



Bridging Language Gaps: English Proficiency and Barriers Among Tourism Professionals in Ao Nang Subdistrict, Krabi Province

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Abstract

English proficiency plays a crucial role in global tourism as it facilitates effective communication between tourists and service providers from various cultural backgrounds. This study aims to examine English language proficiency and the specific challenges faced by tourism sector employees in Ao Nang Subdistrict, Krabi Province, including identifying the need for targeted language development. Data were collected from 390 participants across five key job roles: hotel staff, tour guides, travel agents or tour operators, restaurant and food service staff, and transportation service providers. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and direct workplace observations were utilized as research instruments to provide deep understanding of language use and barriers in real-world settings. Eighty participants were purposefully selected from each job role for the interview, and observations were conducted at different tourism-related establishments, focusing on authentic interactions between staff and international tourists. The findings show that overall English proficiency is moderate, with tour guides and travel agents and tour operators demonstrating higher speaking and listening skills due to frequent customer interaction, while writing remains the weakest skill across all roles. It was also found that vocabulary for specialized tasks, various English accents, pronunciation difficulties, and the lack of regular practice using English in real-life situations are key main challenges. The participants showed strong desire for English language development programs, and they highly preferred language exchange with native English speakers and on-the-job training. Addressing English proficiency, challenges and training program needs is essential for enhancing service quality, improving tourist satisfaction, and strengthening the global competitiveness of Thailand's tourism industry.

1. Introduction

In the tourism industry in Thailand, English proficiency plays a crucial role in enhancing both communication and service quality. Because English functions as a lingua franca, it allows Thai tourism professionals to effectively communicate with international visitors from around the world with a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Having high English proficiency breaks barriers and understands tourists' need and preference better, which leads to improved customer service because staff can accurately respond to inquiries, provide recommendations, and address concerns immediately. Obviously, the role of English is important, which serves as a bridge language, in tourist destinations such as Phuket, Krabi and other provinces in the Andaman Triangle, where there is a high number of international tourists who rely on English to navigate local attractions, understand cultural practices and follow safety guidelines. For tourism professionals in hotels, restaurants and tourist sites, proficiency in English directly helps them meet the needs of tourists more effectively because English makes conversations easier, which in turn enhances satisfaction and encourages positive experiences, leading to higher revenue.

Despite this, concerns have emerged regarding the adequacy of English language proficiency among Thai tourism professionals. Despite its prominent position as a global tourist destination, Thailand continues to struggle with low English proficiency. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (2024), Thailand ranked 101st out of 116 countries, placing it in the "very low proficiency" category. This corresponds to 21st place among 23 Asian countries, where Thai adults typically possess only basic English abilities, such as introducing themselves or interpreting simple signs. Also, research reinforces this concern. Kijpoonphol and Duy Linh (2020, p. 104) reported that Thai front-line tourism professionals lack adequate English-speaking and listening skills. Similarly, Jantawong et al. (2023, pp. 199-211) found that tourism-related personnel in Phang Nga province exhibited problems with their English language skills, and they struggle with effective communication in English, which is essential in the tourism industry. A recent study by Khuanmuang (2025, pp. 242-251) emphasized the need for cruise tourism staff to improve their proficiency in all four macro-skills to deliver quality service and effectively engage with international passengers.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate and assess the current levels of English proficiency among tourism professionals in the Ao Nang subdistrict, Krabi Province, one of Thailand's most internationally visited destinations, in the Andaman Triangle. The study evaluates speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, identifies key challenges in English language use,

and explores potential strategies for improvement. Ultimately, the goal is to enhance the competitiveness of Thailand's tourism sector by promoting effective communication and service excellence through improved English proficiency.

2. Research Questions

The primary research questions of this research are:

2.1. What is the level of proficiency in the English language among individuals working in the tourism sector in Ao Nang Subdistrict, Krabi Province?

2.2 What challenges are faced when using English at work?

2.3 What language skill development programs or resources would be most beneficial for individuals in the tourism sector?

3. Literature Review

3.1 English Communication Skills in the Thai Tourism Workforce

English proficiency plays an important role in the tourism industry, which is crucial for enhancing communication and ensuring customer satisfaction, especially in non-English speaking countries. As the global lingua franca, English allows tourism professionals to interact and engage with travelers from a wide variety background to provide information about local attractions and cultural sites accurately. English does not only improve service quality, but it also promotes cultural exchange and deeper understanding between hosts and guests.

In Thailand, English plays a significant role in shaping the tourism industry for several reasons. Firstly, as the global lingua franca, English allows Thai tourism professionals to communicate effectively with international tourists from diverse backgrounds. This enhances the quality of service and ensures that tourists feel understood and valued, which contributes to higher satisfaction and more positive reviews. Proficiency in English further allows tourism professionals to provide clear information about local attractions, respond effectively to questions, and resolve problems that may arise during the tourists' stay. In addition, at the individual level, tourism professionals with high English skills have more opportunities for professional development. For example, they can attend international training, and they can work in higher-level positions. On a broader scale, English proficiency strengthens Thailand to become more attractive, as it supports more effective marketing and promotional efforts to international audiences. Consequently,

English makes a significant contribution to the national economy and helps maintain Thailand's competitiveness as a tourist destination.

Several studies have confirmed that English language proficiency plays a significant role in ensuring tourist satisfaction. For example, the study of Thitivesa and Siraphatthada (2020, pp. 251-264) revealed that guides who are proficient in English can address the needs and queries of tourists effectively, leading to a more satisfying tourist experience. Higher satisfaction levels among tourists can result in positive recommendations and increased attraction to the cultural sites. Also, English language proficiency among tourist guides in Thailand is essential for effective communication, understanding, and satisfaction, which collectively contribute to positive tourist attraction recommendations and the overall success of cultural tourism in the region.

