

THE ENGLISH COMPETENCE OF FRONT OFFICE HOTEL PERSONNEL

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Abstract

A hotel is a place for many people who are away from home for many kinds of reasons, such as meeting, pleasure, seminar, and shopping. Many of these people are foreigners of different nations, who communicate mainly in English. When they need a place to stay, they will find a hotel, and the first people they communicate with are the front office personnel. This study was conducted to answer one research question: What English competence is required of hotel front office personnel?

This was qualitative research within the aim to find the communicative competence of front office personnel. To get the data, the researcher conducted interview and also asked the participant to fill in the questionnaires.

The research result showed that the front office personnel must be competence in the four skills to communicate with the guests because they were the first persons to interact with the guests. Each skill has its own required competence based on the participant' behavior, opinion, and feeling.

Key words: English communication, English competence, front office personnel.

A. INTRODUCTION

People left their houses temporarily to go to other places near or far, alone or with others for several reasons. Some people go away from home might be for vacation, working, eating, attending a meeting, etc. Whatever reasons they have, people in Hospitality Industry have the job to welcome, inform, comfort those people. Because of globalization, this industry was not only for local travelers, but also foreigners.

As one part of Hospitality Industry, hotel has duty to welcome those travelers whether they were domestic or from abroad. Communication is a way to know the need of the guests. If the guests are local, the language used to communicate will be Indonesia. If the guests are foreigners, English will be the language to be used to communicate.

English is a worldwide language and it is interesting to know the English communication needs in Hospitality Industry. This study is intended to interpret the participants' lived-experience and also to make clear description of the English competence that the employees must have. By knowing this, it will ease the employees to know which standard they are in now or which skills they need to improve. After that they can upgrade their skills in order to communicate better in English with the guests.

This study focus in finding the English communication needs in starred hotel. Starred hotels usually have intensity in using English to communicate, because many foreigners stayed there. There is one goal of this study that is to interpret the English competence, which is required by hotel front office personnel.

From the humanistic point of view, the participants' lived-experienced will improve their understanding of English competence in order to actualize their potentials better. Scientifically, better understanding may help improve the precision of explaining, predicting, and controlling participants' English competence acquisition.

The finding of this study can give an input in the field of English for Specific Purposes, especially English for Hospitality Industries. The technological benefit of this study is that the institution offering the program could make an effective program, so after finishing the program, the students can join to the world of Hospitality Industries and meet the qualification.

LITERARY REVIEW

1. English Communication

The rise of English is a success story. Of all the world's languages, English is the richest in vocabulary (McCrum et al, 1986). About 350 million people use English as a mother tongue. Nearly half of all business deals are conducted in English.

Today, it is common for people to communicate with people outside their cultural group. Intercultural communication affects people in their personal and social lives. Take for example in Hospitality Industry, there are many tourists came to Indonesia. People in this industry need to communicate in English.

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are part of communication skills (Brown, 2001). English is learned as a tool for international communication in many areas. According to Brown (2001), "students will no doubt be more interested in the practical, non-stigmatized uses of English in various occupational fields in their own country than imitating American or British English." They learn English in order to be able to use English for communicative, meaningful purposes.

In the following, each skill related to communication will be discussed further. The skills can be categorized in two. Those are receptive and productive. Listening is a receptive skill because it requires people to receive and understand incoming information (Nunan 2003). Reading, same with listening, is also considered as receptive skill. There was two major differences according to Nunan. First, listening happened in real time, where

you cannot review to unknown words. Second, listening is often needed response (productive) because it is sometimes in the middle of a conversation. While in reading, we have the ability to go back and find the meaning of difficult words.

Speaking is one of productive skill. For many people, speaking is the hardest skill to acquire. There are two reasons as stated by Nunan (2003). The first reason is speaking happens in real time. The second reason is that when people speak, they cannot revise what had said like in writing. Writing is a physical act at the basic level. On the other hand, it is a mental work in getting ideas, organizing them into sentences and paragraph.

2. English Competence

Competencies are related to observable behaviors, which are important for the successful completion of real world activities. It makes as clear as possible what is to be achieved and the standard to measure achievement. Docking (1994:11) in Richards 2002, states the relationship between competencies and job performance:

A qualification or a job can be described as a collection of units of competency, each of which is composed of a number of elements of competency. ... An element of competency can be defined as any attribute of an individual that contributes to the successful performance of a task, job, function, or activity in an academic setting and / or a work setting....

Based on the quotation above, competence in job can be shown in the performance in a work setting. It can be seen from his succeed in dealing with the task or the job.

