

An Assessment of the English Proficiency of the Thai Workforce and Its Implication for the ASEAN Economic Community: An Empirical Inquiry

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Abstract

The ten nation members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) utilize English as the official working language for the organization. This study focused on the nation of Thailand to examine the assessed level of English proficiency of its workforce in relation to its ability to interact within ASEAN's economic community (AEC). This is the first academic study to utilize a sample population consisting of human resources personnel from the top 100 private companies in Thailand who are in charge of employee training for learning English. Self-administered questionnaires were used to obtain self-assessments on the issues of level of English proficiency, language training, resource allocation for communication preparedness in AEC, and overall perceptions of the importance of mastering English within their respective companies. The results indicate that the acquisition of English as an economic *lingua franca* was considered important regardless of the demographic factors of the company examined. A majority of the respondents expressed the belief that their businesses had provided adequate resource allocation for English preparedness and a majority also indicated that their respective workforces possessed adequate English skills. However, a majority also expressed assessments that the employees in their companies did not find it easy to learn English and that Thais in general, and their employees in particular, did not like learning the language.

Keywords

AEC, ASEAN, Business English, English Proficiency, *Lingua franca*, Thailand, Workforce Preparedness

1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), created in 1967, consists of ten nations with a collective population of over 639 million people (2017) representing a diversity of cultures and languages (ILO and ADB, 2014; Verico, 2017) [1] [2]. Its collective economy is represented as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) with an economic value of approximately US\$2.5 trillion as of 2017 and consisting of a wide and dynamic span of business sectors (Jetin & Mikic, 2016; Kobayashi *et al.*, 2018) [3] [4]. Thailand is a key economic hub within ASEAN with an estimated 37 million domestic employees and an additional 6.5 million intra-ASEAN foreign workers (ILO & ADB, 2014) [1].

English is recognized as the global language or *lingua franca* of business communication (Baker, 2015; Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011; Sharifian, 2009) [5] [6] [7] [8] [9]. English is also the official working language for ASEAN where it fulfills a vital role in intra-national and international business communications (Cheng, 2012; Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014; Honna, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Low and Hashim, 2012; Nunan, 2003) [10]-[15]. In Thailand, the mastering of English has been acknowledged among the urban middle class as a crucial skill for economic advancement, especially in Bangkok where most international businesses are located (Simpson, 2007) [16]. However, the country's workforce has continued to display lower English proficiency than most Asian nations, thus threatening Thai competitiveness (Channgam, 2012) [17]. The World Bank (2012) [18] determined that a significant gap existed wherein "nearly all firms in Thailand [rated] labor skills in English ... as poor or very poor." It also indicated that 23.4% of job vacancies were due to lack of English proficiency and related IT skills where communications regarding technological innovation and research, as well as maintenance, required a good command of the English language (World Bank 2008) [19]. The United Nations Development Programme (2014) [20] reinforced this in a poll they cited wherein 26.7% of respondents indicated lack of English proficiency as an obstacle towards ASEAN integration.

Finally, EF English First, a private company that collects test data, on an annual basis, from over a million adults who take their English proficiency test, rated Thailand as number 53 ("low") out of 80 countries examined and number 15 out of 20 Asian countries examined. However, this is an improvement from a score of 56 ("very low") of 72 nations examined in 2016 and 62 ("very low") out of 70 nations examined in 2017 (EF Education First 2017) [21].

2. Statement of the Problem

The following literature review provides ample evidence that Thailand has suffered from a long-term shortage of skilled workers who are proficient in English. This study aimed to determine the degree to which the management of top Thai companies has assessed their preparedness towards dealing with English as a commercial *lingua franca*, specifically regarding resource allocation and training

to meet the challenge of English preparedness. This investigation also attempted to determine whether specific demographic variables of these companies affected perceptions relating to preparedness for English within AEC.

3. Literature Review

There exists a large amount of literature addressing the lack of preparedness within Thailand regarding English proficiency for comprehensive business communications within AEC. The literature is primarily found in two bodies: 1) scholarly journal articles exploring the overall subject, and 2) specific case studies of work environments, most of which were also presented in academic literature. However, there are no academic studies, to date, that specifically addressed English proficiency of the Thai workforce by directly accessing and testing human resource personnel of leading Thai companies.

