

The Role of the English Language in the Tourism Industry

Ravantharanathe Rao

Faculty of Communication and Modern Languages
Universiti Utara Malaysia
Kedah, Malaysia
rao@uum.edu.my

Syharom Abdullah

Universiti Malaysia Perlis
Perlis, Malaysia
drsyharom@hotmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian government has designated 2007 as visit Malaysia year. The country is expected to attract more than 20 million visitors and earn about RM50 billion from tourism related activities. An important component in the tourism industry is the human resource. The human resource factor plays an eminent role in promoting the image of the country as a top tourism spot. Tourists do not just come for the facilities and attractions. They want to be treated right and well. A good command of the English language is always regarded as an asset for personnel in the tourism industry since most visitors do not speak Bahasa Melayu, the national language. However, the preference for those with good English proficiency will burden the recruitment of hotel personnel. This paper will present the findings of a study conducted employing the questionnaire survey and interview methods to investigate the relative role of English language proficiency in the choice of holiday destination. It was found that the role of English language proficiency in the tourism industry is prominent. It is a factor that could affect choice of hotel and satisfaction of stay. However, the results obtained indicate that the role and importance of the English language in the tourism industry is relative to job function.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is fast becoming an important revenue generator for Malaysia. It was another record breaking year as Malaysia registered 17.54 million visitors (17,546,863) in 2006, slightly surpassing the target of 17.5 million. This is an overall increase of 6.8% compared to the previous year. The total tourist receipts for 2006 was RM36.2 billion, an increase of about 13% compared to 2005. This is, however, RM1.4 billion less than the targeted figure of RM37.6 billion (Tourism Malaysia, 2007). 2007 has been designated by the Malaysian government as Visit Malaysia Year with the theme "Celebrating 50 Years of nationhood". The Prime Minister of Malaysia, YAB Dato' Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi officially launched the Visit Malaysia Year (VMY) 2007 at 8pm on 6 January 2007, during a grand ceremony in Taman Tasik Titiwangsa, Kuala Lumpur. The country is expected to attract more than 20 millions visitors and to earn about 50 billion Ringgit from tourism related activities (Tourism Malaysia, 2006) this year.

Enticing the tourists to visit Malaysia

Many factors are involved in the making of a country a tourist preferred destination. Both the government and the private sectors must work hand in hand. The people in the front line, from the immigration officers to the chambermaid are capable of making the visitors feel that they have chosen the right vacation destination.

The hotel industry is a service based industry, and as such, the human factor is of major importance. Only with the complementary effort of the hotel staff and physical infrastructure can hotels and resorts achieve their maximum attraction. The need to secure good calibre employees coupled with the expansion the tourism industry have created a shortage of 'employable' employees. In the selection of hotel staff, the language factor has a prominent role. In general, only those who have a reasonably good command of the English language are favoured.

The emphasis on language proficiency is understandable. Language not only is a means for establishing a communication but also is a vehicle for fostering relationship. Language, when use properly can generate a very favourable impression. However, when it is used 'wrongly', it can produce a disastrous response. It is a sword that can cut both ways. Therefore, the personnel in the tourism industry, especially the front liners, must possess the level of language proficiency that will allow them to use the language effectively. It has also been pointed out that the level of language proficiency needed depends very much on the relative importance of the language factor as perceived by the people who matter, the tourists. This study was conducted to examine the perceived importance of language proficiency in the tourism industry.

Objectives of the study

1. To ascertain the relative importance of the language factor in generating tourist's satisfaction.
2. To evaluate the relative importance of the language factor in the recruitment the man-power requirement in the tourism industry.

METHODOLOGY

Methods and instrument

The interview and questionnaire survey methods were used to gather data for the study. A questionnaire developed by the researchers was used

Sample

Fifty one randomly selected English speaking foreign and local tourists staying at four five star resorts in Langkawi were used in the survey and interview. However, only 42 of the questionnaire completed could be used in the analysis. Foreign tourists have been found to prefer resort island such as Langkawi, Pulau Tioman, Pulau Pangkor, etc. However, Langkawi, with its physical beauty and legendary myth, is the favourite among

them. It is reflected by the number of luxurious resort hotels found on the island and direct international flights to the island. This is the main criterion for using it in the study.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated using SPSS to examine the relative importance of the various factors investigated. The Chi-Square coefficient was used to determine the significance.

