

Roles of Language and Culture towards Customer Satisfaction in the Competitiveness of the Thai Tourism Industry

Thavorn Thitthongkam

Sripatum University, 61 Phaholyothin Road, Sena-nikom, Jatujak, Bangkok 10900. Thailand.

thavorn.th@spu.ac.th

ABSTRACT

Language and culture are important parts towards customer satisfaction. Understanding them well will never un satisfy with some complex mistakes. The purposes of this paper were to study international tourists and tour company managers on customer satisfaction in the competitiveness of the Thai tourism industry with regard to the perspectives on the language roles on customer satisfaction, the language roles in culture, the establishing and the maintaining of competitiveness. In-depth, face-to-face qualitative interviews were engaged with a convenience sample of 42 international tourists and 32 tour company managers. They were from snowball technique and a random basis from all international tourists who used to visit Thailand and tour company managers. A semi-structured interview form was created as a research tool by the researcher in an attempt to obtain information to answer the research question. The results focused on the language roles on customer satisfaction, language roles in culture, establishing and maintaining competitiveness for the Thai tourism industry. It is recommended that organizations should emphasize the importance of the language and culture that can satisfy the international tourists or customers.

Keywords: *Competitiveness, Customer Satisfaction, Establishing and Maintaining Competitiveness, Roles of Language and Culture, Tourism Industry*

1. INTRODUCTION

The language and culture are key factors in tourism industry (Hall, 1976: 90). In particular, it is one of the most general public discussions with millions of people taking part in its establishment when entering a numerous of communicative situations. The language used in tourism is a particular kind of language of the fulfilling various functions that relate to the specific position of tourism in the current society. It relates to sociological side, which enables better understanding of tourism communication community (Gitman & Carl, 2005: 78; Thitthongkam et al., 2010). Sociological studies indicate that the tourism search for realism, participating might come into argument with what is authentic valuable (Duff, 2000: 54). Sociological studies also propose that tourism communication is closely related to a wide range of cultural issues. As a result, the language and culture of tourism can provide a revealing insight into the nation and into the changes of existing culture.

The language and culture are very important to the tourism industry. It is believed that they assist the tourism increase the figure of the international tourists. There are many international tourists from all over the world that they are not speaking the same languages. Therefore, language and culture play important roles.

The language and culture involve a method of socialization for those who make it and those who interpret it (Kessler, 2003:88; Dann, 2001:29). Tourism is also referred to communication (Thitthongkam et al., 2010; Thitthongkam & Walsh, 2011; Thitthongkam, 2012), advertising, and promotion (Johns, 2003:70). Since the tourism industry has become one of the most important economic influences, it needs positive

advertising and public relations efforts to offer countless services to the travelling public and persuade them to tour to specific places (Berry, 1991:60).

This study aims to explore perspectives of the international tourists and tour company managers towards customer satisfaction in the competitiveness of the Thai tourism industry with respect to the perspectives on the language roles on customer satisfaction, the language roles in culture, the establishing and maintaining of competitiveness.

With this objective in mind, the paper is structured in four more parts. In the first part, a review of literature serves as a reference for analysis of the results. In the second part, the setting of the research methodology employed is described. In the third part, there is a presentation of the research findings obtained the data analyzed in order to answer the research question. Finally, conclusions and recommendations of the empirical work are presented.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section focuses on review of literature. The contents cover the definitions of the term culture, dimension of culture, types of culture, level of culture, customer satisfaction, the importance of customer satisfaction, impact of culture on satisfaction, Thai cultural points, relevance of the Thai cultural points and customer satisfaction, improving customer satisfaction, and assessing customer satisfaction.

2.1 Definitions of Culture

Many educators defined meaning of culture similarly. Summers (2000) defined culture as the ideas;

the customs, beliefs, all other human thought are shared and accepted by a particular group of people. Reisinger and Turner (2003) supported that culture is multi-dimension phenomenon. Soeda (2008) refers to language, which is a part of culture. Culture is based on belief system (Willging, 2004). Culture is an integrated prototype of behaviour and the typical way of people's life (Terpstra et al., 2006; Ueltschy et al., 2007). It is everything that people have, and think of taking action as a member of population. Culture is related to customer motivation. Culture has significant impact on customer satisfaction. This is supported by Ueltschy et al. (2007). Thus, culture is a vigorous factor that creates customer trust, thought, behavior, beliefs, desires, acceptance, and attitude. Usunier (1996) stated that culture is a channel for communication and interaction. The sources of culture are language, nationality, education, profession, ethnicity, religion, family, sex, social class, and corporate or organizational culture. Richards, Platt and Platt (1995) indicate that attitudes, behavior, and social habits are parts of culture. Culture is a key success of customer satisfaction. Understanding of culture, language plays a

significant role as a mean in transferring from one culture to another culture (Thitthongkam&Walsh, 2010). It is believe that the impact of culture on customer satisfaction is resulted in differences in service quality because culture is the lens through which perceptions are categorized.

2.2 Dimension of Culture

Hofstede and Hofstede (2004) identified culture as a multi-dimension. There are five dimensions: large-small power distance (PDI) (hierarchy), individualism (IDV) - collectivism, masculinity-femininity (MAS) (gender), strong-weak uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) (truth), short term-long term orientation (LTO) (virtue) as shown in Figure 1.

