



# Benefits of Foreign Language Skills in Foreign Businesses in Thailand

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**Abstract:** Foreign language skills in Thailand have become an important key to professional advancement and business operations. Having some fluency in a language other than the employee's native language improves employee coordination, clientele satisfaction, business operations, and business management. Thai employees' foreign language proficiency skills in business firms facilitate smoother communication and coordination between local headquarters and offshore subsidiaries. Most employers and owners consider foreign language proficiency skills assets to their business operations, but surprisingly not all do. This paper focuses on the role and influence of foreign language in five business firms in Rayong Province, Thailand. It concentrates on four foreign languages: English, Chinese, Japanese and Korean. The primary purpose is to assess the benefits of foreign language proficiency to Thai employees in the five selected firms. The findings show that there is indeed a close relationship between the degree of benefit and level of foreign language proficiency. It finds that foreign language skill improves the promotion opportunities, income, prestige and working conditions of Thai employees. Thus, Thai employees in Rayong who have a good command of any of the four foreign languages studied here have more advantages and opportunities than Thai employees who lack such skills. This research should prove useful at three levels. At the national level, it will be added to the many studies and research projects conducted by the Thai Ministry of Labor and Employment to improve the proficiency of the Thai people in a foreign language. The results of this research will provide more evidence and support for the Ministry in its ongoing efforts to improve Thai student skills needed for the working environment of the globalized world.

**Keywords:** *Foreign language, skills, clientele satisfaction, business operations*

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## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Language is communication. In business, better command of language improves the coordinating skills of employees, operation of technology, customer satisfaction and effective management (Andersen & Rasmussen, 2004; Arsal & Ambarwati, 2018; Barker, 2008). Moreover, language skills facilitate communication and coordination between headquarters and offshore subsidiaries (Thitthongkam & Walsh, 2010). Staff who are knowledgeable in foreign languages can have an impact on the company's global competency and on business administration (Barlas, Dowsett, Verschoor, & Williams, 2002).

In Thailand for example, foreign language competency has become important for professional advancement and a tool to help business firms function more effectively (Hiranburana, 2017; Kongmanus, 2016). On the other hand, ignoring the importance of foreign language in business may reduce resources and limit a firm's organizational and managerial development due to its inability to share knowledge (Bloch, 1995).

At present, being able to communicate in multiple languages has become an asset to individuals who want to improve themselves, and such language skills lead to faster promotion. Although English still dominates the business

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world, according to [Nuffield Foundation \(2000\)](#) Chinese language has the largest number of native speakers, and it is rapidly rising in prominence. This paper explores the role of foreign language in selected business firms in Rayong Province in Thailand. This province is part of an area receiving special support from the Thai government to set up export manufacturing units. Many of the increasing number of foreign companies operating in Thailand tend to hire employees who are knowledgeable in the company's home language ([Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2017](#); [Kironska, 2015](#); [Ramsey, 2017](#); [Thailand Board of Investment, 2016](#)). Many of the companies across Thailand, especially in industrial economic zones such as Rayong, are hiring Thai people with foreign language skills. English language demand continues to grow in Thailand. English remains the de facto second language of the country as seen in the importance given to it by the Thai government in the Thai education curriculum ([Dili, 2017](#); [Taher, Shrestha, Rahman, & Khalid, 2016](#)). As is well-known, Chinese language is in a stage of rapid expansion, along with the Chinese economy. Japanese and Korean are also aggressively competing with Chinese and English for popularity in Thailand due to the strong influence of Japan and South Korea in many fields such as music, TV series, electronic devices, and beauty products.

Because of this ongoing contest of foreign languages in Thailand, there is a need to evaluate their influence in Thai society, particularly in the business sector. Therefore, this paper aims to assess the benefits of foreign language proficiency to Thai employees in selected business firms in Rayong.

### ***Significance of the Study***

This study investigates the foreign language abilities of Thai personnel working in five business firms in Rayong province, Thailand. The primary objective is to explore the foreign language abilities of Thai personnel working in these companies and to assess the benefits they receive from the company for their foreign language skills. Benefits may include the following: promotion, higher income, prestige, and better working conditions. The assumptions are, first of all, that Thai employees who are fluent in another language apart from their native language have a higher possibility of getting a promotion because they have a wider opportunity for jobs in both Thai-owned and foreign-owned companies. Thus, there should be a greater demand for their skills and a greater fear among managers that they might leave for a better job in a competing company.

Such benefits should have a domino effect on the employees personal and professional development. As the employee climbs the ladder of success, he/she could expect to be treated with increasing respect and prestige in the company. Working conditions should also improve due to the company's motivation to retain these skilled employees, bringing them less demanding assignments, more comfortable or private offices.

To sum up, the hypothesis is that there should be a close relationship between degree of benefit and level of proficiency in foreign language. In addition, the data collected in this research may help Thai educational institutions to create, develop and enhance language-training programs in business communication and other contexts.

This research should prove useful at three levels. At the national level, it will be added to the many studies and research projects conducted by the Thai Ministry of Labor and Employment to improve the proficiency of the Thai people in foreign language ([Kanoksilpatham, 2011](#); [Masuntisuk, 2006](#)). The results of this research will provide more evidence and support for the Ministry in its ongoing efforts to improve Thai student skills needed for the working environment of the globalized world.

At the institutional level, this research will be helpful to encourage the study of foreign languages in Thai schools, both public and private. Certainly it can provide strong support for improvement of existing programs. Finally, at the individual level, this research will provide factual evidence of the benefit of foreign language skills in finding a job, or for those seeking additional benefits in an existing job.

