

# Teaching English for Communication for Mass Transit Personnel in Bangkok

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## ABSTRACT

*The effective use of English for communication is required for mass transit personnel as Thailand is one of the leading tourist destination countries and traveling by mass transit is a popular channel for tourists as well as for expats. This study therefore aimed to identify the major English skills usage of mass transit personnel and their problems in using English at work. This is a survey study which used pre-survey post-survey experimental research design. The subjects were one hundred fifty-two mass transit personnel who worked for sky train (BTS) and fifty foreign passengers. The findings revealed that English speaking and listening were the first two major skills used the most for mass transit personnel, while most of them rated their listening and speaking skills proficiency at the level of fair ( 63.16% for listening and 62.50% for speaking ) as well as they rated the weakness of their speaking skill proficiency from greatest to least as following: grammar (46.05%), Vocabulary (26.32%), pronunciation (17.76%) and accent (9.87%), whereas, the factors which affected their listening the most were pronunciation (46.05%), accent (28.29%) and speed (25.66%) respectively.*

**Keywords:** *Problems in English Communication, Communicative English, Mass BTS personnel's English skills*

## INTRODUCTION

English communication skills are needed for Mass transit personnel. Nowadays, there are lots of foreign passengers using metropolitan mass transit resulting from great number of tourists visiting Thailand each year. Katesuwan (2014) revealed that the number of tourists visited Thailand in 2014 was high up to 24.77 million people and that resulted in a massive number of foreign passengers using

mass transit for their travels. Thus, English is as an instrument to help communicate between mass transit personnel and foreign passengers.

Mastery of English oral communication skills is an advantage to mass transit personnel in their workplaces. In the context of workplace communication, having good communication skill is the way to success and that good communication skill is seen as fundamental and additional advantage (Mehta, D., Mehta, N. K. 2009). Kirkpatrick (2007) pointed that all over the world people in ever-increasing numbers are using more and more varieties of English, thus, being skilled in English communication especially in speaking and listening will help to understand better in diverse pronunciation from people in different countries. English has now become the language of international communication, there are many more speakers of world English's and people who use English for international communication than there are native speakers of it.

The problems of using English language for communication between people who are from different countries are significant, especially to whom the English language was not their mother tongue but English language was needed to be used as a media for communicating among them. In Thailand, there are three systems of metropolitan mass transits: sky trains, metro and elevated airport rail link and today have become the major public transportation used the most by both Thais and foreign passengers.

The increasing number of foreigners in Thailand both tourists and expats motivates people in the country to develop their English for some reasons, especially for people who work in the service industries including mass transit personnel because they meet a number of foreign passengers inevitably each day. Moreover, being the hub of transportation in the region is one of the main goals of Thailand towards AEC in 2015 when English will become the official language. As a result, the competence of English communication of mass transit personnel is needed.

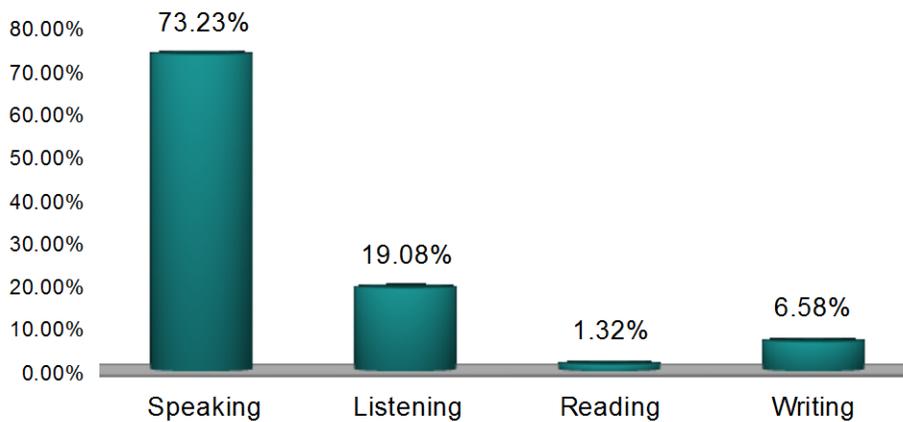
## **POPULATION AND SUBJECTS**

The population of this research study were one hundred fifty-two mass transit personnel who work in BTS, a sky train system, in this study call "BTS personnel", one of the metropolitan mass transit systems in Bangkok and fifty foreign passengers from different countries and races. For the post-survey, there were two forms of questionnaires, one for foreign passengers and another for BTS personnel. For the BTS personnel, the questionnaires were distributed to them via the main office personnel along two lines of the route with 34 stations, about 4 – 5 persons per one station. For the foreign passengers, the questionnaires were distributed to them randomly and conducted on weekends.

