

AN ENGLISH COMMUNICATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR SPA THERAPISTS IN BANGKOK, THAILAND

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In order for the Thai spa industry to attract more foreigners from different countries, this study attempts to explore the communication skills and problems of spa therapists across Bangkok to better serve the needs of foreign spa customers. Foreign spa customers have been randomly given structured questionnaires and interviewed for specific crucial data about the communication skills and problems that most spa therapists often have. With the use of the TOEIC and IELTS Score Descriptors as the benchmarks for most of the questionnaire items, it was found that the level of English of most spa therapists in Bangkok is at the medium level. Ultimately, their listening and speaking skills need considerable improvement. In addition, grammar, reading, gestures, and cross-cultural awareness, along with the spa therapists' needs regarding their English competency are necessary to be included in the communicative framework, which can be used as a guideline for developing an English for Spa curriculum. Consequently, Thai spa therapists will be able to communicate in English more effectively and better serve the needs of foreign spa customers.

Keywords: Spa therapists, Bangkok, Foreign customers, English, Communication skills.

Introduction

The hospitality industry is one of the largest industries in the world, and it also links with other related industries such as the international travel and tourism industries. Accordingly, since the year 2004, the government and other related organizations (e.g., the TAT and the Thai Hotels Association) have been giving increasing importance to the ability of Thailand to remain at the forefront of the Asian tourism industry and to become the "Tourism Capital of Asia" under the promotional theme "Happiness on Earth" (TAT, 2005).

According to Magennis (2002), the growth of the tourist industry can be attributed to these two factors. The first factor is that people with a large amount of leisure time and disposable incomes tend to spend more on time and money on travelling. Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)'s figures for the year 2000 show that the international travel and tourism business in Thailand generated foreign exchange income of more than 7 billion U.S. dollars from almost 10 million foreign tourists (TAT, 2001). The other factor is that activities related to tourism business which were previously unimportant are now getting more popular.

The health and hospitality industry, which is comprised of spa for health, health massage, and spa for beauty, is inextricably linked to the tourism industry and is currently getting much more popularity than a decade ago. Nowadays, there are more than 6,049 operators of health spa, health massage, and beauty spa combined throughout the country. The Ministry of Health of Thailand reported that the number of spa for health operators had been increasing from 548 in 2004 to 1,210 in 2008. (The Bureau of Policy and Strategy, Office of the Permanent Secretary of Ministry of Public Health, 2007, online) In 2008, it was found that health spa could generate a revenue of more than 12,000 million Baht--- a 16% increase from

that of 2007. (The Bureau of Information, Office of the Permanent Secretary of Ministry of Public Health, 2009, online) According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the number of spa businesses in the country is 791, consisting 490 day spas, 282 resort and hotel spas, 4 destination spas, and 15 medical spas, which have been being operated by both local and international investors. (Spa Operators in Thailand, 2007, online) In addition, it was found that from 2000 until 2002, Thailand's spa industry had been growing rapidly with a rate of 64%. Furthermore, it generated a revenue of more than 85 million US dollars to the country from 2001 to 2002. In fact, it is expected that the spa industry will certainly grow exponentially in the very near future.

The spa industry is one of the many which are facing communication problems between employees and foreign customers. Thai Gold Finger has conducted a study on the standard practices in Thai massage to meet the customers' needs. The practices have been regarded as "the necessary qualifications of Thai Gold Finger spa therapists", which consist of 8 different standards: 1). Thai personality and manners 2). Massage skills 3). Ethics, honesty, and punctuality 4). Patience and endurance 5). Knowledge of anatomy, physiology, histopathology, and massage 6). Health (physical health and mental health) 7). Communication and English, and 8). Standard practices of Thai Spa Finger spa therapists against all forms of unethical massage practices. (Thai Gold Finger, 2008) It is evident that the ability of spa employees to communicate in English with foreign customers is one of the standard practices in the spa industry, deemed necessary by most spa customers. Despite the continuously rapid growth of the spa industry in Thailand, the spa curriculums which are available nowadays seem not to be able to fully enhance the knowledge and skills of spa employees, particularly spa therapists to communicate in English with foreign tourists the most effectively. As a result, in order to solve this communication problem correctly and promote the quality of Thai spa personnel and spa service standards as the country is becoming the region's medical hub, as well as to get prepared and boost the economic competitiveness of the country before the full implementation of ASEAN Economic Community, it is crucial to create a new English communicative framework for spa personnel, which will lead to the development of a high-quality English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum for Thai spa staff. (Krungthep Turakij Newspaper, *Spa Health and Beauty*, 2004)