### ***Objectives of the Study***

The general objective of this research is to assess the benefits to Thai employees of proficiency in a foreign language. This will be fulfilled by first of all evaluating the benefits of foreign language proficiency as opposed to no foreign language proficiency. Once the benefit of foreign language has been established in general, the investigation will focus on the four foreign languages studied (English, Chinese, Japanese and Korean), to compare the benefits each one provides.

### ***Selection of Foreign Languages to be Studied***

In the interest of brevity, this study will focus on only four foreign languages, as follows: English, Chinese, Japanese and Korean. These foreign languages have been selected because they are prominent within the business firms in Rayong Province. These firms in turn were selected because they were accessible, they are fully or partly owned by foreigners, they have diverse employees and they have various foreign language proficiency needs. Thus they often require business communication conducted in any of these four foreign languages.

### ***Research Questions***

The concrete benefits to Thai employees of proficiency in a foreign language were assessed by posing the following questions:

1. What are the benefits to Thai employees of having foreign language proficiency skills?
2. Among the foreign languages English, Chinese, Japanese and Korean, which is the most beneficial for Thai employees?

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Proficiency in certain foreign languages other than ones mother language opens wide opportunities for individuals, especially since globalization is rapidly dominating all business and financial institutions. The importance of a foreign language in any business focuses primarily on communication with other business partners, clients, competitors and even colleagues (Global Organization Design Society, 2009).

Knowledge of foreign languages gives a Thai employee an advantage over other employees who lack such knowledge. Misunderstandings and obscurities are far less common when a company employee has knowledge of the language of the customers and offshore clients. In this way, transactions are smoother and the customers feel more comfortable and secure.

### ***The Importance of Foreign Languages in Business Firms***

Verbal communication involves face-to-face interactions, thus increasing such interaction and promoting friendships. Thus having the required language skills gives people opportunities to land better jobs and at the same time to understand other cultures (Abdullah, Laily Ramli, & Rafek, 2017; Davies, 2000; Leslie & Russell, 2006; Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999) foreign language skills bring better understanding of negotiations between owners and customers. They also help the customers feel more confident that they will obtain the right products and services from any company whose employees can speak their language (Cotton, Falvey, & Kent, 2007; Crystal, 1989). Ideally, the foreign language competence will include speaking, listening, reading and writing. For Stewart (1973), these four aspects of language are necessary in any form of negotiating. He emphasizes that foreign language competence is very powerful in business dealings to gain the trust of the customer.

A company which has an employee who can speak the language of a potential customer makes it relatively easy for that customer to obtain the required products or services. This is called productive foreign language communication where customers get what they order (Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1997). Unfortunately, they will not get what they want if there is a language barrier, called unproductive communication (Thitthongkam, Walsh, & Bunchapattanasakda, 2011). Usually, cases when foreign customers do not get what they wanted or expected are usually a small percentage of overall volume, but they can create a high risk to company reputation if it happens too often. Moreover, according to Crystal (1989), knowledge of foreign languages creates customer satisfaction which leads to increased competitiveness, which can happen only if the company handles its customers well.

Batt (2008) estimated that Thai businesses lost an average of 17 million baht per year in their transactions with British counterparts by failing to close business deals due to the language barrier. This shows how significant the knowledge of foreign language is in business.

Thitthongkam et al. (2011) did research on 543 business firms in 29 EU members, regarding the relationship between language and competitiveness. They found that foreign languages play a fundamental role in European businesses, especially their adaptation to the globalized world. Thus, multilingualism is no longer a choice or an option; rather, it is a requirement for business growth. The study also noted that a job applicants lack of language skills reduces chances of employment, notably in jobs leading to management positions.

Research by Gella (2017) in Nigeria found that having foreign language skills in a company is especially necessary

to assist administrators or managers to reduce communication problems at work. Employees also communicate more effectively with foreign customers. As a result, customers will appreciate being able to use their own language and will not feel like they are strangers but rather they tend to feel that these people are business partners upon whom they can rely. In his conclusion, Gella (2017) recommended that people should study other languages if they want to be successful in business. Business managers should also pay more attention to other languages for better business administration. He added that negotiation becomes easier if the relationship is good and cultural differences are minimized through communication in the same language. Foreign language skill helps business relations to grow more efficiently. It may also help the company to expand within the country and internationally (Gella, 2017).

Marschan et al. (1997) found the positive or negative impacts of language proficiency to be a major factor in the ability of a multinational to control and coordinate its global subsidiary network. This finding applies even more today.

In India, a study was conducted on 200 small and medium entrepreneurs to evaluate the impact of foreign language on their business operations. There was a significant impact of language proficiency, leading to the conclusion that language proficiency is a vital skill of entrepreneurs which helps not only to improve their business performance but also to create a sense of belonging between the service provider and customer (Maharana & Chaudhury, 2017).

The role of language in international entrepreneurship is crucial. Zahra and George (2002) found that top managers foreign language knowledge is very critical as a source of competitive advantage contributing to superior performance of the company. Kostić-Bobanović and Bobanović (2013) conducted a study of 73 companies in Croatia, where they found a high demand for foreign language competence in these firms. The greatest benefit of foreign language knowledge in the company was sharing information among employees, employers and customers: foreign language plays a very important role both inside and outside of the company. However, there was at least one exception to the above-mentioned findings. In his study in Kazakhstan, Thitthongkam et al. (2011) focused on the effect of foreign language knowledge and foreign market knowledge on firms doing foreign business. His study of 128 small and medium enterprises revealed that there was little relation between knowledge of foreign language and company success. In addition, his results showed that the lack of foreign language knowledge did not influence business success. However, he did not deny the positive impact of foreign language abilities of managers in international businesses, especially those in non-English-speaking countries, like some ASEAN member states.

