

English Language Needs of Elderly Entrepreneurs in a Rural Organic Rice Seed Community in Northeastern Thailand

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Abstract

In rural Thailand, many elderly community members continue to take part in small-scale entrepreneurship, especially in areas connected to local or organic products. This study explores the English language needs of elderly entrepreneurs from the Dow Lom Duan Organic Rice Seed Community Enterprise in Sakon Nakhon Province. The enterprise produces and sells chemical-free rice products such as organic brown rice, banana leaf sticky rice (Khao Tom Mad), crispy rice cakes (Khaotan), and puffed rice (Khao Pong). As the group seeks to expand its market and communicate with foreign customers, the role of English becomes more important. However, most members are older adults with limited formal education and little experience learning English. This study used structured interviews with 48 entrepreneurs to examine how they currently use English, the challenges they face, and the types of English they wish to learn. Findings show that participants mainly need English for product descriptions, greetings, price negotiation, and online posts. They prefer short phrases, visual support, and oral learning methods. The study highlights the importance of practical, task-based English lessons and gives suggestions for future training or materials that support elderly entrepreneurs in similar rural communities.

Keywords: elderly entrepreneurs, English communication, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), needs analysis, organic rice products community enterprise

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Introduction

In many rural areas across Thailand, elderly members of the community continue to play an active role in local economic activities. One such group includes elderly entrepreneurs who manage and operate community-based enterprises, particularly those involving local or organic products. In Sakon Nakhon Province, members of the Dow Lom Duan Organic Rice Seed Community Enterprise grow their own rice using traditional and sustainable methods. The rice is free from chemicals and pesticides, and natural fertilizers such as animal manure are used. The community produces a variety of organic rice-based products, including organic brown rice, banana leaf sticky rice (Khao Tom Mad), crispy rice cakes (Khaotan), and puffed rice (Khao Pong). These products are often sold at local events, exhibitions, or through informal markets, and in some cases, promoted online via social media platforms like Facebook.

As these communities gradually move toward broader markets, including online sales and potential foreign buyers, the need for English language skills becomes more important. However, most of the entrepreneurs in these rural enterprises are elderly, with limited formal education and little exposure to formal English learning. Their experiences with English tend to be minimal, often limited to seeing English on packaging or hearing it in media. They typically avoid using English in real communication, especially with non-Thai customers, due to a lack of confidence and familiarity.

Despite these challenges, many of these elderly entrepreneurs have shown strong interest in learning practical English, especially expressions that are directly useful in their businesses. These include the ability to introduce their products, provide simple explanations, answer questions from customers, and use short phrases for online posts or product labels. In particular, they are interested in learning how to describe the benefits of organic rice, explain the production process, and highlight the health and environmental value of their chemical-free rice products. Their needs are not academic but functional: they seek ready-to-use English that can support their small business operations and improve their communication with a wider customer base.

Understanding these specific language needs is important for designing effective English support and training that fits the realities of rural entrepreneurs. A targeted needs analysis can help identify what types of English are most relevant, what tasks require language use, and how learning can be best supported in low-literacy, elderly groups. It can also help bridge the gap between language education and real-world economic empowerment.

Previous studies in Thailand and other countries have shown that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is most effective when it is designed around learners' real-life communication tasks. For example, several needs analysis studies in community-based tourism, agricultural businesses, and small enterprises have identified similar themes such as the need for language in customer interaction, product promotion, and labeling (e.g., Chaiyapoo et al., 2025; Rattanagamonwan et al., 2025; Nomnian, 2014a, 2014b).

This study focuses on identifying the English language needs of elderly entrepreneurs in the Dow Lom Duan Organic Rice Seed Community Enterprise in Sakon Nakhon Province. By focusing on the actual tasks and communication situations that require English, the study aims to provide insights that can be used to support appropriate language learning programs or materials.

Literature Review

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an approach to language teaching that focuses on the specific communicative needs of learners in particular contexts. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) defined ESP as a learner-centered approach that emphasizes the use of English for real-world tasks rather than general proficiency. A central concept in ESP is needs analysis, which is used to understand the target situations in which English is needed, the current abilities of learners, and the most suitable methods for teaching. Needs analysis often identifies three types of needs: target needs (what learners need to do with the language), present needs (what learners can currently do), and learning needs (how they learn best). This approach has been used widely in studies involving tourism personnel, community vendors, and local entrepreneurs in Thailand and across Southeast Asia.

