



Intelligibility of English on Signs in Tourist Attractions in Thailand

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Abstract

Due to the fact that one of the main sources of Thailand's income is from tourism, this paper focuses on the use of English on signs in 40 tourist attractions across Thailand. The research aims to find out to what extent the variety of English in Thailand, so-called Thai English, is intelligible to non-Thai people. If non Thai people cannot understand English used by Thai people well, why it is there? The study was drawn from 1,828 photos of Thai English signs. The signs were broadly divided into grammatical features and lexico-semantic features. Then, 30 signs were carefully selected and divided into three levels based on the degrees of the mistakes, namely, Level 1: no errors (socio-culturally unintelligible), Level 2: minor errors, and Level 3: major errors. Then the 30 items were made into an online questionnaire about the intelligibility of Thai English. The data were collected from 456 participants who were asked to rate a Likert scale of comprehensibility ranging from

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1 incompressible to 6 comprehensible. The results were based on the statistical analysis and interviews with 29 participants. The findings showed that, first, English messages with grammatical features could be more easily understood than those with lexico-semantic features. Second, regarding items in Level 1 (socio-culturally unintelligible) and Level 2 (minor errors), native speakers generally had higher mean scores of intelligibility than non-native speakers, because native speakers could negotiate the meanings of Thai English better. Nevertheless, third, when signs contained major errors (Level 3), being native speakers did not play a role, because it was difficult for non-Thai people to understand the messages anyway. Fourth, most of the English translations in Level 3 were done by translation software. The interview data revealed that translation software was not helpful in conveying meaning to the participants. It can be concluded that Thai English could be intelligible to non-Thai people to some extent. However, to have a better understanding of Thai English messages, international visitors should bring the contexts around the messages into account rather than focusing only on the literal meanings of the messages.



Overview

This research paper focuses on to what extent English used by Thai people on signs in tourist domains in Thailand could be understood by overseas tourists.

Thailand is regarded as one of the main tourist destinations in Asia due to its unique culture, exotic sights, beautiful beaches, friendly people, its famous and being one of the major Asian air hubs. Every year, Thailand welcomes tens of millions of people from all over the world. In 2013, Thailand had over 36 million international visitors (Immigration Bureau of Thailand, 2014). In 2012, Bangkok won the World's Best City Award announced by Travel & Leisure Magazine, which is one of the globally well-known travel magazines based in New York City, the United States (Travel & Leisure Magazine, 2013). In order to accommodate a large number of visitors from all over the world, many prints including road signs, billboards, and documents are written in English. However, as English is considered as a foreign language of the country, the English used on signs as well as other documents can lead to some communication problems between Thai people and their visitors at times (Baker, 2008; Huebner, 2006).

These issues triggered my interest about the intelligibility of English used on signs in Thailand whether they could be well understood by international audience or

not. Because these signs were mainly aimed at visitors to Thailand, I was wondering to what extent overseas tourists could understand the English language used by Thai speakers. Moreover, I would like to know about their opinions towards another variety of English in Thailand so-called Thai English (Sergeant, Tagg, & Ngampramuan, 2012), referring to a Thai variety of English, which is different from other Englishes because it has been influenced by Thai culture and Thainess (Sergeant et al., 2012; Watkhaolarm, 2005). According to Watkhaolarm (2005), Thainess includes the transfer of religious, cultural and social elements, shift of old sayings, metaphors or fixed collocations, translation, lexical borrowing, reduplication, and hybridization.

Based on the study of features of Thai English on signs, Thai English can be broadly divided into two main features – grammatical features and lexico-semantic features.

First, grammatical features refer to the items that are grammatically incorrect. There are five subcategories, namely, misspellings, parts of speech (conversion), inflection, punctuation marks, spacing and capitalization, and ellipsis. Second, lexico-semantic features refer to the items that contain no grammatical errors but can be unintelligible to international visitors because socio-cultural background of Thailand is needed. There are four subcategories, namely,



translations, 2) Thainess, 3) word choices and creativity, 4) translations.