In order to construct communicative competence, according to Canale and Swain in Brown 2000, there are four different components to make it. Those are grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic

competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence is the competence that we associate with mastering the linguistic code of a language. Discourse competence is the ability to connect sentences and to form meaningful utterances. Sociolinguistic competence requires social context understanding in which language is used. The last competence is the ability to cope with imperfect knowledge through paraphrase, repetition, avoidance, etc.

Canale and Swain description on four elements of communicative competence might best described the intended meaning of competence. Those four elements are needed to communicate oral or written using the skills. Here, English competence is the ability to listen, speak, read and write in English, since English here as the tool to communicate.

3. Front Office Personnel

The word 'hotel' was started to be used since 18 century in London (Arief, 2005). This word was taken from the word 'hostel' from France. It was a big house, which was equipped with facilities to be rented daily, weekly, or monthly. A hotel has a primary function that is to provide lodging accommodation. Each hotel has its own functions and departments, depends on how large the hotel is or the types of hotel.

According to Walker, front office has been described as the hub or nerve center of the hotel. The personnel' office hour depends on shift. There are three main functions of the front office. The first is to sell rooms. The second is to maintain balanced guests account. The last is to offer services such as handling mail, faxes, messages, and hotel information. In order to do their functions, the front office personnel should have skills that they need in order to communicate with the guests.

In short, in front office department especially front desk, the hotel employees need to master communication skills and language function appropriate to the field. This is necessary because they are in direct contact with the guests. They also must master English, because some guests came from other countries, and English can be used to communicate.

B. METHOD

A qualitative research is conducted in a 'normal' situation, which reflects everyday life of individuals or groups. It tries to portray 'what it is like' to be in a particular situation, to catch the reality of participants' lived experience of, thoughts about and feelings for a situation (Cohen, 2000).

There were two kinds of data in this research, those are from questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire is conducted to replace the interview that the researcher wanted to conduct. From the questionnaire, the data is in the form of words, while the interview is held to get rich data.

The participants of this research were 6 front officers from the Front Office Department. According to Patton, 2002:

There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources.

There are only two that are being interviewed, one female and one male. It is because of the available time that the participants have at that moment is limited.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Use of English in the work Field

From the questionnaire, below were the activities that they did in their work field in which they use English to communicate with foreigners.

- a. Answering telephone
- b. Process of check in and check out
- c. Explaining hotel products
- d. Correspondence (letter, memo)
- e. Talking to supervisor
- f. Greeting the guests
- g. Confirmation process
- h. Taking the guests to their room, downtown, to work
- i. Showing (hotel tour)
- j. Handling complaints

2. Experiences in Handling The Guest

English is prerequisite to be the front office personnel. Even though English was really needed, the use of it depended on the shift that the front office personnel have. Each shift has different characteristic. In the hotel, the check in time is 2 p.m. and the check out time is 12 p.m. Therefore, morning shift personnel (7 a.m. until 3 p.m.) usually handled check out process and afternoon shift personnel (3 p.m. until 11 p.m.) handled check in time, while the grave yard shift (11 p.m. until 7 a.m.) handled the closing.

In short, what happened in the front office was two-way communication, where there were two parties involved, sender and receiver. It can be said that it was a question and answer only, where mostly the guests asked information and the front office personnel responded by giving the answer of the guests' questions.

3. Opinion About The Four Skills in Communication

3.1 Listening

Below is the result of the participants' opinion on listening.

- a. It is very important, but the problem here is too many different dialects from different country.
- b. It is sometimes difficult to differentiate guests' voices because the vocabularies are almost the same.
- c. It is very needed to start the interaction and communication to foreign guests.
- d. Sometimes it is difficult to know unclear words because they (foreign guests) speak too fast.
- e. By listening carefully, we can directly understand what they want.
- f. It is a must! As a start to learn foreign language.

From the data above, most of the participants agreed that listening, as a part communication process was very important. The difficulty that they faced was recognizing dialects. For example, Italian usually speak English with many 'o' in every word.

3.2 Speaking

Here is the participants' opinion on Speaking.

- a. It is easier, because we just say the words that we know, but the problem lay on the vocabulary.
- b. Because our dialect is rather different from native, so often the guests can not catch the meaning of our conversation.

- c. After listening process, then we speak. We have to know vocabulary and understand grammar.
- d. It is difficult to develop because every foreigner has different dialect.
- e. Sometimes it is difficult, because Javanese tongue not really suit to English pronunciation.

