

Foreign Passengers' Satisfaction of Thai Ground Staff's English Oral Communication Ability and Brand Loyalty of a Thai Airline

ความพึงพอใจของผู้โดยสารชาวต่างชาติที่มีต่อความสามารถ
ในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษด้วยวาจาของพนักงานต้อนรับ
ภาคพื้นคนไทยและความภักดีในตราสินค้าของสายการบินไทย

Received: July 30, 2021

Revised: September 9, 2021

Accepted: November 17, 2021

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the level of foreign passengers' satisfaction towards Thai ground staff's English oral communication ability in their function - specific tasks at a Thai airline. It also explored passengers' perception of brand loyalty in relation to the ground staff's satisfying English oral communication ability. The relationship was additionally examined between the passengers' satisfaction of the ground staff's English oral communication ability and their brand loyalty. The research made use of a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The results showed that the ground staff's English oral communication ability in three function-specific tasks was rated as very satisfied: special service function (Mean = 3.81), airport customer service function (Mean = 3.96), and baggage services function (Mean = 3.66). Furthermore, regarding the ground staff satisfying English oral communication ability, the passengers were loyal to this airline and will travel with this airline again in the future and will recommend this company to others. Finally, the correlation between the ground staffs' satisfaction on English oral communication ability and the passengers' brand loyalty was found to be low ($r = .19$, $p = .49$). Although the ground staff's English oral communication ability has low impact on the passengers' brand loyalty, it can be an antecedent of brand loyalty based on the passengers' opinions during the interview. This study's results can be used as guidance for ground staff's trainers and English teachers to create training and teaching courses for English oral communication ability leading to retaining or increasing brand loyalty.

Keywords: English oral communication ability, passenger perception, passenger satisfaction, brand loyalty

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาระดับความพึงพอใจของผู้โดยสารต่างชาติต่อความสามารถการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษด้วยวาจาของพนักงานภาคพื้นคนไทยในการปฏิบัติงานเฉพาะหน้าที่ที่สายการบินไทย และสำรวจการรับรู้ของผู้โดยสารต่างชาติเกี่ยวกับความภักดีในตราสินค้าที่เป็นผลจากความพึงพอใจในความสามารถในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษด้วยวาจาของพนักงานภาคพื้น และตรวจสอบความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างความพึงพอใจกับความภักดีในตราสินค้าของผู้โดยสารต่างชาติ งานวิจัยครั้งนี้ใช้แบบสอบถามแบบ 5 ระดับ ของลิเคิร์ตและสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง ผลวิจัยพบว่าความสามารถการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษด้วยวาจาของพนักงานภาคพื้นในการปฏิบัติงานเฉพาะหน้า 3 ด้าน ได้รับคะแนนความพึงพอใจอย่างมาก ได้แก่ บริการช่วยเหลือพิเศษ (เฉลี่ย 3.81) บริการลูกค้าที่สนามบิน (เฉลี่ย 3.96) บริการสัมภาระ (เฉลี่ย 3.66) เนื่องจากความพึงพอใจต่อความสามารถในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษด้วยวาจาของพนักงานภาคพื้น ผู้โดยสารต่างชาติตั้งใจจะเดินทางกับสายการบินอีกครั้งในอนาคตและแนะนำสายการบินให้กับผู้อื่น โดยพบว่าความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างความสามารถการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษด้วยวาจาของพนักงานภาคพื้นกับความภักดีในตราสินค้าของผู้โดยสารต่างชาติมีไม่มาก ($r = .19, p = .49$) จากความคิดเห็นระหว่างการสัมภาษณ์ผู้โดยสารต่างชาติ แม้ว่าความสามารถในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษด้วยวาจาของพนักงานภาคพื้นจะมีผลกระทบต่อความภักดีในตราสินค้าของผู้โดยสารต่างชาติไม่มาก ก็สามารถเป็นหนึ่งในปัจจัยที่ทำให้เกิดความภักดีในตราสินค้าได้ ผลการวิจัยสามารถเป็นแนวทางให้ผู้ฝึกสอนเจ้าหน้าที่ภาคพื้นและครูสอนภาษาอังกฤษสำหรับสร้างหลักสูตรการฝึกอบรมและการสอนเพื่อเพิ่มความสามารถในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษด้วยวาจา โดยนำไปสู่การคงไว้หรือเพิ่มขึ้นซึ่งความภักดีในตราสินค้าได้

