



ความต้องการการฝึกอบรมทักษะการใช้ภาษาของบุคลากรบริษัทท่องเที่ยวในภาคอุตสาหกรรมการท่องเที่ยวประเทศไทย: มุมมองด้านการจัดการ

The Need for Language Skills Training for Tour Company Staff in the Thailand Tourism Industry: Managerial Perspectives

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ ศึกษามุมมองของผู้จัดการการท่องเที่ยวเกี่ยวกับความต้องการการฝึกอบรมทักษะการใช้ภาษาของบุคลากรบริษัทท่องเที่ยวในภาคอุตสาหกรรมการท่องเที่ยวประเทศไทย และศึกษาปัญหาของบริษัทท่องเที่ยวด้านการฝึกอบรมทักษะภาษา โดยใช้วิธีการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกแบบตัวต่อตัวและการสัมภาษณ์ทางโทรศัพท์ กลุ่มตัวอย่าง คือ ผู้จัดการบริษัทท่องเที่ยวที่สะดวก จำนวน 30 ตัวอย่าง ได้มาโดยใช้วิธีการสุ่มอย่างง่ายจากบริษัทท่องเที่ยวในกรุงเทพมหานคร ซึ่งมีอยู่ในฐานข้อมูลของการท่องเที่ยวแห่งประเทศไทย เครื่องมือที่ใช้เป็นแบบสัมภาษณ์ซึ่งสร้างโดยผู้วิจัย การวิจัยในครั้งนี้ ผู้วิจัยได้สัมภาษณ์ข้อมูลเพิ่มเติมจากผู้จัดการ โรงเรียนสอนภาษาและเจ้าหน้าที่ของการท่องเที่ยวแห่งประเทศไทย รวมถึงการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลทฤษฎีซึ่งประกอบด้วยตำรา วารสารทางวิชาการ ฐานข้อมูลออนไลน์ บทความวิจัยนี้ ได้นำเสนอผลการวิจัย 4 ประเด็นสำคัญ และมีข้อเสนอแนะว่าองค์กรต่างๆ ควรร่วมมือกัน เพื่อปรับปรุงคุณภาพการบริการให้ตรงกับความต้องการด้านความพึงพอใจของนักท่องเที่ยว ผลการวิจัยนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่าการฝึกอบรมทักษะภาษามีส่วนช่วยปรับปรุงคุณภาพของการบริการ

Abstract

This study investigates the perspectives of tourism managers concerning the needs for language skills training for tour company staff in the Thailand tourism industry and to study the problems of tour companies with respect to language skills training. In-depth, face-to-face and telephone qualitative interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 30 tour-company managers. The sample consisted of randomly-chosen tour companies based in Bangkok and listed in the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) database. A semi-structured interview form was created as a research instrument by the

researchers. The study was supplemented by additional interviews with managers of language schools and relevant officials at the TAT, together with analysis of existing secondary data sources including books, journals and online databases. The study shows that organizations should cooperate with each other so as to improve the quality of services to meet tourists' expectations and levels of satisfaction and, also, that language skills training helps improve the quality of services overall.

คำสำคัญ: การอบรมภาษา บริษัทท่องเที่ยว อุตสาหกรรมการท่องเที่ยว ความพึงพอใจของนักท่องเที่ยว คุณภาพของการบริการ

Keywords: Language training, Tourism companies, Tourism industry, Tourist satisfaction, Quality of service

1. Introduction

The financial crisis has sparked a worldwide economic downturn, characterized by volatile exchange rates, uncertainty over oil prices, diplomatic problems inspired by the threat of nationalism, globalization and technology. These are negative factors for growth in the tourism industry (TCEB Newsletter, 2008) and signal a decrease in the number of tourists from the US and European countries, which will also lead to declining revenue and employment rates in the tourism industry. In fact, the tourism industry is one of the world's biggest and fastest growing industries (Pan, 2004). However, economic crisis and structural changes in global population and spending power are combining to force managers in the tourism industry to question the nature of their management skills and the type of human resources they require to keep customers satisfied.

