

Thai Hotel Receptionists' Challenges when Communicating with Non-Native English-Speaking Guests: A Case Study of a Hotel in Phuket

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine hotel receptionists' English communication challenges especially with non-native English-speaking guests, together with the adequacy of English training and courses at the Thai universities during their undergraduate level. The participants were four receptionists, one learning and development supervisor at a hotel in Phuket province, and two lecturers in a hospitality management program at a local university. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews by employing open-ended questions and were triangulated from different sources to increase the reliability of the findings. The results showed that, among all English skills, listening to a variety of English accents spoken by non-native speaking guests—especially those from China, India, and Russia—was most challenging to the receptionists because these guests tended to speak English with a heavy mother-tongue accent and with great speed. Speaking is the second most challenging skill, especially because non-native speaking guests may not understand English vocabulary typically used in the hotel business, although such vocabulary is familiar to native English speakers. This present study offers some suggestions regarding additional foreign language training that hotels should provide to receptionists and how undergraduate English courses for hospitality management students can be improved to better prepare them for their future careers.

Keywords: needs, front office staff, non-native English-speaking guests, undergraduate level, English course

Introduction

According to the World Tourism Organization (2019), Thailand ranks as one of the top 10 destinations for international tourists. Owing to the beautiful white sandy beaches and range of activities, Phuket has attracted international tourists from around the globe, especially those from non-native English-speaking countries who constitute approximately 47% of the total number of tourists in Phuket (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2020). The increasing number of tourists has led to the expansion of the hospitality industry. Hotels consist of several departments, for instance, front office, food and beverage, housekeeping, and sales and marketing. Each department plays a significant role in operating services for the guests; however, the front office is considered to be a center of hotel operations as the department has contact with guests throughout the day (Paige & Paige, 1997).

With the increasing number of non-native English-speaking guests in Phuket, English has been used as a standard language for communication between hotel receptionists and guests. These receptionists are required to proficiently communicate in English to provide high quality services. Using English for communication, however, might be challenging for those whom English is not their native language. Kachru (1992) categorized countries where English is considered to be only for educational purposes as belonging in the expanding circle, and Thailand is one of these countries. Some hotel receptionists still encounter difficulties in using English for communication. For example, Kawinthon (2013) pointed out that speaking was the most challenging skill which hotel receptionists wanted to develop followed by listening. In addition, Namamuti (1999) added that most hotel receptionists tend to misunderstand requests from guests and have speaking problems as they have a limited vocabulary.

Although there are many related studies regarding the needs of and problems with English communication among Thai receptionists, no studies are focused on the needs and problems in using English for communication between front office staff and non-native English-speaking guests in Phuket. Such problems may result from the insufficiency of their English educational background. Moreover, these studies were conducted using questionnaires or surveys, and the results only indicated the types of general communication problems that hotel receptionists encountered (e.g., speaking, listening) without providing useful details. The current study aims to address these research gaps. Its findings may be useful as a guideline for human resources (HR) departments in the design of training courses to improve the communicative competence of hotel receptionists. Moreover, the findings might also be useful in the future for universities or institutes to understand and design suitable English courses to prepare similar students for this profession or career.

Literature Review

The term needs analysis first appeared in the 1920s and became popular during the 70s and 80s (West, 1997). Needs analysis generally means the process to discover the skills and knowledge that learners should have in order to be expert in foreign language learning. Various definitions of needs were held by scholars from different perspectives. For example, Berwick (1989) referred to needs as the gap between existing knowledge and target proficiency. According to this, Berwick (1989) identified existing knowledge as the learners' background knowledge, whereas target proficiency referred to the goal that learners wanted to achieve after completing an English course. Hence, the gap between these two can be referred to as the challenges or problems that learners encountered in using English.

This view is supported by Hutchison and Walters (1987) who defined needs as necessities and lacks. They pointed out that necessities referred to the language which learners have to know in order to perform their duties in the target situation. Hotel receptionists, for example, should be skillful in writing formal business emails and writing reports, listening to different English accents, and speaking skills such as telephoning and daily English communication. Meanwhile, lack can be explained as the gap between existing knowledge of the learners and the required knowledge of the target situation. In other words, lack is the difference between what the learners already know and what they need to know to perform their duties successfully.

