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A NEEDS ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE USE AMONG THAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PART-TIME SERVICE EMPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

Abstract—This study investigates English use, workplace communication challenges, and perceived curriculum relevance among Thai Business English students engaged in part-time employment. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 51 undergraduate Business English students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, all of whom had experience using English in part-time jobs. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to examine patterns of English use, required communication skills, workplace challenges, and students' perceptions of curriculum relevance. The findings reveal that English use in part-time jobs is predominantly oral and interaction-driven, with speaking and listening skills most frequently employed in customer-facing situations such as welcoming customers, taking orders, and recommending products. Vocabulary limitations, difficulty understanding diverse accents, and lack of communicative confidence emerged as the most significant challenges. Although students perceived that university English courses were generally relevant to workplace demands, their confidence in real-time communication remained at a moderate level, suggesting a gap between classroom instruction and the dynamic nature of workplace communication. The study highlights the importance of practice-oriented and context-specific English instruction that reflects authentic workplace interactions. The findings provide pedagogical implications for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum development, emphasizing the need to integrate real-world communication tasks, intercultural awareness, and spoken interaction practice to better prepare students for part-time and future professional work.

Keywords—Part-time English use, Business English, English for Specific Purposes

INTRODUCTION

Part-time employment has become increasingly common among university students, particularly those majoring in English or business-related fields. Through part-time jobs, students gain opportunities to apply language skills in authentic workplace settings, develop professional competencies, and enhance employability. In many service-oriented part-time jobs such as cafés, restaurants, retail stores, and hospitality businesses, English is frequently required for interaction with foreign customers. Consequently, English plays a crucial role in students' workplace performance and professional development (Syamsudin, 2024).

Previous studies have shown that English use in part-time employment is predominantly oral and interaction-driven. Research conducted in Asian contexts indicates that speaking and listening are the most frequently used skills among students working part-time, particularly in hospitality and retail sectors (Nhung & Hoa, 2024). Exposure to real-life workplace communication has been found to contribute to improvements in fluency, confidence, and pragmatic awareness (Kaharuddin & Arafah, 2017; Syamsudin, 2024). These findings suggest that part-time jobs function as experiential learning environments where students encounter communicative demands that differ from those in academic settings.

Despite the benefits of workplace exposure, several studies have identified persistent communication challenges. Sayuri (2016) reported that Japanese university students often experienced anxiety and hesitation when speaking English at work, largely due to limited vocabulary and difficulties understanding diverse accents. Similar challenges have been observed among Thai learners, who may demonstrate adequate grammatical knowledge but struggle with spontaneous oral communication in real-time interactions (Nguyen & Boonkit, 2009; Ork et al., 2024). In addition, students' workplace communication performance has been shown to be influenced by affective and contextual factors such as confidence, motivation, and the frequency of interaction with foreign customers (Hendra, 2023; Thalion, 2023).

From an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective, the relationship between academic English instruction and workplace communication demands has been a central concern. Studies have consistently pointed out a mismatch between classroom-based learning and real-world language use. While university English courses provide theoretical knowledge and general language skills, students often face difficulties transferring this knowledge to practical workplace communication (Budiman et al., 2023; Thuy & Le, 2024). This gap has prompted calls for curriculum designs that integrate authentic communication tasks and context-specific language use (Sayuri, 2016).

Recent ESP research has emphasized the importance of aligning university curricula with workplace communication needs. Clarice (2021) argued that instruction focusing on job-related vocabulary and authentic communicative tasks is more effective in preparing students for professional encounters than general English instruction. Similarly, Budiman et al. (2023) proposed incorporating practical modules such as English for Customer Service and Business Communication into academic programmes to better reflect the communicative realities of modern workplaces.

However, although a growing body of research has examined English use in part-time employment, most studies have focused on contexts outside Thailand, particularly in Vietnam, Indonesia, and Japan. Research specifically investigating Thai university students' English use in part-time jobs remains limited, especially among students majoring in Business English. Moreover, few studies have systematically examined patterns of English use, communication challenges, and students' perceptions of curriculum relevance within the Thai context. Addressing this gap, the present study examines English use and communication challenges among Thai Business English students in part-time jobs and explores their perceptions of the relevance of university English curricula to workplace communication demands.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To analyse patterns of English use among Thai Business English students in part-time jobs.
2. To identify key workplace communication skills and communication challenges experienced by Thai Business English students in part-time jobs.
3. To examine Thai Business English students' perceptions of the relevance of university English curricula to workplace communication demands.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a **quantitative research design** using a questionnaire to investigate English use among Thai Business English students in part-time jobs. The participants were **over 50 undergraduate Business English students** from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, all of whom had experience using English in part-time employment. **Purposive sampling** was applied to ensure that respondents met the study criteria.

The research instrument was a **self-developed questionnaire** consisting of five sections: (1) demographic information, (2) patterns of English use in part-time jobs, (3) workplace communication skills and challenges, (4) students' perceptions of the relevance of university English curricula to workplace communication demands, and (5) open-ended questions addressing communication challenges and curriculum improvement. The questionnaire included multiple-choice, multiple-response, Likert-scale, and open-ended items.