3.2 Current Status and Challenges of English Proficiency in Thailand

A recent survey by EF English Proficiency Index (2024) reported that English proficiency of people in Thailand remains extremely low comparing to other countries. Thailand ranked 101st out of 116 countries and last among the eight ASEAN countries, with a score of 416, classified as "very low proficiency". This low proficiency is reflected across all regions, with only modestly higher scores in major cities such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Academic research further highlights that Thai university students generally perceive their English proficiency at the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), indicating basic user status with limited communicative ability (Ngonkum & Deerajviseta, 2024, pp. 185-211).

Several persistent challenges contribute to this situation. Studies point to a shortage of qualified English teachers, limited exposure to communicative English in both classroom and daily life, and an educational focus on rote memorization and grammar rather than practical language use. Many students report insufficient materials and unclear guidance on how to develop skills aligned with international standards like the CEFR, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing. There is also a notable gap between curriculum goals and actual proficiency outcomes, with proficiency levels declining over time despite policy efforts. These factors collectively hinder the development of English proficiency necessary for academic, professional, and international communication contexts in Thailand (Ngonkum & Deerajviseta, 2024, pp. 185-211).

3.3 Previous Studies

Several studies related to English language proficiency in the tourism industry are summarized as follows.

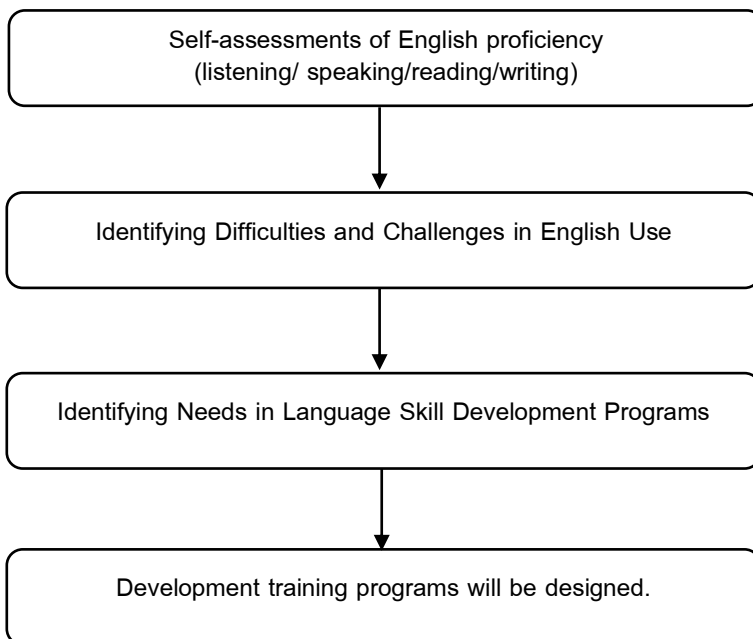
Jantawong et al. (2023, pp. 199-211) examined the problems and needs relating to improving English language skills among 150 tourism-related personnel in Phang Nga province and the communication problems experienced by 50 foreign tourists. The questionnaires were distributed, and interviews were conducted to collect the data. The collected data were analyzed using percentages, means, standard deviations, and content analysis. The findings indicated moderate English-language problems among tourism-related personnel in Phang Nga and this was confirmed by foreign tourists. The most problematic area was writing skills followed by reading skills. However, it was also observed that tourism-related personnel in Phang Nga province needed to enhance their listening skills followed by speaking skills. The majority of personnel expressed a desire to attend English training. The study suggests developing an English training program tailored to the specific needs of tourism-related personnel to enhance their English proficiency for effective communication at work.

Thitivesa and Siraphatthada (2020, pp. 251-254) investigated the influence of English language proficiency on tourist attractions, specifically within the context of cultural tourism in Thailand. The study emphasized the importance of English communication skills for enhancing tourists' understanding, satisfaction, and overall perception of cultural sites. Methodologically, a quantitative approach was employed using surveys distributed to tourists in Thailand, and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was utilized for data analysis. The findings demonstrate that English language proficiency significantly affects communication, understanding, and satisfaction, which in turn enhances tourist attractions. The study shows that effective English communication by guides can positively impact tourist experiences and attract more visitors. The study also underscores the importance of improving English language skills among tourism service providers to boost Thailand's cultural tourism industry.

The study of Chanwanakul (2021, pp. 1905–1910) aimed to examine the English language proficiency of tour guides at a historical attraction to suggest a guideline for developing their English language skills. The sampling group used includes 400 foreign tourists who have been to a historical attraction with Thai tour guides accompanying them using English language to communicate. The findings indicates that an average level of the tourists' opinions on English language proficiency of tour guides at the historical attraction was overall at a high level. When considered by aspects, presentation skill is at the highest level followed by communication skill with the use of appropriate language level, respectively. However, considering the average level of the tourists' opinions by gender, it is found that, overall, the averages of the two aspects:

presentation skill and communication skill with the use of appropriate language level are significantly different at a statistic level of 0.05.