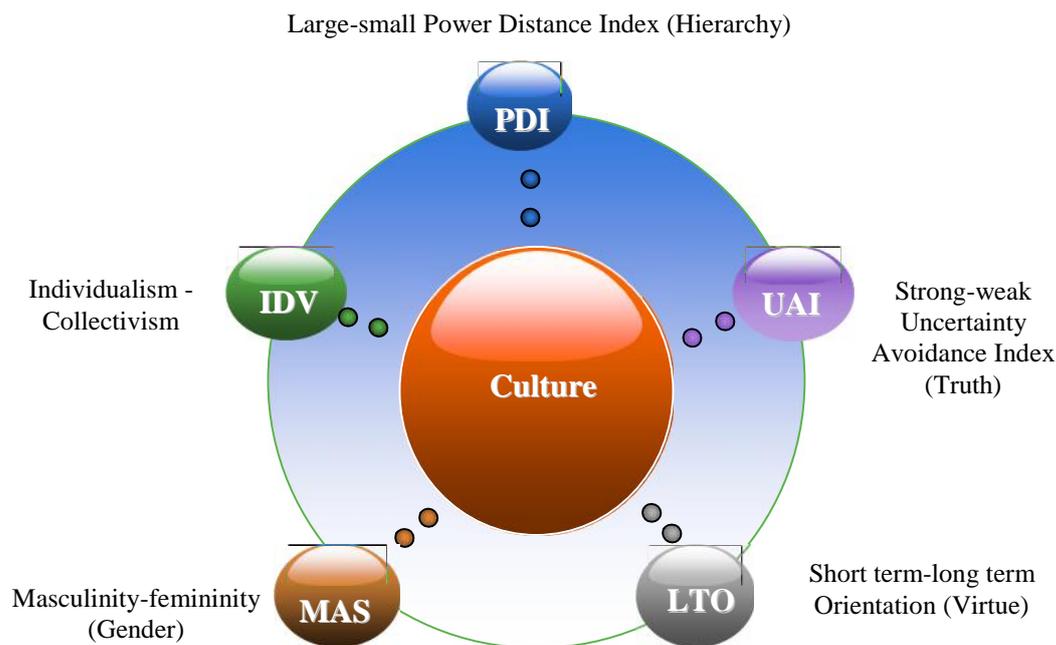


Fig 1: Hofstede' Dimensions
 Source: Adapted for this paper

Large-small Power Distance (PDI) (hierarchy) – By “power distance” means the extent to which members of a culture expect and accept that power is unequally distributed (Neuliep, 2006). If unequal distribution of power is widely accepted, it will call “Large Power Distance”. “Small Power Distance” is reverse. Unequal distribution of power is only accepted to a limited degree. It is the extent to which the less powerful members of

organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Another word, this dimension is accepted by society of unequal distribution

of power. It is believed that power inequality is extremely fundamental facts. They can find in any society and anybody with some international practice. All societies are unequal. Some are more unequal than others. In Thai culture, it seems to be large power distance cultures since

the Thai cultures have some features such as inequalities are expected and desired, centralization is popular, there is a wide range of salaries, managers rely on superiors and on formal rules, subordinates expect to be told what to do, etc.

Individualism (IDV) - collectivism – By “individualism” means cultural orientation that the individual is unique and that emphasizes individual goals over group goals, where is the term “collectivism”, the group is the main unit of culture (Neuliep, 2006). It concerns with the expectation that everyone is to take care of oneself and one immediate family. Individualists are independent, autonomous entities that look for themselves and their immediate families (Liu et al., 2001; Imrie et al., 2002; Lee&Kacen, 2008). Efficient service is demanded more by customers in individualistic cultures. It is emphasized that in western cultures, efficiency of service is more valued than in the Asian service manner (Riddle, 1992; Liu et al., 2001). Japan and Korea are example countries with individual cultures (Kong&Jogaratanam, 2007). In Thai culture, it seems to be collectivism.

Masculinity-femininity (MAS) (gender) - It refers to roles between the genders. Women's values are different from men's values. This dimension also emphasises on assertiveness, competitiveness and materialism. The assertive pole has been called “masculine” and the modest, caring pole “feminine”. The women in feminine countries have the same modest, caring values as the men; in the masculine countries, they are somewhat assertive and competitive, but not as much as the men, so that these countries show a gap between men's values women's values. Sweden, for example, is classified as masculinity dimension (Vitell et al., 1993). There are overlapping social role for both men and women.

Strong-weak Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) (truth) - It is the avoidance of the situation (Phillips, 2005) for uncertainty, unstructured and ambiguity. Uncertainty accepting cultures, people are more liberal of opinions; they try to have as few rules as possible. Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility situations by strict laws and rules, safety security measures, and on the idealistic and religious level by a belief in absolute truth. Unstructured situations are unknown and different from usual. Ambiguity means unclear or unpredictable situation. People in uncertainty avoiding countries are more sensitive. Vitell et al. (1993) proposed that the countries such as the United States of America and Canada are characterized by uncertainty avoidance dimension.

Short term-long and term Orientation (LTO) (virtue) - It is regardless of truth. Long-term orientation focuses on future. Short-term orientation focuses at present. They respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's “face”.

Tsoukatos and Rand (2007) stated that there is a possible relationship between the dimensions of culture

and customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction has directly supported by culture.

2.3 Types of Culture

After the researcher has received types of culture, and concluded that the types of culture in global context are different. However, culture is classified into two types. They are national culture and organizational culture. Voss (2006) pointed out the national culture as the most important one. This type of culture is according to geography, history, politics, economic, religion and language.

Gillespie et al. (2008) refers to organizational culture. Organizational culture involves organization and employees. Operational results from organizational members are shown to narrate both for employees and organization as a whole. Customer satisfaction will be an important key factor of a successful and prosperous organization. It is also involved profit margins, customer retention and purchasing repeat of organizations. There is a significant relationship between culture and satisfaction of customers (Gillespie et al., 2008; Thitthongkam&Walsh, 2011). According to Bellou (2007), customer satisfaction can be determined by the operation organization culture. It is indicated that customer satisfaction is strongly impacted by organization culture operation (Chow et al., 2002; Bellou, 2007). Measuring the organizational culture, the organizational culture profile is known as one of the instruments (O' Reilly et al., 1991).

2.4 Level of Culture

Phillips (2005) pointed out that understanding culture must be reviewed on several levels. Schein (1999) classified culture into three levels. They are artifact, espoused value, and basic underlying assumption. Artifact is the most superficial manifestation of culture (stories, jokes, ceremonies). This level of culture can be seen, heard, and felt in an organization. Espoused value is a norm and a rule that guide behavior (strategies, goals, philosophies). It explains behavior. Basic underlying idea concerns the reality and human nature, which involves unconsciousness, beliefs, thoughts and feelings. It can be transformed time by time.

2.5 Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction means meeting and exceeding the expectations and the customers have about the experience they are going to receive when visiting business (De Keyser&Vanhove, 1997). It is the most powerful and stable forces operating in organizations (Phillips, 2005). Williams (2006) agreed that customer satisfaction is made up of the concepts of customer expectations and perceptions. Customer satisfaction is a basic construct given its established relationship with customer relationship, customers repurchase behavior, and revenue earned.

