

Foreign Languages in Workplaces: A Reflection from Human Resource Officers

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Abstract. *The purpose of this study was to investigate the reflection from human resource officers' perspective on foreign languages used in workplaces located in the Eastern region of Thailand. A questionnaire was employed to collect the data from human resource officers from 24 multinational companies in Chon Buri and other provinces in the region. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire on corporate language development needs, which consisted of foreign languages used in the workplaces, the departments that require foreign languages, and the needs for foreign language development. The findings showed that, apart from English and Japanese, some South East Asian languages were widely used in the workplaces. In addition, Human Resource departments and Sales and Marketing departments were reported using foreign languages at the highest level. Finally, the foreign language development was found to be a crucial tool to communicate both inside and outside the organizations.*

1. Introduction

In this globalized economic era, a workforce can transfer almost freely from country to country. Multinational companies are viewed as being normal among local businesses. Japanese corporations, for example, have offices and factories in various areas around the world, including Thailand. At the same time, many multinational companies are located in several regions of the country. The same situation occurs in other industrialized countries as well. Because of this fact, there are interactions between people from different countries and cultures, who work in the same place.

In order to achieve the same business goals, these different people have to speak the same language. It might be the language that one of them is a native speaker in, but sometimes the moderate language is not one of their native languages. In some situations, the moderate language becomes a big obstacle of communication both inside and outside organizations. Therefore, to prevent the problem and support the business growth, an amount of training budget has been spent on foreign language training in most multinational companies.

The situation has been more challenging in Thailand due to the promotion of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), in which there will be regional economic integration by 2015. It is a big plus for someone to relocate to new workplaces in different Southeast Asian countries. At the same time, a huge workforce from all Southeast Asian countries will move to Thailand. In a workplace, there will be more than Thai, English, and Japanese spoken. Therefore, it is necessary to find out the current use of languages in the companies as a preparation for the coming free trade era in South East Asia.

1.1 Purposes of the Study

The present study aimed to examine the use of foreign languages in 24 multinational companies in the Eastern region of Thailand. Three enabling objectives were: 1) to investigate the foreign languages that are currently used in workplaces located in the Eastern region of Thailand; 2) to identify the departments or divisions that used foreign languages; and 3) to investigate the corporate attitude towards foreign language development in the workplace.

1.2 Scope of the Study

Established in 2010, the Burapha University Language Institute (BUULI) aims partly to support economic growth in the Eastern region of Thailand with foreign language services. This study, therefore, was focused on multinational companies located in Chon Buri, Chachoengsao, Rayong, and

other provinces in this region. The participants were human resource officers of these companies who responded to a questionnaire. Foreign languages referred to English, Chinese, Japanese, and other languages used in ASEAN member countries.

2. Literature Review

As the English language is known as a common corporate language, the studies on English language in workplaces and a variety of languages used in South-East Asia were reviewed.

2.1 A Common Corporate Language

Language plays important roles in today business. It can be a key of business success and a big barrier that cannot be crossed easily. In the age of globalization, the “global language of business” is normally referred to English language. More and more multinational companies are adopting English as the common corporate language – the idea that there should be one common language used among people in a multinational company. English is the natural choice for business, because it is already the dominant language of business. There are many reasons that English has been promoted, such as competitive pressure, globalization of tasks and resources, and M&A integration across national boundaries (Neely, 2012).

Many studies support the notion of English as the common corporate language. Harzing, Köster and Magner (2011) investigated the language barrier and its solutions in the relationship between multinational company’s headquarters and its subsidiaries. Managers from German and Japanese companies were interviewed. The research found that language is an important barrier that slows down and increases the cost of decision-making. The researchers suggested twelve solutions, which included language training and corporate language policies.

The difficulties of internal communication for multinational companies were also studied by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012). This research pointed out the disadvantages of English as a common corporate language, as there are different forms of standard English and international communication are commonly conducted by non-native speakers of English. Therefore, this policy might not be a straightforward solution. The results found that the role of English as a common corporate language meant that employees felt uncomfortable and, yet, were confused with having to use multiple corporate languages. The internal communication with a single corporate language seemed to be smoother. Rogerson-Revell (2007, p. 118) also commented about using English for international business:

“While people may well need to ‘speak the same language’ in such multilingual contexts, they may not necessarily ‘speak the same way’, for instance, because of underlying differences in socio-cultural conventions or differences in linguistic competence.”

Still, as Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) concluded, the role of other languages should be acknowledged and promoted in multinational companies when appropriate.

