

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A WEB APPLICATION TO IMPROVE ENGLISH SPEAKING ABILITY AND VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE OF CONVENIENCE STORE PERSONNEL

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ABSTRACT

This research was focused on the development a web application for convenience store personnel to improve their English language ability. The effectiveness of the application would be evaluated in terms of to what extent it would facilitate the improvement of the personnel's vocabulary knowledge and communication skills; in particular, speaking skills. In addition, users' satisfaction with using the web app would be examined. The research was divided into three phases: a preliminary study to construct the web application; evaluation of the application; and implementation and subsequent evaluation of the application's benefits.

Keywords: web application, convenience store personnel, speaking ability, vocabulary knowledge

Introduction

At the annual Tourism Authority of Thailand's (TAT's) Action Plan Meeting in July 2016, TAT's 2017 Marketing Plan was announced, focusing on "providing visitors with unforgettable experiences with our rich culture, fantastic tourist destinations and unforgettable tourist activities." TAT's 2017 Annual Report of tourists boasted an increase of a total number of visitors from 32.59 million in 2016 to 35.38 million in 2017 (Updated: February 2018). TAT's Action Plan for 2018 emphasizes both international and domestic tourism, designed to "promote new ideas and follow the development agenda of Thailand 4.0." (Tourism Authority of Thailand's Plan, 2017)

In order to create "unforgettable experiences" for 2018 incoming tourists, both foreign and local, all sectors of the service industry from hotels, tourist agencies, restaurants and convenience stores, among others, must be involved and tuned towards that goal.

Among the major convenience store chains, there are more than 10,000 stores, approximately 50% of which are located in Bangkok and environs, and the rest covering provincial areas around the country. It is essential that employees of these stores should have the basic English ability to communicate with foreign customers. However, the majority of employees have very limited English language ability to serve foreign customers' needs. Therefore, English training courses could be of benefit to reaching the goal of ensuring a smooth and pleasing travel experience for tourists. However, a challenge such convenience store chains would face is how to arrange English courses for their employees when they are scattered in thousands of stores throughout the country. It would seem to follow that it would be wise to help their employees develop their English communication skills wherever their location is. The mobile application appears to be a perfect solution in this situation as stated in TAT's marketing plan 2018 to follow the development agenda of Thailand 4.0. Thus, it is the main purpose of this research to develop a web-based application which will facilitate the improvement of convenience store employees' English language ability, whenever and wherever they are.

In order to improve the English communication skills of convenience store employees, vocabulary about products and services in the stores should be taught, including the aspects of meaning and pronunciation as well as basic useful phrases in different situations such as greetings, giving information, and parting (Pochakorn, 2012).

Literature Reviews

Vocabulary and its importance

It has long been acknowledged by scholars and researchers that "There is not much value in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to convey what one wishes to say ..." (Wilkins, 1972 as cited in Alqahtani, 2015). This is further elaborated by Nunan (1991), who argues that the knowledge of a sufficient vocabulary is significant for successful second language use because, without an extensive vocabulary, structure and functions, one will be unable to engage in comprehensible communication. To produce the language, one cannot convey a message without adequate vocabulary to express it. Second language learners, therefore, rely seriously on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge

is the main and the largest obstacle for L2 learners to overcome (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995). The acquisition of vocabulary is significant for successful second language use and plays an important role in the creation of completed spoken and written texts (Laufer and Nation (1999), Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), Tellier (2008), and Nation (2011). Similarly, Schmitt (2000) insists the importance of vocabulary acquisition, stating that “lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language.” Moreover, both receptive and productive vocabulary should be taught in order to promote communication skills (Webb, 2008). The importance of vocabulary can be daily demonstrated in and out the school. Frequently reviewing vocabulary knowledge is a significant tool for second language learners because a limited vocabulary in a second language impedes completed communication. Nation (2001) states the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as supplementary: knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and, contrarily, language use enlarges vocabulary knowledge. Thus, learning vocabulary items plays a vital role in all language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Autonomous learning through technologies and applications

Many researchers have studied learner autonomy through technologies. Hayta and Yaprak (2013) investigated learner autonomy and computer technology as a facilitator of autonomous language learning. Over half of the participants responded that their English had improved through audio-visual materials. Rahimi and Miri (2014) studied the impact of mobile dictionary use on language learning. Similarly, the results showed that the experimental group achieved better results in post-tests, as reported in similar studies by Deng and Shao (2011), Basal, Yilmaz, Tanriverdi, and Sari (2016).

Recently, Deng and Trainin (2015) presented an overview of learning vocabulary with apps: from theory to practice focusing on how mobile devices enhance English learners’ vocabulary knowledge, with the conclusion that mobile applications could be considered scaffolding for vocabulary acquisition of English learners. The applications help students learn word meaning, pronunciation and word structures, e.g. prefixes and suffixes.

