



An Investigation of Communication Problems and Communication Strategies among Thai Baristas and Foreign Customers in Chiangmai

Sackhy Lounnarath; Saber Alavi

Payap University, Thailand

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v12i6.6782>

Abstract

This study explores communication challenges and strategies between Thai baristas and foreign customers in Chiangmai, a major tourist destination with a vibrant coffee culture. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 50 Thai baristas and 50 foreign customers through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The research addresses gaps in intercultural communication studies within hospitality contexts, focusing on linguistic and cultural barriers and adaptive responses. Findings reveal that communication problems often arise from limited English fluency, insufficient vocabulary, incorrect grammar, unclear pronunciation, and difficulties with diverse accents. Thai baristas particularly struggle with understanding orders, explaining product options, and responding to specific customer needs, while foreign customers sometimes fail to simplify their language appropriately. To overcome these challenges, both groups employ strategies such as circumlocution, mime, approximation, and direct appeals for help. Interactional techniques like asking for clarification and using repetition or fillers also help manage misunderstandings and maintain conversational flow. The study highlights the critical role of strategic competence in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps. Practical recommendations include developing tailored English training programs for Thai baristas, focusing on listening, speaking, and intercultural skills. The findings offer insights for enhancing service quality through English for Specific Purposes curricula and workplace training, benefiting educators, policymakers, and business owners. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of English as a Lingua Franca interactions in Thailand's hospitality sector and suggests directions for future global studies on language, culture, and business.

Keywords: *Communication Problems; Communication Strategies; Thai Baristas; English as a Lingua Franca; Intercultural Communication*

1.Introduction

In the current era of globalization, effective communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries has become essential, particularly in service-oriented industries. English, as the most widely used lingua franca, serves as a bridge language in many multicultural and multilingual settings. Thailand, known for its vibrant tourism sector and welcoming hospitality culture, is no exception. Chiangmai, a cultural hub in Northern Thailand, is especially renowned for its flourishing coffee scene and international clientele. The interactions between Thai baristas and foreign customers in this setting

provide a unique context to explore English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) communication. Despite the widespread presence of English in Thailand's tourism and service sectors, proficiency among Thai speakers varies widely, often resulting in communication breakdowns. These breakdowns, known as communication problems (CPs), can impact service quality and customer satisfaction. To navigate such issues, speakers—both Thai baristas and foreign customers—employ various communication strategies (CSs), consciously or unconsciously, to repair breakdowns and maintain effective interaction.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical frameworks. First, Canale's (1983) model of communicative competence, specifically focusing on grammatical and strategic competence. Grammatical competence includes vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation—all of which affect how clearly a message is conveyed. Strategic competence, on the other hand, enables speakers to deploy communication strategies when linguistic resources are insufficient. These strategies ensure continuity in dialogue and support mutual understanding. Second, this study utilizes Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy of communication strategies, which categorizes CSs into direct (achievement), interactional, and indirect (time-stalling) strategies. This taxonomy offers a nuanced understanding of how speakers manage language deficiencies and communication breakdowns. Integrating these frameworks provides a robust lens for analyzing the interplay between language proficiency and real-world service communication in ELF contexts. To ensure relevance and effectiveness, this study's questionnaire selected 18 communication strategies from Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy, based on the research context and prior studies involving Thai participants in workplace interactions. These strategies address coping mechanisms for communication problems between Thai baristas and foreign customers. The strategies are categorized into three types: a) Direct or Achievement Strategies: methods like circumlocution, approximation, using all-purpose words, word coinage, literal translation, mime, and self-repair to bridge linguistic gaps., b) Interactional Strategies: techniques involving collaboration, such as direct appeals for help, accuracy checks, asking for repetition, clarification, confirmation, indirect appeals, guessing, and interpretive summaries., c) Indirect Time-Stalling Strategies: approaches to maintain communication flow, including use of fillers, repetition of the interlocutor's words, and verbal strategy markers. Each strategy facilitates overcoming language barriers to sustain effective communication in natural conversational settings.

Research into ELF communication has highlighted the significance of both grammatical and strategic competence. Grammatical competence includes fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, while strategic competence pertains to the speaker's ability to use strategies like paraphrasing, approximation, or gestures to overcome communicative barriers. This study focuses on these two competencies to examine real-life service encounters in Chiangmai's coffee culture. The primary goal of this research is to investigate the nature of communication problems in these interactions and to analyze the strategies employed to resolve them. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study offers comprehensive insights into the communication dynamics between Thai baristas and foreign customers. It also aims to inform English language education and training programs tailored to Thailand's hospitality industry. To contribute to the development of pedagogical recommendations for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula aimed at service industry professionals.

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To investigate oral communication problems that occur among Thai baristas and foreign customers.
2. To investigate which communication strategies are applied to deal with communication problems among Thai baristas and foreign customers.

