EVALUATION OF LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS USED BY THAI BUSINESS PEOPLE*

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports the evaluation of language functions used by Thai business people, with an emphasis on the language functions of disagreeing, apologizing, questioning, and expressing politeness. The subjects in the study were Thai business people enrolled in a graduate course in language functions for business communication offered at the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce. They were trained how to use accurate and appropriate forms to function in various business interactions that prompt disagreeing, apologizing, questioning, and expressing various degrees of politeness in their communication tasks. Their performances were evaluated in three stages: (1) Preparation Stage which requires scripts for oral delivery with an emphasis on the linear pattern of development of ideas, (2) Oral Delivery Stage which utilizes criteria on content appeal, language forms, organization, and opening and closing techniques, and (3) Feedback Stage which gives the instructor and peer evaluation on presentation techniques. Through these three stages of evaluation, the subjects' use of the target language functions was evaluated, their language performances were analyzed and the results were concluded. Pedagogical implications of the study will be discussed.

1. Introduction

Language performance evaluation has been recognized among language practitioners as an integral part of formal training. It can be used to help learners understand their learning process in addition to its function as a tool to assess their performance at the end of a course or specific training period. The process-oriented nature of evaluation is reflected in the use of peer evaluation and learners' performance evaluation which secure feedback from the instructor/trainer and peers/colleagues. Through this type of evaluation, the learner's autonomy can be enhanced in that learners are responsible for their learning and the quality of their language performance. Ibrahim (1997) asserts in his work that the mastery of the skills of autonomous learning should be the product of formal education. Learners' autonomous skills can help them carry out self-directed learning not only in university programs, particularly by distance education, but also in the most desired life-long education with the use of information technology.

At university level, language training for business communication certainly requires learners, business people in the workforce, to be autonomous so that they can monitor their language performance in business transactions. As stated in Scharle and Szabo (2000), learners should become aware of their learning responsibilities and take action in further developing their skills in the use of a target language. If they still rely on their teachers/trainers to help reduce language errors or limitations, it will certainly take them longer than necessary to reach the level of performance required for their current work. In this regard, this paper attempts to describe how learners or business people can be trained to use accurate forms and appropriate functions in their communication tasks at work and how their language performances can be assessed in the process-oriented evaluation. Learners' data obtained in the period of four years (2000-2003) in a graduate course dealing with language functions and business communication will be reported and discussed to illustrate how performance evaluation can be carried out in support of learning autonomy.

2. Background on Thai Business People and Their Needs for Language Functions

In general, Thai business people need to use English to communicate in business transactions. The University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok has been responsive to their needs for language training and studies at the graduate level. Business personnel at the middle management level seek training in language use for business and technology (MA program in English for Business and Technology), and business communication (MBA program with emphasis on Business Communication). Those enrolled in these two programs provided information on their language requirements and their needs for language training specific or relevant to their current work. In 1998, thirty-eight of forty business people identified their difficulty with speech function appropriateness (Pholsward, 1998; 1999). They pointed to some language functions problematic to their performance, particularly disagreement, negation, apology, compliment, expressing opinion, and question/request. The information obtained has prompted the two graduate programs to offer a course that provides training in language functions for business communication.

Graduate students or Thai business people once enrolled in this course, will be informed and trained in selected language functions from both theoretical and practical perspectives. They will study the characteristics of language functions derived from empirical studies reported in international journals and then practice how to use them in their work context. To illustrate this point, the author will exemplify in this paper the forms and functions of disagreement, apology, questions particularly requests, and expressions that show varied degrees of politeness. The forms and functions of these speech acts are taken from earlier research as follows.

Disagreement

Myers (1998) studied topics and disagreement in focus groups and found out that the subjects expressed disagreement by addressing it to the moderator in their groups. This finding points to the use of a practical strategy in expressing disagreement to the third party to reduce conflict between the speaker and the target listener. Sacks (as cited in Myers, 1998) pointed out that a response to be taken as disagreeing will typically be delayed, prefaced, and modified. Other disagreeing strategies are suggested by Dawson-Smith (communication in a guest lecture, 2001). He explained that when disagreeing, one needs to provide reasons, use the right words and intonation, keep eye contact, listen and know when to stop, agree to differ, and invite comments and thoughts to make disagreement less confrontational. As for the forms used to refuse or disagree, Sproat (communication in a guest lecture, 2000) suggested the following expressions: "I'll see what I can do," "I don't think I'll be allowed to...," "I would really like to help

you, but ...," "Have you tried (so and so)?" and "You would get better help from ...."