Content validity was established using the **Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC)**, evaluated by experts in English language teaching. A pilot test was conducted to ensure clarity and reliability. Data were collected online via Google Forms over a two-week period. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and mean scores) were used to analyse closed-ended items, while open-ended responses were summarised thematically.

RESULT

Participant Profile and Work Context

A total of **51 Thai undergraduate students majoring in Business English** participated in the study. Most respondents were **senior students (70.6%)**, followed by juniors (15.7%), while freshmen and sophomores together accounted for less than 15% of the sample. As **all participants (100%) were Business English majors**, the sample represents students with formal academic training in English for professional and workplace communication.

Regarding part-time employment, participants were engaged primarily in **customer-facing positions**. The most common roles included waiter/receptionist, restaurant or fast-food staff, and service staff in shopping malls. These positions typically require frequent interaction with customers and immediate communicative responses in English. In terms of work experience,

nearly one-third of respondents (31.4%) reported working part-time for more than one year, while others had short- to medium-term experience, indicating varied levels of exposure to workplace communication contexts.

Patterns of English Use in Part-Time Jobs

The findings indicate that English use among participants was **predominantly functional and interaction-driven**. The most frequent situations requiring English were **welcoming customers, taking orders, recommending products, and describing services**, all of which are core frontline service tasks. These activities highlight the central role of spoken English in facilitating customer interaction and service delivery

Less frequent uses of English included **handling complaints or problem-solving situations** and **communicating with foreign colleagues**, while writing-related tasks such as preparing advertising materials were reported least often. Overall, English use in part-time jobs was concentrated on **immediate oral communication** rather than extended or formal written interaction.

In terms of communication channels, **face-to-face interaction** was the dominant mode of English use, followed by communication via applications and phone calls. Email communication was used least frequently, indicating that students' part-time work relied heavily on spontaneous verbal exchanges rather than formal written correspondence.

With regard to frequency of use, English was employed **regularly but intermittently**. The largest group of students reported using English on some days of the week (2–3 days), while approximately one-quarter used English daily. This suggests that English use was embedded in routine service encounters rather than continuous workplace communication.

Workplace Communication Skills and Challenges

Participants identified **speaking** as the most important skill required for part-time work, followed closely by **listening**. Writing and reading were perceived as less essential, reflecting the oral nature of communication in customer-facing roles. In addition, students highlighted the importance of **service-specific vocabulary**, indicating the need for job-related lexical knowledge to support effective interaction.

Despite frequent exposure to English, several challenges were reported. **Vocabulary limitations** emerged as the most significant difficulty, particularly the lack of job-specific terms and difficulty retrieving words during fast-paced interactions. **Listening challenges**, especially related to understanding diverse foreign accents and rapid speech, were also prominent and often led to hesitation or communication breakdowns.

Students reported a **moderate level of confidence** when using English at work ($M = 3.55$), despite perceiving a high level of skill development through part-time experience ($M = 4.08$). This suggests that increased exposure alone does not automatically result in communicative

confidence. Grammatical issues were mentioned but were generally considered secondary, as most students perceived that customers prioritised **intelligibility over grammatical accuracy**.

Intercultural communication challenges further affected workplace interaction. Differences in communication styles, politeness norms, and non-verbal cues occasionally caused misunderstanding and anxiety, highlighting the importance of pragmatic and cultural awareness alongside linguistic competence.

Perceived Alignment between Curriculum and Workplace Communication Demands

Overall, students expressed a **high level of agreement** regarding the relevance of their university English curriculum to part-time work ($M = 4.08$). Courses most frequently applied in the workplace included **English for Customer Service** and **Public Speaking**, followed by other communication-focused courses. These findings align closely with the functional demands identified in workplace English use.

However, despite this positive perception, a gap between classroom learning and workplace performance remained evident. Students reported that while academic courses provided foundational knowledge and polite language forms, they offered limited opportunities for **spontaneous interaction, exposure to diverse accents, and real-time problem-solving**. As a result, confidence in actual workplace communication remained moderate.

Participants reported applying classroom knowledge mainly in terms of **polite expressions, basic grammatical structures, service-related vocabulary, and public speaking techniques**. The emphasis was on clear pronunciation, courteous language, and appropriate responses to customer needs rather than on complex linguistic forms. Overall, the development of vocabulary and communication-related skills at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University emphasizes application in real-world situations and the promotion of creativity, alongside cultural preservation. (Kulachai et al., 2025)

DISCUSSION

This study examined patterns of English use, workplace communication challenges, and perceived curriculum relevance among Thai Business English students engaged in part-time jobs. The findings provide empirical support for previous ESP and workplace communication research, while also contributing context-specific insights from the Thai higher education setting.