2.6 The Importance of Customer Satisfaction

Customers are an economic asset (Kanji&Wallace, 2000). Hence, customer satisfaction should be the goal in tourism industry. The purpose of a business is to satisfy customers, so that the business can retain them. Seeking understanding of customer satisfaction and examining cultural differences provide a better understanding (Bianchi, 2001; Kong&Jogaratanam, 2007). Understanding culture can satisfy the needs and the desires of customers (De Keyser&Vanhove, 1997). In addition, it reduces differences (Winkler, 2005) and conflict (Neyer&Harzing, 2008) which can affect upon customer satisfaction (Voss, 2006). Culture helps increase positive communication (Blades, 2009:28) with customers, and better to understand the importance of differences (Chung&Smith, 2007). Therefore, satisfying customer is important in tourism industry competitiveness. People involved cannot be understood fully without paying much attention to cultural context (Kandampully et al., 2001). Some studies also suggest that culture plays a role in determining how customers evaluate the quality of service (Liu at al., 2001; Imrie et al., 2002).

2.7 Impact of Culture on Satisfaction

Communication between service providers and customers arise with potential difficulties and misunderstandings (Guptara, 1992). The difficulties are from culture differences. To ensure success in dealing with difficulties and be competitive, people involved in tourism industry should recognize and understand the differences that potentially exist based on nationality and culture. Therefore, achieving competitiveness, service provision should be designed to effectively react to different language and culture of customers (Kong&Jogaratanam, 2007).

Previous research indicates that customers from different backgrounds have different satisfaction (Kandampully et al., 2001; Heo et al., 2004). Satisfying customers in tourism industry, language and cultural backgrounds will make it possible (Sizoo et al., 2005). According to William et al. (2006), customer satisfaction occurs when customer judge the service they have received equals or better than their expectation.

Surviving in highly competitive industry, organizations need to provide services that meet customer satisfaction. Culture is a component in achieving customer satisfaction. Understanding roles of language and culture on customer satisfaction is important because language and culture can change customer desires (Szumal, 2007), and it is necessary of considering culture when interpreting customer satisfaction (Ueltschy et al., 2007). The information helps understanding customers from different cultural backgrounds (Kandampully et al., 2001). Tse at al. (1988) confirmed that roles of language and culture have predictable significant effect on customer satisfaction. It is distinguished in the degree of regulation of customer behavior, attitudes, values (Tse, at al., 1988), and satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction is also based on cultural interpretations and beliefs of customers. Within organizations, there has been noticed a considerable increase in a global activity (Kovacheva, 2004). It is perhaps the impact of culture on today's customer satisfaction has significantly involved. Tourism industry is an obviously seen example, which involves understanding cultures of customers from different countries. Understanding of culture provides a competitive advantage to the organization (Bellou, 2007). Moreover, culture affects the perception of customer's anxiety (Hauser et al., 2008). Also, culture helps employees to provide better service and to communicate more efficient with customers (DDI, n. d.). It also brings customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction through word-of-mouth. To bring understanding of culture, language plays a significant role (Collins, 1994; Short, 1994; Hirschman, 1995; Barker, 2008; Thitthongkam, 2010).

Boshoff and Gray (2004) argued that satisfaction or dissatisfaction is not depended on the service, instead, is related to culture of customers. In fact, culture affects of customer satisfaction on willingness to pay for products (Ueltschy et al., 2007; Huh, 2002).

Thus, it can be concluded that culture impact on customer satisfaction. Creating customer satisfaction with understanding of the cultural differences can lead to competitiveness in tourism industry. Culture difference is probably the reason of argument that some customers greatly have.

2.8 Thai Cultural Points

Winning customer satisfaction is important because an increase in customer satisfaction will lead to greater repurchase, the country's revenue, and the Thai tourism industry competitiveness. Customer satisfaction in Thai tourism industry comes from better understanding of Thai culture. This section presents general concept ideas about Thai culture, which certainly influences on customer satisfaction.

Thailand is known as "Land of Smiles". It is called "Land of Smiles" because there are different kinds of smiles such as the polite smile, used for strangers who are barely know, the smile to mask feeling of unhappiness, the smile used to mock, or laugh at someone, and so forth. This indicates that Thai smiling has several meanings. Thai smiling is used to show happiness, embarrassment, fear, tension, resignation, etc. So, it is sometimes hard to distinguish types of the Thai smiles. Understanding Thai culture in the point of smiling is beneficial to international tourists or customers because it helps to be aware of smiles. It is emphasized that the Thai smiles do not necessary mean the same as a smile on the west or in other countries around the world. Some Thai people smile as a form of apology. Sometimes they smile if they are unable to answer some questions.

Businessmen who run business in Thai tourism industry can always expect the best performance from the Thai people. Absolutely, the Thai people will need time to adapt for a new assignment or a new situation. This means that businessmen must understand the point of adaptation.

The Thainess makes Thai people always say “yes” all the time. Saying “yes” can favour others. However, it does not always mean they understand the task assigned to them well enough. So, it is recommended that asking what the Thai people understand will help getting the expected task done in the right way. Otherwise, the “yes” answer will be a cause of wasting time. The researcher had faced the case when he was working with a western supervisor. The supervisor gave the researcher the task. The researcher agreed to what his supervisor was saying. Unluckily, the researcher ended up having things done that the supervisor had not asked for. It took another month to complete the right one. The researcher assumes that other Thai people will do the same way.

The Thai people are not so creative in terms of the capacity to react and solve unexpected situation. Being creative people, the Thai people certainly need some training or practice. Practice only makes the Thai people do thing perfectly.

In term of power distance in Thai culture, it is not easy to meet talk with higher-ranking people. Meeting an important person, the president of the organization as an example needs to meet many lower ranking people first. You are lucky if you have a good connection with someone who is close to the president. Then you may take shorter time.

Many Thai people learn to admire the rich and famous people. The rich people can turn wrong thing to right thing easily using money without getting into prison. A simple example, a rich and famous man who hit a pedestrian died, and he could afford for the punishment, he did not have to be in jail. He is still admired by other people. Similarity, car drivers who maybe named as richer people on the street rarely stop for pedestrians at zebra crossing because they have never thought of other people even when it rains cats and dogs. They can break the law whenever they like, and police officers do not pay much attention. It is unlike when the poor do.

