

Language Function Difficulties Experienced by Thai Students in Real Situations: A Case Study of Thai Students in the United States

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การวิจัยนี้เป็นการศึกษาระดับความยากของบทบาทและหน้าที่ทางภาษาที่ใช้เพื่อการสื่อสารในชีวิตประจำวันวัตถุประสงค์ในการศึกษาวิจัยครั้งนี้เพื่อแสดงให้เห็นถึงระดับความยากของบทบาทและหน้าที่ทางภาษาทั้งนี้ผลที่ได้จากการศึกษาสามารถใช้เป็นแนวทางสำหรับผู้สร้างหรือพัฒนาหลักสูตรและครูผู้สอนผู้ที่ต้องการพัฒนาหลักสูตรภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อใช้ในการสื่อสารกิจกรรมรวมทั้งตำราสื่อการสอนภาษาอังกฤษให้มีประสิทธิภาพยิ่งขึ้นผู้ให้สัมภาษณ์ 3 คนคัดเลือกจากกลุ่มตัวอย่างวิจัยกลุ่มตัวอย่างวิจัยครั้งนี้เป็นผู้สำเร็จการศึกษาระดับปริญญาโทจากหลายสาขาอาชีพจากมหาวิทยาลัยในสหรัฐอเมริกาจำนวน 35 คนเครื่องมือวิจัยที่ใช้การสัมภาษณ์และแบบสอบถาม

ผลการวิจัยสรุปได้ดังนี้

1. กลุ่มตัวอย่างให้ความเห็นว่าบทบาท-หน้าที่ทางภาษาจำนวน 6 กลุ่มมีความยากต่อการใช้ในการสื่อสารอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ

2. กลุ่มตัวอย่างส่วนใหญ่เห็นพ้องว่าระดับภาษาที่ใช้เป็นทางการของบทบาท-หน้าที่ทางภาษาอังกฤษเป็นระดับภาษาที่ยากที่สุดเมื่อเปรียบเทียบกับภาษาที่ใช้ทั่วไปหรือภาษาที่ไม่เป็นทางการ

3. กลุ่มตัวอย่างมีกลวิธี 5 ประการในการแก้ไขปัญหาที่เกิดขึ้นจากความยากของบทบาท-หน้าที่ทางภาษา

การวิจัยนี้มีข้อเสนอแนะว่าควรมีการพัฒนาหลักสูตรเพื่อการฝึกอบรมที่เน้นในเนื้อหาของบทบาท-หน้าที่ทางภาษาที่ได้พบปัญหาเกิดขึ้นโดยใช้สื่อการสอนที่น่าสนใจเพื่อให้ผู้เรียนเรียนได้ง่ายยิ่งขึ้นเพื่อให้เกิดความเข้าใจและสามารถนำไปใช้ในชีวิตประจำวันได้จริง

คำสำคัญ : บทบาทหน้าที่ทางภาษาที่ใช้ในการสื่อสาร อุปสรรคในการใช้ภาษา

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Abstract

This study investigated the language function difficulties experienced by Thai students in real situations. The major purpose of this study is to reveal the frequency of language functions which serve as useful information for English language course, materials developers, and English teachers to develop effective and efficient communicative English course syllabuses, activities, and materials. The participants of the study were a selection of 3 students from 35 graduates of the United States universities in several fields of study. The instruments used were an interview and questionnaires.

The results of the study can be summarised as follows.

1. The samples reported that there are six major functions which are significantly difficult in communication.
2. Formal language in language function is the most difficult in comparison with neutral or informal language.
3. There are five problem-solving strategies used by the participants to deal with language function difficulties.

This study suggests the development of training courses which emphasise employing problem-solving strategies to deal with language content functions, and using interesting teaching media for learners to acquire knowledge easily and to utilise functional language in real life situations effectively.

Keywords : Language Function, Language Difficulties

1. Introduction

Language discussions often focus on English as an international language. This focus is primarily on the ways people engage in situational discourse, which are called language functions. There is a growing concern for the language function difficulties of Thai people who use English to communicate with native speakers; furthermore, discussion with work colleagues and further reading of related articles and assessments have drawn further attention to these issues. Focus on these issues is obvious in many ways, including the development of educational standards aimed at promoting the early studies of functional language acquisition. As standard English communication has the potential to influence students' achievement while studying abroad or in the workplace, the ability to employ language functions should be examined closely. This report analyses language function difficulties in English language learning of students from three perspectives:

- Describing the language function difficulties.
- Analysing the frequency of the occurrences of language function difficulties.
- Reporting strategies to solve problems in English communication.