The English Communication Problems and Cultural Knowledge of Thai Tourism-Related Service Providers

In this present study, the English communication problems and cultural knowledge of Thai tourism service providers can be divided into different areas as follows:

1. The lack of the ability to interact with foreign customers using the English language in impromptu situations (Heranramdej and Chinokul, 2006)
2. The lack of good English skills to communicate foreign customers (Chivasom Academy, 2011)
3. The lack of enough the service providers' knowledge of the society and cultures of the foreign tourists (Leung and Terence, 1996; Pornpimol Senawong, 1998; Suphanee Jancamai *et al*, 2006; and Chivasom Academy, 2011)
4. Standard practices and professional curriculums for Thai tourism-related service providers (Suphanee Jancamai *et al*, 2006; Thai Gold Finger, 2008; and Chivasom Academy, 2011)

Population and Samples

The population of this present study are the spa therapists who work at the 616 spa centers in Bangkok (Department of Business Development, Ministry of Commerce, 2008). As for the samples of this study, they are the spa therapists who provide spa services to foreign tourists and work at the 32 spa centers chosen with the purposive sampling technique (Spa Directory of Bangkok: Sukhumvit, 2010).

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data collected from the sample group using the SPSS for Windows Program, and the statistical tools which were used in the data analysis are as follows:

- 1 Frequency and Percentage were used for analyzing the results from Part 1 of the questionnaire, which deals with the background information of the respondents.
- 2 Mean and Standard Deviation were used for analyzing the results from Part 2 of the questionnaire, which deals with the viewpoints of foreign spa customers towards the English communication skills and other important skills of the spa therapists working at spa centers in Bangkok.

The English Competency and Other Important Skills of Bangkok's Spa Therapists Nowadays

Due to the viewpoints of the 90 respondents (foreign spa customer who visited the 32 spa centers on Sukhumvit Road, Thailand), it was found that the characteristics of the English competency of spa therapists working in Bangkok nowadays can be described as follows:

1. 60% of the respondents responded to the item *"How would you rate the English communication skills of spa therapists working in Bangkok?"* by choosing the good level. However, overall the English language skills and other important skills of the spa therapists working in Bangkok are at the medium level, with a mean score of 3.08. (See Table 1 and Table 2)
2. Even though it is at the medium level, reading, with a mean score of 3.00, is the strongest skill of the spa therapists working in Bangkok. On the other hand, speaking is the weakest skill, with a mean score of 2.98. (See Table 1)
3. Listening has been chosen by the respondents as the top priority for the spa therapists in Bangkok, followed by speaking, grammar, reading, and gestures, respectively. Interestingly, no respondents chose cultural awareness as the top priority for the spa therapists. (See Table 2)
4. The respondents (representatives) of each continent have given different priorities to the English communication skills and other skills necessary for Bangkok's spa therapists. (See Table 3)

Discrepancies between the Findings of the Present and Past Studies

The present and past studies regarding the English communication skills of hospitality personnel have yielded contradictory results as follows:

1. According to the viewpoints of the respondents in this study, the main English communication problem of the spa therapists in Bangkok is speaking skills, particularly in situations of giving suggestions, telling directions, giving a compliment, and warning foreign customers. On the other hand, in the study by Pornpimol Senawong (1998), it was found that Thai tourism-service providers in general were poor in different skills of English, including grammar, discourse, linguistic, social competencies, and choosing appropriate communication strategies.
2. Due to the viewpoints of the respondents in this study, the English communication skills and other important skills of Bangkok's spa therapists range from medium to the good level. On the other hand, in the study conducted by Heranramdej and Chinokul (2006), most of the employees of Divana Massage and Spa, Bangkok could use only phrases and sentences which they had prepared in advance, not being able to communicate in English in impromptu situations well enough. The discrepancy could be attributed to the fact that in this present study structure questionnaires have been administered to foreign spa customers to acquire their viewpoints towards the English communication skills of Bangkok's spa therapists, whereas in the other study the spa therapists' needs to improve their English communication skills were analyzed.

3. Contradicting the present research, the study by Pornpimol Senawong (1998) showed that those Thai tourism-related service providers in general still lacked the intercultural knowledge important for communicating with foreign tourists. This discrepancy can be attributed to the characteristics and expectations of each industry.