In the context of community and small-scale entrepreneurs, English is often used as a tool to promote products, communicate with non-Thai customers, and access broader markets. However, many of these entrepreneurs have limited exposure to formal English education and prefer learning that is simple and directly relevant to their business. Choomthong (2023), for example, found that local rice product vendors needed English for explaining products, greeting foreign visitors, and labeling items. Similarly, Meunchong and Kantapat (2025) reported that members of a woven fabric community in Phetchabun used Facebook Pages to sell their goods and needed English for online marketing, price communication, and packaging. Their study also showed that bilingual labeling and social media captions were common areas where English was used or desired. These findings are consistent with other research, such as Chiablaem (2020), who explored the English needs of Thai massage employees and highlighted the need for service expressions, greetings, and basic conversations.

Research also shows that many of these entrepreneurs are adults or elderly people. Learning English at an older age presents additional challenges, such as low confidence, limited memory, or unfamiliarity with formal education settings. However, several studies highlight that older learners are highly motivated if the lessons are practical. Humphries and Klatt (2025) explored adult community education in Australia and found that adult learners performed well when learning materials were simple, repetitive, and focused on speaking. Dupuis (2024) emphasized the importance of building literacy skills gradually, especially for learners with low educational backgrounds. Datu (2024) investigated in-house English training in Jakarta and found that adult learners benefited from learning through oral practice and short dialogues. These findings support the idea that English lessons for elderly entrepreneurs should be functional, easy to remember, and closely connected to their work and social contexts.

Digital tools such as social media have introduced new forms of English communication for local businesses. With platforms like Facebook and LINE becoming popular for small-scale sales, community entrepreneurs are increasingly using English in new ways. Meunchong and Kantapat (2025) found that community businesses in Phetchabun Province used short English posts and hashtags to reach a wider audience. Yimklib et al. (2021) showed that entrepreneurs in the textile and fashion industry needed English to promote their work online and communicate delivery information. Ahmad and Khan (2023) also emphasized that global entrepreneurship now includes digital English communication, even for small businesses. These studies suggest that rural entrepreneurs, while not highly proficient in English, are using it in digital spaces where short messages, key phrases, and visual elements support communication. Rattanagamonwan et al. (2025) also noted the increasing interest in bilingual product labeling and online responses, especially when selling to customers outside the local province.

In addition to communication needs, some studies focus on the idea of language as a resource for business development. Chaiyapoo (2025) described how entrepreneurs in Myanmar viewed language skills as part of their market strategy, where English served as a form of capital that increased business opportunities. Muslimah et al. (2025) similarly emphasized the potential of Arabic language students to apply their skills in entrepreneurship through the creation of “Arabic for Specific Purposes” modules. Hadley (2025) promoted an embedded entrepreneurship pedagogy that encourages learners to apply real communication skills in business situations. These ideas reinforce the argument that language learning, especially English, can be a valuable tool for business owners, particularly in rural or semi-formal economic contexts.

Several Thai studies have also used needs analysis methods to identify English communication requirements of small business owners, tourism staff, and service providers. Gallagher et al. (2025) studied agro-tourism entrepreneurs in Nakhon Pathom and found that participants needed English for giving information, greeting tourists, and talking about local products. Their study used focus groups and interviews to gather data. Rattanagamonwan et al. (2025) studied tourism-based entrepreneurs in Mae Hong Son and reported a strong demand for English in creating online posts and bilingual packaging. Choomthong (2023) found that rice vendors, though not confident in English, were eager to learn common expressions and key product vocabulary. Nomnian (2014b) explored the needs of raft service entrepreneurs and identified a need for English in basic conversation, signposting, and customer interaction. These studies commonly reported that participants preferred short, fixed expressions and oral communication over complex grammar or reading tasks.

