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There are no crocodiles in this hospital

The perceived quality of service in hospitals is greatly affected by interactions between patients and their relatives and frontline staff, particularly doctors and nurses. When problems occur and customers complain, more senior staff are called to resolve the conflict before it escalates into something more serious, such as a law suit. This study analyses the language difficulties experienced by a small well-established team of such troubleshooters in a large Bangkok hospital, which has a significant share of the medical tourism market. Each member of the team of ten Thai staff holds an appropriately senior title within the hospital hierarchy, and communicate in either Thai or English with patients and relatives. The focus of this study is on their second language usage of English when interacting with non-Thai speaking patients and relatives.

All the troubleshooters are qualified nurses with many years of experience who reported directly to the board of directors on a daily basis. The two most senior members of the team primarily worked only in Thai, and so this study focuses on the remaining eight frontline staff who interacted with non-Thai speakers.

Language errors were collected over 150 hours of language tuition delivered to members of the troubleshooting team on a series of highly specialised training courses designed to resolve conflicts in a hospital setting. The courses essentially followed a problem-based learning format with the troubleshooters raising a language or cultural problem that they had experienced. The team and language tutor worked together to solve the problem in a way which would be transferable to other similar scenarios. The situations dealt with related to (1) financial issues, such as the collection of deposits, missed payments and outstanding balances; (2) medical issues, such as inappropriate treatment, unexpected side-effects and complaints regarding surgeons, doctors and nurses; and (3) other issues, such as wait time, legal problems and personality conflicts.

The course resulted in approximately 25,000 words of notes, which were distilled into two summary course booklets and distributed to the participants. Over 3000 errors were recorded, including lexical slips, such as the usage of crocodile for cockroach. The researcher analysed the errors using grammatical parsing and systemic functional grammar. The errors are categorised by topic, type and cause; and prioritised according to potential effect on customer satisfaction using a failure mode and effects analysis.

The results of this analysis suggest that modality and intonation should be primary areas of concern when delivering language-based training courses for medical staff who need to resolve conflicts.