

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

The world has become smaller and smaller with international communication and globalization; it is now merely a global village where countries have become neighbors and continents are just the next city block over. Tourism has encouraged people to visit other countries a world away, broken down prejudices, created a sense of community instead of individualism and has allowed the seeds of thought to blossom into current ideas that those people over there are just like me; they like happiness, they have emotions and do not like being uncomfortable either. We have more in common than not. This individual one-on-one interaction that used to be only government to government has changed social relationships among peoples from other countries and regions of the world (Pope John Paul II, quoted in Smith 1987, 12). Tourism is the act of travel for the purpose of recreation and business, and the provision of services for this act. Tourists are people who are traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited (Wikipedia, 2006 a).

The tourism industry has been growing since the 1940's when the soldiers returned with stories of far away lands that even a decade earlier in the 1930's had no roads. The war changed that as infrastructure was built to allow a world war to rage on, air fields, roads, housing were constructed. Since that time at the beginning of global tourism the hotel and airline industries have grown exponentially and boast more than 100,000 hotels and thousands of airports worldwide (Nikom, 1993:221). As natural resources have been exploited and used up over the last 70 years, export of natural resources and manufacturing have been replaced by tourism as the most important source

of income for at least half of the countries on our planet. Those countries that never had wealth from their abundance of natural resource have benefited the most as they still have the most intact ecosystems and natural surroundings which appeal to eco-tourists. Globally, the number of “developing” countries far outweighs the number of “developed” nations. Developed nations still rely on manufacturing and globalized trade to sustain the economy, but in lands with little wealth or global export trade, tourism can bring in much needed foreign reserves. In some countries at least one-third of the economy is supported by tourism trade services. On a global scale, tourism represents 25% of the worldwide Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the last decade (Edgull, 1993:20). Tourism itself has become an increasingly complex phenomenon, with political, economic, social, cultural, educational, bio-physical, ecological and aesthetic dimensions (Tirdsiri, 2003:9).

Today’s global tourism industry which directly impacts the building industry, airline industry, petrol-chemical industry, service industry, and the food and beverage industry is a “double-edged sword.” If times are good, there is economic expansion, but bad times spell disaster and economic downturn for the global economy and individual nations’ economies. Worldwide tourism has expanded at such great speed in the last 15 years, and now many economies rely exclusively on tourism as the number one foreign exchange earner and employment source for their citizens. Tourism has become one of the main products of international trade in many countries, while being categorized to be among the top ten leading industries in several of these countries including Thailand (Silanoi, 1998:1). In the year 2002, the East Asian market had a growth rate of 7.71%, totaling 6,531,546 visitor arrivals. Countries with good economies and tourism expansion rates were Malaysia, China, Korea, and Japan. China, in particular, grew more quickly than the others in this group. Increased growth factors include expanded tourism advertising and visitor promotions, largely in China and Korea, and Thailand’s year-round tourism (Vataniyasakul, 2004:2). The purpose of tourism is to allow visitors from around the world to relax in new and exciting surroundings with warmer or different climates, provide a range of sporting activities, provide delicious foods unavailable in a visitor’s home country and provide a space to unwind. Visitors come from different parts of the world seeking different things, and every country is now trying to provide as many options as possible to the widest range of visitors as possible to entice them to choose their particular country.

For the past 30 years in Thailand, the hotel and tourism industries have become a rapidly expanding industry (Inthapanya, 1989:1). Thailand has been a well-known tourist destination for many years and it also happens to be a country that has its tourist economy inter-twined with business, transportation, government, and employment (Chumni, 2001:5). A large amount of Thailand's income and taxes come directly from tourism and tourism-related businesses. From 1977 onward, it was starting to be realized that if directed and managed, tourism could become an economic resource just like mining, agricultural exports and manufacturing. Thailand is a large country with a variety of different attractions from the famous beaches in the south with crystal blue water to hill tribes and cool mountains in the north, and the ancient ruins all throughout the central areas of the country (Poontawesuke, 2005:2). Thailand's popularity as a tourist destination really took off in the mid-eighties; from then on, rapid development to accommodate all of the newly arriving visitors was in "full swing". Bangkok as a central city in Asia to hold business conferences and international exhibitions also was developed by the government. (Higashi, 2000:iv). Statistics in 1981 showed approximately two million international visitors had visited the Kingdom, but since then, the figure has multiplied by five times to ten million annual visits in 2003. The total amount of tourism-related revenue had increased from 1998 to 2004, putting tourism second as the largest money maker in the country (Ongsulapa, 2005:1). The Thai government established the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) in 1959 to help visitors who knew little about the kingdom before arriving and for those who spoke and read no Thai to still find maps and brochures about things to see and do. From the late 1950's to the present, TAT has continued to promote tourism, advertise and keep Thailand at the top of travelers' "places to go".