Although Thai people have also used English in various domains, such as, business, education and international relations (Baker, 2008), the main focus of the research is on tourist domains, as they are places where English has its real use as a medium language for communication between Thai people and their visitors.

Research aim and research question

This research paper focuses on to what extent English used by Thai people on signs in tourist domains in Thailand could be understood by overseas tourists The study in this aims to find out about the degrees of intelligibility of Thai English messages on signs rated by 456 overseas participants from 56 countries through an online questionnaire. There are three hypotheses.

1) To what extent international participants can understand Thai English messages on signs in tourist domains?

2) Between the group of signs with grammatical features and the group of signs with lexico-semantic features, which one is more difficult to be understood for international visitors?

3) Do native and non-native speakers show different degrees of intelligibility of Thai English messages on signs?

Theoretical frameworks

The widespread use of English has led to the development of a wide variety of English in association with local languages, cultures and ways of thinking of the countries where English has been spreading. The existence of this worldwide English with the contact of local languages along with local cultures and identities of local people transforms one English into plural and become World Englishes (B. B. Kachru, 1985: 28). World Englishes refers to the global use of English across cultures around the world (Bamgbose, 1998; B. B. Kachru, 1996).

To categorise the circles of Englishes, Kachru (1989) developed a concentric circle model dividing countries around the world into three circles as follows: Inner Circle refers to the countries where English is a native language (ENL), Outer Circle refers to the countries which used to be governed by the British Isles and the United States and English is one of the official languages or second language (ESL), Expanding Circle refers to the countries where English is taught and learned as a foreign language (EFL). According to Kachru (1989), there are 5 countries in the Inner Circle, namely, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada,



Australia and New Zealand. Regarding the English as a second language country (Outer Circle), there are 53 commonwealth countries, and the Philippines (The Commonwealth, 2013). Then the other countries in the rest of the world (over 130 countries) belong to the Expanding Circle where English is used as a foreign language (The United Nations, 2014). According to Kachruvian model, Thailand belongs to the Expanding Circle, as English is officially taught and learned as a foreign language.

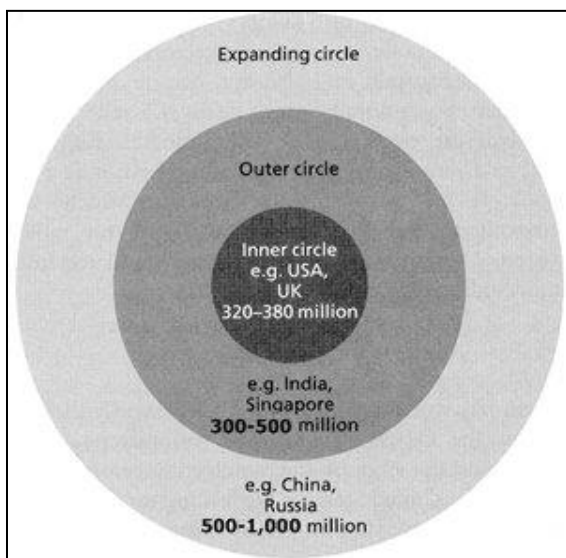


Figure 1 Kachru's (1989) three concentric circle model of Englishes (Crystal, 2003, p. 61)

Seidlhofer (2005, p. 339) also mentions the term ‘English as a lingua franca’ (ELF), which refers to a communication in English between speakers with different first languages’. Firth (1996, p. 114) further adds that although native speakers are part of the interaction, it can still be considered as an ELF encounter, because the key concept of ELF is that English is primarily used as a ‘contact’ language between speakers who do not share any native languages or cultures. In Thailand, English is regarded as a means for wider communication between Thai people and their visitors to Thailand. Hence, English is also used as a lingua franca in the country.