The Components of the English Communicative Framework for Spa Therapists in Bangkok

According to results of this study, the components of the English communicative framework for spa therapists in Bangkok should include the following:

1. Listening and speaking skills (and also the specific language needs of spa therapists) should be included as the primary components of the framework.
2. Grammar, reading, gestures, and cultural awareness should be used as the secondary components of the framework.

Recommendations

Due to all the findings of this present study, the most important components of an English communicative framework for spa therapists in Bangkok are listening and speaking skills. As a result, the potential main components of an English for spa curriculum are listening and speaking skills. If an English for spa therapists curriculum is to be developed, it will be compulsory to include English listening skills and English speaking skills as the main standard in it. Also, the other skills, including grammar, reading, gestures, and cultural awareness, should be included to make the interactions of the spa therapists in Bangkok with foreign spa tourists more successful. Additionally, there should be an in-depth need analysis to find the specific language needs of spa therapists working in Bangkok, so that an English for spa therapists curriculum to be developed will perfectly suit their needs and wants and help improve their English communication skills. More importantly, if possible, each and every spa center in Bangkok should have their own unique English for spa therapists course or curriculum for training their staff by giving the top priority to the nationalities that are their most frequent customers and including what these nationalities expect from them, so that they will best suit the needs of their foreign spa customers.

Future research should be conducted to develop an ESP curriculum for spa therapists, using the English communicative framework for spa therapists in Bangkok, Thailand, proposed in this present study. More important elements from English communication standardized tests, such as IELTS and TOEIC, which can be useful to spa therapists in Bangkok, should be included or used as guidelines for the future English for spa therapists curriculum. Furthermore, more crucial data should be collected from three parties: spa service providers, foreign spa customers, and stakeholders by using various research tools, including structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, observations, and focus groups. In doing so, Thai spa therapists will become more communicatively competent in English and be equipped with the ability to compete with their future counterparts who are coming from other ASEAN countries sooner or later.

Appendixes

Table 1. The Overall picture of the English communication skills and other important skills of Bangkok’s spa therapists.

Overall Picture of the English Communication Skills and Other Important Skills of Spa Therapists in Bangkok	Scores of Viewpoints		Level of English Competency
	Mean	Standard Deviation	
1. Grammar	3.05	1.031	Medium
2. Listening	3.20	0.952	Medium
3. Speaking	2.98	1.073	Medium
4. Reading	3.00	1.085	Medium
5. Gestures	3.08	0.967	Medium
6. Cultural Awareness (Knowledge about the foreign spa customers’ cultures)	3.18	0.951	Medium
Overall Picture of All the Skills	3.08	1.010	Medium

Table 2. The responses from the respondents to the question “How would you rate the English communication skills of spa therapists working in Bangkok?”

Questions	No. of Persons	Percentage
1. How would you rate the English communication skills of spa therapists working in Bangkok?		
1.1 Good	54	60.00
1.2 Average	21	23.33
1.3 Poor (and improvement needed)	8	8.89
1.4 Very good	7	7.78
Total	90	100.00

Table 3. The rankings of the English communication skills necessary for spa therapists working in Bangkok by the 59 respondents (out of 90), who are foreign spa customers. (Only what the respondents of each continent think should be the most important skill for Bangkok's spa therapists is shown in the table) (N = 59).

Origins of Respondents	English Communication Skills											
	Listening		Speaking		Grammar		Reading		Gestures		Total	
	No. of persons	Percentage	No. of persons	Percentage	No. of persons	Percentage	No. of persons	Percentage	No. of persons	Percentage	Total Number persons	Percentage
North America	-	-	-	-	2	100.00	-	-	-	-	2	100.00
Europe	3	60.00	2	40.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	100.00
Scandinavia	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	100.00	-	-	1	100.00
South Asia	1	20.00	3	60.00	1	20.00	-	-	-	-	5	100.00
East Asia	18	69.23	8	30.77	-	-	-	-	-	-	26	100.00
Africa	3	42.86	2	28.57	1	14.29	-	-	1	14.29	7	100.00
Middle East	6	46.15	6	46.15	-	-	1	7.69	-	-	13	100.00
Grand Total	31	52.54	21	35.59	4	6.78	2	3.39	1	1.69	59	100.00

Remarks: None of the respondents chose cultural awareness as the top priority for the spa therapists in Bangkok.

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