In 1993, the total revenue from tourism in Thailand amounted to 127,802 million baht, and the number of tourists is increasing every year. In 2003, the total revenue from tourism in Thailand amounted to 289,600 million baht (Table 1).

Table 1 Number of Foreign Tourist arrivals and Revenue Gained

Year	Number of tourist arrivals	Average length of stay (Day)	Revenue from Tourism (Million Baht)
1993	5,760,533	6.94	127,802
1994	6,166,496	6.98	145,211
1995	6,951,566	7.43	190,765
1996	7,192,145	8.23	219,364
1997	7,211,345	8.33	220,754
1998	7,764,930	8.40	242,177
1999	8,580,332	7.96	253,018
2000	9,508,623	7.77	285,272
2001	10,061,950	7.93	299,047
2002	10,799,067	7.98	323,484
2003	10,004,453	7.96	289,600

Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2003

Tourism develops as more visitors come to a destination, and Thailand is no exception. More steady arrival numbers mean that new bungalows and hotel rooms need to be built for the rising average number of tourists in the country at any one time. This is also true for restaurants, transportation networks and visitor tour operators. Visitors can rough it and eat in local markets if they have to if there are few restaurants, but this is definitely not the case with hotels and guesthouses. It is a simple fact that few travelers will stay in a grubby bed bug filled room with little security for their bags. This in turn makes hotels and accommodation the most important part of the tourism industry. Hotels and guesthouses need to be built first and then the travelers come. Hotels popped up around many innovations created in modern times, such as the stagecoach, railroads, steamships, automobile, motor coach, and private airplane (Narkwichet, 2004:2). Continuous growth and development in Thailand's hotel and accommodation industry

now services every type of tourist and traveler that arrives to the Kingdom. Thailand's hotels are accepted world wide as some of the best hotels in the world in terms of giving excellent service to customers (Kholthanasep, 2001:5).

Furthermore, the Tourism Authority of Thailand's report (1997) shows that the accommodation expenditure of tourists was their second highest in total expenditure (Table 2).

Table 2 Tourist Consumption Expenditure for the Year 1997

Expenditure item	Percentage (%)	Average/Person/Day (Baht)
Shopping	34.35	1,261.28
Accommodation	24.87	913.19
Food and Beverage	15.12	555.18
Entertainment	9.91	363.88
Local Transportation	7.61	257.39
Sightseeing	5.84	214.43
Miscellaneous	2.9	106.48
Total	100%	3,671.83

Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand, 1997

Chiang Mai is Thailand's fourth most popular tourist destination and is highly dependent on the tourist business. The hotel industry, therefore, is a vital element of Chiang Mai's economy and is an important factor in setting numbers and types of tourists. Chiang Mai is regarded as a city with a big hotel industry compared with other provinces because the number of rooms in 2002 was about 13,466 rooms or 5.63% of the total number of rooms in Thailand (TAT, 2003), which is the fourth largest number next to Bangkok, Phuket, and Chonburi.

In the year 2003, there were 136 hotels in Chiang Mai with a total number of 13,163 rooms. If we classify hotels in Chiang Mai in terms of the numbers of rooms, there are 25 large hotels (more than 150 rooms) which comprise 53.73% of the total number of rooms; 44 medium-size hotels (60-149 rooms) which comprise 31.72% of the total rooms; and 67 small hotels (less than 60 rooms) which are 14.55% of the total number of rooms (Table 3).