The first body of literature provides assessments of English preparation at secondary and tertiary levels of the Thai educational system. Most found that Thai learners had unsatisfactory levels of English proficiency that jeopardized their abilities to obtain an array of employment, but particularly in companies applying new technologies or engaging in research and development (Khamk-hien, 2010; Krai-suth & Panjakajornsak, 2018; Prapphal, 2004; Saraithong & Chancharoenchai, 2012; Wongsathorn *et al.*, 2002) [22] [23] [24] [25] [26]. Specifically, educational institutions at the secondary and tertiary levels were found to have English language programs that were underfunded, neglected, overcrowded, and taught by poorly trained, unmotivated teachers with low levels of English proficiency (Chatsawat, & Rimkeeratikul, 2013; Herberholz & Sukontamarn, 2014; Kaur, *et al.*, 2016; Noom-ura, 2013) [27] [28] [29] [30]. Herberholz and Sukontamarn (2014) [28] conducted in-depth interviews at twelve public and private universities in Thailand and found that their “major weakness appeared to be the English language skills of both students and staff.”

A recurring explanation for the stated inadequacies in the teaching of English is the phenomenon of “credentialism” or the “diploma disease” (Tangchuan-g 2010) [31] within the country (Dore, 1976; Lauder *et al.*, 2006; Buasuwan and Jones, 2016; Suebnusorn, 2010) [32] [33] [34] [35]. Presented from a historical perspective, Thailand’s experience in undergoing modernization and globalization required a dramatic increase in educational certification. According to Mounier and Tangchuan-g (2010) [36], this triggered a “dumbing down” (*i.e.*, the lowering of requirements for entry into higher education and, later, for graduation) of educational programs in higher education in order to increase the number of diploma holders. Higher educational institutions began to be seen as “certificate-issuing factories” (Buasuwan and Jones 2016) [34] as the “quality of education [was] bartered for quantity of education” (Mounier and Tangchuan-g 2010) [36]. This phenomenon impacted on vital English language courses at a time when the demands of globalization called for its mastering as a *lingua franca* for international commerce.

The second body of literature consists of academic case studies that assessed the impact and importance of English proficiency within specific business environments in Thailand. These studies covered the fields of the airline industry (Chaikarn & Jaratrasamee, 2013; Khamkaew, 2015; Paosuphan & Rimkeeratikul, 2013) [37] [38] [39], banking (Edgerton, 2016) [40], engineering (Luekhuntod & Wongsuwanich, 2013; Rajprasit *et al.*, 2014; Sureeyatanpas *et al.*, 2016) [41] [42] [43], hospitality management (Chaiyapornangkul & Phankaew, 2013; Sirikhan & Prapphal, 2011) [44] [45], manufacturing (Saenkam & Viriya, 2013; Sirisommai & Rimkeeratikul, 2013) [46] [47]; publishing (Buddhithammaporn & Tangkiengsirisin, 2013) [48], and retail sales (Chensarikit & Rajatanun, 2013) [49]. These case studies were employee-focused and applied both quantitative (mostly close-ended questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews) methods of inquiry. All of these studies acknowledged the importance of English proficiency for the success of the business and for job advancement of its employees.

With Thailand's contemporary focus on quantity over quality, as well as years of low English test scores, there arose the question as to how the country's top businesses assessed the importance of English proficiency. Because of the pioneering effort of this study, importance was determined to be assessed in relation to the company demographic factors of managerial level of the respondent, amount of company profit, number of employees, capital investment in business, and business sector categorization. Location of the company in Thailand was not used as a demographic variable because virtually all the businesses examined were in the greater Bangkok area.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Demographic factors have a significant influence on the assessed level of importance of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.*

H1a: The managerial level of the respondent has a significant influence on the assessed level of importance of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H1b: The amount of profit has a significant influence on the assessed level of importance of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H1c: The number of employees has a significant influence on the assessed level of importance of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H1d: Capital investment in the business has a significant influence on the assessed level of importance of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H1e: Business sector categorization has a significant influence on the assessed level of importance of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

Following their assessment on the importance of English proficiency, an inquiry was made as to an overall assessment of English proficiency of the company's workforce.