The literature on international management and marketing suggests that foreign language ability is important in cross-cultural communication and learning about foreign markets (Williams & Chaston, 2004). In other words, knowledge in foreign language plays an important role in the success of the company. In conclusion, the importance of foreign language in the world's workplaces is overwhelmingly proven by a massive number of studies and literature. However, the necessity of foreign language competence in the Thai workplace seems lacking in this body of research.

### ***Development of Foreign Languages in Thailand***

The advantage of having a multilingual population is clearly understood by the Thai government (Dili, 2017; Thailand Ministry of Education, 2008).

However, the historical development of foreign languages in Thai society can differ significantly from their history and development in their original countries. One foreign language that developed very early in Thai society is Chinese, evidence of which dates back to the Sukhothai period 700 years ago (Kanoksilpatham, 2011). With the long history of Chinese-Thai relations, Chinese culture has had considerable influence upon Thai society. One result is that the same borrowed word may have a different pronunciation in Thai than in modern-day Chinese. More importantly, in all sectors of current Thai society, from business and finance to politics, Thais of Chinese descent are well-represented. This is due to periods of massive immigration in modern times. A few of these families still retain some level of Chinese language, but most Chinese in Thailand today is spoken in a local dialect, and the pronunciation and vocabulary is usually very different from modern-day Mandarin.

The English language started its expansion in Thai society during the reign of King Rama V in the early 19th century (Dili, 2017). The other European languages that were able to penetrate Thai society were German and French in the late 20th century (Saengaramruang, 2006).

English language has been in the Thai education system for centuries now as a mandatory subject in the elementary level (Choomthong, 2014). Moreover, the importance of English language was also highlighted in the 2008 Basic Education Core Curriculum (Thailand Ministry of Education, 2008). Despite all the Thai government efforts to highlight the importance of English in the Thai educational system, Thailand still ranks very low, according to the

[English Proficiency Index \(2017\)](#). It is 15th out of 20 countries in Asia and 53rd out of 80 countries worldwide.

According to some scholars, the main cause of Thai students poor English skills is ineffective teaching ([Deerajviset, 2014](#); [Karnnawakul, 2004](#); [Kimsuvan, 2004](#)). On the other hand, [Dhanasobhon \(2006\)](#) and [Kongkerd \(2013\)](#) believe that not only teachers should be blamed but also students attitude and low motivation to learn English. Other East Asian languages (Japanese and Korean) entered the country in later years. Korean was first developed in the southern part of Thailand, particularly in Songkhla and Pattani during the late 1980s. The reason was more economic than cultural because at that time many Korean companies had established businesses in this part of Thailand. As a result, these companies needed employees who could communicate in Korean ([Song & Pornsima, 2017](#)).

Japanese language education in Thailand started earlier than that. The first known Japanese language course was first offered by Thammasat University in the 1960s ([Sanruang, 2018](#)).

With the important role played by foreign languages in the Thai society and economy, it is not surprising then that Thai policy supports multilingualism among its people. Multilingualism has an especially significant role in business firms when it comes to communication with customers, other companies and suppliers. Thai business organizations often hire professional language trainers to help improve their employees foreign language skills in vocabulary and conversation.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to investigate the benefits of foreign language skills in selected business firms in Thailand. It also explores typical problems of foreign language usage in dealing with customers. This study was conducted by selecting small and medium business firms in Rayong Province in Thailand, using a case study approach in which a variety of methods of collecting and analyzing the data were used ([Nunan, 1992](#)).

One of the reasons why Rayong Province was chosen for field research was because it has a very large number of industrial estates and has attracted high interest from investors, according to Thailand Industry Outlook 2018-2020 ([Thailand Industry Outlook, 2018](#)). Rayong is also a designated part of the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) development. This region is believed to have the highest potential for growth. Other provinces in eastern Thailand are Chonburi, Chachoengsao and Prachinburi.

### *Methods of Gathering Data and Analysis*

This study focuses on five small and medium business firms in Rayong Province in Thailand. Small and medium enterprises are defined as having employees ranging from 10 to not more 300 people ([Berisha & Shiroka, 2015](#)).

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data collection methods include document analysis, employee/employer surveys and semi-structured interviews. This research approach was used to explore and assess the multiple factors leading to the degree of importance of foreign language in each company ([Ricento, 2006](#)).

According to [Creswell \(2007\)](#), qualitative research is a way of understanding the human issues and problems. Thus this paper examines the Thai employees attitudes and understanding as well as the factual and calculable importance of foreign language skills in their careers. And of course quantitative survey data, depending on the questions asked, can be a fruitful source of qualitative insights. As a result, this paper employed a case study approach by which, according to [Nunan \(1992\)](#), the researcher can conduct an in-depth investigation of the employees preferences and their reasoning, as well as their factual choices. The respondents were Thai employees working in both Thai and foreign companies.

This study surveyed a total of 287 Thai employees from five companies in Rayong province. These companies were Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Korean and German. Due to the extensive studies of the role of English language in Thai society, the researcher decided not to include a company from an English-speaking country. However, English is covered in the survey questions and the data allows a comparison to be made, especially when ranking the languages. Representatives or managers from each company were surveyed and interviewed with the understanding that they were speaking on behalf of the company. This approach was used to bring out and clarify the differences of each group so that the study will be more balanced between employees and employers. Data-gathering procedures and their relations to research questions are described in Table 1.

Table 1 DATA COLLECTION AND RELATIONSHIP TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS (?, ?)