When the location of hotels is considered, more than 80% of the hotels are located within the city and a few of them are scattered in other districts such as Fang, Chiang Dao, Mae Rim, Mae Tang, etc. Those hotels located in the outskirts of the city are mostly small ones (less than 60 rooms). Therefore, the rooms in the city make up 96% of the total of hotel rooms in Chiang Mai (Table 4).

Table 3 Number of hotels in Chiang Mai classified by number of rooms, 2003

Number of rooms	Hotel			
	Number of service sites	Percentage (%)	Number of rooms	Percentage (%)
>150 rooms	25	18.38	7,073	53.73
60-149 rooms	44	32.35	4,175	31.72
< 60 rooms	67	49.26	1,915	14.55
Total	136	100	13,163	100

Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2003

Table 4 Number of hotels in Chiang Mai classified by districts, 2003

District	Hotel			
	Number of service sites	Percentage (%)	Number of rooms	Percentage (%)
Muang	115	84.56	12,655	96.14
Fang	9	6.62	263	2
Mae Rim	1	0.74	31	0.24
Hang Dong	1	0.74	25	0.19
Chiang Dao	3	2.21	61	0.46
Mae Ai	1	0.74	28	0.21
Mae Tang	1	0.74	12	0.14
Doi Saket	0	0	0	0
Hod	0	0	0	0
Prao	1	0.74	12	0.09
Samoeng	0	0	0	0
Sansai	0	0	0	0
Chomthong	1	0.74	30	0.23
Mae Jaem	3	2.21	40	0.3
Saraphi	0	0	0	0
Mae On	0	0	0	0
San Pa Tong	0	0	0	0
San Kam Paeng	0	0	0	0
Total	136	100	13,163	100

Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2003

Statement of the Problem

Today's visitors arriving at Thai hotels have high standards and demand excellent service, especially if paying one hundred dollars or more per night. With many hotel room charges far below that price per night, it has increased competition and now instead of having only a nice room to draw you in, they offer "high quality staff" as an amenity as well. Guest satisfaction is the highest priority for owners and managers competing with hundreds of others, and personal service is at the top of the travelers' list of the most important things when considering a hotel to stay in (Wipoosattaya, 2001:5). The hotel front desk staff are the first employees that a guest will see other than the bellman or doorman, and it is the most important personnel resource that the hotels have (Kunakitkumjorn, 2003:5).

All hotel front desks are at the center of hotel operations, but focus mainly on these ten functions:

1. Guest Registration
2. Guest Room Selection
3. Handling Reservations
4. Issuing Room Keys
5. Luggage Delivery within the Hotel
6. Concierge Information
7. Telephone Messaging Service
8. Guest Mail Delivery
9. Billing
10. Guest Check-out

This is where it is a necessity that Thai hotel workers have the ability to verbally communicate in English with guests to greet guests, give directions, arrange tours and services, and handle problems. Communication between the tourists and the people in the services consequently becomes very significant. Thai hotel workers' ability to communicate in English verbally to guests is thus absolutely necessary to fulfill and meet the guests' wants and needs as English is the international language most used among tourists around the world (Hauenstein, 1975:1).

Most arriving guests will speak English, as most world travelers have some knowledge of the language. English is now spoken as a worldwide second language and is the most widely taught and understood language on our planet, after Mandarin Chinese. An estimated 300-400 million people speak English as their first language. Recent estimates put the number at 1.9 billion people, nearly a third of the world's population that have a basic proficiency speaking English. English has been the dominant international language in communication, science, business, aviation, entertainment, and diplomacy since 1945 and is now so on the Internet as well. Currently, English represents a significant role in society, politics, economy, trade, mass communication, and education. Furthermore, English is referred to as a global language in computer science, travel, medicine, and much more so in the case of hotel and tourism industries (Wikipedia, 2006 b). Knowledge of English as a foreign language is highly valued in Thai society, professional settings and considered an economic asset (Suranutkarin, 1999:1). In the international business arena, English is essential for foreign business contacts and negotiations, which explains why Thailand's economy and the number of international business partnerships have increased (Khangkhun, 2000:1). Thai people have accepted that English is used in higher academic education and occupational fields as the standard language. Recently it has become a symbol of prestige in Thai society as much as the new Rolls-Royce or new house in the exclusive neighborhood (Petchkij, 2001:1).

