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ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OF HOTEL FRONT-LINERS: WHAT AND WHY?

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Abstract

English proficiency for hotel front-liners is paramount in giving excellent service for the guests. 60 seconds in the beginning of interaction leave the first impression for them. Therefore, oral communication skills play a significant role as a part of a must-have competence for front-liners. This study was triggered by initial findings at some hotels in Surabaya where there was a discrepancy between hotel leaders' perception and real English proficiency of their front-liners. The hotel leaders perceived lower than the passing grade of the hotel and urgency of upgrading their competence emerged. Two research questions should be answered: (1) WHAT level of the front-liners' English proficiency was, and (2) WHY they experienced difficulty when facing foreign guests. To answer the questions, a descriptive qualitative research employing a case study approach was conducted. The 3-star hotel consisting 20 participants was involved. Test of Business English Communication Competence Version 2.0 (TBECCv.2.0) was given to participants. TBECCv.2.0 was an ESP test created and developed for front-liners. After running the test, an online questionnaire was disseminated and interviews were also conducted for triangulation. Results revealed that the score range of 50-59 received the highest percentage; 40% which showed their English proficiency needed to be upgraded. Reasons of difficulty handling the foreign guests were due to (1) L1 interference, (2) educational background, (3) less English exposure, (4) the absence of ESP test at recruitment process. The study recommended further study for other categories of hotel and the staff professional development was recommended as well.

Keywords: *Front-liners, TBECCv.2.0, oral communication skills, English proficiency.*

Introduction

Meeting, Incentive, Convention, and Exhibition (MICE) has been titled to Surabaya for the past few years and it is nothing to be surprised with since the city always develops many strategic programs that sustain its existence. Besides a city of MICE, support for vocational education is apparently one of the examples of the strategic programs which becomes a practical solution to minimize unemployed graduates in this city. Furthermore, tremendous and continuous efforts in

making the city better in image, lots of beautiful parks have been created to strengthen a notion that this city is worth visited by anybody who wishes to do for business or even only for leisure.

The impact of engineered image along with its title as the city of MICE, growth of hotel number in Surabaya seems inevitable as a consequence where many capitalists notice such condition as an opportunity to put their capital in hotel and tourism business. At least, it has impacted the competition in hospitality industries in Surabaya. The presence of 3-star hotels in Surabaya has been mushrooming in a decade as an intuitive response from the capitalists who seek fortune in hotel business. Not only local visitors, but also foreign visitors have been attracted by the development of Surabaya and never-ending attempts made by local government to make the city safe to stay or live in want to witness and experience themselves all the city can offer for them.

With such tight competition, consequently, all those 3-star hotels should give its excellent service in order to make visitors stay longer or repeat their stay in the hotels. There are four specific customer service characteristics that lead to the biggest effect on repeat business and customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry; competence, friendliness, knowledge, and service attitude. The competence refers to the hotel front desk employees' problem solving and working performance (Meijerink, Bondarouk, & Lepak, 2016). The "friendliness", "competence" and "service attitude" are actually elements needed when interacting with guests to make the best impression. Therefore, front-liners in this case play an important role for they are the first impression makers. The first impression is defined as a part of human-to-human interaction (Bergman, Eyseel & Korp, 2012). The "interaction" between front-liners and visitors require strong oral communication skills.

In the writer's initial observation, informal interview with some hotel leaders in Surabaya implied that there was an urgency for upgrading their front-liners' English proficiency due to their hardship in making interaction with the foreign guests for some tasks like handling complaints, describing local tourism spots and culinaries and others. To know more on how these hotel leaders perceived their front-liners' oral proficiency, it was found that all of them (100%) gave the same score for their own staff. Their perception can be seen in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Perception of Hotel Leaders towards Their Front-Liners