FINDINGS

Country of Origin

The forty-two respondents were from, rough categorized, seven regions of the globe. The distribution of respondents by country of origin is given in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency distribution of respondents by country of origin

Country	Number	%
Europe	19	45.2
Australia/New Zealand	5	11.9
Japan/Hong Kong /Taiwan	1	2.4
India/Pakistan	1	2.4
ASEAN	13	31.0
Africa/South Africa	2	4.8
Canada	1	2.4
TOTAL	42	100

Factor Affecting Choice of Resort/Hotel

The responses to the questions on the general factors that affect the choice of resort/hotel (see table 2) show that the location of the resort/hotel was the most considered factor (98%) in the choosing process, hotel amenities the second most considered (57%) and quality of service the third most considered (50%).

Table 2

Frequency distribution of selection of factors affecting choice of resort/hotel

Factor	Number	%
Hotel amenities	24	57.1
Architectural design	13	31.0
Quality of service	21	50.0
Room rates	18	42.9
Room appointment	17	40.5
Location	41	97.6
Quietness*	1	2.4
Cleanliness*	3	7.1
Privacy*	1	2.4
Word-of-mouth	1	2.4

* Provided by respondents

Ranking of the Factors Affecting the Choice of Resort/Hotel

To compare the relative influence of the six given factors, the respondents were asked to rank them using 1 to 6. The ranking is shown in Table 3 below. The location factor was ranked the most important, the quality of service as the second most, and hotel amenities as the third most in terms of the mean ranking received. These were followed by room appointment, room rates, and architectural design in that order. The mean rankings received by the top three factors were very close and with a standard deviation of more than 1, caution is needed in interpreting the results.

Table 3

The mean, mode and standard deviation of the ranking of factors affecting choice of resort/hotel

	Location	Quality of service	Hotel amenities	Room appointment	Room rates	Architectural design
Mean	2.02	2.78	2.95	3.81	4.17	4.74
Mode	1	3	2	3	5	6
S.D.	1.55	1.35	1.37	1.40	1.55	1.46
Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6

Note; 1 – Most important, 6 – least important

The actual distribution of ranking is as shown in Table 4. All the distributions were significant at the $p < .05$ levels

Table 4

Frequency distribution of ranking of factors affecting choice of resort/hotel

	1	2	3	4	5	6	N	χ^2
Location	25	4	7	2	2	1	41	74.66
Quality of service	9	9	11	6	6		41	2.29
Hotel amenities	4	17	6	10	2	3	42	22.85
Room appointment		9	11	8	7	7	42	1.33
Room rates	3	4	5	8	11	9	40	7.40
Architectural design	1	4	3	4	11	16	39	25.46

Note: 1 – the most important, 6 – the least important

N – total number of respondent

χ^2 – Chi-square coefficient

The Ranking of Personal Qualities of the Various Groups of Hotel Staff

To gauge the relative importance of the personal qualities of the various group of hotel personnel, the participants were asked to rank four qualities which are pleasant disposition, English language proficiency, courtesy, and service oriented from the most important to the least important. The distribution of the ranking is as shown in the Tables below.

Table 5A

Distribution of the ranking

Personnel: Waiter	Pleasant disposition	English language proficiency	Courtesy	Service oriented*
1	13 (33%)	4 (10.3%)	13 (33.3%)	17 (40.5%)
2	11 (28.2)	8 (20.5%)	14 (35.9%)	12 (28.6%)
3	6 (15.4%)	12 (30.8%)	6 (15.4%)	10 (23.8%)
4	9 (23.1%)	15 (38.5%)	6 (15.4%)	3 (7.1%)
N	39	39	39	42
Mean	2.28	2.97	2.12	1.97
Mode	1	4	2	1
SD	1.16	1.01	1.05	0.97
Obtained ranking	3	4	2	1

Table 5B

Distribution of ranking

Personnel: Receptionist	Pleasant disposition*	English language proficiency	Courtesy	Service oriented
1	20 (50.0%)	11 (28.2%)	13 (32.5%)	8 (21.1%)
2	7 (17.5%)	11 (28.2%)	13 (32.5%)	9 (23.7%)
3	6 (15.0%)	11 (28.2%)	7 (17.5%)	10 (26.3%)
4	7 (17.5%)	6 (15.4%)	7 (17.5%)	11 (28.9%)
N	40	39	40	38
Mean	2.00	2.30	2.20	2.63
Mode	1	1	1	4
SD	1.17	1.05	1.09	1.12
Obtained ranking	1	3	3	4

