context, English oral communication is used by both native and non-native English speakers who do not share cultural or linguistic backgrounds which give rise to varieties in accents, dialects, and social contexts that are distinguished from standard Englishes.

In summary, the oral communication for the automotive maintenance and repair profession consists of linguistic aspects (vocabulary, grammatical structures, pronunciation, and sociocultural knowledge) and functional aspects (expressions) based on language competencies (Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia, 1995 and 2007) and English as an International Language (Tomlinson, 2016; Crystal, 1997).

Needs Analysis in English for Specific Purpose (ESP)

Needs analysis is essential for ESP instruction (Patiyasevi, 2013). It accurately guides teachers to what specific language to teach students in order to succeed in their courses (John, 1991). As "English for Specific Purpose (ESP) is the role of English in a

language course or programme of instruction in which the content and aims of the course are shaped by the specific needs of a particular group of learners” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010), needs must be defined in prior as objectives and contents for an ESP course. Brown (2016) stated that ESP is derived from the specific needs of particular students. Thus, ESP can be served as a learner-centered approach to fulfill the specific needs of the target learners to satisfy either their professional or vocational demands (Ramirez, 2015) effectively in language instruction.

Findings

Research Question 1: How is English oral communication important for the automotive maintenance and repair profession?

Both automotive mechanical students and stakeholders responded with their views on importance of English oral communication for the automotive maintenance and repair profession in the comments and suggestions section and interview protocol. They agreed that English was required to communicate with foreign customers, understand customers’ desire, enhance service satisfaction, and expand business as following statements:

- ‘I need to use English to talk with international customers.’ (Student 1)*
- ‘If I can communicate with foreign customers effectively, I will really understand what they clearly want from our services.’ (Student 2)*
- ‘If we can speak English with foreign customers, they will trust us to provide services to them. Besides maintaining their bikes, we can even make more sales too.’ (Stakeholder 1)*
- ‘Automotive mechanics must understand what customers want in order to provide the right services which can increase customers’ satisfaction.’ (Stakeholder 2)*
- ‘I want to use English to develop and expand my own automotive business.’ (Student 3)*
- Stakeholder 3 added: ‘We can communicate with international suppliers like China to order cheaper spare parts as options for our customers.’ (Stakeholder 3)*

Research Question 2: What are current English oral communication abilities for automotive mechanics?

Based on the Needs Analysis Questionnaires of automotive mechanical students and stakeholders, the mean and standard derivation were reported for each English oral communication abilities in Table 1.

Table 1
Needs of English Oral Communication

English oral communication needs	Students	Stakeholders
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Linguistic aspects		
1. Technical terms used in automotive maintenance and repair utterances	3.01 (0.65)	4.00 (0.00)
6. Social etiquettes	3.01 (0.65)	4.00 (0.00)
7. Formal and informal languages in a conversation	3.01 (0.65)	2.80 (0.84)
2. General terms used in automotive maintenance and repair utterances	2.97 (0.68)	3.40 (0.55)
3. Pronunciation	2.97 (0.68)	2.60 (0.55)

English oral communication needs	Students	Stakeholders
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
8. Intercultural communication	2.97 (0.68)	3.60 (0.55)
9. Knowledge of cultural differences and sensitivity towards cultures that may interfere with intercultural communication	2.91 (0.69)	3.80 (0.45)
4. Grammatical structures	2.70 (0.80)	2.40 (0.55)
Language functions		
1. Introducing yourself or someone	3.01 (0.65)	3.40 (0.55)
2. Discussing	3.01 (0.65)	3.20 (0.84)
3. Giving and following instructions	3.01 (0.65)	2.60 (1.14)
4. Making appointments	3.01 (0.65)	4.00 (0.00)
5. Giving advice and expressing opinions	2.97 (0.68)	3.60 (0.55)
6. Describing objects and pictures	2.97 (0.68)	3.80 (0.45)
7. Placing orders	2.97 (0.68)	3.00 (1.00)
8. Telecommunication	2.97 (0.68)	3.60 (0.55)
9. Asking and giving information and details	2.88 (0.64)	3.80 (0.45)
10. Giving explanations	2.86 (0.73)	3.60 (0.55)
11. Negotiating	2.83 (0.88)	3.80 (0.45)
12. Summarizing and reporting	2.77 (0.83)	4.00 (0.00)

*** The criteria for assessing Mean score are divided into four scales: 4 = Most important, 3 = Very important, 2 = Slightly important, 1= Least important

