

The English Usage of Employees in Selected Chinese Logistics Companies in China

Ma Yu, Faculty of Education, Burapha University, Thailand
Paratchanun Charoenarpornwattana
Chalong Tubsree

Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to study (1) the importance of English usage to employees in selected Chinese logistics companies concerning the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing; (2) to study the frequency of the English usage in the different logistic job functions namely: transportation, warehousing, packaging, distribution, and information in the selected Chinese logistics companies concerning the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and (3) to study the English proficiency of the current logistics employees in selected Chinese logistics companies concerning the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These were studied in selected Chinese logistics companies for current employees concerning the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. A quantitative approach was applied to answer the research questions proposed for this study. The respondents were only employees who worked with logistics functions, which did not include the positions of cleaner, security, and other positions not related to the logistics functions. This study used a questionnaire to collect purposively from a sample of 700 of the population of 965 employees in two selected Chinese logistics companies in China. The statistics used in the data analysis were percentage, mean, standard deviation, t-test, and F-test. From the results of this study, the employees think English usage in the company is important, but they still need a higher awareness of English skills. Employees in the two selected companies used English at least one time during the month, the level of professional English proficiency was average, and the higher the position, the better the English skills.*

Keywords: English Usage, Employees, Logistics, China

Introduction

English language, as we know it, is an international language. From the calculation of Ethnologue: Language of the World in 2015, the data gave the number of first-language speakers in the millions, the number of native English speakers is the third largest in the world, less than only Chinese and Spanish (Fenning, Paul & Simons, 2015). English is a global language (Crystal, 1997, p. 1), it is the first language for many countries around the planet from UK and Ireland to the USA, from Canada to Australia and New Zealand, from Guyana to Jamaica plus others. As a second language, it is also widespread in countries like Central and Eastern European, and English is taught as a part of multilingual education in India, South Africa, Singapore and others (Hingne, 2013, p. 319 - 321). With the accelerating process of globalization, countries are linked more closely, English as a global language plays an essential role under the wave of globalization (Shen, 2013, p. 105). Yoneda (n.d.) added that the use of English is especially widespread in the international business world, so that English has become the standard language of world business. It means that the English language appears almost every place, people could use it anytime and anywhere in the any field.

According to Tu (2016, p. 39), "After 15 years' accession to the WTO, China's position in the world economy and trade has changed greatly, and the ability and demand in global trade governance influence have been enhanced, meanwhile other countries have also had a higher expectation of China's role in global trade governance." According to WTO statistics, the total amount of import and export trade (Ma & Shen, 2015), China is No. 1 in the world. According to the official website of the WTO (World Trade Organization, 2015), English, French and Spanish are the official languages of the WTO, and staff are expected to be able to work in at least two of these (World Trade Organization, 2015). English has a decisive role in world trade activities. Chinese logistics companies want to go far in WTO activities, and language skills of their employees are important, especially English language skills.

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), as the biggest union of Southeast Asia, has an important role in the Asian economy. It is comprised of ten countries with ten different languages, therefore, it is difficult to select any language from the members of ASEAN. As a result, ASEAN must conduct its meetings, formulate its correspondence, record its proceedings and decisions, issue its statements, and undertake its other interactions in English (Chadchaidee, 2013, p. 10). According to statistics from the General Administration of Customs of China (ASEAN-China Centre, 2015), China is ASEAN's largest trade partner, and ASEAN is China's 3rd largest trade partner. As the growth of the trade, the role of logistics will be more important, especially international logistics. In the scope of ASEAN, Chinese logistics companies should follow the language policy of ASEAN to accelerate the cooperation between China and ASEAN. So, English skills in international logistics companies should have the main role.