Although Thailand has only one official language, Standard Thai, Smalley (1994, p. 25) analyses that English is not only a language for wider communication but also a symbol of modernity to connect Thailand with a larger world. Smalley (1994, p. 25) states that ‘Thailand as a nation has two languages, Standard Thai and Standard English. The first is the internal language of the nation, the second its external language.’ Baker (2008, p. 138) supports that in Thailand, ‘English is in practice the de facto second language and used in a wide range of domains.’ The Thai government has seen English as an important language and makes it a required school subject (Backhaus, 2007, p. 44). Besides, English is not only used in education but also used as a



‘lingua franca’ for international relations, business, education and tourism (Baker, 2008: 135-136). For the reason that part of the main sources of country’s income is from tourism and being a major hub for global air travel in Southeast Asia, English has been widely used across the country in both public sector and private sector (Huebner, 2006, p. 33).

This research is centred on the role of English as a lingua franca in Thailand on signs in tourist attractions as a means for communication between Thai people and their visitors from various countries by stressing on its intelligibility for communicative purposes.

Research methodology

When conducting a piece of research, a researcher should take the issues of research methodology and analytical approaches into account, because different methods can lead to different results, although the same set of data is used for the analysis (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 19). There are two main paradigms for doing research, namely, quantitative and qualitative paradigms.

Quantitative methods mainly involve with the applications of certain statistics and some kinds of significance testing and primarily presents the result in numerical data (Dörnyei, 2007). However, it is not necessary that a piece of quantitative research needs to involve with

complicated statistics but a concern of quantity and the process of enumerative induction (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2006; Brannen, 1992; Welman, Kruger, Mitchell, & Huysamen, 2005). Inferential statistics are used as means for identifying particular characteristics of the sample population (Brannen, 1992: 5). Quantitative paradigms are usually employed in many pieces of scientific research. The standard tools for quantitative data collection are mainly questionnaires and statistical software such as SPSS for data analysis and results (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 25).

Qualitative methods, on the other hand, do not give priority to numerical results but aim to gain in-depth understanding of human behaviour and find out the reason why participants do things / respond to the questions in some certain ways. A qualitative study may focus on just only a small number of participant units rather than several ones (Barbour, 2008). With the intention of understand the world in its actual existence, qualitative methods include a range of techniques ranging from participant observation, focus groups, case studies, narratives, intensive interviewing and ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Therefore, researchers who employ qualitative methods should be able to explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, and have more understandings, experiences and imagining towards research participants than those relying on



quantitative ones (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Flick, 2006; Mason, 2002).

Apart from the two research methods, the third research paradigm, so-called mixed methods, or the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches has also increased its popularity in recent years (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Dörnyei (2007, p. 24) explains that ‘mixed methods research involves different combinations of qualitative and quantitative research either at the data collection or at the analysis levels. Typical example: consecutive and interrelated questionnaire and interview studies.’ By combining both qualitative and quantitative methods together, the combination should allow researchers to develop analysis that can provide richer data, according to Denscombe (2010). This research combines qualitative and quantitative methods together, because combinations should be able to allow the researcher to develop analysis that can provide richer data Rossman and Wilson (1985).

In terms of qualitative approaches, signs or the main source of data were collected from the ‘real world’ contexts, in this case, tourist domains in Thailand. After the 30 signs were selected based on the nine sub-categories of Thai English characteristics and made into an online questionnaire about the intelligibility of English used on signs

in tourist domains in Thailand. The signs in the questionnaire were divided into three levels. Level 1 refers to the items that contain no errors but could be unintelligible because participants need to have strong socio-cultural knowledge of Thailand (8 items). Level 2: English signs that contain minor grammatical mistakes (12 items). Level 3: English signs that contain major grammatical mistakes (10 items). So, in total, there were 30 items. Across the three levels, the items were also categorised into two main categories based on their features into grammatical features and lexico-semantic features.

Under each item, participants were asked to rate the scale of comprehensibility from 1 incomprehensible to 6 comprehensible based on their understanding of the English message on each sign. They were first given the context where the sign was located followed by the photo of the sign. The question ‘How well do you understand the English message on the sign?’ was asked.