So, the details of qualitative data are described as a means of solving some of the problems involved in language function difficulties in various situations. From the results of the study, it is regarded that language function acquisition performance is important for successful communication when using English in real, everyday situations.

2. Background of the study

Interest in this study emerged from discussions about English language studies in relation to language function difficulties. Consequently, this led to the research question, "What are the language function difficulties of Thai students"? Language

functions are concerned with problems in language teaching as stated by Widdowson, (1978). Thus, with this concern in mind, the researcher decided to study language functions as among the main difficulties of Thai learners of English. Language functions are the purposes for which people speak or write (Blundell, 1982). We only speak or write with some purposes in mind: to help someone to see our point of view, perhaps, or to ask for advice, or to reach an agreement with them. We call these purposes the language functions. Since all languages express functions in different ways, so too, in the English language there are different ways to express such functions. Halliday (1973) defines a functional grammar as essentially a "natural" grammar, in the sense that everything in it can be explained ultimately, by reference to how language is used. According to the Hallidayean point of view, there are three main functions, namely ideational content, interpersonal, and textual functions. Ideational and interpersonal functions rely on the third: "the textual function", which enables the other two to be realised, and ensures that the language used is relevant; the textual function represents the language user's text forming potential (Halliday, 1985. Leo Jones, & C. von Baeyer, 1983). The problem of the selection of the function affects the realisation and feeling towards different situations. In addition to the decision on the appropriateness of functional language usages, speakers also use their differences situational world experiences in their English communications (J.B. Pride, 1971).

2.1 Statement of the problem

Realising that English is an important tool of communication in globalisation, Thai people have been enthusiastic about learning English for decades. The United States is recognised as one of the most popular Anglophone countries in which commercial, educational institutions and many parents choose to study abroad as the best way to improve their English. Many Thai students often

travel to the United States to study, however, the students who graduate from those universities and need to use English for work, remain defective in language functions (Holiday, 1973). In everyday life we communicate with people at many different levels of society. Even though graduates can communicate in English, their effectiveness and confidence does not always provide knowledge of the language functions to be employed in different situations. That is, they have not acquired the socio-linguistic variables that a fluent speaker must use in fluent discourse (Juthamas, 1998). Solid grounding in functional grammar and the various levels thereof, in order to communicate effectively in English, is necessary for Thai people who are desirous of linguistic competence in English. Therefore, this study aims to serve as a small part in considering the major problems of Thai students in employing language function in the real contexts.

3. Purposes of the study

3.1 To investigate the difficulties of language function reported by the graduate students and how those difficulties affect the English abilities of the students.

3.2 To investigate the frequencies of occurrence of language function difficulties and the frequency of levels of formality of Thai student graduates.

3.3 To propose some solutions when encountering language function difficulties.

4. Research questions

4.1 What are the language function difficulties and their frequency?

4.2 Which level of language in respect to language function is the most difficult for Thai student graduates to use?

4.3 How do student graduates solve their problems when they encounter language function difficulty?

5. Research method

The participants in the study were interviewed face-to-face and were asked to complete the questionnaires.

5.1 Population and Participants

The participants in this study were 35 American University graduates, both males and females, from several fields including law, arts, engineering, and commerce. They studied English for at least 10 years in Thailand and passed the TOEFL test with the minimum score of 550. During their study in the U.S. they had a social life like other international students, going to parties and joining university activities etc. They are now employees in international companies which use English in everyday communication. In their professional life, they have to use all English skills, including speaking, listening, reading and writing in a wide variety of communications situations. Therefore, it is the researcher's belief that they are among the most appropriate informants for the study of language function difficulties.

5.2 Questionnaire

A questionnaire contains 43 questions in which all language functions are included. These functions are obtained from an American English student book, *Functions of American English*, by Jones (1983). In this case, it can be said that all language functions are those used in real life.

5.3 In-depth interview

An in-depth interview was conducted at the beginning of the study with 3 students. The questions in the interview were the same as those in the questionnaire, but "why" was added to the questions in the interview in order to obtain detailed explanations. They were also asked to answer open-ended questions about the strategies to solve communication problems.

