

## Using Business English as a Lingua Franca for Written and Spoken Communication: Challenges Encountered by Thai Human Resources Professionals in An American Multinational Company

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### ABSTRACT

*Unquestionably, English is a medium for international communication, particularly in multinational companies (MNCs). In this regard, professionals who work in MNCs, including human resources (HR), inevitably encounter challenges in using English in the workplace environment where people are from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This study attempts to examine how Thai HR professionals perceived the role of business English as the lingua franca (BELF) and how they faced the challenges in using English for workplace communication. This survey study employed a mixed-methods approach for data collection. A questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview were developed to collect the data. Thirty-nine Thai HR professionals at an American oil and gas subsidiary in the Bangkok metropolitan area were purposively selected. Data collected from both instruments were analysed using descriptive statistics and content analysis, respectively. Our data analysis demonstrates that most of the respondents had a positive attitude about using BELF in their organisation. However, it was necessary for them to be aware of their interactants' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and to effectively use BELF and avoid serious mistakes in their written and spoken communication. In summary, this study reveals that the Thai HR professionals understood the BELF concept and faced more difficulties in spoken communication tasks (e.g., press briefings and business negotiations) in comparison to written tasks. The findings can be beneficial for educators and HR trainers in terms of*

*awareness of intercultural business communication and guidance for developing BELF-oriented courses for university students, graduates and HR professionals.*

*Keywords: Business English as a lingua franca; spoken communication; written communication; communication challenges; Thai HR professionals*

## INTRODUCTION

The number of international businesses has been increasing and multinational companies (MNCs) expand their global marketplace, decentralise management, and have operations around the globe (Cogo & Yanaprasart, 2018). In order to operate such businesses successfully, much of the office staff must be fluent in English. Thus, the concept of Business English as a lingua franca or BELF – a use of English as a neutral and shared communication code among users from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds - has become popular (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Takino, 2017). In this sense, such professionals should prioritise how to use BELF to effectively communicate with their colleagues and/or business counterparts. Most MNCs require their employees to have effective communication skills in English. Such English skills include reading, writing, speaking, and listening; however, specific skills depend on the specific professions and the levels of positions (e.g., entry, middle, etc.) (Chan, 2019; Coffelt, Grauman & Smith, 2019).

One of the professions in which English communication skills are necessary in MNCs is human resources (HR). In the HR field, these professionals typically take responsibility for the most valuable asset of the organisation, as they are responsible for contacting employees in different departments, cultivating a healthy work environment, and maintaining qualified employees (Dharmjiva, 2018). As a result, they have more opportunities to deal with colleagues from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds within their own department and across departments. This can lead to challenges, as each colleague speaks English in his or her own accent and at varying levels of ability. In addition, jargon is used variously in particular professions, and the communication styles of individuals (e.g., personal vs. functional) are different, as well. These factors can cause miscommunication and/or communication breakdown. Thus, English communication in international workplaces or MNCs is a huge challenge for HR professionals, including ones in the Southeast Asian and multilingual context such as Thailand and Malaysia (Dharmjiva, 2018; Karachedee, 2017; Marina & Rajprasit, 2016; Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012). Even though English is key for all professionals working in MNCs, including HR professionals, studies on this issue in Thai contexts are limited. This study attempts to investigate Thai HR professionals' views concerning BELF and its use in an American subsidiary, in order to broaden an understanding of this phenomenon.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### INTERNATIONAL WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION

Globalisation involves companies around the world extending their business overseas, having branches in different countries, many foreign employees, and mergers between companies from different countries. Such companies have obviously hired employees from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and English is used as a working language or an international language, as

we all know. Thus, employees have to fluently communicate in English, get the job done, and build trust and productivity (Kassim & Ali, 2010; Takino, 2017). In the current workplace, employees are required to have three essential communication skills. First is the ability to write, as in reports, proposals, minutes, memos, agendas, letters, and correspondence. Second, oral communication includes presentations, business meetings, business negotiations, and telephone calls. Last, visual and electronic communication skills, such as producing animated marketing material or interactive visual aids and writing effective e-mail, are also essential in many jobs (Coffelt, Grauman & Smith, 2019). However, such skills are specific to an industry, occupation, and/or organisational culture. Each context requires specific skills, and employees have to adapt their skills to new tasks or contexts (Coffelt, Grauman & Smith, 2019).

