

Investigating English Communicative Competence of Hotel Receptionists in EFL Countries

Pitak Tragoolsawang

Nattida Nutaro

*Traithana Chaovanapricha**

School of Liberal Arts, Mae Fah Luang University

*Corresponding author's email: traithana.cha@mfu.ac.th

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Abstract

This academic article analyzed the level of English communicative competence of hotel receptionists in countries where English is a foreign language, highlighting the challenges affecting their ability to provide effective service. The article adopted a qualitative content analysis approach to examine and synthesize existing literature published between 2002 and 2024, with a particular emphasis on the Thai context. Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, academic reports, and studies were thematically analyzed using Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence framework, which categorized language use into four key components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence. The findings revealed that hotel receptionists faced limitations in various areas, including vocabulary, grammar, speaking strategies, cultural awareness, and coherent organization of ideas—factors that impeded communication with international guests. Guided solutions are proposed, such as integrating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses into educational curricula and enhancing professional training programs. The article emphasizes the need for collaboration among educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and future hospitality professionals to strengthen communicative competence and improve service quality in EFL hotel contexts, especially in Thailand.

Keywords: hotel receptionist, communicative competence, linguistic competence, strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, English for specific purposes

Introduction

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2024), approximately 790 million overnight visitors traveled internationally during the first seven months of 2024 which is a continued recovery of Asia Pacific destinations. This recovery has led to the resurgence of the global hotel and tourism industry returning to a healthy economic growth rate after years of disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted the tourism and hospitality industries. Hotels represent a major sector within the global hospitality industry that allows hotel staff, especially the hotel receptionists to meet both local and international tourists from all over the world. Tourists, who come to receive the services, expect to receive high standard of services from the hotel, including facilities, services, security, cleanliness, decoration design, hotel location and public transportation accessibility of the hotel (Thai Hotels Association - Southern Chapter, n.d.). Moreover, the most important expected standard of receptionists is ‘communicative competence or communication skills’ integrating with the excellent services. Communicative competence is thus central maintaining professionalism and reaching guests’ expectations since it requires staff to have excellent abilities e.g., speaking skills while providing services. Therefore, hotel staff in all sectors not only play a crucial role as an image of the hotel but also drive the hospitality industry and hotel business to become more standardized and internationalized, making tourists’ impressions and building a positive relationship. To succeed in hotel services, effective communication between hotel receptionists and customers is an essential factor apart from providing only excellent service. As English has become the widely used medium of communication, effective communication is not only recognized as a basic understanding but also includes accuracy and politeness to prevent misunderstanding with customers. Unfortunately, many hotel receptionists in English as foreign language countries face many challenges and difficulties while working and communicating with international tourists. Several studies have investigated this issue and collectively revealed that many hotel receptionists in Thailand struggled with speaking skills including grammar usage, constructing complete sentences, and responding appropriately (Chaichana et al., 2017; Pinsirikul et al., 2023; Prombut et al., 2024). To tackle this, Prabhu and Wani (2015) suggested that they should have a strong foundation of skills that come from previous experiences of teaching and learning English to perform better language competency.

As the hotel business has become a globalized industry, one of the globalized forms is the hotel chains, which are defined as groups of hotels under a common brand with

standards in the global hospitality industry (Ivanov & Zhechev, 2011). In addition, chain hotels are distributed in each location and are all part of the network of the main companies in the network. Brand standards are of utmost importance in maintaining good relationships with customers as they expect the best experiences and values for money spent on the hotel. Therefore, hotel receptionists play a crucial role to maintain the brand standards as they are the ones who interact first hand with the guests from the beginning to the end of their stay. However, the hotel wants to attract talented people to work with it and this brings up the challenge of the English language competence of their staff, resulting in professionalism of the brand. As a result, the language proficiency level of hotel receptionists, especially English communicative competence is paramount. Communicative competence framework refers to “the ability to use language to interact by communicating linguistic patterns and, moreover, being aware of the rules of use in different contexts for using English for specific purposes” (Hymes, 1972, p.1). In the service industry, communication is a key element; therefore, staff must be proficient at both verbal and nonverbal communication as it is the key to building goodwill relationships between the organization and customers (Bobanovic & Grzinic, 2011). However, the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) (EF Education First, 2024), the world's largest annual English proficiency ranking for adults by country or region, reveals that Thailand is ranked 106 out of 116 countries with the EF EPI score of 415. The announced score shows that it is in a very low level of English proficiency which corresponds to the lower half of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels A2 and B1. For this reason, the results do not comply with the policy of raising English language standards from the Commission on Higher Education Standards (CHES) (2024) of Thailand since it requires the Bachelor's degree graduates to have CEFR equivalent results at level B2, where they are expected to communicate confidently across a range of complex topics.