6. Results and Suggestions

6.1 Quantitative Data from the questionnaire (Table 1)

TABLE 1 A comparison of the frequencies of 43 major language functions related to their level of formality as queried on the questionnaire

	Name of Functions	Formal		Neutral		Informal	
		Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.
1	Talking about yourself	2.23	0.973	2.31	1.105	2.94	0.765
2	Starting a conversation	2.31	0.932	2.6	0.946	3.06	0.873
3	Making a date	* 1.77	1.33	* 1.94	1.434	2.46	1.291
4	Questioning for information	2.77	0.942	3.06	1.11	3.49	0.742
5	Getting more information	2.86	0.974	3.09	1.011	3.51	0.781
6	Requesting	2.37	0.877	2.57	1.037	3.03	0.857
7	Attracting attention	2.11	1.078	2.26	1.245	2.89	0.932
8	Agreeing	2.09	0.981	2.37	0.973	2.43	0.917
9	Refusing	2.29	0.86	2.46	1.01	2.86	0.912
10	Remembering	2.43	1.008	2.51	1.222	2.86	0.944
11	Describing experiences	2.06	0.968	2.2	1.158	2.8	1.052
12	Imagining	* 1.89	0.796	2.29	0.957	2.57	0.884
13	Hesitating	2.06	0.998	2.43	1.037	2.57	0.884
14	Preventing interruptions	2.43	0.815	2.66	0.998	3.03	0.822
15	Discussing	2.63	0.942	2.63	1.031	3.17	0.822
16	Offering to do something	2.86	0.692	2.86	0.879	3.2	0.677
17	Asking for permission	3.17	0.747	3.09	0.919	3.37	0.77
18	Giving reasons	2.94	0.838	2.86	1.089	3.31	0.718
19	Giving opinions	2.91	0.818	2.91	0.919	3.23	0.808
20	Disagreeing	2.31	0.963	2.57	1.145	2.89	1.051
21	Discussing	2.8	0.868	2.83	1.043	3.37	0.731
22	Describing things	2.66	0.968	2.71	1.045	3.06	0.873
23	Instructing people how to do things	2.46	0.919	2.74	0.95	3.14	0.912
24	Checking understanding	2.57	0.884	2.63	0.91	3	0.907
25	Talking about similarities	2.57	0.979	2.69	1.078	3.14	0.845
26	Talking about differences	2.37	0.942	2.46	1.01	2.83	0.923
27	Starting preferences	2.23	0.843	2.34	1.056	2.74	0.78
28	Making suggestions and giving advice	2.49	0.919	2.77	1.003	3.29	0.825
29	Expressing enthusiasm	2.37	1.031	2.46	1.094	2.91	1.095

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Name of Functions	Formal		Neutral		Informal	
		Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.
30	Persuading	2.31	0.867	2.37	1.087	2.94	0.938
31	Complaining	* 1.94	0.998	2.2	1.183	2.83	1.071
32	Apologizing	2.66	0.873	2.69	0.9	3.14	0.879
33	Forgiving	2.71	0.86	2.97	0.822	3.29	0.789
34	Expressing disappointment	* 1.97	0.985	2.31	0.932	2.66	0.906
35	Describing places	2.57	0.948	2.74	0.886	2.97	0.891
36	Describing people	2.49	0.853	2.43	1.092	2.84	0.923
37	Telling a story	2.34	0.998	2.46	1.039	2.83	0.857
38	Handing dialogue	2.26	0.886	2.34	1.083	2.94	0.906
39	Controlling a narrative	2.23	0.91	2.26	1.067	2.8	0.868
40	Expressing anger	* 1.71	0.957	* 1.71	1.017	2.17	1.043
41	Expressing sadness	* 1.71	0.957	* 1.74	1.197	2.11	1.207
42	Expressing indifference	2.17	0.891	2.23	1.114	2.63	1.031
43	Saying goodbye	3.09	0.853	2.97	0.985	3.31	0.832

6.2 The Qualitative data from the interview
43 Answers to the 43-question in-depth interview can be summarised as follows:

6.2.1 All participants viewed that there is difficulty in using the following functions in all formal, neutral, and informal discourses:

- Q2 : Starting a conversation
- Q 3 : Making a date
- Q5 : Getting more information
- Q8 : Agreeing
- Q10 : Remembering
- Q11 : Describing experiences
- Q16 : Offering to do something
- Q20 : Disagreeing
- Q24 : Checking understanding
- Q29 : Expressing enthusiasm
- Q33 : Forgiving
- Q34 : Expressing disappointment
- Q36 : Describing people
- Q43 : Saying goodbye