Recent studies have reported and may explain how Thai professionals experience challenges in English workplace communication. Sanjit (2015) studied Thai employees' opinions and actual English ability in a multinational company, especially regarding other people's accents. Those employees admitted that their reading skills needed improvement and that their work-related vocabulary needed to be much bigger. In a similar study, Wisawajaroenkit (2015) investigated English communication among Thai employees (i.e., sales staff, sales coordinators, and administrative staff) in a Japanese trading MNC. That study revealed that speaking English was a serious problem for them, even though English was the corporate language in their company, and they received English training at work. In another study, Dharmajiva (2017) explored the attitudes of Thai employees (e.g., accountants, secretaries, and salespeople) regarding using business English at MNCs, and identified the difficulties they encountered. Even though those employees worked in an international environment, some communicative tasks (e.g., writing formal documents, understanding business English terms, having the confidence to communicate in English, and responding in English) were problematic to them, they said that their overall work performance was not undermined. However, their attitudes about using BELF were positive. Karachedee (2017) attempted to survey Thai employees' needs for English communication skills in an MNC, and reported that, among the Thai employees, English is essential. Those with good English communication skills are better at completing tasks, apart from domain-specific knowledge, with foreign colleagues and interactants. In a study by Marina and Rajprasit (2016), Thai human resources professionals at an oil and gas MNC in Bangkok were surveyed on their use of communication mobility (communication strategies). The study confirmed the expected communication problems among people of different nationalities. The key is individuals' strategies for overcoming obstacles in such communication. The HR profession has been underexamined, in terms of how such staff have experienced these challenges.

#### BUSINESS ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

In international workplace settings (e.g., multinational companies), English is used as a lingua franca. In such settings, non-native English speakers outnumber the native English speakers, and communication occurs regularly among these groups (Jenkins, 2015, Louhiala-Salminen, & Kankaanranta, 2012). Thus, the use of English in such settings tends to emphasise how to achieve communication goals, and native-like use of the language is not priority. Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005: pp. 403-404) explain that: "*BELF refers to English used as a neutral and shared communication code. BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as her or his mother tongue.*" According to these pioneers, most speakers are non-native users of English who mainly focus on achieving communication goals. BELF is highly

recommended in one's home country and in subsidiaries abroad. Therefore, using BELF is standard in many MNCs and the ultimate goal of BELF users is to get the job done (Cogo & Yanaprasart, 2018). BELF has three important contextual features: the scope of use (global business), the users' roles (professions), and the overall goal of the interactions (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013). In addition, it can be characterised as a simple, hybrid, or highly dynamic communication code. BELF requires clarity and accuracy of the content and knowledge of business vocabulary more than pure linguistic accuracy (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). Thus, BELF competence is one of the essential abilities (i.e., business knowhow and multicultural competence) required in today's global business environment (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010).

#### HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS IN THE INTERNATIONAL WORKPLACE

Human Resources (HR) is designed to maximize employees' performance of their employers' strategic objectives. Generally, HR departments are responsible for a wide range of activities, from participating in interviews and doing performance appraisals; setting and developing a corporate strategy; setting and complying with tasks; managing resources and talents; recruiting and selecting new resources; dealing with coaching, mentoring, and counselling; reviewing workers' performance; and dealing with HR branding and consulting. In the HR departments, there are four categories of job levels: the lower or entry level, middle level, senior level, and specialized level (Johanson, 2009). Typically, HR professionals help develop strategic messages and communicate with employees, as well as communicating the employees' intentions and interests to management. That is to say, HR functions are essential. Routinely, HR professionals in international workplace settings (e.g., MNCs) interact with people inside and outside their organisation who have the same and different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, English is a primary language used for workplace communication which require HR professionals to be proficient in the language. Communicative activities that take place in their daily work include chairing and speaking in meetings, writing reports, editing written materials, communicating with staff from other departments, resolving workplace conflicts involving staff from other departments, and communicating with the parent company (Kaur & Clarke, 2009; Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012).

According to the literature review, English, particularly BELF, is key to successful international communication in all professions. The present study aims to investigate the experiences of Thai HR professionals regarding BELF in an American subsidiary and to identify the most common linguistic challenges that they face, and the following research questions were posed:

1. What are these Thai HR professionals' views on using BELF in an American subsidiary?
2. To what extent do Thai HR professionals face challenges in their English workplace communication?

