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**PERCEPTIONS ON ENGLISH COMMUNICATION SKILLS  
TRAINING FOR HOTEL FRONT OFFICE EMPLOYEES**

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**Abstract**

Successful communication is key to lucrative hospitality industry. Communication in this industry is an important factor and plays a role in a smooth and effective interaction between the hotel service staff and their customers. English communication skills training is associated with several benefits including enhanced job performance, high guest satisfaction and sustainable growth in today's competitive hotel business. This paper surveys front office employees' satisfaction toward an implemented English communication skills training at a five-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Participants' satisfaction on the training content and method were assessed via questionnaire and group interview session. The results reveal that most of the participant had encouraging attitudes towards the method and content of the training. Findings of this study help to create the awareness among employers, human resource managers and industrial experts to reconsider the content and methodology of communication skill training for hotel staff. Implications of well-designed English communication skills training for hotel front office employees were discussed.

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## **1. Introduction**

The uniqueness of the hospitality industry is that customers buy services rather than products. The quality of services provided is subjected to the acts of the employees who serve the customers. One of the main challenges of hotel business is sustaining guests' satisfaction with the services. The position of the front office employees is to both sell and promote the hotel services to the clients. This is because they are the ones that will handle guests' matters starting from the very beginning of their arrival till the end of their stay in the hotel. To name a few of the services are like issuing keys, handling reservations including checking ins and outs, organizing tours, and attending to complaints and issues of hotel rooms.

Like many other professionals, hotel front office employees commonly use English as the professional lingua franca with hotel guests of different nationalities. According to Blue and Harun (2003), Bobanovic and Grzinic (2011) and Yasmin et al. (2016), people who work in the tourism industry need to be able to be proficient and fluent in English. Thus, there is a growing realisation among hotel employers that English language training is no longer an expense but an investment because having employees with good command of English is seen as a way of ensuring competitive advantage since it is important for front desk staff to be proficient in English especially when they are dealing with guests (Afrianto & Gulö, 2019).

### **1.1. Language needs analysis**

Hyland (2014) viewed language needs analysis (LNA) as the vital process when designing any English for Specific Purpose (ESP) courses. This is to gauge systematically the communicative practices and linguistic forms needed by a particular group of learners. To get as wide a range of data as possible, LNA needs to triangulate three main aspects which are learners, applied linguists and domain experts (Long, 2005, pp. 26–27). As highlighted by Cowling (2007), it is a process of “casting a large net to cover many sources allowed for more opportunities to identify needs and also to filter out any inaccurate perceived needs through the use of triangulation” (p. 429). “What distinguishes ESP from General English (GE) is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 53). This is because, for adult ESP learners, generally they know what their language needs are. It is fundamental to conduct needs analysis to develop more meaningful language courses (Dodigovic & Agustín-Llach, 2020) since it will help trainers to decide on the suitable materials for learners to achieve the targeted learning outcomes (Menggo et al., 2019). Thus, it only seems appropriate to design the language modules and instruction approach based on the way English is used in the real workplace setting.

### **1.2. Content of the modules**

Adults know what they need to perform well at workplace, thus the modules should be tailored closely to the workplace linguistic, and genre needs. Hotel employees are commonly expected to communicate with guests in English as the language is the international language of travel. Being able to communicate effectively with hotel guests can determine the success of the service quality delivered by the front office employees. Thus, it is essential and required for them to be competent in English so that

guests, especially the international ones to be satisfied throughout their stay. Oftentimes Human Resource (HR) regards Workplace English Language Training (WELT) as an expense rather than an investment. However, significant changes have taken place as more and more hotel managers are realising the benefits of having fluent English-speaking employees. It gives competitive advantage in customer service and care. It also increases on-the-job safety, employee retention, prevents job loss and promotes deserving employees (Ekkens & Winke, 2009) at the workplace. Additionally, if employees are fluent in their English, it will benefit the hotel itself. This can indeed boost the hotel image and subsequently it can encourage guests to frequent the hotel. For many hotels in Malaysia, front office employee-guest interactions are mainly facilitated through the English language. Thus, the hospitality industry can fall short of its potential if the employees are not competent in English (Poznansky & Davis, 2021).

A survey confirmed that hotel managers in Kuala Lumpur considered it is essential to provide English language communication skills training for upgrading the quality of customer service (Chan, 2002). In order to meet the participants' job-specific goals, the need of the English for Occupational Purpose (EOP) course has to be clearly defined. For instance, the front office hotel employees need to develop language skills in the following contexts: addressing a person, soliciting and giving information, responding to requests, the use of gestures, dealing with difficult customers and appeasing complaints (Blue & Harun, 2003). Thus, a well designed English communication skills training will improve participants' conversational abilities as it is tailored for their needs.