At present, there are more than 60 countries and international organizations in response to the B & R (the Belt and Road) total population of these countries are around 4.4 billion, and the economy was valued at about \$ 21 trillion, respectively 63% and 29% all over the world (Wikipedia, 2015). As a new strategic method of China's opening policies, the B & R (the Belt and Road) policy is now playing a very important role in promoting the development of logistics (Lin et al., 2015, p. 3), communication and cooperation in this strategy, language has a significant role. Because there are lots of different kinds of languages that these countries and international organizations are using, and the English language is a global language, it will be the basic negotiating language in the B & R (the Belt and Road) strategy. Li (2012, p. 127) explained that if the employee management of international logistics in China, improve their ability to use English in the situation of international workplace will to a large extent determine the strategic development and the success or failure of developing overseas markets.

Ballou (1997, p. 117-129) reported that "Logistics is important because it creates value – value for customers and suppliers of the firm, and value for the firm's stakeholders. To many firms throughout the world, logistics has become an increasingly important value-added process for a number of reasons." So, English usage of the employees will be important for the Chinese logistics companies in China. Four English skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – will be the communication tools that Chinese logistics companies negotiate with other international companies.

Employee development is one of the human resource developments. Holton III and Swanson (2001, p. 3) explained that the two core threads of HRD are (1) individual and organizational learning and (2) individual and organization performance. In the different logistics job functions – transportation, warehousing, packaging, distribution, and information – the frequency of the English language used may differ. Whatever job position the employees are working in, more or less, they should have Basic English language skills when they are cooperating with foreign companies. Berger et al. (2004, p. 102) said "learning some basic language skills can demonstrate your interest in the culture and help you feel less dependent on others. Almost everyone appreciates attempts by a nonnative speaker to communicate in his or her local language, and this show of good will is usually more important than the speaker's degree of proficiency."

Under the background of economic globalization and under the support of advanced science and technology, the development of international economy and trade has been developing rapidly, cooperation increasing more every day, the frequency of the English used also increases. English is a skill that senior talent must possess in today's society, especially the professional logistics companies. Different English levels that employees have, will determine the development of employees in the company, and are the main factors influencing the development of the company. Li (2012, p. 127) stated that "English proficiency in the workplace as an important quality of international logistics employees to promote the logistics company to be international, and to be an intangible asset to strengthen the anti-risk ability and profitability."

Purposes of the Study

1. To study the importance of English usage to employees in selected Chinese logistics companies concerning the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
2. To study the frequency of the English usage in the different logistic job functions namely: transportation, warehousing, packaging, distribution, and information in the

selected Chinese logistics companies concerning the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

3. To study the English proficiency of the current logistics employees in selected Chinese logistics companies concerning the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Research Questions

1. What is the importance of English usage to employees in selected Chinese logistics companies concerning the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing?
2. How frequent is the English usage in the different logistic job functions: transportation, warehousing, packaging, distribution, and information in the selected Chinese logistics companies concerning the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing?
3. What is the English proficiency of the current logistics employees in selected Chinese logistics companies concerning the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing?

Literature Review

Hunt (1988:14, cited in Chetsadanuwat, 2012, p. 45) mentioned that “in 70% of working hours, listening compared to speaking tends to be the most used modality when people want to communicate.” Oxford (1993: 206, cited in Chetsadanuwat, 2012, p. 45) added that among the four skills in English, listening is more essential and plays more vital roles in communication than the other three skills.

There are four basic kinds of skills of English language—speaking, reading, listening and writing. Jones (1996), Burns (1998), and Richards (2008) divided “speaking into three functions—interaction, transactional, and performance (cited in Kongsontana, 2014, p. 9-12). 1) Interaction refers to the normal conversation like greeting, having a brief talk, or describing experiences which are considered as fundamental social aspects. 2) Transactional is the things said or done become the central focus in the situation. 3) Performance refers to public speaking which involves the transmission of information to an audience or peers.” “Reading is fundamentally important for success. It opens the door to personal freedom or shuts the door to opportunity” (DeMoulin and Loye, 1999, p. 43, cited in Rebecca, 2005, p.8). “The ability to read allows us to feel successful, access information, and orient ourselves in the world among competing paradigms.” It also facilitates the exercise of power in North American mainstream society (Pressley, 2002b, cited in Yee, 2010, p. 1), allowing readers to see how others have transformed the world through the written word (Freire and Macedo, 1987, cited in Yee, 2010, p. 1). William (1966, p. 2) explained that “the importance of writing: 1) Names the object, procedure, or knowledge preserved through writing. 2) Reveals how that object, procedure, or knowledge influences life today.”