2.9 Relevance of the Thai Cultural Points and Customer Satisfaction

As stated, customer satisfaction is a part from cultural points. The phrase “Thailand is the land of smiles” can persuade international tourists or customers to visit Thailand. The smiles that are showing happiness, sincerity, politeness, including impressing and admiring international tourists or customers help create the international tourist or customer satisfaction. In contrast, the smiles such as, showing that a winner gives a losing rival, showing unhappiness, mock or laugh at tourists or

customers certainly create negative feeling to them. They may decide not to come back, and tell other people they know not to come. This will influence directly to the tourism industry, especially in term of revenue that the companies and the country will earn. Another point, the Thai people are reliable. This cultural point helps to create international tourist or customer satisfaction. By reliable means they are worthy of trust and based on fact. This important point create good image to international tourists or customers. Also, saying “yes” all the time of the Thai people can create better feeling of tourists or customers. This shows the willingness and helpfulness create positive feeling to tourists or customers. In term of power distance, tourists or customers may feel uncomfortable, inconvenient and feel difficult to deal with since it will take a lot of their time. Interestingly, admiring the rich and the famous people can cause some conflicts. Take the case those car drivers who maybe named as a rich people on the street rarely stop driving for pedestrians to cross even at the zebra crossing as an example, international tourists or customers who come to Thailand, they may feel that the Thai people do not pay respect to them. This will lead to the decision of their future visit. Some international tourists or customers may go sightseeing; they are in such as situation. Then they may feel that they do not want to come to Thailand anymore.

Obviously, the Thai people often have a stereotyped perception of some behavior, which provides imperfect picture of the people in the country. These behaviors are nonverbal language which impact on customer satisfaction, will lead to competitiveness in Thai tourism industry.

2.10 Improving Customer Satisfaction

The strategy exists to help organizations develop the current levels of customer satisfaction. Some organizations have been released the international customer service standard (Ganesh et al., 2000: 64). They enable organizations to focus their awareness on delivering excellence in the management of customer service. It should have the quality to offer to customers. Policy, processes, people, premises, product and services, as well as performance measurement, they are important to help the customer satisfyingly (Fey&Denison, 2003: 14). The implementation of a customer service standard should lead to higher levels of customer satisfaction, which in turn influences customer retention and customer loyalty.

2.11 Assessing Customer Satisfaction

Assessing customer satisfaction provides a hint of how doing well the organization is at offering products and, or services to the market. Customer satisfaction is an unclear and abstract idea. The actual sign of the state of satisfaction will differ from person to person product, and service to product and service (Johnson, 1996: 49). Satisfaction relies on a figure of both psychosomatic and physical variables, which associate to satisfaction behaviors such as coming back and recommend degree. The level of satisfaction can also change depending on

other preferences. The customer may retain other products or service in contrast to which the customer can compare the organization's products or service. The common measures of customer satisfaction involve interviewing using techniques. The customer is asked to evaluate in term of their perception expectation of performance of the organization being measured (Fornell et al., 2006: 70).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To explore the perspectives of the international tourists and tour company managers towards customer satisfaction in the competitiveness of the Thai tourism industry with respect to the perspectives on the language roles on customer satisfaction, the language roles in culture, the establishing and the maintaining of competitiveness.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was based on in-depth face-to-face qualitative interviews with convenience samples of 42 international tourists and 32 tour company managers. They were selected using snowball technique and a randomly basis from all international tourists who used to visit Thailand, and tour company managers. The purpose is to explore the perspectives of the international tourists and tour company managers towards customer satisfaction in the competitiveness of the Thai tourism industry with respect to the perspectives on the language roles on customer satisfaction, the language roles in culture, the establishing and the maintaining of competitiveness.

A semi-structured interview form in English was created as a research instrument by the researcher. It consisted of two main parts. First part was the informant information about personal data of the interview. The second part consisted of questions to obtain information to answer the research question.

After designing an interview form, it was given to tourism industry experts in designing interview forms to consider. Some changes were made as a result. After that, the researcher made appointments with the international tourists and tour company managers for interviewing. Each interview spent 20-30 minutes. Interviews of international tourists were conducted via online.

Future research would benefit from more intensive interviewing with informants and further development of the research agenda. A larger and more varied sample might also be helpful. This paper presents only some of the findings accumulated from the research. The findings focused on customer satisfaction in the competitiveness of the Thai tourism industry with respect to the perspectives on the language roles, on customer satisfaction, the language roles in culture, the establishing and the maintaining of competitiveness.

5. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The international tourists and tour company managers have various perspectives towards customer satisfaction in the competitiveness of the Thai tourism industry with respect to the perspectives on the language roles on customer satisfaction, the language roles in culture, the establishing and the maintaining of competitiveness as the following discussion.

5.1 Language Roles on Customer Satisfaction

Most of the international tourists as the informants were satisfied because the tour company staff are able to communicate in English. Tour companies must take good care of international tourists such as services, and preservations of local culture. The informants are very satisfied that they encountered friendly people.

Maintaining the informants' satisfaction, eye contact, and smiling, using appropriate body language can also help as mentioned by Ueltschy et al. (2007). The informants stated that people in the tourism industry need to remember that international tourists may not understand much of Thailand and its language and culture. Subsequently, they may make mistakes or acts against local culture. Thai people need to understand that the act is not intentional, just a mistake.

Moreover, the informants supported that the crucial factors in the process of making maintaining their satisfaction is using word and language in communication of the vendors and the service providers. This includes having a good manner because they must always think the international tourist is God in tourism industry. This means, using polite language can create customers' satisfaction.

Focusing on tour company managers as the informants, maintaining the international tourist satisfaction, most of them pointed out that a company with good service would always perceive those tourism-related companies that they have very strong English skills. International tourists will feel confident if they understand a staff who can communicate well.

The crucial factors in the process of establishing and maintaining international tourist satisfaction is to know international tourists' preferences and needs habits. The international tourists will feel more important. Providing materials or manpower using native language of the international tourists can help. This supports Voss (2006) when he pointed out that language is an important tool in establishing and maintaining customer satisfaction.