H2: *Demographic factors have a significant influence on the overall assessment of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.*

H2a: The managerial level of the respondent has a significant influence on the overall assessment of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H2b: The amount of profit has a significant influence on the overall assessment of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H2c: The number of employees has a significant influence on the overall assessment of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H2d: Capital investment in the business has a significant influence on the overall assessment of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H2e: Business sector categorization has a significant influence on the overall assessment of English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

The academic literature on preparedness for the use of English within AEC provides a recurrent theme regarding lack of resource allocation for English language instruction at the secondary and tertiary levels of public and private education (Baker, 2012; Fry & Bi, 2013; Herberholz & Sukontamarn, 2014; Puengpipattrakul, *et al.*, 2007; Sanonguthai, 2014; Saraithong & Chancharoenchai, 2012) [25] [28] [50] [51] [52] [53]. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) issued a report (2016) [54] which stated that Thailand's overall educational system either underfunded or provided misallocations for language acquisition programs as well as information and communication technology (ICT) programs, both of which are closely tied.

This study looked to see if the top private companies in Thailand emulated a similar level of resource allocation policy regarding English language training.

H3: *Demographic factors have a significant influence on the level of resource allocation for preparedness to achieve desirable English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.*

H3a: The managerial level of the respondent has a significant influence on the assessment of the level of resource allocation for preparedness to achieve desirable English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H3b: The amount of profit has a significant influence on the level of resource allocation for preparedness to achieve desirable English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H3c: The number of employees has a significant influence on the level of resource allocation for preparedness to achieve desirable English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H3d: Capital investment in the business has a significant influence on the level of resource allocation for preparedness to achieve desirable English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

H3e: Business sector categorization has a significant influence on the level of

resource allocation for preparedness to achieve desirable English proficiency of the workforce in a private Thai company.

The body of literature regarding the degree of ease in learning English is mixed. In most of the studies, consisting of self-perceptions by way of self-administered questionnaires with closed-ended questions, most of the respondents were in general agreement as to the utilitarian benefits learning of English which included greater personal economic gain, more options for employment, and greater career advancement (Dueraman, 2013; Hayes, 2016; Noom-ura, 2013; Wang & Rajprasisit, 2015) [29] [55] [56] [57]. However, while these served to enhance motivation, some respondents found English to be an unpopular and difficult subject due to inadequate teaching and insufficient resources for learning (Kaur *et al.*, 2016) [29]. While Thais understood the importance of English for commerce, most preferred a Thai-language work environment (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1997) [58] and used English almost exclusively in their private lives and entertainment. Hayes (2016) [56] found that 71% of Thai university students he surveyed “strongly agreed” (20%) or “agreed” (51%) that the Thai language is “superior to English.”

This study sought to determine if the learning of English is considered easy by the companies being examined.

H4: *Demographic factors have a significant influence on assessment of ease in learning English.*

H4a: The managerial level of the respondent has a significant influence on the assessment of ease in learning English.

H4b: The amount of profit has a significant influence on the assessment of ease in learning English.

H4c: The number of employees has a significant influence on the assessment of ease in learning English.

H4d: Capital investment in the business has a significant influence on the assessment of ease in learning English.

H4e: Business sector categorization has a significant influence on the assessment of ease in learning English.

This study then sought to determine if Thais liked learning the language.

H5: *Demographic factors have a significant influence on the perception of Thais liking to learn English.*

H5a: The managerial level of the respondent has a significant influence on the perception of Thais liking to learn English.

H5b: The amount of profit has a significant influence on the perception of Thais liking to learn English.

H5c: The number of employees has a significant influence on the perception of Thais liking to learn English.

H5d: Capital investment in the business has a significant influence on the perception of Thais liking to learn English.