2.2 Studies of English Language in Multinational Workplaces

Studies about English language used in multinational workplaces have been widely conducted. They are mainly based on the concept of English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF), which refers to the use of English as a shared language among non-native speakers in business contexts. Unlike standard English, BELF does not have strict rules of grammatical form, structures, or correctness (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012). Whereas BELF works well in some contexts, it is problematic in certain situations and linguistic researchers around the world are interested in this field, such as in the technology sector (Ehrenreich, 2010), in the telecommunication sector (Dalmau, 2012), and in the international trade sector (Ku & Zussman, 2010; Wongwaiyut, 2011).

In the cases where BELF becomes problematic, language training is listed as one of the frequent solutions for organizations (Feely & Harzing, 2003; Harzing, Köster & Magner, 2011). In addition, it is not necessary to reach native fluency to be effective at work. Neeley (2012) suggested that knowing about 3,000 – 5,000 words is sufficient for working effectively.

2.3 Variety of Languages in South-East Asia

The AEC comprises ten nations in the South-East Asian region, in which people of each country speak a variety of languages. For the integration of the AEC, beginning in 2015, different languages can be viewed as a huge barrier. Therefore, English has been announced to be the common language among the nations. It was officially declared in the ASEAN Charter in November 2007 that “The working language of ASEAN shall be English” (Kirkpatrick, 2008). The ASEAN Secretariat (2011) also claimed that learning of English language is given priority in order to develop human resources in the region.

In terms of a global business language in this region, there is an attractiveness of the Chinese language because of the rapid economic growth of China and the huge number of native speakers of Chinese in South-East Asia. China also has a big impact on AEC business growth, as it is one of ASEAN+3 countries (including China, Japan, and South Korea). Graddol (2006) noticed that there would be a steady rise of the Chinese language and a slow relative decline of Japanese. Neeley (2012), on the other hand, suggested that it is quite difficult for Mandarin to overtake English as the global language of business, because English has a great head start as the British Empire embedded English language in many parts of the world. In addition, Mandarin is extremely difficult to learn and it is easier to pick up “broken English” than “broken Chinese”. However, knowing Chinese is an advantage and, as Graddol (2006) suggested, the interest in Chinese (i.e., Mandarin) may remain a long-term trend.

Apart from Chinese, Japanese still has an impact on the business of the region. This language is not a native language of people in AEC nations, but there are a number of Japanese companies located in this region. People who know Japanese are also at an advantage. Anyway, this trend is on the move. Many Japanese firms have adopted English as their global business language. For instance, Rakuten – Japan’s largest online marketplace which established joint ventures with major companies in some South-East Asian countries, announced in 2011 that English would be the company’s official language of business (Neeley, 2012).

In short, although there are a variety of languages among ASEAN nations and there is a huge Chinese and Japanese economic impact in this region, English remains the common business language.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were human resource officers in Chon Buri and other provinces in the Eastern region of Thailand. They were randomly selected. The participants were from 24 companies located in industrial parks, including Amata Nakorn Industrial Estate, Wellgrow Industrial Estate, and Pinthong Industrial Estate.

3.2 Instruments

A questionnaire was employed to collect the data. It was used to examine the corporate language development needs, which consisted of foreign languages used in the workplaces, the departments that require foreign languages, and the needs for foreign language development.

3.3 Data Collection

A questionnaire was distributed to companies in Chon Buri Province, Rayong Province, Samut Prakarn Province, and Chachoengsao Province, Thailand. The participants voluntarily completed the questionnaire and submitted it to the researcher via post mail, facsimile, and email.

3.4 Data Analysis

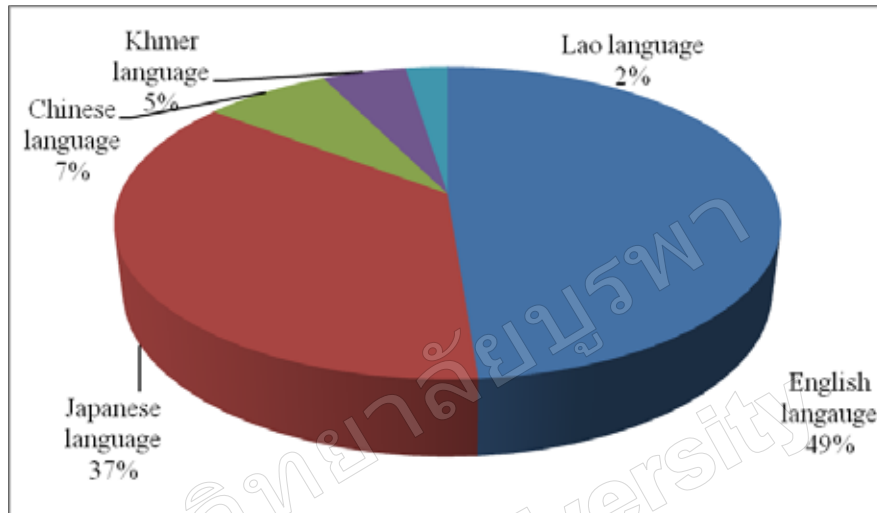
The quantitative or qualitative data derived from the survey were analyzed with different methods. A statistical program was employed to analyze the quantitative data. For the qualitative data, a focus coding technique was utilized to seek answers as to why the participants reported foreign languages were important for their companies.