Learning styles and preferable channels of perception

Boneva and Mihova’s (2012) study of learning styles focuses on students’ preferred channel of perception. Visual learners tend to think in pictures. Auditory learners, on the other hand, will be able to learn best by receiving information through listening. Kinaesthetic learners learn best through touch, movement, impersonation, and other physical activities. They remember best by composing or physically controlling the data.

In their analysis of vocabulary learning techniques, Oxford and Crookall (1990) suggest that visual learners might prefer to learn vocabulary by using visual imagery. Visual imagery involves the forming of associations between a picture and a word and is generally more effective than using words in isolation. Learners may visualize a set of locations (such as the rooms in their house) and could then associate each place with a particular word or expression.

Pochakorn (2012) analyzed the needs of convenience store employees in terms of necessities, lacks, wants, and problems in English use so as to their proficiency to communicate with foreign customers. The results indicated that employees greatly needed to improve their vocabulary knowledge and grammatical usage. Krisnachinda (2016) showed the importance of vocabulary knowledge in terms of products and services which convenience store personnel should have. While it has been an obvious fact that employees are truly in need of training, either in or out of their work sites, it would be impossible to provide such support, due to their workload and the sheer number of store chains. Thus, a similar study by Suwantarathip and Orawiwatnakul (2015), which examined the effect of using mobile-assisted exercises to support students’ vocabulary skill development and reported the enhancement of vocabulary knowledge of language learners, is of particular use.

It is, therefore, the aim of this research to develop a mobile application to teach vocabulary and basic communication skills to convenience store personnel.

Objectives

1. To develop a web application to improve English vocabulary knowledge and communicative skills of convenience store employees.
2. To examine vocabulary knowledge of the employees after using the web application.
3. To examine the effectiveness of the web application in terms of communicative skills of the employees.
4. To examine the satisfaction level of the employees after using the web application.

Methods

The study was divided into three phases as follows:

Phase 1: Preliminary study to construct the web application

Phase 2: Evaluation of the web application by convenience store employees- interview and questionnaire responses

Phase 3: Implementation of web application and consequent evaluation means of analyzing the difference between the pre-test and the post-test scores.

Phase 1: Preliminary study and web application development

In this phase, the study comprised of an interview and an observation of convenience store employees working at five convenience stores located in the Pattaya and Jomtien municipalities in Chonburi province. Under the time limitations, the interview questions of Pochakorn (2012) were replicated in light of the similar research settings in language use in convenience stores, and were verified by experts. For research depth, observations notes were documented to describe the situations happening at the time of the observation.

The interview and observation were conducted as follows:

Table 1: Interview schedules

Site	No. of convenience stores	No. of interviewees	No. of research team members
Jomtien	3	9	6
Pattaya	2	4	4

Five research assistants were recruited to conduct interviews and observations of the employees and to maintain the validity and reliability of the interview, all interviewers were instructed on how to observe and ask interview questions. The interview was conducted on a one-to-one basis. The data from the interview were transcribed, and then the coding process based on Miles and Huberman (1994) and Saldana (2009) was employed to analyze it. The results were interpreted, analyzed and utilized in the development of the application which is called 'Just What You Need'.

Working as a team of two, one researcher or assistant conducted a face-to-face interview with each employee, while the other would document the observations on the real-time, on-site situations. The coding in this present study followed the coding process of Miles and Huberman (1994) and Saldana (2009).

The interview results were analyzed based on the coding as shown in Table 2 to identify the language/skill needs and requests of the participants which would be the basis for the web-based application development.

Table 2: Category of coding of convenience store employees' interview

Major categories	Associated concepts
Verbal communication (Language need)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Basic communication: greetings and parting ● Sale transactions ● Pronunciation
Nonverbal communication (Skill need)	Body language
Problems with vocabulary knowledge (Language need)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Special days or public holidays ● Food products ● Non-food products, particularly SIM cards
Problems with general information (Language need)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Directions ● Tourist attractions
Language skill improvement (Participants' requests)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Training course ● Thai teachers and/or native teachers ● Pronunciation
Company assistance (Participants' requests)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Training course ● Call center (Interpreters)

The interviews of employees from the five convenience stores revealed that the employees requested assistance from their company, i.e. providing call-center interpreters and/or English training courses with Thai and/or foreign teachers, with topics including pronunciation and useful phrases for sale transactions. However, it was considerably difficult for management to rotate staff to attend the company's training courses because of the shortage of manpower. Another issue that emerged was that all interviewees stated that they found great difficulties in explaining the use/types of SIM cards and cosmetic products to customers.