4. Conceptual Framework



5. Research Methodology

5.1 Participants

This study focused on individuals employed in the tourism industry in Krabi Province and utilized three sampling methods to ensure robust and comprehensive findings. First, stratified random sampling was used to select 390 participants from an estimated population of 26,898 tourism workers, with the sample size determined using the Yamane formula at a 5% margin of error. The population was divided into five main professional strata, including others. There were 20.51% of travel agents and tour operators, 31.28% of hotel staff, 12.05% of tour guides, 17.18% of restaurant and food service staff, 11.54% of transportation service providers, and 7.44% in the 'Others' category, which included laundry and housekeeping staff, shop employees, hospital staff, and airport tourist service staff. Participants were randomly chosen from each group to complete

a questionnaire, yielding statistically representative data across occupational roles. For qualitative insights, a volunteer sampling method was employed to recruit 80 participants (calculated with a 10% margin of error) from the same five main job roles, excluding the others category, for semi-structured interviews exploring factors influencing English proficiency, consisting of 25% of tour guides, 20% of tour operators, 25% of hotel staff, 16.25% of restaurant and food service staff, and 13.75% of transportation service staff. Additionally, snowball sampling was used to select 50 individuals (20% from each occupational group) for workplace-based English proficiency assessments, providing a nuanced understanding of English usage in real-work settings.

5.2 Research Instruments

Three primary research instruments were employed to collect data on English proficiency and its impact in the workplace.

5.2.1 A structured questionnaire consisted of 42 items to provide a broad overview of English proficiency levels, challenges, and training needs across a large and diverse sample. It comprised six sections: (1) demographic information, (2) frequency of English use in the workplace, (3) self-assessment of proficiency across speaking, listening, reading, and writing, (4) challenges encountered in English use, (5) preferences for training and self-development programs, and (6) willingness to participate in further research.

5.2.2 A semi-structured interview with 15 open-ended questions was developed to generate rich qualitative insights into experiences of employees. It was divided into sections covering (1) role and use of English in the workplace, (2) self-rated proficiency and critical incidents of language use, (3) challenges and barriers, (4) needs and areas for improvement, (5) preferred learning methods and support mechanisms, (6) goals and perceived importance of English for career growth, and (7) additional comments.

5.2.3 A structured checklist with 10 items was used to observe employees' English use in real work contexts to capture actual English use in real workplace interactions, offering direct evidence of communication practices. There were 10 key areas: (1) engaging in conversation with tourists, (2) understanding and responding to queries, (3) handling written communication, (4) using appropriate greetings and farewells, (5) clarity of speech and pronunciation, (6) use of polite language and manners, (7) giving directions and providing information, (8) managing difficult situations or complaints, (9) confidence in using English, and (10) overall effectiveness in communication. Each item was rated on a four-point frequency scale (not observed, rarely observed, occasionally observed, frequently observed), with space for brief comments.

The questionnaire and interview items were validated for content using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). Three experts in English language teaching and tourism reviewed each item for relevance to the study's objectives. The IOC values for the questionnaire items ranged from 0.67 to 1.00, indicating acceptable to strong content validity, while the interview guide items yielded IOC values between 0.70 and 1.00. Based on the expert feedback, minor revisions were made to wording for clarity, but all items met the threshold of 0.50 and were retained. The observation checklist, similarly, reviewed by experts, obtained IOC values between 0.75 and 1.00, confirming strong congruence with the study objectives. Additionally, all three research instruments were pilot tested with a small group of tourism employees (n=15) in Meung District, Krabi Province, to ensure clarity, feasibility, and appropriateness of the items. Feedback from the pilot led to minor revisions in the wording of questionnaire items, refinement of interview prompts, and adjustment of observation checklist indicators. The pilot confirmed that the instruments were practical for use in real workplace contexts and aligned with the study objectives.

Each instrument was employed to address the three research questions and to ensure methodological triangulation. The questionnaire provided measurable trends for RQ1 (English proficiency), RQ2 (challenges), and RQ3 (training needs and preferences). The in-depth interviews added depth by exploring lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual explanations, while the observations captured authentic workplace behaviors that either confirmed or contrasted with self-reports.

5.3 Data collection

The data collection process involved three main steps.

5.3.1 A questionnaire was distributed to 390 participants from five main job roles within the tourism industry in Krabi Province

5.3.2 Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 80 participants, selected to represent five different job roles and proficiency levels, to gain qualitative insights into their experiences and challenges in using English in the workplace.

5.3.3 Direct observations were conducted with 50 participants during their regular work activities. Each participant was observed over a sufficient period, with a structured checklist form to document specific behaviors, interactions with tourists, and any difficulties encountered in using English.

5.4 Data Analysis

The three steps of data analysis were described as follows.

5.4.1 For the questionnaire, descriptive statistics including percentages, mean scores and standard deviations were calculated to analyze self-reported English proficiency, frequency of English usage, challenges encountered when using English at work, and needs of English language skills development programs.

5.4.2 Transcriptions of interviews were analyzed to identify recurring themes and insights related to challenges and needs in English usage.

5.4.3 Data from observation checklists were compiled and subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns in real-time English usage and common communication challenges

6. Results

6.1 RQ1: What is their level of proficiency in the English language among individuals working in the tourism sector in Ao Nang Subdistrict, Krabi Province?