After the questionnaire was closed, the answers from the 456 respondents were statistically analysed by means of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software package. SPSS was chosen because it has been considered to be one of the most widely used programmed for statistical analysis ranging from descriptive statistics, bivariate statistics, prediction for numerical outcomes and prediction



for identifying groups (Dörnyei, 2007; Field, 2013) . The results from this research came from descriptive statistics (frequencies) and bivariate statistics (Means, t-test, and ANOVA). To confirm the statistical results and find sufficient reasons to support the results, in-depth interviews with 29 participants who were both native and non-native speakers were conducted.

Results

To answer the first two research questions regarding to what extent international l) participants can understand Thai English messages on signs in tourist domains and 2) between the group of signs with grammatical features and the group of signs with lexico-semantic features, which one is more difficult to be understood for international visitors.

The answers can be found from Table 1, which shows the mean scores of international participant's intelligibility of Thai English on signs.

Table 1 International participants' intelligibility mean scores
(N = 456)

No.	Question	Message	Level	Features		<i>M^a</i> (<i>SD</i>)
				GR ^b	LS ^b	
1	Q 18	Foot massage	1	✓		5.70 (.85)
2	Q 7	Museum hours	1	✓		5.69 (.86)
3	Q 10	No littering	1	✓		5.56 (1.08)
4	Q 26	Tourist discount	1	✓		5.53 (.97)
5	Q 4	Wel come	2	✓		5.49 (1.06)
6	Q 28	Coming soon	2	✓		5.44 (1.21)
7	Q 25	No trolley	2	✓		5.33 (1.18)
8	Q 17	Fake goods	1		✓	5.32 (1.25)
9	Q 8	Feed a pigeon	1		✓	5.21 (1.36)
10	Q 1	Close	2	✓		5.20 (1.23)
11	Q 9	Toilet/shoes	1		✓	5.19 (1.52)
12	Q 3	Cannot be changes	2	✓		5.18 (1.19)
13	Q 2	Open time	2	✓		5.05 (1.28)
14	Q 5	Please next counter	2	✓		4.96 (1.38)
15	Q 16	No parking across	2	✓		4.91 (1.45)
16	Q 6	Beautiful girl passport	1		✓	4.81 (1.57)
17	Q 20	3 pcs up	2		✓	4.50 (1.70)
18	Q 30	Exhibition hell	3	✓		4.45 (1.75)
19	Q 21	Happy toilet	2		✓	4.17 (1.79)
20	Q 22	Thai house style	3	✓		4.06 (1.71)
21	Q 27	Wat Phra Kaew	2		✓	4.02 (1.85)
22	Q 19	2 free 1	2		✓	3.67 (1.58)
23	Q 23	Hire a pet	3	✓		3.48 (1.74)



24	Q 15	Please ring to bring	3	✓	3.07 (1.69)
25	Q 24	Please it neatly	3	✓	3.04 (1.68)
26	Q 14	OTOP	3	✓	3.02 (2.02)
27	Q 11	Food order	3	✓	2.38 (1.62)
28	Q 29	Ovalcano	3	✓	2.36 (1.72)
29	Q 13	Forbiddenisland glass	3	✓	1.99 (1.39)
30	Q 12	A motorcycle works for	3	✓	1.49 (1.08)

^aScore 6 = comprehensible and 1 = incomprehensible

^bGR = Grammatical features, LS = Lexico-semantic features

To answer the question about to what extent Thai English can be intelligible to international participants, the average mean score of the 30 items was $M = 4.34$ out of 6 comprehensible. Hence, it implies that Thai English was quite clearly intelligible to overseas respondents. The score for the item (Q 18) getting the highest intelligibility score was $M = 5.70$ ($SD = .85$), while the item (Q12) getting the lowest intelligibility score was $M = 1.49$ ($SD = 1.08$).

It is fairly interesting that although being in Level 1, the two items (Q17 and Q18) with lexico-semantic features got lower mean scores than the three items (Q4, Q28, Q25) with grammatical features from Level 2. Furthermore, another item (Q9) with lexico-semantic features from Level 1 also got a lower mean score than the item (Q17) of Level 2 with grammatical features. In the same way, the last item in Level 1 (Q6) containing lexico-semantic features got a lower

mean score than the four items (Q3, Q2, Q5, and Q16) with grammatical features from Level 2.