Table 5C

Distribution of ranking

Personnel: Management personnel	Pleasant disposition	English language proficiency	Courtesy	Service oriented
1	12 (32.4%)	14 (37.8%)	7 (18.4%)	14 (35.0%)
2	4 (10.8%)	11 (29.7%)	13 (34.2%)	12 (30.0%)
3	7 (18.9%)	7 (18.9%)	13 (34.2%)	7 (17.5%)
4	14 (37.8%)	5 (13.5%)	5 (13.2%)	7 (17.5%)
N	37	37	38	40
Mean	2.61	2.08	2.42	2.17
Mode	4	1	2	1
SD	1.29	1.06	0.94	1.1
Obtained ranking	3	1	4	2

Table 5D

Distribution of ranking

Personnel: Reservation	Pleasant disposition*	English language proficiency*	Courtesy	Service oriented
1	7 (20.0%)	21 (53.8%)	7 (19.4%)	10 (29.4%)
2	9 (25.7%)	10 (25.6%)	13 (36.1%)	5 (14.7%)
3	2 (5.7%)	6 (15.4%)	12 (33.3%)	11 (32.4%)
4	17 (48.6%)	2 (5.1%)	4 (11.1%)	8 (23.5%)
N	35	39	36	34
Mean	2.82	1.71	2.36	2.50
Mode	4	1	2	3
SD	1.24	0.91	0.93	1.16
Obtained ranking	4	1	2	3

Table 5E

Distribution of ranking

Personnel: Activity coordinator	Pleasant disposition	English language proficiency	Courtesy	Service oriented
1	14 (38.9%)	8 (22.9%)	5 (14.7%)	14 (37.8%)
2	8 (22.2%)	15 (42.9%)	10 (29.4%)	8 (21.6%)
3	5 (13.9%)	7 (20.0%)	13 (38.2%)	6 (16.2%)
4	9 (25.0%)	5 (14.3%)	6 (17.6%)	9 (24.3%)
N	36	35	34	37
Mean	2.15	2.26	2.58	2.27
Mode	1	2	3	1
SD	1.22	0.98	0.95	1.21
Obtained ranking	1	2	4	3

Table 5F

Distribution of ranking

Personnel: Housekeeping staff	Pleasant disposition*	English language proficiency*	Courtesy*	Service oriented*
1	7 (18.9%)	2 (5.6%)	7 (18.4%)	26 (63.4%)
2	9 (24.3%)	2 (5.6%)	19 (50.0%)	10 (24.4%)
3	17 (45.9%)	7 (19.4%)	9 (23.7%)	3 (7.3%)
4	4 (10.8%)	25 (69.4%)	3 (7.9%)	2 (4.9%)
N	37	36	38	41
Mean	2.48	3.52	2.21	1.53
Mode	3	4	2	1
SD	0.93	0.85	0.84	0.84
Obtained ranking	3	4	2	1

Note: 1 – the most important, 4 – the least important

N – total number of respondent

Obtained ranking – based on mean obtained

* - significant at the $p < .05$ level

The obtained ranking which was based on the mean obtained, fairly clearly showed that hotel guests did have different expectations for different hotel personnel. The mode of the distribution is, however, a more accurate reflection of the perceived relative importance of the qualities evaluated.

For a waiter, ‘pleasant disposition’ and ‘service oriented’ were considered as most important (ranked as 1), ‘courtesy’ as the second most important, and ‘English language proficiency’ as the least important (ranked as 4) by the respondents (refer to Table 5A). However, only the ranking for ‘service oriented’ was significant at the $p < .05$ level.

For a receptionist, ‘pleasant disposition’, ‘English proficiency’, and ‘courtesy’ were ranked as the most important. The quality ‘service oriented’ was ranked the least important (refer to Table 5B). Only the distribution for ‘pleasant disposition’ was significant at the $p < .05$ level.

For management personnel, ‘English language proficiency’ and ‘service oriented’ were ranked as the most important. ‘Courtesy’ was ranked 2 and ‘pleasant disposition’ as 4. None of the distribution was significant.

For a reservation staff, ‘English language proficiency’, ‘courtesy’, ‘service oriented’ and ‘pleasant disposition’ were ranked as 1,2,3, and 4 respectively. Only ‘pleasant disposition’ and ‘English language proficiency’ were significant at the $p < .05$ level.