6.1.1 Self-assessments of English proficiency

Based on data collected from 390 participants' frequency of English usage, the overall level of English proficiency among individuals working in the tourism sector in Ao Nang Subdistrict, Krabi Province can be categorized as moderate, with notable variations across different job roles. To examine the self-assessment of English skills by job roles, the data collected from the questionnaires was analyzed to find out mean scores, and standard deviations of the self-assessment of English proficiency across different roles in the tourism sector in Ao Nang Subdistrict, Krabi Province, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Self-Assessment of English Skills by Job Roles

<i>Position/Roles</i>	<i>English Skills</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Level</i>
<i>Travel agents and tour operators</i>	Overall	3.33	0.96	Moderate
	Speaking	3.33	1.04	Moderate
	Listening	3.32	1.01	Moderate
	Reading	3.50	1.00	Good
	Writing	3.36	0.94	Moderate

Table 1*Self-Assessment of English Skills by Job Roles (Cont.)*

Position/Roles	English Skills	Mean	SD	Level
<i>Tour guides</i>	Overall	3.27	0.89	Moderate
	Speaking	3.27	0.98	Moderate
	Listening	3.35	0.91	Moderate
	Reading	3.43	0.92	Good
	Writing	3.33	0.97	Moderate
<i>Hotel staff</i>	Overall	3.02	0.93	Moderate
	Speaking	3.06	0.94	Moderate
	Listening	3.15	0.92	Moderate
	Reading	3.24	1.06	Moderate
	Writing	3.04	1.04	Moderate
<i>Restaurant and food service staff</i>	Overall	2.91	0.91	Moderate
	Speaking	2.76	0.95	Moderate
	Listening	3.04	0.96	Moderate
	Reading	3.16	0.96	Moderate
	Writing	2.65	0.91	Moderate
<i>Transportation Services</i>	Overall	2.91	0.83	Moderate
	Speaking	2.93	0.92	Moderate
	Listening	3.15	0.94	Moderate
	Reading	2.97	0.90	Moderate
	Writing	2.86	0.93	Moderate
<i>Others</i>	Overall	2.80	1.04	Moderate
	Speaking	2.92	1.03	Moderate
	Listening	3.12	1.09	Moderate
	Reading	3.04	1.17	Moderate
	Writing	2.68	1.10	Moderate
<i>Total</i>	Overall	3.07	0.94	Moderate
	Speaking	3.06	0.98	Moderate
	Listening	3.19	0.96	Moderate
	Reading	3.26	1.01	Moderate
	Writing	3.03	1.01	Moderate

The overall English proficiency across all roles was found to be moderate, with a mean score of 3.07. Listening (3.19) and reading (3.26) skills were relatively stronger across most

roles, reflecting their frequent use in day-to-day interactions with international tourists. However, speaking (3.06) and writing (3.03) were consistently identified as the weakest areas, indicating a clear need for improvement in formal communication, particularly for tasks such as emails and reports. The moderate proficiency levels across all job roles demonstrate that while employees have functional language skills, there is significant room for improvement, especially in writing.

When looking at the English proficiency across four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, the findings show both strengths and areas for improvement described as follows:

1. Speaking was generally rated as the weakest skill for restaurant and food service staff and transportation services, indicating challenges in verbal communication, particularly in more interactive or customer-facing contexts. Tour guides and hotel staff demonstrated relatively higher proficiency in speaking which is essential for their roles that require constant verbal interaction with tourists. In contrast, travel agents and tour operators reported a mean score of 3.33, showing balanced proficiency in both oral and written communication. This can be seen by the fact that travel agents and tour operators are usually involved in handling client correspondence and documentation, which relates to their roles and responsibilities. By comparing, the employees in the “other” category showed the lowest speaking proficiency due to limited interaction with tourists.

2. Listening was the highest-rated skill across most roles, particularly for hotel staff with the mean scores of 3.72, and tour guides also reported a high proficiency in listening. Travel agents and tour operators showed slightly lower, but they are still strong at listening skills. Restaurant and food service staff and transportation services also reported moderate proficiency in listening. While both face challenges in speaking, their ability to understand customer needs is relatively strong. The “Others” category also rated listening moderately, reflecting a functional proficiency in understanding interactions with tourists or clients.

3. Reading proficiency varied notably across job roles, with travel agents and tour operators and tour guides demonstrating significantly higher levels of competence compared to other groups, likely due to their routine engagement with travel documents, emails, and booking information, reading brochures, scripts, and informational texts to effectively communicate with tourists. In contrast, the other three job roles showed lower reading proficiency. Hotel staff reported a moderate level while restaurant and food service staff and transportation services staff had the

lowest scores, reflecting the limited role of reading in their daily tasks. The Others group also showed moderate proficiency, with reading being less essential in their roles.

4. Writing was the weakest skill across all job roles, with the most significant challenges observed among restaurant and food service staff and transportation services. Both roles indicated that written communication is less frequent or less important in their daily tasks, leading to lower proficiency. Hotel staff and tour guides reported higher proficiency in writing but still identified it as an area for improvement, especially for tasks like emails or formal guest communication. Travel agents and tour operators showed relatively higher proficiency in writing, likely due to their engagement in creating written correspondence and processing travel documents. Others reported the lowest proficiency in writing, reinforcing the idea that written communication is a challenge across roles with less customer-facing interaction.

6.1.2 English Proficiency Across Job Roles in the Tourism Sector: Insights from Interviews

To explore English proficiency in greater depth, a volunteer sampling method was used to recruit 80 participants, excluding the “Others” category, for qualitative interviews. The findings from the semi-structured interviews reveal key themes related to the English proficiency across different job roles. Across all job roles, English is predominantly used for customer interactions such as providing information, answering questions, giving directions, and explaining services. Hotel staff use English daily for check-ins/check-outs, providing information about local attractions, and assisting guests with general inquiries. Tour guides use English constantly to give information about tourist destinations such as beaches, islands, and sightseeing, and explain cultural and historical details and to answer tourist questions. Similarly, travel agents and tour operators frequently use English for customer inquiries, handling bookings, and email communication regarding logistics. Restaurant and food service staff use English primarily for taking orders and explaining food items to tourists. Transportation service workers, such as van drivers and boat drivers use English to greet tourists, explain routes, or provide safety instructions.