คำสำคัญ: ความสามารถในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษด้วยวาจา
การรับรู้ของผู้โดยสาร ความพึงพอใจของผู้โดยสาร
ความภักดีในตราสินค้า

Introduction

According to Chen (2018), the airline industry has a high level of competition. Many low-cost airlines have had an influence on the market share due to their low price. Therefore, all airlines need to find strategies to enhance passenger numbers. To do this, the airline can improve their brand image by providing passengers with a fantastic service and allowing them to give feedback on their services (Chonsalasin et al., 2020). Gharaibah (2020) explained that to attract or increase more new customers and to maintain previous customer levels, the airline needs to build a positive brand image to stand out from the competitors. Similarly, Kee (2021) suggested that one of the ways to improve a company's image is to "build trust and authenticity between your clients and your brand" (p. 6). Moreover, for decreasing the number of dissatisfied customers is to improve services by training frontline employees with knowledge skills and customer service skills to reduce passenger complaints (Muzinda, 2021). According to Zahedpisheh et al. (2017), for the hospitality industry, including airlines, tourism, and hotels, staff's English ability, English accuracy, and English proficiency skills have been required and must be improved. Based on Erazo et al.'s (2019) study, English proficiency has been necessary, especially for oral communication ability. It has been needed to communicate clearly and concisely for providing good services, solving problems, and responding to customers' needs. This can create, maintain, or increase brand loyalty.

Consequently, English communication skills, especially oral communication ability, can be one of the important factors to improve an airline's services, quality, and loyalty among passengers. Sricharoenpramong (2018) found that it was very important for airlines to ensure their ground staff can compete with other airlines by focusing on satisfying passengers or providing services beyond their expectation. Based on the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) pilots, air traffic controllers and all others who use English on international routes must be at ICAO English Language Level 4 (Operational) or above (Anglo-Continental, 2020). ICAO English Level 4 is based on: pronunciation, grammatical and sentence structures, vocabulary, spoken fluency, message comprehension, and interaction (Skybrary, 2021).

Based on the background and importance of the study, the researchers were interested in exploring the level of foreign passengers' satisfaction towards Thai ground staff's English oral communication ability in function-specific tasks at a Thai airline and the passengers' perception of brand loyalty regarding the ground staff's satisfying English oral communication ability. Furthermore, a relationship between the passengers' satisfaction of the ground staff's English oral communication ability and their brand loyalty was explained.

Objectives

This study explores the level of foreign passengers' satisfaction towards Thai ground staff's English oral communication ability in their function-specific tasks at a Thai airline and the passengers' perception of brand loyalty regarding the ground staff's satisfying English oral communication ability. The relationship between the passengers' satisfaction of the

ground staff's English oral communication ability and their brand loyalty is also examined. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the level of foreign passengers' satisfaction towards Thai ground staff's English oral communication ability in their function-specific tasks at a Thai airline?
2. What is the passengers' perception regarding brand loyalty of this airline based on the ground staff's satisfying English oral communication ability?
3. Is there a relationship between the passengers' satisfaction of the ground staff's English oral communication ability and their brand loyalty?