6.2.2 All participants viewed that the following functions are difficult to use in all formal, neutral, and informal discourses:

- Q1 : Talking about yourself
- Q4 : Questioning for information
- Q6 : Requesting
- Q7 : Attracting attention
- Q22 : Describing things
- Q28 : Making suggestions and giving advice
- Q37 : Telling a story

6.2.3 All participants viewed that the following functions are difficult to use in formal discourse:

- Q 3 : Making a date
- Q12 : Imagining
- Q31 : Complaining
- Q34 : Expressing disappointment
- Q40 : Expressing anger
- Q41 : Expressing sadness

6.2.4 All participants viewed that this function is difficult to express in informal discourse:

Q9 : Refusing

The informants reported that it seemed to be more difficult when they had to refuse requests that came from family members or friends than from strangers. Mostly they preferred to use formal language and a soft voice. In formal situations, such as in business, they delegated to avoid refusing, additionally, they often offered other options to their interlocutors.

6.2.5 All three participants viewed that there was not much language pattern for the following functions, therefore they usually tried to use other functions instead.

Q23 : Instructing people how to do things

Q27 : Starting preferences some respondents reported that they drew pictures on occasions to describe things such as a complicated materials or mechanical operations.

Q25 : Talking about similarities, three respondents reported that they used simple structures which had the verbs 'like' or 'same' and 'same as' for this function.

Q26 : Talking about differences, the respondents used the explanation function along with the negative sentences, S2 said that, for example: it doesn't like..., but it is..

Q30 : Persuading, respondents reported that body language and eye contact are the most effective additional language to use to express this function.

6.2.6 The participants viewed that it was difficult to express this function, because they were not familiar with the patterns and the socio-linguistic significances in English contexts, even after being given explanations.

When asked about imagining (Q12) the students were aware of the use of the word and its use but did not know how to describe its function of use. For the remaining functions (Q13, Q38, Q39) listed below, the respondents had no

knowledge of English language usage relating to these functions.

Q12 : Imagining

Q13 : Hesitating

Q38 : Handling dialogue

Q 39 : Controlling a narrative

6.2.7 All participants viewed, that if not necessary they did not use these functions by reasoning, that according to their culture, these actions are judged to be impolite manners.

Q14 : Preventing interruptions

Q31 : Complaining

Respondents often felt uncomfortable when they had to complain to someone; most of them agreed that the formal language was the most appropriate in such situations. S1 stated that this function was also rather difficult to articulate, as both eye contact and body language were also needed for this function. This was also the case when the listener might be a close personal friend, and a softer tone was required.

6.2.8 This question received two completely opposing answers.

Q41 : Expressing sadness

S 2, and 3, both agreed that "To express this function to a superior, an elder, their parents or boss was more difficult, but S1 disagreed".

Conclusions

The findings from the interviews and the qualitative data from the personal questionnaires, were used in order to answer the 3 research questions, as follows:

6.3 Question One: What are the Language Function difficulties and their frequency?

According to the results shown in Table 1, there are six functions having the mean scores lower than 2.00 which show that the most significant language function difficulties are;

1. Making a date = 1.77 in formal language, 1.94 in neutral language.

2. Imagining = 1.89 in formal language.
3. Complaining = 1.94 in formal language.
4. Expressing disappointment = 1.97 in formal language.
5. Expressing anger = 1.71 in formal language, 1.71 in neutral language.
6. Expressing sadness = 1.71 in formal language, 1.74 in neutral language.

In contrast, there were 21 functions where the mean scores were higher than 3.00, which demonstrates the least difficult language functions. The top 3 functions with mean scores higher than 3.00 consisted of the followings:

1. Getting more information = 3.51 in formal language, 3.09 in neutral language.
2. Questioning for information = 3.49 in formal language, 3.06 in neutral language.
3. Asking for permission = 3.37 in formal language, 3.09 in neutral language.

6.4 Research Question Two: Which level of language, in respect to language functions, is the most difficult for Thai student graduates to use?