Taken together, the literature shows that elderly and community-based entrepreneurs in Thailand face similar challenges in learning and using English. Their needs are mostly practical and task-based, such as explaining products, greeting customers, handling prices, and responding online. They are often willing to learn English, especially when it is relevant to their work and easy to practice. Although many lack formal education or previous English training, they demonstrate high motivation when the learning is flexible, visual, and connected

to real-life tasks. These findings provide important background for the current study, which focuses on the English language needs of elderly entrepreneurs in the Dow Lom Duan Organic Rice Seed Community Enterprise in Sakon Nakhon Province. The study aims to fill a gap in research by exploring how English can support this group in both face-to-face and digital communication for small-scale business purposes.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do elderly entrepreneurs in the Dow Lom Duan Organic Rice Seed Community Enterprise currently use English in their business?
2. What are their English language needs related to specific business communication tasks?

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive research design with a focus on needs analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The purpose was to explore the English language needs of elderly entrepreneurs in the Dow Lom Duan Organic Rice Seed Community Enterprise in Sakon Nakhon Province. This enterprise specializes in producing and selling locally grown, chemical-free rice products, including organic brown rice, banana leaf sticky rice (Khao Tom Mad), crispy rice cakes (Khaotan), and puffed rice (Khao Pong). These products are often sold during local exhibitions and through online platforms. This approach allowed the researchers to gather in-depth data about real-world communication problems related to product selling, language use in marketing rice products, and preferences for practical English support. The methodology followed the principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), especially in designing tools that captured both target needs (what the participants need to do with English) and present situation needs (what they are currently able to do).

2. Participants

The participants were 48 entrepreneurs from the Dow Lom Duan Organic Rice Seed Community Enterprise. They were aged 30–74 years (majority 50–59 years: 60.4%) with most engaged in farming. Out of the 48 participants, 44 were female and 4 were male. Occupations included farmers (93.8%), local politicians (4.2%), and laborer (2%). Most had low levels of formal education, with many not completing secondary school. All participants were actively involved in rice-related tasks, including rice seed production, processing, packaging, marketing, and selling of organic rice-based products. They were selected through purposive sampling, as they represent the core group managing the enterprise. Participation was voluntary, and verbal consent was obtained. All participants were native Thai speakers and reported limited prior experience with English learning in formal classrooms.

3. Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a structured interview guide consisting of fixed questions designed to explore English language needs in business-related situations. Although the full

tool originally included nine question sets, the current study focused on six core areas that directly addressed the research questions and anticipated findings. These areas included:

- Experiences with English use in business operations (e.g., describing organic rice products, answering customer questions)
- Problems and challenges when communicating with foreign customers
- Situations where English is needed, such as for price negotiation, explaining the benefits of organic rice, or completing export documents
- Types of English skills and content participants wanted to develop (e.g., vocabulary about rice types, short expressions, listening for customer enquiries)
- Use of digital tools (e.g., translation apps, Facebook Pages) in supporting English communication
- Suggestions for practical English language training for community enterprise entrepreneurs who sell rice-based products

Each main question was followed by sub-questions to elicit detailed examples and allow participants to speak freely about their needs and difficulties. The questions were phrased in simple Thai, and familiar vocabulary related to rice and farming was used to support participant understanding.

4. Data Collection

Given that many participants had limited literacy in Thai and no prior exposure to written English, the interview process was designed to be entirely oral. A team of 10 trained student research assistants, who were on internship in the local area, were assigned to conduct the interviews. Each assistant was responsible for interviewing approximately 4 to 5 participants. All assistants received a short training workshop led by the researchers to ensure they understood the research objectives, interview protocol, and ethical considerations.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, mostly at the participants' homes or community centers. The questions focused on communication related to specific products, such as how to describe the ingredients, health benefits, or preparation methods of organic rice snacks. Responses were audio-recorded with permission and then transcribed verbatim in Thai for analysis. The structured nature of the questions ensured consistency across interviews, while still allowing space for participants to provide real examples from their experience.

5. Data Analysis

After transcription, the responses were coded using content analysis. Thematic categories were developed based on the interview questions and the patterns that emerged from the data. This included coding for:

- Types of English communication tasks (e.g., explaining what Khaotan is to foreign tourists)
- Common difficulties and barriers
- Desired content and formats for English support (e.g., product vocabulary cards, spoken scripts for exhibition booths)

- Suggested modes of delivery (e.g., workshops, audio materials, translation apps)

The analysis aimed to identify both the frequency of certain needs (e.g., many participants requesting English for Facebook product promotion) and the depth of those needs (e.g., participants expressing concern about using the wrong English terms when describing rice types). The results were then grouped under major themes to be presented in the findings section.