Thailand is a country in which the tourism industry has become an increasingly important part of the national

economy and it provides a long-term benefit for Thai citizens. The tourism industry in Thailand has created a large number of jobs and contributed a large proportion to the gross domestic product (GDP) of Thailand in recent years. The tourism industry was responsible for direct and indirect job growth of around 3 million jobs and it now represents 8.4% of total employment during the past few years (TISC, 2008). The tourism industry typically contributes about 5.3% to GDP. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) reported that in the year 2007, Thailand welcomed 14.46 million foreign visitor arrivals - a record figure and one beyond expectations. The total revenue of THB547,782 million, or around EUR14,031.30 million, was generated. The success and achievements would have been higher had there not been several negative factors. In particular, the seizure of Suvanabhumi International Airport and Don Mueang Airport in December 2008 by anti-democracy activists caused enormous damage to the reputation of the country, in addition to the direct costs caused by their

illegal actions. Other political incidents have also damaged the country's reputation as a safe place for tourists to visit.

Although the number of tourist arrivals from western countries appears to have fallen slightly because of the economic crisis, this has not yet begun to affect the arrivals from China. There are, consequently, still areas which can provide growth for Thai tourism and there are historical sites which are magnificent but which have not yet reached their potential. Further, while many tourists were put off by the political conflict, others found it quite enjoyable to see another side of Thailand's sometimes chaotic public life. Tourists themselves have not been targeted for violence and were able to watch peacefully from the sidelines incidents such as the coup d'état on 19th September 2006 and the 7th October 2008 incidents. The situations did not scare the tourists actually present and none of them were injured. Nevertheless, international press coverage painted a negative picture.

To strengthen the tourism industry in Thailand in the context of these crises, operators need to revise their market strategies accordingly. For example, operators may need to focus on the short-haul market – that is within Asia – instead of America or Europe, which has been more directly affected by the global financial crisis. Indeed, the TAT should hasten to create and deploy an effective campaign to restore the country's image as a leading tourist destination. In addition, the public and private sectors should cooperate in

order to increase competitiveness – especially, concerning human resource development in terms of language skills training (TCEB, 2008).

It is forecast that the Thai tourism industry may experience a trend of continued growth or it may grow at a rate of a little below the earlier target. Nevertheless, operators should set their sales positioning by emphasizing experience and service and Thailand's extensive array of high quality tourist destinations. Tour company staff must also realize that they should learn to adapt to a difficult environment. It means that tour company staff development should be re-considered because it is an important element in sustaining tourist numbers. While the industry can continue to grow, this will only occur if good quality services are provided and staff are able to respond to changes in the environment and to issues customers may have (Hitt et al., 1999). Operators will need to develop their services to meet international standards and, in this, language skills are of critical importance. Unfortunately, foreign language skills are generally poor in the Thai labour market and this represents a barrier to market growth. English and Chinese language skills are of particular importance in this regard (Leong & Ma, 2008). English has become the international language of tourism as well as commerce and essential for tourism staff. However, staff can no longer offer only English as a foreign language in servicing tourists. The TAT (2006) reveals that China has become a key market and generated

tourism revenue of THB26,980.26 million or about EUR 691.09 million for Thailand. According to a report by the Thai Farmers Bank Research Centre, the Chinese economy has expanded significantly within the global economy, resulting in people enjoying higher purchasing power and beginning to spend more on tourism. This is the reason why the Chinese language skill training is also important. With the number of Chinese tourists in Thailand increasing, the tourists demand that local staff can communicate with them on their own terms. There is increasing demand also for skills in German, French, Spanish, Russian, Korean and Japanese.

Importantly, training foreign language skills can improve the ability effectiveness in providing higher quality service (Norwack, 1991; Jameson, 2000). The skills involved, especially speaking and listening, are essential for tour company staff. Not only do they help in communicating with tourists but they also help in competing in the market place in order to maintain existing clients and gain new ones. The inability of some companies to deal with routine communications in a different but common language like English can lead to very expensive cancellations of business.

To increase foreign language skills, many tourism companies have established budgets for staff development. The main aim is to increase the quality or effectiveness of services. Just as the TAT has promoted internationalization, so it needs to pay attention to the needs of an international

audience, as well as establishing competencies in communication with tourists in various languages to demonstrate the potential of the Thai tourism industry. In contrast, some tour companies have been focusing internally on revenue, pricing and organizational structure while, in crisis situations, learning to think externally might prove to be an advantage (Ellion, 2006).

The purposes of this study are to investigate tourism manager perspectives on the needs for language skills training of tour company staff in the Thailand tourism industry and to study the problems of tour companies face in managing language skills training.