1.4. Research Questions

1. Which oral communication problems occurred among Thai baristas and foreign customers?
2. Which communication strategies are applied, to deal with communication problems among Thai baristas and foreign customers?

2 Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods design to investigate communication problems and communication strategies among Thai baristas and foreign customers in Chiangmai. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently to offer both generalizable trends and rich, contextual insights. The integration of these methods allows for cross-validation and a nuanced understanding of ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) service interactions.

2.1. Participants

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (2020) estimated that nearly 11 million domestic and foreign tourists came to Chiangmai in 2019 (Kirkey, 2020). Yet, determining the accurate number of the entire population is not possible. Therefore, some general guidelines were used as a rule of thumb to decide how many participants are needed for a valid and reliable research. In order to have an appropriate estimate of the sample size, the following factors of this study are taken into account: the research approach; number of variables; research instruments; time for completion; cost of the study; sample size of previous related studies. Sample size from past studies of a similar nature can be acceptable to determine how many participants are needed for a study (Creswell, 2018). Wongchan (2019) studied the perception of communication problems and communication strategies with Thai vendors and English-speaking tourists, the researcher's study included fifty Thai vendors and fifty English speaking tourists. Similarly, Su-yai's (2018) study contained 114 Thai Songthaew drivers and ten foreign tourists. Furthermore, a sample size more than thirty and less than five hundred is acceptable, for comparative analysis which contain several subgroups, a minimum of thirty respondents is thought sufficient (Roscoe, 1975). Therefore, it is determined that a sufficient sample size to collect quantitative data will consist of between thirty to five hundred participants. Qualitatively, a smaller sample size will be gathered. Generally, smaller numbers, such as 4-10 are found in the reported cases, numbers tend to connect with the research questions or type of qualitative approach (Creswell, 1998).

With that considered, the population sample for this study included 100 participants categorized into two groups. First are the Thai baristas working at cafes primarily located within the Old Town area. The second group being the foreign customers who have purchased a coffee with a Thai barista in English. Both groups at the time of the study were within Mueang District, Chiangmai Province, also known as Chiangmai City. Probability sampling, specifically through the cluster technique was utilized to obtain the Thai participants. One advantage for choosing this method is that it allows for the larger population to be divided into subgroups or clusters. Thus, by first dividing the cafes into clusters such as tourist destinations where English is often used as the means of communication, in effect the Thai baristas for this study were selected. The commonality of this subgroup resides in their similar job duties, as well as the cafes where they work being located within areas which have a high concentration of foreign customers. Lastly, cluster sampling allows for an ease of implementation and consumes less time and cost (Scheaffer, Mendenhall & Ott, 1990). Regarding the foreign participants, snowball sampling was utilized to seek out the subjects. This method is preferred as it allows new participants to be obtained from the referrals of participants who have already taken part in the study (Acharya et al., 2013). This chain-like effect is useful as it has the ability to streamline subjects who share a specific similar trait. The homogenous characteristic being that the foreign customers have all recently visited and ordered a coffee

in English from a Thai barista in Chiangmai City. The diverse distinction lies in the nature of the foreigners being either native or non-native English speakers.

2.2. Instruments

The questionnaires used to collect quantitative data for this study were developed by the researcher and native Thai teachers proficient in English. Two separate sets were created, one questionnaire for the Thai baristas developed in the Thai language for accuracy and ease of comprehension. The other set in English for the foreign customers. The questionnaire consists of three sections comprised of similar questions. Section 1 focuses on the participants demographic information and English proficiency. Additionally, only Thai participants were asked to answer how many years of experience they have as a coffee shop employee. Whereas foreign participants were asked to answer questions regarding their status in Thailand, and English language status. Section 2 contains 16 questions which aims to elicit information about communication problems in the areas of: grammar; vocabulary; fluency; pronunciation. Section 3 contains 18 statements seeking to identify which communication strategies are applied to cope with the problems or enhance communication. As previously stated in the conceptual framework, the 18 CSs are adopted from Dornyei & Scott's (1997) taxonomy in order to identify the types of strategies utilized among the Thai baristas and foreign customers. Technical terminologies are tuned for ease of comprehension for the participants. In order to evaluate the participants' agreement level of CPs and CSs, a Five-point Likert Scale was applied. The range of the Likert Scale is rated as follows: Never —Rarely —Sometimes —Often —Most often.

Semi-Structured Interviews conducted with over 30 volunteer participants, these interviews captured deeper reflections and anecdotal evidence of real-life communication breakdowns and repairs. Participants were invited to share specific incidents, describe their thought processes during interactions, and elaborate on the strategies they used to navigate communication challenges. The semi-structured format combined prepared questions with the flexibility to pursue emerging topics, allowing participants to introduce experiences not directly addressed by the initial questionnaire. Open-ended questions encouraged detailed narratives, personal insights, and diverse perspectives, providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the linguistic and cultural factors influencing service interactions between Thai baristas and foreign customers. This qualitative data complemented the structured survey results, offering depth and contextualization to the thematic analysis.