Research Questions	Data Sources	Data Collection Method
1. What is the benefit of proficiency in a foreign language to Thai employees in terms of securing a job, promotion, higher income, prestige and working conditions?	Documents and existing literature	Document analysis
	Result of the survey from Thai employees and representatives or managers from each company	Survey questionnaire
	Results of interviews from the five firms	Semi-structured Interviews
2. Among the foreign languages (English, Chinese, Japanese and Korea) which is the most beneficial for Thai employees?	Result of the survey from Thai employees and representatives or managers from each company	Survey questionnaire

### **Document Analysis**

Much research similar to this paper has been conducted in other countries, and this has helped to conceptualize the paper better. In addition, results from international research will allow useful comparisons with the results of this paper. In this way, there will be a better understanding of the relative impacts of foreign language in the Thai companies studied in this paper.

### **Surveys**

287 Thai employees participated in this study, including five representatives from the five companies. The companies were chosen as typical examples of foreign-owned and Thai-owned businesses. Employees and representatives were asked in the survey questionnaire to share their experience, perceptions and feelings about the importance of foreign language in their workplace.

In addition, the survey also explores the problems and challenges faced by companies and employees when there is a lack of knowledge of foreign language. It also assesses the efforts of the companies to develop foreign language ability among their employees. And of course the survey focuses on how the employees ability in a foreign language affects their (1) promotion, (2) income, (3) personal gratification or prestige, and (4) working conditions.

The survey questionnaire was divided into two types: one for the employers, (completed by the representatives) and the other one for the Thai employees. The questionnaire for representatives had two parts. The first part was designed to obtain the representatives perception of the foreign language proficiency of Thai employees. The second part is questions regarding the benefits gained by employees as a result of their foreign language competencies.

The questionnaire for the employees had three parts. The first part was their demographic profile, and the second part was about their use of foreign language in their workplace. In this part, questions focused on the Thai employees language competencies in English, Chinese, Japanese and Korean. The third part was about their views of the benefits of such foreign language competency. Since the participants in this study were Thai employees, the questionnaires were translated into Thai, the translation was verified, and then administered to the respondents at the five participating companies.

### **Interviews**

Alongside the questionnaires, interviews were also employed to obtain more nuanced and detailed information from the company representatives (Kvale, 1996). This study used a face-to-face qualitative and semi-structured interview with each of the five company representatives.

Informal interviews were also conducted with some Thai employees to shed light on the effect of their foreign language skills on their careers.

Interview questionnaires were sent to the involved persons by e-mail prior to the date of the interview. This was to allow them some time to prepare the answers. Appointments with them were made about two weeks in advance, and all interviews were conducted in each companys office space on the day the researcher went to administer the survey questionnaire to the employees (May 15 to June 13, 2017). The interviewing process took about 30-40 minutes.

### **Demographic Profile of the Companies**

This study assessed the importance of foreign languages in the workplace, and it was conducted in an industrial park in Rayong, Thailand. Five small and medium companies participated in the study from Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Korean and German companies. A total of 287 employees participated in the study but only 55 were knowledgeable in foreign languages as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 NUMBER OF THAI EMPLOYEES IN THE STUDY WHO SPEAK FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Company	Employees	Level of Fluency				
		Poor	Fair	Good	Very good	Excellent
Company A (Thai)	90					
Correspondents who can speak English	22		16	6		
Company B (Chinese)	60					
Correspondents who can speak Chinese	11		6	2	3	
Correspondents who can speak English	5		2	3		
Company C (Japanese)	13					
Correspondents who can speak Japanese	2			2		
Correspondents who can speak English	3		2	1		
Company D (German)	46					
Correspondents who can speak German	0					
Correspondents who can speak English	6		5	1		
Company E (Korean)	78					
Correspondents who can speak Korean	4		1	3		
Correspondents who can speak English	12		10	1	1	

In Table 2 it can be observed that only small numbers of Thais working in foreign-owned companies in Thailand can in fact speak the language of the country where the company originated. In fact, in Company D, a German-owned company, none of the Thai employees can speak German. This can be attributed to the company's belief that learning German language is not a priority for now. Since this company is focused on the manufacturing of electrical and automotive parts, most of its 46 Thai employees were assembling parts, working at jobs that are considered blue collar jobs and not in the customer service area. These employees were not tasked to face and communicate with customers, or with work related to marketing. In any case, since Germany is a member of the European Union, this company is used to functioning in English.

Another example is Company A, a Thai-owned company engaged in the manufacture and distribution of motor vehicle parts for passenger cars, pickup trucks, heavier trucks and agricultural machinery. The company's products include axle shafts, disc brakes, drum brakes, exhaust manifolds, leaf springs, stabilizer bars and hot coil springs, among other items.

In international business, English is dominant globally. In the case of Company A, the owners want it to be a world-class Thai manufacturing company. They know that to penetrate the international market, their employees should communicate in the dominant international language, English. This is the reason why Company A provides free English tutorials for its ordinary employees twice a month, while managers or high-ranking employees received English language training from a native English speaker, also twice a month.

Company B is a leading company in wire and cable products for communications, energy transmission and storage technologies. It is dedicated to becoming a leading vendor of these products worldwide, by enhancing the current core business section of wires for optical communication, and developing a second related business section dealing with high temperature superconducting, precision copper fittings, submarine cables and electric power cables for varied voltages. Since Company B wants to expand to other ASEAN countries, and believes that most ASEAN businesspeople can speak Chinese, one of its requirements for its employees, particularly in higher/managerial positions, is knowledge of Chinese. For ordinary employees, Company B usually hires Thai employees of Chinese descent. The company believes that Thai-Chinese employees are much better than pure Thais, since they can speak Chinese and have a stronger work ethic. However, they do not overlook their employees who do not know how to speak Chinese. To train their Thai employees to speak Chinese, their strategy is to have their Chinese employees work closely together with their Thai counterparts. This is to develop some Chinese language skills for those who cannot speak the language (Company B Supervisor). It is also of note that except for one employee in Company D, the employees in Company B

were the only ones (three in number) who felt confident enough in their language competence to consider themselves Very Good (no employees rated themselves Excellent).