In the linguistic aspects, the English oral communication abilities which were most required based on the automotive mechanical students' opinions are "Technical terms," "Social etiquettes," and "Formal and informal languages in a conversation" with mean score of 3.01 (SD = 0.65). Referring the high SD, it shows that students had different opinions in scoring these important items. On the other hand, the students agreed that "Grammatical structures" was least wanted in this section with a mean score of 2.70 (SD = 0.80). Based on responses of the stakeholders, "Technical terms" and "Social etiquettes" received highest mean score of 4.00 (SD = 0.00) which presents that these English oral communications abilities were the most important. Due to the zero SD, it means that all of the stakeholders agreed that these English oral communication abilities were the most important. Additionally, the stakeholders also agreed that "Grammatical structures" was least wanted in this section with a mean score of 2.40 (SD = 0.55). In the language functions, the items that were the most important (\bar{x} = 3.01, SD = 0.65) in the automotive mechanical students' opinions are "Introducing yourself or someone," "Discussing," "Giving and following instructions," and "Making appointments." In contrast, "Summarizing and reporting" was viewed as the least important language function with the mean score of 2.77 (SD = 0.83). In reference to the stakeholders' response, the most important language functions were "Making appointments" and "Summarizing and reporting" which received the mean score of 4.00 (SD = 0.00). Reversely, "Giving and following instructions" received the lowest mean score (\bar{x} = 2.06, SD = 1.14) from the stakeholders' opinions which means that it was slightly important.

Table 2
Needs of English Oral Communication Ranking

Top-3 ranking of needs of English oral communication abilities	
Based on the automotive mechanical students	Based on the stakeholders
Linguistic aspects	
1. Technical terms used in automotive maintenance and repair utterances	1. Technical terms used in automotive maintenance and repair utterances
1. Social etiquettes	1. Social etiquettes
1. Formal and informal languages in a conversation	
2. Pronunciation	2. Knowledge of cultural differences and sensitivity towards cultures that may interfere with intercultural communication
2. General terms used in automotive maintenance and repair utterances	
2. Intercultural communication	
3. Knowledge of cultural differences and sensitivity towards cultures that may interfere with intercultural communication	3. Intercultural communication
Language functions	
1. Introducing yourself or someone	1. Making appointments
1. Discussing	1. Summarizing and reporting
1. Giving and following instructions	
1. Making appointments	
2. Giving advice and expressing opinions	2. Describing objects and pictures
2. Describing objects and pictures	2. Asking and giving information and details
2. Placing orders	2. Negotiating
2. Telecommunication	
3. Asking and giving information and details	3. Giving advice and expressing opinions
	3. Telecommunication
	3. Giving explanations

To have a clear understanding of the level of needs of English oral communication for the automotive maintenance and repair profession, the top English oral communication abilities were ranked based on the mean scores in top-3 ranking as shown in Table 2 as the English oral communication abilities that are required for the automotive maintenance and repair industry. The items with highest mean scores are in rank number one and the items with lower mean scores are in lower rankings.

Discussion

Requirement of Needs analysis for an ESP course

For general English curriculum of Thailand, English language teaching and learning aim two main areas regarding General English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Zhu & Liao (2008). ESP concerns learners' use of English in a specific domain (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). It focuses on specific vocabulary in particular context, for examples, academic, business, nursing, science, automotive, catering, etc.

In the automotive field, ESP is a suitable English instruction methodology for the vocational students who must use English language specifically for working. However, the English curriculum in Thailand is generalized for various career fields (OVEC, 2016). Automotive mechanical students learn the same English course as students in electrics, electronics, ship mechanics, and other mechanical fields, which are not quite appropriate for the automotive mechanical students. There is a big gap between the English curriculum and the present needs of English oral communication abilities for the automotive mechanical students. Such English curriculum is unlikely to bring the most benefit to the automotive mechanical students in their future career. Robinson (1991) supported the objective of ESP course for the vocational students that ESP is similar to an educational firm, training and practice, and drawing from three areas of knowledge: language, pedagogy, and the students' areas of specialty, which makes ESP an appropriate methodology for teaching and learning English oral communication for automotive mechanical students in the automotive maintenance and repair profession.

Less grammar focus in English oral communication

Regarding important English oral communication abilities, automotive mechanical students and stakeholders both agreed that "Grammatical structures" is least required in the linguistic aspects. The stakeholders believed that their automotive mechanics only need to use suitable verbs and phrases which are adequate in producing meaningful utterances when communicating with foreign customers. The stakeholders did not expect coherence and correct forms of grammar structures in English oral communication from their employees. This phenomenon is in relation to the finding of Cahyati, Rahmijati, & Rizkiani (2014) which reports that some students do not think that grammar is needed in their profession, because they work with companies that do not deal with English grammar. Alexander (2013) also gives an opinion that comprehensive in English can be improved if students can use many vocabulary. The view is supported by McWhorter (2012) stating grammar is not an important skill in various professions, and not every job relies on mainly on grammar.

Along these lines, grammar may not be the main language objective in the automotive maintenance and repair profession, instead the needs stresses on producing meaningful messages with basic language forms, use of phrases, verbs, and related vocabulary.

Importance of sociocultural knowledge for intercultural communication

Although, the concentration in the functional aspects outperform the sociocultural aspects, but sociocultural knowledge have distinguished roles in bringing intercultural communication which can lead to successful communication. However, English teachers only emphasize too much on grammar, and ignore the sociocultural aspects (Noom-ura, 2013).