The needs and problems analysis of English communication has been extensively used in various industries, especially in tourism and hospitality. Many studies have been conducted in the full range of departments found in the hospitality industry, especially the front office department. The findings indicated that listening and speaking were the most challenging skills for hotel receptionists (e.g., Chaiyapantoh, 2008; Chantanont, 2012; Charunsri, 2011). Additionally, these studies suggested the approaches these hotel receptionists employed to attempt to solve these communication problems. For example, Chaiyapantoh (2008) undertook a study of the needs and problems in using English with foreigners of hotel receptionists in Mueang District, Ubon Ratchathani province and the result indicated that most of the time when these hotel receptionists encountered problems in conversation, they typically asked for help from coworkers who have better English skills. Likewise, in the study of problems and needs for English communication improvement of hotel receptionists at hotels in Bangkok conducted by Chantanont (2012), the result revealed that inability to understand guests who speak rapidly is the most problematic activity. The study also added that hotel receptionists solve this problem of misunderstanding by asking the guest to provide more clues in conjunction with reducing their speaking speed.

These communication challenges may result from insufficient English training. Thus, the adequacy of the English courses at undergraduate level that the staff took while attending university should be taken into consideration in terms of whether they were sufficient to prepare them for working in hospitality. To design an appropriate English for tourism course, Edwards (2000, as cited in Zahedpisheh et al., 2017, p. 89) described that “learning tasks and activities should have a high surrender value.” In other words, learners must be able to adapt what they learned to execute their job proficiently. Therefore, target situation analysis (TSA) should be conducted before designing a course to obtain the learners’ rationale for taking this course. Furthermore, Hutchinson and Walters (1992) asserted that the materials selected for the course should be suitable in terms of both course goal and learners and teachers because they function as a link between what the learners already have learned or have as existing knowledge and new information. Moreover, for ESP courses, it is essential to conduct evaluation as it can reveal the effectiveness of lessons. Moreover, it also reveals the topics which were not successfully covered during the learning. As Hutchinson and Walters (1992) concluded, learners’ assessment and course evaluation are the two levels of evaluation; a test is the best instrument to evaluate learners’ assessment.

To the best of author’s knowledge, no studies have been conducted into the communication between receptionists and non-native English-speaking guests who constitute a large percentage of tourists in Phuket and the design of an appropriate English for tourism course in Thai universities. This leads to the following research questions:

1. What are the communication challenges encountered by hotel receptionists when communicating in English with non-native English-speaking guests?
2. Do Thai universities provide sufficient English training to prepare these front office staff for their employment?

Methods

Context and Participants

To accurately provide the detail regarding the challenges faced by hotel receptionists in their English communication and to formulate proposals for the hotel training course, the participants selected for this study were four hotel receptionists and one learning and development supervisor to provide more information concerning hotel's training courses. In addition, two faculty members from the Tourism and Management program at a university in Phuket were recruited to provide detailed explanation regarding the English course at the Thai university. These participants were selected by purposive sampling as they were potential sources of in-depth information to answer the research questions. The names furnished in this study are pseudonyms.

The four hotel receptionists and the learning and development supervisor work in the same resort in Phuket. The five-star beachfront resort is located in the northern part of Phuket and consists of approximately 600 rooms and private pool villas as well as having its own water park. The main nationalities of their guests vary depending on the season; however, Russian and Chinese are the main tourist markets of the resort. Receptionists at this hotel are required to graduate with at least a bachelor's degree in any field. Moreover, during the hotel's recruitment process, the hotel generally accepts job applications who can communicate in English.

The first participant, "Non," and the second participant, "Dao," both graduated with a Bachelor in Humanities majoring in English from the same university. This program is mainly focused on every aspect of English communication and students are able to choose between English for hospitality and tourism or other English courses as an elective subject. Dao has been working as a front office staff for seven years; whereas Non has been working for one year.

The third participant named "New" has been working in hospitality for approximately eight years; six years as a kids-club attendant and two years as a front office staff. She graduated with a Bachelor of Business Administration major in Tourism Management. This program mainly focuses on tourism management and some English communication.

The fourth participant named "Amy" has been working in the front office for five years after graduating with a Bachelor of Humanities majoring in German. Most of the subjects she studied were related to the German language along with some English for academic purposes, but no subjects related to hospitality and tourism. However, she has used less German in the workplace in comparison to English.