For an activity coordinator, ‘pleasant disposition’ and ‘service oriented’ were ranked as 1, ‘English language proficiency’ as 2, and ‘courtesy’ as 3. None of the distribution was significant.

For a house keeping staff, ‘courtesy’, ‘pleasant disposition’, ‘service oriented’, and ‘English language proficiency’ were ranked as 1, 2, 3, and 4 respectively. All the distributions were significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Level of English Language Proficiency Required

Table 6 below shows the distribution of the level of English proficiency that is perceived to be sufficient for the various hotel personnel.

	Reasonably good	Good	Very good	N
Waiter	24 (58.5%)	16 (39.0%)	1 (2.4%)	41
Receptionist	13 (31.7%)	26 (63.4%)	2 (4.9%)	41
Management personnel	13 (31.7%)	22 (53.7%)	6 (14.6%)	42
Reservation staff	15 (36.6%)	20 (48.8%)	6 (14.6%)	42
Activity coordinator	17 (43.6%)	21 (53.8%)	1 (2.6%)	39
Housekeep staff	29 (72.5%)	7 (17.5%)	4 (10.0%)	40

Note: N – total number of respondents

The general trend observed from the responses seems to point towards different requirements. For waiters and housekeeping staff, a reasonably good command of the English language proficiency was thought sufficient, whereas for the receptionists, management personnel, reservation staff and activity coordinator, a level of at least ‘good’ was suggested by more than half of the respondents. About 15% of the respondents thought that reservation staff and management personnel must possess a very

good level of English language proficiency. All the distributions were significant at the $p < .05$ level.

The Impact of English Language Proficiency of Hotel Staff on Choice of Hotel and Satisfaction of Stay

The respondents were asked whether their choice of hotel/resort and stay would be affected by the use of ‘survival English’ by hotel staff members. Slightly more than half of the respondents said that they would be affected. The distribution of responses was as shown in Table 7 below. None of the distribution was significant at the .05 level.

Table 7

Frequency distribution of responses to the questions “Choice of hotel would be affected by the use of ‘survival’ English” and “Satisfaction of stay would be affected by the use of ‘survival’ English”

	Yes	No	N
Choice of hotel	16 (38.1%)	26 (61.9%)	42
Satisfaction of stay	20 (47%)	22 (56%)	42

About two thirds (76%) of the respondents thought that it was essential for them to be able to do so. However, in the interview with the researchers, many of the respondents qualified that it was an asset to be able to speak good English. The distribution was shown in Table 8 below. The distribution was significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 8

Frequency distribution of responses to the question “good English is essential for hotel staff”

	Yes	No	N
Essential to have good English	32 (76%)	10 (24%)	42

DISCUSSION

A tourist’s choice of holiday accommodation appears to be affected by several factors, with ‘location’, ‘hotel amenities’, and ‘quality of service’ as the three most considered and important factors. As to the importance of the personal qualities such as ‘pleasant disposition’, ‘courtesy’, ‘English language proficiency’, and ‘service oriented attitude’ that form the foundation of the quality of service rendered, they seem to differ according to the job function of a hotel staff member.

The role of English language proficiency in the tourism industry is prominent. It is considered as a factor that could affect choice of hotel and satisfaction of stay. However, the results obtained indicate that the role and importance of the English language in the tourism industry is relative to job function. It is more important for those who do not often come into direct face-to-face contact with hotel guests such as the reservation staff

and hotel management personnel. For hotel staff who often comes into direct contact with hotel guests, qualities such as pleasant disposition, courtesy, and 'service oriented' are viewed as more important by hotel guests. Hotel guests expected different level of English language proficiency from the various groups of hotel personnel. In short, the guest's expectation of English language proficiency is relative in nature.

CONCLUSION

The results, as a whole, suggest that the role of the English language should be appropriately considered in the recruitment of hotel personnel. The emphasis on English language proficiency should be based on the nature of job. For the staff members who are in direct contact with guests most of the time, qualities such as 'courtesy' and 'pleasant disposition' should be given higher priority than language proficiency. An equal stress would only hinder the recruitment process and consequently, affect the quality of service provided by a hotel as it would having difficulty employing sufficient number of staff.

The results of this study, however, must be viewed with some reservation. The number of respondents in the study was comparatively small and the location was only limited to one resort island. The language used in the questionnaire might have also affected the responses of the guests from countries where English is not the native language.

REFERENCES

Tourism Malaysia, (2006), retrieved March 9, 2007 from <http://www.tourism.gov.my>.