In addition the last five items (Q12, Q13, Q29, Q11, and Q14) having the lowest mean scores belong to Level 3 and contain lexico-semantic features. While the two items (Q30 and Q22) in Level 3 with grammatical features got higher mean scores than the items (Q21, Q27, Q19) from Level 2 with lexico-semantic features.

When specifically looking at the first top five items and the five items from the bottom, the items from no.1 to no.5, namely, Q18, Q7, Q10, Q26, Q4, belong to the grammatical feature group. In contrast, all the item from no. 30 to no. 26, namely, Q12, Q13, Q29, Q11, Q14, belong to lexico-semantic feature group.

Based on the mean scores of intelligibility, the question about the intelligibility of signs with grammatical features and those with lexico-semantic features can be answered that items with grammatical features could be more intelligible to international participants than items with lexico-semantic features because the former ones got higher intelligibility score than the latter ones.

To answer the question about the degrees of intelligibility of native speakers versus non-native speakers, a t-test was done and the results are shown in Table 2.



Table 2 International participants' intelligibility and English tongue (Native speakers n = 192, non-native speakers n = 244)

Level	Features		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	Effect size ^a
All items	All	Native	4.54	.62	433.89	5.36***	.06
	(30 items)	Non-native	4.19	.77			
L. 1	All	Native	5.66	.45	377.21	7.35***	.11
	(8 items)	Non-native	5.17	.89			
L. 1	Grammatical	Native	5.86	.34	321.91	6.58***	.09
	(4 items)	Non-native	5.44	.92			
L. 1	Lexico-semantic	Native	5.45	.70	415.64	6.36***	.09
	(4 items)	Non-native	4.90	1.11			
L.2	All	Native	5.04	.66	429.86	5.07***	.06
	(12 items)	Non-native	4.66	.93			
L. 2	Grammatical	Native	5.38	.63	420.28	4.93***	.05
	(8 items)	Non-native	5.00	.97			
L.2	Lexico-semantic	Native	4.58	.91	432.96	4.03***	.04
	(4 items)	Non-native	4.18	1.14			
L.3	All	Native	3.06	.98	434.00	2.33*	.01
	(10 items)	Non-native	2.84	.93			
L.3	Grammatical	Native	3.92	1.25	433.00	2.14*	.01
	(4 items)	Non-native	3.66	1.22			
L. 3	Lexico-semantic	Native	2.48	1.04	406.11	1.96	
	(6 items)	Non-native	2.29	1.02			

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$. ^aEta squared.

There were 192 native speakers ($n = 192$) from five countries, namely, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and there were 224 non-native speakers ($n = 224$) from 51 counties.

Table 2 illustrates that native speakers had higher intelligibility mean scores ($M = 4.54$, $SD = .62$) than non-native speakers ($M = 4.19$, $SD = .77$). It can be seen that across the ten sub-categories across the three levels, native speakers had higher scores of intelligibility than non-native speakers. The differences in mean scores of both groups of participants were significant at $p < .001$ for all 30 items, Level 1: all items, grammatical items, and lexico-semantic items, Level 2: all items, grammatical items, and lexico-semantic items. For Level 3: all items and grammatical, the significance was at $p < .05$.

The effect size of the significant categories of sign was moderate ranging from .06 to .11 for all 30 items, Level 1: all items, grammatical items, and lexico-semantic items, and Level 2: all items. The effect size was small ranging from .01 to .05 for Level 2: grammatical items, and lexico-semantic items and Level 3: all items and lexico-semantic items.

From the results, it can be concluded that native speakers could understand Thai English better than non-native speakers.



Discussion

Based on the interviews with 29 international participants, they revealed that Thai English was quite intelligible to them although some messages were misspelt or grammatically wrong. The key point was that as long as the erroneous messages such as the messages with misspelling could not mean something else, they would still be able to guess the gist of the messages. However, if the messages contained some socio-cultural information and those items with direct translations, it would be very difficult for them who had different backgrounds to understand English used by Thai people properly.