## METHODOLOGY

This section describes the procedure used to design the study, as well as selecting, processing, and analyzing the data collected from Thai HR professionals.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This survey study is a non-experimental, descriptive design which seeks to describe reality, and it is a cross-sectional study which is complete at one point in time and represents an overall image of what is happening in that particular time. Additionally, a mixed-methods approach is employed to collect the data from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to investigate Thai HR professionals' views regarding the challenges they face using BELF (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### PARTICIPANTS

There were two groups of participants: one for responding to the questionnaire and the others for taking part in the semi-structured interviews. The first group consisted of 39 Thai HR employees working for an American oil and gas subsidiary in the Bangkok metropolitan area. Females (87.2%) outnumbered males (12.8%), and over 80% of them have a master's degree. Interestingly, most of them could communicate in at least one foreign language other than English (i.e., German, Dutch, Italian, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese). About 40% of the participants worked for the company for 11-15 years, and about 30% of them for 6-10 years. Thirty percent of them worked as an HR analyst, while the others were compensation advisors (12.84%), HR specialists (7.70%), data-management analysts (7.70%), policies and benefits analysts (5.12%), talent-acquisition managers (5.12%), pensions-process managers (2.56%), compensation supervisors (2.56%), HR supervisors (2.56%), HR operations team leaders (2.56%), recruitment team leaders (2.56%), compensation and benefits-design advisors (2.56%), resignation-process advisors (2.56%), payroll analysts (2.56%), pension SMEs (2.56%), and others (10.26%). All were at the entry and middle levels. The criteria for purposively selecting the participants were that they had Thai nationality, worked for the HR department for at least two years, and were required to use English in their daily communication. Regarding the second group, the respondents who completed the questionnaire were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Totally, there were five interviewees.

### RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, two research instruments were developed, including the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews.

#### THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire was designed based on prior studies by Dharmajiva (2017) and Chan (2019), which were adapted to be more relevant to the scope of our study. There were three parts in the questionnaire: *Part One - Demographic information* (six items); *Part Two - Views of Thai HR professionals concerning BELF in the multinational workplace* (28 items); and *Part Three -*

*Common challenges to BELF use faced in the workplace communication* (25 items). A five-point Likert scale was used for rating the items in Part Two and Part Three (5 = Strongly agree, easiest; 1 = Strongly disagree, most difficult). When the first version of the questionnaire was developed, a Thai HR professional who had the relevant work experience in multinational companies was invited to evaluate the questions and their relevance to HR workplace communication. After the evaluation, the researchers revised the questions which were suitable for the Thai contexts of such communication.

The researchers invited three experts in fields related to HR and international business communication to verify the second version of the questionnaire by using the evaluation form (Item-Objective Congruence Index, IOC) (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977) to determine content validity. The IOC was used to evaluate the items on the questionnaire based on a score range from -1 to +1 (i.e., Congruent = +1 Questionable = 0 and Incongruent = -1). After the experts completed the evaluation form, some items were revised based on their recommendations. In order to measure the questionnaire's reliability, a pilot study was conducted to prepare for a main study and was intended to ensure that the questionnaire would be effective in practice. Ten Thai HR professionals who worked in subsidiary companies from China, Japan, and South Korea were invited to attend the pilot study.

#### THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The themes of the interview questions were initially developed: views of Thai HR professionals regarding BELF and their most common challenges with BELF at work. However, the interview questions which were actually used in the semi-structured interviews were set after analyzing the survey responses from the participants, in order to delve into the staff members' experiences with BELF (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). There were ten questions (e.g., Do you have to be aware of grammatical and linguistic correctness to effectively communicate at work? As spoken communication in English can lead to misunderstandings, what do you think are the main causes of such misunderstandings between Thais and their foreign colleagues?). Each interview was conducted in Thai (as a native language) to ensure a clear understanding. Responses to the questions lasted 40-50 minutes per an interview.

#### DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

An explanatory sequential design was used in our study. The design involved a two-phase data collection in which the researchers first collected quantitative data (from the questionnaire), then analysed the data, and used the results to plan the second phase for collecting qualitative data (the semi-structured interviews) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data-collection procedure lasted for four months.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The data from the closed-ended items in the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics involving frequency, mean and standard deviation. On the other hand, the data from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using content analysis. In doing so, the data were coded for specific themes and were interpreted in search of useful insights into the participants' experiences with BELF.

## FINDINGS

The research findings obtained from the Thai HR professionals who completed the questionnaire and participated in the semi-structured interviews are reported in this section.

### VIEWS ON THE ROLE OF BELF

TABLE 1. BELF in HR workplace communication

Item	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Level of agreement
<i>Understanding the concept of business English as a lingua Franca</i>					
1. Native English accents are easier to understand than other English accents.	2	5	3.59	0.933	Somewhat agree
2. I want to speak English like a native speaker does.	2	5	4.23	0.842	Strongly agree
3. Effective communication is more important than linguistic correctness and Standard English norms.	3	5	4.54	0.643	Strongly agree
4. When communicating with foreign colleagues, I think it is important to understand their cultural backgrounds.	3	5	4.36	0.537	Strongly agree
5. Perfect communication in English is done only by native speakers.	1	5	2.58	1.200	Somewhat disagree
6. I feel capable when communicating with people who speak English fluently.	1	5	3.63	0.998	Somewhat agree
7. Perfect communication in English is conducted only by native speakers.	1	5	2.58	1.200	Somewhat disagree
<i>The role of English in international workplace communication</i>					
8. If I know English well, I will have better career opportunities.	2	5	4.36	0.843	Strongly agree
9. Using English effectively gives a good image to HR professionals.	3	5	4.49	0.601	Strongly agree
10. Nowadays, it is necessary to communicate in English in the HR profession.	3	5	4.56	0.680	Strongly agree
11. My English skills are sufficient for communicating at an international level.	3	5	4.36	0.628	Strongly agree
12. English is my first language choice for communicating with non-Thai colleagues.	1	5	4.69	0.731	Strongly agree
13. I am willing to use English at work.	3	5	4.62	0.673	Strongly agree
14. I enjoy working in intercultural environments.	4	5	4.69	0.468	Strongly agree
15. I keep improving my English skills because they are important to my career advancement.	4	5	4.54	0.505	Strongly agree
Overall			4.25	0.728	Strongly agree

In general, the Thai professionals understood the concept of business English as a *lingua franca* (Mean = 4.25, SD = 0.728). To illustrate, when these people communicated with colleagues, their goal was to complete a task. Linguistic correctness and Standard English norms were not considered to be vital. Due to their working in an international environment, they pointed out that foreign colleagues' cultural backgrounds should be fully aware in order to avoid misinterpretation and communication breakdown. Even though the participants understand that non-native speakers can very effectively communicate in English, they stressed that they still wanted to speak English "like a native speaker" and felt that native English accents are easier to understand than non-native ones. English was their first foreign language choice for international communication with non-Thai colleagues, even though many of them could speak other languages. Additionally, exceptional ability in English communication leads to better career opportunities and gives them a more positive image at their profession. Thus, they continue to work on improving their English.

The semi-structured interviews revealed that, among these workers, using English effectively creates a good image for the organisation. However, they stressed that Thai staff in MNCs should pay more attention to achieving correct English pronunciation than to their accent, and that many Thais focus on having what they think is a perfect accent in English. Here are some of their statements:

Using effective English has an impact on the image of the organisation. If you are competent in English, you can use proper words in each situation. Using the correct words enables you to deliver effective messages. (HR5)

The effective use of English creates a good image for your company. However, it depends on who we work with. From my experience, most Thais focus on having native-like accents. (HR3)

In addition, they stressed that, in English workplace communication, using perfect grammar is less important than understanding what foreign colleagues are trying to communicate. Obviously, since English is not their mother tongue, they make grammatical and other mistakes, and these may not interfere with effective communication. However, in terms of written communication, they emphasised that grammatical correctness is much more important, as errors in grammar may lead to significant misunderstanding, as mentioned below:

In terms of e-mail communication, we should be aware of grammar when communicating with our global team. When speaking, it is more acceptable to have some grammatical errors. (HR1)

I think everyone in my organisation does not worry or focus on the correctness of grammatical structure when we are having discussions and giving presentations. We are more concerned about linguistic accuracy in our written communication. (HR2)



DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY THAI HR PROFESSIONALS

TABLE 2. Difficulties encountered in the international workplace

Item	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Level of agreement
1. I have communication problems with my foreign colleagues.	1	5	2.49	1.048	Somewhat disagree
2. It is easier for me to communicate in Thai than in English at work.	1	5	3.28	1.255	Uncertain
3. I have to prepare English scripts before giving presentations and participating in discussions because I don't feel confident about my English-speaking skills.	1	5	3.36	1.347	Uncertain
4. I feel nervous to provide written and spoken information in English.	1	5	2.44	1.165	Somewhat disagree
5. I don't feel confident in my communication skills at work.	1	5	2.51	1.097	Somewhat disagree
6. I feel embarrassed to communicate in English at work.	1	4	1.44	0.788	Strongly disagree
7. I misunderstand messages in English.	1	5	2.10	0.955	Somewhat disagree
8. I can understand non-native English speakers' accents easier than those of native speakers.	1	5	2.67	0.982	Uncertain
9. I do not have the opportunity to improve my English skills to reach an international business level.	1	3	1.51	0.644	Strongly disagree
10. I have to revise my reports and/or e-mail several times before sending them because I am not confident in my English writing skills.	1	4	2.26	0.966	Somewhat disagree
11. I do not understand a lot of technical terms in English which are used in international business.	1	4	2.23	0.902	Somewhat disagree
12. I cannot promptly respond to conversations in English because I need time to translate them into Thai.	1	5	1.87	1.005	Somewhat disagree
13. Foreign colleagues ask me to repeat what I say because they do not understand me at first.	1	4	1.79	0.695	Strongly disagree
Overall			2.30	0.988	Somewhat disagree

Table 2 reveals that these professionals have not encountered serious difficulties in their workplace communication (Mean = 2.30, SD = 0.988). To clarify, the staff may have exceptional English communication skills, as they said that they did not feel any embarrassment or other problems while communicating with their foreign colleagues. This is because their company has provided them with opportunities to improve their English to reach an international business level. Examples of how effectively they were able to communicate are that they did not feel nervous when giving written and spoken information in English. For instance, they wrote a report and/or

sent an e-mail without any error and could immediately respond to conversations in English, without first translating things into Thai. Nevertheless, they were uncertain whether non-native English speakers' accents were easier to understand, in contrast to those of native English speakers. This is probably because there were many non-native English-speaking colleagues or expatriates (e.g., German, French, Dutch, and Italian) who had considerable professional experience and had excellent English. According to one key BELF concept, when using English to get a job done (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kanraanranta, 2005), the HR professionals do not pay much attention to which accent their colleagues have, as long as they can achieve the task at hand.

These HR staff mentioned that the main problem they have encountered involves the cultural background of their interlocutors, as this can lead to misunderstandings. Two interviewees shared relevant experiences:

I think culture can cause some problems in international communication. For example, when writing an e-mail, sometimes our foreign business partner writes it too directly. This can be offensive to a receiver whose culture favors a more indirect approach. So, it is not a language issue, but culture. (HR1)

The indirect communication style of Asians may cause the misunderstandings with Westerners. (HR4)

#### THAI HR PROFESSIONALS' CHALLENGES IN WRITTEN BELF COMMUNICATION

TABLE 3. Challenges in written BELF communication

Item	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Level of agreement
1. Reports (e.g., progress reports/project reports/routine operational reports)	2	5	3.31	0.893	Neutral
2. Business plans (e.g., strategic plans/ marketing plans/financial plans)	1	4	2.56	1.021	Difficult
3. Proposals	1	5	2.92	0.929	Neutral
4. Minutes/memos/agendas	2	5	4.00	0.761	Easy
5. Contracts (e.g., employment contracts, termination contracts, part-time contracts, etc.)	1	5	2.03	1.112	Difficult
6. Letters and correspondence 1 —goodwill messages (e.g., recognition letters)	1	5	3.03	1.013	Neutral
7. Letters and correspondence 2 —negative messages (e.g., performance letters)	1	5	2.38	1.161	Difficult
8. Letters and correspondence 3 — promotional letters (e.g., promotion of new policies and/or guidelines)	1	5	2.85	1.089	Neutral
9. Letters and correspondence 4 —persuasive texts (e.g., persuasive speeches)	1	5	2.49	0.997	Difficult
10. Letters and correspondence 5 —inquiry letters (e.g., letters of inquiry and replies to inquiries)	2	5	3.31	0.832	Neutral
11. Letters and correspondence 6 —job applications (e.g., application letters/ résumés/cover letters)	1	5	3.18	0.970	Neutral