## RESULTS OF THE STUDY

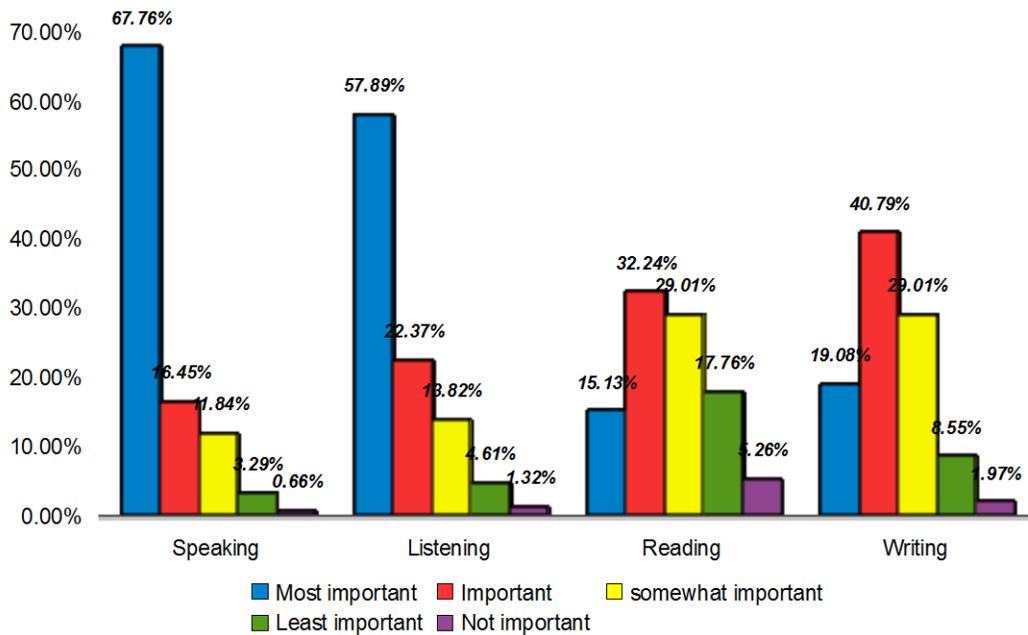
The results of the study were presented base on two specific research questions of the study. For the first research question: What are the major English communicative skills and their functions used the most by BTS personnel? The results revealed that speaking and listening were the two major skills used the most by BTS personnel and their fourteen communicative functions found as shown in the following charts.

***Chart 1: Frequency of English language skills usage of mass transit personnel***



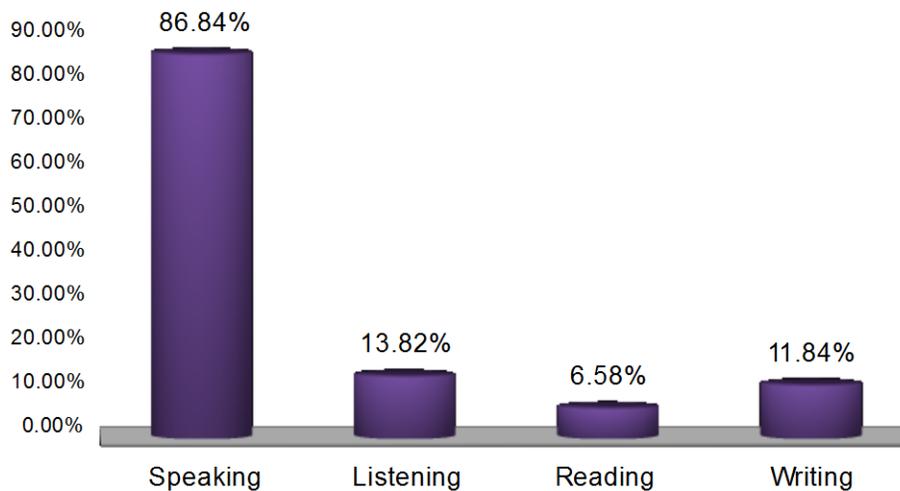
The table presents the frequency of English language skills usage of BTS personnel. Speaking skill was most used, followed by listening, writing and reading, respectively. This precisely seen that speaking and listening skills were the first two major skills used the most for BTS personnel.