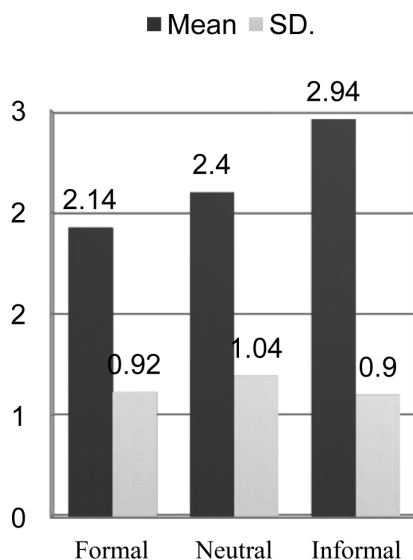


Figure 1 Comparison of Average Mean and Standard Deviation Values of the language function difficulty interviews.

TABLE 2 Average Mean and Standard Deviation Values

Formal		Neutral		Informal	
Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.
2.14	0.92	2.4	1.04	2.94	0.90

Figure 1 shows the portion of the Mean scores and S.D. values accumulated from all items of functional grammar difficulties data (see table 2.), asked in the questionnaire of the study data.

The mean scores of each level of language function difficulties represent which level of language was the most difficult for the subjects. The S.D. values of each level of language illustrate the distribution of the data.

The findings revealed that the usage of formal language functions was the area of the most concern for the Thai student graduates, with the use of informal language function being the area of least concern, and concern for the use of neutral language function lying in between the higher and lower values.

In contrast to the author’s original hypothesis that the use of formal language functions would be the area of least concern amongst the subjects of the study, the study actually demonstrated a reversal of the hypothesis. The mean scores are 2.14, 2.40, and 2.94 respectively. On average, the distribution of these outcomes shows that all three types: formal (S.D.= 0.92), informal (S.D.= 0.90), and neutral are normal distribution, however; the neutral language (S.D.= 1.04) is more than those of the other types of language, demonstrating that the experiences of the subjects were different to the expected hypothesised results .

6.5 Research Question Three: How do student graduates solve their problems when they encounter language function difficulty?

The qualitative data used to answer this question was gathered by asking the subjects how they dealt with not being able to use the correct language functions in situations where they did not know which were the appropriate functions to use? The qualitative data was categorised into five items as follows:

1. Mostly, the strategy used was to choose another function that was similar and appropriate for that situation, e.g, in the situation when required to use the refusing function they first tried to use the offering an alternative option rather than declining outrightly or using a soft voice when had to decline an offer outrightly. When they cannot find the appropriate formal pattern of language to show dissatisfaction to someone, they would use the neutral pattern instead of the formal pattern.

2. The interviewees reported that the strategies of body language and eye contact are used to explain doubtful functions in English.

3. The interviewees reported that if they found the topic too hard to find the appropriate function to use, especially in rather typical discourse situations, they will avoid continuing that topic.

4. The interviewees reported that the silence strategy is used when it is worse to say something that might cause a misunderstanding between themselves and the listeners.

5. The interviewees reported that drawing pictures was helpful in some cases in order to describe things such as complicated technical materials or mechanical operations.

Taking into account all the answers shown in the qualitative data above, the decision of the graduate students in selecting these strategies rested on more serious features in the situations, rather than their personal behaviour. The major reasons for using language function's problem-solving strategies during communication are that their most frequent relationships with foreigners tended to mostly be in formal encounters. Secondly, they were concerned

with English as a foreign language, which is rather more complicated to communicate in than their mother tongue

6.6 Suggestions for the course designers

It seems clear that language function difficulties are factors to some extent in communication involved in Thai Student graduates' attitudes towards English Language usage. The frequencies of language function difficulties in the data explain that the graduate students suffer from the lack of some knowledge about cultural norms and language functions. The qualitative data and supplementary data suggest that the subjects who were trying to solve this problem with other communication strategies were not always successful. Therefore, the course designers and teachers should focus on the findings and the suggestions from this study before giving priority to the lesson in class. In order to create further understanding of the language, teachers should impart some knowledge of western culture to the students and endeavour to explain the rationale of western people's ways of thinking.

6.7 Suggestions for the students

A partial resolution of this problem may lie in undergraduate learning programs that deal with language function frequency usage. Therefore, students who plan to study abroad will need some knowledge of western culture and increased frequency practices in using language functions or an intensive practice course before graduation. In addition, they should also:

1. Determine which language functions are difficult, and try to practice them for fluency.

2. Make the effort to distinguish levels of language used in various situations.

3. Learn about or study Western culture along with the target language.

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