However, it can be observed that the company not only has Thai employees who can speak Chinese, but also employees who can speak English. Nearly half of the Thai employees who speak Chinese can also speak English, but not as fluently. This is similar to Company C (Japanese-owned) and Company E (Korean-owned). Both have Thai employees who can speak Japanese and English or Korean and English. Not only that, the numbers of Thai employees who speak English in each of these two companies are larger than those Thai employees who speak Japanese or Korean.

The reason for this unusual ratio of foreign language abilities between English and Japanese or Korean can be found in the objectives of the two companies. Neither company requires their Thai employees to be fluent in Japanese or Korean unlike Company B (Chinese-owned). The managers from Company B and C (Japanese-owned) believe that employee knowledge of another foreign language has little impact on the company's productivity. These companies have no foreign language requirements in their hiring processes but they do appreciate those applicants with knowledge of any foreign language.

This finding that only a small percentage of employees speak foreign languages and the perception (at least among some managers) that foreign language skills have no direct impact upon the success of the company is not new. According to Schorr (2010), foreign language skills do not play an important role in either hiring or career advancements. Schorr's finding is an isolated case in the workplace setting and experience of other companies worldwide.

It is interesting to note, however, that in this study nearly 90 percent of Thai employees cannot speak the native language of their company. We might expect that Thai employees would try to speak Korean if they are working in a Korean firm, but the company policy, as noted above, does not encourage this. However, although the majority of Thai employees cannot speak the native language of their company, many of them are fluent in English. This is because of the historical spread of the English language in the international business world since the colonial period. In any case, the Japanese and Korean companies are not worried if their employees cannot speak any foreign languages.

When asked their perceptions, managers from Companies A and C answered that their primary concerns were those Thai employees working as customer service representatives, or doing marketing for the company. In these departments, the company is looking for individuals who can speak the company's mother language, or at least English, which was called the mother language of business. Not surprisingly, of the languages which Thai employees use in the workplace, English is ranked first, as seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3 *SUMMARY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCE (AT ANY LEVEL) IN THE FIVE COMPANIES*

Foreign Language	Number of Respondents	Ranking
English	48	1
Chinese	12	2
Korean	4	3
Japanese	2	4
German	0	5

Results of this study show that managers are looking for employees with foreign language skills only for their customer service, sales, and marketing departments. As a matter of fact, most companies require their employees in these areas to be fluent in either English or in the mother company's language, as do Companies B (Chinese-owned), C (Japanese-owned) and E (Korean-owned) in this study. When asked about remuneration, the three companies (B, C and E) all agreed that the salary for such positions is roughly 20% above that of ordinary jobs. Company C explained that the additional 20% in salary is because it is difficult to find Thai employee who can speak both English and one of these foreign languages.

To be admitted to these departments in foreign-owned companies in Thailand, Thai applicants must have passed the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) examinations for English language speakers, Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) for Korean language speakers, Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) for Japanese language speakers and Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) translated as the Chinese Proficiency Test for Chinese language speakers. During the conduct of this research, Thai employees in these companies (except in Company D) often showed their certificates in these foreign language examinations.



## **RESULTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE THAI WORKPLACE**

Among foreign languages used in the Thai workplace, English is the most prominent language in all five companies in the study and Chinese ranked second. Some possible reasons for this dominance of English (even without an American or British-owned company in the sample) could be as follows:

First, since these five companies (including Company A which is Thai-owned) all have a goal of worldwide expansion, and since English is the working language of international business worldwide, it is therefore necessary that any such international company must have staff competent in English (Dili, 2017).

Another factor is the popularity of English in Thailand and the efforts of the government to make their people fluent in English. Thai job applicants with high ambitions therefore have already been learning English, and will have passed their TOEIC examinations, one of the important qualifications to be hired by an international company.

The popularity of English in Thailand is simply part of a world-wide pattern, based on the pre-eminence of the United States in world politics for the past 70 years. It is well established now that this period of US world dominance is coming to an end, at a time when China is rising rapidly in world business. In general, Chinese shows a strong position in all the companies surveyed, and given the political and economic rise of China currently, there is no doubt that the use of Chinese and the need for higher and higher levels of competence in Chinese will only increase in Thai-based international companies in the future. Further research on the rapid rise in the use of Chinese in international businesses will be a natural follow-up to this study.

### ***Managerial Views on the Role of Foreign Language in Business Administration***

In the interviews with the five managers, all of them claimed that the ability to communicate with their foreign contacts in a common language improved their ability to understand foreign markets, an advantage to any company.

For Company B, knowledge of Chinese language is an advantage since Thai employees can communicate better with their counterparts from China: Of course, it is very important, you know, because many times every year Chinese owners and Chinese investors visit us here in our factory. They talk to our office staff in Chinese and they are happy about it, said the manager of Company B. From this comment, we can see how their language skills brought prestige to the foreign language speakers.

Of course, I feel happy and proud every time I speak Japanese in the office. Sometimes, when my boss asked me to go out and work as translator for Japanese clients, I feel happy also because many Thais look at me and you can see in their faces that they are also proud. - Thai employee from Company C (Japanese). Most importantly, the managers from Company B stated that Chinese investors were proud to learn that Thai employees could speak Chinese, and this made these investors more likely to invest in the country. They believe that setting up a business in Thailand is not difficult since employees are easy to communicate with. The manager from Company B elaborated this point of view, saying, One of the reasons they want to put their money into Thailand is because of Thai peoples abilities to speak Chinese. Of course it is also because of Thailand's location. You know that it is located at the center of mainland ASEAN. It connects China and all the other ASEAN countries in Southeast Asia, and I think this is also the reason why they choose to put up their factories in Thailand. It is easy to travel and bring their products down to Malaysia and Indonesia and the Philippines.