From the interview, there were two things that can be gotten. The first one was to speak up, just use words to deliver your message. The second, it is important to know the cultural background of the speaker. For example, Japanese speak English faster and it's confusing.

3.3 Reading

Participants' opinion on Reading was listed below.

- a. It was rather easy, but there were some unknown vocabulary.
- b. Short, simple and clear (forms).
- c. After speaking and listening, sometimes we have difficulties to understand text in English.
- d. It is rather easy, because besides studying automatically our vocabulary will be improved.

Reading English text was limited in the hotel. As front office personnel, reading was rarely used in job. They read only registration form for check in and check out.

3.4 Writing

Below was the participants' opinion on Writing

- a. It is easier, because we have time to think and then we write it.
- b. Different new vocabulary that we have learnt.

- c. Because in English, one sentence can be interpreted in more than one meaning, so we have to know the use of the sentence.
- d. In hospitality industry, the vocabulary is rather different from other.
- e. It is difficult because it must be in line with the grammar.

In the interview, it was revealed that there were many terms or abbreviation that must be memorized. Take for example: rbf stands for room breakfast, p/o stands for pick up, and eta stands for estimate date of arrival.

4. Feeling About The Four Skills in Communication

Feeling is the affective dimension of human life. Below are the respondents' feelings about the skills. The respondents were not really aware of their feeling. It can be seen from their answers in the questionnaires that didn't really explain about their feelings.

4.1 Listening

- a. Like, but it's difficult to understand
- b. Good (3 times)
- c. Really needed

From the interview, the participants prefer listening than speaking, because in listening they just focus on the guests' words.

4.2 Speaking

- a. Rather like it
- b. Enough (3 times)
- c. Really needed

4.3 Reading

- a. This is the thing that I don't like if I have to read in a large number in English because there are many things that I don't understand. If it is in a limited scale (not too much) I like it.
- b. Insufficient (2times)
- c. Important to be proved
- d. Good

In the interview, the participant realized that the problem was related to the limitation of the English vocabularies that she mastered.

4.4 Writing

- a. I like it because I think I can (a little)
- b. Insufficient (2times)
- c. Good thing to do
- d. poor

5. The Relation Between Activities and The Skills Needed.

From the table below, the skills that they mention were four of them: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Reading and writing only mention once and twice, compare to listening and speaking, which were almost in every activity.

Table 1 The Relation between Activities and Skills

Activities	Skill	Explanation
Check in	Speaking and Listening	To explain hotel facilities and listen what the guests want.
Check in group	Writing and reading	To make acknowledgment letter and reading guest comment.
Check out guest	Speaking and listening	Speaking to check bill outstanding while listening to listen guest complaint.
Reservation	Speaking and Listening	To explain about hotel product and listen to guest want.
Reservation	Listening and Writing	To listen when the guest want to check in and check out and to write the guest want.
Showing	Listening and speaking	Listen to guest questions and explaining hotel's product.
Handling Complain	Listening and speaking	Listen to guest's complaint and explain and also find solution.

From the table above, listening was mentioned six times, speaking five times, reading once, and writing twice. In short, listening and speaking were two important skills used in the communication with foreign guests.

D. CONCLUSION

This research was limited in setting, therefore it cannot be generalized. In conclusion, based on the data of questionnaire and interview, the four skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) are all needed for the front office personnel to show their English competence for communication. The conclusions below were based on participants' behavior, opinion, feeling, and knowledge.

Most of the participants thought that speaking is rather difficult. Although they thought that way, they also thought that all of those skills are important for them to show their English competence. In their opinion, speaking is related closely to listening. Reading and writing are seldom to be used, because in the process of check in and check out, they just fill in the standard forms.

The next is their feeling on the skills of communication. Some of them like those skills, but although they did not like the skills, they have to like them, because they work in the field with full of communication that used those skills.

In the following, the competence will be discussed in accordance to the skills.

1. Listening

Here, the personnel need to understand questions and instruction in standard language. They also have to understand basic information about the hotel and surrounding. Those competences were closely related to their activities in check in and check out process.

2. Speaking

In speaking, the front office personnel can ask questions concerning with the data needed for check in and check out process. They can also give information about hotel and surrounding by telephone or face to face. If there

was a complaint from the guests, front office personnel must be able to handle it by giving explanation and reasons.

3. Reading

Reading is rarely used in their job. At least, they have to understand articles and reports concerned with hotels and also standard letter.

4. Writing

Based on the analysis, the personnel must be able to complete details in form, for example registration form. They also need to take telephone messages and to make important points clear.

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