Research Methodology

The study's participants were 30 foreign passengers who were selected by convenience sampling and have flown domestically and internationally with a Thai airline at Don Mueang International Airport. The passengers speak English as a first language, a second language, or a foreign language. According to Dornyei (2007), a number of 30 participants for a survey is appropriate. Consequently, the number of the participants could be accepted. Furthermore, since this study's data collection period was from March 2021 to June 2021 which has been during the COVID-19 pandemic, there have not been many foreign passengers travelling on Thai airlines. To address this issue, foreign passengers who flew with the airline before March 2020 which marked the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand were also included.

The investigation was mainly focused on the correlation between the passengers' satisfaction of the ground staff's English oral communication ability and their brand loyalty. Data collection was conducted by an online 5-point Likert scale questionnaire relating to the passengers' satisfaction towards the ground staff's English oral communication ability in function-specific tasks and perception of brand loyalty. In addition, a semi-structured interview was employed to obtain in-depth information from seven foreign passengers who were one American, one British, one Dutch, one German, and three Filipino.

The data from the passengers' questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively. Their personal information was analyzed by using frequency and percentage. For a 5-point Likert scale used to rate the degree of the passengers' satisfaction and perception, its results were analyzed by using means and standard deviations. Finally, the relationship between the ground staff's satisfying English oral communication ability and the passengers' brand loyalty was analyzed by the Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient (Spearman, 1904) since the data were from a nonparametric population. They were also of the rank-order value and ordinal data types (Hauke & Kossowski, 2011; Lobo & Guntur, 2018).

Findings and Discussion

1. Foreign Passengers' Personal Information

Before explaining the results for three research questions, 30 foreign passengers' personal information is described in the following table.

Table 1**Foreign Passengers' Personal Information**

Personal information		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	20	66.7%
	Female	10	33.3%
Age	20-25	3	10.0%
	26-30	8	26.7%
	31-35	2	6.7%
	36-40	2	6.7%
	Above 41	15	50.0%
Nationality	Filipino	6	20.0%
	American	7	23.3%
	Danish	2	6.7%
	Laotian	1	3.3%
	Australian	1	3.3%
	Dutch	4	13.3%
	British	3	10.3%
	Mexican	1	3.3%
	Spanish	1	3.3%
	Indian	1	3.3%
	German	3	10.0%
Amount of flying time	First time	7	23.3%
	2-5	14	46.7 %
	6-10	3	10.0%
	More than 10	6	20.0%

Based on Table 1, it can be concluded that among the 30 foreign passengers there were more male passengers than

female passengers. Half of the passengers were above 41 years old. Among the 11 nationalities, the majority of passengers were American (23.3%) followed by Filipino (20.0%). There were 14 passengers (46.7%) flying with this airline 2-5 times.

2. Foreign Passenger's Satisfaction Towards Thai Ground Staff's English Oral Communication Ability

In this study, English oral communication ability was adapted from ICAO English Level 4's rating scale consisting of six component skills of linguistic proficiency in listening and speaking: pronunciation, grammatical and sentence structures, vocabulary, spoken fluency, message comprehension, and interaction (Skybrary, 2021). The level of foreign passenger's satisfaction towards Thai ground staff's English oral communication ability in their three job areas' tasks at a Thai airline was analyzed by using the following criteria:

4.21 - 5.00 = extremely satisfied

3.41 - 4.20 = very satisfied

2.61 - 3.40 = moderately satisfied

1.81 - 2.60 = slightly satisfied

1.00 - 1.80 = not satisfied

The tables below show foreign passenger's satisfaction towards the ground staff's English oral communication ability in each task of three job areas: special services function, airport customer service function, and baggage services function.

