

English Communication Challenges and Coping Strategies of Thai Call Center Staff in a European Airline Group

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Received November 11, 2025; **Revised** December 17, 2025; **Accepted** December 27, 2025

Abstract

This study investigates English communication challenges and coping strategies among Thai staff at a European airline call center, grounded in the framework of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The objectives were to identify specific communication problems and to examine strategies employed for immediate problem-solving and long-term development. A mixed-methods design was utilized with 31 respondents selected via convenience sampling. Data were collected using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, then analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis. The results indicated that overall problems in listening, speaking, reading, and writing occurred at a rare to moderate frequency ($M=2.32$ to 2.72). Key challenges included understanding diverse accents and using appropriate professional vocabulary. Regarding strategies, staff primarily employed compensatory strategies such as focusing on keywords and using online translation tools for immediate issues. For long-term development, cognitive and metacognitive strategies like consuming English media were reported, though systematic training participation was limited. The findings suggest a need for integrating explicit strategy training into ESP courses and call center onboarding programs.

Keywords: Strategies; English Problems; Thai Staff; Airline call center

Introduction

At the beginning of this century, it was common for airlines to have their own customer service agents at their town offices and airport offices around the world, with high standards and quality of service. With the advent of globalization in recent years and the power of new technology and communications, many multinational companies have since then opted to transfer and outsource their customer services to offshore call centers in certain regions of the world. Such is the case for a well-known European airline group that now operates its call center in Thailand, with over 90 call center staff in total. The entire call center staff are Thai nationals with Thai as their L1, who communicate with non-Thai customers in English, which is their L2.

Customer satisfaction is highly correlated to increased loyalty to and patronage of the airlines (Ganiyu, 2017). It is in the interest of the airline company to maintain high standards

of customer service at all customer contact points, on ground or in flight, be it pre-sales, during travel, or after-sales. As a result of ever-increasing online ticket purchase, there is diminishing opportunity for more personal interaction between airlines staff and customer. It has thus become increasingly crucial to meet expectations of customers when these come into contact with the airlines' customer service agents. Key elements of exemplary airline call center customer service include the following: Firstly, staff knowledge about the airline-specific product and understanding of the airline-specific landscape. Next, clear communication between the call center customer service agent and the customer, in order to correctly and speedily identify the issue at hand. Finally, conducting the transaction in a polite, culturally appropriate, business-like yet friendly manner. The call center management is aware of the importance of ensuring that the English communication skills of its staff are kept up to standard. They are therefore on the lookout to maintain and improve the language skills of their staff. To achieve this end, a study that find out some proposed strategies for the staff to address these problems immediately and in the long-term, would be of significant value.

However, despite the critical role of English as a lingua franca in aviation, there is limited empirical research addressing the specific ESP needs and dual-layer strategy use (immediate vs. long-term) of outsourced airline call center staff in non-native English contexts. Drawing on ESP frameworks and language learning strategy theories, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating the specific challenges faced by Thai staff and the strategic measures they employ to maintain service standards.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research were:

- 1) To identify and categorize the specific English communication problems encountered by Thai staff at a European airline call center.
- 2) To investigate the strategies currently employed by staff to address these problems in both immediate and long-term contexts, and to propose pedagogical implications for training.

Literature Review

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) refers to a focused approach to teaching English that targets learners' current or future academic or occupational needs. Unlike General English, which covers a broad range of language skills aimed at fluency (Twin, E. E. (2025), ESP tailors content to meet specific purposes related to the learner's field, such as the workplace or academia. This learner-centered approach adapts language, genres, and skills to be relevant and practical for real-world settings (Oo, 2025). ESP is divided primarily into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), addressing distinct needs in educational institutions and professional environments respectively.

This approach is grounded in the understanding that language usage varies according to the discipline and that effective teaching must reflect learners' immediate and future functional needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Anthony, 2018; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

Research Methodology

Respondents

The respondents were 31 Thai staff working at the call center that services the group of European airlines at its downtown office in Bangkok. The call center consists of over 90 staff working in 2 units, the **BSC** (Bangkok Service Centre) that mainly service customers in Thailand, and **RBC** (Remote Business Center) service the airlines' airport staff worldwide.

The **BSC** has 1 team leader and 1 supervisor while the **RBC** has 3 team leaders. The researcher additionally interviewed the Thai operations manager of the call center in order to represent the stakeholder of the employer.