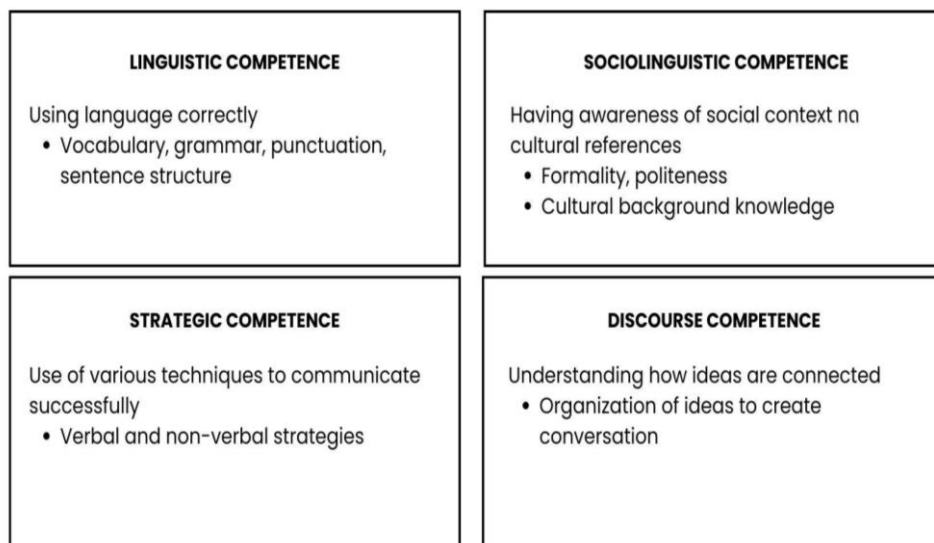
This study aims to analyze the overall challenges and difficulties faced by hotel receptionists in their professional duties. To examine these challenges systematically, this study is grounded in the Communicative Competence framework proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), which offers a structured lens for analyzing English usage in professional contexts. It also discussed their strengths and areas that require improvement within the context of Thailand, with a focus on enhancing communicative competence across all four language skills. Furthermore, this academic article offers practical recommendations for addressing these challenges, targeting both hotel personnel and educational institutions

responsible for preparing students for careers in the hospitality industry. Finally, the study recommends conducting further empirical research on the communicative competence of hotel receptionists to gain deeper insights and inform more effective training and development strategies.

Communicative Competence Framework

The concept of communicative competence, originally introduced by Hymes (1972), defines a person's linguistic ability to use language appropriately for specific purposes within a social context. This concept emerged in response to Chomsky's focus on linguistic competence, which emphasized the formal structure of language over its social use. This concept refers to the ability to use language of the speaker; therefore, he suggested the concept of using language to interact with both the speaker and the listener in various situations. However, he highly believed that knowing only grammar or linguistic features is not enough to have linguistic ability. Therefore, Hymes' theory was further developed to this concept by responding to his perspectives e.g., the possibility of grammatical forms to speech, psycholinguistic factors on the ability of the interlocutor to speak, the consistency and appropriateness of culture to speech in a specific context, and the impact on speech from not understanding cultural context.

Morrow (1977) and Widdowson (1978) similarly proposed the notions that communication is a multi-modal and creative social interaction that begins with two or more people communicating through their authentic language in a conversational context. They continuously interpret and exchange meaning through messages when communicating (Gałajda, 2012). Additionally, Canale and Swain (1980) further highlighted the difference between communication capacity and authentic communication or performance to assess communication effectiveness. Authentic communication consists of basic knowledge and existent skills of the communicator in order to be effective. Since the speaker lacks knowledge or skills in any component, the consequence of communication may not be complete as intended.

Figure 1*Four Components of the Communicative Competence (Canale & Swain, 1980)*

The communicative competence framework (see Figure 1) is a theoretical framework consisting of four components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence as stated by Canale and Swain (1980). They focus on presenting the elements of communication competence through theoretical discussion. Linguistic competence is the ability to use language according to rules and meaning. Language users must understand and use vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation to create accurate word and sentence structures. Sociolinguistic competence is the capability and awareness of understanding the rules of language used in each social group or situation appropriately by understanding and adapting it to that society, e.g., the degree of politeness, formality, and cultural differences and backgrounds in expression. Furthermore, the capability to convey meaning and avoid conflicts that lead to situations where communication is not able to be completed accurately and appropriately depends on the norms of each society and context (Gałajda, 2012). Discourse competence involves the ability to construct coherent and cohesive messages by connecting ideas effectively across sentences and paragraphs. This ability also contributes ideas to be organized to prevent confusion for both the speaker and the listener during conversations. Lastly, strategic competence requires the speaker to use various techniques to communicate meaning consistently and successfully without disrupting communication, e.g., expanding on vocabulary by giving more explanations or examples when the meaning cannot be explained directly.