**Chart 2:** The importance of English language skills in BTS profession



The chart presenting the importance values of English language skills in BTS profession and the finding shows that speaking was rated most important for BTS profession, followed by listening, writing and reading, respectively. This can be assumed that that speaking and listening skills were the first two major skills used the most for BTS personnel.

**Chart 3:** English language skills that BTS personnel would like to improve.



The chart above presents the English language skills that BTS personnel would like to improve. The

result shows that speaking was most rated, followed by listening, writing and reading, respectively. This can be assumed that speaking and listening skills were the first two major skills used the most for BTS personnel.

The findings for research question 1 revealed via the three charts above which can answer the question. The answer distinctly shown via the three charts above, that speaking and listening were most frequently used by BTS personnel, were rated the most important skills for mass transit profession and were rated the most skills that BTS personnel would like to improve. As a result, speaking and listening were the two major skills used the most by BTS personnel.

English speaking and listening in Mass transit profession is very important because there are a massive number of foreign passengers taking service. Thus, the BTS personnel cannot avoid to communicate with those passengers as service task is their job and some passenger might request for information make complaints about the service then English communication especially speaking and listening ability is needed to manage with such those necessity.

In accordance with speaking and listening were the major skills used by the BTS personnel, it is conformed to what Murphy (2012) mentioned in his study in oral communication in TESOL that speaking and listening were discussed as major skill areas. The article argued that attention to these components of oral communication is viewed as indispensable to any coherent curriculum design. Although relative degrees of emphasis may vary for particular courses, speaking and listening are characterized as reciprocally interdependent oral language processes.

Shsengupta (2011) shared opinion towards importance of speaking English at work that effective communication in English is one of the most sought after skills in an employee at all workplaces. Interpersonal communication at workplaces includes public and small group communication through with we can communicate our needs and requirements in different situations. Besides, speaking English properly among various business levels in an organization, one also needs self promotion.

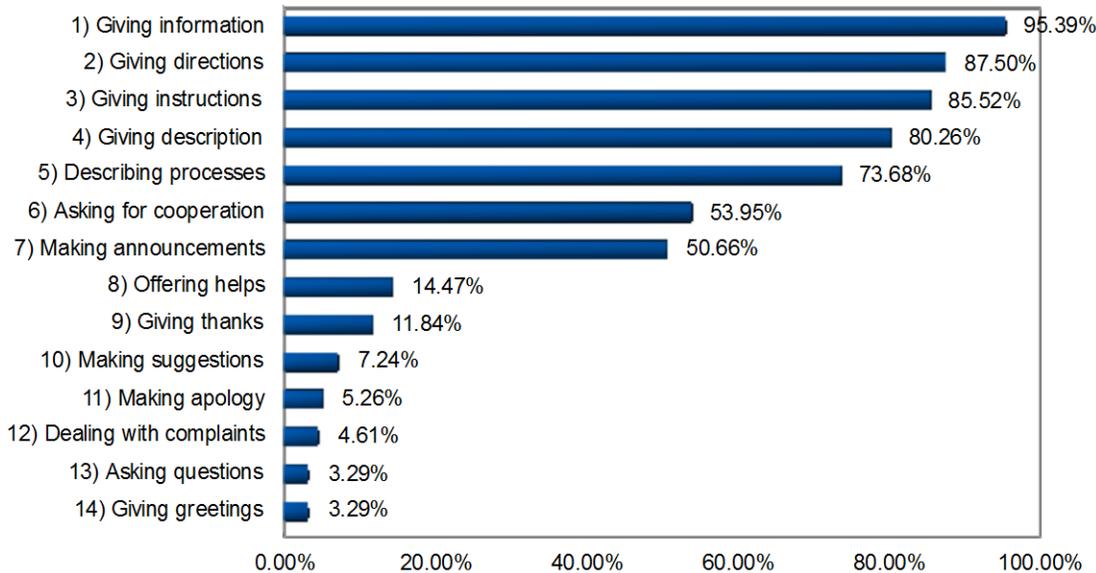
Every career consists of a variety of communication activities such as listening, speaking, questioning, gathering and participating in small work groups (123helpme.com, 2009). The listening skill is one of the most important aspects of communication process. Borchers (2010) added that listening is not just important in the workplace; it is critical. The ability to listen impacts nearly every responsibility of management role and service task is one of those. It helps to understand and read the other person's message. Effective listening skill helps to know the certain needs of passengers and they can give or provide the right information to the passengers.

Based on speaking and listening as primary skills used by the BTS personnel, communicative

functions upon them are necessary to be studied. The chart below shows the found functions ranked by frequency of the use.