The findings from the semi-structured interviews confirmed the questionnaire findings: tour guides and hotel staff expressed stronger speaking and listening skills, while restaurant and transport staff reported broader difficulties. Importantly, the interviews revealed nuances not evident in survey data, including anxiety, lack of confidence, and difficulties using specialized vocabulary or formal writing. For example, a tour guide explained:

"I use English almost every day to explain history, culture, and tourist sites to international visitors. Listening and reading are okay, but when tourists ask deeper questions, I often feel limited. The biggest challenge is vocabulary, especially technical words, and sometimes different accents are hard to understand."

In contrast, a restaurant staff member highlighted challenges in fast-paced service settings:

"I use English every day when taking orders or answering questions, but understanding tourists when they speak fast is difficult. I can speak simple sentences, but I often get nervous. On-the-job training focusing on food and service vocabulary would help."

These excerpts illustrate how, while customer-facing staff demonstrate higher proficiency in daily communication, confidence issues and lack of specific vocabulary remain significant barriers, particularly for employees in roles with less exposure to sustained English interaction.

6.1.3 Observational Analysis of English Proficiency in Customer Interactions Across Job Roles

Observations were conducted in typical workplace scenarios where English is frequently used, including hotel front desk interactions (check-in/out and service inquiries), restaurant staff taking orders and explaining menus, tour operators and travel agents booking trips and providing destination information, tour guides leading tours and explaining attractions, and transportation staff giving directions and safety instructions. The findings from the observation of 50 participants provide a detailed look at the English proficiency and communication behaviors across various job. The findings were described as follows:

1. Hotel staff were frequently observed engaging in conversations with tourists, especially during check-ins/check-outs and when answering general inquiries. Their proficiency in responding to most routine questions was noted, though they struggled with more complex or technical queries. Hotel staff were able to handle basic forms, though formal written communication, such as emails, posed challenges. Their ability to use polite language and maintain appropriate greetings and farewells was frequently observed, reflecting their guest-facing roles. While their speech was clear, some difficulties arose with the pronunciation of unfamiliar terms. Overall, hotel staff

demonstrated high confidence in routine interactions, although they were less confident when handling technical language or complex issues. In managing difficult situations, hotel staff could handle basic complaints but struggled with more complex or sensitive issues. Their overall communication effectiveness was strong in routine interactions, but less so in more complicated situations.

2. Tour guides were frequently observed engaging with tourists, providing detailed information about tourist destinations, cultural aspects, and answering questions. Their proficiency in speaking and listening was rated highly, though they sometimes struggled with more complex queries. It was observed that written communication was less frequent. When they did, it was generally clear. They often produced mistakes in the case of complex grammar. In face-to-face interactions, tour guides used polite language, especially when they greeted tourists at the beginning and end of tours. In speaking, their speech was usually clear, but they sometimes have problems when they had to use technical terms or listen to unfamiliar accents. Most tour guides were confident in using English for routine conversations. However, they felt uncomfortable when they faced specialized situations. Also, tour guides communicated well to handle basic issues in difficult situations or complaints.

3. Travel agents and tour operators were occasionally observed engaging in conversations with tourists. In fact, they usually replied to emails, or they sometimes had telephone conversations with foreign clients. It was found that they are strong at basic writing, especially for booking and logistics details, and they usually used polite language in their writing. In terms of speaking, they answered questions clearly, but they faced difficulties in listening with strong accents or more complicated questions such as cultural issues, and details of cultural events. From observation, it was found that travel agents and tour operators were confident in their writing, but they were less confident in speaking.

4. Restaurant and food service staff were observed using English mainly for simple interactions such as taking orders and explaining food items. Compared to hotel staff and tour guides, their listening and speaking skills were weaker. Restaurant and food service staff often struggled when they were faced with more detailed questions. For example, clients asked about the ingredients of the dish to avoid allergy. For writing, it was observed that they rarely produced full sentences, instead noting only words or numbers based on the food items in the menu. While restaurant and food service staff generally used polite language, their range of formal or complex expressions was limited. For speaking, they communicated clearly enough to handle basic service

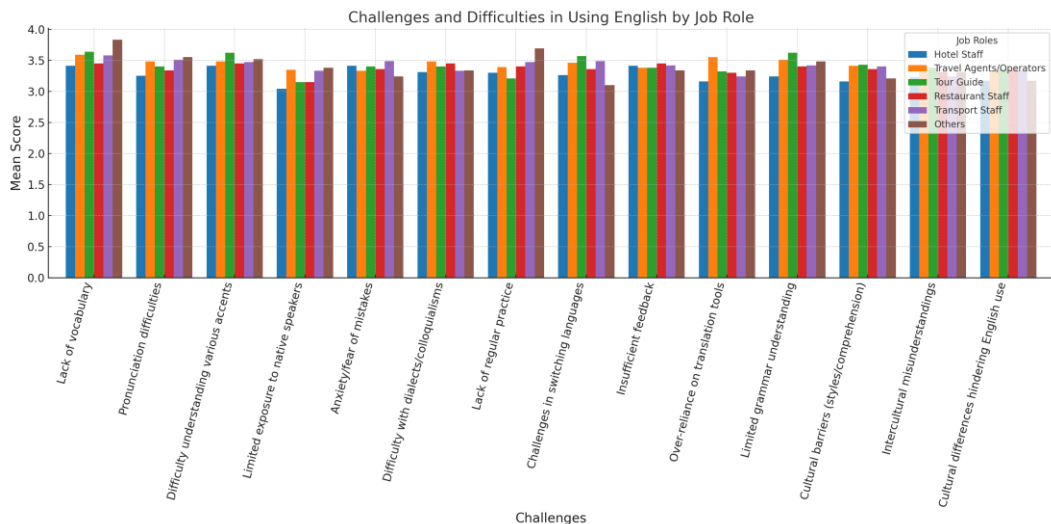
interactions. However, their pronunciation often lacked accuracy when they were required to say unfamiliar words, particularly vocabulary related to ingredients, taste and flavor. Confidence in English was generally low among this group, particularly new staff with little experience in this role, whereas more experienced staff demonstrated higher confidence.