Building upon this theoretical foundation, the following section outlines the methodological approach used to examine relevant literature through the lens of communicative competence.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative content analysis method to examine and synthesize existing literature related to the English communicative competence among hotel receptionists in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) countries, with a particular emphasis on the Thai context. The theoretical framework developed by Canale and Swain (1980), which categorizes communicative competence into four components—linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence—was used to guide the analysis and thematic categorization of the findings.

To select relevant literature, systematic searches were conducted using academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, ERIC, and ThaiJo. The search was conducted between January and March 2025 and included studies published between 2002 and 2024. The following search terms were used in various combinations: “hotel receptionist,” “English communication,” “communicative competence,” “English proficiency in hospitality,” “EFL tourism industry,” “strategic competence hotel staff,” “sociolinguistic competence tourism,” and “ESP hotel curriculum.”

Search Strategy: Boolean operators (AND/OR) and filters for peer-reviewed articles and full-text availability were applied to refine the search results. Backward and forward reference checking of selected papers was also performed to identify additional relevant literature.

The inclusion criteria were 1) Studies published between 2002–2024, 2) Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and academic theses, 3) Focus on hotel receptionists or front office staff in EFL contexts, 4) Discussion of communicative competence or English language skills in the hospitality sector, and 5) Availability in English or Thai.

The exclusion criteria were 1) Articles focusing solely on general education or language learning without hospitality context, 2) Studies without empirical or qualitative data, and 3) Non-academic blog posts, news articles, or opinion pieces.

A total of 32 sources were reviewed and included in the analysis. These consisted of 24 peer-reviewed journal articles, 4 academic theses, and 4 professional reports or conference proceedings. The selected studies represent research conducted in Thailand from various

provinces such as Bangkok, Phuket, Buriram, and Kamphaeng Phet, and other EFL countries such as Indonesia, Algeria, and Japan. These sources were thematically analyzed to identify recurring challenges and best practices in English communicative competence for hotel receptionists.

The reviewed literature was analyzed thematically by categorizing identified challenges and proposed solutions under each of the four dimensions of communicative competence. This approach allowed the researchers to identify common trends, gaps in knowledge, and effective practices used to enhance English language skills among hotel receptionists. The findings were then synthesized to highlight practical implications for educational institutions, hospitality training programs, and industry stakeholders in improving communicative competence in real-world hospitality settings.

Findings

Drawing on the reviewed literature, the findings are categorized according to Canale and Swain's (1980) four-component framework and highlight the key areas where hotel receptionists encounter communicative challenges.

1. Linguistic Competence

Since hotel business has become a global industry, it allows hotel staff to have opportunities to work with foreign clients and interact with them through effective communication. To achieve effective communication skills, receptionists are required linguistic competence to be proficient for working in the hospitality industry. In fact, it showed that many hotel receptionists in English as their foreign language (EFL) countries still struggle with difficulties in responding with clients since they are not able to communicate fluently (Yutthapirut, 2023). Krizan et al. (2002) stated that major obstacles to effective communication can be caused by difficulties in word choice, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. Using correct, clear, and concise vocabulary to convey important information also prevents listeners from getting confused because they receive too much information.

Competency in linguistics is considered a crucial role to make the interpretation of sentences more complete, such as constructing sentences with correct grammar. Correct communication also helps build confidence when speaking or using English in communication and promotes the professionalism of both the hotel organization and the individual because

clients or those who use the hotel's services are important people of the organization. Moreover, it makes the message that the English user wants to communicate complete and not missing, making the receiver or customer more impressed by the hotel.

However, some attitudes toward English should be improved. Some Thais have the attitude that it is too challenging for them to be proficient due to interference from their mother tongue or Thai language, especially in pronunciations, grammars and idioms (Wiriyaichitra, 2002). Some may view grammatical accuracy as unnecessary. Learning foreign language can be difficult for many learners since it is not their primary language in their country for communication. According to Charunsri (2011), the most common problems in listening skills of hotel receptionists in Chinatown Bangkok were listening to telephone conversations, customer complaints, customer needs and listening to the English accents of Indian and Singaporean clients because their English accents were difficult to understand. Moreover, they also had problems in changing tenses e.g., past tense, present tense and future tense according to the relevant situations. Although choosing the right tense to use in communication can be difficult for some people, incorrect tense usage can lead to temporal misunderstandings among listeners. In addition, using the correct parts of speech was stated as one of the obstacles, e.g., nouns and prepositions. Therefore, the survey results concluded that hotel receptionists in Chinatown Bangkok could not use vocabulary related to the tourism industry, providing information about directions and public transportation to clients; therefore, they needed to improve their writing, speaking, reading, vocabulary, and grammar skills. These obstacles resulted in ineffective communication and an inability to understand and respond to clients' needs as much as possible.