In brief, to international tourists, maintaining satisfaction is based on being aware of the tourists needs as much as possible. Satisfaction occurs because of the understanding of the informants' communication, needs, meeting needs, providing alternatives, tracking and monitoring service level, ongoing improvement by learning from past experience, patience, courtesy, having

service mind and realize to first advantage international tourists. It is marked that the crucial factors are continual communications even after they have left. A real sale is when they come back. For tour company managers, maintaining satisfaction is based on being aware of the tourists needs as much as possible. Satisfaction is created when the tourism staff understand the international tourists' communication, needs, and meeting needs. This indicates that language plays an important role on customer satisfaction.

5.2 Language Roles in Culture

The international tourists as the informants love to learn about different language and culture. For simple tourists, knowledge of the Thai language is not essential. Nevertheless, the Thai language and culture are important to the informants, especially for someone who is interested in the Thai culture. It would definitely be a great advantage if they could read and speak the Thai language. In contrast, they emphasized that Thailand should not adapt too many western qualities as Thailand has plenty of own qualities. As westerners, they are rather interested in exploring the difference between the Thai culture and their cultures. That is why the international tourists dominated places are not really interesting for them. Thai tourism industry lives from the exotic difference to their home countries and not from finding what they have.

The informants pointed out that their languages and cultures are significant in Thai tourism industry competitiveness. They are important for the Thai people to understand, and then they can take advantage of the knowledge to satisfy the international tourists with their needs. The satisfaction the informants are, the bigger they spend. If people in Thai tourism industry understand, they can serve better; know what to do and not to do which is consistent with the findings of Kandampully et al. (2001), Heo et al. (2004), Sizoo et al. (2005), and William et al. (2006).

The informants enjoy learning about the culture. It is part of their experience that the informants pay for. Actually, the informants want to be immersed in authentic Thai culture when they visit Thailand; not visit a country that mirrors their own. An informant stated, "I would not go to a foreign country to eat American food, or look for American culture. More importantly, I would want only Thai culture to colour my world adventures to Thailand."

They do not mind feeling uncomfortable in order to learn something about a new culture. They have positive view to learning the Thai language as one says, "If you know the Thai language, you can communicate with the Thai people, you will learn more culture too."

The informants verbalized that tour companies in Thailand can manage and operate well. They are ready to help tourists, as one of the informants says, "First time when my friend came from India, he booked hotel in Bangkok. He did not know here than the hotel managers

operate to help my friend. They sent staff to pick up my friend from hotel. So I think Thai tour companies are good at managerial and operational levels"

The informants do not expect everyone in Thailand to understand them, but someone who is going to deal with international tourists, it is very important. The more ones understand their clients, the better they can serve them. The better a visitor is served, the more likely they will make return trips. Sometimes the informants' culture will help the tour staff understand tourists from different countries better.

By getting to know other cultures, they will then be able to provide and meet the needs of people from different countries. Providing good service is one of the most important ways to make people feel comfortable and like the place. This will enhance competitiveness in the tourism industry.

Focusing on culture, most people travel to see an expensive different culture. So, if tourism industry has supply different levels of mixes of cultures, then the international tourists would have a choice. For example, 1) High level of Thai, dressing up in traditional custom's, meals, dances, 2) Middle Level of Thai; Western dressing with Thai food and some western food, 3) Low level of Thai; Casual dress with western food and a bit of Thai with western music.

Focusing on language, the informants realized that the Thai tourism industry cannot afford to train people working in this industry to learn every language in the world. So, the informants think as far as the staff are able to speak some of the main speaking languages in the world, it is enough.

Thai culture is important because they believe every tourist who visited a country would like to see the country culture. Understanding the culture helps reduce misunderstandings and awkwardness when communicating with local people.

For tour company managers, as the informants, they stated that the Thai culture and the Thai language were important in Thai tourism industry competitiveness. The Thai people still prefer to use their own language or feel more confident using native language to communicate or convey their needs. Thus, using the Thai language is still a necessary tool in tourism industry competitiveness. This shows that the tourists from other countries also feel comfortable the same way if they can communicate in their native languages.

The informants emphasized that the international tourists' cultures and their languages were important in Thai tourism industry competitiveness. Learning the international tourists' needs and preferences, languages and cultures are very important in a service-oriented industry. In most cases, the memorable holidays are always those whom the informants gave personalized

service because they researched for international tourist needs and preferences, and even up to the extent of providing these services through the use of their native language.

The informants also referred to some habits. The tour companies help international tourists to understand the Thai language and culture. In terms of Thai culture, the informants promote it through various activities or tours relating to cultural places to open the international tourists' knowledge of Thai culture. As far as language is concerned, for online travel company, communicating in Thai language with international tourist is hardly used or is not used at all. The informants would normally use standard Thai greetings or courtesies whenever there are opportunities. Another way that the tour company helps the international tourists is about understanding of the Thai language and culture when conducting the tours. They have Thai staff to provide historical information to the international tourists, and answer any questions the international tourists may have.

The Thai language and culture are important in the Thai tourism industry competitiveness when they involve using Thai driver and guides. They also regularly negotiate with Thai businesses to gain discounts. It is important for their staff to know not only the language but also the culture. So, the informants can empathetically negotiate with each other, and not cause offences.

The informants had considered dimensions of culture for both at managerial and/or operational levels. Culture has an important role to play in the society and the organization as well. It is important to know the cultural similarities and differences of each staff to be able to work effectively with them. For example, even majority of the people in the informants' company are Buddhism, the companies also opened to celebrate Christian cultures and values such as gift giving during Christmas or New Year Season. On the contrary, foreign employees have to respect Thai culture and belief; they can gain the cooperation from the team well. Thai culture strongly gives respect to older people even if in terms of organizational rank, people are considered superior.

The informants realized that if they did not understand their tourists, the tourists would find someone that did. In tour business, the tourists are always right and come first if they are going to be successful. Paying attention to see how quickly those that did not serve their tourists got out of business.

The tour companies also helped the Thai tourism industry to be able to compete through language. The informants handed out brochures that give a background of Thailand and its people. It provides information about culture that international tourists can do and cannot do in the country.