In Company B Chinese as a foreign language serves as a bridge of better communication between them and their prospective clients and counterparts in other countries, particularly in neighboring ASEAN countries. Chinese companies use the abilities of Thai employees for their business expansion into ASEAN, as do the other companies, but there seems to be some nationalist sentiment as well. Similarly the manager of Japanese-owned Company C said

Better communication is very important to Japanese people, since they are giving very difficult technical instructions. Thus the Japanese owner of our company makes sure that he can talk to essential local people in Japanese. So, our Thai representative who is very good in Japanese is always the one to talk to him and share with us what the Japanese owner said.

He added that they were very lucky to have someone from the company who could speak Japanese. In this way, it is easier for the staff to understand all instructions from the Japanese owners, particularly specific details of running the company. He further added, Oh my God, sometimes I cannot understand them if they talk to me in English because I cannot understand their accent and pronunciation. That's why I always ask my staff member who is good in Japanese to stay with me every time my Japanese boss comes to talk to me. In Thai Company A, the importance of foreign language (particularly English) to their company lies in the company's planned international expansion. Their representative

said, Our company wants to expand to Vietnam, Japan and other parts of ASEAN. We want our company to be the biggest company in ASEAN manufacturing steel parts. But we can only expand to other countries if we have many English-speaking Thai employees. That's why most of our staff are very good in English.

Again, communication is the magic word for Company A. English-speaking Thai employees play a huge role in the expansion of their company. This is especially true since ASEAN has already declared that the official language of the association is English, so Thai and all other ASEAN companies will increasingly need to speak English. In ASEAN, for example Vietnam, and in other countries like Japan they don't speak Chinese but they can speak English. So our company is looking for people who are very good in English, more than in those languages. We do not place much importance on Chinese in our expansion, although Chinese language is also very important. But for us, English is better because not many countries are good in Chinese. Sometimes, if our clients are Chinese, we send them someone who can speak Chinese. Anyway, many Thai people can also speak Chinese! (Company A representative)

Thai employees who know foreign languages have a better opportunity to be selected for higher positions. Most representatives from the participating companies in this study said that the ones who always accompany the higher management are the ones who can speak the mother language of their company. Obviously, these employees are most likely to get promotions in the company. This researcher asked one of the representatives from Korean Company E who he is likely to nominate to replace him after he retires, and he unhesitatingly answered, the staff member who is fluent in Korean, referring to his subordinate who always accompanies him to every meeting with the Korean investors, and attends all the seminars or professional trainings in South Korea. When asked why he will choose her, he said, Because our boss likes her; because she can speak Korean.

This perception of a representative of a Korean-owned company illustrates the biggest advantage of individuals with foreign language skills: faster promotion in the company, compared to those who do not have such skills. This study is based in part on interviews of five representatives from participating companies, and it clearly shows the important role of foreign languages in the Thai workplace. English is the most prominent among the five foreign languages in the study, but this does not mean the other foreign languages are not important. Inside the workplace, knowledge of foreign language has an indirect impact on the success of the company, especially for companies planning expansion. The absence of foreign language-speaking staff in a company also has a major impact on its internal operations. The absence of a translator or someone who can speak and understand the mother language of the company can be a barrier in giving specific directions, which could result in a production failure, costing the company billions of baht. This is another less-obvious benefit of having people who are fluent in other languages. Thai employees with foreign language skills have a deep and crucial role in the company that goes well beyond the familiar and essential services.

### ***Thai Employees Views on the Role of Foreign Language in the Workplace***

Thai employees' perceptions of foreign language in the workplace were surveyed in the questionnaire and in informal interviews. Out of 287 respondents, 55 are working in administrative roles (including customer service and marketing). Not included here are the perceptions of Thai employees in other departments, such as the security guards, liaison officers, engineers, and manual laborers. Below is a summary of respondents working in the administrative departments of the five participating companies.

Table 4 *NUMBER OF THAI EMPLOYEES IN ADMINISTRATIVE DEPARTMENTS*

Name of Company	Employees (Total)	Office Staff	Percent
Company A (Thai)	90	22	24.44%
Company B (Chinese)	60	11	18.33%
Company C (Japanese)	13	3	23.08%
Company D (German)	46	6	13.04%
Company E (Korean)	78	13	16.67%

The role of foreign language in business administration is primarily that of staff who work in customer service and marketing.

Based on the interviews, employees in marketing departments know that customer satisfaction depends on how the staff interact with their clients. They all agree that knowledge of foreign language is crucial to their job. Less than perfect fluency in a foreign language is still enough for them to close a contract with their foreign clients. I know my

Japanese is not good but at least I can understand a little and talk a little every time that we have Japanese clients and visitors. I am the one who faces them and I feel that our Japanese clients are happy when they leave, said a customer representative from Company C. This is the same perception as that of staff from Company A (Thai-owned): My English is not perfect but I am proud of it. Almost every day we have visitors from other countries asking about our products, and I am the one who explains everything to them.

In terms of non-verbal communication like answering inquiries through e-mail, a representative from Company D said that he is not troubled whenever a letter or inquiry about their products comes in from other countries. In fact, he takes it as a challenge to practice his English abilities:

Oh my God, of course I was afraid at first, but not now. Not anymore, because I know how to answer all their questions. And that's because sometimes their questions are almost the same. So I have already memorized how to answer them. But when they call and I talk to them on the telephone, sometimes I feel afraid. But only a little bit.