No	Category	Score of English	Passing Grade
1	5 star hotel	70-80	80
2	5 star hotel	70-80	80
3	4 star hotel	60-70	70
4	4 star hotel	60-70	70
5	4 star hotel	60-70	70
6	4 star hotel	60-70	70
7	4 star hotel	60-70	70
8	3 star hotel	50-60	70
9	3 star hotel	50-60	70
10	3 star hotel	50-60	70

The above table shows there are 3 different categories of hotels comprising of two 5-star hotels, five 4-star hotels and three 3-star hotels. When asked about the range of scores of their staff's English proficiency, two of 5-star hotel leaders had the same range of scores; 70-80. According to them, the passing grade should be 80. Meanwhile, five 4-star hotels also indicated the same score range; 60-70. The findings in the initial interview were interesting since they were interviewed at their places. As further asked reasoning they would not give exact scores, they admitted that they were not sure enough since at the beginning of recruitment they did not have a specific test for front-liner recruitment.

Similarly, the 3-star hotels respondents also gave the same range of scores; 50-60. The same statement was also given as they were asked about the reason of giving the score range not the exact score of the staff's English proficiency. The 4-star and 3-star hotels admitted the passing grade for English should be 70. An interesting issue for this case is that both categories of hotels seemed to have similar "click" of score for English proficiency.

Relevant to the above background, this study aimed at revealing WHAT the actual level/score of the front-liners' English proficiency was and WHY these front-liners experienced difficulty in handling foreign guests was the second research question to answer. For this objective, this study employed a descriptive qualitative research applying a case study approach. Due to time limitation, a 3-star hotel was involved and there were 20 respondents participating in this study. They were all from front-office division.

To answer the WHAT, the writer used Test of Business English Communication Competence Version 2.0 (TBECCv.2.0) and to elicit the WHY, online questionnaire and interview were conducted. Stages to conduct this study consisted of:

1. Familiarizing the TBECCv.2.0 to the respondents

TBECCv.2.0 is an ESPT test designed for front-liners and considered as a new-coming test where items of questions drawn from target language use (TLU) both in speaking and writing. For this reason, an effort to make the test familiarized was done which including introducing features of the test and time of completion.

2. Running the TBECCv.2.0 for the respondents

After participants got familiar by the TBECCv.2.0, the next stage was to run the test followed by 20 participants.

3. Disseminating online questionnaires

Online questionnaire was distributed to find more about participants' profile and elicit information relevant to the research questions.

4. Conducting interviews for triangulation

To clarify unclear information during the process of analysing the questionnaire, an interview was conducted for triangulation.

Theoretical Framework

First Impression in Hospitality Industry

Hospitality industry completely relies on its front-liners since these front-liners are the "marketing" for the hotel's image and product. Some scholars argue in order to make a first

impression, it takes a maximum of 60 seconds (Wargo, 2006). In addition, the whole process of forming the first impression happens very quickly and has lasting effects. For this reason, the moments should not be ignored and must be well-handled.

The 60 seconds of first impression is important in any industry, but it is especially important in the hospitality industry because the industry is considered as a service dominated industry (Sundaram & Webster, 2000). This notion stresses out the importance of what to say in the early interaction between the customers and the staff. Moreover, hospitality employees constantly interact with different customers every day so they are the way that new customers are forming the first impression every day (Agarwal, 2016). The staff should be able to maintain this competence at any time and any cost which means that keeping up with making good impression is truly critical.

Furthermore, in the long run, front-liners' high-quality service can finally affect hotels' financial performance (Sundaram & Webster, 2000), if they demonstrate good behaviours and create strong first impressions which can help the hotel have a more positive reputation and more repeated customers. The awareness of their important role should be known when they are recruited at the very first place.

Necessity of Oral Communication Skills

Interaction between customers and staffs that can create an unforgettable first impression should be well-maintained. The activity uses so much on the ability to listen and respond the guests' needs. Good oral and written communication skills are the top skills important to hospitality practitioners at different position levels (M. Kostic Bobanovic & J. Grzinic, 2011). The statement points out that oral communication skills should be acquired more specifically by all front-liners.