Research Procedures

A mixed-methods design was employed, consisting of a survey and semi-structured interviews. To obtain prerequisite information, the researcher interviewed the operations manager and team leaders of both call center units.

After designing the questionnaire, it was reviewed by the two team leaders and piloted with two respondents to check for their understanding and obtain initial feedback. The three specialists were consulted for the correctness and appropriateness of all constructed questions which were evaluated in terms of Index of Congruence (IOC). All questions possessed the IOC value in the range of 0.66 to 1.00. The adjusted questionnaire was formatted into an online Google form. The link was sent to the team leaders of the call center units and passed on to the staff via a private group channel on the LINE application with the request for voluntary participation. Some questions on the problems for language skills were based on the microskills and macros kills proposed by Brown and Abeywickrama (2019).

Part I of the questionnaire included a five-point Likert scale to establish the importance of using the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing at work, and to determine the frequency of problems in using the four skills at work. In addition, an open-ended question allowed for problems to be described more freely.

Part II consisted entirely of open-ended questions to inquire about strategies used to solve problems in using each English skill at work (listening, speaking, reading and writing), in terms of immediately solving the problem at hand, as well as solving the problem in the long-term.

Part III included general questions to obtain background information about the participants, including gender, age, education, years of call center work experience, and the current call center unit of assignment.

A semi-structured interview was conducted online with three participants to allow for more in-depth analysis. The participants were purposively selected from the questionnaire results and were among those with the highest reported frequency of overall problems in using English at work.

The researcher interviewed the operations manager and team leaders of both units, which served as preliminary method in obtaining prerequisite information. After the questionnaire was designed, it was reviewed and piloted by the two team leaders to check for their understanding and obtain initial feedback. The questionnaire was in English as participants were assumed to have sufficient English language competence based on the hiring criteria of call center staff.

For the semi-structured interview, 3 participants, 1 from **BSC** unit and 2 from **RBC** unit, were selected from those with the highest reported frequency of overall problems in using English at work and interviewed on a voluntary basis. The interviews were conducted online as per participants' preference, on either MS Teams or LINE application platform. The participants, designated as R1, R2 and R3 respectively, gave consent for audio recording of the interview for purpose of subsequent transcription. Each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes and was conducted in English.

Sampling Limitation "It should be noted that the participants were selected through convenience sampling on a voluntary basis. Consequently, the findings represent the perceptions of the 31 respondents and may not be fully generalizable to the entire call center population."

Ethical Considerations "Ethical procedures were observed; all participants provided informed consent, and data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality."

Data Analysis "Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation). Qualitative data from open-ended questions and interviews underwent thematic content analysis to identify key strategy patterns.

Data Analysis

Answers to the open-ended questions obtained from the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews were analyzed in depth, and included descriptive information about strategies used for both immediate and long-term solving of their English language problems at work.

Research Results

The Findings on the Problems in Using English at Work

Taken as a whole, the average importance of the four language skills was evaluated as "very important". Listening was ranked the highest in importance and the only skill with the degree of "extremely important".

Table 1 Importance of English Skill for Performing Work

<i>Importance of skill at work</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Degree of Importance
Listening	4.35	0.80	Extremely Important
Speaking	4.19	0.79	Very Important
Reading	3.55	1.06	Very Important
Writing	3.52	1.00	Very Important
Total	3.90	0.91	Very Important

The problems of Thai staff in using English skills at work for each of the four language skills are detailed as follows, whereby Q1-Q8 refers to the sequence of the questions as presented in the questionnaire:

Table 2 Listening Problems using English at Work

<i>Listening Problems</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of Problems
Processing speech at different speeds of delivery (Q4)	2.61	0.80	Sometimes
Processing speech containing pauses, errors, corrections and other performance variables (Q5)	2.52	0.77	Rarely
Retaining chunks of language of different lengths in short-term memory (Q2)	2.52	0.63	Rarely
Becoming familiar with speakers' accents (Q3)	2.48	0.89	Rarely
Distinguishing between literal and implied meanings (Q8)	2.42	0.67	Rarely
Recognizing key words and interpreting word order pattern and their significance (Q1)	2.39	0.72	Rarely