Apology

Cohen and Olshtain (1981) reported four semantic formulas from their empirical study on apology as:
1. An expression of apology (I'm sorry/ I apologize/ Excuse me/ Forgive me)
2. An acknowledgement of responsibility
3. An offer of repair
4. A promise of forbearance (i.e., that it won't happen again).

Ziesing (communication in a guest lecture and in his published paper, 2000) pointed out that there is a cultural impact of the speech act of apologizing, especially in Thai culture, regarding the concept of hierarchy which therefore results in associating apology with submission, and no apology with power. It is important for non-native speakers to differentiate between 'sorry' and 'excuse me.' Apology can be used to express your regret for something you are or are not responsible for, fix relationship, reduce conflict, and ease up the speaker's life.

Question/ Request

Crymes and Potter (1979) identified question functions and forms in five categories:
1. Opening questions (WH-questions)
2. Leading questions (Polar verb subject)
3. Challenges (Polar verb subject for strong challenges and polar verb elliptical)
4. Softened assertions (Affirmative statement with question for softened assertions)
5. Questions of clarification (Polar subject verb, polar subject verb elliptical, and polar verb subject, i.e., for strong

challenge, challenge, and leading questions, respectively.

Levine, Baxter and McNulty (1987) identified forms used to ask questions for focused explanation as follows:

- I understand this but could you explain the (other/ first/ next/ last) thing you said?
- I got what you said about the first part, but I didn't get the next part.
- Do/ Did you mean that I need to ...?
- Can you give me an example of this?
- I'm not sure how/ when/ where to (verb) ....

Questions for request functions have received a great deal of attention from Thai business people for language difficulty in use. Request functions inevitably incorporate the target degree of politeness which varies by the intention or imposition (embedded in the task) of the speaker. Request forms can be seen as interrogatives (questions), declaratives (affirmative statements), or imperatives (commands) (Carrell & Konneker, 1981). The concept of directness or indirectness (Carrell & Banergee, 1988) as well as the concept of social and psychological distance (age, gender, status, like, dislike) (Tanaka & Kawade, 1982) must be taken into consideration when a speaker makes a request.

Expressing Different Degrees of Politeness

Carrell and Konneker (1981) pointed out that politeness strategies vary across three syntactic/semantic features with the use of interrogatives, declaratives, and imperatives from a high to a low degree. Based on this finding, Tanaka and Kawade (1982) further developed their two studies on the syntactic hierarchy of politeness and the social and psychological distance that

determines one's use of politeness expressions. They discussed the forms used in American English at six levels from high to low as follows:

- I'd appreciate (if) ....
- Could you ...?/ Would you ...?
- Can you ...?/ I'd like you to .../ Will you ...?/ Verb (e.g., turn down), won't you?/ Why don't you ...?
- Verb (e.g., turn down), will you?
- I want you to .../ Verb (e.g., turn down X)
- Object (e.g., radio)!

Pholsward (1998) reported findings from a study on NS-NNS politeness strategies used by Thai business people that nonnative speakers had difficulty with regarding varying degrees of politeness, as seen in their use of limited expressions or the same form at different levels. In contrast, native speakers predominantly used interrogatives (past forms), declaratives, imperatives with 'please,' the use of names, priming techniques and explanations to vary degrees of politeness in four request tasks (with varied degrees of imposition in the given tasks).

3. Exemplified Data on Language Functions Obtained from Thai Business People during 2000-2003

As mentioned earlier in Section 2, Thai business people who needed training in language use for business and technology as well as business communication were enrolled in a graduate course in language functions for business communication. Students in this course (specifically 2000-2003) were assigned specific language tasks for class practice, written communication via e-mail, scripts for oral delivery, individual reports and presentations. In the beginning,

they were informed of the forms and functions used in specific business interactions, and then were asked to perform language functions identified as problematic to Thai learners. After this practice, they were assigned to collect further data from other Thai speakers to gain insights into the forms and functions required for their communication at work. Discussion of target speech data in terms of accuracy and appropriateness was carried out afterwards for comments and feedback. Their individual reports were evaluated by peers and the instructor on content appeal, delivery (organization), language use, and opening and closing (see more details in Section 4). Here are some examples of practice tasks and speech data:

- In the context of a company's meeting, discuss its new budget for the coming year (specific details will be worked out with students' contributions on current situation in their workplace). Use the "addressing to the moderator" technique (Myers, 1998) and the three techniques of verbal disagreement: delayed, prefaced, and modified (Sacks, as cited in Myers, 1998). (Target: Speech function of disagreement)

- Create a context of request or apology, and perform the speech act of requesting or apologizing in pairs. The instructor will give comments and feedback on pair interaction (by observation or videotape) and their linguistic expressions used. (Target: Speech function of request or apology)

- Debate the concept of politeness in Thai and English with a focus on "Who is more polite, linguistically?" Give practical reasons to support your viewpoints. (Target: Speech function of disagreement and expressing directness/indirectness/ politeness)

Speech Data of Disagreement (collected in 2000 by students; errors kept intact)

Context: In a one-to-one meeting with your boss, you disagree with your boss on his suggestion on expanding the factory. What would you say?

NS Data:

- *You should be aware of all the consequences* if we expand the factory.

- *I'm sorry but I don't agree with you because* decreasing cost will not ensure higher productivity.

- *I have to suggest that* we do not go ahead with this plan because now it's not a good time to make any investment due to the economic crisis.

NNS Data:

- *I think we'd better* look at the plan more carefully.

- *Why do you need to expand the factory? I don't see the point. I think* a factory is big enough. *I think I disagree with you.*

- *I don't think so because* our company has faced with economic crisis.

- *I think we should* slow down the plan to expand the factory to see an economic trend whether it's going to be better or not.

- *I don't agree due to* the economic situation right now.

From the exemplified speech data, it is apparent that the NNS subjects tended to be direct in expressing disagreement (i.e., less appropriate) with *"I think..."* and *"I don't agree..."* which sound rather confrontational while the NS subjects expressed the need to disagree by saying *"You should...," "I'm sorry but ...,"* and *"I have to suggest that ...."*

Speech Data of Apology (collected by students in 2001; errors kept intact)

Situation: You are half an hour late to your company's important meeting. When you arrive there, what are you going to say?

NNS Data

- *I'm sorry.* There was an accident during the way.
- I tried to come as quick as I could but there was an accident. *I'm sorry.*
- *I'm so sorry.* I forgot my meeting document. It won't happen again.
- Hello! *I'm sorry* for being late.
- Say nothing.

It can be seen from the obtained data that two subjects did not explain the cause of being late. One subject explained before giving an expression of apology (*"I'm sorry"*). Another subject expressed a promise of forbearance (*"It won't happen again"*). which may sound somewhat exaggerated if late for the first time (but will be considered appropriate if the speaker has regularly repeated the same behavior).

Speech Data of Question in Request Tasks (collected by students in 2001; errors kept intact)

Situation: Your director assigns you to apply for a visa at the American Embassy for Thai delegation who will attend the conference. You have to contact the American Embassy official, what would you say?

NS Data:

- I'm the official representative of the Senate's delegations at the upcoming conference in Washington. I have been authorized to apply for the visas for our

delegation. *Can you* help me with this process?

NNS Data:

- *Could you please help ....?*
- *It would be very kind of you if you please ....*
- *Can you ...?*

As seen from the NNS subjects' responses, one subject used *"Can you...?"* like the native speaker but without using priming information (explanation on why making such a request). One subject tended to be too polite in the given situation when saying *"It would be very kind of you if you please...."*

Speech Data of Expressing Politeness at Three Different Levels (data collected by students in 2003; errors kept intact)

The speech function of request was used to elicit politeness expressions at three levels: basically polite, moderately polite, and very polite. According to the study conducted by Pholsward in 1998, the NNS subjects (40 Thai business people at the middle management level) tended to be uncertain about the use of politeness expressions at the moderately polite and very polite levels. Despite their claim of awareness of the syntactic/semantic hierarchy of politeness, their use of politeness expressions pointed to inappropriate speech products as required in the given request tasks.