12. Business publicity (e.g., pension funds/ annual reports)	1	5	1.84	1.027	Difficult
13. External written communication (e.g., communication to the social security or other government offices)	1	5	2.08	1.109	Difficult
Overall			2.76	0.993	Neutral

The results in Table 3 indicate that they faced certain challenges in written BELF communication (Mean = 2.76, SD = 0.993). Overall, they considered writing minutes, memos, and agendas to be the easiest tasks. This is probably because those are common daily tasks. They also reported no significant problem with writing progress reports, project reports, and routine operational reports, as these are also standard. Even though they were confident that they have a high level of English communication skills (see Tables 1-2), written communication can pose some challenges. These employees considered writing contracts difficult. They rarely have to do this; therefore, they are not adept at making employment contracts, termination contracts, and part-time contracts. Also, writing publicity takes significant time to prepare. These staff face greater challenges and perhaps stress when writing pension funds and annual reports.

The interview responses reveal that written communication is more problematic than speaking. When writing in English (especially for non-native English speakers), errors in grammar, word choice, and tone are common, as stated below:

The cultural differences can be big, as we work with multinational companies. For example, some Singaporeans or Europeans and other Westerners are very direct, and they use an exclamation mark at the end of many sentences. So, when they write, it sometimes looks like they are angry. It's good if we know that it's not personal, but that it's just their cultural style of writing an e-mail. Sometimes, it looks angry when written, but when they talk on the phone or face to face, they don't express anger at all. I think it is just cultural differences. (HR1).

These HR people also talked about the challenges of writing contracts and having to exactly comply with the law. However, some senior staff said that it is an easy task, once one is experienced enough as the two statements provided:

Many written tasks are dictated by the law and the need for precisely proper words. I think that the new HR staff who are starting to draft contracts must consult the law and policies. So, they need to read and draft carefully because errors can negatively affect the company. (HR4)

I think that writing a business plan is more difficult than other tasks because it requires legal jargon. So, it is hard to translate. But the main factor is the relevant experience of each person. (HR3)

THAI HR PROFESSIONALS' CHALLENGES IN SPOKEN BELF COMMUNICATION

TABLE 4. Challenges in spoken BELF communication

Item	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Level of agreement
1. Presentations	1	5	2.95	0.972	Neutral
2. Business meetings (annual meetings/routine meetings/business conferences, etc.)	1	5	3.15	0.961	Neutral
3. Conference calls (more than two parties are involved)	1	5	3.26	0.938	Neutral
4. Video conferences	1	5	3.18	0.970	Neutral
5. Telephone calls (one-to-one)	1	5	3.64	0.986	Easy
6. Job interviews	1	5	2.97	0.843	Neutral
7. Professional training and workshops	1	5	2.72	1.123	Neutral
8. Social interactions in the office (e.g., chatting, staff parties)	1	5	4.26	0.938	Easiest
9. Business negotiations	1	5	2.31	1.004	Difficult
10. Press briefings	1	5	2.00	0.973	Most difficult
11. Announcements	1	5	2.44	1.021	Difficult
Overall			2.98	0.975	Neutral

Importantly, in Table 4, the HR staff had fewer challenges with spoken BELF than with writing (mean = 2.98, SD = 0.975). Generally, they considered social interactions at the office and at staff parties as the easiest part of their work-related communication, along with making telephone calls. Other spoken tasks (e.g., presentations, business meetings, conference calls, and professional training and workshops) do not seem to be problematic for them. However, press briefings were their most difficult task, as they require specific skills such as presenting key information, organizing persuasive and informational presentations, and influencing audience. In addition, business negotiations are difficult because they require very precise word choices and persuasive skills.