5. Transportation services, like van drivers and boat drivers, were observed to have limited interactions with tourists, primarily involving greetings and basic information exchanges. Their listening and speaking skills were basic, and they often struggled when they were required to give detailed explanations such as giving directions or explaining safety information. It was observed that transportation services, like van drivers and boat drivers, were usually accompanied by tour guides, making it less necessary for them to use English directly. When speaking, they tried to use polite language, typically confined to basic greetings or functional phrases, like “*good afternoon and welcome*” or “*please*”. Confidence in using English was rarely observed as they had limited or little interaction with tourists.

Taken together, the findings from the questionnaire showed that employees rated listening and reading as their stronger skills, while speaking and writing were weaker. These results were supported by interview data, where participants, particularly hotel staff and tour guides, emphasized their confidence in listening, but they admitted to struggling with writing. Observations confirmed this pattern, as employees were generally able to understand spoken instructions, but they struggled with accurate verbal responses and written tasks. Together, these findings demonstrate strong triangulation: all three methods point to a proficiency hierarchy where receptive skills surpass productive skills.

6.2 RQ2: What are challenges or difficulties faced when using English at work?

The challenges faced by employees in using English within their respective job roles were assessed through a questionnaire completed by 390 participants from various roles in the tourism sector. The survey aimed to identify the key difficulties related to English usage in the workplace, with participants rating their experiences on a Likert scale. To facilitate a clearer understanding, the findings are described based on the mean scores reported by each job role as illustrated in Figure 1 to highlight the unique challenges faced by different occupational groups within the tourism industry.

Figure 1*Challenges Faced by Different Job Roles*

The findings from the questionnaire show that the most reported challenges faced by employees in the tourism sector are related to vocabulary limitations, pronunciation difficulties, and difficulty understanding accents, lack of regular practice or opportunities to use English in real-life situations, as well as limited understanding of English grammar rules, leading to difficulties in constructing correct sentences. While challenges such as cultural barriers and insufficient feedback or correction on English usage, leading to persistent errors were less widespread, they still affected a significant portion of the workforce. Additionally, it was found that English language challenges vary significantly based on job-specific tasks and the intensity of tourist interactions. Hotel staff reported moderate difficulties, mainly in vocabulary, anxiety about mistakes, and accent comprehension, but benefited from routine use of familiar phrases. Travel agents and tour operators experienced greater struggles with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and reliance on translation tools, reflecting the demands of administrative and formal communication. Tour guides, who interact intensively with tourists, faced persistent issues with accents, grammar, and vocabulary, requiring comprehensive language and customer service training. Restaurant staff struggled with insufficient feedback, dialect comprehension, and cultural barriers in fast-paced service contexts, while transportation staff highlighted vocabulary, pronunciation, and confidence-related challenges. The "Others" group faced the broadest set of

difficulties, particularly in vocabulary, pronunciation, and accent comprehension, reflecting diverse role-specific communication demands.

Based on the triangulated use of three research instruments, the questionnaire highlighted widespread challenges including limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, accent comprehension, grammar weaknesses, and anxiety about making mistakes. The interviews confirmed these findings while adding nuance, revealing that employees often lacked confidence, felt anxious in unpredictable situations, and struggled with cultural differences and fast-paced interactions. The observations further validated these self-reported issues by documenting frequent communication breakdowns in real time, particularly in speaking and listening during customer-facing tasks. Taken together, the three instruments consistently identified vocabulary gaps, pronunciation and accent difficulties, grammar limitations, and confidence-related barriers as the most significant challenges across tourism roles.

6.3 RQ3: What language skill development programs or resources would be most beneficial for individuals in the tourism sector?

To answer the third research question regarding the most beneficial language skill development programs or resources for individuals in the tourism sector, the participants were asked to evaluate various language skill development programs or resources based on their perceived effectiveness. Responses were rated using a Likert Scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (1-5). The mean scores and standard deviation for each statement were analyzed to interpret the extent to which participants favored different language training programs or resources to express levels of need from very low to very high.

Table 2

Language Skill development Programs or Resources

Language Skill development Programs or Resources	Mean	SD	Level
1. In-person and classroom-based English language training programs	3.74	0.94	High
2. Online English language courses	3.75	1.00	High
3. On-the-job English training	3.90	0.98	High
4. Self-paced English learning programs	3.79	0.97	High
5. Workshops and seminars conducted in English	3.85	0.96	High
6. English language training that focuses on tourism-specific vocabulary and situations.	3.71	1.06	High

Table 2*Language Skill development Programs or Resources (Cont.)*

Language Skill development Programs or Resources	Mean	SD	Level
7. Language exchange programs with native English speakers	3.96	0.98	High
8. Short, intensive English language courses	3.72	0.96	High
9. Training programs that include assessments and certifications	3.76	1.00	High
10. Training that incorporates interactive language learning tools and technologies (e.g., language learning apps, virtual reality scenarios).	3.83	1.02	High
N	390		

The findings from 390 participants indicate that language exchange with native speakers ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.98$) was the most preferred program, followed closely by on-the-job training ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.98$) and workshops/seminars ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.96$). Interactive tools and technologies such as apps and virtual reality ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.02$) and self-paced learning programs ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.97$) were also positively received, reflecting interest in flexible and modern approaches. Training with certification ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.00$), online courses ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.00$), intensive short courses ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.96$), and tourism-specific vocabulary training ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.06$) were rated slightly lower but still valued. It can be concluded that participants favored practical, interactive, and flexible training formats, with variation in preference reflecting differences in individual learning needs and job requirements.