2.3. Data Collection Procedure

This study employed a mixed methods research design, where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently. Data was collected during the months of December of 2023 to August 2024. Thai participants were approached onsite and provided with the questionnaire to complete. They were allowed up to two weeks to fully complete the questionnaire which was then collected at a later time. The foreigners who participated in this study were approached in-person and made known of the research. Additionally, they completed the questionnaire and semi-structured interview with the researcher alone within the same time.

2.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, with descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) used to profile communication problems and strategies. Inferential analyses (t-tests, chi-square tests) identified statistically significant differences between participant groups. Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This included initial coding, theme development, and iterative review. Triangulation was employed to cross-validate qualitative and quantitative findings. Member checking enhanced trustworthiness, allowing participants to verify transcriptions and interpretations. To ensure validity and reliability, the instruments were piloted and reviewed by bilingual experts. For qualitative credibility, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria—

credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability—were observed. Rich descriptions of participant demographics and setting supported the potential for future application in similar ELF contexts.

3. Results

The study investigates the oral communication problems that arise and the strategies used to overcome them. It combines quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis. The study involved 100 participants: 50 Thai baristas and 50 foreign customers. The research focused on the communication problems encountered and the strategies employed by both groups. The findings are organized based on the research questions stated earlier.

3.1. Demographic Information

There were more foreign male participants (64%) than female (36%), while Thai baristas were predominantly female (62%) compared to male (38%). In terms of age, most Thai baristas (48%) were between 20 and 25 years old, whereas the largest group of foreign participants (28%) were aged 26 to 30. Regarding status in Thailand, the majority of foreign participants were expats (46%), followed by international students (14%), tourists (12%), and retirees (6%). In terms of experience, nearly half of the Thai baristas (46%) had 1–5 years of work experience, while 32% had less than one year. Concerning English language background, most foreign participants (44%) were native English speakers, while the majority of Thai baristas (52%) were non-native English speakers. In terms of English proficiency, most foreign participants (40%) reported native-level proficiency, whereas the majority of Thai baristas (66%) identified themselves as beginners.

3.2. Research Question One: Communication Problems

The study identified communication problems experienced by both foreign customers and Thai baristas. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the frequency of these problems (5 = Most often; 1 = Never).

3.2.1. Communication Problems Experienced by Foreign Customers

Findings from table 4.3 and reveal the most significant oral communication problem experienced by foreigners is the use of technical terms, jargon, or idioms, with a mean score of 3.06. This indicates that when foreigners use complex language, it frequently leads to communication problems with Thai baristas. This is further reinforced by qualitative responses, where customers shared real-life experiences of communication problems due to technical terms, jargon or idioms. For example, one customer stated, *“Sometimes there can be miscommunication over the slight names and meanings of different sizes of drinks. For example, Americano – Long blacks. These are different in Thailand than they are in Australia.”* Another customer similarly echoed, *“If there is a slight miscommunication, it’s often about topics related to the product at the café.”* Following this, pronunciation issues from the Thai baristas also pose a substantial challenge, with a mean score of 3.02. Foreigners find that incorrect pronunciation by the baristas often leads to communication problems. One customer mentioned, *“The problems 69 I met were about the pronunciation.”* In like manner, tone, stress, or intonation used by Thai baristas is another notable issue, with a mean of 2.80, suggesting that variations in speech delivery can create confusion.

Feedback from a customer stated, *“Thai pronunciation of English words can be difficult to understand if you’re not use to their inflection or stress on different syllables.”* One other customer complimented by saying, *“Stress and accent can lead to communication problems,”* referring to Thai baristas’ pronunciation. Another common problem is when Thai baristas use words that are unfamiliar to the foreign customers, as reflected by a mean score of 2.70. This includes both general vocabulary and

specific technical terms, slang, or idioms used by baristas, which has a mean score of 2.68. On the foreigners' side, their own rate of speech, whether too fast, too slow, or with too many pauses, also contributes to communication issues, with a mean of 2.58. Additionally, their tone, stress, or intonation during speech can lead to misunderstandings, as indicated by the same mean score. Overall, the data suggests that both sides face challenges, but the most critical areas for improvement are related to the use of complex language, pronunciation, and speech delivery. Addressing these issues could significantly enhance communication between Thai baristas and foreign customers.