Table 2

Satisfaction Towards Thai Ground Staff's English Oral Communication Ability in Special Services Function

Special services function	Mean	SD	Level of satisfaction
1. Making reservations as passengers request	3.96	0.62	Very satisfied
2. Providing special passenger services	3.96	0.64	Very satisfied
3. Handling passengers covering the failures in services	3.60	0.78	Very satisfied
4. Issuing airline documents which are needed to facilitate services	4.05	0.73	Very satisfied
5. Meeting and assisting first and business class passengers in the airline lounges	4.03	0.74	Very satisfied
6. Taking reservations from passengers who call in	3.90	0.75	Very satisfied
7. Issuing tickets to passengers	4.03	0.73	Very satisfied
8. Giving special assistance to disabled passengers outside the terminal	3.92	0.66	Very satisfied
Total	3.81	0.62	Very satisfied

Based on Table 2, for the ground staff's English communication ability of the first job area, special service function, it can be concluded that foreign passengers were very satisfied with it (Mean = 3.81). Issuing airline documents which

are needed to facilitate services gained the most satisfying level (Mean = 4.05). One of the foreign passengers gave an opinion that “everyone can access the lounge even you fly with the economy class. They have nice food, nice snack before you begin boarding. Ground staff are friendly, they smile all the time. I feel that I am welcome even I fly with economy class. I feel like...this is a premium class” (Dutch). It can be concluded that this foreign passenger was satisfied with the interaction with ground staff and was facilitated while using the services.

Table 3

Satisfaction Towards Thai Ground Staff's English Oral Communication Ability in Airport Customer Service Function

Airport customer service function	Mean	SD	Level of satisfaction
1. Checking passengers' tickets and reservations status	4.05	0.80	Very satisfied
2. Checking passengers' travel documents	4.09	0.80	Very satisfied
3. Assigning seats to passengers by issuing boarding passes and baggage tags	3.97	0.73	Very satisfied
4. Boarding passengers to the aircraft smoothly	4.00	0.73	Very satisfied
5. Standing by to assist the arriving passengers upon arrivals at the gate	3.91	0.86	Very satisfied

Airport customer service function	Mean	SD	Level of satisfaction
6. Manning the check-in counters that serve departing passengers	4.02	0.79	Very satisfied
7. Manning and attending to customers at the arrival and departure gate	3.92	0.83	Very satisfied
Total	3.96	0.75	Very satisfied

Table 3 shows that overall satisfaction towards the ground staff's English oral communication ability in airport customer service function was at the very satisfying level (Mean = 3.96). The most satisfying task was checking passengers' travel documents (Mean = 4.09). This result could be supported by four foreign passengers' interviews as follows:

“...they can communicate their job; for example, they can find out the requirement at the airport...” (British).

“...when I encountered the ground staff before the crew, they were approachable and fine. It is very important for me. I feel comfortable with that” (Filipino 1).

“Well,...the way they handle customer service is very excellent...all the staff are friendly and accommodating...” (Filipino 2).

“...I did check in and they were very nice, yeah I think the person who checked me in, their English was quite good” (German).

In summary, the ground staff's English oral communication ability satisfied these foreign passengers. The staff could communicate well in English, so they could handle all the passengers' needs.

Table 4

Satisfaction Towards Thai Ground Staff's English Oral Communication Tasks in Baggage Services Function

Baggage services function	Mean	SD	Level of satisfaction
1. Handling cases of lost or damaged baggages	3.55	0.66	Very satisfied
2. Delivering the delayed baggage to passengers' residence	3.62	0.74	Very satisfied
3. Stationing in the baggage claim area to help passengers	3.84	0.89	Very satisfied
4. Assisting passengers by answering questions, providing directions, or attending to their other needs	3.81	0.87	Very satisfied
5. Assisting passengers with luggage check-in at the ticket counter	3.83	0.66	Very satisfied
6. Making sure that all baggages are delivered	3.75	0.75	Very satisfied

Baggage services function	Mean	SD	Level of satisfaction
7. Confirming the identities and providing passengers with boarding passes	4.01	0.78	Very satisfied
8. In some cases, ground staff may be responsible for screening passengers and their luggage for security purposes	3.97	0.82	Very satisfied
Total	3.66	0.67	Very satisfied

Table 4 illustrates that overall satisfaction towards the ground staff's English oral communication ability in baggage services function was at the very satisfying level (Mean = 3.66). Confirming the identities and providing passengers with boarding passes gained the most satisfying level (Mean = 4.01). Based on the interviews, one of the foreign passengers mentioned about baggage services function as follows:

“...it is the thing that I check-in my baggage and get the boarding pass...Of course I feel it was perfect. They speak very good English...” (Dutch).