H5e: Business sector categorization has a significant influence on the percep-

tion of Thais liking to learn English.

4. Research Design

4.1. Sample Population

The persons being examined were personnel responsible for English preparedness at the top 100 private companies in Thailand. A listing of the top 100 companies was compiled by information obtained from the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) as well regional and local business publications. Over a period of one calendar year (2017) the human resources personnel of these companies, responsible for English preparedness, were approached through direct contact at numerous corporate partnership meetings and job fairs at an international university in Bangkok and through email communications where a link was provided for access to a specifically designed website where this study's questionnaire could be filled out anonymously. Out of the 100 companies contacted, 67 companies responded. The remaining 33 companies were contacted, by email, three different times over the course of one calendar year and failed to participate. Given the difficulty of accessing the specific personnel and obtaining approval for participation, due in part to the culture's strong hierarchical structure (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1997; Suntaree, 1990; Welty, 2004) [58] [59] [60], 67% can be considered to be contextually sufficient.

4.2. Research Instrument and Data Collection

Because of the self-reporting nature of this study's inquiry, direct questioning through an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire was utilized to minimize social desirability bias. A 4-point, forced Likert scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") was created to avoid a neutral option (e.g., "not sure") since Thai culture discourages the practice of asserting opinion (*kreng jai*) when possible (Calderon *et al.*, 2015; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1997; Suntaree, 1990) [58] [59] [61]. All scales had a Cronbach alpha internal reliability score that exceeded 0.90, thus indicating high internal reliability and consistency (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010; Sekaran, 2000) [62] [63]. The questionnaire was translated into Thai and was administered as a document only in the Thai language. The Thai translation was translated back into English, using a second translator, to assure accuracy of the original content (Behling & Law, 2000; Domyei & Taguchi, 2009) [64] [65].

5. Data Analysis and Discussion of Research Findings

5.1. Data Analysis

Participants in the study were human resources professionals involved in the administration of English-language training in their respective companies. As shown in **Table 1**, the respondents were predominately female (64.2%), mainly middle management (31.3%) or administrative staff (56.7%), with only 11.9% describing themselves as executives. (The issue of social desirability bias as a

possible response contaminant is discussed later in this study.) The companies that they represented were primarily moderate to large in size with 71.6% having a profit of over a half a million dollars in the previous year. Approximately one-third (34.3%) of the companies in the sample had between 101 and 500 employees and 29.9% had more than 500 employees. Twenty-six of the companies (or 38.8% of the total sample population) had over one billion US dollars in invested capital. Three of the participants (4.5%) were employed in a firm in the primary business sector (specifically, oil and gas in this study), 25 (37.3%) in the secondary business sector (mostly finished goods such as manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, etc.) and 39 (58.2%) in the tertiary business sector (intangibles/services such as tourism, market research, and financial services).

The first hypothesis suggested that perception of the importance of English preparedness would vary by business sector, by the managerial level of employment by the size of the company in terms of gross profits from the previous year and by number of employees. The responses from the human resources personnel, which made up the sample population, are presented in **Table 2**.

As indicated in the percentages shown in the table above, all the demographic factors—business sector, managerial level of respondents, size of company by both profit and number of employees, businesses—overwhelmingly acknowledged the importance of English proficiency for their company as well as for the success of Thailand in AEC. Over 75% of the respondents expressed some degree of agreement while no one chose the “strongly disagree” as a response.

Hypothesis 2 examined the respondents’ perception of the level of English proficiency currently possessed by the employees of their company. The respondents were requested to express their level of overall assessment as to the perceived English proficiency of personnel employed in their respective company. **Table 3** provides the outcome of this inquiry.

The results appear to suggest that significant efforts may have been made in attaining English proficiency across the companies for all demographic categories. Approximately 75% of all respondents expressed at least some agreement that their employees possessed some proficiency in the English language. A greater proportion of executives strongly agreed with the assessment that their employees were proficient in English than non-executive personnel. (This will also be addressed in the section on social desirability bias.) No respondent across any of the company demographic categories felt that he/she strongly disagreed that their company’s employees did not possess some proficiency in English.