Hotel service quality is mainly appraised based on how the hotel employees communicate with the hotel guests. Hotel employees need to possess the communication skill nuances when dealing with guests from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Hotel employees' lack of use of hospitality vocabulary will not be taken well by certain types of guests. For example, employees working at hotel casinos should be well versed with casino related lingo or slang besides the casino policies and procedures for the guests' pleasant experience at the hotel. Besides, the front office employees need to have strong interpersonal and communication skills so that guests will be able to create good memories at the hotel. They need to be helpful, courteous and welcoming too because they are the ones who will be responsible to attend to the guests throughout their stay there in the hotel. Thus, they need to be more careful in their choice of words like employing modal auxiliaries to sound more polite when soliciting information or handling complaints from guests. Another type of lingo that front office employees need to be familiar with is romantic experience related terms for couple related packages like honeymoon suite, romantic dinner and tailored itineraries. Meanwhile for business travellers they are more interested in accessible meeting rooms, free and fast wifi, proximity and personalisation. In dealing with different types of hotel guests, the front office employees must know what the clients need and be well versed with all the lingo and terms that can attract clients who look for certain experiences.

There can be little doubt that English is the most commonly used language of hospitality and the lingua franca of tourists and travellers worldwide. Thus, in many parts of the world, the art of greeting, soliciting information, thanking and bidding farewell requires some measure of familiarisation with the relevant English expressions before a person can serve effectively as a receptionist, telephonist or in other guest-contact capacities. Even though in countries like Malaysia there is a tendency to use the mother tongue when communicating with those from the same linguistic background, English is still regarded

important in multiethnic contexts such as hotels and leisure clubs. Whether in English or another language, there is an identifiable cluster of language skills which staff dealing with hotel guests should have already acquired. At the very minimum, these skills include; how to address a person; how to solicit and provide necessary information; how to respond to questions or requests; how to use prompts; how to use gestures (Hauge, 2000); how to deal with difficult customers and how to appease complainants (Blue & Harun, 2003). Grammar and vocabulary are the two pillars of spoken English. Grammar has its own set of rules to be followed and it can be learned. With intensive practice and hard work, one can master them (Alsaif & Farhana, 2019).

It is interesting to note that the hotel in this study does not provide systematic training in these important skills. Front office employees are expected to know how to communicate with guests when seeking a job. Observations on how fellow front office employee executes the job are carried out once the person is employed. The average three months on-the-job training is presumed to be a matter of further polishing and perfecting their hospitality skills. Language use is treated as implicit, and hence taken for granted. The hotel in the study is viewed as simply providers of hospitality and not as institutions for training in communication skills. Time is of the essence for them so they do not have the time to conduct on-going training for their staff where language or communication are concerned. However, hospitality staff should at least have an adequate command of English to be able to communicate with guests.

### **1.3. Training method**

Role play is one of the common training methods employed for hospitality industry staff that allows them to act out real life scenarios (Wood & Neal, 2009). Role play is considered the best method to expose hospitality staff to real life scenarios based on actual guest experiences to improve their communication skills (Prewitt, 2009). Trainers can come up with role play stimuli that require hospitality staff trainees to enact the real-life scenarios with hotel guests to gauge the trainees' English language hospitality vocabulary. Then, tailored modules could be developed to upskill the hospitality staff's English language communication skills. Trainers could appraise the trainees' language ability based on the role play stimuli and facilitate the trainees to enhance their hospitality vocabulary and English language skills. Hotel guest inputs are useful in the development of the modules which could be obtained from hotel reviews on the websites and hotel patron feedback forms. Service employees can be more sensitive to nonverbal cues if role play method as well as videotapes that demonstrate both positive and negative nonverbal cues were used (Sundaram & Webster, 2000).

By incorporating role play as one of the methods in the training programme, the employees will have the opportunity to experience a real work environment situation including the content and the context of the job scope. Employees can apply what they have learned from a good training programme in a real job setting. Therefore, the choice of role play situation must be based on real scenario of the work setting. Not only that, the role play situation must also be suitable to the skill levels and needs of the participants. Thus, role play is regarded as the best method (Frash et al., 2010; Prewitt, 2009).

In teaching service skills, role play offers numerous advantages. It is an effective way to practice customer interaction, communication training, assisting front office staff interaction with customers and also providing opportunities for improving the practicality of the training session. Role play also is able to

give trainees the opportunity to feel the experience of having interaction with guests. It can help build empathy skills, create possibility to practice technical and interpersonal skills, break down barriers among trainees so that an effective learning environment can be achieved. Role play also promotes interactions, creates involvements and found to be effective in terms of participants' involvement. Due to the mentioned advantages, the role play method is therefore an excellent choice to be used to train these employees (Feiertag, 2001; Nikendei et al., 2005).

