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**An Investigation of Listening Proficiency
Levels in English for Service and
Hospitality Industry of Thai Students in Public
and Private Universities**

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were (1) to investigate graduating students' listening ability in English for service and hospitality industry, (2) to find the cut-off scores for eight levels of the listening ability, and (3) to find ability descriptors for each level of the listening ability. The subjects in this study included the interviewee group and the test taker group. The former consisted of hotel personnel, Heads of Tourism and Hotel Industry Department and teachers from selected public and private universities, specialists in ESP test development, and hotel guests; the latter group consisted of students, majoring in tourism and hotel industry or related fields. Research instruments included (1) Test of Listening Proficiency in English for Service and Hospitality Industry (L-PESH Test), (2) students' attitude questionnaire, (3) the standardized test (Test of English for International Communication, TOEIC), and (4) interviews.

This results showed that the L-PESH Test could differentiate graduating students' listening proficiency in English for service and hospitality industry, which could be classified into eight ability levels.

Background of the Study

Tourism and hotel industry is one of the leading businesses that have made a great deal of profit and income for the country (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 1996). This trend continues to the present.

Resulting from this fast growth of the tourism and hotel industry, there is a shortage of labor supply in the hotel industry, tour operation companies, restaurants, airlines, and shops. The need for personnel to work in these areas is steadily increasing. This is advocated by the result of a study on "The Existing and the Shortage of Labor in Tourism Industry 1993." The finding shows that the employers need to hire more staff that have good English proficiency (Faculty of Statistics, National Institute of Development Administration, 1993).

According to the interviews with HRD Managers from selected hotels in Bangkok, it was found that not only business skills, personality, and related previous experience but also English ability in communication, particularly English ability in listening and speaking, are considered basic criteria for selecting personnel. Some chain hotels use their own English tests developed by the head office to assess the English ability of candidates, while many others use TOEIC scores for English language assessment in the employee selection. Studies on TOEIC testing within the hotel industry in Thailand resulted in the minimum recommended scores of 550 for management training (cited in an article on "Complete Facts about the TOEIC Test," presented in TOEIC Technical Manual, www.gettoic.com).

Moreover, the majority of work and communication in the service and hospitality industry is conducted in English. Therefore, it is crucial that the hotel personnel have adequate English ability to perform their tasks.

Recognizing the importance of English ability, many leading universities and colleges in Thailand have designed curricula in which English language courses for both general and specific purposes are included. Their major aim is to produce qualified graduates to supply extremely competitive job markets. Many hotel and tourism schools or departments provide plenty of English for

Specific Purposes (ESP) courses such as English for Hotels, English for Tourism, Listening and Speaking in English for Hotel and Tourism, Public Speaking in English, and so forth, for their students.

And of course, where there is language teaching there is a need to know how well one can use the language (Alderson & Bachman, cited in Douglas, 2000: X). Thus, each institution has developed its own tests to assess their students' English ability in certain courses. However, these tests are usually based on different criteria and identify the achievement of the students in certain courses in each institution only. The results of these tests cannot identify the overall English ability of their graduating students, particularly when compared to those graduating from different institutions.

To get an overall picture of the graduating students' ability in English for service and hospitality and to see whether these students have adequate ability in English to meet the requirements of the job markets or not, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is frequently used as a measurement. Moreover, those who plan to work in the service and hospitality industry are usually required to report their TOEIC scores in their resumes. Some hotels in Thailand also use TOEIC scores as a benchmark in employee selection and as a means to identify training needs (On-line article on "The Uses of TOEIC in Thailand," www.toEIC.co.th/TOEIC/Htmls/Uses.html).

Nevertheless, it was found from the interviews with the educators and the hoteliers that although the TOEIC scores can generally indicate how well people can communicate in English with others in a global workplace, the test does not require specialized knowledge or vocabulary. It measures only the kind of English used in everyday work activities. Both educators and hoteliers agree that there should be a more specific purpose test that can measure the graduating students' ability in English for the service and hospitality industry before leaving the universities and entering the job market. The results of this ESP test is expected to help educators learn about the quality of their graduating students and improve their curriculum and English courses. As for the hoteliers, the test results are expected to help them screen their employees or

help them make decisions about arranging training courses for their new employees.

Moreover, the results of a previous survey on materials used in teaching English for service and hospitality from the majority of universities in Bangkok, together with the result of telephone interviews with some instructors and hotel HRD Managers showed that among the four skills of English language learning: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the first two skills are the most important ones for hotel personnel. Many scholars and educators agree with this and have elaborated the significance of listening proficiency as follows.