Situation: Request for an object and a favor

You want someone (on his way home to the office) to pick up a new equipment catalogue from the main office for you tomorrow morning, you will say ....

Basically polite _____

Moderately polite _____

Very polite _____

NS Data:

- *Name, could you please ...?*
- *Name, would you mind ...?*
- *Name, would it be possible for you to ...?*

NNS Data:

- *Please pick up ..../ If you have free time please pick up ..../ Could you pick up...?*
- *Please pick up ..../ Do you mind if I would like you to pick up ...?/ Excuse me, could you pick up ...?*
- *If you have free time, please pick up ..../ Can you pick up ...?/ Excuse me, do you mind if I would like you to pick up ...?*

As seen from NNS data, the subjects tended to use " *please + Verb"* for level 1 (basically polite) and *"Could you...?"* at level 3 (very polite). The NNS subjects used fewer interrogatives (expressing a higher degree of politeness) than the NS subjects.

4. Data Obtained from Performance Evaluation

Students enrolled in a graduate course in language functions and business communication were trained to use correct language forms and appropriate functions via practice in class. In addition, they were required to collect speech function data to gain insight into the forms and functions required for specific business interactions. Their language performances were mainly evaluated in three stages: script writing, oral delivery, and feedback for improvement. The first stage emphasized the linear pattern

of development of ideas while the second stage called learners' attention to peer evaluation which shifted responsibilities from the teacher to the learners as well as helping to boost their abilities as active listeners with a sense of control over their language performance. This section will, therefore, give examples of script writing, peer evaluation of language performance, and the use of feedback for improvement.

Stage One: Script Writing

At this stage, writing assignments were evaluated by their relevance to task directions, critical reaction to an assigned point or issue, organization (linear pattern emphasized), and language use (forms and functions). As seen below, two examples are given with the first one earning a B+ while the second one a B because of its greater off-focus organization. In the feedback discussion, the teacher pointed to the students that the off-focus organization would affect efficiency (i.e., comprehensibility and persuasiveness) of the message. The italicized parts in the examples indicate points made by the students and language errors are kept intact.

Task: In two to three paragraphs, discuss the importance of communication subjects in MBA programs.

- I think *communication program is very important* to the present situation. Therefore, it will be good to add this communication course in MBA program in Thailand as same as the UTCC. In the past, I thought that why had to learn this communication course in the Master degree. But now I really think that this course is very useful for the organization and doing work. I can know and understand in some case that

I never known before. And I didn't learn anything in communication course in the Bachelor Degree. I think that the good communication is the good advantage for me. Many people don't really know how to communicate or what do they need from good communication. *If Thai people can change attitude* and focus on the communication skills, it's a good advantage for the organization. *So, we have to concentrate in the Thai education* by containing the program like the many universities of United State.

• In Thailand *communication subject is the new subject*, it quite difficult to find the university where teach this subject. Many people don't know how the communication is important in daily life and dealing business. Thus, it is very important to communicate with people to realize the important with communication skill to be the effective person in organization. *World rapidly change, customer always need more demand.* Two way communication, questionnaire, comment via internet, is the best way to check what is the need of customer and respond in the way they want.

• Nowadays, the core management of every business is *communication with customer* effectively. Every business would like to build *the good image of organization* to customer in term of social marketing. Due to a lot of *competition* in business, *the strong communication skill of employee* is the preferable technique in working both communicate with colleague and customer. These are the reasons why *business course should have the communication subject in the program.*

<u>Stage Two: Oral Delivery with Peer Evaluation</u>

Students' individual reports are evaluated by peers and the instructor in terms of (a) content appeal, (b) language use (language forms and functions emphasized), (c) delivery (linear organization), and (d) opening and closing techniques. As in Stage One, a letter grade of A (excellent), B+(very good), or B (good) (grading levels for graduate courses) will be assigned by peers and the instructor to oral performance based on the above specifications, and the script writing earns a grade according to the following criteria:

A   = Content clearly explained and good language use

B+ = Content sufficiently explained, fair language use

B   = Content comprehensibly explained and fairly functional language use

(Note: A- can be assigned if the quality of the work falls between A and B+.)

Below are two examples of students' oral performances evaluated by peers and the instructor in a group of three and four, respectively; their scripts are shown for illustration (language errors kept intact).