Table 4.3 Communication Problems Experienced by Foreign Customers

(Item number) Communication Problem	Foreigner Group (N=50)	
	\bar{x}	SD
(7) When I use technical terms, jargon or idioms, it causes communication problems.	3.06	1.06
(13) The Thai barista's pronunciation causes communication problems.	3.02	0.89
(14) The Thai barista's tone, stress or intonation in speech causes communication problems.	2.80	0.99
(6) A word the Thai barista says, which I do not know, causes communication problems.	2.70	0.97
(8) When the Thai barista uses technical terms, slang or idioms, it causes communication problems.	2.68	0.84
(12) My rate of speech is too fast, too slow, or has too many pauses, which causes communication problems.	2.58	0.78
(15) My tone, stress or intonation in speech causes communication problems.	2.58	0.88
(3) The Thai barista's sentence structure causes communication problems.	2.48	0.89
(10) The Thai barista's rate of speech causes communication problems.	2.44	0.91
(11) When my flow of speech is interrupted, it causes communication problems.	2.44	1.01
(2) The Thai barista's grammar error causes communication problems.	2.40	0.95
(9) When the Thai barista's flow of speech is interrupted, it causes communication problems.	2.50	0.81
(5) I have problems choosing the correct word to express my thoughts, which causes communication problems.	2.06	1.00
(1) When I use the wrong grammar tense, it causes communication problems.	2.00	0.86
(4) I have problems with my grammar when speaking, which causes communication problems.	1.92	0.99
(16) I have problems pronouncing some words in English which causes communication problems.	1.58	0.86

3.2.2. Communication Problems Experienced by Thai Baristas

The data from table 4.4 reveal that the most significant oral communication problem experienced by Thai baristas is problems with grammar when speaking, with a mean score of 3.58. Following this, using the wrong grammar tense is another notable issue, with a mean score of 3.52. This suggests that baristas often struggle with grammatical accuracy when communicating with foreign customers. One

customer explained, *“Often the problem is that the barista does not have the sentence-building ability to be able to communicate with me in English.”* Another foreigner customer noted, *“The wrong grammar of Thai baristas led to communication problems.”* Additionally, the Thai barista’s flow of speech being interrupted poses a significant challenge, with a mean score of 3.50, implying that disruptions in speaking hinders effective communication. Similarly, baristas have trouble choosing the correct word during interactions, with a mean score of 3.44, contributing to communication breakdowns. Other common problems include using technical terms, jargon, or idioms with a mean of 3.38, 73 and foreign customers using technical terms, slang, or idioms, which also has a mean score of 3.38, indicating mutual difficulty in understanding specialized language.

Foreign customer’s rate of speech being too fast or too slow is another issue, with a mean score of 3.34, affecting the baristas’ ability to comprehend. Baristas also experience pronunciation difficulties, reflected by a mean of 3.28, suggesting that their English pronunciation sometimes leads to misunderstandings. One foreign participant mentioned, *“Thai pronunciation of English words can be difficult to understand.”* Another participant echoed a similar comment when referring to Thai baristas’ pronunciation, *“The problems I met were about pronunciation,”* which led to incorrect meaning. My speech being too fast, slow, or having too many pauses has a mean score of 2.88, indicating that unclear speech patterns cause CPs. Overall, the data indicates that both foreign customers and Thai baristas face challenges in effective communication, particularly related to grammar, word choice, and specialized language. Addressing these issues could improve communication between Thai baristas and foreign customers.

Table 4.4 Communication Problems Experienced by Thai Baristas

(Item number) Communication Problem	Thai Group (N=50)	
	\bar{x}	SD
(4) I have problems with my grammar when speaking, which causes communication problems.	3.58	1.01
(1) When I use the wrong grammar tense, it causes communication problems.	3.52	0.97
(11) When my flow of speech is interrupted, it causes communication problems.	3.50	1.16
(5) I have problems choosing the correct word to express my thoughts, which causes communication problems.	3.44	0.95
(7) When I use technical terms, jargon or idioms, it causes communication problems.	3.38	1.14
(8) When the foreign customer uses technical terms, slang or idioms, it causes communication problems.	3.38	1.07
(10) The foreign customers’s rate of speech causes communication problems.	3.34	1.21
(16) I have problems pronouncing some words in English which causes communication problems.	3.28	1.23
(13) The foreign customer’s pronunciation causes communication problems.	3.04	1.12
(12) My rate of speech is too fast, too slow, or has too many pauses, which causes communication problems.	2.88	1.17
(15) My tone, stress or intonation in speech causes communication problems.	2.86	1.25
(6) A word the foreign customer says, which I do not know, causes communication problems.	2.86	1.01

(9) When the foreign customer's flow of speech is interrupted, it causes communication problems.	2.82	1.30
(14) The foreign customer's tone, stress or intonation in speech causes communication problems.	2.34	1.10
(3) The foreign customer's sentence structure causes communication problems.	1.86	0.99
(2) The foreign customer's grammar error causes communication problems.	1.82	0.96

3.2.3. Summary of Research Question One

Communication problems between Thai baristas and foreign customers involve grammar, pronunciation, speech delivery, and technical language. Thai baristas reported their biggest challenges as grammar errors (mean 3.58), incorrect tense usage (3.52), speech flow interruptions (3.50), word choice (3.44), and pronunciation (3.28). Foreign customers mainly struggled with technical terms, jargon, and idioms (3.06), followed by issues with baristas' pronunciation (3.02), tone and intonation (2.80), and unfamiliar words (2.70). Both groups shared difficulties in tone, stress, intonation, and maintaining smooth speech flow. A major shared problem was the use of technical or idiomatic language, highlighting a mutual gap in understanding.