Hunt (1987) states that in 70% of working hours, people listen more than speak in order to communicate. Lundsteen (1990) adds that in everyday communication listening skill is mostly used. Listening is a key in learning and it initiates interactions among people. In addition, Oxford (1993) points out that among the four skills in English, listening is more important and plays more significant roles in communications than the other three skills. That is, people spend 45% of the time listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing. In the field of service and hospitality, Pichitnorakarn (cited in Fredrickson, 2003) mentions that listening is often a problem for house keeping, kitchen staff, or servers. Most of the time when these employees are hired, they need to have more training or make use of the hotel self-access center to improve this skill.

In conclusion, it is necessary that universities and colleges equip their graduates with adequate ability in English together with knowledge of a particular field or career before entering the job market or the real working environment. In order to see whether their graduating students are qualified and have adequate English ability to meet the requirements of the job market, a new ESP test, Listening Proficiency in English for Service and Hospitality (L-PESH), should be developed. The test is used as a common indicator to measure students' ability in English for service and hospitality. The test results, based on the same criteria, are expected to identify the students' English ability levels focusing on the service and hospitality industry.

Therefore, the purposes of this study were to investigate the level of Thai graduating students' listening ability in English for the service and hospitality industry and to find the cut-off scores and ability descriptors for eight levels of listening ability.

The subjects in this study included the interviewee group and the test taker group. The interviewee group consisted of three hotel personnel from selected hotels, four Heads of Tourism and Hotel Industry Department and teachers from selected public and private universities, two specialists in ESP test development, and three hotel guests. The test taker group consisted of 250 graduating students, majoring in tourism and hotel industry or related fields. These students were randomly selected from selected four public and private universities including Bangkok University, Kasem Bundit University, Kasetsart University, and Rangsit University.

The research instruments included the ESP listening test, L-PESH Test, and the student's attitude questionnaire. Both the test and the questionnaire have been validated based on experts' judgment and statistical values.

The findings from this study provided answers to the following research questions:

1. Can the L-PESH Test differentiate Thai graduating students' listening proficiency in English for the service and hospitality industry?

It was found that the L-PESH Test can differentiate the students' listening proficiency into eight levels. These levels included "Distinguished," "Superior," "Advanced-High," "Advanced-Low," "Intermediate-High," "Intermediate-Low," "Novice-High," and "Novice-Low." The highest ability level is "Distinguished," whereas the lowest ability level is "Novice Low." The performance description of each level can clearly differentiate students' listening ability. The students with higher ability level can perform more complicated listening tasks than those who have lower ability level. However, this result can be generalized to the group of subjects in this study only. To apply this result in describing listening ability of other students, not participating in this study or not majoring service and hospitality industry, may lead to invalid and unreliable decisions.

2. What are the appropriate cut-off scores for each level of listening ability?

The cut-off scores were set up based on frameworks suggested by Angoff (1971), Brown (1996), Morgan & Michaelides (2005), and Claycomb (1999). These cut-off scores were established by means of calculating the mean and the standard deviation of the L-PESH Test scores in the normal distribution. The total score was 80, the mean score was 42.16, and the standard deviation of the scores was 11.85. The cut-off scores received from the calculation were sent to educators and hoteliers to discuss and validate them. After that the adjusted cut-off scores were set up as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Cut-off Scores and Ability Levels of the L-PESH Test

L-PESH cut-off scores	Ability Level
77-80	Distinguished
65-76	Superior
53-64	Advanced-High
41-52	Advanced-Low
29-40	Intermediate-High
17-28	Intermediate-Low
5-16	Novice-High
0-4	Novice-Low

3. What are the descriptors for each level of the listening ability?

The proficiency levels and descriptors were set up based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (available from <http://www.sil.org>). These descriptors were justified and triangulated with the results of the interviews with experts and test takers. Table 2 presents the cut-off scores and descriptors of the L-PESH Test.

Table 2 The L-PESH Proficiency Table

Ability Level	L-PESH cut-off scores	Descriptions
Distinguished	77-80	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - make inferences within the cultural framework of the target language - understand all forms and styles of speech concerned with social, and professional needs tailored to different audiences - function in all of the situations described below whether professional or social, concerning concrete or abstract subjects <p><u>Note:</u> The listener in this level may have difficulty with some dialects and slang.</p>
Superior	65-76	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understand registers used in the area of service and hospitality - make implication from the guest replies, requests, and complaints - handle emergencies and guest's illness - understand and deal with complicated and serious requests or complaints - understand most work related situations - understand most speakers of English in international meetings - function in all of the situations described in the lower ability levels <p><u>Note:</u> In this level, the listener rarely misunderstands but may not understand excessively rapid speech with strong cultural references.</p>
Advanced-High	53-64	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understand explanations about how to perform routine tasks related to service and hospitality industry - understand co-worker discussing simple problems that arose at work

