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## Use of English in the Thai workplace

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## ABSTRACT

A number of features of business discourse in English in a Thai workplace, for example, in e-mail memos, are integral to modern business operations. In this study, a questionnaire was used to find the important situations in which English is used in business communication. For this purpose, Thai businesses were requested to provide samples of written business correspondence—mostly e-mails in English. These e-mails were examined using genre analysis to identify typical moves and steps in order to understand the use of English at the linguistic and discourse levels. Genre can be defined as a class of communicative events, with the members sharing some set of communicative purposes. Interviews were also conducted to gather data in order to describe in-depth, the nature of English language communication and possible problems arising in a Thai business context. The findings showed that despite a large number of errors in usage in the English samples, they rarely caused problems with the running of the business as Thai communicators employed a move/step structure in their e-mails and other communications strategies including follow-up inquiries for clarification. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

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## Introduction

Since the economic crisis of the late 1990s, most Thai business organizations have undergone significant changes by having to develop new work structures and practices to compete effectively in a rapidly changing, global, business environment. Thai businesses have adopted corporate strategies such as mergers and collaborations with outside entities and thus, have experienced organizational restructuring necessitating deeper interaction with people from other countries and cultures.

Also, in recent years, the global economic environment has led to business focusing on Red Ocean strategies, aiming to shift from the battle for market share within known market spaces, to Blue Ocean strategies with moves to

create new products or services and new demand in uncontested market space (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). This new perspective has further developed to a White Ocean Strategy, which emphasizes social concerns focusing on People, Planet, Profit, and Passion (Chanchaochai, 2012). These changing business strategies and attitudes have in turn influenced the way in which workplace English is used for communication.

In this context, English used as a foreign language in Thailand has gained an important role as a medium required for professional advancement as well as a tool to help businesses function more effectively. In addition, with increased expansion of communication technologies and electronic media, it is worth exploring the use of English and examining its features to supplement the many studies on the needs of English users in the workplace (So-mui & Mead, 2000). This is important as the findings will have implications for the design of course materials in English programs for business and hopefully lead to further empirical research.

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Several studies have analyzed features of specialized discourse genres in English business communication, for example, [Devitt \(1991\)](#) and [Flowerdew and Wan \(2006\)](#). Using traditional methods such as interviews to measure attitudes, these studies have come to conclusions as to learners' needs which have implications for the design of English for specific purposes courses ([Bhatia & Bremner, 2012](#)). However, to meet these specific needs, a number of courses in business communication including English for business correspondence have been provided. Most of them are likely to use commercial course books which rarely reveal the English use in authentic target business situation which is more relevant to students' career work. Research has been conducted to determine how English is used, for example, by Thais for communication at work revealing that the skills of most importance in firms related mostly to requirements for competence in spoken English ([Pholsward, 1993](#)). Other researchers who have looked into English requirements in the workplace have emphasized the importance of competence in listening and speaking suggesting that the English curriculum in Thai universities in its current form cannot meet the demands for English as used in the workplace ([Wiriyachitra, 2001](#)).

Office workers and business people have access to a variety of media including fax, e-mail and, recently, social media such as Facebook and the smart phone application, Line, to use for external correspondence as well as internal communication in the company. For example, a study of English communication trends in the Finnish business community revealed that the fax had become the most common medium for business communication ([Louhiala-Salminen, 1996](#)). Also, in terms of external communication for international trade between Thai companies and their business partners, it was found that faxes were used as an alternative to letters and that they contained certain distinctive linguistic features ([Hiranburana, 1998](#)). In order to achieve their goals, business communicators were likely to modify the generic structure of a typical text type, such as sales documents and replies to existing communications, by collapsing typical communicative moves. As an example, they tended to combine functions such as complaints and orders or replies to orders and collections, in one communication.

It has been estimated that 70 percent of business communication occurs electronically ([Lehman & DuFrene, 2002](#)). It would therefore be interesting to see whether e-mail is just another alternative medium or if it constitutes a new genre of English communication. This question was raised by [Gains \(1999\)](#) who based his study on e-mail messages used within businesses. He concluded that there were no essential differences between paper-based and electronic-based formats in terms of textual features such as the subject line, opening and closing salutations, register and abbreviations used. Therefore, from his study, one might conclude that e-mail is not a new distinct genre of communication.

In other studies, however, certain features distinctive to e-mail have been suggested. One such study is [Crystal \(2002\)](#) who investigated the nature of electronic media

and the Internet and their effects on the language of e-mails, chat groups, virtual worlds, and websites. These findings show the emergence of a distinctive variety of language. Moreover, the exploration by [Gimenez \(2000, pp. 244–245\)](#) of external business e-mails suggests a shift from informal to a more formal style moving from personal e-mails/letters to business letters/faxes and legal documents. As such, the style of e-mails may reflect a greater degree of informality. Moreover, based on 40 e-mail replies to inquiries, [Van Mulken and Van der Meer \(2005\)](#) observed that electronic and paper-based replies were similar in terms of moves, but slightly different in degree of formality and interpersonal rhetorical strategies. Also of interest is an analysis of 327 English business e-mail messages written by Thais and Germans in profit and non-profit organizations by [Thaweewong \(2006\)](#) who found that e-mail messages typically contained seven moves, namely, Opening Salutation, Establishing Correspondence Chain, Introducing Purposes, Attaching Documents, Soliciting Response, Ending politely and Closing. Such moves reflect cultural norms of communication of the e-mail writers governed by the corporate culture of the organizations they work in. Investigating the textual features of 36 commercial e-mails, [Zhang \(2006\)](#) revealed they shared some characteristics with memoranda, particularly when e-mail routinely functions as a device to negotiate the accomplishment of small, immediate tasks in a work environment.

Given the increasing importance of English in the Thai workplace and the scarcity of studies on English use in Thai business, it is worth exploring the use of English in the Thai work context to discern typical linguistic features, preferred media, communication activities, topics, and features of the discourse involved. The current study thus aimed at disclosing the strategies Thai business communicators exploit along with several features of the English used to achieve their communicative purposes in the workplace.

#### *Research Questions*

1. What channels or media of communication using English are most often used in the Thai workplace and what are the features of English used by Thai business communicators?
2. What is the nature of the users' language skills and which communication activities are conducted in English?

#### *Definition*

*Thai workplaces* refers to business organizations situated in Bangkok or in its metropolitan area where most employees are Thais using English in their work both for internal and/or external communication purposes.

*Genre* can be defined as a class of communicative events, with the members sharing some set of communicative purposes recognized by the members of the community. A sample of the genre of the Thai business includes e-mail memos in the Thai workplace.

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