With these objectives in mind, the paper is structured in three further sections. In the first of these, a review of literature serves as a reference for analysis of the results. In the second part, the setting of the research and methodology employed are described. In the third part, there is a presentation of the research findings obtained and the data analyzed in order to answer the research questions. Finally, recommendations and conclusions of the empirical work are presented.

2. Overview of Tourism

2.1 What Is Tourism?

In any tourism industry study, it is important to consider the meaning of "tourism". The term can be defined in several ways. According to the International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism (1981), tourism is defined as "particular activities selected by choice and undertaken

outside the home environment." Mathieson and Wall (1982) claimed that tourism is the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, and the activities conducted during their stay in those destinations created to cater to their needs.

The definition of tourism has also been specified by Macintosh and Goeldner (1986) as the sum of the phenomena and relationships rising from the interaction of tourists, business suppliers, host governments and host communities in the process of attracting and hosting these tourists and other visitors. Tourism includes activity facilities, entertainment venues, shops, eating and drinking establishments, accommodations, a variety of other hospitality service providers who cater to individuals or groups and transportation. In the same way, tourism is the business of providing services for tourists, including organizing their hotels, entertainments, travel and so on (Walter, 2004).

Mabudafhasi (2008) defined tourism as a dynamic and competitive industry that requires the ability constantly to adapt to tourists' changing needs and desires, in terms of their satisfaction, safety and enjoyment. Tourism comprises of both outbound tourism and inbound tourism (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008) and it consists of the five different sectors of accommodation, food and beverage services, recreation and entertainment, transportation and travel services.

For the purposes of this study, tourism is defined as the business of providing tours and services for tourists. It focuses on tour companies.

2.2 How Do Tourists Choose Where to Go?

The second focus of the literature review attempts to determine the reasons for choosing where tourists go. Schwarz (2003) pointed out that tourists decide their travel destinations based on the kinds of adventures they would like to experience, dream places, expense, geographical preferences and references from previous tourists. Some tourists tend to visit the places that make their hearts beat faster. The TAT Annual Report 2006 stated that choosing a destination involves many factors. Those factors include the variety of destinations, safety, language, politics and society. Multiple cultures and ethnicities, as well as beautiful landscapes, can also attract tourists to visit. Destinations which are less risky will be better choices for tourists. When traveling for some activities such as for scuba diving or bicycling, physical fitness is required. Also, if tourists want to visit specific places, they must be able to communicate with people there. Consequently, before visiting a country, tourists should take the language that people use in the country into consideration. It is recommended that tourists should at least learn a few basic phrases in the local language before traveling as that will benefit them, since the more language tourists know, the richer the experience they will gain. Other factors that affect tourist

decision-making are political and social issues. A country suffering from political instability, where people are fighting for power, is less likely to attract tourists in general terms. Also, tourists have reduced their traveling schedules due to the global slowdown, rising fuel prices and the prevalence of deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, and H1N1.

According to Newsweek (2008), strong reasons for choosing a destination included greenness, cleanliness, good street food, convenient transportation, good accommodation, good shopping malls, honesty and politeness of people, amazing and fascinating festivities, stress-free atmosphere, white sandy beaches, good climate, cultural activities, good quality of services, and especially, the language used. Similarly, Germany's Travel Marketing Industry conducted a survey about reasons for choosing a place to visit. The results showed that tourists would choose as a quality destination one with convenient and good quality services, which was also perceived as being unique (TCEB, 2008). Moreover, tourists are drawn to the destination by the friendliness of the people there. Research conducted by Omondi (2003) found out that a good percentage of tourists who visit a place often think of the availability of sex as a reason for their trips, especially men.

Thaiways Magazine (2005) observed that tourists come to Thailand not only because of its natural beauty, historical sites and reputation as the Land of Smiles but

also for medical reasons. Tourists visit Thailand to make use of medical services since they want to have cost effective medical services with world-class medical facilities, specialists and warm hospitality and well-trained English speaking staff that can make them feel at home. Tourists can use the savings from the treatment fees to travel around the country and enjoy its beauty and experience its unique culture. According to the information from Office of Export Services, Department of Export Promotion, Thailand (2004), there were 973,532 people receiving medical treatments from Thailand, contributing TH฿27 billion (approximately EUR6,915,983.61 million) to the country. On the other hand, tourists rarely consider the environmental or social impact of their journeys. In fact, most tourists still view their holidays as a way to escape routine jobs (Nolting, 2004).