From the findings, all sociocultural aspects, including "Social etiquettes," "Formal and informal languages in a conversation," "Intercultural communication (non-standard

English),” and “Knowledge of cultural differences and sensitivity towards cultures that may interfere with intercultural communication” are required in their profession. McKay & Bokhorst-Heng (2008) support the findings; they stated English has been developed as a global language which includes both native and non-native English speakers, we are expected to use English as an International Language (EIL) to communicate effectively in present days. Regarding the benefit of sociocultural knowledge, it can also raise power in interactions between people who have different linguistic and cultural background as it bonds individuals together (Kilpatrick, Johnson, King, Jackson & Jatrana, 2015). Mindtools’s article about cross-culture communication (2018) added that having awareness about culture basics of different countries is important for expressing appropriate greeting, body language, physical contacts to prevent communication breakdowns in global community. Fundamental differences can result in misunderstanding, thus, miscommunication (University of Tasmania, 2012).

In conclusion, these items in the sociocultural aspects should be emphasized extensively in the contents of course syllabus to develop mutual understanding between automotive mechanics and foreign customers which can prevent communication breakdowns for effective intercultural communication in the workplace, and relatively impacts on creating a good relationship and exclusive customer experience for such business.

Using CBI in designing an ESP courses

In developing an ESP course, Content-Based Instruction (CBI) can be used as a model of the course in order to close the gap between the English curriculum for the automotive mechanical students (current state) and the actual expectations (the investigated needs) from the industry. ESP is addressed as a learner-centered approach to fulfill the specific needs of the target learners to meet their professional demands (Ramirez, 2015), and relatively, CBI is a teaching approach which emphasizes on language teaching through specific contents for the target learners (Brinton, 2003), thus, the allied objectives of both teaching language teaching are agreeable for developing a course syllabus for the specific target learners. Additionally, the uses of authentic texts and tasks in delivering the contents in classroom practices in CBI model of Brinton can engage and facilitate students in authentic language areas for their future career, and it is commonly used in ESP courses (Patiyasevi, 2013) to meet students’ professional goals.

Implementation of CBI model in ESP courses gives positive impacts on students. The study of Amiri & Fatemi (2014) on the effect of CBI on students’ achievement in ESP courses revealed that the students outperformed when they were taught through CBI, compare to students who were taught by Grammar Translation Method (GTM). Curtain (1995) & Met (1991) also support such finding with benefits of CBI. They stated that CBI can master students’ language proficiency and student can achieve more when the content are related to students’ lives and meaningful to them, rather than focusing on the forms of language. As the students’ interests, professional goals, lives are selected as the main focus of the course in CBI model, the investigation on using CBI in teaching English for an ESP course in Vietnam (Ngan, 2011) proves that in implementing CBI in ESP context can improve students’ motivation and results in students’ better scores in the end of the course.

For these reasons, applying CBI in teaching and learning English is suggested as it is an effective model for ESP courses to close the gap between the current English curriculum in Thailand and the needs investigated in this research.

Limitations

Even though the needs analysis was conducted in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area, but not all automotive students had experience in using English oral communication with real foreign customers. Some automotive mechanical students were not exposed to English uses with foreign customers. Additionally, the sample size (119 automotive mechanical students and 5 stakeholders) is too small to generalize the needs of English oral communication for the automotive maintenance and repair profession in all regions in Thailand. Some areas, such the southern provinces, may have different cultural contexts and needs to be explored.

Recommendations

This study can be investigated further in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ), for example, in the southern provinces of Thailand and Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), such as Rayong province where people have particular, strong cultures and traditions, as well as an intense focus of vocational education from the Ministry of Education of Thailand in such areas, in order to investigate particular and practical contents for designing a specific English oral communication course for automotive mechanical students in such regions. Furthermore, extended investigations can be made with automotive mechanics who have strong work background and direct experience with customers in the automotive maintenance and repair profession to get a different view on the needs. Lastly, in addition to teaching and learning English in classrooms, learner autonomy practices should be analyzed for automotive mechanical students for sustainable and effective instruction in English oral communication to achieve their professional goals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided the information on the low English proficiency of the automotive mechanical students, the importance and current needs of English oral communication for the automotive maintenance and repair profession regarding enhancement of services and business expansion. The findings reveal important English oral communication abilities in the linguistic aspects and language functions for automotive mechanical students in a vocational certificate level in the vocational institutions of Thailand for the automotive maintenance and repair profession context. Some concerns stress the over intensive teaching of grammar in English courses which is not required in this industry, and the sociocultural aspects which are necessary for effective intercultural communication, yet it has been ignored by English teachers. Suggestions are made for using needs analysis in ESP in designing ESP courses for effective English instruction, and CBI is recommended as an appropriate instructional model for the automotive mechanical students. Lastly, more investigation could be conducted in Special Economic Zone and Eastern Economic Corridor in Thailand in search for different needs and unique sociocultural contexts, and with students who are exposed to English usage in their workplace. Learner autonomy for the automotive mechanical students is also recommended in further study for effective and sustainable English teaching and learning to achieve career goals.

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