In short, language and culture certainly play important roles on customer satisfaction; especially

language helps foreign employees, international tourists, and locals to understand the culture of others. Understanding other cultures will lead to satisfactory of the international tourists.

5.3 Establishing Competitiveness

The international tourists as the informants pointed out that language is not an unelectable factor for establishing competitiveness. It helps to provide good service, and to advertise so as to get more international tourists. Establishing competitiveness, the tour companies should set a contact for international tourists to sign, and should also manage personal accident insurance for tourists. Moreover, the tour companies need to increase the best service, and make standard service charge implement more promotion for each month, especially during the long holidays. The ability in communication helps understand tourists better so as to fulfill their needs and meet their expectations, and gain their assurance.

Good language skills also help selling tourism products better. When the language of the international tourists can be used, it establishes competitiveness. The informants who can communicate in their own language, they feel more at ease and more comfortable travelling. Language also helps establish competitiveness in tourism industry in terms of building good relationship with tourists. Hence, it is important for tour companies to employ people who are fluent in specific languages such as English, Chinese, Russian, etc.

Focusing on the international tourists' consideration, Thai tourism industry product suppliers and marketers might establish competitiveness to help Thailand a preferred tourist destination by paying more attention on language factor. Definitely, it will bring better service, and establish better understanding.

Tour company managers as the informants pointed out that their companies could establish and maintain competitiveness through the language roles. As earlier mentioned they continuously improve their product offerings and making it available in various languages in order for international tourists to put Thailand as a preferred destination. Moreover, they consistently improve the language skills of their manpower through training and various activities that could enhance their language skills.

Establishing competitiveness in tourism industry with respect to language roles, the informants described that developing language competitiveness is an ongoing task for them. They continued to improve skills of their staff to be able to be more competitive in the tourism industry. Also, the key is to ensure that all staff is competent in the local foreign languages. It is also important that staff is able to connect appeal to customers personally, which goes beyond the language itself.

The roles of language help establish competitiveness in the tour company

(Thitthongkam&Walsh, 2010). Because of consistent development of the language skills of the informants' team, it has become their valuable asset, and has helped them grow and be more efficient in their areas of work. For example, the informants' sales teams are able to negotiate for better deals because of excellent language proficiency.

Importantly, the informants described that language can help a lot in establishing company for competitiveness in tourism industry. Nevertheless, the point is that the Thai laws are quite tough and hard. If a company wants to overcome these issues, the company must hire some qualified people, but there must be a work permit for each one. One work permit can be obtained by registering a TH 2 million (US\$ 58,823.52) company. So in this aspect, if some companies need to hire 5-6 people, they must have a capital of TH฿10-12 million (US\$ 294,117.64-US\$352,941.17). This is a very big obstacle. A small company cannot do anything. The informants confirmed that the language helps increase revenue for the tour companies if they can communicate well, can understand international tourists' needs and wants, and can deliver what the international tourists want. Then, it will attract more international tourists, and will gain more revenue as a result.

At last, the informants reconfirmed that the language helped increase revenue for the tour company. Strong skill set, especially in their operations enabled them to improve their booking conversion, as they are able to convince their international tourists more effectively on their products and services because of excellent language skills.

In conclusion, focusing on the establishment competitiveness, the Thai tourism industry product suppliers and marketers might establish competitiveness to help Thailand a preferred tourist destination by paying more attention on language and culture factors. The informants who involve long enough in Thai tourism industry confirm on this matter. Language and culture can bring better service and create better understanding.

5.4 Maintaining Competitiveness

The international tourists expressed that maintaining competitiveness in the Thai tourism industry needs to think of religion, language, and culture. A high level of language skill helps to understand the needs of international tourists. Another practice for maintaining competitiveness is to prepare some phrases of Thai, and to study some cultural points. The informants pointed out that promoting the country would encourage maintaining competitiveness. To maintain competitiveness, it is also meaningful to build satisfaction as the informants insisted, "Customer satisfaction is important because the customer is always correct." Service and hospitality is certainly important elements, which brought up by one of the informants, "I think service and hospitality is something to think about. Bad service is something people don't usually forget."

For the tour company managers, they suggested that maintaining competitiveness in Thai tourism industry needs to think of satisfaction. Satisfaction can motivate repurchase of the international tourists. Making the international tourists satisfied, language and culture play an important role in communication. Effective communication creates better understanding, which will lead to competitiveness in Thai tourism industry. This is consistent with the perspectives of Chung and Smith (2007), and Blades (2009).

The crucial factor includes the most important critical in the process of maintaining international tourists. They affect competitiveness in tourism industry. The most crucial factor affecting international tourist decision or maintaining them is the security or political stability issues. If the international tourists still feel secure travelling to a particular destination, then even if that country is in economic recession. Still, many tourists will consider travelling because during economic recession, prices of commodities or products tend to go down. So, their purchasing power is bigger only if the country of that tourist is not affected by the recession. However, if there is any threat to security or tourist safety, embassies would issue a travel warning or travel ban, thus, greatly affecting travel industry. Price would not be a major issue because even expensive cities like Tokyo or London are still popular tourist destinations.

The most important and critical in the process of maintaining international tourists, they affect competitiveness in tourism industry is about good advertising, which involves language, as well as things like photo, video etc are very important. They appeal to potential tourists. This helps to create a positive image for the country, which can attract tourists.

The informants have also thought about maintaining long-term competitiveness for their tour companies. The major criteria of choosing the factors included the language and culture. The informants have been doing many long-term projects to be more competitive in the market. One example is gaining region market share. If the Thai market is very stable, and Thais need to travel within the region, the informants are sure that they will get a bigger share of this market. They will be more competitive.

Also, they have been developing popular packages and destinations for region market to attract them to book with the informants. However, maintaining long-term competitiveness for tour company need to consider economic predictions, ways to differentiate the services, and different trends in the actual country of origin of tourists. For example, the informants have noticed that more Russians are coming to Thailand, which may be a new market for them, and require them to become skilled in the language and culture.