Bowersox et al. (2013 p. 29) explained that “Logistics is the leadership responsibility to design and administer systems to control movement and geographical positioning of raw materials, work-in-process, and finished inventories at the lowest total cost. The functions of logistics included transportation, warehousing, packaging, distribution and information.” Anthony et al. (2002, p. 49) also explained that “Development of a global logistics strategy to align all logistics initiatives on a global basis is essential . . . [and provides] the framework to move to the “best in class” level. The approach should understand that no two locations would have the same needs or be at the same level in their logistics development. Local conditions, needs, and customer expectations will make the requirements of each market very different. The global logistics strategy must take these differences into account and create tactics that are appropriate for each region to achieve significant benefits in changing the logistics paradigm.”

According to Bowersox et al. (2013, p. 191-193), “There are five basic transportation modes—rail, truck (also referred to as motor carrier or highway), water, pipeline, and air”. Bowersox, Closs and Cooper (2007, p. 168-169) stated that “Transportation decisions are influenced by six parties: (1) shipper, sometimes referred to as the consignor; (2) destination party, traditionally called the consignee; (3) carriers and agent; (4) government; (5) internet; and (6) the public”. Figure 1 shows the relationship among transportation participants.

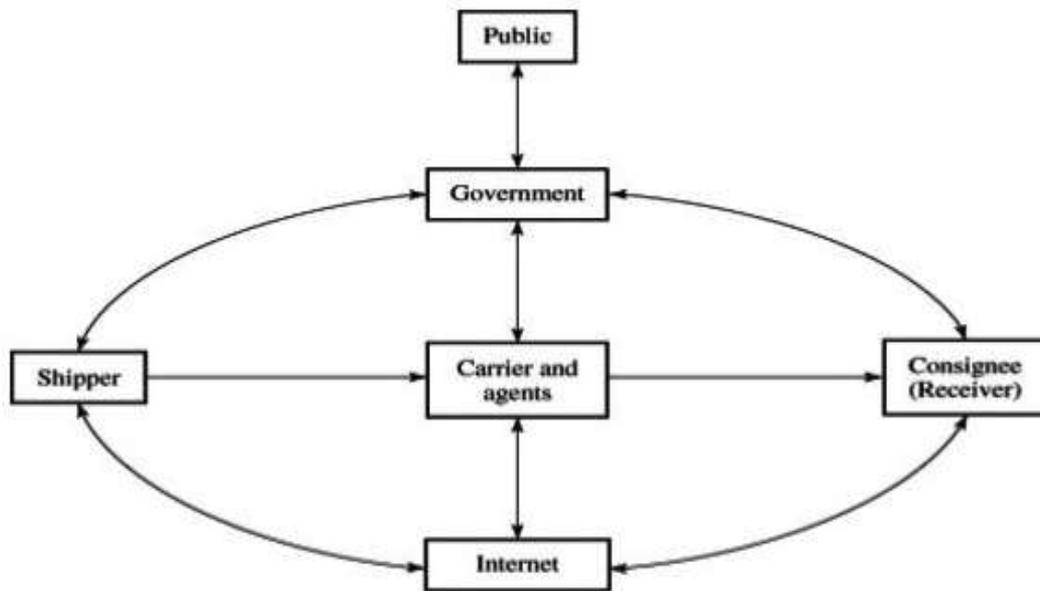


Figure 1 Relationship among Transportation Participants

Source: Bowersox et al. (2007, p. 169)

“Warehousing is one of the important auxiliaries to trade. It creates time utility by bridging the time gap between production and consumption of goods. The effective and efficient management of any organization requires that all its constituent elements operate effectively and efficiently as individual SBUs (strategic business units) / facilities and together as an integrated whole corporate. A good warehouse management can improve the efficiency for the company” (Tungsub, 1995, cited in Charojrochkul, 1999, p. 17). Stevenson (1996, cited in Charojrochkul, 1999, p. 18) emphasized the importance of warehousing as follows:

- To accomplish the production and transportation economy.
- To achieve the quantity purchase discount.
- To absorb the effect of changing market conditions.
- To achieve the least-total cost.