From the study of need analysis of the Indonesian hotel industry (Guntoro, 2021), a hotel manager in Indonesia said staff could speak English but when asked more complex questions they had to rely on colleagues due to difficulties in expressing themselves accurately. Other staff in the study said they had a limited vocabulary, and they could not understand British, Indian and Arabic accents and were confused when trying to respond even if they understood what the foreigners were asking, e.g. vocabulary related to cashiering, hotel facilities, checking-in and checking-out process, and personal information terms. The data showed that hotel front desk staff are required to use English to input the guests' personal information to the computer database system, hence, it also requires hotel staff to familiarize basic computer terminology (Guntoro, 2021).

Guntoro (2021) stated that the concept of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) has been introduced in higher education but in some cases ESP has been used in the context of corporate employee training to develop employee skills. To gain linguistic competence, students can prepare themselves from the ESP course to familiarize their communication skills to an authentic workplace from the learning and doing the activities in class. Interviews with tourism students by Lertchalermtipakoon et al. (2021) found that students lacked listening and speaking skills in learning English. Moreover, students supported the teaching of ESP courses in communication. Positive attitudes towards ESP were also found in the study of Arnó-Macià et al. (2020) that ESP helped students use English more effectively in professional situations. These qualitative findings indicate the benefits of using ESP to promote student training in preparation for careers in the hospitality industry. Additionally, the course syllabus on English for Hotel Staff at the Udon Thani Rajabhat University has been developed by Thammawong (2017) for students who are interested in preparing for their careers as hotel staff. The course book also provided useful materials with the situations in the hotel, e.g. English terminology, language expressions and grammatical structure related to the hotel industry. The materials in this course promote the major skills needed in communication. By engaging with audio recordings featuring various accents, the listening section helps students prepare for real-world communication in multicultural contexts. To clarify, each chapter in the coursebook provides the benefits for language learners to apply their knowledge and prepare them for being hotel staff in the future. According to a study exploring motivation, reasons and methods for learning English among adult EFL learners in Istanbul, Turkey, adult learners practice English outside the classroom for about 30 minutes to 1 hour each day by watching English movies and videos to improve their listening skills (Souri & Merç, 2021). In addition, learners also read English books and articles to expand their vocabulary. Therefore, hotel staff can practice their English skills through these methods to increase their familiarity with English vocabulary from native speakers and adapt the knowledge when they work in real situations.

2. Strategic Competence

Beyond linguistic limitations, hotel staff must also develop strategic techniques to navigate real-time communication barriers. As hotels are an international business, the chances of meeting people from many countries increase, hence, hotel receptionists are

exposed to a variety of foreign accents and challenges while providing the services, such as the pronunciation of consonants or the speed at which customers speak English, or even the different language skills of customers from non-native English-speaking countries. These factors lead to difficulties in understanding what customers are trying to communicate, for example, understanding the different accents of American English and British English. Language users employ various strategies to ensure mutual understanding. According to Thongsai and Sitipragan (2019), receptionist participants in their study employed a variety of communication strategies when conversations broke down. These included using translation applications on their mobile phones and asking customers to repeat their questions or clarify their needs to ensure accurate understanding. These strategies show attempts to sustain communication when breakdowns occur. It also showed an attempt to communicate with customers in a variety of ways to enhance customer satisfaction. Moreover, some people also use strategies through body language such as moving their hands according to what the speaker wants to convey, such as giving directions by pointing to the right direction or even telling customers details through writing so that they understand. Interestingly, Arunchai (2020) reported that some receptionists do not understand customers' English accents while working, so they find ways to improve and practice their English language skills by watching English movies, television and listening to English songs to become familiar with various accents and more vocabulary.

According to Singtha et al. (2019), Thai hotel front offices in Khao San Road, one of the most popular walking streets in Thailand, sometimes were unable to respond to the questions immediately. The employees adopted strategies such as speaking slowly, using short and simple sentences with a Thai accent to avoid ambiguity, and politely asking guests to repeat their messages for better understanding. Gestures by pointing with a finger, using words with similar meanings and using the telephone to search the meaning of unfamiliar words were also the techniques used by the front desk staff to continue the conversations. Significantly, communication by controlling the tone of voice, facial expression, gestures or eyes to look friendly and pleasant also helps the listener understand the intention or purpose of the speaker. On the other hand, inappropriate voice tone or gestures can lead the listener to have a negative feeling toward speakers.

Chen and Tabari (2017) stated that nowadays, tourists are turning to review their travel experiences by expressing both satisfaction and dissatisfaction through websites and social

media. Travel and service behaviors have been found to have changed significantly. As social media becomes more accessible, hotels need to cope with guest feedback by engaging online through a variety of communication channels. Developing a communication strategy can also benefit hotels in many ways such as providing hotel information and advertising. However, hotel staff must always be careful with choosing words they use in their communication as the information or opinions they share can spread very quickly. Furthermore, hotels and hospitality organizations should therefore train their employees to practice adapting communication strategies both on social media and in the workplace, as online feedback can also be derived from customers' real travel experiences. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now utilized by luxury hotel chains worldwide. As a result, hiring hotel staff in the future is increasingly challenging.