In conclusion, there is no one specific reason that tourists choose where to go. Tourists choose destinations for a variety of reasons and tourism managers should be aware of this.

2.3 What Determine Tourist Satisfaction?

Tour companies recognize that the new global economy has changed things forever. They have realized that measuring tourist satisfaction is a key. Only by doing so can tour companies hold on to the numbers of tourists they have and understand how to attract new tourists. It will be recognized that satisfaction is a very important fundamental issue that can bring profits. However, Cacioppo (2000) suggested that

companies need to understand how to measure and follow up tourist satisfaction better than they do.

Tourist satisfaction measurements must be taken in conjunction with understanding tourist expectations (Moliner et al., 2007). Brunner et al. (2008) insisted that tourist satisfaction is an important factor for the tourism industry which is related to service levels because it will have an impact on loyalty.

Johnston (2004) has studied tourist satisfaction in a study that examined the tourist experience and found that a high quality service can inspire tourists to return. Berry and Parasurman (1991) and Ahmed (2008) observed that reliability, simplicity, empathy, responsiveness, assurance and tangible facilities are dimensions of the quality of services. Providing high quality service is significantly important since the tourists' perception of quality of service is influential in their final evaluation of satisfaction with the company involved. To measure the quality of service, the balanced scorecard (BSC) method can be an effective approach (Kaplan and Norton, 1992).

According to Ahmed (2008), tourist satisfaction refers to the way a tourist feels about the key activities, interaction, communications and consideration received during a visit. Accuracy, respect, honest, security, reliability, trustworthiness, friendliness and politeness are all components likely to have a positive impact on tourist satisfaction. Further, the greater the satisfaction of tourists with the service

received, the greater the profits the company will earn (Moormann, 2003). Satisfied tourists will usually tell other people of their experience (Fornell et al., 1996).

To measure general tourist satisfaction, companies often use a tourist opinion survey. These surveys measure different kinds of satisfaction such as satisfaction with service, product, activities, willingness to help and time spent with tourists (Moormann, 2003). Measuring tourist satisfaction involves assessing the quality of service performance the companies provide. Tourists are satisfied only when a company meets, gets better and exceeds their expectations. Consequently, tourist expectations are also very important (UWA, 2005) and they are not stable. Services which satisfy a tourist today may not be sufficient to satisfy the same tourist in tomorrow's competitive environment. So, companies need to follow up changes in tourist expectations over time and continuously adjust their services in order to meet those changing expectations (Akama & Kieti, 2003). Furthermore, service people need to understand the tourist's problems and to express empathy for the tourist's situation. Problem solution is significant to maintaining tourist satisfaction.

Technology is another factor influential in tourist satisfaction (Moharrer et al., 2006). Utilizing and managing suitable information technology resources is essential for tourism organizations to satisfy tourists because of the need for swift communications and it

allows information to be managed effectively and transported worldwide.

Tourist satisfaction is defined as a tourist's overall evaluation of the performance of an offering to date and affects loyalty and future intentions. A study by Fornell et al. (2006) found that tourist satisfaction led to greater tourist loyalty which then has a positive impact on profitability and the success of the organization overall.

Ahmed (2008) observed that in order to achieve high levels of tourist satisfaction, it is necessary to pay attention to price, culture, distribution, service people, service process, tourist feeling, efficiency, ease of access, speed of response, environment, inter-departmental teamwork, service behaviour and innovation. Meanwhile, Hillabrant and Earp (2003) proposed possible methods to follow up tourist satisfaction by: (1) asking tourists a series of open-ended questions, (2) mailing a questionnaire to a group of tourists for self-completion and return, (3) using interactive questionnaires on a website, (4) telephone interviewing and (5) in-depth face-to-face interviewing.

Most importantly, perhaps, improvements in tourist satisfaction have come about through better management of tourists regarding total quality management (TQM) (Ahmed, 2008) by focusing on strategic planning strategic development, operational execution and measurement and adjustment.