The fifth participant named "Natalie" has been working in the Human Resources Department as a Learning and Development Supervisor for four years. Her responsibilities include introducing the company together with its policies during new staff orientation, assisting human resources in the recruitment of new staff and trainees, and arranging in-house training for all staff.

The two faculty members work in the same university. This university is well-known among local Thai students as the program is aimed at preparing students for working in tourism and hospitality. This program is mainly focused on hospitality services and foreign languages. The first faculty member named "Kiwi" mainly teaches hospitality services covering the full range of hotel departments as well as psychology. She also assists in designing the course and

subjects according to the needs of the workforce in the tourism and hospitality industry. The second faculty member named “Cherry” teaches German language and also assists in handling other foreign language teaching including English. She has to ensure that the foreign languages selected to teach in the program have been requested by students and are useful in Phuket’s tourism market.

Data Collection

The instrument used was the semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions to allow the participants to disclose their perspectives. The interview questions were created to answer the two research questions and divided into three sets as follows:

1. For hotel front office staff: consisted of eight questions to elicit information regarding their educational background, internship and working experience, communication challenges with non-native English-speaking guests at the hotel, and English training course at the hotel.

2. For learning and development supervisor: consisted of seven questions mainly focused on the detail of the English training course which was organized for the hotel front office staff.

3. For faculty members: consisted of nine questions to collect information concerning the adequacy of English courses at undergraduate level provided for tourism and hospitality management students.

The interview questions are listed in the appendix. During the interview, the researcher asked participants the prepared questions and allowed each participant to present their perspectives. However, the additional questions were asked to probe for more information if the participants raised important issues. The interviews of the hotel receptionists, learning and development supervisor, and two faculty members were conducted twice. The first interview for front office staff and learning and development supervisor was conducted individually at their hotel in Phuket and each session lasted for an average of 30 minutes; whereas a group interview was conducted for the two faculty members outside of their office in Phuket owing to their convenience and lasted for approximately two hours. The second interview was conducted individually via telephone call for obtaining further information.

Data Analysis

After the data was transcribed, the researcher started the coding process according to the thematic framework and grouped the data by theme. To ensure the accuracy of the information, the researcher applied a data triangulation process by comparing and contrasting all the responses from all participants. The results were itemized and are briefly described in the next chapter.

Findings

During the interview, the front office staff were asked whether they encountered any communication challenges during their duties. The results indicated that listening to a variety of English accents was challenging due to the unfamiliarity with the accents and speed of speaking. For example, Non, who majored in English, mentioned that listening to a variety of English accents was most challenging, especially the accents of Chinese guests. They stated

that: *“From my educational background, I know that Chinese language has approximately four intonation marks. Therefore, Chinese guests seem to speak English by applying these intonation marks and that always makes me confused.”* They further explained that Chinese language pronunciation is considered to be the major cause of English sound variation. Additionally, they mentioned that English spoken by Russian guests was another challenge. They stated, *“Most Russian guests are unable to speak English, but they do try to speak by mixing with their mother-tongued accent which I am completely unable to understand.”* This is similar to responses in the interview with Amy who described that hotel receptionists use listening and speaking skills more than reading and writing during their duties. She mentioned that listening to guests who use English with their mother-tongued accent is complicated, especially Indians, even with five years’ experience working in the front office department. They stated, *“I could not differentiate between R and L when communicating with Indian guests.”*

In addition to the heavy mother-tongue accent, the inability to understand guests who speak rapidly is another listening challenge. During the interview, Dao explained that they used all her communicative skill in their routine work. However, listening to guests who speak quickly was the most challenging. They stated that, *“Because of the variety of accents, I found listening quite hard. I am familiar with both British and American accents but not English spoken by Indians. This is the hardest thing for me. They speak with rapid and no pause between the word at all.”* In addition to listening challenges, the interviews revealed that speaking is another problem encountered. The results indicated that speaking to the guests using hospitality vocabulary in conversation is considered the major issue. For instance, New explained that most of the time Russian guests could not understand when technical terms, abbreviations, or other vocabulary related to hospitality were used. *“Most of the guests are not able to understand when I use words such as best available rate, flexible rate, or BB which stands for bed and breakfast. That makes me lose confidence.”* Furthermore, Non added that speaking English with non-native English-speaking guests is considered complicated in terms of vocabulary. *“One of our room categories is deluxe balcony, but Russian guests are definitely unable to understand the word ‘balcony.’ I later found out that the Russian pronoun for ‘balcony’ is ‘balcon’.”*