The acquisition of communication strategies does not only come from internal training in an organization. This skill can also be honed through higher education prior to employment. The teaching of English for Specific Purposes courses plays an increasingly important role in preparing students to hone their skills for employment. According to Western Languages Program (2017) at Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, an "English for Careers" course has been developed for students' career preparation by teaching them through a variety of activities, e.g. simulation of working situations for gaining presentation skills, reading and writing skills, cultural issues and communication skills. The activities in the classroom allow students to apply the strategy to communicate and create the ideas through conversations since it develops analytical skills and enhances the thinking process. Moreover, it promotes problem solving, teamwork according to assigned tasks, which are skills that students who are preparing to become employees in the service industry can practice from these activities, such as job applications, job interviews, and writing business letters. To illustrate, job interview simulation is one method that allows students to practice the strategy to communicate and persuade the recruiter. In fact, they will learn how to make impression on the recruiter and grab the attention from the beginning to the end of the interview, such as speaking clearly and using a friendly voice tone. Furthermore, they can apply the skills and techniques to impress the customers' satisfaction in their future career to communicating in the real workplace.

3. Sociolinguistic Competence

While strategic competence addresses real-time problem-solving during interactions, sociolinguistic competence emphasizes the importance of cultural norms, politeness, and formality in communication. Having awareness in communication in different social rules of language is crucial for hotel receptionists since they work among people from different social backgrounds. Formality and politeness in providing services and communication affected the challenges in sociolinguistic competence to use English in their working environment. The study of Sermsook et al. (2021) on examining English language issues among tourism workers identified that tourism employees faced the challenges in their working environment as it required them to communicate in English fluently and effectively. They encountered difficulties in writing English correspondence both letters and emails. They need to write the email by using the formal pattern effectively. Hence, the hotel employees are needed to write business letters and emails to meet customer needs and create satisfaction in communication (Chaisarn, 2020). Written communication is effective when the writers utilize appropriate language and formats with a clear message and structure in emails (Hartley & Bruckmann, 2002). Therefore, hotel employees should know the way to communicate in a formal pattern. With this, degree of formality is not only applied in written format but also in oral communication as it also shows professionalism in the hospitality industry. Additionally, the hotel context required staff to memorize alphabet codes which are used only in hotels and unlike other industries. Chantanont (2012) stated that staff should recognize the hotel alphabet codes to avoid confusion in spelling, for example, A for able, S for sugar and Y for york. The alphabet codes are necessary for staff to utilize for rechecking the customer information to avoid misunderstanding and mistakes in information. Additionally, specific technical terms are also used only in the hotel business every day for all hotel front staff to familiarize the technical terms, e.g. hot deal, day use, cabana room, and ocean view room.

Apart from having awareness of social rules of language, background knowledge in cultural references is also needed. Cultural conflicts arise from miscommunication and social and cultural differences among people. Accepting people's differences and cultural values increases the chances of building good relationships, especially in the service industry. Receptionists have the opportunity to meet people from many different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, being aware of social diversity and context is a crucial goal of communication that demonstrates respect for each other and increases the opportunity of making a good

impression on clients. However, conflict-causing situations can arise unexpectedly. In order to avoid social and cultural conflicts, learning to communicate appropriately in a variety of contexts will enhance the communication competency. Nevertheless, according to Reguieg's (2020) study in cultural conflict at the hotel front desk in Algeria, feelings toward different cultures cause some staff to give up when communicating. It also revealed that the participants are enthusiastic to learn clients' cultures which help to mitigate cultural conflicts and avoid misunderstandings. Additionally, knowing how to handle various situations and communicate appropriately by using the appropriate voice tone and body language will rectify intercultural communication skills of participants when dealing with the guests. As the aforementioned capabilities, these components also enhance the speaker's confidence and make the receptionist appear more professional, such as using a friendly tone of voice or gestures that show care towards the customer along with effective communication. Communication culture in the context of Thai society in providing services is still considered a highlight that attracts tourists to the country, such as observing the other person while communicating to provide service and assistance. It is important to help staff understand the guest's needs better in certain situations, for example, when staff face the situation of a guest's anxious gesture, using a sympathetic tone of voice shows the empathy and the enthusiasm of staff for providing assistance.