3.3. Research Question Two: Communication Strategies

The study also examined the communication strategies used by both groups to deal with communication problems. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the frequency of strategy use (5 = Most often; 1 = Never).

3.3.1. Communication Strategies Applied by Foreign Customers

The communication strategies employed by foreign customers when interacting with Thai baristas highlight specific patterns in how they address language barriers. Table 4.5 displays the strategy used most frequently by foreign customers is asking for repetition, with a mean of 3.22 (SD = 0.95). Interview excerpts further illustrate this trend, for example, one participant simply stated, "*Repetition*", when asked about which strategy they often utilize. Another foreign participant stated, "*asking the barista to repeat it can solve it.*" Moreover, "*repeating key information*" was expressed by a participant during the interview. This indicates that foreign customers often request baristas to repeat themselves when they do not understand the message clearly, demonstrating a direct approach to ensuring effective communication. Similarly, asking for confirmation ranks high, with a mean of 2.98 (SD = 0.84), suggesting that foreign customers frequently check if the barista has understood their message. This is supported by the following interview excerpts. One participant commented, "*I always need to check if they understand my order.*"

Another similar statement was, "*Sometimes I will ask for confirmation to make sure they understand what I mean.*" Self-repair, with a mean of 2.94 (SD = 1.20), shows that foreign customers often correct their own speech mid-conversation, signaling an awareness of potential errors and a desire for clarity. Notably, a foreign participant mentioned, "*Simplifying English and eliminate useless articles, verbs, and/or nouns to create a version of broken English that is comprehensible for the Thai barista.*" This was echoed by another participant who stated, "*I am often breaking my Native English, I rarely for a full sentence if I a speaking with someone who doesn't understand basic English.*" Approximation, where a similar word is used in place of an unknown term, also has a mean of 2.94 (SD = 1.25), highlighting that foreign customers find this strategy useful when vocabulary is limited. For example, a participant mentioned, "*Use simple, common or similar vocabulary to explain and then revise them can help solve communication problems.*" This is similar to another customer who would, "*use similar words*" to effectively communicate with Thai baristas. In summary, foreign customers tend to favor structured and

interactional strategies, such as asking for repetition or confirmation, while less conventional methods like word coinage or literal translation are less commonly used.

Table 4.5 Communication Strategies Applied by Foreign Customers

(Item number) Communication Strategies	Foreigner Group (N=50)	
	\bar{x}	SD
(14) Asking for repetition	3.22	0.95
(16) Asking for confirmation	2.98	0.84
(7) Self-repair	2.94	1.20
(2) Approximation	2.94	1.25
(6) Mime	2.90	1.36
(18) Interpretive summary	2.82	0.87
(15) Asking for clarification	2.76	1.00
(3) Use of all-purpose words	2.76	1.27
(17) Guessing	2.74	1.08
(1) Circumlocution	2.72	1.29
(10) Use of fillers	2.64	1.01
(13) Own-accuracy check	2.52	1.07
(12) Verbal strategy markers	2.48	1.15
(11) Other-repetition	2.26	0.99
(8) Direct appeal for help	2.22	1.07
(9) Indirect appeal for help	2.18	1.16
(5) Literal translation	2.14	1.23
(4) Word coinage	2.06	1.06

3.3.2. Communication Strategies Applied by Thai Baristas

The table 4.6 illustrates the various communication strategies employed by Thai baristas when interacting with foreign customers, ranked by the level of frequency based on mean scores. The most frequently used strategy is the Direct appeal for help, with a mean of 4.24 (SD=0.98), which involves asking for assistance directly, such as asking how to say something in English. This is followed by Asking for repetition, with a mean of 4.04 (SD=0.95), where baristas request customers to repeat their message when it is unclear. Another highly utilized strategy is Mime, with a mean of 3.76 (SD=1.25), where baristas rely on gestures to convey meaning when language barriers arise. Mid-frequency strategies include Use of fillers (\bar{x} =3.72, SD=1.11), such as using pauses to gain time to think, and Indirect appeal for help (\bar{x} =3.68, SD=1.25), where baristas seek assistance nonverbally, through cues like confused expressions or eye contact. Self-repair (\bar{x} =3.64, SD=1.03) is another commonly used tactic, where

baristas correct their own mistakes in English. Interpretive summary (\bar{x} =3.56, SD=1.23) and Guessing (\bar{x} =3.46, SD=1.15) also rank in this range, showing how baristas attempt to restate the customer's message or guess words when unsure. These strategies demonstrate a range of approaches used by Thai baristas to bridge communication gaps with foreign customers.