***Chart 4:***

*Communicative functions used by BTS personnel*



The functions presenting via chart above arranged by frequency from greatest to least. The functions that most rated frequently used by BTS personnel are: giving information, giving directions, giving instructions, giving description and describing processes, asking for cooperation, and making announcements, respectively. According to language is a means of communication (Valin & Polla, 199&), it must have means of conveying the basic communicative functions.

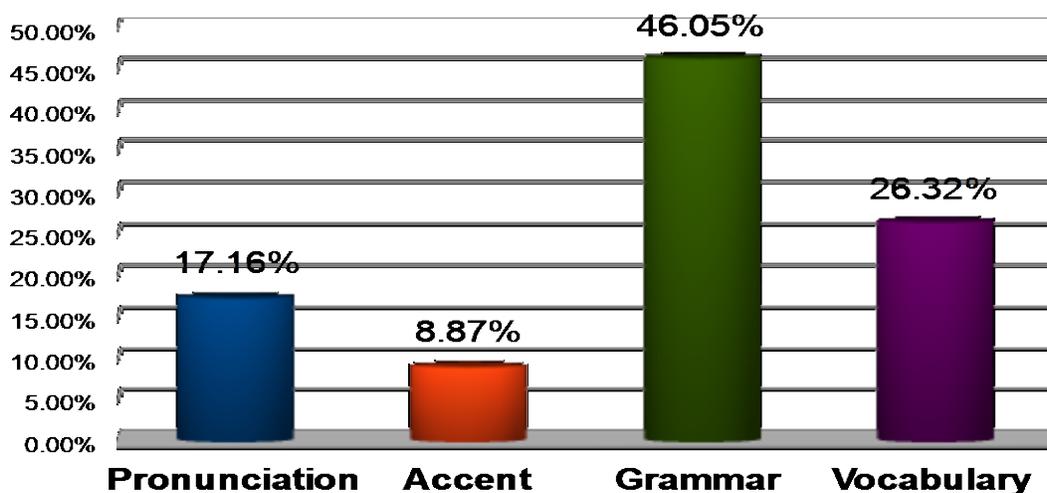
The term communication is freely used by everyone in modern society, including members of the general public, scholars and management practitioners. Communication is defined as the interaction, giving and taking of information, sending and receiving of messages through verbal and non verbal means (2015).

Communicative function varies as one must determine the function of communication. Known as the primary function and in certain circumstances the situation or position may have one, two or three other secondary functions. For example, giving, informing, controlling, persuading and coordinating (2015)

Communication allows BTS personnel interact with passengers. A passenger service task communicates with passengers to help them resolve problems in taking service. English communication function is essential for BTS personnel who work at stations and meet a massive number of foreign passengers each day.

For the second research question: What are the major problems encountered by BTS personnel in using English at work? The results revealed that inability in sustaining conversation resulted from some some factors presenting in chart 1 and chart 2 below.

**Chart 5:** *The factors in speaking that personnel were weak*



The speaking skills that BTS personnel rated weak are grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and accent. Grammar is considered a trouble in English learning and using for Thai people more than other skills. In Thai language we don't have tenses and this seems to be the most difficult part of grammar. When Thai people speak, many of them will recall tense and first think into Thai language before translating and speaking it out in English, whereas vocabulary, pronunciation and accent are less difficult for them.

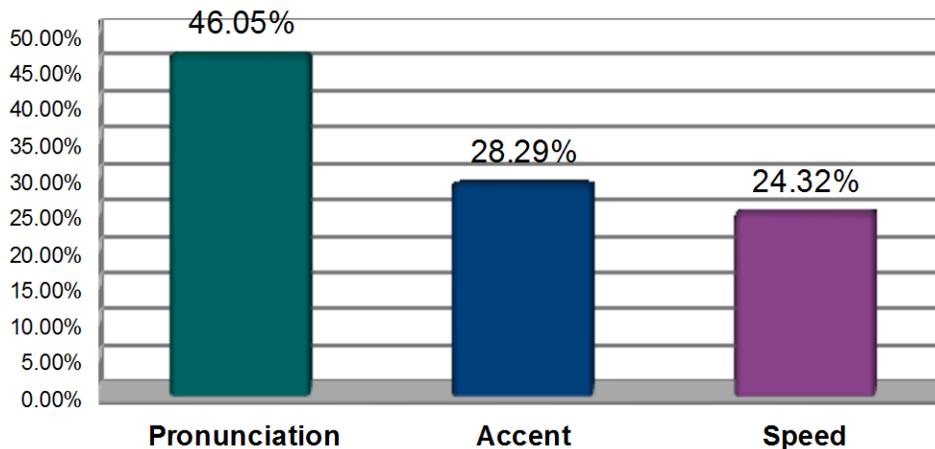
The uses of the temporal expression and the context are essential for time reference in Thai (Upsorn Tawilapakul, n.d.). Thai does not have verb inflections, whereas English has several verb inflections applied to fit with their twelve tenses. Similar to what Ingkaphirom (2005) presented, Thai expresses tenses by temporal adverbs, the context and inference from the aspect making in sentence without the verb inflections.