Fernández-Amaya et al. (2014) mentioned that 'culture' is the factor that affects the expectations of Spanish tourists who stay abroad. They pay attention to the reception staff and expect them to show empathy and consideration to non-native English customers when they travel abroad because they may feel that their communication is not fluent enough. Moreover, these expectations also make them feel satisfied while traveling. However, language expectations are affected when there is an intercultural encounter. Basalamah et al. (2021) argued that globalization has created opportunities for various careers internationally and encouraged tourists to travel across borders to gain more work experiences. Therefore, the tendency of cultural diversity within organizations is higher and creates different perspectives for each individual. Communication has become more important for daily life. When mistakes occur, employees collaborate to correct mistakes and help each other (Basalamah et al., 2021). The language patterns that employees use to communicate with each other in their daily lives are different from those used to communicate with customers because the social context is different. They can communicate with each other in their daily lives without having

to be as strict with the level of politeness and degree of formality as when communicating with customers who use the services of the hotel. Basalamah et al. (2021) collected data from participants working at Hotel X in Japan, consisting of Japanese, Filipino, Thai, Korean, Indonesian, and Taiwanese employees. The results revealed that their hotel has long faced cultural diversity, both guests with communication problems and difficulties in communication within the organization. In addition, the differences in the team were identified as resulting in conflicts and communication barriers, as well as experiencing discrimination (Kadam et al., 2020). These difficulties also show the challenges of sociocultural competence when working with a multicultural environment, for instance, in some contexts, employees or customers do not communicate their design needs straightforwardly or some are strict about maintaining social etiquette and this can lead to conflicts due to misunderstandings. Blue and Harun (2003) strongly mentioned that ESP courses, especially learning hospitality languages should be included in the curriculum of professional hospitality programs to create cross-cultural communication awareness either at the higher education level or during their working lives. According to Klanrit (2021), the study of teaching English speaking in the EFL context of role-playing is an activity that helps students practice speaking English in the classroom. This particular study correlates with the idea of Humanistic Theory proposed by Rogers' (1951) that focuses on person-centered approach which highlights the self-concept, personal growth, and self-actualization. Students can act as different people in various social contexts and have different roles. In order to do the activity, the teacher provides instructions or roles through creating role cards or descriptions of each character. After that, students act out the role-playing topic that they have been assigned to act out. This activity can also be applied to a hotel-related topic, for example, the teacher assigns Student A to be a receptionist in a hotel with international guests and Student B to be an international guest who wants to complain about a room that he is not satisfied with. This role-playing activity also helps to practice students' communication skills by finding ways to use words or sentence structures in a formal way to apologize to guests appropriately according to the social context. Additionally, the development of English language teaching curriculum should emphasize the intercultural dimension. It is proposed to apply Hofstede's cultural dimensions in the English language teaching curriculum for hotel staff to create awareness of cultural differences (Reguieg, 2020). Moreover, intercultural communication skills training and workshops to handle unexpected situations enhance skills in responding to customer requests.

4. Discourse Competence

In addition to navigating social and cultural norms, hotel staff must also ensure that their communication is coherent and well-structured—this is where discourse competence plays a vital role. In daily workplace, people always need to communicate and coordinate with others, both between customers and colleagues in the organization. Organizing thoughts and connecting ideas in communication will help support work efficiency from understanding the same goal to prevent mistakes. Linguistic features and meaning functions in texts are emphasized as knowledge and skills required for discourse competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Harris, 1952; Hymes, 1972; Paltridge, 2012). According to Cherdchoo (2023), most Thais write English without considering the correct structure usage. They use Thai sentence structures as models when writing in English. The lack of connecting ideas was pointed out in this study in which they rely on their first language as the main structure, which is different and affects English skills, such as the lack of appropriate connectors between ideas. For this reason, they face problems in English grammar writing skills, which is an important component of English use in many skills, not only in writing skills. Lack of well-organized communication also affects the professionalism of the receptionist who should be an expert in communication to meet clients' needs. For example, dealing with customer complaints, receptionists have a lot of opportunities to encounter situations where they have to handle customer complaints. The organization of thoughts before answering customer questions is an important factor because the image of the hotel can be affected if there is a lack of correct and complete communication to assist the customers. For example, a customer complains about the cleanliness of the room during their stay, therefore, the staff is responsible for responding to their needs to handle the situation. Mistakes or incomplete communication in explaining the mistakes that happened so that guests can understand; failure to do so may lead to dissatisfaction with the quality of the hotel and the hotel staff because the receptionist cannot provide full assistance. Although in some situations, hotel staff may find it difficult to organize their thoughts due to various factors at that time, practicing communication skills and constantly connecting ideas will help them communicate more professionally. Additionally, when employees have to talk to customers for whom English is a foreign language, misunderstandings can make communication even more difficult. Connecting the conversations can be even more challenging as the influence of one's native language structure can affect how sentences are structured and coherent to express the idea. This could

be clarified by the example in Japanese context that communicating with customers where English is considered a non-daily language and has no official status (Yano, 2011). Also, Stanlaw (2004) argues that Japanese English is constructed for use by Japanese people without regard to the linguistic perspective for native English speakers, with the use of loanwords, and they have a quite distinctly different way of communicating. Japanese sentence structure is also different from English, for instance, the sentence structure starts with a subject, an object, and followed by a verb, which can cause mistakes when communicating.