Results

This chapter presents the key findings of the study based on structured interviews with 48 elderly entrepreneurs from the Dow Lom Duan Organic Rice Seed Community Enterprise in Sakon Nakhon Province. The findings are organized into five main themes, aligned with the research questions: (1) current use of English in business operations, (2) problems and challenges in English communication, (3) situations in which English is needed, (4) desired English content and skills, and (5) preferred learning modes and support.

1. Current Use of English in Business

The majority of participants (87.5%, or 42 out of 48) reported not using English in their daily business operations. Most communication took place in Thai, including when selling rice-based products such as organic brown rice, banana leaf sticky rice (Khao Tom Mad), crispy rice cakes (Khao tan), and puffed rice (Khao Pong) at local markets or exhibitions. Only 12.5% (6 participants) indicated that they had ever tried to use English, mostly in very simple ways such as saying “hello” or responding with a smile to foreign tourists. A few mentioned recognizing English words from product labels or Facebook posts but said they could not understand or explain them.

One participant shared:

“I saw someone post ‘organic’ under our rice photo, but I don’t know what it really means.” (Female, 53, Farmer)

Another said:

“When foreigners ask about the rice, I smile and call someone younger to help.” (Female, 40, Farmer)

Another highlighted issues with difficulties in English explanation:

“I cannot explaining the benefits of organic rice I want to say “it helps balance the natural ecosystem... prevents chemical contamination of soil, water, and plants... promotes good health and immunity, but I have English restriction.” (Female, 42, Farmer)

2. Problems and Challenges in English Communication

A total of 48 participants took part in this study, all of them (100%) reported fear or discomfort when communicating with foreigners due to their lack of English proficiency. Many

deliberately avoided engaging with non-Thai customers, particularly during exhibitions, because they felt embarrassed or afraid of making mistakes.

One participant shared her concern:

“I can read some English but cannot communicate at all. When foreigners ask questions, I feel nervous and lose confidence.” (Female, 53, Local Politician)

Another highlighted issues with technology:

“I want to use technology that can be accessed immediately, without having to type or translate questions before communicating with customers.” (Female, 37, Farmer)

A third participant emphasized the business consequences of language barriers:

“Not being able to use English means I lose customers when foreigners visit.” (Female, 61, Farmer)

Another common challenge was understanding questions typed in English on social media. Even if a product was posted online, participants could not reply to inquiries. Several mentioned relying on younger family members or using Google Translate, which they found difficult to use correctly.

3. Situations Where English Is Needed

A total of 48 participants (100%) described specific business situations where English would be helpful. These included explaining products to foreign buyers at events or online, describing the benefits of organic rice (e.g., pesticide-free, healthy, natural fertilizer), negotiating prices or offering discounts, writing bilingual labels for packaging, and providing production or export information in basic English.

One male participant shared:

“We want to say our rice is safe. It is grown with no chemicals. We use cow manure only.” (Male, 58, Local Politician)

Another female participant noted:

“Some customers asked about the process. I want to tell them we steam the khao tom mat, not boil. But I don’t know the words.” (Female, 40, Farmer)

A third participant responded:

“Foreign buyers ask how much and what type of rice. I want to answer by myself, not always wait for my children.” (Female, 53, Local politician)

In line with the oral learning method emphasized in this study’s abstract, most participants (93.7%, or 45 out of 48) expressed strong interest in learning practical English content directly linked to their business context. They emphasized vocabulary lists, short expressions, and

phrases related to organic rice, health benefits, and export procedures. In addition, participants requested practice in all four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but in short, practical formats rather than theoretical lessons.