As spoken communication in English can lead to misunderstandings at MNCs, the Thai HR staff identified the main causes of such misunderstandings between Thais and others at work, as the followings:

Cultural diversity: There are some elements of Thai and other Asian cultural communication that play into intercultural miscommunication. Some direct phrases still seem rude or too straight for me, and I am sometimes still afraid of being direct in an international communication context. (HR5)

Thai employees share their opinions less, partly because they do not want to interrupt the speaker and they cannot find a gap to share their ideas. The main issue is that most Thai employees feel embarrassed and not familiar with foreign partners, somehow. (HR2)

The participants in our study pointed out that each person has different levels of English-speaking skills, depending on their familiarity with particular spoken tasks. That is to say, even though they are employed at the same workplace and in the same position, each of them has different problems, as shown below:

I think telephone calls are hard because, when talking on the phone, we cannot gauge the body language and are unfamiliar with English accents. There are some unique accents that are still hard for me to understand. Also, every person has different English communication skills, so they may have different challenges in dealing with telephone calls. (HR4)

## DISCUSSION

Our study focuses on the experiences of Thai HR professionals whose English is not a first language and who use English as a lingua franca in an American subsidiary. In addition, our findings can add to the existing literature, especially regarding one underexamined part of the phenomenon. In this study, both the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that these professionals understand the vital role of BELF in the international workplace. This is because they have identified the priorities for achieving communication goals over native-like use of English and worked in an environment surrounded by more non-native speaking colleague than native speaking one. Such findings have confirmed the notion of BELF that English is merely used as neutral and shared language in intercultural business communication with an ultimate goal to get their job done, as explained by the BELF pioneers (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005) that it is a language choice that fits all. It can be assumed that these professionals have mastered a use of the content and knowledge of business, especially in their profession, together with communication strategies in each specific context. Even though such a context will be simple, hybrid, or highly dynamic, they can adapt to the context and handle each communicative situation (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). Therefore, effective workplace communication is not merely achieved by native English speakers, but also by non-native ones (Cogo & Yanaprasart, 2018). The professionals in our study stressed the great importance of English communication skills, and this is consistent with a study by Karachedee (2017) and Dharmjiva (2017) on Thai professionals at various MNCs that English for communication in the workplace should not emphasise linguistic perfection and Standard English norms, but, instead, clear communication and achieving the tasks at hand.

In addition, the HR professionals in our study asserted that using English in their workplace has posed only some challenges to them when communicating (both spoken and written communication) with colleagues and clients from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In other words, they did encounter some difficulties in English communication with their Thai and foreign colleagues even though they have enjoyed working in their multinational company. On one hand, our findings are somehow consistent with the conclusions of Jeharsae (2012), who stated that the Thai respondents in her study encountered problems such as difficulties understanding foreign accents and with having an insufficient knowledge of other cultural backgrounds. This may be due to the differences in individual companies (e.g., their work environment, corporate language policy, management, and the number of foreign employees or expatriates). Additionally, one's professional experience and English language proficiency have a direct impact on how he or she experiences using English in an international workplace. On the other hand, our findings are inconsistent with previous studies of international business communication in Thailand. The

respondents in these studies (Jeharsae, 2012; Sanjit, 2015; Wisawajoenkit, 2015) who were from different professions (e.g., engineering and sales) and work environments, such as Thai-owned companies and Japanese-owned ones where Thai and Japanese languages may be used dominantly or equally to English, had serious problems when communicating with foreign colleagues and clients. The different findings in this study to others is mainly because we focus only on one group of HR professionals (i.e., entry and middle-level) in the same international work environment (i.e., an American-owned company) where English is mainly a corporate language for employees with diverse nationalities. According to the findings, about 70% of the professionals (i.e., entry and middle-level) have been working for the HR department of an American multinational company for 6-15 years, meaning that they tend to be familiar with routine tasks (both spoken and written). Thus, they have quite similar work experiences and challenges in both spoken and written tasks

Even though the Thai HR professionals have not faced serious difficulties in their workplace English communication, some spoken communication posed more challenges to them in comparison to the written communication. Regarding the shared opinions of difficulties of spoken and written tasks at work, the written tasks (e.g., writing minutes, memos, agendas, progress reports, project reports, and routine operational reports) seem to be easier than the spoken ones (e.g., press briefings and business negotiations). According to the professionals, the former deals with common daily tasks and they have no serious problem with such writing tasks, as these are also standard. However, the latter can pose more challenges to them because spoken communicative situations are naturally dynamic and unpredictable, in particular a case of using English as a foreign language. The professionals stress that there can be a chance that such challenges cause misunderstandings and miscommunication among speakers with different backgrounds because of their English proficiency, work experiences and intercultural communicative competence (Marina & Rajprasit, 2016). That is to say, apart from English proficiency, spoken tasks need more specific skills for effective communication. For instance, press briefings require skills in presenting key information, organizing persuasive and informational presentations, and influencing audience whereas business negotiations need very precise word choices and persuasive skills (Chan, 2019; Dharmajiva, 2017).