Taken together, the three instruments confirm that tourism employees strongly prefer practical, interactive, and context-specific training methods. The questionnaire results clearly showed that employees language exchange with native speakers, on-the-job practice, and workshops were rated highest across roles. The interviews helped explain these choices, as participants showed strong desire for direct practice, immediate feedback, and real-world application, which made learning more meaningful and effective than classroom-based or purely theoretical instruction. Observations supported this view, showing that employees usually faced challenging moments during real interactions, where they had to manage real-time or spontaneous conversations. The findings from three instruments point to the same conclusion that training for the tourism sector need to focus on workplace-based, situational practice that builds both competence and confidence.

7. Discussion

7.1 English Proficiency in the Tourism Sector in Ao Nang Subdistrict, Krabi Province

The findings indicate that English proficiency among employees in the Ao Nang tourism sector is moderate overall, with relative strengths in listening and reading and persistent weaknesses in speaking and writing. This asymmetry between receptive and productive skills is not unique; it reflects broader patterns in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) context, where workers prioritize understanding over producing native-like output (Jenkins, 2015, pp. 50–72; Kirkpatrick, 2020, pp. 89–108). In tourism, comprehension is crucial for meeting immediate customer needs, but the limited opportunities to practice extended speech or structured writing hinder the development of productive skills.

The stronger performance in listening and reading can be linked to exposure and low-risk processing: employees frequently read menus, signs, and online reviews and listen to tourists' questions in predictable service encounters. By contrast, speaking demands real-time negotiation, which heightens anxiety and fear of mistakes, while writing requires accuracy and organization rarely demanded in frontline tourism roles. This is consistent with studies in Thai ELT, where emphasis on grammar accuracy in classrooms often undermines communicative fluency (Baker, 2012, pp. 20–24; Foley, 2005, pp. 123–135).

Importantly, these results highlight a mismatch between traditional English language teaching (ELT) in Thailand and the communicative realities of tourism. ELT in Thailand has often been examination-driven, focusing on grammatical correctness rather than pragmatic competence. Participants in the present study demonstrate that they understand spoken interactions, but they lack confidence and flexibility in unpredictable situations. This can be described as typical for EFL users who focus on being understood (Seidlhofer, 2011, pp. 139–162). Also, it was found in the interviews and observations that low self-confidence and fear of embarrassment tend to cause these difficulties, which are similar to other Southeast Asian ELF studies (Björkman, 2013, pp. 45–78).

It can be seen by the fact that improving English proficiency in tourism requires special courses like English for Specific Purposes (ESP) that simulate authentic scenarios, expose learners to a variety of accents and tourism-related vocabulary, and emphasize clarity and effective communication over strict grammatical accuracy.

7.2 Challenges or Difficulties in Using English at Work

The findings indicate that employees in Ao Nang's tourism sector face a range of challenges in using English, with the most common being difficulties in understanding diverse

accents, pronunciation issues, limited vocabulary, and a lack of confidence in stressful situations. These barriers reflect the realities of ELF communication, where interlocutors come from varied linguistic backgrounds and intelligibility rather than native-like accuracy becomes the key to successful interaction (Jenkins, 2015, pp. 50–72; Seidlhofer, 2011, pp. 139–162).

A prominent difficulty reported across roles, particularly by hotel staff, tour guides, and restaurant staff, was the challenge of understanding tourists' diverse English accents, including those from China, Russia, India, and the Middle East. This finding aligns with Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011, pp. 461–467), who emphasize the strain that accent variation places on listening comprehension. Such difficulties not only reduce comprehension but also risk miscommunication in customer service encounters, directly affecting tourist satisfaction.

Employees also reported limitations in vocabulary, particularly for context-specific tasks. Restaurant staff often lacked the lexical range to explain menus or ingredients clearly, transportation workers struggled to describe routes or safety procedures, and tour guides faced difficulties with the specialized terminology needed to explain cultural and historical sites. According to Nation (2001), inadequate vocabulary knowledge is one of the most persistent barriers to effective communication. These findings also resonate with Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which suggests that when employees must simultaneously process unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar, and meaning under pressure, their working memory becomes overloaded, making communication breakdowns more likely.

Writing tasks, including emails, reports, and responding to guest feedback, often required proficiency in formal business English. Many employees felt insecure about their ability to write professionally in English, especially when managing formal communication. This aligns with research that emphasizes the importance of written communication in professional settings, where clear, concise, and accurate language is essential for maintaining a positive image and fostering effective communication (Hyland, 2004).

Psychological barriers such as anxiety, hesitation, and fear of mistakes were reported across all roles but were most pronounced among less customer-facing employees in transport and food service. This reflects what Krashen (1982, p. 31) termed the “affective filter,” where nervousness and self-doubt hinder language performance. These findings highlight that linguistic challenges are not only cognitive but also emotional, and addressing confidence and motivation is as essential as teaching vocabulary and grammar.