4. Results

4.1 Foreign Languages in Workplaces

According to the information from Department of Industrial Works, Ministry of Industry (2012), most of the companies in the Eastern region conduct businesses which need to communicate with oversea clients and customers. The participants reported using 5 languages, English, Chinese, Japanese, Khmer, and Lao, to communicate in the companies and with other organizations.

Figure 1. Foreign Languages in Workplaces

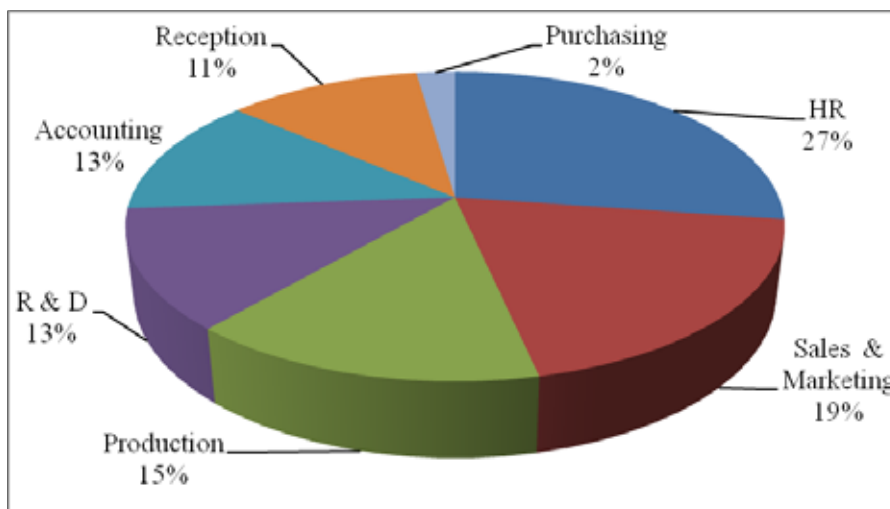


The chart above shows that English and Japanese were the most common languages used. ASEAN languages were reported as being used in a few companies.

4.2 Departments that Used Foreign Languages to Communicate

The findings revealed that most departments in the companies used foreign languages in their communication. They were the human resource department, sales and marketing department, production department, research and development department, accounting department, purchasing department, and public relations department. The following chart reveals that the human resources department was found to be the department that used foreign languages at the highest level.

Figure 2. Departments that Used Foreign Languages to Communicate



4.3 Importance of Foreign Language

All participants reported that foreign language development was crucial for their organizations. Three main reasons were as follows:

- 1) to communicate with their bosses and colleagues in the companies;
- 2) to communicate with people in other organizations in the country and overseas; and
- 3) to prepare for the free trade among ASEAN countries.

5. Discussion

The findings revealed that English was the most popular corporate language widely used in the 24 companies. However, Japanese and Chinese are also broadly used in the companies located in the Eastern region. This finding is consistent with the view of Graddol (2006) on the rise of the ASEAN+3 languages.

The participants reported that most departments in their companies used foreign languages to communicate either within the companies or with other organizations. Some of them explained that their boss and clients are foreigners. Similar to what Harzing, Köster & Magner (2011) found in their study, it is necessary for staff to be able to use foreign languages effectively. The higher the ability to communicate leads to a better understanding among the workforce.

Furthermore, the participants reported noticing the importance of the other foreign languages used among ASEAN nations. They reported that it is necessary to prepare their manpower to be able to communicate in foreign languages as a channel to expand business in the near future. This is compatible with the conclusion of Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012). There should be support to develop other languages' skills in multinational companies.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the results from the survey gave the layout of needs in language development of workforces in the Eastern region of Thailand. English was widely used in multinational workplaces as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF). Meanwhile, there were needs to enhance the ability to use other languages for communication.

The findings suggested that educators and human resource officers should not overlook the importance of language development. The ability to communicate in English and other foreign languages is a crucial weapon for the companies to compete with other countries in the AEC.

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