Regarding the pedagogical implications of our study, our findings should be useful to educators and professional trainers in the area of HR, along with current workers in this field. First, our findings can be guidelines for university course developers and instructors of English for human resources to reevaluate and redesign their courses in relation to the experienced HR professionals in this study to prepare Thai undergraduates who aim to have a career in a multinational company. Even though the professionals have not reported serious problems in English workplace communication because of having worked in the field for more than ten years, they stress the importance of spoken communication such as press briefings and business negotiations which require both English proficiency and specific communication skills. Such communication can be a highlight of contents and learning activities to teach English for human resources. For instance, a lesson focuses on how to persuade and influence audience in communicative situations with the audience from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds by creating problematic situations in workplace. In addition, the course developers and instructors should develop BELF-oriented learning activities which raise students' awareness of the BELF notion (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005). The professionals in this study had positive attitudes towards the BELF notion as they have a real experience in working with both native and non-native English-speaking colleagues and clients and using English as a neutral and shared language to reach communication goals. However, university students may not realize how

English is realistically perceived and used outside the classroom contexts. The students may expect English communication with many native English speakers in their future career. As this study has shown that there are more interactions with non-native English-speaking people, not only native ones, the students should be aware of this fact and recognize the role of English as a lingua franca from newly designed courses which highlight the most common challenges facing HR staff who use English at work.

Second, our findings can also benefit multinational companies when they do professional development, especially for new HR employees. The companies can provide training courses on business communication skills (e.g., most challenging spoken tasks and a use of communication strategies), with an integration of awareness of BELF. Apart from the guidelines offered by this study, the companies need an assistance from experienced HR professionals to work closely with training course developers to design and develop activities. Their hand-on experiences will be useful for developing specific activities to enhance effective intercultural business communication. Thus, promoting English as a lingua franca among employees, including HR professionals, will help everyone involved communicate and work more effectively together. In doing so, linguistic perfection and Standard English norms will not be the priority (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kanraanranta, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

We have reported the experiences and perspectives of Thai HR professionals at the entry and middle levels of HR in an American oil and gas subsidiary, and this focus is rare in Thailand. The majority of these professionals feel very positively about BELF in the workplace and stress how useful it is, as opposed to stressing linguistic correctness and Standard English norms. Apparently, these Thai workers face certain challenges in using English, but, overall, they feel that they are comfortable with the international language in their profession. Even though the present study has reached its aims, there were some unavoidable limitations. First, the number of professionals we focused on was small, and we concentrated on only one subsidiary company. Collecting data from only one company may not be adequate and comprehensive in identifying most Thai HR professionals' experience with BELF. Second, only Thai professionals at the entry and middle levels of HR were included in this study, not senior and specialized levels (Johanson, 2009). HR professionals at the senior and specialized levels should have been included and interviewed about work performance and challenges in using BELF for written and spoken communication by their colleagues at the lower levels. They would provide their colleagues with insightful information about the work performance and challenges, together with recommendations on how to beat off such challenges. Third, only the HR department of an oil and gas subsidiary in Thailand was a focus. Studying the same type of industry, but in other non-native speaking countries such as the ASEAN region, would fully explain the phenomenon of using BELF among HR professionals. Finally, a set of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews are mainly used. If some work-related documents such as performance letters and letters of inquiry and replies to inquiries were included, analysis of them would confirm the challenges that the professionals encounter. For further studies, having more participants (HR professionals) from other subsidiary companies in Thailand (e.g., German, French, Japanese, and Korean ones) or in other countries would render more diverse responses. In addition, comparison among different subsidiary companies in

Thailand or other countries can be drawn for generalization about business communication and BELF in the HR profession.

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