Table 4.6 Communication Strategies Applied by Thai Baristas

(Item number) Communication Strategies	Thai Group (N=50)	
	\bar{x}	SD
(8) Direct appeal for help	4.24	0.98
(14) Asking for repetition	4.04	0.95
(6) Mime	3.76	1.25
(10) Use of fillers	3.72	1.11
(9) Indirect appeal for help	3.68	1.25
(7) Self-repair	3.64	1.03
(18) Interpretive summary	3.56	1.23
(17) Guessing	3.46	1.15
(12) Verbal strategy markers	3.42	1.25
(16) Asking for confirmation	3.40	1.14
(11) Other-repetition	3.40	1.20
(15) Asking for clarification	3.36	1.29
(2) Approximation	3.36	1.27
(13) Own-accuracy check	3.34	1.15
(1) Circumlocution	3.28	1.29
(3) Use of all-purpose words	3.08	1.29
(4) Word coinage	2.76	1.36
(5) Literal translation	2.68	1.35

3.3.3. Summary of Research Question Two

The communication strategies employed by both Thai baristas and foreign customers when interacting with each other show some similarities and differences. Both groups frequently use interactional and structured methods to overcome communication barriers. For example, asking for repetition is one of the most commonly used strategies by both foreign customers (\bar{x} = 3.22) and Thai baristas (\bar{x} = 4.04). This similarity suggests that both parties prefer to clarify misunderstandings by asking the other to repeat themselves, ensuring clearer communication. Additionally, Self-repair is another strategy used by both groups, with a mean of 2.94 for foreign customers and 3.64 for Thai baristas, indicating that each group often corrects their own mistakes during interactions.

Despite these similarities, there are notable differences in the frequency and types of strategies used by each group. Thai baristas tend to rely more on Direct appeal for help ($\bar{x} = 4.24$), asking for assistance explicitly, whereas foreign customers use this strategy much less frequently ($\bar{x} = 2.22$). Thai baristas also frequently use Mime ($\bar{x} = 3.76$) to supplement verbal communication with gestures, while foreign customers use it less often ($\bar{x} = 2.90$). This difference suggests that baristas may feel more comfortable using non-verbal strategies, perhaps due to their higher exposure to language barriers. In contrast, foreign customers more frequently use strategies like Asking for confirmation ($\bar{x} = 2.98$), where they verify if the barista has understood their message. Thai baristas use this strategy as well, but with a slightly lower frequency ($\bar{x} = 3.40$). Additionally, foreign customers tend to avoid unconventional methods like Word coinage ($\bar{x} = 2.06$) and Literal translation ($\bar{x} = 2.14$), strategies that are also infrequently used by Thai baristas ($\bar{x} = 2.76$ and 2.68 , respectively). Overall, the results show that while both groups use some similar methods, Thai baristas are more likely to use non-verbal strategies and directly seek help, whereas foreign customers focus more on structured verbal strategies like repetition and confirmation.

3.4. Thematic Analysis

As Chiang Mai's café industry expands alongside its growing international clientele, effective communication between Thai baristas and foreign customers has become increasingly important. To explore this, a thematic analysis was conducted based on foreign customers' responses to four in-depth interview questions. In response to Interview Question 1 (*"What communication problems have you experienced when interacting with Thai baristas?"*), four principal difficulties were identified: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency. Pronunciation emerged as the most frequently cited barrier. Several participants reported that Thai-accented English complicated understanding; one British respondent stated, *"The barista found it hard to understand my British accent,"* while another noted, *"Sometimes I can't understand because of the accent of a Thai barista."* Grammar issues also contributed to misunderstandings. A native English speaker commented, *"The barista does not have the sentence-building ability to be able to communicate with me,"* and a non-native participant similarly remarked, *"The wrong grammar of Thai baristas often makes me unable to understand what they mean."* Vocabulary limitations, particularly regarding coffee-specific terminology, further impeded communication. One participant explained, *"The barista does not have the vocabulary to communicate beyond simple phrases,"* and another expressed frustration when specialty orders were misunderstood: *"They say they know what it is, but when I receive it, they didn't understand."* Fluency issues were also highlighted, restricting conversations to basic exchanges: *"We are only able to have very simple communication, like ordering food or asking where the bathroom is."*