Their research also explored the importance of communication skills (speaking, reading, listening and writing) in English language among hospitality employees and students studying business and tourism. There were 105 graduate students of a Department of Economics and tourism involved as their respondents and results of the study can be seen as follows.

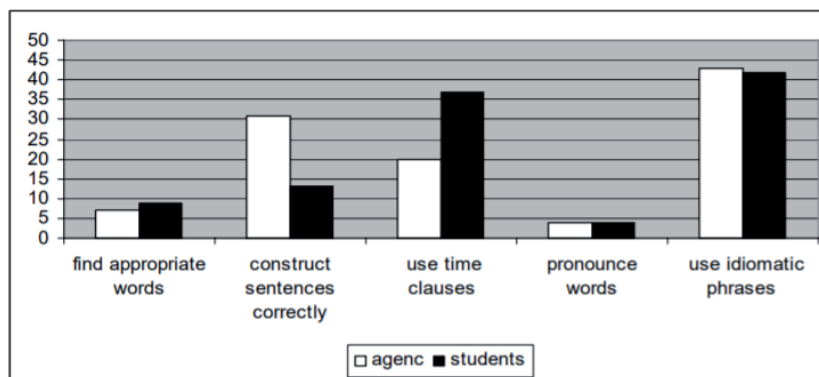


Chart 1. Difficulties in English Speaking

Their research found that idiomatic phrases became the most difficult part in English speaking for both students and employees are idiomatic phrases (39,44% and 41,47%). Additionally,

students also had difficulties in using time clauses (35,21%). From this information, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of their usage in everyday communication. It is proven from their respondents that the urgency to improve communication skills is inevitable.

Meanwhile, Meijerink, Bondarouk, and Lepak (2016) stated that there are four specific customer service characteristics that have the greatest impact on repeat business and customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry: competence, friendliness, knowledge, and service attitude. Here, competence refers to the hotel front desk employees' problem solving and working performance. The working performance is related to how the front-liners give attention towards the guests' needs and respond well.

Another research conducted by Prabhu and Wani (2015) dealt with Indian hospitality industry. The findings of the study reflected the importance of English as the universal medium of communication, and its importance in rendering quality service. In sum up, all the hoteliers and Hotel Management teachers and students vehemently agreed that English language proficiency was a pre requisite for a career in hospitality. Students' confidence and performance was largely dependent on English language proficiency and urgency of motivating and guiding in order to meet industry standards existed. From their study, link and match between graduates and hotel industry should be continuously done in order to get professionals that suited the demand in hospitality industry.

Test of Business English Communication Competence Version 2.0 (TBECCv.2.0)

The need of English for Specific Purpose Test (ESP) test has emerged ever since hotels in Surabaya do provide one. TBECCv.2.0 is created and designed to respond to such a need. The test is specifically designed for front-liners in Surabaya funded by the Ministry of Research and Technology of Indonesia within 2 years' project. It comprises two skills; speaking and writing and overall duration to complete the test is 1.5 hours. In addition, 18 of 26 items were extracted as Target Language Use (TLU) for speaking and 7 of 10 items were extracted to serve as TLUs for writing (Datu, et.al. 2019). The TBECCv.2.0 was developed on the basis of 2-year research which involved 8 hotels in Surabaya and 40 participants comprising hotel leaders and FO staff. The important stages in the study were conducted, such as conducting Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with hotel leaders, distributing a set of questionnaires to Front Office leaders and staffs, as well as enhancing clarity and confirmation through interviews. This ESP test has received 2 Intellectual Property Rights (HKI) from the Ministry of Law and Human Rights of Indonesia with the certificate numbers as follows: (1) EC00201853927, 13 November 2018 and (2) EC00201972077, 20 September 2019.

Front-liner's competences for speaking can be broken down in the following table (Datu, et.al. 2019).