A strong preference was placed on oral learning methods, particularly the ability to explain product characteristics and communicate stories about organic rice in English. As one participant explained, *“the stories and products of Organic Rice and speaking about them from the villagers.”* This oral practice was seen as essential for building confidence in business communication: *“This will enable villagers to explain the properties of the rice.”*

4. Desired English Content and Skills

Most participants (93.7%, or 45 out of 48) expressed strong interest in learning practical English content directly linked to their business context. They emphasized vocabulary lists, short expressions, and phrases related to organic rice, health benefits, and export procedures. In addition, participants requested practice in all four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing but in short, practical formats rather than theoretical lessons. A strong preference was placed on oral learning methods, particularly the ability to explain product characteristics and communicate stories about organic rice in English. As one participant explained, *“the stories and products of Organic Rice and speaking about them from the villagers.”* This oral practice was seen as essential for building confidence in business communication: *“This will enable villagers to explain the properties of the rice”*.

Specific requests included:

- Vocabulary related to rice and its benefit such as organic rice, production, and health benefits
- Oral learning methods involve the ability to explain product characteristics and communicate stories about organic rice in English.
- Short question-answer patterns (e.g., “What is this?” / “This is crispy rice with coconut.”)
- Simple expressions for greeting, thanking, and explaining prices
- Key words for use in Facebook captions or hashtags
- Filling in the documents correctly such as rice exports

Participants emphasized that they did not want grammar lessons or long reading passages but instead preferred interactive, oral-based learning supported by practical examples from their own community enterprises.

One female participant highlighted the importance of oral practice, stating,

“We want to be able to talk about the stories and products of organic rice and speaking about them.” (Male, 52, Laborer)

Another participant explained the practical outcome, saying,

“Having been training in speaking of the our enterprise such as information of rice. This will enable our members to explain the properties of the rice.” (Female, 51, Farmer)

One person said:

“I just want words and sentences I can say to explain our khao pong or write on the label.” (Female, 52, Farmer)

Some also asked for common sentences like:

“This is organic rice with no chemical,”

“It is good for health,”

“One pack is 50 baht.”

One participant explained:

“the stories and products of Organic Rice and speaking about them from the villagers.”

Another woman added:

“I want to practice explaining the story of organic rice... the vocabulary in this section, and the health benefits of organic rice.” (Female, 49, Farmer)

5. Preferred Learning Modes and Support

A total of 79.2% (38 participants) preferred practical learning methods, such as:

- Speaking practice through repetition or role-play
- Listening to audio clips in Thai and English
- Using bilingual booklets with pictures and key expressions
- Short community-based workshops
- Using of applications and translation tools to overcome communication barriers with foreign customers.

Some also expressed interest in simple mobile tools like Google Translate or Thai-English phrasebooks. However, they needed guidance on how to use them correctly.

One participant suggested:

“Give us a booklet with Thai and English words. With pictures. We can look and use it.” (Female, 42, Farmer)

Another said:

“If you teach us step by step, and we repeat, we can learn.” (Male, 47, Farmer)

A different woman added:

“We want to provide training on the use of applications to enhance proficiency and make faster communication with customers.” (Female, 50, Farmer)

Many believed that English would be useful, especially if they planned to sell their rice products outside the province or attract more tourists online.

The findings revealed that while the majority of participants had little or no experience using English in their businesses, they were highly motivated to learn practical, ready-to-use English expressions for product introductions, greeting customers, and online marketing. Participants highlighted a strong desire to understand and communicate the health benefits, ingredients, and unique identity of their organic rice products, such as organic brown rice, banana leaf sticky rice (Khao Tom Mad), crispy rice cakes (Khaotan), and puffed rice (Khao Pong). As one female participant (51, farmer) explained, *“If we know how we can talk about the stories and products*

of organic rice and speaking about them, this will enable us to explain the properties of the rice, and so forth.” This highlights the importance of oral-based storytelling as a learning method, allowing participants to both share product knowledge and express cultural identity. The use of English was especially seen as important for interacting with foreign visitors, improving product labeling, talking about the product and process of growing rice and expanding their reach through Facebook and other digital platforms.