#### **1.4. The study**

The objective of this study is to seek into trainees' perceptions on the content of English Communication Skills training (12 hours) and the training instructional method implemented at a five-star hotel located in Kuala Lumpur. 25 front office employees participated in the study and data were collected from a set of questionnaires and a group interview. The respondents rated their opinions on the modules and instructional method based on a 5-point Likert scale and gave suggestions on how to improve the training content and instructional method.

The researchers designed an integrated-skills course which includes receptive and productive skills. Vocabulary, grammar as well as pronunciation are incorporated too, and the course was aimed at helping the trainees acquire and develop content-specific skills and knowledge. Needs analysis and proficiency test were conducted to achieve a well-grounded course.

At the end of the course, data was collected from a set of questionnaires and group interview. This is to find out whether the course fulfilled their needs and supported their learning and achievements.

## **2. Research Methods**

Quantitative data were collected for this study through a questionnaire distributed to 25 employees at Double Tree by Hilton, Kuala Lumpur. The items on the questionnaires were constructed to get participants' opinions on the training modules and instructional method. They were to rate these aspects based on five-Likert scale with the following descriptors: "Strongly agree", "Agree", "No opinion", "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree". The 19 items probed whether the modules meet the trainees' English language needs and the appropriateness of the training method.

A group interview was carried also out at the end of the four-week training (12 hours) which required the participants to give responses on how to improve the training content and instructional method. As posited by Ary et al. (2010), interviews are tools for gathering information on people's thoughts feelings and opinions about certain subjects. Seven front office employees who participated in the training were selected for the interview. The interview questions investigated the strengths and weaknesses of the course, what they would like to change regarding the course and the course improvements in relation to the task appropriateness and density.

### 3. Findings

**Table 1.** Questionnaire

	Frequency (N=25)	Percentage
1. I need to learn more hotel vocabulary.	25	100% totally agree
2. I need to practice hotel role plays to become better at conversation.	20	80% totally agree
	5	20% No opinion
3. I want to learn General English for myself.	25	100% totally agree
4. I need General English to improve my spoken grammar.	25	100% totally agree
5. The materials I need to study are General English.	17	68% totally agree
	8	32% disagree
6. The materials I need to study are Hotel English.	25	100% totally agree
7. I want the sessions to focus 50% on General English and 50% 25 100% totally agree on Hotel English.	25	100% totally agree
8. Learning General English will help me more in my life.	21	84% agree
	4	16 % No opinion
9. Learning Hotel English will help me more in my career.	19	76% totally agree
	6	24% agree
10. I want to learn about topics in English outside of the Hotel situation.	19	76% totally agree
	6	24% agree
11. I want this course to enable me to speak about myself in English.	25	100% totally agree
12. This course will match what the hotel wants.	25	100% totally agree
13. I like the Hotel English sessions more than General English sessions.	22	88% totally agree
	3	12% No opinion
14. The classes were fun and enjoyable (motivating).	25	100% totally agree
15. I can now speak with the hotel guests more easily in English.	25	100% totally agree
16. I can speak to anyone more easily in English.	25	100% totally agree
17. The materials helped me to speak more English.	25	100% totally agree
18. The materials were too easy.	10	40% agree
	15	60 % agree
19. The materials were very difficult.	15	60 % agree
	10	40% agree

Based on Table 1 above, the results reveal that for question 1, the participants (100%) totally agreed that the hospitality vocabulary covered in the course was satisfactory. The participants also shared the view that they need to learn more hotel vocabulary since they are working in the hotel industry and the training content on hospitality vocabulary was a great help to them. There are certain registers that they realised they need to be familiar with to do their jobs efficiently. This echoes Jawhar's opinion that being fluent in English using the proper vocabulary would certainly enhance the hospitality industry staff communication skills (Yasin et al., 2010). During their training, participants should learn specialised registers in order to understand frequent words that have different meanings in a general context such as register for front office (Jubaedah & Yanty, 2021).