Effective verbal or spoken communication is dependent on a number of factors and cannot be

fully isolated from other important interpersonal skills such as non-verbal communication, listening skill and clarification. Robbins (2011) stated that barriers to effective communication can retard or distort the message and intention of the message being conveyed which may result in failure of the communication process or an effect that is undesirable.

Bagovich (cited from Smith, C. 2013), Crafton resident and self-professed “Grammar Nerd” said that grammatical mistake can result in a lack of confidence in communication, poor performance reviews, and negative perspectives in professional and personal situations. The statement of Bagovich was supported by Guilloteau Nancy that grammar is important, while vocabulary is as essential component for successful communication. A lack of vocabulary may result in complete failure to convey a message.

**Chart 6:** *Factors that influenced listening ability of the personnel*



There were factors resulted from foreign passengers

ers' speaking that influenced personnel's English listening comprehension ability. Those factors were pronunciation, accent and speed. Pronunciation was rated the greatest factor, followed by accent and speed, respectively.

Dodge (2015 ) stated that if there is a pronunciation difference that causes problems with people understanding you, then it deserves attention. For example, a very common pronunciation challenge for Chinese speakers of English that can cause misunderstanding is the "th" sound. They pronounce it as “s” sound, for example, “Thinking” is “Sinking”. Another pronunciation issue that might affect people understanding you is speaking speed. If you talk too fast, it's easier to make mistakes and listeners don't have time to "process" what you are saying. Even native English speakers have to "process" what other native speakers are saying, to make up for pronunciation differences or even unfamiliar vocabulary.

Shelby (2013) pointed that listening comprehension and speaking in English are the skills generally more frequently used than reading and writing in daily living. In accordance to Shelby’s

perspective, Prof. Carter, R., Davies, K., Lewis, J., Byatt, J. and O'Meara, T. (2007) agreed that spoken language is at the heart of much human interaction, at home, at work and society. Speaking and listening skills are important in all contexts whether it be family literacy, language and numeracy or the offender learner sector. Good speaking and listening skills are a key aspect of employability: getting a job, maintaining employment and progressing at work. On the other hand, Taylor and Campbell (1999) foresee communication as a two-way process that requires clarification and reinforcement, and should be reflected back by repetition to confirm understanding.

Stablesa (2006) mentioned that speaking and listening were found to present particular problems. Shelby (2013) believed that vocabulary is the most comprehensive and most difficult aspect of English for the learners so they should first concentrate on learning the most frequently used and therefore most important English vocabulary for their practical real life needs. Albostan (2012) found out that pronunciation, writing and grammar are slightly more problematic skills than reading, speaking, listening and vocabulary.

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that, firstly, English communication skills are needed for the BTS personnel. Nowadays, there are a number of foreign passengers using BTS. Thus, English is as an instrument to help in communicating between personnel and foreign passengers. Secondly, speaking and listening were most frequently used by BTS personnel, thus they were the major skills used for communication. Moreover, based on the major skills, fourteen important communicative functions found as the functions of communicative language used in any situations for BTS personnel to complete their service task. Lastly, the majority of the respondents agreed that the biggest problem that they had in using English for communication at work was the inability in sustaining conversation because their communication skills which were speaking and listening were weak. In speaking, grammar was rated the weakest skill that they had, followed by vocabulary, pronunciation and accent, respectively. In listening, they rated the pronunciation as the weakest, followed by accent and speed. According to the results, English communication intensive courses are needed for BTS personnel.

This study indicates that there were a number of foreign passengers using the BTS but English communication skills of the BTS personnel used with foreign passengers were weak. This might result in a lot of problems which caused by the communicative misunderstanding among them. Intensive practice of the language skills is needed for the personnel in order to help them get better in the skills they were weak or lacked. This will lead them to be more confident in using those skills to perform their work effectively.

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