Take the sign ‘Q30 Exhibition Hell’ as an example. It was obvious that the word ‘Hall’ was misspelt into ‘Hell’. A male British participant who visited Thailand twice shared his idea that ‘I think these signs are funny. I laughed a lot when I was doing the questionnaire. To me, I don’t think that these items created problems for me to understand the intended messages.’ In the same way, a female Chinese interviewee who has never been to Thailand commented that ‘I like the sign “Exhibition Hell” (Q30) the most. It makes me laugh a lot. If I go to Thailand, I want to go to this place and take a photo of the sign, take a photo with it and send it to my friend’.



Figure 2 Q30 Exhibition Hall

Regarding the items containing major errors especially poor translations by the use of google translate or a translation software, it did not make many differences between native and non-native speakers, as it would be difficult for anyone who could not fully understand Thai language to get intended messages anyway.

Take the sign ‘Q13 Forbidden Island Glass’ as another example. This sign has been shared hundreds of times via social media especially Facebook due to the funny word-for-word translation done by google translate. The English message on the sign is displayed as ‘Forbidden Island Glass’. However, when seeing the original message in Thai, those who can read Thai should be able to quickly realise that the translation is entirely wrong. The message in Thai is displayed as ‘ห้ามเกาะกระจก’, which is a negative imperative sentence meaning ‘Don’t touch the glass’. Nevertheless, when looking at the sentence structure, the main word is ‘เกาะ’, which is homonymic. The word ‘เกาะ’ can be both a noun and a verb. If it is used as a verb, it can mean ‘to touch’, ‘to grab’, or ‘to hold’ depending on the context. If it



is used as a noun, it means ‘an island’. To conjugate a verb into a negative form for a comparative sentence, the word ‘ห้าม’ (Do not) must be added in front the verb. However, the same word can also mean ‘Forbidden’ when being used on its own. Therefore, in this case, google translate picked up the wrong word choices for both the word ‘ห้าม’ (‘Forbidden’ was chosen instead of ‘Don’t/ Do not’) and the word ‘เกาะ’ (island was chosen instead of touch). Therefore, the only word that has the right translation is ‘กระจก’ or glass.

Based on the interviews, some of them who first thought that they could understand the message revealed that they actually got the message wrong. Only four (accounting for 13.8%) out of 29 participants could correctly guess. However, they all showed a high degree of uncertainty. When being asked about the meaning for ‘Forbidden island glass’, most of the international interviewees reported that the main word that they focused on is ‘Island’, as Thailand is famous for beautiful beaches and islands. A male British participant who misunderstood the message said that ‘I thought the glass was from the Island called Forbidden, so it is a special piece of glass or a rare-item glass’. A female Chinese participant who also misunderstood the message revealed that ‘I think the translation did not help to convey the message AT ALL.

Seriously, I thought that the snacks behind the glass were products from the island called Forbidden’.



Figure 3 Q13 Forbidden Island Glass

In summary, based on the interviews with 29 participants, both native and non-native speakers of English, it can be concluded that the participants mainly focused on meanings of the messages rather than forms. As long as they could still understand the intended messages or get the gist of the messages, they would not think the erroneous messages on the signs were serious and should immediately be corrected. On the other hand, although there were no grammatical errors on the signs, the original meanings were distorted mainly due to the interference of Thai language and the use of google translate or a translation software, they would not be able understand the messages. In addition, these messages could also mislead them.



Conclusion

Based on the statistical results from the online questionnaire about intelligibility of English used on signs in tourist domains in Thailand filled in by 456 international participants and in-depth interviews with 29 interviewees, it can be concluded that Thai English was fairly intelligible to international participants. However, the participants could understand Thai English messages with grammatical features better than those with lexico-semantic features, as no socio-cultural background knowledge was not required. Finally, the results showed that native speakers of English could understand Thai English better than non-native speakers.

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