Apart from challenges in using hospitality vocabulary in speaking, the results also pointed out that using full grammatical function is another speaking challenge. Dao explained that most Russian and Chinese guests are unable to understand when she uses a full sentence to explain something. She stated that, *“Whenever I use standard English to communicate, they won’t understand me. So I have to use only a single word. Instead of saying ‘This is your room key,’ I just say ‘Room key’.”* Non also added that the use of grammatical functions in speaking to Russian and Chinese guests seems too problematic. They stated that, *“The guests do not understand why I need to add helping verbs into a sentence so I just use a simple sentence which contains only subject, verb, and object.”*

The results also indicated that these receptionists typically seek help from their colleagues who are better in English speaking. For example, Non who has less working experience in front office department, stated that *“I always look for senior or duty manager who seem to have better English to talk to the guest when I couldn’t understand.”* Furthermore, Dao added that they would ask guests to slow down and provide more context clues. They

explained that this is the most effective means of addressing issues when encountering communication challenges. They stated: *“It’s easy to ask guests to slow down or provide context clues rather than ask them to repeat what they just said.”*

As these receptionists encountered listening and speaking challenges, Natalie, a learning and development supervisor, was asked during the interview whether the hotel was aware of these challenges. Natalie explained that the hotel conducted annual questionnaires and surveys to assess staff training needs with the purpose of utilizing the results to design an appropriate and effective training courses for these staff. They stated that, *“One of the skills that these receptionists need to be trained is listening, especially listening to English spoken by those non-native English-speaking guests as well as other foreign languages such as Chinese or Russian.”* However, Natalie noted that the hotel had not organized any training for hotel receptionists on how to communicate in English with those non-native English-speaking guests as well as communicating in other foreign languages. In regard to the receptionist positions, Natalie also added that the hotel is unable to hire native Chinese or Russian speakers or Thais who are able to speak Chinese and Russian because these individuals typically require salaries which exceed the hotel’s budget. Therefore, these training courses were listed in the training year plan and were awaiting approval from Skill Development Center of Thailand.

Another purpose of this study was to examine the adequacy of the undergraduate-level English course at Thai universities and whether the learners can apply what they have learned there in their career. The interview result indicated that the English courses were useful, but not sufficient for preparing students for a front office career.

The interviews results indicated that the four receptionists can adapt the skills they had learned to use in daily communication with guests. They believe that English is important in workplace, especially in the hospitality industry. Therefore, mastering English communication is essential. For instance, Non stated, *“I can use all of my English ability here to communicate to the guests. Language is the skill that everyone should have before applying for a job as a front office staff because when you come to work, they will only teach you how to do the document or how to check in and check out.”*

Similarly, Amy, who has a different educational background than the others as she graduated with a German major, pointed out that she participated in some English courses as an undergraduate. Even though she studied less English, she can still use her writing, listening, and speaking skills in English at work. She explained, *“No matter which language you study, you can definitely use English in the workplace depending on the main nationality of the hotel guests.”*

The above results were supported by the views of the two faculty members. For example, Kiwi stated that they had previously talked with hotel receptionists who graduated from this undergraduate program in regard to English. She explained, *“The students are able to use English in the workplace quite well. They do not have to spend much time practicing English during working hour. They only need to learn and adapt themselves to the organization.”*

Even though the English courses at undergraduate level taken by the four receptionists were useful, it was insufficient to prepare them for their front office career, especially in Phuket. During the interviews, receptionists were asked to provide in-depth detail regarding their undergraduate English course, especially the learning materials. The results showed that

the materials – both textbooks and other online channels – focused on either British or American English. As Non stated, *“I am more familiar with either English or American accents because of my textbooks. The focus will be on these two accents only.”* However, the main tourism market in Phuket is those from non-native English-speaking countries, thus most of front office staff are unfamiliar with other English accents.