To gain discourse competence, students can gain these skills from university courses before they start working in the future as the curriculum is constantly being developed. According to Walailak University (2019), an “English for Communication in Tourism and Hotel” course is designed to develop students' fluency in English communication required in the tourism industry. Learning assessments are used to develop students' skills in a variety of evaluation such as presentations, role-plays, group debates, and individual interviews. These assessments also help to assess and develop students' skills effectively as they are required to apply their skills. Group discussion on assigned topics assesses students' ability to organize their ideas to connect the topic to the audience. The interaction during the discussion also measures the speaker's ability to communicate meaning to create debate within the group. Individual interview examination also measured the competence of students in this course since it required them to exchange information and interact with each other during the interview. In addition, Jeong (2018) examined the development of EFL learners' communicative competence in language learning through multimedia-assisted. In university of South Korea, Jeong primarily proposed interesting solutions and later conducted the simulation and discussion activity in the class to improve students' skills, such as simulated news reporting, news discussion and analysis to practice students. Jeong (2018) found that this method allows students to organize their ideas in order to analyze news content, discuss in groups and report news in simulated situations.

Discussion

Having identified key communicative challenges in the literature, this section discusses the implications of those findings and links them back to the broader aims of the study.

Firstly, linguistic competence, receptionists in EFL countries face problems with language fluency, grammar, pronunciation and idioms influenced by their first language

(Wiriyaichitra, 2002). Comprehending various English accents such as Indian, Singaporean, British and Arabic is a challenge for them to communicate because it can lead to misunderstandings during conversations (Charunsri, 2011; Guntoro, 2021). This difficulty also includes the ability to use incorrect tense and limited knowledge of service industry vocabulary. Moreover, confusion in using parts of speech e.g., nouns and prepositions is also mentioned. Yet, the limitation in vocabulary for technical terms mentioned in cashier services, hotel facilities information results in reduced accuracy and correctness of communication. In addition, the staff lacks confidence in communication due to frequent errors from previous experiences, causing them to be unsure and hesitant to choose appropriate grammar because it results in incomplete and unclear information, which confuses customers (Krizan et al., 2002).

Secondly, strategic competence, poor communication can lead to a disruption in conversations when a customer's question is unclear or when staff cannot immediately answer a complex question (Singtha et al., 2019). Lack of understanding of proper communication can lead to incorrect tone of voice or gestures, which results in misunderstandings or negative impressions of customers (Singtha et al., 2019). To tackle these challenges, asking customers to repeat or elaborate for clearer understanding, and using simpler, slower sentences are among the strategies used by hotel staff. In addition, gestures such as pointing directions, and tools such as translation apps or writing messages are also used to communicate meaning (Thongsai & Sitipragan, 2019; Singtha et al., 2019). More importantly, staff can practice their listening skills through English media, such as watching English movies, TV shows, or listening to English songs, to increase familiarity with various accents and increase their vocabulary (Arunchai, 2020).

Thirdly, difficulties in maintaining formality in English have been identified as one of the issues that hotel staff experience both in speaking and writing, such as writing formal letters and emails, which can pose communication challenges (Sermsook et al., 2021; Chaisarn, 2020). Additionally, the diversity of the organization's team, including customers from different countries, can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and poor communication in some cases (Basalamah et al., 2021; Kadam et al., 2020). Therefore, staff needs to understand social and cultural nuances such as communication gestures, word choice, and appropriate tone of voice in order to avoid cultural conflicts (Reguieg, 2020).

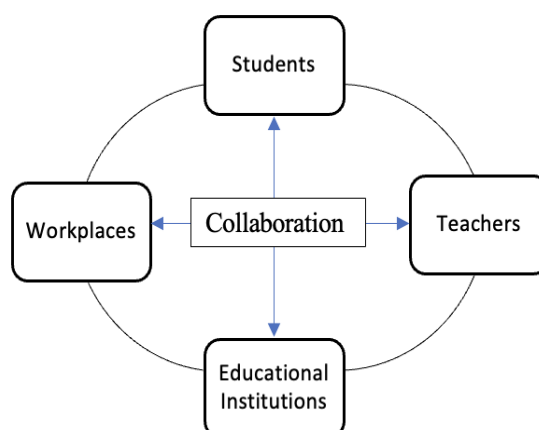
Discourse competence in the organization of ideas and the connection of content, influenced by the receptionist's first language, could results in a lack of skills in connecting

ideas in a complete sentence (Rungchatupat, 2002). The use of appropriate conjunctions and structures affects clear communication, which is an essential communication skill. If the organization of ideas is not correct, it may cause confusion in the ideas to be conveyed. However, developing this skill through specialized English courses from previous studies, such as using technology media and practical training, will increase confidence in handling complaints and connecting ideas completely. It also results in customer satisfaction and creates a good image for the hotel (Walailak University, 2019; Jeong, 2018).