Understanding the content and purpose of the speaker (Q6)	2.26	0.68	Rarely
Capturing specific information required for taking action (Q7)	2.19	0.65	Rarely
Total	2.42	0.73	Rarely

For **listening**, having to comprehend fast speaking speed (Q4) and speech with *pauses, errors, corrections and other performance variables* (Q5) were among the challenges faced. Hurried speech occurred because calls were made under time constraints especially when passengers were already at the airport (Interview R2). The accents that came up as being difficult to process included British, Irish, Indian and European, namely German, French and Spanish. Some listening problems occurred when callers could not speak English themselves. At times, the callers also code-switched between English and another language, like German, leading to a lack of clarity (Interview R3). One respondent referred to low volume and poor signal as a factor hindering listening.

Table 3 Speaking Problems using English at Work

<i>Speaking Problems</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of Problems
Using the right stress patterns, rhythmic structure and intonation (Q4)	2.97	0.95	Sometimes
Speaking fluently at different speeds (Q5)	2.90	0.70	Sometimes
Applying acceptable word patterns and grammatical rules (Q3)	2.87	0.72	Sometimes
Selecting appropriate vocabulary according to situation (Q2)	2.81	0.75	Sometimes
Pronouncing speech sounds correctly (Q1)	2.68	0.60	Sometimes
Extending a customer service mindset and politeness (Q7)	2.48	1.00	Rarely
Appropriately accomplishing the purpose of oral communication (e.g. relaying information, providing offers and solutions, etc.) (Q6)	2.32	0.65	Rarely
Total	2.72	0.77	Sometimes

For **speaking**, difficulty making oneself understood with the Thai accent, stress and pronunciation (Q4) came out as the top challenge. Some callers were not used to hearing the Asian or Thai accent, so when for example the call center staff pronounced *United* [airlines] as *u-ni-TED* with a rising tone, the caller could not understand it (Interview R3). Call center staff speaking too fast also created problems for the callers. Many responses were about struggling to find the right word or using correct grammar to make themselves understood, e.g. sentences with difficult vocabulary was a problem, and “sometime my tongue ties up when I speak too much”. Issues in *extending a customer service mindset and politeness* (Q7) were expressed by the reply that “sometimes mood and tone of some word making the wrong understanding”. One participant admitted to sometimes being impatient and speaking less politely when communicating with airport staff rather than a passenger (Interview R2).

Table 4 Reading Problems using English at Work

<i>Reading Problems</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of Problems
Distinguishing between literal and implied meanings (Q7)	2.45	0.93	Rarely
Reading the material at an efficient speed to suit the purpose (Q3)	2.39	0.80	Rarely
Recognizing key words and interpreting word order pattern and their significance (Q1)	2.29	0.78	Rarely
Retaining chunks of language of different lengths in short-term memory (Q2)	2.35	0.84	Rarely
Inferring links and connections between events, deducing cause and effects, and detecting relationships between the main idea, supporting ideas, given information and new information (Q6)	2.29	0.90	Rarely
Understanding the content and purpose of the writer (Q4)	2.29	0.94	Rarely
Identifying specific information required for taking action (Q5)	2.19	0.83	Rarely
Total	2.32	0.86	Rarely

For **reading**, the elaboration from one participant that “the email that we got sometime are complex and confusing” could be in line with problems in “*distinguishing between literal and implied meanings*”(Q7) which had the highest reported frequency for this skill. Some manuals were reported as being unclear or not straight to the point. Sometimes there was conflicting information between the text and booking information (Interview R3). Taking a long time to read because of being a slow reader (Q3) was cited. A handful of responses involved encountering unknown vocabulary, technical terms that were difficult to comprehend, or unclear abbreviations (e.g. Does TA mean travel agent or ticketing agent?). One response was that some emails were in other languages like German, Chinese and French, which were difficult to interpret upon being translated to English because of the changed context.