Task 1: How can you know when and why you should give compliments in Thai versus English? Discuss and support your points with examples you have encountered in your workplace.

• In Thai culture, a compliment will give to admire or flattery someone in a particular situation. For example, sale manager is received a compliment from his boss when he is successful in negotiation with customer. However, buyer might not give it to retailer when they deliver a goods in time. Differ from English context, for example in

American culture, compliment frequently occur in their routine life which it aims to reinforce a good feeling between speakers such as parents will give compliment to their children when they transfer a class. Compared with Thai families, this is a duty of students to study and pass on an examination. So, they sometime did not receive a compliment from their parents when they got high grades.

(Peer evaluation: Results B, A, A, agreed after discussion as A ; the script earns an A-)

Task 2: Discuss briefly what you have to take into consideration when making verbal invitations to target guest(s) in English. Make up a situation and tell what you would say to him/ her/ them.

• Firstly, I have to consider about age; younger or older, position and language. Age is importance to consider because I able to use a suitable language in verbal invitations.

Secondly, my tone, and action are necessary to careful in an invitations.

So, I set a situation in Mum' birthday party on Sunday. My responsibility is invitation guests. Therefore, in this party has many guests; such as colleague, boss, etc. Hence, when I invite my colleague, I use a language different in boss. For example, *Excuse me, do you have a free time on Sunday? I would like you come to join a birthday party of my mum.*

Invitation boss, I will say ...*Excuse me, I would like to invite you join to Mum' birthday party on Sunday. Please, come to join with us.*

(Peer evaluation: Results A-, A- , B+, A, agreed after discussion as A- ; the script earns an A-)

Stage Three: Feedback

With the results of peer evaluation on students' oral delivery, the teacher and the students discuss individual performances to conclude the final grade in consensus. As noted earlier, students tend to have problems with the linear organization of ideas and writing relevant to the given tasks/ directions. All conceptual and linguistic limitations will be discussed and exemplified from students' work, particularly based on their scripts (submitted after their oral delivery). This stage has proved useful to students, as most of them said that they were helped in seeing their areas of improvement, particularly organization of ideas as well as language forms and functions. Peer evaluation also helped them to concentrate on important points required of effective listening and speaking. To them, discussion after peer evaluation can shed more light on how they move off focus in their script writing and subsequent reporting to class. The feedback stage has provided to students good opportunities to learn and understand accuracy and appropriateness of language use. (Also see the final note on details of peer evaluation criteria for students' presentations.)

5. Pedagogic Implications and Conclusion

The paper thus far has reported examples of data from students' work in a graduate course dealing with language functions and business communication, which focuses on students' understanding and use of specific language forms and functions required in business interactions. These items have been identified as problematic to students, Thai business people, in their face-to-face interactions and at meetings where they have to report or explain points to their superior, colleagues,

and customers. The students have learned the formulas of language functions pertinent to their needs, particularly in disagreeing, apologizing, questioning/requesting, and expressing different degrees of politeness. With their own data collection of target language functions, they are helped to gain insight into the accurate and appropriate forms required for intended meanings.

Once students' understanding of language functions has been attained, they are assigned to do peer evaluation which involves linear-focused script writing, oral delivery with specific criteria, followed by feedback discussion. Through this process-oriented evaluation, students can become gradually autonomous by growing a sense of self-judgment and a control over their language performance which can be developed by their own efforts. When being able to reduce their reliance on the teacher/trainer, they can internalize the concept of learning autonomy as an ultimate goal and see for themselves fruitful results from their practice. This should represent a mutual academic gain to both the teacher and students.

In addition to peer evaluation for students' oral reports, the students are also required to do individual presentations on minor studies which are evaluated by peers and the instructor. The criteria for evaluation deal with research components and presentation skills as follows:

Research Components:
- Clarity and soundness of the problem/ issue
- Clarity and significance of the objective (s)
- Practicality and soundness of methodology (the instrument and the subjects)
- Sound and logical discussion, and interpretation of the obtained results
- Clarity of conclusion(s) on major findings

Presentation Skills:
- Clarity and the logical order of presented points
- Competency in handling questions and explanations
- Competency in language use
- Effective use of visual aids

Grading: A (excellent), B+ (very good), and B (good) as required for a graduate course; grade assignment also complies with the guidelines given for script writing.

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