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understand and deal with simple requests and complaints - understand description and narration in different time frames or aspects - understand short lectures or interviews on both familiar and new topics - function in all of the situations described in the lower ability levels <p><u>Note:</u> In this level, the listener shows an emerging awareness of culturally implied meanings beyond the surface meanings of the text but may fail to grasp sociocultural nuances of the message.</p>
Advanced-Low	41-52	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understand simple exchanges in everyday professional or personal life with both native English and non-native English speakers (face-to-face) - sustain understanding over longer stretches of connected discourse on a number of topics pertaining to different times and places - take order at the table in the hotel restaurants or bars - understand and explain simple dishes or drinks in the menu to the guests - arrange a table or a room reservation - understand and make simple suggestions about food and rooms to the guests - function in all of the situations described in the lower ability levels <p><u>Note:</u> Understanding in this level may be uneven because of variety of linguistic and extra linguistic factors in the text.</p>
Intermediate-High	29-40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understand explanations related to routine work in one to one situations - understand limited social conversations (face-to-face) - understand simple directions and time

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - take simple phone messages <p><u>Note:</u> Understanding in this level is inconsistent because the listener may fail to grasp main ideas and details.</p>
Intermediate-Low	17-28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understand adequately for immediate survival needs such as basic greeting to the hotel guest "Good morning/afternoon /evening." - understand simple questions in social situations, spoken slowly and deliberately, such as "How are you?," "What's your name?" - understand utterances which consist of learned elements in a limited number of content areas <p><u>Note:</u> Misunderstandings in both main ideas and details frequently arise.</p>
Novice-High	5-16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understand short, learned utterances with repetition, rephrasing, and presented in slow rate speech - understand some words and phrases from simple questions and statements, high-frequency commands, and courtesy formulae about topics <p><u>Note:</u> The listener requires long pauses for assimilation.</p>
Novice-Low	0-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understand some frequently used isolated words. - have no ability to understand even short utterances <p><u>Note:</u> The listener has very limited understanding.</p>

The results from this study were used to identify the students' listening proficiency in English for the service and hospitality industry. Following is a summary of the students' listening ability.

The students who took the L-PESH Test were categorized into eight groups according to the established cut-off scores.

Out of 250 students, there were no students in the highest ability level, "Distinguished." There were no students grouped under the levels of "Novice-High" and "Novice-Low," as well. There were 15 students in the "Superior" level, 31 students in the "Advanced-High" level, and 81 students in "Advanced-Low." The "Intermediate-High" level covered 97 students, while "Intermediate-Low" included 26 students.

The Distinguished level students can relate their listening ability to positions such as Assistant to General Manager, Training Manager, Administrative Manager, Personnel Manager, Outlet Manager, Sales and Marketing Manager, Assistant to Group Training Manager, HRD Manager, F&B Manager, Front Office Manager, Executive Secretary, Spa Manager, Chief Engineer, and so on.

The listening ability of the Superior group may fit the following positions: Front Office Assistant Manager, Reservation Agents, Business Center Supervisor, Front Office Supervisor, Public Relation Officer, Sale & Marketing Officer, Purchasing Officer, Engineer, Accountant, and so on.

These Advanced-High and Advanced-Low level students can be fit into the following positions; cashier, electrical engineer, waiter, waitress, butler, bell captain, Assistant Executive Housekeeping, spa receptionist, Japanese restaurant server, and so on.

The Intermediate-High and Intermediate-Low level students may be able to get the jobs in the following positions: mini-bar man, F&B staff, lounge/lobby bar receptionist, Laundry Manager, Florist Supervisor, operator, and so forth.

In conclusion, the graduating students' listening ability in English for service and hospitality industry was investigated by means of the L-PESH Test administration. The findings showed that these 250 students who took the test had different levels of listening ability. Their ability was classified into eight levels as mentioned earlier. The graduating students who participated in

this study possessed average listening ability, ranging from Intermediate-High to Advanced-Low. Though listening ability was found not to be very high, it is sufficient for the students to perform the tasks in various positions in leading hotels in Bangkok.

In addition, since the cut-off scores and ability descriptors of the L-PESH Test were established based on the test scores of 250 test takers in a single test administration, the statistical values may not be stable. Therefore, in establishing these cut-off scores and descriptors, the researcher did not only rely on the statistical values. The cut-off scores and descriptors were also triangulated by the related experts and educators.