Discussion

This study explored the English language needs of elderly entrepreneurs in the Dow Lom Duan Organic Rice Seed Community Enterprise in Sakon Nakhon Province. The findings revealed that while the majority of participants had little or no experience using English in their businesses, they were highly motivated to learn practical, ready-to-use English expressions for product introductions, greeting customers, and online marketing. Participants highlighted a strong desire to understand and communicate the health benefits, ingredients, and unique identity of their organic rice products, such as organic brown rice, banana leaf sticky rice (Khao Tom Mad), crispy rice cakes (Khaotan), and puffed rice (Khao Pong). As one female participant (51, farmer) explained, *“The stories and products of Organic Rice and speaking about them from the villagers. This will enable us to explain the properties of the rice.”* This highlights the importance of oral-based storytelling as a learning method, allowing participants to both share product knowledge and express cultural identity. The use of English was especially seen as important for interacting with foreign visitors, improving product labeling, and expanding their reach through Facebook and other digital platforms.

The findings confirm patterns observed in several previous studies. For example, Choomthong (2023) and Nomnian (2014) reported that Thai community vendors and entrepreneurs prefer short, fixed expressions that can be directly used for product explanations or greeting customers. This aligns with our participants’ focus on key phrases such as *This is organic rice* or *No chemicals used*.

Additionally, the interest in describing health benefits and ingredients of organic products reflects what Rattanagamonwan et al. (2025) found among tourism entrepreneurs, who emphasized the value of simple English for telling local product stories in exhibitions and online. Similarly, Meunchong and Tachom (2023) emphasized the need for bilingual labeling and caption writing when community products are promoted online gain, consistent with the finding that over 80% of participants in this study expressed a desire to learn English for Facebook posts and captions.

The challenges faced by elderly learners in using English such as low confidence, memory difficulties, or fear of miscommunication are also consistent with research by Humphries and Klatt (2025), who found that elderly adult learners perform best when the lessons are functional and repetitive. Dupuis (2024) and Datu (2024) also emphasized the importance of oral interaction and simplified materials in teaching older learners, particularly those from rural or low-literacy backgrounds.

The finding that many participants requested help with basic reading and completing export-related documents also echoes Chiablaem (2020), who found that service staff in Pattaya needed help with functional tasks like reading booking requests or writing short notes to customers. While our participants are not directly exporting yet, their interest in learning how to complete export-related paperwork in English shows that they view language as a tool for future business growth a finding also echoed by Ahmad and Khan (2023) and Barruga (2025), who described English as a form of "entrepreneurial capital" in local economies.

Conclusion

The study highlights the specific and practical English language needs of elderly entrepreneurs in a rural Thai context. These entrepreneurs are not seeking academic proficiency but rather functional English expressions to promote and explain their locally produced organic rice products. Their interest in using English for digital marketing and customer interaction shows a strong motivation to engage in wider markets, even with limited literacy or previous English exposure.

The findings support the development of contextualized ESP programs that are simple, visual, and business-oriented. By aligning language education with the real-world tasks of elderly entrepreneurs, future interventions can empower communities like the Dow Lom Duan Organic Rice Seed Enterprise to communicate more confidently and grow their businesses in both local and global markets.

Implications for English Support Programs

These findings suggest that English training for elderly rural entrepreneurs should focus on practical, context-specific content that supports everyday communication. Training should prioritize oral skills (e.g., greetings, product introductions) and product-specific vocabulary (e.g., health benefits of organic brown rice). Visual aids and bilingual cue cards could be highly beneficial for building confidence and reinforcing memory.

Support programs should also consider integrating digital tools such as translation apps or pre-written templates for Facebook posts. Since participants were already using mobile phones and social media to sell their products, teaching them how to use English in those same platforms would offer immediate benefits.

Training sessions should be short, interactive, and flexible, in line with the findings of Datu (2024), who emphasized oral practice in real business settings, and Yimklib et al. (2021), who noted the importance of practical English in the textile and fashion sectors. In addition, as Hadley (2025) suggested, embedding entrepreneurial content in language lessons may help learners feel more connected to the learning process and see its direct relevance.

Limitations

This study was limited to a single community enterprise in Sakon Nakhon Province and may not represent the needs of other elderly entrepreneurs across Thailand. The sample size (n=48) was appropriate for qualitative inquiry but does not allow for broader generalization. Also, due to the oral nature of the interviews, there may have been inconsistencies in how responses were interpreted or recorded, despite training given to research assistants.

The study also focused solely on English needs and did not investigate attitudes toward English learning, even though some participants spontaneously expressed opinions on the usefulness or difficulty of English. Future studies could expand on this aspect to better understand emotional or psychological barriers to language use.

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