Table 5 Writing Problems using English at Work

<i>Writing Problems</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Frequency of Problems
Applying acceptable word patterns and grammatical rules (Q2)	2.94	1.00	Sometimes
Selecting appropriate vocabulary according to the situation (Q1)	2.90	1.11	Sometimes
Finishing a written task at an efficient speed to suit the purpose (Q4)	2.74	1.12	Sometimes
Observing correct spelling and/or punctuation (Q3)	2.65	1.02	Sometimes
Appropriately accomplishing the purpose of your writing (e.g.	2.55	0.93	Rarely

relaying information, providing offers and solutions, etc.) (Q5)			
Conveying links and connections between events and communicating the main idea, supporting ideas, given information and new information (Q6)	2.48	0.89	Rarely
Extending a customer service mindset and politeness (Q7)	2.16	0.93	Rarely
Total	2.63	1.00	Sometimes

For **writing**, problems relating to grammar (Q2) and appropriate word choice (Q1) were the top two frequencies, which were echoed in several of the participants' descriptions such as "I don't know how to make sentence looks nice" and "grammatical structure is hard for me". As one participant elaborated, "I am able to write informally like chatting, but when it comes to the professional way, I don't know how to do it at all" (Interview R3). Taking a longer time in writing a reply (Q4) was mentioned for special cases like customer requests not previously encountered. One participant clarified about rarely having to perform writing tasks at work, while a few others did not provide additional descriptions regarding their writing problems.

The Findings on Proposed Strategies to be Employed by the Staff in Solving English Problems at Work

Multiple strategies were allowed in one reply, and sometimes participants gave no reply to some questions. The number of responses are indicated below in parenthesis.

The strategies reported by participants for solving *immediate listening* problems included watching out for keywords (14), checking for understanding with the caller (11), requesting the speaker to repeat what they said (5), and reviewing the given booking information (4).

For solving *immediate speaking* problems encountered at work, participants chose simpler words and avoided jargon (9), checked for caller comprehension (7), repeated or rephrased what they had said (4), adjusted their speaking tone or accent (3), asked colleagues for help (2), and resorted to writing by sending an email (1).

When it came to *immediate reading* problems at work, strategies reported by participants were searching for the main idea or using the context to guess the meaning (12), looking up the meaning of words or translating them online (6), sending emails to get customer clarification (4), and conferring with colleagues about the meaning (2).

Participants employed the following strategies for solving *immediate writing* problems: using an online translator (9), using online tools like Grammarly or Microsoft Editor to check their work (6), getting help from colleagues (4), copying and adapting existing samples (2), and using simple words (1).

For solving *listening* problems in the *long-term*, many participants reported watching English movies or series, which they said helped them get familiar with accents (13). They used subtitles while watching, often in English but sometimes in Thai. They listened to English podcasts or music (4), engaged in English conversation outside work mostly with foreigners (4), and took classes (1).

Strategies reported being used for solving *speaking* problems in the *long-term* were generally as straightforward as speaking English whenever there was a chance, whether with colleagues or foreigners (21). In addition, participants said they watched movies or read books

to remember more words (4), attended classes or training especially for listening/speaking (3), talked to/by oneself or practiced one's own accent with an app (3).

Participants mostly reported reading English books and watching English movies or news with subtitles as the strategy they used for solving *reading* problems in the *long-term* (13). Their specific replies included practice, doing online exercise, daily reading (at least 1 page/day), reading more English articles, reading a variety of English materials, reading educational books to increase academic vocabulary, and exploring new words. Some participants did not respond to this question, or simply indicated 'nil'.

With regard to strategies employed for solving *writing* problems in the *long-term*, a number of participants referred to learning from online platforms or taking courses or training (10). Others said they read more to increase their vocabulary (3), or simply practiced more writing. Finally, getting help from colleagues was also cited (2). Some participants did not respond to this question, or simply indicated 'nil'.

Discussion

According to the findings on the Problems in Using English at Work. For listening, issues with accents (like British) which had surfaced in the preliminary talk with management, and which appeared in previous studies (Srisang, 2017: 56-60) also emerged in the findings. To solve this, aside from clarifying with customers or asking them to repeat, call center staff could also simultaneously refer to the booking information on their computer screens during their call. For speaking, issues of speaking tone, accent and intonation or the appropriateness of word choice, as revealed in the findings for strategies used, avoiding the use of technical terms or jargon, finding simpler words to explain, and confirming customer's understanding helped solve the problem. For reading skill, participants "rarely" encountered reading problems. The likely reason is that the majority of respondents were from the RBC unit where there is little handling of customer emails. However, staff in both units need to regularly read through constantly changing airline guidelines and procedures, which participants said were sometimes unclear. For this reason, *distinguishing between literal and implied meanings* emerged with the highest frequency of reading problems. Nevertheless, the strategy of searching for the main idea and using context makes sense since the call center staff had access to the booking information to help them comprehend the customer's needs. For writing skill, their concern was that their choice of words was not clear or "professional" enough. To solve the top problem of *applying acceptable word patterns and grammatical rules* it is no surprise that call center staff resorted to online tools to correct the grammar or find alternative wording suggestions. The strategy of avoiding jargon and technical terms was also employed. Actually, there were templates and previous correspondence to pattern writing in most cases, so problems only surfaced in non-routine cases, if at all.