Moreover, the two faculty members were asked to provide in-depth detail concerning the undergraduate course design for English language. The results showed that although the main nationality of tourists in Phuket are those from non-native English-speaking countries, the English course during undergraduate level was designed based on the university instruction or requirement and unable to be modified according to the local tourism market. Kiwi explained even though the university provides English for tourism courses, these courses do not seem to focus on English communication with non-native English speakers. She stated, *“The focuses of the English for tourism courses are how to make the students become familiar with English language and hospitality vocabulary.”* Additionally, the university does not conduct a survey of learners’ needs in order to understand the purpose of taking this course, as shown by Kiwi’s comments as follows, *“We did not do any survey of the learners’ needs before creating the course as everyone knows that all students must learn English in Thailand and English is important for them for their future career.”* Without conducting a survey to investigate English communication skills graduates need, undergraduate programs in tourism may not provide students with adequate training for their careers.

In conclusion, the results of this study indicated that front office staff encountered listening and speaking problems with non-native English-speaking guests, especially those from China, India, and Russia. They are unfamiliar with these accents. Their undergraduate English course was useful; however, it was insufficient to prepare them for their profession as front office staff because the course design is based on an outline handed down from the university and not based on learner needs. Furthermore, in undergraduate tourism programs, there may be no teaching materials focusing on varieties of English spoken by non-native English-speaking guests who account for a large percentage of foreign guests at hotels in Phuket.

Discussion

The receptionists at the hotels in Phuket province need to use English to communicate with their hotel guests. The study found that listening to the variety of English accents was considered to be the most challenging for these receptionists owing to the heavy mother-tongue accents of the Indian, Chinese, and Russian guests. As Kachru (1992) categorized these countries in either outer or expanding circle where English is not the first language; therefore, their first or mother-tongue language results in a wide range of accents when speaking in English. It seems possible that some of these receptionists have less opportunity for exposure to English accents of guests from these countries; therefore, they were unfamiliar with listening to a variety of English accents. This study suggests that to avoid misunderstandings, this skill should be practiced by having conversations with people who have different English accents, a finding which supports the research of Brownell (1994), who mentioned that the way to improve communication was to interact regularly in conversation.

Another point to be raised is the speaking challenge. The finding of this study showed that these receptionists had difficulties in speaking English to non-native English-speaking guests. This is in line with Kawinthon (2013), who pointed out that speaking was the most challenging skill for receptionists. Although they were able to convey their message, guests from India, China, and Russia were not able to understand what was said when they used hospitality vocabularies during check-in and check-out to explain the hotel facilities and room amenities. Dann (2001) observed that hospitality and tourism vocabulary is specialized and occurred in a particular context. Regarding solutions for these speaking problems, the results of this study indicate that most front office staff would ask guests to slow down, provide more context clues, or seek help from colleagues. This is similar to Chayapantoh (2008) who found that when most hotel front office staff encountered a speaking problem during conversation, they requested help from their colleagues who seemed to have a higher level of English competence. According to this result, it is recommended that HR or the training department of hotels in Phuket should provide regular English training focused on non-native English-speaking accents to foster familiarity with them in these receptionists. Hotels may also organize knowledge sharing sessions in which more senior receptionists proffer suggestions to younger receptionists as to how to overcome challenges that may arise during communication with non-native English-speaking guests from China, Russia, and India. In addition, hotels in Phuket may consider providing receptionists with training on foreign languages, particularly Chinese and Russian, to receptionists.

The finding of this study also indicated that staff training was significant and should be conducted because lack of staff training can damage the hotel's reputation. This result is similar to Yang (2010) who investigated the importance of staff training in the hotel industry and stated that the hotel could enter into a crisis situation if there is no regular staff training. Accordingly, the hotel should arrange a training course such as a listening course, especially listening to English spoken by non-native English speakers, as they are the primary market of the hotel. This course would help front office staff to become familiar with the variety of English accents; therefore, they will be able to better understand and serve the guests. Second, the hotel should consider providing foreign language training, especially in Russian and Chinese. These front office staff believed that being able to communicate with these guests using their first language would better facilitate communication more so than English.