Finding and Discussion

This study aimed at analyzing two critical questions; (1) what the level of proficiency of front-liners was, and (2) why they experienced difficulty in handling foreign guests. The first question can be analyzed from the results of Test of Business English Communication Competence Version 2.0 (TBECCv.2.0) which was tested to all front-liners. The results obtained from the test given to them using TBECCv.2.0 can be seen in the following Table 2.

Table 2. Description of Competence in TBECV.2.0 for Speaking

Question	Task	Competence	Criteria	Time
1	Describe a picture	Describing room types	Pronunciation Grammar Vocabularies	2 minutes
2 – 3	Express an opinion	Explaining local places and local delicacies	Pronunciation Grammar Vocabularies Cohesion	4 minutes
4 – 7	Propose a solution	Offering additional services at the hotel Offering welcome drink Offering solution for complaints	Pronunciation Vocabularies Cohesion Relevance of the Context Completeness of the Context	4 minutes
8 – 9	Summarize and Re-tell Information	Asking about room preferences	Pronunciation Relevance of the Context Completeness of the Context	6 minutes
10 – 12	Respond to a statement	Greeting guests Asking about the reservation Making small talk Responding to a complaint Doing morning call	Relevance of the Context Pronunciation Grammar	2 minutes
13 – 14	Formulate questions based on the information given	Asking about food preferences Asking about the payment method	Pronunciation Relevance of the Context Grammar	2 minutes

Meanwhile for the writing, it can be broken down in the following table.

Table 3. Description of Competence in TBECcv.2.0 for writing

Question	Task	Competence	Criteria	Time
1	Fill a form based on the information given	Filling a detailed form about a guest	Relevance of the Context	10 minutes
2 – 3	Write letters	Writing a confirmation letter Writing a welcome letter Writing an email of coordination	Grammar Relevance of the Context Quality and variation of the sentences Vocabulary Organization	30 minutes
4 – 5	Respond to written letter	Replying a complaint in written form Writing a thank you email	Grammar Relevance of the Context Quality and variation of the sentences Vocabulary Organization	30 minutes

Table 4. Results of Speaking and Writing

No	List of Participants	Total	Average
1	Participant 1	1242	65
2	Participant 2	1350	71
3	Participant 3	1275	67
4	Participant 4	1072	56
5	Participant 5	1285	68
6	Participant 6	1247	66
7	Participant 7	1037	55
8	Participant 8	431	23
9	Participant 9	970	51
10	Participant 10	1454	77
11	Participant 11	783	41
12	Participant 12	1040	55
13	Participant 13	1083	57
14	Participant 14	979	52
15	Participant 15	1382	73
16	Participant 16	1326	70
17	Participant 17	1075	57
18	Participant 18	1211	64
19	Participant 19	1093	58
20	Participant 20	1311	69
		1.068	60
		Total	Avg Score

As seen in the table, the highest score is 77 and the lowest score is 23. The gap was deep and it means there is a huge discrepancy when performing their communication skills to serve the guests on daily basis activity. It can be easily predicted the struggles for those with the score of 23 in delivering the tasks as front-liners. The TBECCv.2.0 consisted of two main components of test; speaking (20 minutes) and writing (one hour and ten minutes). It was tested within 1.5 hours. The above results were already combined assisted by the TBECCv.2.0 software.

There were 6 participants (30%) who received the score in a range of 60-69, 3 participants (15%) receiving the score in a range of 70-79, 8 participants (40%) receiving the score range of 50-59, 1 participant (5%) with the score of 40-49, and 1 participant (5%) with the score range of 20-29. The distribution of score range can be seen as follows.

Table 5. Score Range Distribution

No	Score range	%
1	50-59	40
2	60-69	30
3	70-79	15
4	40-49	5
5	20-29	5

The distribution of score range above shows that the highest percentage of the score range is between 50-59. The score implies that both speaking and writing skills need to be improved since they are under 60. Another concern is for those with score ranges of 60-69, 40-49 and 20-29 since according to the hotel leaders' perception in the writer's initial observation, their English proficiency should be at least 70.