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses are developed to help address English language problems encountered in real-world situations. For example, an “English for Hotel Staff” course by Thammawong (2017) promotes classroom activities to practice interactions between learners and teachers. The course content also provides useful language expressions in the hospitality industry. Interestingly, role-playing activities based on given conversations allow learners to receive advice and feedback from teachers to improve their skills. Furthermore, simulating job interviews helps students practice their tone of voice, clarity, and persuasive communication skills, which can be applied to future interactions with customers (Western Languages Program, 2017). In fact, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) should focus on building cultural awareness, such as role-playing in a hotel context, resolving complaints from foreign customers to practice speaking skills and choosing formal words (Klanrit, 2021). Developing formal writing skills allows employees to communicate more professionally (Hartley & Bruckmann, 2002; Chaisarn, 2020). In addition, applying Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in the curriculum creates an understanding of cultural differences (Reguieg, 2020). Last but not least, practicing the use of hotel-specific terminology and codes can help avoid errors in checking customer data (Chantanont, 2012).

Figure 2

Collaboration among Stakeholders



However, it seems that in the Thailand context the use of grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure and responding to complex questions should be improved even though they can achieve the purpose of communication in strategic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence with customers effectively. As shown in Figure 2, the authors suggest that the successful implementation of previous solutions need collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including students, educational institutions, teachers, and workplaces. Firstly, students should have the positive attitudes and motivations to learn as they are the crucial elements for individuals who are preparing to become workers (Dörnyei, 2001). If students do not have motivation, this process may not be successful. Secondly, educational institutions should promote English-medium learning activities and provide budgets for students and teachers to practice their skills in real workplaces, such as site-visit activities, and have hotel simulation rooms in universities for students to practice as hotel staff in which students may lack experience without sufficient support from educational institutions (Feinstein & Parks, 2002). Thirdly, teachers should have knowledge, direct experiences and readiness in terms of knowledge related to skills, thinking of activities, creating activities that are sufficient and appropriate for developing communication skills (Khan et al., 2017), and teachers should receive support to study work from real workplaces to know the actual duties of receptionists. Lastly, the cooperation from workplaces should provide more opportunities for students and instructors to come for study visits, therefore they can be an important factor in promoting quality personnel in the future by coordinating with educational institutions to increase opportunities to provide real work experience to students. However, the authors suggest that the cooperation among these stakeholders should not lack any element as they are essential for the successful completion of communicative competence.

Recommendations for Further Studies

To address the challenges identified in the discussion, the following recommendations are proposed for improving English communicative competence among hotel receptionists in EFL contexts.

1. Designing ESP courses in institutions to promote the use of English in classroom

Further studies can focus on integrating the content from the challenges presented in this study for ESP learners to exploring the area of improvement, e.g. adding classroom

simulation activities and materials to the current context to train students to achieve all four dimensions of communicative competence. Moreover, the design of assessment and learning language in further education should follow the policy of CHES (2024) regarding the improvement of higher education institutions' English language teaching and learning standards. Therefore, educational institutions should encourage students to enhance their communicative competence at a level B2 or higher.

2. Developing an English Language Learning Environment

Educational institutions can adjust the campus environment to be multicultural so that students are familiar with using English, such as providing information on campus in both English and Thai.

3. Organizing activities that promote multicultural communication

University can support a variety of events e.g. multicultural events, debates, activities to exchange ideas among students from various nationalities, academic seminars to encourage the exchange of ideas among each other.

Conclusion

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings and emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts in fostering communicative competence in the hospitality sector. This study examined the challenges faced by hotel receptionists in EFL countries through the lens of Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence framework, which includes linguistic, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse components. The findings revealed that while many receptionists demonstrate the willingness and effort to communicate effectively, significant limitations persist—particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure—due to limited exposure, first-language interference, and insufficient formal training.

In contrast, some strengths were evident in the use of communication strategies, such as paraphrasing, gestures, and technology, as well as in cultural sensitivity and adaptability, especially in high-contact environments. However, sociolinguistic and discourse competence still require more structured development, particularly regarding formality, politeness, and coherent message organization.

The study underscores the practical value of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in bridging the gap between academic language education and workplace communication demands. Well-designed ESP curricula—featuring role plays, job simulations, and cross-cultural training—can equip learners with both the linguistic and intercultural skills necessary for success in the hospitality industry.

Finally, the study recommends further empirical research, particularly classroom-based and longitudinal studies, to evaluate the long-term impact of ESP training and to refine teaching approaches that foster communicative competence in real-world settings.

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