With these examples from the Thai staff members, clearly both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication are very important. Communication skills in foreign language are often needed in the first contact with foreign customers and are thus crucial to making them feel satisfied with the company's products and services. Another important point is the positive attitude and friendly manner of Thai staff members in their personal interaction with foreign visitors or clients. These Thai employees were not hampered by their lack of fluency in a given foreign language. Though the Thai staff admit their not-so-perfect English or Korean or Japanese in front of native speakers, this does not stop them or make them excessively shy in talking with native speakers. As a matter of fact, these kinds of behavior, being friendly and positive, gained them the respect of their customers. One Korean customer happened to be on site during the researcher's administration of the questionnaire. He noted that although the Thai staff who speak to him don't have perfect Korean grammar and accent, he still finds conversation with them funny and satisfying. It is essential then, that companies develop more than sheer language skills. Equally important is their staff's positive and friendly interaction, their understanding and care for the customers. Also, listening to customers carefully to learn what they need or want from the company is very important. Actually, this is a major strength of Thai culture, and generally it could be a major reason why Northeast Asian countries build bases in Thailand. Japanese business-people cite the sweet smell of culture as a reason for locating in Thailand (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017). This is definitely a point for further research.

However, there also were problems of foreign language usage when Thai staff communicated with customers. These problems occurred because of differences between customers. Not all foreign customers who go to Thailand can communicate in a common foreign language, let's say English. Many of them could speak only their own native language. This can be a serious problem faced by Thai staff in an international company in Thailand, as one employee from Company D told the researcher:

One time I had a Russian client asking me about our products and he wanted to order. But the problem was I could not understand his English. He couldn't speak English very well and sent the orders in very bad English. And so what did you do? Well, I just made some guesses about the meaning of his English. Lucky for me, all of the orders we delivered were correct.

This issue is not isolated. Almost all the companies participating in this study had similar experiences, and one staff member from Company E had a suggestion: Although the staff member must guess the meaning from the context of incorrect sentences, we should always use clear and simple English that the customer should be able to understand. Although the findings of this study show the positive impact of foreign language skills upon international business firms, dealing with foreign customers and investors is not easy. Employee comments clearly show the crucial role of Thai bilingual staff, without whom the success of the company would be seriously at risk.

### ***Benefits to Thai Employees of Proficiency in a Foreign Language***

With all the positive feedback from the managers regarding the important role of foreign language speakers in their companies, the next question is whether these Thai employees are compensated sufficiently.

The benefits, as stated above, are of four kinds: promotion, higher income, prestige and better working conditions. In terms of promotion, Thai staff members from all five companies agreed that being bilingual or having knowledge of a foreign language contributed only minimally to promotion. Years of service, certificates, and professional development training all helped them receive a promotion. These kinds of requirements are the same for all employees in the company. I don't think that my company promoted me because I am very good in Chinese. You see, many of us here can speak Chinese, but all at about the same level, said a staff member of Company B. A similar perception was shown

by a staff member in Company D: This is only a small company and not many of us can speak English. When I applied to work in this company, they knew that I could speak English. But five years later here I am, still in my position as ordinary staff in my department.

Hence, competency in foreign language has not had a big impact on mobility within the company. However, when asked if they believed that being bilingual is an advantage to get promoted, the majority of them said Yes, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5 *RESPONDENTS PERCEPTION OF MOBILITY IN THE COMPANY BECAUSE OF THEIR FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCY*

Name of Company	Office Staff	Yes	No
Company A (Thai)	22	20	2
Company B (Chinese)	11	5	6
Company C (Japanese)	3	2	1
Company D (German)	6	1	5
Company E (Korean)	13	10	3
Total	55	38	17

The data show the positive attitude of the office staff about possible promotion. The majority of them are hopeful. In terms of income, office staff who can speak a foreign language received an average of 20% more in salary compared to their colleagues who have the same position and rank. In Company C for example, the entry salary for ordinary staff (Thai employees who don't have any foreign language) is 17,000 baht, but staff with foreign language skills who applied for the same position were offered a monthly salary of 25,000 baht. This proves that being knowledgeable in another foreign language has a definite advantage in terms of salary.

When it comes to prestige and better working conditions, Thai employees who can speak a foreign language all received commendations from their employers. These employees also get opportunities to travel to other countries, accompanying their bosses to serve as translators, all expenses paid by the company. According to one office staffer in Company B, One thing I like about my job as translator in this company is I get to travel to China three times a year. I always go with my boss to translate for him from Chinese to Thai. Also, sometimes if we talk to American or European investors in Europe, I also go with him because I also can speak English. This kind of benefit, though not always monetary, is considered by many as prestigious.

The findings in this study showed that employees who were competent in a foreign language received many benefits compared to those who were not. Even though the gap between the ordinary Thai employees and those who can speak foreign language is narrow in terms of some benefits, many linguistically-skilled Thai employees are thankful and contented.

### ***Findings of the Study***

This paper focused on the effect of foreign language competence in five selected firms in Rayong Province, Thailand. The results were based on the perspectives of the company as represented by their general managers and from the individual perspectives of their Thai employees. As expected, there was a significant positive view from both the Thai employees and their managers regarding the importance of foreign language in their company and workplace, probably increased by the fact that 90 percent of the Thai employees could not speak a foreign language. Employees and managers both agreed that foreign language is very important in business communication, especially in dealing with foreign clients and investors, in product marketing as well as in business expansion.