Concisely, language and culture are key factors that play imperative roles towards customer satisfaction in tourism industry. Understanding them well can lead to competitiveness, and can maintain competitiveness in tourism industry sustainably.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of this study demonstrate the importance of language and culture, which influence the capacity to compete in the tourism industry. Understanding of language and culture is advantageous to both locals and international tourists. The international tourists can make use of leisure time happily. Focusing on tour companies, they can take part in reducing some conflicts and misunderstandings among locals and international tourists. Language is an important tool for communication, and it helps to create understanding of the issues. In other words, language and culture are the most important factors of customer satisfaction and understanding of local people. People in the country and the international tourists need to comprehend language and culture properly. Understanding the differences of each other and caring for each other are important. Moreover, language and culture can facilitate to increase the number of international tourists, which is the main source of revenue and employment. Consequently, they can lead to competitive advantage. Thus, the tour companies need to know about language and culture of international tourists. Establishing competitiveness, language and culture can bring better service and understanding. Similarly, maintaining competitiveness, language and culture issues need to be concentrated. Thus, it is recommended that organizations should emphasize the importance of language and culture to gain international tourist or customer satisfaction.

REFERENCES

- [1] Barker, C. (2008). *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. 3rd Edition. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- [2] Bellou, V. (2007). Achieving long-term customer satisfaction through organizational culture: evidence from the health care sector. *Managing Service Quality*, 17(5), pp. 510-522.
- [3] Berry, L., & Parasuraman, A. (1991). *Marketing Services, Competing Through Quality*. New York: Free Press.
- [4] Bianchi, C. (2001). The Effect of Cultural Differences on Service Encounter Satisfaction, *Proc. of American Marketing Association Conference, AMA, Chicago, IL*, 12, pp. 46-52.
- [5] Blades, M. (2009). Don't forget the culture check. *Leadership and Management*, February, p. 28.
- [6] Boshoff, C., & Gray, B. (2004). The relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction and buying intentions in the private hospital industry. *South African Journal of Business Management*, 35(4), pp. 27-37.
- [7] Chow, C. W., Harrison, G. L., McKinnon, J. L., & Wu, A. (2002). The organizational culture of public accounting firms: evidence from Taiwanese local and US affiliated firms. *Accounting, Organizations, Society*, 27, pp. 347-360.
- [8] Chung, M., & Smith, W. (2007). The importance of overcoming cultural barriers in establishing brand names: an Australian company in China. *Innovative Marketing*, 3(2), pp. 33-43.
- [9] Collins, R. (1994). Trading in culture: the role of language. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 19(3), pp. 45-53.
- [10] Dann, G. (2001). *The Language of Tourism: A Sociolinguistic Perspective*. 2nd Edition. Wallingford, UK: CAB International.
- [11] De Keyser, R., & Vanhove, N. (1997). Tourism quality plan: an effective tourism policy review. *The Tourist Review*, 3, p. 33.
- [12] Denison, D. R., & Mishra, A. K. (1995). Toward a theory of organizational culture effectiveness. *Organizational Science*, 6, pp. 204-223.
- [13] Development Dimensions International (DDI). (n.d.). *Service Culture*. MMIII, pp. 1-5.
- [14] Duff, A. M. (2000). *Writing and Translating into English as a Second Language*. Ljubljana: Slovenia, DZS.
- [15] Fey, C. F., & Denison, D. R. (2003). Organizational culture effectiveness: Can American theory is applied in Russia? *Organizational Science*, 14, pp. 686-706.
- [16] Fornell, C., Mithas, S., Morgeson, F. V., & Krishnan, M. S. (2006). Customer satisfaction and stock prices: high returns, low risk. *Journal of Marketing*, 70, pp. 3-14.
- [17] Ganesh, J., Arnold, M.J., & Reynolds, K.E. (2000). Understanding the customer base of service providers: an examination of the difference between switchers' stayers. *Journal of Marketing*, 64, pp. 65-87.
- [18] Gillespie, M., Denison, D. R., Haal, S., Smerek, R., & Neale, W. (2008). Organizational culture and customer satisfaction. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, pp. 1-33.

<http://www.ejournalofbusiness.org>

- [19] Gitman, L. J., & Carl, D. M. (2005). *The Future of Business, the Essentials*. Mason, Ohio: Southwestern.
- [20] Gupta, P. (1992). The impact of culture on international negotiation. *European Business Review*, 92 (2), pp. xi-xii.
- [21] Hall, E. J. (1976). *The Language of Tourism in English: English for Careers*. New York: Regent.
- [22] Hauser, R., Paul, R., & Bradley, J. (2008). The Impact of Culture and Computer Self-Efficacy in an Online Training Environment, *Proc. of the Academy of Information Management Sciences*, 12(2), pp. 19-21.
- [23] Heo, J. K., Jogaratnam, G., & Buchanan, P. (2004). Customer-focused adaptation in New York City hotels: exploring the perceptions of Japanese and Korean travellers. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 23 (1), pp. 31-53.
- [24] Hirschman, L. (1995). The roles of language processing in a spoken language interface. *PNAS*, 92(22), pp. 9970-9976.
- [25] Hofstede, G., & Hofstede, G-J. (2004). *Cultures Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- [26] Huh, J. (2002). *Tourist Satisfaction With Cultural/Heritage Sites: The Virginia Historic Triangle*. Master of Science Thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.
- [27] Imrie, B. C., Cadogan, J. W., & McNaughton, R. (2002). The service quality construct on a global stage. *Managing Service Quality*, 12(1), pp. 10-18.
- [28] Johns, J. (2003). *Fundamentals of Customer-Focused Management: Competing Through Service*. Westport, Conn: Praeger.
- [29] Johnson, J. W. (1996). Linking employee perceptions of service climate to customer satisfaction. *Personnel Psychology*, 49, pp. 831-851.
- [30] Kanji, G. K., & Wallace, W. (2000). Business excellence through customer satisfaction. *Total Quality Management*, 11(4), pp. S979-S998.
- [31] Kandampully, J., Mok, C., & Sparks, B. (2001). *Service Quality Management in Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- [32] Kessler, S. (2003). *Customer Satisfaction Toolkit for ISO 9001: 2000*. Milwaukee, Wis.: ASQ Quality Press.
- [33] Kong, M., & Jogaratnam, G. (2007). The influence of culture on perceptions of service employee behavior. *Managing Service Quality*, 17(3), pp. 275-279.
- [34] Kovacheva, E. (2004). *The Impact of Culture Factors on the Diffusion Rate of Information Technology in Subsidiaries of a Multinational Corporation*. M. Sc. Thesis, Swedish School of Economics Business Administration.
- [35] Lee, J. A., & Kacen, J. J. (2008). Cultural influence on customer satisfaction with impulse and planned purchase decisions. *Journal of Business Research*, 61(3), pp. 265-275.
- [36] Liu, S., Furrer, O., & Sudharshanan, D. (2001). The relationships between cultures and behavioral intentions towards services. *Journal of Services Research*, 4(2), pp. 118-129.
- [37] Neuliep, J. W. (2006). *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach*. 3rd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [38] Neyer, A-K., & Harzing, A-W. (2008). The impact of culture on interactions: five lessons learned from the European commission. *European Management Journal*, 26(5), pp. 325-335.
- [39] O'Reilly, C. A., Chatman, J., & Caldwell, D. F. (1991). People and organizational culture: a profile comparison approach to assessing person – organization. *Academy of Management Journal*, 34(3), pp. 487-516.
- [40] Phillips, M. J. (2005). *The Impact of Organizational Culture on the Perceived Quality of Service Delivery*. D. B. A. Nova South-eastern University.
- [41] Richards, J. C., Platt, J., & Platt, H. (1995). *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*. Essex: Longman.
- [42] Riddle, D. (1992). Leveraging Cultural Factors in International Service Delivery. In Swarz, T. A., Bowen, D. E., & Brown, S. W. (eds.), *Advances in Services Marketing and Management*, 1, JAI Press, Greenwich, CT, pp. 279-322.
- [43] Reisinger, Y., & Turner, L. (2003). *Cross-cultural Behaviour in Tourism Concepts Analysis*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- [44] Schein, E. H. (1999). *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide: Sense and Nonsense about Culture Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<http://www.ejournalofbusiness.org>

