

Free Vocational Event in Improving English and Chinese Literacy for Restaurant Workers

As Tha Sala District in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province gradually emerges as one of the top destinations in the region, the number of foreigners residing and visiting the district has significantly increased. Recent records indicate that 70% of the foreign population in the district consists of students and staff from Walailak University, with the remaining being foreign tourists or expatriates living in the district. However, one of the pressing challenges these foreigners face is the language barrier, which hampers effective communication with the local population.

Language Barriers in Tha Sala: A Growing Concern

Tha Sala District is predominantly inhabited by locals who, for the most part, lack basic English proficiency, making it difficult for them to interact with the growing foreign community. This language gap is especially noticeable in everyday settings such as restaurants, where the inability to communicate effectively can lead to misunderstandings and a less welcoming experience for foreigners. This issue, if unaddressed, could result in a decline in the number of foreign visitors, potentially diverting them to other districts where English is more widely spoken, thus impacting the local economy.

The Birth of the "Tha Sala Global – The Global Neighbour" Initiative

Recognizing the need to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for foreigners, Walailak University, through its International College, launched the "Tha Sala Global – The Global Neighbour" initiative in 2023. The initiative aims to foster an English-friendly environment across the district, enabling seamless interaction between locals and foreigners. Key areas identified for this purpose include restaurants, cafés, drug stores, local supermarkets, hotels and hostels, government offices, and local markets. By targeting these areas, the initiative seeks to bridge the communication gap and enhance the overall experience for foreigners in the district.

Addressing the Immediate Need: Essential English for Restaurant Staff

In 2024, Walailak University's International College took a significant step forward by organizing a free vocational event titled “Essential English for Restaurant and Food and Beverage Workers” under the project “The 2024 Tha Sala Global Neighbour Project”. This event was specifically designed to address the most critical issue identified through surveys and interviews with foreigners in Tha Sala District: the language barrier in restaurants. The inability of local restaurant staff to communicate effectively in English was seen as a major deterrent for foreign visitors, potentially leading them to seek dining options in other areas where English is more commonly spoken. This, in turn, could result in a loss of customers and a missed opportunity to boost the local economy.

The event brought together local restaurant workers from seven different establishments in Tha Sala District, providing them with the necessary skills to engage with foreign customers confidently. Dr. Suchita Manajit and Dr. Konrawan Rattanaburi from the WU International College led the training sessions, focusing on various aspects of basic English conversation pertinent to the food and beverage industry. The participants learned essential vocabulary related to food ingredients and cooking tools, how to greet customers, take orders, describe menu items, handle payments, address special requests and complaints, and understand international dining etiquette.

Adding a practical dimension to the training, international students from Walailak University played a vital role in the event by conducting role-playing sessions. These sessions simulated typical restaurant interactions, allowing local restaurant workers to practice their newly acquired English skills in real-life scenarios.

Ad-hoc Program for Expanding the Scope: Introducing Mandarin Chinese

As the demographic composition of Tha Sala District continues to evolve, with an increasing number of Chinese nationals residing or visiting the area, the WU International College recognized the need to further expand the language training initiative. In response to this growing trend, the vocational event was extended to include basic Mandarin Chinese conversation skills. This addition was crucial, as many Chinese visitors may not be proficient in English, posing an additional communication challenge for local restaurant workers.

The Mandarin Chinese sessions were conducted by Chinese students at Walailak University, who provided training on essential phrases and expressions commonly used in restaurant settings. The local restaurant workers were taught how to greet customers in Mandarin, take orders, handle payments, and manage

other basic interactions, ensuring that they could cater to the needs of Chinese-speaking customers with ease.

The Path Forward: Building a Truly Global Neighbourhood

The "Tha Sala Global – The Global Neighbour" initiative is a testament to Walailak University's commitment to fostering cross-cultural understanding and supporting local economic development. By equipping local restaurant workers with the necessary language skills, the initiative not only enhances the experience of foreign visitors but also empowers the local community to thrive in a more globalized environment.

As a result of the training provided through the event, participants have become significantly more skillful in English conversation, which has had a tangible impact on their businesses. With improved communication abilities, these restaurants have become more attractive to a broader customer base, including not only Thai patrons but also an increasing number of foreign customers. This influx of diverse clientele has led to increased revenue for the participating restaurants, contributing to the overall economic growth of the Tha Sala District. The success of these businesses underscores the importance of such initiatives in fostering both local and global connections, ultimately boosting the local economy.

As the initiative continues to evolve, the university plans to expand its scope to include other areas of interaction between locals and foreigners, ensuring that Tha Sala District remains a welcoming destination for people from all corners of the world. The success of this program highlights the importance of collaboration between educational institutions and local communities in addressing global challenges at the grassroots level.