Addressing Interview Question 2 (*"When communication problems happen, what strategies do you use to solve them?"*), participants described a range of coping strategies. Three main categories emerged: direct or achievement strategies, interactional strategies, and indirect time-stalling strategies. Direct strategies included simplifying language, using circumlocution and approximation (e.g., *"Not too hot, but not too cold, in the middle"*), employing all-purpose terms (*"Biggest one"*), and non-verbal communication such as pointing or miming. Literal translation and the use of translation apps were common solutions: *"I learned how to order my drinks in Thai or I use Google Translate."* Interactional strategies focused on maintaining mutual understanding. Many customers asked for repetition (*"Ask the barista to repeat what he or she said"*) or clarification (*"Always check for clarification that we both mean the same thing"*), and some rephrased information to ensure accurate comprehension. Indirect time-stalling strategies, such as speaking more slowly (*"I'll talk slower"*) or repeating parts of a barista's speech (*"Repeating part of the speech"*), helped customers manage the flow of interaction while allowing extra time for processing.

In relation to Interview Question 3 (*"What strategies are the most effective when trying to overcome communication problems with Thai baristas?"*), participants affirmed the effectiveness of

simplification, gesture use, translation tools, and speech adjustment. Participants recommended, “*Use very easy words to describe what you want,*” and “*Use hand gestures,*” while translation aids such as Google Translate were widely praised. Slowing speech and repeating important information were also viewed as key strategies: “*Speak slowly and clearly*” and “*Repeat the order to confirm understanding.*” Beyond these core strategies, several respondents highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity, patience, humor, and using basic Thai phrases.

Finally, addressing Interview Question 4 (“*Do you use any communication strategies to enhance your interactions with Thai baristas even when there is no communication problem?*”), many participants reported adopting proactive communication behaviors. Direct strategies such as simplifying language, using non-verbal gestures, and mimicking Thai pronunciation were common. One participant explained, “*I use clear and straightforward language,*” while another described, “*I use gestures, pointing, and body language.*” Interactional strategies, including confirmation and interpretive summary, were emphasized as ways to maintain smooth exchanges. Indirect strategies like slowing speech and using fillers were also employed to ease interaction and provide time for thinking. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that foreign customers not only react adaptively to communication challenges but also engage proactively to foster positive service interactions. Addressing the identified barriers through targeted English language training—focused on pronunciation, vocabulary, and conversational fluency—could substantially enhance service quality and customer satisfaction in Chiang Mai’s evolving café sector.

4. Discussion

This section looks at the main findings of the study, focusing on the communication problems and strategies used by Thai baristas and foreign customers in Chiangmai. The quantitative results show patterns in communication challenges and strategies, while the qualitative findings provide deeper insights into participants’ experiences. Together, these findings shed light into understanding how to improve communicator and cross-cultural interactions in real-world settings.

Thai baristas struggled primarily with pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and grammar—echoing issues documented by Ekwannang (2004), Kittiwutrungruang (2016), and others. Foreign customers reported misunderstandings due to baristas’ inaccurate grammar and sentence structures, complicating service interactions. To bridge these gaps, both groups used a variety of communication strategies. Thai baristas employed achievement strategies (circumlocution, approximation) and interactional strategies (asking for clarification). Whereas, Foreign customers often used rephrasing and paraphrasing, adapting their speech to fit the listener’s ability. These findings support the need for communicative competence training focusing on vocabulary, pronunciation, and effective strategy use in ELF contexts. Key themes included pronunciation challenges, limited vocabulary, grammar issues, and reliance on non-verbal cues like gestures. Thai-accented English and unfamiliar coffee-related terms were often problematic for foreign customers. Cultural expectations played a role; many foreigners expected better English fluency in a tourist hub. Both groups frequently used clarification and repetition but lacked more advanced strategies, revealing gaps in TESOL-focused training. Some customers adapted by mimicking Thai accents, a practical approach that could influence TESOL methods. The findings of this study align with and expand upon previous research on communication problems and strategies in ELF contexts. Several parallels were identified, particularly in the areas of communication challenges and the use of strategies to overcome these barriers.

The communication problems faced by Thai baristas, including issues with pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and fluency are consistent with findings from prior studies conducted in similar Thai ELF settings. For example, pronunciation difficulties observed in this study resonate with Ekwannang (2004) and Leelaviriyawong (2015), who identified pronunciation as a significant barrier in cross-cultural interactions within Thai service industries. Similarly, vocabulary challenges reflect the

findings of Kittiwutrungruang (2016) and Pupphavesa (2017), where limited lexical knowledge hindered effective communication in professional environments. Fluency issues, such as hesitations and overuse of fillers, align with Jeharsae (2012) and Netfang (2015), who documented these barriers in workplace interactions between Thai employees and international customers. These findings collectively emphasize that Thai baristas, like other professionals in ELF contexts, face recurring linguistic challenges stemming from limited exposure to English and differences in linguistic competence. Such challenges often lead to 99 misunderstandings and require additional clarification efforts during interactions with foreign customers.