Bowersox et al. (2013, p. 248) explained that packaging is typically viewed as being either consumer, focused primarily on marketing, or industrial, focused on logistics. Anthony et al. (2002, p. 249) stated that three purposes are served by packaging: identifying the product, protecting it, and aiding in handling. “Identification serves a variety of purposes, from automated recognition of the product through bar coding to promotional purposes: packages make the product stand out on a store shelf and say, “take me home” to the customer. The protective function is to protect the product and, in some instances, to keep the product from damaging surrounding items. Packaging also makes handling the product in distribution a much simpler task. The choice of packaging materials is influenced by concerns for environmental protection.”

Kasiphongphaisan and Supasansanee (2009, p. 11) said that “a channel that has only a producer and final customer, with no middlemen providing assistance is called “direct distribution”, whereas a channel of producer, final customer, and at least one level of middlemen represents an “indirect channel”.” The most common distribution channels for consumer goods is shown in Figure 2 which illustrates the major channels of distribution.

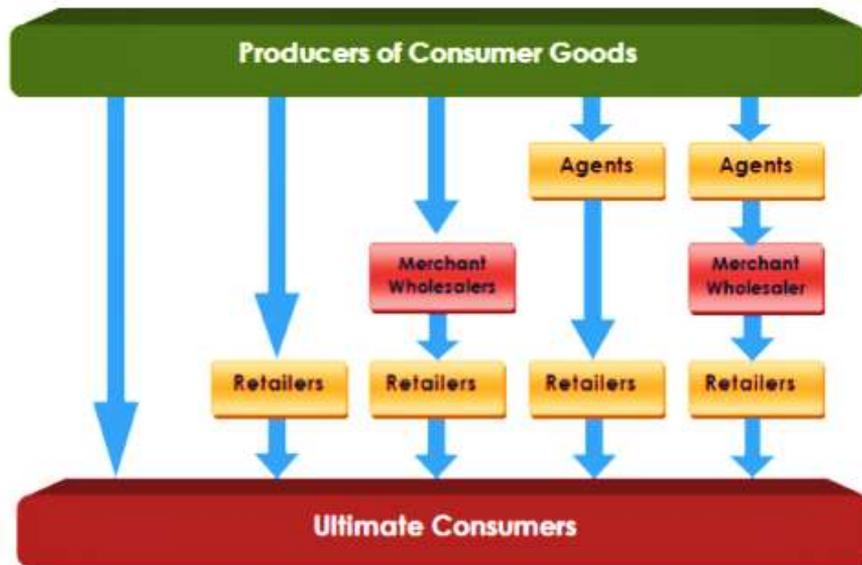


Figure 2: Major Channels of Distribution

Source: Kasiphongphaisan and Supasansanee (2009, p. 12)

“A logistics management information system is necessary in order to provide management with the knowledge to exploit new markets; to make changes in packaging design; to choose between common, contract, or private carriage; to increase or decrease inventories; to determine the profitability of customers, to establish profitable customer service levels; to choose between public and private warehousing; and to determine the number of field warehouses and the extent to which the order processing system should be automated” (Lambert & Stock, 2001, p. 166).

Research Methodology

A quantitative research approach was applied to this study. The population in this study were employees who work in two selected Chinese Logistics Companies, and these employees are Chinese. The total number of the population from the two companies was 965 employees. To make sure all the respondents working in logistics positions, the sample was employees and managers selected purposively from the population of two companies. The respondents were only employees who worked with logistics functions, which did not include the positions of cleaner, security, and other positions not related to the logistics functions. The number of participants was 700 employees from the population.