2.4 Roles of Foreign Languages in the Tourism Industry

What are the roles of foreign languages in the tourism industry? Davies (2000) indicated that, in the tourism industry, there are three major roles of foreign languages: First, to communicate with non-native speaking employees; second, to assist foreign tourists; third, to work with actors in other countries. Collins (1994) examines the roles of foreign languages as a factor in explaining the structure of cultures. Foreign languages provide understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds (Hirschman, 1995). Similarly, studying foreign languages bring people from different nations closer together. Foreign language skill also helps to exchange information and ideas, and achieve deeper understanding. Foreign language skills take an important role in enabling employee to cope with new perspectives and help make tourists satisfied with services (Crystal, 1989).

According to Leslie and Russell (2006), foreign languages play two roles in the tourism industry. One role concerns tourism staff and the other role concerns tourists. Tourism staff must convey information to tourists through foreign languages. Then the tourists absorb the words conveyed to them and analyse them when necessary. Foreign languages are also the means used to transmit information from one mind to another and they are widely but possibly wrongly considered to be an exclusively human mode of communication. Foreign

language skills are essential in communication. However, the strength of foreign language skill depends on the employee's level within the organization and reason for using the language. In the tourism industry, the need for foreign language skills resides in both employees and employers. If people in the tourism industry understand the foreign language roles well enough, they will be able to use foreign languages in performing their job effectively and, consequently, services are more likely to meet tourist expectations.

The literature clearly shows that the tourism industry is a key industry in creating revenue for the nation. Tourists are important people who decide themselves where to go for their own reasons. However, the purpose of the tourism industry is to help create revenue for the country, so providing the appropriate quality of services should be considered carefully. Foreign language skills play an important role in enabling tourists to meet their expectation. These relationships are examined in this paper through a program of qualitative interviewing described in the next section. The purpose of the research is to help establish the relationship between the constructs of tourist satisfaction, level of customer service and degree of skill and competency in non-native languages. The term 'training' in this paper refers to a wide range of possible developmental activities conducted within the context of a specific place and mode of employment with a view to improving productivity, defined broadly.

Training can take place in-house or contracted outside (or provided at subsidized rates by a public sector or public-private partnership agency), can take place on-the-job or off-the-job and with the intention of direct or indirect improvements in productivity. No specific type of training is referred to in this paper, rather a general process of improvement through a deliberate and focused attempt to effect improvement.

3. Methodology

This study was based on in-depth, face-to-face and telephone-mediated qualitative interviews with a convenience sample of 30 tour-company managers. They were selected on a random basis from all tour companies within Bangkok, Thailand. The TAT database of all tour companies was employed to define the population. It was considered important to interview only those tour company managers who directly took responsibility for administrative work and who were willing to give information. The aims were to investigate the tour company managers' perspectives on the needs for language skills training of tour company professionals in Thai tourism industry and to study the problems of the tour companies in terms of language skills training.

A semi-structured interview form in English was created as a research instrument by the researchers. It consisted of two main parts. The first part was designed to obtain the interviewee's personal information (e.g. gender, educational background, years of

working experience etc.) and the tour company's current situation in terms of foreign language. The second part consisted of questions related to the objectives of the study.

After designing an interview form, it was given to tourism industry experts and people expert in designing interview forms to consider. The aim was to determine whether wording, question order and other issues were relevant and understandable for interviewees. Some minor adjustments were made to the form as a result. Then formal letters requesting interviews were prepared for those tour company managers who requested them and all interviews were scheduled as appropriate.

Interviews were conducted mostly in the tour company offices and the interviewing process averaged approximately 30-40 minutes. Since some tour company managers found it inconvenient to be interviewed in their offices, telephone conversations were organized instead. Telephone interviewing provided valid and reliable information, as did the face-to-face interviews. There is no reason to suspect systematic bias in the data or in the form of non-response bias. Interviewing of some tour company managers also took place at the 'Tourism Exhibition,' which was a part of 'Thailand Best Buyer 2008 Fairs' at Queen Sirikit Convention Centre, which represented a good opportunity to meet tour company managers.

Tour company managers were prompted for additional information as much as possible and, also, they were encouraged to provide extra recommendations on any points of interest. The interviews were conducted in Thai or in English with those tour company managers who were foreigners. Extensive notes were taken during the interviews for subsequent analysis. The qualitative interviewing program was supplemented by additional interviews with managers of language schools and relevant officials at the TAT, together with analysis of existing secondary data sources including books, journals and online databases. The secondary data analysis is integrated into the findings overall, while the findings section is divided into the insights derived from the managers, the insights gathered from interviews who are language school managers and then the additional findings, which include public sector officials in different categories.