The analysis of the interview results, together with observation notes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Category of coding of the real-time observation in the stores

Major categories	Associated concept
Verbal communication (Language need)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Basic communication: greetings and parting ● Numbers ● Sales ● Counter services
Nonverbal communication (Skill need)	Body language
Problems with vocabulary knowledge (Language need)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Food products ● Non-food products, particularly SIM cards ● Health
Assistance (Participants' requests)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assistance from colleagues

After the analysis of data from the interview and the observation, an early stage of the 'Just What You Need' web application was undertaken. The application aims to enhance vocabulary knowledge and communicative skills of convenience store employees. To this aim, the expected learning outcomes, particularly speaking skills, were taken into consideration based on a theory of learning styles (Kolb and Kolb, 2015, as cited in Clark, Threeton and Ewing, 2010) vocabulary retention strategies (Subaşı, 2014), and technologies enhancing language learning (Rüschhoff and Ritter, 2001; Yang, and Chen, 2007).

The first version of 'Just What You Need' is presented in Appendix E. According to the identified problems, SIM card products were the first language topic selected to be developed and presented on the application.

The SIM Card lessons consist of:

Videos of conversation models in five situations

Review exercises and answers (Appendix B)

Games related to the lesson

Summary of vocabulary and phrases used in the lessons

After developing the 'Just What You Need' web application, the evaluation of the application's features such as contents, design and activities will be conducted through interviews and questionnaire responses of convenience stores employees.

Phase 2: Evaluation of web-based application

The purpose of this phase is to evaluate the features of the web application. The instruments of evaluation comprise of the in-depth interview and the questionnaire responses of convenience store employees working at stores in areas of Chonburi province. In this phase, the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size formula will be employed to calculate the sample size of the convenience store employees working in the Chonburi area and/or areas where foreigners commonly live for questionnaire distribution. Additionally, ten employees will be randomly selected from the shops in similar areas for an in-depth interview. Two research tools will be employed, namely, interviews and questionnaires. The 5-scale questionnaire questions have been developed and will be sent for verification by three experts. In addition, in-depth interview questions have also been developed to examine the employees' satisfaction towards the features of the web application and to determine priorities of content requirement.

The questionnaire verified by the experts will be distributed to the sample in order to evaluate the features of the 'Just What You Need' web application. At the same time, in-depth interviews will be conducted. The results of this phase will be analyzed and employed to revise the features of the application.

Phase 3: Implementation and evaluation of web-based application benefits

In this phase, the 'Just What You Need' web application will be implemented after revisions. The purposes of this phase are to examine the effectiveness of the web application in terms of the improvement between pre-test and post-test scores. Twelve convenience store employees working in Chonburi and/or areas where foreigners commonly live will be selected to learn English on 'Just What You Need' in their free time for a period of at least 15 hours. Those employees are selected on the basis of differences in their English proficiency levels: upper intermediate, intermediate, and beginning.

A speaking rubric will be selected and verified by three experts and employed to assess employees' speaking abilities in the pre-test and the post-test after 15 hours of learning English for convenience stores through the 'Just What You Need' application.

Ten participants will take the speaking pre-test with a foreign examiner via an online application examining their speaking abilities and vocabulary knowledge before using the application. After that, they will be shown how to learn English on the 'Just What You Need' application. They are requested to study the lessons for a period of at least 15 hours. At the end, they will take a speaking post-test to examine their speaking abilities and vocabulary knowledge before using the application.

Conclusions

The researchers hope that the 'Just What You Need' web application will improve the English vocabulary knowledge and communicative skills of convenience store personnel and that the positive results will serve as a model and example for web and app-based English language instruction in Thailand. Through a commitment to learning and innovative methods of instruction, Thailand's people will be able to reach a higher level of English language ability to effectively meet their tourism goals, ensuring unforgettable experiences for visitors, and reaching other benchmarks.

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Appendix A
Examples of the first version of ‘Just What You Need’



Appendix B Review exercises and answers

Conversation 1

Last updated: 04 July 2017



international SIM card international calls surf the internet TRUC carrier tourist SIM registering country SIM Pre internet 4G

Revision Answer

Cashier: Welcome to 7-Eleven. What would you like today?

Tourist: Hi, there. I'm looking for international SIM card.

Cashier: What kind of _____ are you looking for?

Tourist: Actually, I'm not sure. But I need something that would help me make _____ calls and surf the internet with high speed.

Can you suggest something?

Cashier: Sure. We have many carriers such as TRUC, STAC, 3G, BPPICAT and so on.

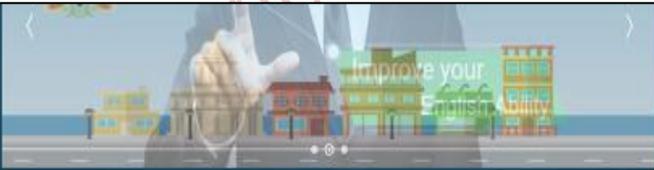
But I would recommend TRUC _____ because for tourists it is to use. We have two types of this.

They are: "Tourist SIM" and "_____ Country SIM". Both would make international calls and internet 4G.

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GO TO TOP

Ask your Question?



GAME-SIM CARD

A foreign customer is walking into your store. -
(What should you say?)



Why are you here? Welcome to Seven-Eleven!

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