Data Collection

The researcher contacted the two selected Chinese logistics companies in China. The questionnaire was translated to Chinese and the questionnaires were distributed by the Internet to all respondents who were in the sample group. The questionnaire system was closed in 3 months.

Results

The researcher collected 592 questionnaires from a total sample of 700 questionnaires, and 514 questionnaires were valid. The quantitative data was analyzed in terms of percentage, mean, standard deviation, t-test, and F-test. The researcher analyzed the data collected from the questionnaires by using the SPSS program.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations of three purposes which include six aspects

Six Aspects in Three Purposes	\bar{x}	<i>SD</i>	Level
• The Importance of English Usage in General Life	3.08	1.13	Average
• The Importance of English Usage in the Company	3.38	1.12	Average
• Frequency of English Used in General Life	2.65	1.24	Monthly
• Frequency of English Used at Work	2.76	1.30	Monthly
• Level of General English Proficiency	2.71	1.12	Average
• Level of Professional English Proficiency	2.68	1.14	Average

Table 1 shows the Means and Standard Deviations of three purposes which include six aspects. For purpose 1, the respondents were at an “Average” level in both aspects. For purpose 2, the respondents were at a “Monthly” level in both aspects. For purpose 3, the respondents were at an “Average” level in both aspects.

Table 2 Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes between Males and Females

Six Aspects in Three Purposes	t value	Sig.
• The Importance of English Usage in General Life	-3.789	0.000
• The Importance of English Usage in the Company	-1.712	0.088
• Frequency of English Used in General Life	-3.235	0.001
• Frequency of English Used at Work	-2.092	0.037
• Level of General English Proficiency	-1.921	0.055
• Level of Professional English Proficiency	-2.119	0.035

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 2 shows Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes between Males and Females. There were no significant differences in “The Importance of English Usage in the Company” and “Level of General English Proficiency”. There were significant differences in “The Importance of English Usage in General Life”, “Frequency of English used in General Life”, “Frequency of English Used at Work”, and “Level of Professional English Proficiency”.

Table 3 Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes among Different Age Level which are 18-22 years old, 23-27 years old, 28-32 years old, 33-37 years old, 38-42 years old, 43-47 years old, and 48 years old and above

Six Aspects in Three Purposes	F	Sig.
• The Importance of English Usage in General Life	0.827	0.550
• The Importance of English Usage in the Company	3.728	0.001
• Frequency of English Used in General Life	1.685	0.123
• Frequency of English Used at Work	4.293	0.000
• Level of General English Proficiency	4.411	0.000
• Level of Professional English Proficiency	4.110	0.000

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 3 shows Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes among Different Age Level which are 18-22 years old, 23-27 years old, 28-32 years old, 33-37 years old, 38-42 years old, 43-47 years old, and 48 years old and above. There were no significant differences in “The Importance of English Usage in General Life” and “Frequency of English Used in General Life”; There were significant differences in “The Importance of English Usage in the Company”, “Frequency of English Used at Work”, “Level of General English Proficiency” and “Level of Professional English Proficiency”.

Table 4 Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes among Different Working Experience which are 0-3 years, 4-6 years, 7-9 years, 10-12 years, 13-15 years, 16-18 years, 19-21 years, and 22 years and up

Six Aspects in Three Purposes	F	Sig.
• The Importance of English Usage in General Life	0.499	0.835
• The Importance of English Usage in the Company	3.276	0.002
• Frequency of English Used in General Life	1.968	0.058
• Frequency of English Used at Work	2.525	0.015
• Level of General English Proficiency	2.023	0.051
• Level of Professional English Proficiency	1.547	0.149

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 4 shows Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes among Different Working Experience which are 0-3 years, 4-6 years, 7-9 years, 10-12 years, 13-15 years, 16-18 years, 19-21 years, and 22 years and up. There were no significant differences in “The Importance of English Usage in General Life”, “Frequency of English Used in General Life”, “Level of General English Proficiency” and “Level of Professional English Proficiency”. There were significant differences in “The Importance of English Usage in the Company” and “Frequency of English Used at Work”.