There are limitations to this study which should be noted. First, the respondents were often very busy. Second, they confronted the serious political crisis of the seizure of Suvanabhumi International Airport and Donmueang Airport by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). This led to significant economic damage to Thailand and especially the tourism industry which may have had an impact upon responses. Third, some of them were difficult to communicate with and they were willing to speak for only 20-25 minutes.

Future research would benefit from more intensive interviewing with respondents and further development of the research agenda. A larger and more varied sample might also be helpful. This paper presents only some of the findings accumulated from the research. The findings concentrate on managerial perspectives, the problems of tour companies in providing language skills training, additional findings from language schools managers and the findings from the interviews with relevant officials at the TAT.

4. Research Findings

The research findings are divided into four sections: (1) the tour manager's perspectives, (2) the problems of tour companies in providing language skills training, (3) the additional findings from the interviews with language school managers, and (4) the findings from the interviews with relevant officials at the TAT.

4.1 The Tour Managers' Perspectives

Respondents in the sample were asked if their tour companies had policies for language skills training and the results revealed that only a few of the larger companies did. Significantly, the big tour companies support staff to receive language skill training and this indicates that language skills training appears important to them. In big tour companies, both internal and external language skills training courses were provided to staff. They organized language skills training within their organizations. Tour companies utilize language skills training courses at language

schools, higher education institutions in the country or even abroad.

Most small tour companies do not have a policy for language skills training. However, they realized that a policy would be necessary because it would be very helpful in making the language skills training possible. It will lead to increased quality of service for tourists and hence raise satisfaction levels. Some small tour companies are taking language skills training seriously.

Unsurprisingly, on the job language skill training was the most common method used by small tour companies. This indicated that they tend to like informal language skill training methods or else had little choice. They also encouraged tour company staff to practice from books and other media and tended to believe that staff could develop their skills from their own real-life working situations.

Most small tour companies clearly lack a language skills training policy. Management of human resources in small tour companies tends still to be unsystematic and there were no recognized standards in improving service quality to meet international norms. Hence, language skills training policy for small tour companies should be established.

Importantly, setting up a language skills training policy is necessary because it is the only road that can take staff to being able to provide international quality service. They also thought that tour company staff should at least receive some language skills

training because it affected the performance of the company. Language skill training depends on: tour company policy, performance need, individual need and time.

Tour company policy: a company policy is a foundation factor that drives language skills training. It shows the vision and intension that are necessary in providing quality service to tourists. Budgets are necessary.

Performance need: language skills training in the Thailand tourism industry involves only a comparatively small number of people: for example, those who communicate with tourists from overseas and those who coordinate with organizations such as tour agencies abroad and embassies.

Individual need: language skills training needs focus at the individual level in terms of existence needs, related needs and growth needs.

Time: language skills training cannot be organized without consideration of the time factor. By the nature of the job, tour company staff are regularly busy. Attending language skills training courses means they have to leave the tourists behind from time to time. Consequently, the most appropriate time for language skill training is during the low season.

The respondents in the sample were asked about language courses provided by external organizations such as Srinakharinwirot University, Ramkham haeng University, Silpakorn University,

Sukhothaithamathirat Open University and language schools. They pointed out that those courses are beneficial and convenient for tour companies because they can choose an appropriate time and course to meet the needs of their staff. Further, these organizations would perform well because they expect to gain more customers as a result. In addition, they offer qualified and experienced native speakers who are effective teachers. Respondents trusted these organizations and found costs to be low compared to sending staff to be trained abroad, while results from several language courses were thought to be good.

Respondents recommended that tour company professionals should receive language skills training at least once per year. Staff need all four skills for language training for different purposes such as business letters, e-mail messages, report writing, fax messages, instructions, notes, tour programs, visa application forms, payment vouchers, job application forms, invoices, application forms, making reservations, giving directions, giving explanations, giving information on the telephone, making suggestions, giving warnings, offering help, giving presentations, entertaining tourists, selling tour programs, solving problems and listening to foreign employers.

Clearly, company managers strongly agreed that language skills training, especially in English and Chinese, is very important because this will have a direct impact on income generation. The better the

service tourists receive, the more tourists will be satisfied and the more revenue the companies and the country will earn.