Hypothesis 3 examined whether the human resources professionals’ perceptions that their company had adequately prepared for the use of English in their business by way of resource allocation and language training. The results are presented in **Table 4**.

Across each of the various demographic categories, the majority of the companies agreed that their level of resource allocation was adequate. However, few

Table 1. Profile of the sample population

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------|---------|--------------------|
| Gender | Male | 24 | 35.8 | 35.8 |
| | Female | 43 | 64.2 | 100.0 |
| Level in Company | Executive | 8 | 11.9 | 11.9 |
| | Middle Management | 21 | 31.3 | 43.3 |
| | Administrative Staff | 38 | 56.7 | 100.0 |
| Company Profit | 0 - \$500,000 USD | 19 | 28.4 | 28.4 |
| | Prior Year >\$500,000 USD | 48 | 71.6 | 100.0 |
| Number of Employees | 1 - 100 | 24 | 35.8 | 35.8 |
| | 101 - 500 | 23 | 34.3 | 70.1 |
| | 500+ | 20 | 29.9 | 100.0 |
| Investment in Business | <\$50 Million USD | 13 | 19.4 | 19.4 |
| | \$50 - 100 Million USD | 13 | 19.4 | 38.8 |
| | \$100 Million - 1 Billion USD | 15 | 22.4 | 61.2 |
| | >\$1 Billion USD | 26 | 38.8 | 100.0 |
| Business Sector* | Primary | 3 | 4.5 | 4.5 |
| | Secondary | 25 | 37.3 | 41.8 |
| | Tertiary | 39 | 58.2 | 100.0 |

*Business sector categorization is based on the three-sector theory, an economic model developed, over time, by Allan Fisher, Colin Clark, and Jean Fourastie.

Table 2. Percentage of responses indicating level of importance of English by company demographic*

| Company Demographic | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Somewhat Disagree</i> | <i>Somewhat Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Business Sector | | | | |
| Primary | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Secondary | 0.0 | 4.0 | 40.0 | 56.0 |
| Tertiary | 0.0 | 0.0 | 35.9 | 64.1 |
| Level in Company | | | | |
| Executive | 0.0 | 12.5 | 25.0 | 62.5 |
| Middle Management | 0.0 | 0.0 | 47.6 | 52.4 |
| Administrative Staff | 0.0 | 0.0 | 31.6 | 68.4 |
| Profit in Prior Year | | | | |
| 0 to \$500,000 USD | 0.0 | 0.0 | 36.8 | 63.2 |
| Over \$500,000 USD | 0.0 | 2.1 | 35.4 | 62.5 |
| Number of Employees | | | | |
| 100 or Fewer | 0.0 | 4.2 | 29.2 | 66.7 |

Continued

| | | | | |
|------------|-----|-----|------|------|
| 101 to 500 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 39.1 | 60.9 |
| 500+ | 0.0 | 0.0 | 40.0 | 60.0 |

*Where respondents indicated degree of agreement with statements expressing level of importance of English in their company. Note: Gender, presented in the profile of the sample population (Table 1), was not operationalized for this study because there were no material differences in assessments based on this variable.

Table 3. Percentage of responses indicating level of English proficiency by company demographic*

| Company Demographic | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Somewhat Disagree</i> | <i>Somewhat Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> |
|----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Business Sector | | | | |
| Primary | 0.0 | 33.3 | 66.7 | 0.0 |
| Secondary | 0.0 | 24.0 | 76.0 | 0.0 |
| Tertiary | 0.0 | 17.9 | 74.4 | 7.7 |
| Level in Company | | | | |
| Executive | 0.0 | 12.5 | 62.5 | 25.0 |
| Middle Management | 0.0 | 23.8 | 71.4 | 4.8 |
| Administrative Staff | 0.0 | 21.1 | 78.9 | 0.0 |
| Profit in Prior Year | | | | |
| 0 to \$500,000 USD | 0.0 | 10.5 | 84.2 | 5.3 |
| Over \$500,000 USD | 0.0 | 25.0 | 70.8 | 4.2 |
| Number of Employees | | | | |
| 100 or Fewer | 0.0 | 16.7 | 83.3 | 0.0 |
| 101 to 500 | 0.0 | 13.0 | 78.3 | 8.7 |
| 500+ | 0.0 | 35.0 | 60.0 | 5.0 |

*Where respondents indicated level of agreement with statements expressing level of English proficiency for employees in their company.