However, the listening ability only cannot indicate the students' real level of language proficiency. In some kinds of test, such as placement decisions or screening decisions for employment, the consideration may cover multiple content categories (i.e., using a combination of scores by separate reading comprehension, writing, and speaking). It is not appropriate to consider only the applicant's particular content area or skill without considering his or her mastery of the other content areas or skills required for a particular position. In such instances it may be advantageous and, in fact, necessary for a complete test or the total student performance to be considered as a whole rather than as one item or content area at a time. Therefore, the L-PESH Test needs three more skills focusing on speaking, reading, and writing to be included in order to increase its standard.

Significance of the research

The results of this study can be beneficial in the following aspects.

1. As for the quality assurance in each university, to see if their graduating students in this field have adequate English ability to enter competitive job markets or not, ESP proficiency tests in English for the service and hospitality industry are needed in order to investigate this ability. The L-PESH Test can serve as part of these tests to be used in investigating graduating students' listening ability.

2. The test results can tell the levels of listening ability of the students and identify their gaps between their present level and the needed level of English competency of each position or the kind of training they may need to get.

3. Research-related participants such as educators, employers/hoteliars, graduating students, and other interested persons can benefit from the results of the study because the findings can:

3.1 provide the guidelines for educators to design English courses to improve their students' ability in English listening, especially in the area of English for service and hospitality in which listening and speaking skills play significant roles. The students should have more chances to practice and improve these two skills in the university. However, in real learning situations, it was found that reading and writing skills are more emphasized while listening and speaking skills are less practiced and evaluated. To serve the need of the job market and to equip the students with adequate ability in English to perform their future tasks, the universities and educators may need to re-consider their curriculum design in this field of study. Courses in English for specific purposes focusing on listening and speaking skills should be included in the curriculum from the very first year of study. With more learning and practices, the students can better their quality in English listening and speaking.

3.2 provide frameworks and processes for language testers to develop any tests of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), focusing on listening skills. These new ESP tests can be used as an in-house test or a standard one.

3.3 be used as self-assessment among students in related fields to practice and improve their listening ability at their own pace.

3.4 be used by employers to measure the candidate's ability in English before the main procedures in their recruitment.

3.5 provide suggestions for further studies concerning listening skill.

Suggestions for further studies

As there are limited budget and time constraints in this study, the researcher was not able to develop tests on the other three skills; speaking, reading, and writing. Moreover, in order to establish standard for a new test, there is a need for more test administrations and a larger group of subjects. To achieve its standard, the new test needs a number of reviews and revisions. And most importantly, the test must be reliable and valid. Therefore, it is advisable that the L-PESH Test be revised and re-administered to other groups of subjects. Item-analysis, the process in setting cut-off scores, as well as the validation of the proposed cut-off scores and ability descriptors should also be reconsidered in further studies.

In addition, this study focused only on listening skill; further studies on developing the tests on speaking, reading, and writing in English for service and hospitality industry are worth conducting. According to some information gained during the interviews, many experts, educators, students, and hoteliers agreed and looked forward to having other three sets of tests that could measure speaking, reading, and writing ability in this field. Some teachers and heads of departments in those four universities who were interviewed had shown interest in joining the researcher to develop the other three tests. They strongly believed that the complete set of the L-PESH, S-PESH, R-PESH, and W-PESH Tests would be useful to improve the English language proficiency of the students in this field.

Moreover, from this study the researcher found that there are many more interesting aspects for future studies. For example, a still study on the comparison of the established cut-off scores from different methods would be interesting. It is also worth considering exploring the relationship between the L-PESH Test scores with the scores from different test types. Further studies can also be conducted to investigate the impact of pictures used in the test. A study of native and non-native English accents used in the

recording is also worth conducting. Finally, alternative methods in setting cut-off scores and ability descriptors can be tried out in future studies.

Lastly, recommendation is also made for educators to consider revising their current curriculum that can provide more learning and practice in English listening and speaking skills. It was also suggested by the specialists in the interviews that students taking this field of study should get acquainted with English for service and hospitality from the very first year in the university. This means that courses in English for service and hospitality should be provided for them from the very beginning. The skills that should be emphasized are listening and speaking followed by reading and writing.

In conclusion, in the eyes of educators and language testers, there is always still more room for studies on establishing standards and setting cut-off scores and their descriptors, particularly for other disciplines of the ESP listening tests. Studies on appropriate curriculum design in English for the service and hospitality industry are also interesting and waiting to be conducted.

The Author

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