In summary, based on exploring the level of foreign passengers' satisfaction towards Thai ground staff's English oral communication ability in their job areas' tasks at a Thai airline. Foreign passengers were very satisfied with the ground staff's English oral communication ability. This result could be

supported by all seven foreign passengers' interviews as follows:

“...I don't have any problems with it. My interaction with ground staff was not very much. It was mostly about all things you have to do, such as showing a passport and a boarding pass, and telling direction...” (American).

“...I thought it was functional for the service that they provide and they can communicate their job...” (British).

“...I think they do speak very good English because they have to work with the foreigners...” (Dutch).

“... I think that ground staff are all nice, but they have to improve their English sometimes...” (German).

“...I feel comfortable with ground staff and cabin crew...” (Filipino 1).

“...Actually, I am very satisfied with the customer service the way they handle the customer..., I am very satisfied...” (Filipino 2).

“...I think their English is good when communicating. I never really had a problem communicating with them...” (Filipino 3).

3. Foreign Passenger's Perception of Brand Loyalty Towards Thai Ground Staff's Satisfying English Oral Communication Ability

Foreign passenger's perception of brand loyalty towards Thai ground staff's satisfying English oral communication ability was analyzed by using the following criteria:

- 4.21 - 5.00 = very loyal
- 3.41 - 4.20 = loyal
- 2.61 - 3.40 = neutral
- 1.81 - 2.60 = disloyal
- 1.00 - 1.80 = very disloyal

The following table shows the passengers' perception of brand loyalty towards the ground staff's satisfying English oral communication ability.

Table 5

Perception of Brand Loyalty Towards Thai Ground Staff's Satisfying English Oral Communication Ability

Perception of brand loyalty	Mean	SD	Level of loyalty
1. I will travel with this airline again in the future.	3.47	0.86	Loyal
2. I intend to keep flying with this company.	3.50	0.86	Loyal
3. I would recommend this company to others.	3.67	0.80	Loyal
4. I am willing to pay a higher price for this company.	2.93	0.78	Neutral

Perception of brand loyalty	Mean	SD	Level of loyalty
5. I consider myself as a loyal customer to this airline.	3.33	0.80	Neutral
Total	3.38	0.70	Loyal

Table 5 shows that foreign passengers were loyal to this airline company (Mean = 3.38). They would recommend this company to others (Mean = 3.67) and intend to keep flying with this company (Mean = 3.50). Similarly, foreign passengers explained in the interviews that good customer services with good English oral communication ability could support brand loyalty as follows:

“...They speak very good English. Of course, I am sure after COVID-19, I will tell my family and my friends that I have very good experience with this airline. I would like to fly with them again if I have a chance to go back again to Thailand” (Dutch).

“...I think ground staff are good. They can speak and understand English. As long as they still have an accommodating customer service, my friends and I are using the airline again” (Filipino 1).

“Actually I am very satisfied with the customer service and the way they handle customers. I can even say and recommend this Thai airline as well” (Filipino 2).

“They are well trained with communication skills. I know they are very good at customer service as well though there is a little mistake. We can't say that we need perfect people

to speak as same as a native speaker. As long as you can communicate with each other. My needs are attended possibly. I am satisfied the way they handle with me. Then I'll go for this airline..." (German).

However, there were two foreign passengers who thought that the price was also important as follows:

"I would fly with this airline if they can continue to provide the prices and the services reasonably. I am loyal to it" (British).

"I think I would keep flying and recommending this airline to other people. I would say I don't know you can call it very loyal because if you can get anything cheaper price with a good quality, then why not" (Filipino 3).