Table 4. Percentage of responses indicating adequacy of the level of resources allocated for English preparedness, by company demographic*

| Company Demographic | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Somewhat Disagree</i> | <i>Somewhat Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> |
|----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Business Sector | | | | |
| Primary | 0.0 | 33.3 | 66.7 | 0.0 |
| Secondary | 0.0 | 16.0 | 72.0 | 12.0 |
| Tertiary | 2.6 | 7.7 | 66.7 | 23.1 |
| Level in Company | | | | |
| Executive | 0.0 | 12.5 | 50.0 | 37.5 |
| Middle Management | 4.8 | 9.5 | 61.9 | 23.8 |
| Administrative Staff | 0.0 | 13.2 | 76.3 | 10.5 |

Continued

| | | | | |
|----------------------|-----|------|------|------|
| Profit in Prior Year | | | | |
| 0 to \$500,000 USD | 0.0 | 5.3 | 68.4 | 26.3 |
| Over \$500,000 USD | 2.1 | 14.6 | 68.8 | 14.6 |
| Number of Employees | | | | |
| 100 or Fewer | 0.0 | 8.3 | 79.2 | 12.5 |
| 101 to 500 | 0.0 | 4.3 | 73.9 | 21.7 |
| 500+ | 5.0 | 25.0 | 50.0 | 20.0 |

*Where respondents indicated degree of agreement with statements expressing level English preparedness for employees in their company.

respondents strongly agreed that their company was prepared. Those expressing disagreement were mainly in the primary sector with over five hundred employees. The phenomena of higher percentages of agreement by executive-level personnel versus non-executive reappear in this data. This is discussed further in the section on social desirability bias.

Respondents were then questioned about the level of difficulty or ease in learning English. There was a strong consistency among all the company demographics as to the difficulty by ranking of the four basic English skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing). Speaking was considered the most difficult followed by Listening. Writing ranked next with Reading considered being the least difficult of the four skills. Despite stated attempts by the companies studied to increase English proficiency in their respective work environments, this study found that there did not exist any pervasive human resource practices to test prospective employees as to their English proficiency. What little testing existed, primarily focused on the skills of Speaking and Listening.

Table 5 presents the results of questioning as to the overall degree of ease in learning English as per company demographics.

When asked about how difficult it was to learn English, none of the respondents strongly disagreed that learning English was easy. However, there very small percentages of the respondents strongly agreeing that learning English was easy. Most respondents fell in the middle with about a third of the respondents somewhat disagreeing as to the ease of learning English and about half somewhat agreeing with the idea that learning English was easy.

A final question examined whether the human resources personnel perceived that Thais actually liked to learn English. Respondents were asked to express their level of agreement with a statement that Thais liked learning English. Their response is provided in **Table 6**.

While no one expressed strong disagreement with the idea that Thais liked learning English, most did express some disagreement with the statement. Very few indicated strong agreement that Thais liked learning English, yet a large number—over 40% in the two business sectors with the largest participants (*i.e.*, secondary and tertiary)—did somewhat agree that Thais did like learning English.

Table 5. Percentage of responses indicating that learning English is easy, by company demographic*

| Company Demographic | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Somewhat Disagree</i> | <i>Somewhat Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> |
|----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Business Sector | | | | |
| Primary | 0.0 | 100.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Secondary | 0.0 | 32.0 | 64.0 | 4.0 |
| Tertiary | 0.0 | 35.9 | 59.0 | 5.1 |
| Level in Company | | | | |
| Executive | 0.0 | 37.5 | 50.0 | 12.5 |
| Middle Management | 0.0 | 38.1 | 52.4 | 9.5 |
| Administrative Staff | 0.0 | 36.8 | 63.2 | 0.0 |
| Profit in Prior Year | | | | |
| 0 to \$500,000 USD | 0.0 | 31.6 | 57.6 | 10.5 |
| Over \$500,000 USD | 0.0 | 39.6 | 58.3 | 2.1 |
| Number of Employees | | | | |
| 100 or Fewer | 0.0 | 37.5 | 58.3 | 4.2 |
| 101 to 500 | 0.0 | 43.5 | 52.2 | 4.3 |
| 500+ | 0.0 | 30.0 | 65.0 | 5.0 |