English is now needed for communication in all facets of the modern world; without it you are lost and this will lower your chances for promotion and social acceptance (Sidakul, 1999:1). For the average Thai, communicating in English is difficult because of grammar differences and some of the sounds needed have no equivalent in the Thai alphabet. Proficiency in English seems to give individuals an upper hand and better chance to advance in social circles and workplace positions (Tothabthim, 1999:1). English skills in most international companies focus on replying to emails and writing to customers and reading what they have written as a response. The internet has shifted the necessity of calling someone across the sea to simply emailing them. "The Land of Smiles", as the TAT likes to call Thailand, has become a traveling hub in Asia which brings travelers from around the planet to this destination. With so many foreigners running around the country, it is natural that some interaction happens either on the street, in a hotel or even at a market. Thai tour guides, hotel staff, flight attendants, tour agency officers, tour

booking officers, etc, are forced to adapt to the tidal wave of visitors and use English as a tool of communication (Laothienchai, 2004:2). To have a successful career in the service and hospitality industry, including hotels, Thai staff need to have the ability to communicate in English verbally at work.

Today's modern Thai business professionals are encouraged to study and stress reading and writing skills, but deal little with speaking or listening as most correspondence is done over the internet. The lack of listening and speaking skills will eventually lead to the failure of correct interpretation during conversations, or worse, misunderstanding orders from factories and customers (Komkrichwarakul, 2000:16).

There are many different types of English language training courses provided for hotel staff in various hotels, but most of the hotel staff still have problems speaking with guests using English or they cannot use the language effectively. Miscommunication is sometimes due to different continental accents, incorrect pronunciation, or incorrect grammar and vocabulary. English learners become quite accustomed to their instructors' accent, but when a speaker from a different continent comes in, it is as if they were speaking Mongolian instead of English; examples include American accents, British accents, Scottish accents, and New Zealand and Australian accents. If a learner is comfortable with an American accent they may have trouble understanding a guest from New Zealand. Additionally, staff often have to deal with various regional Asian English accents, too (Kosalwat, 1999:17). An overall approach to introduce instructors from around the planet with different accents should be considered important for Thai hotel managers who arrange training for workers that have to communicate in English.

This study is designed to examine Chiang Mai hotel front desk staff's English proficiency in communication with their guests. The second aim is to assess the needs of English language skills by Chiang Mai hotel front desk staff. The results from this study can provide suggestions to develop the hotel staff's competences to communicate more effectively in English and are expected to offer useful information for the future of the tourism industry.

Research Questions

In an attempt to provide the best significant contribution based on the findings of this study, research questions were thus created as follows:

1. How proficient are Chiang Mai hotel front desk staff in using English in communication with their guests?
2. Which language skill(s) do Chiang Mai hotel front desk staff need to improve in performing their job responsibilities?

Purposes of the Study

This study attempted to gather data in the following areas:

1. The English proficiency of Chiang Mai hotel front desk staff in communication with their guests.
2. The needs of English language skills by Chiang Mai hotel front desk staff in their careers.

Significance of the Study

This research was specifically made to study English proficiency of front desk hotel employees that speak with their guests throughout Chiang Mai, Thailand. The outcome of this study will allow a better understanding of the job related significance of English for hotel front desk staff and will provide new ideas and insights as how to improve English within skill building industry programs, team building, activities, and other related aspects. This will also be useful for language teachers to find new, fun and innovative ways to improve language training for hotel employees. Additionally, it assists language instructors to find out precisely where these students need to improve their English communication skills.

Limitation of the Study

This research was limited to the following:

1. This research examined the English proficiency of Chiang Mai hotel front desk staff in communication with their guests.