The Thai employees strongly believed that it is better for them to know how to communicate with foreign customers in a language other than Thai. This kind of perception is the result of their long experience in dealing with foreign customers. Because of this, it would be more beneficial for Thai employees, especially those who already can speak English, to try for communicative competence in a third language. This study shows that most Thai employees in foreign-owned companies could not speak their company's home language, but many of them were fluent in English. As mentioned above, the primary assumption of the thesis is that Thai employees who are fluent in second language apart from their native Thai language a) have a higher possibility of getting a promotion in their respective company; b) receive a higher salary compared to their colleagues who have no foreign language skills at all; c) are offered better working conditions by their respective companies which resulted in d) the company treating them with higher respect

and prestige. To prove or disprove this claim, the results of the study are:

- a. promotion Many of the respondents agree that their ability to speak a second language really helped them climb the ladder of success within the company or get promoted more easily, compared to colleagues who didn't have skill in any foreign language. However this is not the only factor, as revealed in this study. Some of the companies saw little benefit. This study did not find any concrete direct link between the ability of the employees to speak a second language and an increase in sales of the company, despite so many assumptions of this in the literature. In this aspect, it appears that beyond second language skills, the employees must also be knowledgeable in marketing and managing. In regards to this, the company must consider not only the second language ability of their employees, but also other skills such as social skills to make foreign customers comfortable.
- b. higher income Employees who have second language ability receive higher salary than their colleague who do not. In this study, employees with second language abilities were inside the office as sales or marketing staff. These positions in the company receive higher salaries than those working outside in the factory, such as those assembling parts. Still, this confirms the assumption that second language competence is an advantage for employees in Thailand. It is interesting to note that in many companies, especially Company B (Chinese-owned) and Company E (Korean-owned), it was common that many of the employees in the sales/marketing department could also speak other foreign languages (usually English) in addition to the home language of the company. This is probably because of the extensive and comprehensive teaching and learning of English in Thailand, as well as the role of English as the mother language of international business.
- c. better working conditions - Based on the findings of this study, better working conditions are a domino effect of the first two above-mentioned rewards. An employee who is promoted and receives a salary raise will also normally be given better working conditions. Of course these improvements do not apply to those employees who were already assigned the highest position. Most of the respondents in this study were originally in lower positions, but because their superiors saw their capabilities and skills in the second language, they were given promotions.
- d. prestige - Prestige can be seen as merely self-gratification, but it is not necessarily a negative attitude. An employee who achieves all the above rewards can feel the difference in treatment from colleagues and superiors within the company. This is the definition of a feeling of prestige, used in this study. The findings of this study also show that such employees usually do not have this feeling to excess. Even though the promoted employees did feel the different treatment after the promotion, this did not change their attitude towards their colleagues: they were not overly boastful or proud in relations with their colleagues or immediate superiors. We can infer from this that these employees were happy to benefit from their foreign language ability, but also saw it as a challenge for them to perform better for the company.

In general, it seems to be true that there is a close relationship between level of proficiency in foreign language and degree of benefit, including benefit to the Thai employees personal development.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The data in this assessment of the benefits of foreign language proficiency to Thai employees showed that English is the most useful language in the Thai workplace, followed by Chinese.

Furthermore, the data showed that more Thai employees know English than those who know Chinese, Japanese, German or Korean languages. The most common uses of foreign language by the Thai employees are for product presentation, for communication with native speakers, and for new vocabulary acquisition.

In this study, it was found that Thai employees, who know how to speak a foreign language such as English, Chinese, Japanese or Korean, have an edge in getting job offers over those who don't have these skills. Thai employees with foreign language skills have higher chances of getting employed, especially in companies operated or owned by foreign companies.

The study also found that Thai employees lack of foreign language competence and skills has an impact on their performance. Employees inability to communicate in another language reduces their opportunity to build up good working relationships and interpersonal relationships with foreigners at work, due to the language barrier in the workplace.

Overall, this study is a case-study snapshot of the attitudes of Thai employees and foreign managers of a small selection of foreign companies in Rayong province of Thailand in 2017. That is its primary value.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the important role that the Thai culture plays in business operations apart

from the Thai employees knowledge or proficiency in any foreign language. Thai culture promotes social skills that facilitate interaction and communication with the offshore subsidiaries and foreign investors. Thus it can be argued that both foreign language proficiency skills and Thai culture are good for business.

As for recommendations, at the institutional level this study clearly demonstrates an overall low level of second language competence of Thai employees in foreign companies, despite the crucial role of foreign language in their company. As emphasized in the Literature Review, thousands of dollars in lost business opportunities occur annually in Thailand because of the incompetence of employees in foreign language. Therefore a clear recommendation is that these companies integrate the study of a second language into their business schedules, or concentrate on foreign language skills when hiring more Thai employees. Also, the companies should revise the internal mobility and development strategies of their human resources departments. They should regularly assess the existing language and communication competencies of their workforce and set goals for employees foreign language competence levels. Language competence must correspond to the employees particular tasks and the established needs of each position. Thai employees, especially those already knowledgeable in a foreign language, should develop the competences they have and help their co-workers to improve their language skills as well. Both formal and informal foreign language learning are ways to make language study into a lifelong learning project. To the extent that the company supports that, it shows the employees that the company is concerned about their needs.

At the national level, this study supports efforts of the Thai Ministry of Labour and Employment to support and improve foreign language proficiency among Thai employees in foreign businesses in Thailand. It also supports (but critically urges improved standards in) the longstanding programs of the Thai Ministry of Education to promote and expand foreign language learning. The improved standards would increase emphasis on actual language usage, communication proficiency, and practical applications. Overall, it was clear that English is still the international language of business, but Thailand would be wrong to consider that to be an unchanging paradigm. This study shows that Chinese is the second-ranked foreign language for Thai employees. Given the worldwide rapid advance of Chinese business today, an increase of Chinese language curriculum by schools and colleges, and increased in-house tutoring by international companies is only preparation for the future -and good business.

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