In addition, the results of this study suggest that the English training in Thai universities was useful; however, it was insufficient for these participants to perform their duties as hotel receptionists in Phuket. The focus of the English course should not only be on English for academic purposes, but should also be on English for tourism purposes. There were various activities during the English courses for learners to participate in, such as topic discussion, reading, listening, group activity, as well as homework and exercises. The primary purpose of these activities was to allow learners to demonstrate the knowledge that they had learned during the course. All of these activities, as mentioned in Zahedpisheh et al. (2017), are recommended to be used in any English courses and must be based on the course purpose. The evaluation was completed by the learners before completion of each course. As a result, all participants can fully apply their English knowledge and skills in their work.

The result of this study, however, revealed that the English courses that these participants took were insufficient as they still encountered listening and speaking problems,

especially with non-native English-speaking guests. This finding suggests that the English courses in the Thai universities were designed based on the requirements of the Ministry of Education. In other words, the English courses might not have been created to meet learners' needs in terms of their future profession. As suggested by Edward (2000, as cited in Zahedpisheh et al., 2017), the target situation analysis (TSA) should be completed to understand the learners' reason for attending a course. It can be inferred that, without conducting a TSA, lecturers will not have an opportunity to assess the learners' needs, and this will affect the course design. Moreover, the materials are essential in English courses because these materials can function as a link between existing knowledge and target proficiency (Hutchinson & Waters, 1992); therefore, teachers must be aware of this link when selecting appropriate materials for each course. This study suggests that all the materials used in English course at Thai universities – especially textbooks and other online channels – focused on either British or American English, resulting in Thai students being familiar with only these two varieties of English accents; however, the primary tourism market in Phuket are from non-native English-speaking countries such as China, India, and Russia, resulting in these front office staff having struggled with understanding the wide variety of English accents.

Since Phuket is famous as a tourist destination in Thailand, it is believed that these findings could be used as a guideline for the hotel to design additional training, especially foreign-language training. The finding could also be used to improve English courses in the hospitality management programs of Thai universities by focusing on a wide variety of English accents together with pragmatic strategies. Therefore, future cohorts of students who wish to pursue careers as a hotel receptionist will be better prepared to perform their jobs.

Limitations

As this paper adopted the qualitative research approach with only a small number of participants, future studies may adopt the quantitative research approach to investigate the needs and problems of English communication between Thai receptionists and non-native English-speaking guests so that the results can be generalized to Thai receptionists in general. Moreover, future studies could incorporate perspectives from non-native English-speaking hotel guests to add reliability to the findings regarding communication problems between these guests and Thai hotel receptionists. Additionally, the two lectures interviewed in this study did not teach the four participants of this study who were hotel receptionists. Thus, to increase the reliability of the findings of future studies, it is recommended that the data should be collected from English lecturers who taught the hotel receptionists who are the participants of the study.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Front Office Staff

1. Could you tell me about your background information, such as your age, position, and work experience?
2. What are the main nationalities of the hotel guests?
3. Which faculty do you graduate from? How many English courses did you take during your undergraduate level? What was the focus of the English courses?
4. Are there any requirements when you first apply as a front office staff? Does the hotel use any English test?
5. Do you think English is important in working as a front office staff? What skills do you use the most? Can you apply what you learned in university to your daily work?
6. Do you encounter any communication challenges? If yes, how can you deal with these challenges?
7. Does hotel provide any English training? Do you think the training is useful?
8. Do you think the hotel provide enough English language training?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Learning and Development Supervisor

1. Could you tell me about your background information, such as your age, position, working experience?
2. What is the most important skill that you think front office staff should master?
3. Does the hotel use any English test when you applied for the job?
4. Could you provide more information in regard to the English test?
5. Does the hotel provide any training? If yes, which course? How do you know that the training you arranged is needed?
6. Do you ask the staff to do any test after they complete training?
7. Do you think the English language training is useful?
8. Besides English language training, are there any other training courses?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Faculty Members

1. Could you tell me about your background information, such as your age, position, working experience?
2. Could you give me more information in regard to the courses that you teach?
3. In what way do English language courses offered at university where you teach important to students?
4. Do you think the courses can prepare students for their future employment?
5. Besides English and tourism courses, does the program provide any other courses?
6. Do you use any test to evaluate the students' English skills?
7. Do the students have any strength and weakness during learning? How can you help them?
8. Does the program require student internships? What types of feedback did you get from employers?