First, the results demonstrate that English use in part-time jobs is predominantly **oral and interaction-driven**, with speaking and listening emerging as the most frequently used and most needed skills. Students primarily used English to greet customers, take orders, recommend products, and describe services. This finding aligns with earlier studies showing that workplace English in service-related contexts is largely conversational and transactional in nature (Nhung & Hoa, 2024; Syamsudin, 2024). It also supports Kaharuddin and Arafah's

(2017) argument that authentic communicative contexts are crucial for developing functional English competence.

Second, despite regular exposure to English at work, students reported persistent **communication challenges**, particularly limited job-specific vocabulary, listening difficulties related to diverse accents, and moderate confidence in speaking. These challenges mirror findings from previous studies in Asian EFL contexts, where learners often struggle with spontaneous communication despite having formal English instruction (Sayuri, 2016; Ork et al., 2024). The emphasis on intelligibility over grammatical accuracy reported by students further confirms that workplace communication prioritises effective meaning-making rather than linguistic correctness, consistent with findings by Hendra (2023) and Thuy and Le (2024).

The moderate confidence levels reported by students suggest that **exposure alone is insufficient** to develop communicative confidence. While part-time work provides valuable opportunities for real-life English use, the findings indicate that learners still experience anxiety and hesitation, particularly in fast-paced service encounters. This supports Nguyen and Boonkit's (2009) view that confidence and communication strategies play a critical role in successful second language use, alongside linguistic competence.

Third, regarding curriculum relevance, students generally perceived a **high level of alignment** between their university English courses and workplace communication demands. Courses such as English for Customer Service and Public Speaking were reported as particularly applicable, supporting claims that ESP-oriented instruction can enhance workplace readiness (Clarice, 2021; Budiman et al., 2023). However, the findings also reveal a clear gap between classroom learning and real-world performance. While academic courses provide foundational knowledge, students reported limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction, exposure to varied accents, and real-time problem-solving.

This mismatch reflects a broader issue identified in ESP research, where theoretical instruction often fails to fully prepare learners for the unpredictability of workplace communication (Sayuri, 2016; Thuy & Le, 2024). The results therefore reinforce calls for more **practice-oriented, context-sensitive ESP curricula**, incorporating role-plays, authentic service scenarios, intercultural communication training, and listening practice with diverse English varieties (Budiman et al., 2023; Clarice, 2021).

Overall, this study supports the view that English learning for part-time work should be conceptualised as a **dynamic interaction between language skills, communicative confidence, and contextual demands**. While Thai Business English students benefit from both academic instruction and workplace exposure, closer integration between university curricula and real workplace practices is needed to better support students' communicative effectiveness and professional readiness.

Implications

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest that English instruction for Thai Business English students should place greater emphasis on **oral communication in authentic workplace contexts**. Since students primarily use English for face-to-face interaction in part-time jobs, teaching practices should prioritise speaking and listening activities that simulate real service encounters, such as greeting customers, handling requests, recommending products, and responding to problems. This aligns with ESP principles that stress the importance of contextualised and task-based language learning (Kaharuddin & Arafah, 2017; Clarice, 2021).

Moreover, the persistence of vocabulary and listening challenges indicates a need for **explicit instruction in job-specific vocabulary and exposure to diverse English accents**. Classroom activities should incorporate role-plays, recorded dialogues, and scenario-based tasks that reflect the speed, pressure, and unpredictability of workplace communication. Such practices may help reduce anxiety and build communicative confidence, which remains only moderate despite frequent English use at work (Nguyen & Boonkit, 2009; Sayuri, 2016).

Intercultural communication should also be integrated into pedagogy. Students' reported difficulties with communication styles and politeness norms suggest that pragmatic and cultural awareness is essential for effective service communication. Teaching strategies that include intercultural case studies and reflective discussions can better prepare students for interaction with international customers (Hendra, 2023; Ork et al., 2024).

Curriculum and ESP Implications

At the curriculum level, the findings highlight the need to **strengthen the alignment between university English courses and workplace communication demands**. While students perceive current curricula as generally relevant, the gap between classroom instruction and real-world performance remains evident. ESP-oriented courses such as English for Customer Service and Public Speaking were identified as the most applicable, suggesting that these courses should play a more central role in Business English programmes (Budiman et al., 2023).

Curricula should therefore move beyond theoretical knowledge and incorporate **practice-oriented modules** that focus on spontaneous interaction, real-time problem-solving, and workplace pragmatics. Integrating simulated service scenarios, workplace-based assessments, and collaborative tasks can help bridge the gap between academic English and occupational language use (Thuy & Le, 2024).

In addition, universities may consider closer collaboration with local businesses to design learning activities or internship-linked assignments that reflect actual communication demands. Such integration can enhance students' readiness for employment and support the development of transferable communication skills needed in part-time and future professional contexts (Syamsudin, 2024).

Implications for Future Research

The study also suggests directions for future research. Longitudinal studies could examine how sustained part-time work influences students' English development over time. Mixed-methods approaches, combining surveys with interviews or workplace observations, may provide deeper insights into how students negotiate communication challenges in real interactions. Expanding the participant pool to include students from other disciplines would also allow for broader generalisation of findings.

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