7.3 Preferences of Language Skills Development Programs or Resources for individuals in the Tourism Sector

The findings from the questionnaire, thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, and observations provide valuable insights into the language skill development programs and resources that are deemed most beneficial for individuals working in the tourism sector in Ao Nang Subdistrict, Krabi Province. These findings are particularly important for enhancing the proficiency of tourism personnel, enabling them to better communicate with international tourists and customers, which in turn improves customer service and overall tourist satisfaction. The discussions of the key findings are described as follows:

The most highly rated program among participants was language exchange with native English speakers, which reflects the importance of authentic interaction and meaningful communication in language learning. This preference aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which stresses that acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level ($i+1$) (Krashen, 1985, pp. 2–3). Exchange programs provide natural, context-rich exposure that is both comprehensible and challenging, encouraging acquisition in a way that traditional instruction often cannot (Ellis, 2015, pp. 221–224). Similarly, on-the-job English training was also strongly valued as it allows employees to apply new language skills directly to workplace tasks such as giving directions, explaining services, or handling guest requests. This supports Celce-Murcia's (2013, pp. 40–45) argument that task-based training is particularly effective in professional contexts, as it fosters practice in real and relevant situations.

Structured workshops and seminars were also rated positively, offering employees opportunities to strengthen technical vocabulary, professional writing, and intercultural awareness in supportive learning environments. These findings resonate with Willis' (1996, pp. 36–40) task-based teaching framework, which highlights the value of purposeful tasks and clear goals in promoting language development. In addition, participants appreciated interactive tools and self-paced programs, which provide flexible, engaging, and individualized learning opportunities. Technology-enhanced learning, including the use of apps and virtual reality simulations, has been shown to boost motivation and simulate real-world encounters (Stockwell, 2013, pp. 110–113), making it particularly valuable for employees with limited access to formal classes or irregular schedules.

While short intensive courses and tourism-specific vocabulary training were seen as useful for rapid improvement, particularly among tour guides and hotel staff, their moderate ratings suggest that not all learners find them suitable. Evidence from Jantawong et al. (2023,

pp. 199–211) shows that specialized vocabulary training significantly enhances communicative competence in tourism, but the findings from this study indicate that employees prefer approaches that balance immediate relevance with sustained learning opportunities.

8. Implications

This study highlights several important implications for the tourism sector in Ao Nang Subdistrict, Krabi Province, particularly in the context of improving English proficiency and addressing communication challenges among employees. The findings suggest key areas where targeted interventions, training programs, and policy adjustments can enhance communication effectiveness in the workplace. The following are the major implications:

1. The findings in the study indicated that employees have stronger receptive skills (listening and reading) than productive skills (speaking and writing). Developing training programs with an emphasis on real workplace scenarios would enable employees to have opportunities to use English effectively. This allows employees to improve both spoken and written English based on each scenario provided such as dealing with complaints, giving directions, explaining food items and ingredients, or giving information about cultural events. This training should be practice-oriented that includes role-playing exercises, language exchange programs with tourists, or simulated customer-service interactions. Also, this training can resolve the lack of regular practice or opportunities to use English in real-life situations, which was one of the key challenges or difficulties identified in this study.

2. The study pointed out the gap between classroom learning and workplace communication, showing that participants lack opportunities to apply what they learned in formal English classes to real workplace situations, and formal English classes did not prepare employees for real-time interactions with tourists. To address this issue, universities could have collaboration with the tourism industry in such contexts as hotels or travel companies to jointly design training modules, internships, and language exchange opportunities with both native and non-native speakers, which can address communication differences in a variety of accents. This would help employees to be ready for authentic workplace situations.

3. Although over-reliance on translation tools was identified as a challenge in this study, technology can still play an important role in supporting language learning. For example, interactive applications like *Duolingo* can help employees to practice authentic conversations, study tourism-related vocabulary and develop listening skills. Virtual Reality is another good example as a valuable tool for simulating real-world customer interactions that allows employees

to enhance their English communication. Businesses could consider and provide language learning applications that are suitable for each job role to help employees improve both English skills and confidence in low pressure environments.

9. Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the English language proficiency and challenges faced by employees working in the tourism sector in Ao Nang Subdistrict, Krabi Province. However, there are several limitations. The sampling frame was restricted to accessible businesses and service providers in Ao Nang Subdistrict, which may not capture the full diversity of the tourism workforce. Non-response bias is also possible, as workers with greater interest in English learning or with more flexible schedules may have been more inclined to participate. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the 'Others' category, which included roles ranging from shop employees to hospital staff, limits comparability with the main occupational groups. Beyond sampling considerations, the generalizability of the findings is limited, as results may not reflect the situation in other Thai tourist destinations or in different cultural contexts. Finally, cultural factors may have influenced self-assessment responses: participants might have under-reported their abilities due to modesty norms or, conversely, over-reported to align with perceived expectations.

Several areas remain unexplored or could benefit from further investigation that could build upon the findings of this study:

1. Comparative studies across different tourism destinations by comparing the findings from Ao Nang Subdistrict with other tourism destinations in Thailand or internationally could provide broader insights into the challenges faced by tourism personnel in different cultural and economic contexts. Such comparative studies would highlight region-specific needs and allow for the identification of best practices that could be applied universally to improve English proficiency in the tourism sector.

2. Future research could examine the direct impact of employees' English proficiency on job performance and customer satisfaction in the tourism sector. This could involve correlating language proficiency levels with customer feedback and service quality assessments to determine whether higher proficiency directly leads to better tourist experiences. Understanding this relationship could provide further justification for investing in language skill development programs in the tourism industry.

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