- [45] Short, D. J. (1994). Study exam examines role of academic language in social studies content-ESL classes. *Forum*, 17(3), Spring.
- [46] Sizoo, S., Plank, R., Iskat, W., & Serrie, H. (2005). The effect of intercultural sensitivity on employee performance in cross-cultural service encounters. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 19(4), pp. 245-255.
- [47] Soeda, Y. (2008). Educational Towards Improving the Quality of Life on Woman: Impact of a Community-Based Organization in Rural Kenya. Master of Arts Thesis, the University of Oregon. Eugene.
- [48] Summers, D. (2000). *Longman Business English Dictionary*. Barcelona: Pearson Educational Limited.
- [49] Szumal, J. L. (2007). How organizations work: improving customer service by changing culture. Human Synergistic International. Accessed 9 August 2009 from <http://www.humansynergistics.com>
- [50] Terpstra, V., Sarathy, R., & Russow, L. (2006). *Global Environment of Business*. Garfield Heights, H.O.: North Coast Publishers.
- [51] Thitthongkam, T. (2011). A Study of Language Roles in Thai Tourism Industry Competitiveness. Ph.D. Dissertation, School of Management, Shinawatra University.
- [52] Thitthongkam, T. (2012). Thai tourism industry competitiveness in the future: perspectives to current tourism Industry, competitiveness in the tourism market and the language roles. *International Journal of Information, Business and Management*, 4 (3), pp.23-42.
- [53] Thitthongkam, T., & Walsh, J. (2010). Roles of language in tourism organizational management. *Asian Journal of Management Research*, 1(1), pp.184-499.
- [54] Thitthongkam, T., & Walsh, J. (2011). The need for language skills training for tourism company staff in the Thai tourism industry: Managerial perspectives. *KKU Research Journal*, 10(1), pp.140-159.
- [55] Thitthongkam, T., Walsh, J., & Banchapattanasakda, C. (2010). Language roles in internal and external communication in the Thai tourism industry competitiveness. *Acta Universitatis Danubius Economica*, 2/2010: 46-57.
- [56] Thitthongkam, T., Walsh, J., & Bunchapattanasakda, C. (2011). Language roles in communication in tourism industry. *Res Manageria*, 1(1), pp.65-75.
- [57] Tse, D. K., Lee, K-h., Vertinsky, I., & Wehrung, D. A. (1988). Does culture matter? A cross-cultural study of executives. *Journal of Marketing*, 52(4), pp. 81-95.
- [58] Tsoukatos, E., & Rand, G. K. (2007). Cultural influences on service quality and customer satisfaction: evidence from Greek insurance. *Managing Service Quality*, 17(4), pp. 467-485.
- [59] Ueltschy, L. C., Laroche, M. Eggert, A., & Bindl, U. (2007). The service quality and satisfaction: an international comparison of professional services perceptions. *Journal of Service Marketing*, 21(6), pp. 410-423.
- [60] Usunier, J. C. (1996). *Marketing Across Cultures*. 2nd Edition. London: Prentice Hall.
- [61] Vitell, S. J., Nwachukwu, S. L., & Barnes, J. H. (1993). The effect of culture on ethical decision-making: an application of Hofstede's typology. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 12(10), pp. 753-760.
- [62] Voss, L. C. (2006). The Importance of Customer Satisfaction Cultural Influences in the European Hospitality Industry: A Case Study of a Four Star Hotel in Spain, Germany, and England. Master of Arts Dissertation, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos Höskolan Dalarna.
- [63] Willging, P. (2004). Culture is just more than just beethoven. *Nursing Homes*, 53(3), pp. 18-22.
- [64] Williams, C. (2006). *Service Quality in Leisure Tourism*. Boswell Wallingford: CABI.
- [65] Winkler, H. (2005). The impact of culture on HR. Accessed 12 August 2009 http://www.ssonetwork.com/topic_detail.aspx?id=142&ekfrm=10

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Thavorn Thitthongkam had received a Bachelor Degree and a Master Degree from Srinakharinwirot University. He had earned a Ph.D. in Management Science from School of Management at Shinawatra University. Currently, he is working as a lecturer at Sripatum University, Bangkok, Thailand. He has over 19 years of academic experience. His area of interest includes teacher development, roles of language in tourism industry competitiveness, language communication, language and culture, customer relation management, and business administration.