4.2 The Problems of Tour Companies in Providing Language Skills Training

When the respondents were questioned about the problems of tour companies in providing language skills training, the results revealed that the main problems were budget and time.

A limited budget certainly leads to a negative effect in terms of language skills training of the staff. Respondents pointed out that, currently, tour companies can send only a few people to attend language skills training courses since the budget is limited. To support more people, tour companies must invest a lot of resources in terms of training fees and transportation expenses. On some occasions, reducing company expenses was possible by organizing language skills training projects at their own companies.

Cooperation between the TAT, governmental educational institutions and tour companies is another solution for providing training. Respondents felt that the government agencies and the TAT should provide free or at least reduced cost training courses for tour company staff and, also, support continuous training programs to improve service quality. Another major problem is time. They found that their people are always busy with tourists. Attending language skills training means they have to leave their tourists behind and this has a serious negative effect.

4.3 Additional Findings from Interviews with Language School Managers

Additional interviews with managers of language schools further reinforced the idea that language skills training in English, Chinese and other third languages are very important to staff. However, they faced some barriers such as budget and time in supporting training. They also pointed out that they organize language training courses for many organizations. This is because their language schools possess qualified teachers, with systems involving internships, working hours and student evaluation. Qualified teachers at language schools are foreign university graduates with experience in teaching English or Chinese. In terms of internships, the language teachers must take such a program regardless of existing experience, before they can receive class assignments. During the internship, they will receive teaching training evaluations. Only the most qualified and competent teachers then move on to regular working hours. The teachers are only scheduled to teach a maximum of six hours per week, so that they will have more time to prepare for classes. The quality of teachers can also be assessed from student evaluation results, since students are asked to evaluate teaching performance at the end of the course. Some teachers who receive high scores will later receive extra pay from the language schools.

In some language schools, taking the Teaching Language Certificate (CLT) is required of both resident teachers and foreign native speakers. In other words,

teachers have to take a pre-service training course which sets out to show potential teachers appropriate techniques and to give them a broad general background in pedagogical issues. The course involves a cycle of activities: (1) assess staff needs, (2) determine objectives, (3) plan the content, (4) choose methods of presentation and learning experiences, (5) implement, (6) evaluate and (7) provide follow up assistance.

Since the language schools do not earn much, so the policy concerning language skills training for staff is not very strong, although respondents believe that the requirement to take at least one language course at the language school can ensure that they can work effectively. They also believe that their staff will improve themselves on the job.

Taking a teaching language course to get a certificate from the language school is not the only policy for language skills training. Respondents pointed out that, each year, they support their staff to attend international conferences and staff development programs organized by other language schools and provided by many higher education institutions. They organized academic social service programs that interested people can join for free. Staff development programs help a lot in improving staff language skills. These organizations usually invite professional trainers to participate. Sending only staff to join language skills training can reduce budgetary needs considerably.

Respondents further pointed out that it is very important to have English and Chinese language skills training because the world is changing. As employees, if we have weak points, we must know how to improve them. As language school employees, they need to have excellent language skills. Otherwise, they cannot grow in their careers. Language schools have many competitors. Each competitor provides many branches, so they need to keep improving the quality of teaching to remain competitive. Focusing only on the staff involved would be inadequate for the current crisis, they must also focus on learners who can use word of mouth to help them obtain more students. Lastly, they proudly said that their organizations take full responsibility for preparing native language teachers to support tourism industry human resource development. They trained thousands of people from both government and private sectors within the Thailand tourism industry. Many organizations in the industry benefit from these language schools each year. However, the majority of the people who received this training were from wealthy tour companies and hotels and the smaller actors in the sector might be getting left behind.

4.4 Findings from the Interviews with Relevant Officials at the TAT

Interviews with relevant officials at the TAT revealed that language skills training for tour company staff is very important. As a government organization, officials at the Personnel Development Division do not use

foreign language skills much. Generally, language skills involve documents, letters and e-mail messages. Most job descriptions are about coordinating and organizing various projects. Actually, the Personnel Development Division involves many projects for staff development from many different divisions of the TAT. This includes organizing seminars. The division does have a focus on policy for improving language skills. The TAT organized language skills training for staff in the Marketing Division as an example. Recently, the Personnel Development Division organized sending staff from the TAT to participate in the major Chinese Outbound Tourism Forum Conference at Sofitel Wanda, Beijing. This forum plays a significant role in promoting knowledge and understanding of the Chinese market. At this event, the staff had chance to develop both knowledge and language skill competencies.