Thai baristas employed a range of communication strategies to overcome these barriers, with a notable reliance on achievement strategies such as circumlocution and approximation. These findings are consistent with Wongchan (2019), who documented the effectiveness of such strategies among Thai vendors in Chiangmai when interacting with English-speaking tourists. Similarly, the use of interaction strategies, including clarification and confirmation requests mirrors the findings of Jeharsae (2012) and Sripraphakhan (2017). These studies highlighted how these strategies were instrumental in resolving misunderstandings and maintaining effective communication. The use of these strategies not only facilitated mutual understanding but also enhanced the overall quality of interactions. This underscores the importance of equipping Thai baristas with practical communication tools that allow them to navigate linguistic challenges effectively.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to improve the communicative competence of Thai baristas. Continuous training on English vocabulary expansion and correct pronunciation should be integrated into workplace programs. Interactive role-playing exercises focusing on common service scenarios could provide baristas with practical, low-pressure opportunities to develop their language skills. Incorporating visual aids, such as picture menus or translation devices, may also help bridge communication gaps and reduce the occurrence of communication problems. Additionally, emphasizing cultural sensitivity and encouraging foreign customers to learn basic Thai phrases could foster better understanding and smoother interactions. Finally, language programs should prioritize developing strategic competence by teaching the use of compensatory strategies, such as paraphrasing and approximation. This study was conducted in Chiang Mai's tourist-centric areas, where English is predominantly spoken among Thai and foreign customers. While the findings provide insights into the interactional dynamics in these settings, the sample size was limited, and results may not be generalizable to all baristas across Thailand. Additionally, the foreign customers participating were both native and non-native speakers of English, but the study did not further distinguish how language backgrounds may have influenced their communication strategies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals that the application of communication strategies plays a pivotal role in overcoming communication problems between Thai baristas and foreign customers. Direct, interactional, and indirect strategies have all been shown to facilitate clearer, more effective communication. These findings underscore the need for ongoing language training and the incorporation of practical, context-specific strategies in English education for service workers in tourist-heavy regions. Future research could explore broader contexts and further investigate the impact of language backgrounds on communication dynamics in cross-cultural service settings.

References

- Acharya, A.S., Prakash, A., Pikee, S., & Nigam, A. (2013). Sampling: Why and how of it? *Indian Journal of Medical Specialities*, 42(2), 330-333.
- Braun V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Canale, M. (1983). From communicative competence to communicative pedagogy. In J. C.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.) SAGE Publications.
- Dornyei, Z., & Scott, M. L. (1997). Communication strategies in a second language definitions and taxonomies. *Language Learning*, 47(1), 173-21.
- Ekwannang, P. (2004). *A study of verbal cross cultural communication barriers among western expatriates and Thai staff in Thailand* [Master's Project, Srinakharinwirot University].
- Jeharsae, F. (2012). *English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai employees in an international workplace to communicate with native and non- 106 native English speaking customers* [Master's Thesis, Srinakharinwirot University].
- Kirkey, J. M. (2020). *Tourism and tradition in Chiang Mai* [Master's Thesis, Portland State University].
- Kittiwutrungruang, K. (2016). *International students' attitudes toward English oral communication with Thai staff at an international college* [Independent Study, Thammasat University].
- Leelaviriyawong, S. (2015). *Foreign tourists' satisfaction towards English oral communication with Thai vendors in Bangkok* [Independent Study, Thammasat University]. 06.pdf.
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations: IJIR*, 9(4), 438-439.
- Netfang, C. (2015). *Communication barrier between Thai hospital staff and foreign patients* [Independent Study, Thammasat University]. 32.pdf.
- Pupphavesa, N. (2017). *Problems of Thai Airways senior cabin crew towards English language communication with guests in Royal First Class and new business class on international flights* [Independent Study, Thammasat University]. Pdf.
- Richards, & R. W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 2-27). Longman.
- Roscoe, J. T. (1975). *Fundamental research statistics for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Scheaffer, R. L., Mendenhall, W., & Ott, L. (1990). *Elementary survey sampling* (4th ed.). Duxbury Press.
- Sripraphakhan, K. (2017). *Communication strategies used by foreign currency exchange staff at Suvarnabhumi Airport with international customers* [Master's Thesis, Thammasat University].

- Su-ya-yai, P. (2018). *English communication problems between Thai songthaew drivers and foreign tourists*. [Unpublished master's thesis]. Thammasat University.
- Wongchan, M. (2019). *The perception of communication problems and communication strategies used by Thai vendors to communicate with English speaking tourists in Chiang Mai province*. [Master's Thesis, University of Phayao].

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).