4. A Relationship Between the Passengers' Satisfaction of Ground Staff's English Oral Communication Ability and Their Brand Loyalty

A relationship between Thai ground staff's satisfying English oral communication ability and foreign passengers' brand loyalty was analyzed by using the following criteria:

± 1 = perfect

$\pm 0.75 - \pm 1$ = high degree

$\pm 0.25 - \pm 0.75$ = moderate degree

$0 - \pm 0.25$ = low degree

0 = no correlation

The following table shows a relationship between the passengers' satisfaction of the ground staff's English oral communication ability and their brand loyalty.

Table 6

A Relationship Between the Passengers' Satisfaction of Ground Staff's English Oral Communication Ability and Their Brand Loyalty

Spearman's correlation coefficient	Satisfying ability in job area 1	Satisfying ability in job area 2	Satisfying ability in job area 3	Overall satisfying ability
Brand loyalty	.18	.21	.14	.19

(p) = .05

Based on the above table, for the relationship between the passengers' satisfaction of the ground staff's English oral communication ability in all three function-specific tasks and their brand loyalty, it was $r = .19$. Within the three tasks, the highest correlation was the relationship between satisfying English oral communication ability in the second task, airport customer service function and brand loyalty ($r = .21$). It can be concluded that there was a low correlation between satisfying English oral communication ability in all three function-specific tasks and foreign passengers' brand loyalty ($r = .19$, $p = .49$). However, for this relationship, it was not statistically significant because the p-value was higher than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$).

In summary, the foreign passengers were very satisfied with Thai ground staff's English oral communication ability in all function-specific tasks: special services function, airport customer service function, and baggage services function. For special services function, 'issuing airline documents which are needed to facilitate services' was more satisfying than the other tasks. 'Checking passengers' ticket and reservations status' in airport customer service function was the most

satisfying. For baggage services function, foreign passengers were satisfied with ‘confirming the identities and providing passengers with boarding passes’ the most. Normally, these satisfying tasks have been a main task for ground staff because they are related to passengers’ basic needs. In this study, the foreign passengers might deal with these tasks more than the other tasks. Thus, it can be said that the ground staff’s good English oral communication ability may influence a higher level of passengers’ satisfaction. For the foreign passengers’ perception of brand loyalty regarding Thai ground staff’s satisfying English oral communication ability, most passengers will fly with this airline again and recommend it to others. This showed that they were satisfied with this airline’s service quality, including the ground staff’s English oral communication ability. This could enhance passenger intentions to remain with the airline. Finally, although the ground staff’s English oral communication ability had a low correlation with the passengers’ brand loyalty, the ground staff’s English oral communication ability is still important and necessary because it can support the level of foreign passengers’ satisfaction on the airline’s services. Similarly, Zahedpisheh et al. (2017) explained that English communication skills could be an essential factor to improve an airline’s services, quality, and loyalty among passengers. Sricharoenpramong (2018) found that it is very crucial for an airline to make sure that their ground staff can compete with other airlines by focusing on satisfying passengers or providing services beyond their expectation. In addition, service quality, perceived value, and customer satisfaction has had positive effects on the airline’s brand loyalty. Consequently, in order to avoid dissatisfaction and keep passengers for a long run, not only ground staff but also other airline employees are required to be good enough at English oral communication skills to serve passengers well and create brand loyalty (Xiaoqin, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the results previously discussed, it might be too early to make any firm conclusions about the relationship between ground staff's English oral communication ability and foreign passengers' brand loyalty. Larger studies with more participants are still needed in order to improve the understanding of this issue. Although not confirming whether ground staff's English oral communication ability is important or not for supporting passengers' brand loyalty, the study undeniably shows that English oral communication ability is necessary for passenger satisfaction in several cases mentioned in the interview. Consequently, an airline can use the study's results as a guideline for strategizing and prioritizing its products and services, including, but not limited to, ground staff's English oral communication ability in order to strengthen its brand loyalty and survive in the current airline market.

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