Personnel Development Division staff may not need language skills training, especially in Chinese. Staff of the division rarely have chance to use their skills. However, staff from the Domestic Marketing section do need English and Chinese skills in operations, so English and Chinese skills training is needed for them. The Personnel Development Division organizes language skills training projects at least once a year to help staff, especially staff from the Domestic Marketing section, to refresh their skills because they are in charge of making tourists understand the country as a wonderful destination. Respondents

also stated that many tourists come from China and European countries. Consequently, without foreign languages skills, it would be impossible for them to maintain their current market situation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

As expected, tour company staff in the Thailand tourism industry need language skills training but they faced problems of budgetary and time constraints. If they do have language skills training, especially in the case of small companies, then they do so informally. This is confirmed by tour company managers, language school managers and related officials at the TAT. The possible solutions to serve needs for language skills training of the tour company staff include modes of cooperation between the TAT, educational institutions and tour companies. In fact, it was found out that language skills training depends on four factors, which are tour company policy, performance need, individual need and time. It was also discovered that big tour companies are more likely to have a specific policy for language skills training. Most small tour companies have not established policy for language skills training but they do train seriously. This supports the study conducted by Jameson (2000) when he found out that small companies like to take language skills training informally and seriously.

Tour company managers are aware of the needs for language skills training. It is one of the most important means of improving service quality and maintaining

the number of international tourists. Providing language skills training for tour company staff will help reduce major difficulties in communication between staff and tourists. Language skills training will also help ensure the tourists understand what the tour company staff are telling them, such as telling the time, giving directions, making reservations and so forth. This indicates that languages play a crucial role in tourist satisfaction. Without effective listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in the target languages, there will be barriers to tourist satisfaction. Language skills training for tour company staff, therefore, is needed and benefits from a written policy and continuous training.

Since the current economic crisis will make tourism industry conditions generally more difficult, setting up language skills training policies is important because it is a way to increase service quality service to the international standard and will lead to customer satisfaction. This research has attempted particularly to motivate tour companies to understand the importance of having language skills training policy to serve the needs for language skills training of tour company staff. The research findings support Leslie and Russell (2006) when they discovered that language skills training affects the performance of tour company staff and they pointed out that having language skills training continuously can maintain numbers of tourists and improve the quality of service. Although the findings date from the year 2008, they remain valid in

that a similar environment for the tourism industry is concerned. International travel as a whole has been negatively affected by the continued economic crisis and the disastrous rush to austerity of so many western governments, as well as the negative factors of the terrible earthquakes in New Zealand, Japan and elsewhere. Confidence is, generally, low. Meanwhile, although education systems and curricula for tertiary level students in Thailand are slowly improving, there is still plenty of scope for further improvement and to catch up with what is happening in neighbouring countries (e.g. Thitthongkam and Walsh, 2011). As a result, the need remains for private sector organizations to organize access to language training skills according to their need and with respect to the criteria outlined previously in this paper.

Based on the research findings, tour companies should have a policy or a proper plan for tour company staff development in both the short and long terms. Once the tour company staff can serve tourists with higher quality service, then tour companies and the country as a whole will earn more income. Staff need to be more active in self-improvement in terms of language skills. They are encouraged to learn and to practice from books, audio tapes and on the job from interaction with tourists. They should find some time to take courses available at educational institutions or language schools. Language schools are recommended to prepare language skills training courses which focus on the contents required for

specific needs. The TAT should establish a budget and provide language skills training courses continuously, during the low season, so that time will not be a problem. Also, the TAT, as a government organization, should provide and disseminate information related to language skills training. Moreover, the TAT should also promote the country's image as a better tourism destination or create new projects to motivate international tourists.

Concerning the problem with time and budget constraints, the solution might include: (1) the TAT should provide language skills training courses for tour company staff for free because they help increase revenue to the country, (2) the language skills training period should be organized during low season.

It is also recommended that more scholars conduct research in this area to confirm and explore the results obtained here. A mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches should be used. However, providing language skills training may be insufficient to help the Thailand tourism industry at a time of international crisis. Consequently, further research should also concentrate on business partnership relationships in the European or Chinese inbound tourism market to Thailand by using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in an effort to help Thailand maintain its position as a sustainable destination for European, Chinese and other tourists.

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