Table 5 Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes among Different Education Background which are Lower than High School, High School, Bachelor Degree/College Degree, and Master Degree and up

Six Aspects in Three Purposes	F	Sig.
• The Importance of English Usage in General Life	14.117	0.000
• The Importance of English Usage in the Company	24.840	0.000
• Frequency of English Used in General Life	24.157	0.000
• Frequency of English Used at Work	33.019	0.000
• Level of General English Proficiency	63.137	0.000
• Level of Professional English Proficiency	64.036	0.000

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 5 shows Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes among Different Education Background which are Lower than High School, High School, Bachelor Degree/College Degree, and Master Degree and up. There were significant differences in “The Importance of English Usage in General Life”, “The Importance of English Usage in the Company”, “Frequency of English Used in General Life”, “Frequency of English Used at Work”, “Level of General English Proficiency” and “Level of Professional English Proficiency”.

Table 6 Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes among Different Job Functions which are Transportation, Warehousing, Packaging, Distribution, and Information

Six Aspects in Three Purposes	F	Sig.
• The Importance of English Usage in General Life	3.569	0.007
• The Importance of English Usage in the Company	4.408	0.002
• Frequency of English Used in General Life	3.398	0.009
• Frequency of English Used at Work	2.332	0.055
• Level of General English Proficiency	0.689	0.600
• Level of Professional English Proficiency	2.302	0.058

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 6 shows Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes among Different Job Functions which are Transportation, Warehousing, Packaging, Distribution, and Information. There were no significant differences in “Frequency of English Used at Work”, “Level of General English Proficiency” and “Level of Professional English Proficiency”. There were significant differences in “The Importance of English Usage in General Life”, “The Importance of English Usage in the Company” and “Frequency of English Used in General Life”.

Table 7 Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes among Different Level in the Company which are Operator, Supervisor, and Manager

Six Aspects in Three Purposes	F	Sig.
• The Importance of English Usage in General Life	5.345	0.005
• The Importance of English Usage in the Company	4.267	0.015
• Frequency of English Used in General Life	2.433	0.089
• Frequency of English Used at Work	6.906	0.001
• Level of General English Proficiency	6.419	0.002
• Level of Professional English Proficiency	7.079	0.001

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 7 shows Comparison of Six Aspects in Three Purposes among Different Level in the Company which are Operator, Supervisor, and Manager. There were no significant differences in “Frequency of English Used in General Life”. There were significant differences in “The Importance of English Usage in General Life”, “The Importance of English Usage in the Company”, “Frequency of English Used at Work”, “Level of General English Proficiency” and “Level of Professional English Proficiency”.

Discussion

(1) The Importance of English Usage in General Life. The results show the respondents had an “Average” level in the aspect of “The Importance of English Usage in General Life”. It means that the respondents think the importance of English usage in General Life is at an average level. This result may show some of the employees in the companies do not have enough awareness that English is becoming more and more important today. The researcher considered that the reasons might include living environment, education background, life career plan and so on. With the development of China in recent years, many foreigners have come to China, in order to make it more convenient for these foreigners to travel and live, many cities are beginning to use English in public places. English usage in today's life in China has a significant role.

(2) The Importance of English Usage in the Company. The results show the respondents had an “Average” level in the aspect of “The Importance of English Usage in the Company”. It means that the respondents think the importance of English usage in the company is at an average level, compared with the aspect of “The Importance of English Usage in General Life”, it had a higher score even they both at the same level. The result may show some of the employees in the companies do not have enough awareness of the importance of English usage in their companies – international logistics companies. The researcher considered that the reasons might include the work environment, education background, personal needs in the company, role in the company and so forth. The Educational Testing Service Test of English for International Communication (ETS TOEIC, 2016) and Ipsos public affairs team conducted a survey, to understand the well-known multinational enterprise staff English level and usage situation. The research examines the Brazil, China, Colombia, France, Germany, Japan and others totaling 13 countries and regions of 749 large multinational companies' human resources managers. Overall, the importance of English skills is widely agreed by the companies surveyed. 87% of the companies surveyed think English skills are crucial. Research results show that, in China, 75% of companies encourage employees to improve their English ability, it shows that at present most Chinese enterprise value employees' English skill levels. According to statistics, China's enterprises generally are aware of the demand for English skills of employees, 88% of respondents thought English skills are crucial.