The second research question addressed the reason WHY the front-liners can be answered with the following results of questionnaire disseminated after they received TBECCv.2.0. The results are as follows:

1. L1 Interference

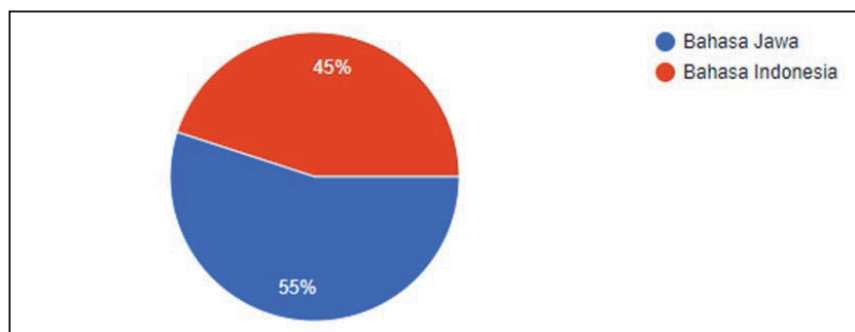


Chart 2. The Participants' First Language (L1)

The Interference of the first language (L1) seems to be one the reasons of their difficulty in responding to foreign guests. Based on the above chart, the participants' L1 is Javanese language (55%) and 45% of the participants admitted that Indonesian as their L1. Further asked in the interview, they simply converted their English into their L1 whenever they found difficulties. In daily conversation within the workplace, both languages are dominated. Consequently, English exposure in speaking is not enough to make them better. Normally, when they have good speaking, confidence to always try out at any situations triggered.

2. Educational Background

73.7% of the participants graduated from senior high schools/vocational high schools as seen on Chart 3 below. Most of the participants took hotel and tourism as their major. From their majors, English should not be troublesome anymore since ideally they were prepared for sufficient English during their study. Yet, when asked further in the interview, though English was given in high schools, the focus of learning was grammar and reading. They claimed that grammar portion was considerably a lot and, therefore, they were not skilful in productive skills, such as speaking.

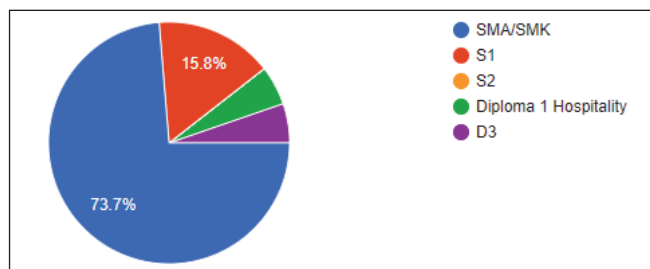


Chart 3. Educational Background

3. English Exposure

When asked the last time the participants learned English, various responses were given. This question actually wanted to reveal exposure of English learning from them. Chart 4 shows that 26.3% of the participants admitted that they learned English more than 4 years ago; 21.1% claimed to learn English for the last time was 2 years ago; 15.8% of the participant learned English 3 years ago. From these findings, it reveals that the exposure of English of the participants was not sufficient yet. Speaking, more specifically, should be practised everyday in order to gain fluency. They realized their exposure needed to be increased but their problem was on their self-confidence issue.

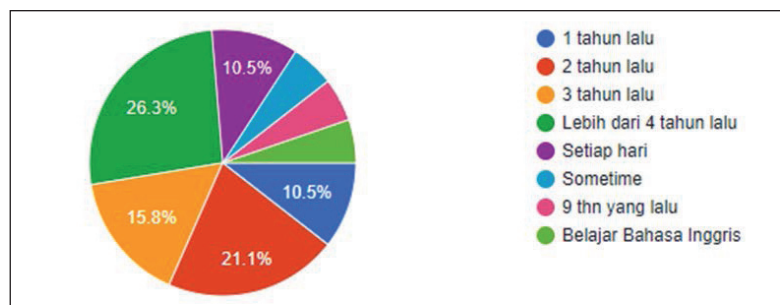


Chart 4. The Last Time of Learning English

They also added in their interview that the use of English at their workplace was considerably high as seen in the following chart.