*Where respondents indicated level of agreement with statements expressing level of ease in learning English for employees in their company.

Table 6. Percentage of responses indicating perception of Thais liking to learn English by company demographic*

| Company Demographic | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Somewhat Disagree</i> | <i>Somewhat Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> |
|----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Business Sector | | | | |
| Primary | 0.0 | 100.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Secondary | 0.0 | 56.0 | 40.0 | 4.0 |
| Tertiary | 0.0 | 43.6 | 48.7 | 7.7 |
| Level in Company | | | | |
| Executive | 0.0 | 25.0 | 62.5 | 12.5 |
| Middle Management | 0.0 | 57.1 | 39.1 | 4.8 |
| Administrative Staff | 0.0 | 52.6 | 42.1 | 5.3 |
| Profit in Prior Year | | | | |
| 0 to \$500,000 USD | 0.0 | 36.8 | 52.6 | 10.5 |
| Over \$500,000 USD | 0.0 | 56.2 | 39.6 | 4.2 |
| Number of Employees | | | | |
| 100 or Fewer | 0.0 | 50.0 | 41.7 | 8.3 |
| 101 to 500 | 0.0 | 52.2 | 43.5 | 4.3 |
| 500+ | 0.0 | 50.0 | 43.3 | 6.0 |

*Where respondents indicated degree of agreement with the statement that Thais like learning English.

5.2. Social Desirability Bias

Social desirability bias generally refers to a tendency within self-reporting wherein a respondent provides information to make himself look good in lieu of more accurate and truthful information. Such bias may have lesser importance when the questions being asked involve an assessment of an individual's subjective well-being but is far more important when the self-reporting reflects upon the overall work performance of the respondent (Holtgraves, 2004; McCrae, 1986) [66] [67]. Paulus (1984) [68] identified two independent dimensions regarding social desirability bias. The first is termed *self-deception* in that the respondent presents an overly positive self-assessment which may actually be unconscious self-deception. The second dimension—and the one more relevant to this study—is *impression management*, “which is a deliberate distortion of self-presentation” (Dodaj 2012) [69]. While the purpose or function of self-deception is the enhancement of a respondent's personality, “impression management is a conscious attempt to create a favorable impression” of the respondent for a particular audience (Dodja 2012) [69]. Therefore, self-deception may be present in self-reporting of well-being while a self-assessment or self-presentation of job performance, productivity, or the managing of a project or program would fall within the realm of impression management.

Impression management can occur in situations of anonymous responding (Paulhus & John, 1998) [70] such as the anonymous use of self-administered questionnaires as occurred in this study. It can serve as a response contaminant that can threaten construct validity (King & Bruner, 2000) [71] and, thus, “distort the information gained from self-reports” (Jo *et al.*, 1997) [72]. Direct questioning is thought to be better than indirect questioning regarding measurement validity (Kidder & Judd, 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) [73] [74]. However, direct questioning does not eliminate social desirable bias, and control for social desirability response bias in self-administered questionnaires can be difficult (Fernandes & Randall, 1992; Owens *et al.*, 2001) [75] [76]. In addition, the questionnaire of this study contained what can be identified as “high self-presentation items” within the questions (Campbell *et al.*, 1999) [77] from which the respondents could infer a self-reported performance appraisal that, if negative within the contextual of the responses, could detrimentally subject them to public disclosure, even if the anonymous nature of the administration of the questionnaire was explained to them.