(3) Frequency of English Used in General Life. The results show the respondents had a “Monthly” level in the aspect of “Frequency of English Used in General Life”. It means that the respondents use English skills in general life at an average level. This result may show some of the employees in the companies do not use English or use less in their general life. The researcher considered that the reasons might include living environment, education background, family situation, and other personal reasons. Lu (2012, p. 473) mentioned some examples of English used in general life in China, and almost all cities have street signs in Chinese and English. When a bus arrives, the name of the station is automatically reported in Chinese and English. All these are convenient for foreign visitors. In addition, people in all fields are beginning to learn and use English. Taxi drivers can communicate with foreign passengers in daily English. Even retired workers have started to learn English, they think that there are a lot of foreign tourists coming to China to travel these years, if

some visitors ask the way to them, they can speak English and show foreign tourists in the right direction.

(4) Frequency of English Used at Work. The results show the respondents had a “Monthly” level in the aspect of “Frequency of English Used at Work”. It means that the respondents used English skills at work at an average level, compared with the aspect of “Frequency of English Used in General Life”, they got a very close score but “Frequency of English Used at Work” is higher, and they both are at the same level. The result may show some of the employees in the companies do not use English or use less at work. The researcher considered that the reasons might include education background, English level, job function, level in company and other personal reasons. Feng (2015. P. 142) researched English usage for Logistics work, one of the results is “frequency of Logistics English usage at work” is in real Logistics works, two of the options “Often Use” and “Average” got a score of 77%, so the frequency of Logistics English usage is high.

(5) Level of General English Proficiency. The results show the respondents had a “Average” level in the aspect of “Level of General English Proficiency”. It means that the respondents’ general English proficiency is at the general level. This result may show some of the employees in the companies are very poor or poor in general English skills. The researcher considered that the reasons might include education background, awareness of general English importance, and other personal reasons. EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2016, p. 1) tested people who were 18-50 years old in 72 countries, and Chinese adults’ English level ranked 39th in the world, at the lowest level. The EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) attempts to rank countries by the average level of English language skills amongst those adults who took the EF test.

(6) Level of Professional English Proficiency. The results show the respondents had an “Average” level in the aspect of “Level of Professional English Proficiency”. It means that the respondents’ professional English proficiency is at an average level, compared with the aspect of “Level of General English Proficiency”, they got a very close score but the aspect of “Level of Professional English Proficiency” is lower, and they both are at the same level. This result may show some of the employees in the companies are very poor or poor in professional English skills. The researcher considered that the reasons might include education background, awareness of professional English importance, job position, level in company and other personal reasons. The results show a higher position level with a higher level of professional English proficiency. The Educational Testing Service Test of English for International Communication (ETS TOEIC, 2016) and Ipsos public affairs team conducted a survey of more than 50% of Chinese enterprises staff. It promoted more opportunity to employees who have good English skills; at the same time, the higher position levels required better English skills. The survey showed that the level of executives with English skills was as high as 80%, more than the global average (73%).

Recommendations

Based on the results in the conclusions part of this research, there are some recommendations as below.

1. Recommendations for Implications. Employers should encourage employees to learn more English. Also, the companies may need to give more chances to employees who have less working experience or lower education backgrounds, to help them improve their English proficiency rapidly, in order for them to have more proficiency in English skills to work better in their international logistics positions.

2. Recommendations for Future Research. The focus on ASEAN and China may require future research in the usage of other languages such as Lao, Thai, and Burmese, or other ASEAN member countries’ languages. Because of emphasis on the WTO and China, future research can be done in French usage, Spanish usage, and Portuguese usage, or other WTO member countries languages can be used in future research. Future research can be done from other aspects of employees, such as translation skills, business writing skills, or employees’ mentality. These aspects can be used in logistics companies, or in any other kind of company.

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