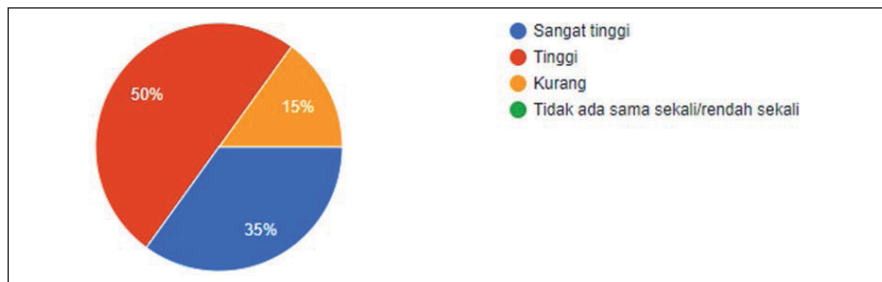


Chart 5. Use of English at the Workplace

Due to the frequent use of English, they tried to put efforts by asking their fellows who were perceived to have better speaking than them. The efforts did not seem to give them better speaking since they were already occupied with other tasks and English exposure did not take place maximally.

4. Absence of ESP Test at the Recruitment Process

During recruitment process, the hotel leader admitted that the ESP test was absent. The only way to see the candidate's English oral proficiency was through an interview. The interview itself only covered general information about the candidates and there were no specific questions that could expose the performance as front-liners. In fact, the process of recruitment was crucial since it determined the quality of the staff who would be hired someday. The staff should be able to be the "marketer" of the hotel for their paramount role as first impression maker.

Conclusion and Recommendation

As a city of Meeting, Incentive, Convention and Exhibition (MICE), Surabaya has become a strategic choice for anybody who seeks for either pleasure or business since its development has sparkled for the last decade. The attraction has made capitalists to invest money in hospitality industry and consequently growing numbers of hotels in Surabaya has been mushrooming. Due to tight competition among hotel industries, excellent service should be a key issue for hotel leaders and the ones who become the face of the hotel as front-liners.

Front-liners are expected to have solid oral communication since 60 seconds in the first meeting can leave good or bad impressions. Initial observation was made and interesting finding was found. Hotel leaders' perception on their staff's English proficiency seemed lower than the passing grade expected by the management. This gap has brought the present study to find answers of 2 research questions; what level of English proficiency of the front-liners actually was and why they experienced struggles when facing foreign guests.

A qualitative research employing a case study was done involving 20 participants of the 3-star hotel in Surabaya. Results of this study showed that the distribution of score range above shows that the highest percentage of the score range is between 50-59. The score implies both speaking writing skills need to be improved since they are under 60. Another concern is for those with score ranges of 60-69, 40-49 and 20-29 since according to the hotel leaders' perception in the writer's initial observation, their English proficiency should be at least 70.

Reasons why they struggled when facing foreign guests seemed to be caused by several factors; (1) L1 interference, (2) educational background, (3) less English exposure, (4) the absence of ESP test at recruitment process. L1 interference also seemed related to less English exposure they had. Their L1 interference prevented them from using more frequent English in daily basis conversation at workplace. Meanwhile, their educational background, mostly graduates of hotel and tourism major, did not have sufficient oral English exposure since the subject of English focused more on grammar and reading, and yet productive skills were insufficient.

Recommendation for further study is to expand the participants' range; more categories of hotel star so wide range of front-liners can optimally elicit deeper information on English proficiency and more solid conclusions can be made. Lastly, a staff professional development for front-liners should be made and the focus will be more on productive skills of the staff. This program can be the link and match between vocational education and hotel industry.

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