The results of the data of this study indicate some disparities between executive-level respondents versus non-executive respondents. Regarding the assessed level of English proficiency in their companies, 25% of the executive-level personnel strongly agreed about overall proficiency versus 4.8% for middle management and zero percent for administrative staff. A notable disparity also occurred regarding the level of resource allocation where 37.5% of executive-level personnel strongly agree that their companies had provided sufficient resources for English preparedness against 23.8% for middle management and 10.5% for

administrative staff. Finally, perception of Thais enjoying the study of English showed that 75% of executive-level respondent agreed or strongly agreed while over half of middle management and administrative staff somewhat disagreed. There was no significant disparity between executive and non-executive respondents in assessments regarding the ease of learning English.

The disparities suggest that impressment management may have served as a response contaminant since the executive personnel that responded were responsible and accountable for achieving English proficiency in their respective companies. An argument can be made that these executives operate in a degree of isolation at the executive level where it is expected that the personnel are more highly educated (perhaps graduates of English language curriculum schools). However, the respondents for this study were those specifically in charge of the English-language programs and should have been as knowledgeable, if not more so, about the issues addressed in this study as those at the administrative staff level. However, the overall probable impact of social desirability bias as a contaminant in this study is limited because the numerical disparities cited were not extreme and the number of executives in the study were only 8% out 67%, or 11.9% of the total sample.

6. Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is a pioneering effort in regards to the population sampled. Therefore, there are no other academic studies to make direct, contextual comparisons. However, when comparing to the body of literature relating to English preparedness at the secondary and tertiary levels of the Thai educational system, this study clearly presents a more positive and encouraging picture. The reason may be that the 67 companies examined (out of the top 100) are more focused on international commerce than smaller enterprises and, therefore, place more emphasis on the English proficiency of their workforce. Also, being larger with more capital, these companies were better able to provide more resources, on a per capita (employee) basis, than public and even private schools and universities. While Thai higher education may continue to rely on credentialism as the stimulus for their profitability, the Thai companies examined in this study need to rely on efficient and effect business communication in the English language.

To achieve a higher response rate than 67% in similar studies in the future is, of course, a practical objective. The 33% that did not respond to this study may be companies that have not paid sufficient attention and resources to English preparedness and proficiency. Therefore, by not participating, they could not incriminate themselves. Future studies might attempt to replicate this study on annual or biennial basis to determine trends as to English preparedness and proficiency. EF English First has conducted annual reviews of English proficiency of nations for the past seven years, thus establishing data of chronological developments. Overall, Thailand went from 42nd out of 44 in 2011 (“very low”) and the lowest of all Asian nations except Kazakhstan, to 62nd out of 70 in 2017

(“low”) and 15th out of 20 Asian nations (EF English First 2017) [21]. Similar chronological data can be established to assess the degree of improvement of English proficiency within the Thai workforce. The testing of English preparedness and proficiency, utilizing this study’s questionnaire, can also be used in other AEC nations, especially the frontier economies of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The data obtained can be used for collective regional analysis and to establish a broader understanding of the growing degree of English proficiency within the workforces of the AEC.

Finally, the assessment of English proficiency of the Thai workforce in this study should not be used to reflect upon the overall proficiency of the country’s population. The utilization of English by Thais as a second language is overwhelming found in the greater Bangkok area and smaller tourist areas in the country (e.g., Pattaya and Phuket). In Bangkok itself, it is almost exclusively used by Thais along a relatively narrow strip of area that runs along six stations on the Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS)’s Skytrain, from the Siam station to the Phrom Phong station. Higher utilization and proficiency can be found among employees of mostly foreign companies in a commercial downtown on this strip, within non-cleaning personnel in the foreign tourist hotels along this area, and by sex workers in two large red-light districts on the strip where the clientele is now predominately mainland Chinese and South Korean, utilizing English as the *lingua franca* of sexual commerce. Anecdotal evidence and personal observations from a combined dozen year of residency and employment in Thailand, lead the authors to conclude that the communication of English by most Thais is still non-existent, that most do not wish to learn English, and that the value of learning English as the language of ASEAN is not seen as essential since most are not even aware that it is the official working language of that organization.

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