In the group interview, one of the participants said, “The course required us to do role play, however there is a lot of vocabulary we do not know, so we had difficulty in expressing ourselves. Thus, we need more relevant vocabulary covered before we have the role play” (Student 3, 2022). It could be concluded that the participants strongly believed they needed to learn more hotel vocabulary before asked to act out possible scenarios as they felt they were not fully equipped with the appropriate vocabulary. Most of the participants (80%) felt they would like to practice more hotel role plays to improve at conversing with the hotel guests which is in line with Erazo et al. (2019) and Rojas and Villafuerte (2018) view that role-play is one of the techniques to assess students’ linguistic skills for their future professionals. Role plays such as greeting the guests and ushering them to their rooms, directing them to different venues in the hotel and even helping them out in calling for the taxi or grab services give the participants simulated experience of real-life hotel staff-guests interaction scenarios. With practice, they will feel more confident dealing with the daily number of guests walking into their hotel. The participants also stated that they (100%) would like to focus on both GE as well as EOP since both are important in the hotel industry. The hotel industry is very diverse in nature and accommodates guests from all parts of the world and with different cultural backgrounds and different languages too. Consequently, English being an international language, plays a predominant role in understanding, communicating, negotiating and fulfilling the guest needs in the hotels (Prachanant, 2012).

As for the materials used, the participants (100%) regarded them of good educational value and strength. The participants regarded the module contents useful and helpful for them to improve their English communication skills. However, they wished that the trainers could come up with a guidebook for them so that they can keep with them wherever they go. It was also found that incorporating grammar and job specific vocabulary are necessary in the training as the trainees found them useful with the job-related knowledge and skills necessary which is in tandem with Bardi’s (2007) findings cited in Kardijan (2017). Most of the participants (60%) found the course contents were quite difficult for them, but the participants managed to understand how to use the vocabulary and language expressions with the help of the trainers and were able to use them effectively after completing the training. On the other hand, almost half of the participants (40%) perceived the materials to be relatively less satisfactory with regard to appropriateness to their level. They found the materials to be easy and not that helpful in improving their English communication skills.

To sum up, most of the hotel employees were of the opinion that the training sessions benefitted them as they were more confident to speak in English with hotel guests.

### **3.1. Interview**

Findings from the group interview revealed that the participants enjoyed the training and they were of the opinion that there should be more in house trainings held for the employees to benefit from particularly on how to approach their workplace scenarios. Hotel industry language is mainly comprised of the functional aspects of hospitality language. The participants stated that the trainers did a comprehensive session on the vocabulary of the hotel industry and they were able to make use of these vocabulary confidently when dealing with the guests. One of the main objectives of the hotel industry is for employees to make sure the guests feel happy with the service provided. So, the participants said they

were able to see how important it is to be able to speak in English so that they could communicate with their guests.

The trainees also found the course was very interesting as the trainers constantly motivated the trainees to speak in English throughout their role plays. They also commented that the trainers always had positive vibes all the time. The very quiet and shy trainees managed to open up and took part in all the activities put forward by the trainers. The trainees particularly enjoyed the English pronunciation session in which they learn to use their articulatory system. They also said they enjoyed the grammar lesson as it was conducted in a game-like manner which made it fun. They mentioned they were more confident to speak in English with their superiors, colleagues and guests. All the interviewees shared the same opinion that the course gave them ideas on how to identify and solve problems in the workplace. By attending the training sessions, they were able to relate to real life situations as they did the role plays which simulated various workplace scenarios including dealing with difficult clients and assisting hotel guests with personal requests. The trainees also mentioned that they would prefer to have some materials that they could keep and refer to in the course of their employment like how to give instructions in English to hotel guests in case of emergency like fire. They also wanted a list of various hotel vocabulary and expressions that they can use in their casual conversations with guests and solving problem situations.

As mentioned before, one of the elements evaluated in the English Language training programme in this study was the training method used. In the interview, the trainees indicated that majority of them were quite satisfied with the role play sessions though some felt a bit uneasy at the beginning because they were concerned about being judged for their fluency. However, in the end of the training sessions, they felt more comfortable to take part in the role plays as they could see they managed to improve their English pronunciation and use of appropriate modal auxiliaries and expressions to sound more polite and helpful.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Findings of the study suggest that the front office employees need to be proficient in English as the hotel industry receives customers from all over the world. All employees who took part in the training found it very helpful and they want similar courses to be conducted periodically to improve their English language communication skills. They were generally satisfied with the training contents as they perceived them very beneficial to their employment. However, the employees felt that the trainers should provide a guidebook for them to keep and use in their daily dealings with the hotel guests. They also suggested that more time and practice be allocated for them to practice their hotel English communication skills. Overall, the training sessions and modules generally seem to support the hospitality training requirements which have meet the hospitality industry front office rhetorical patterns and typically correspond and compatible with the contents of front office staff job-related knowledge and skills. In line with other findings, the success rate of the involved employees will be higher if the training process comprised of examples and methods from real life workplace situations (Frash et al., 2010; Valachis et al., 2009).



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