2. The target demography was the front desk staff of Chiang Mai hotels. The hotel front desk staff referred to here have the positions of front desk managers, receptionists, reservation clerks, telephone operators, and front desk cashiers.

3. The conformity for proficiency using the English language was identical with the English functions of Blundell, Higgins, and Middlemiss (1982), which are as follows:

3.1 Main functions

3.2 Social formulas

3.3 Making communication work

Therefore, these were the only functions chosen from an array of language use types which are necessary for communication.

Definition of Terms

For clarity in this research, individual definitions of the below terms were provided:

1. English Proficiency of Chiang Mai Hotel Front Desk Staff: It refers to the writing proficiency, listening proficiency, and speaking proficiency of English by hotel front desk staff in Chiang Mai.

1.1 The English writing proficiency was evaluated by the researcher and a native professional English teacher by using the Next Generation TOEFL Test Independent Writing Rubrics (Educational Testing Service, 2004) which consists of five bands (Table 9).

1.2 The English listening and speaking proficiency were assessed by the researcher and a native professional English teacher by using the PET (The Preliminary English Test) Assessment (Diana, 1991) that includes five bands which consist of four main aspects: fluency, accuracy and appropriacy of language, pronunciation, and task achievement (Table 10).

2. English Language Skills: These refer to the four areas which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills in this study (except reading skills) were examined in the interviews and the questionnaires.

3. Communication: This refers to a process of people exchanging thoughts, ideas, and feelings through verbal, non-verbal or intuitive commonly understandable ways.

4. Functions of English: These refer to the purposes in using language for communication and include three types:

4.1 Main Functions: These refer to the uses of language which are involving information, attitude, and action (Blundell, Higgins, and Middlemiss, 1982: xiii-xx). There are twenty-three functions:

1. saying you do not know/showing a limitation of knowledge
2. asking about remembering
3. saying something is correct/not correct
4. saying you are not sure
5. saying what you hope will happen
6. saying you are looking forward to something
7. asking how someone feels after something happens
8. asking about preference
9. giving your opinion
10. giving reasons
11. offering to do something for someone
12. asking for permission
13. giving permission
14. refusing permission
15. saying someone is obliged to do something
16. saying someone need not do something
17. telling someone how to do something
18. advising someone to do something
19. suggesting
20. requesting

21. persuading
22. saying you are willing to do something
23. refusing to do something

4.2 Social Formulas: These refer to the use of language in society which confirms social relationships rather than expressing strong feelings (Blundell, Higgins, and Middlemiss, 1982:xvii). They consist of twenty-three categories:

1. starting a conversation with a stranger
2. introducing someone
3. answering an introduction
4. attracting someone's attention
5. greeting someone
6. asking how someone is
7. giving someone your general good wishes
8. inviting someone
9. accepting an invitation
10. offering something
11. declining an offer of something
12. giving something to someone
13. thanking
14. responding to thanks
15. complimenting
16. congratulating
17. responding to compliments or congratulations
18. saying sorry
19. accepting an apology
20. showing sympathy
21. leaving someone politely for a short time
22. ending a conversation
23. saying goodbye

4.3 Making Communication work: It refers to the use of language that helps effectively to continue conversation rather than truly communicate actual ideas, or attitudes (Blundell, Higgens, and Middlemiss, 1982:xvii). There are eight functions:

1. asking someone to say something again
2. checking that you have understood
3. saying something again
4. saying something in another way
5. giving an example
6. showing you are listening
7. giving yourself time to think
8. changing the subject

5. The Chiang Mai hotels referred to here are the following 5 hotels which are Chiang Mai Phuome, Imperial Maeping, Pornping Tower, Lotus Park Juan Kaew, and The Empress. In all of these 5 hotels, the number of hotel rooms are more than 300.

6. The population in this research study refers to Chiang Mai hotel front desk staff such as front desk managers, receptionists, reservation clerks, telephone operators, and front desk cashiers.

7. Duration of time refers to the period of time in which the data for the research study were collected.

8. Guests in this study refer to tourists and/or foreigners that routinely stay at these hotels, use the facilities of the hotels, and use English to communicate.