Asking colleagues including supervisors for help solving immediate problems implies good relations between the staff. Collegiality is more conducive with many staff being in the same younger age range. The spatial layout of the call center where staff sit in close proximity is likely to facilitate language acquisition and make it easy for call center colleagues to seek help from one another, as mentioned in Woydack and Lockwood (2020).

The findings that participants exposed themselves to English media, for instance, watching movies, tv/streaming shows, reading books or listening to music or podcasts, as a common language learning strategy is in line with Boonkit's (2009) research. The call center staff in RBC work periodically in three different shifts and commented that there were times they just needed to relax and were not fit to exert themselves in active learning. This could be one reason that the long-term strategy of attending English communication courses was not often cited. When queried in the interviews about their willingness to participate in trainings

that might be offered by the employer, the replies of both R2 and R3 were tentative and conditional, saying that this depended on the timing of the course and the workload.

Knowledge from Research

Pedagogical and Organizational Implications Based on the findings, the following implications are proposed for ESP practitioners and management:

1. Integration of Strategy Training: Short-term strategies identified in the study (e.g., keyword focus, clarification techniques) should be explicitly taught during the onboarding process as part of an ESP curriculum.

2. Workplace-Based Learning: Management should leverage the call center's collegial environment by formalizing peer-coaching sessions, which aligns with the finding that staff often seek help from colleagues.

3. Incentivizing Long-Term Development: To address the observed lack of motivation for long-term study, language training should be incorporated into regular working hours to reduce stress and fatigue-related barriers

Conclusion

Awareness of strategies used in the short-term for immediate handling of English language problems at work can be taught to call center staff and be incorporated in onboard coaching of new staff as well as in any ESP training, since a conscious knowledge of strategies leads to increased use of such strategies with an ensuing reduction in problems.

Call center management may wish to pay additional attention to long-term efforts for staff to solve English language problems, as there is currently no incentive for language skill improvement. Offering ESP for communication training with the prospect of long-term career advancement can be a source of increased staff motivation and lead to less staff turnover. Nevertheless, to encourage staff participation, it would be advisable to offer any ESP communication training within regular working hours and in a stress-free environment, away from the busy atmosphere of the call center.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies

The study was limited by the number of respondents as there were only 31, representing less than a third of the call center staff. Only three semi-structured interviews were conducted. The study was only conducted on staff whose L1 was Thai. Furthermore, the respondents were all from the single European airline call center. Finally, the two airline call center staff units in the study had varying assignments in their scope of responsibility, which may differ from that of other airline studies.

Replicating this study with an increased number of participants and semi-structured interviews may result in more representative findings. Studying call center staff with other L1 languages than Thai, and/or working in other international airlines may yield different outcomes. Further studies could include a comparison between the problems and strategies of airline call center units serving different customers and fulfilling different tasks. The impact of working in shifts and/or effects when working under increased time pressure on the motivation and effectiveness of call center staff is also a line of study that might be considered for further research.

Suggestions

1. The management should incorporate short-term English communication strategies (such as clarifying, using keywords, and simple vocabulary) into onboarding and training sessions for new staff to help reduce immediate language problems.

2. Long-term English skill development for staff should be encouraged and facilitated, for example by offering ESP-based training, ongoing practice through English media (movies/books/podcasts), and peer coaching.
3. It is advisable to organize any ESP and language skill development training within regular working hours and provide a comfortable learning environment to maximize staff engagement and minimize stress.
4. Providing incentives or linking training participation to career advancement could increase staff motivation and reduce turnover rates in the long term.
5. Future studies should expand participant numbers and compare issues and strategies across different airline call centers, including staff with other first languages, and examine the impact of working shifts and time pressures on language skills and motivation.

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