The 8th International Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) Seminar - Aligning Theoretical Knowledge with Professional Practice

Library Counter Talk: Communication Encounters between Counter Staff and International Students

Shamim Rafik-Galea*, Wan Irham Ishak, Aliyah Baharuddin Marji

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia
Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Malaysia

Abstract

Library patron communication is considered an important form of customer service. The professional use of language by library front desk staff should reflect the professional image of not only the library but also of the university itself. Library front desk staffs are responsible for various types of transactions. This paper presents and discusses the findings based on a qualitative study which investigated language use and communication strategies employed by the library front desk staff and international students of a university. The findings indicate that there is an over reliance of the use of several forms of communication strategies such as holophrastic strategy apart from the use of lexical repetition and literal translation.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the LSP 2012 Committee, Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Keywords: library; language use; communication strategies; front desk

1. Introduction

Library patron communication through library service providers is recognised as a form of institutional communication which has yet to be studied in terms of patterns of communication extensively outside the context of library and information sciences. The probable reasons for the lack of studies pertaining to patterns of communication and/or discourse in this context can be attributed to the fact that people often do not realise that providing information over the counter is still a form of ‘customer’ service where the library patrons are the customers.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6-038-946-6129; fax: +6-038-946-8972
E-mail address: shameemgalea@upm.my
Studies in the area of library services have mainly focused on library systems, information seeking behaviour and library needs. There is still a great deal to be learnt about interaction patterns or communication exchanges between librarians and library patrons or customers. However, customer communication with front desk staff has been extensively studied outside the library context.

1.1 Interaction in service encounters

Several studies have attempted to explain interaction in service encounters, for example, Kidwell’s [1] study on library communication between native English speaking receptionists and international English language students noted that front desk encounters were sequentially and institutionally organized. However, the organization of the discourse was found to be flexible as topics other than business may be brought up. The findings further suggested that speakers employed extra-linguistic resources such as sequential and institutional resources to understand one another’s actions regardless of the speakers’ native or non-native speaking abilities. Interestingly, the study found that participants’ linguistics difficulties did not appear to impede students’ abilities to obtain help, and it also did not hinder receptionists’ abilities to provide assistance.

Complementary to the above, Hewitt [2] investigated communication between receptionists and patients in general practice surgeries showed that receptionists and patients appeared to be strongly familiarize to their institutional roles and therefore there was very little small talk at the counter. Hewitt further pointed out that patient actions were mainly confined to checking in or making an appointment. The receptionist tasks on the other hand, were mainly that of dealing with routine talk or communication. A similar study by Mohandas [3] in an orthopaedic clinic noted that receptionists interactions with patients was minimal and confined to mainly confirming appointments, inquiring about wait time and occasionally engaging in small talk.

Another interesting study by Shively [4] on service encounters between L2 learners of Spanish and local Spanish service providers found that speakers tended to use hearer-oriented verbs in their requests including elliptical requests. Shively further noted that the speakers would alter the use of discourse markers from English to Spanish including the content of greetings after receiving negative answers or responses from the service providers. In addition, Ryoo [5] noticed that Korean immigrant shopkeepers and African American used communication strategies such as ‘let it pass’, hypothesis forming, metalinguistic comments, repetition and paraphrasing in their interactions with each other to facilitate understanding. Similarly, Glushko and Nomorosa [6] examined the degree to which a service provider substitutes information for interaction in service oriented organisations such as hotels and found that the degree to which the service provider substitutes information for interaction depended on the richness of the provider’s customer model to predict his next interaction or information needed.

Other studies such as that of Morais [7] provide evidence that communication strategies are more frequently used by second language learners in comparison with first language native speakers of a target language.

Code-switching is also another communication strategy used in service encounters. Schau et al. [2] noted that code switching between counter employee and customers occur even in scripted service encounters which are usually initiated by the customer. According to Schau et al.[2], code switching in service encounters is of a short duration, with fewer returns and negative comments or questions. The literature on front desk and service interaction encounters reveal that customer service is very important as it reflects an organisation’s image and reputation. These studies suggest that communication strategies in service encounters play an important role in ensuring effective communication.

1.2 Communication strategies: Theoretical perspectives

Selinker [9] coined the term ‘communication strategy’ which refers to the method a learner uses when communicating with a native speaker. Other researchers such as Tarone define communication strategies differently. For example, Tarone [10, p. 420]; [11, p. 65] defines communication strategies (CSs) as “…a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where the requisite meaning structures do not
The literature on communication strategies is very wide and the more prominent works are that of Bialystok [14] who conducted a comprehensive analysis of communication strategies for second language use and Dornyei [15] who expanded the scale of CSs definitions to take into consideration devices that were not firmly meaning related such as hesitation devices and fillers. Canale [13] and Ellis [16] studies on the use of fillers reveal that hesitation devices and fillers are important when speakers want to maintain conversations in complicated situations. Surapa and Channarong [17] believe that CSs are also used to keep the speakers’ conversation going within their current linguistics knowledge, and in due course control their communication.

The psychological problem-solving framework developed by Faerch and Kasper’s [12];[18], state that speakers utilize CSs when they have limited linguistic resources to overcome difficulties in communicating. Speakers restructure utterances to compensate for lack of particular linguistic information. The psychological problem-solving framework outlines two main strategies. These are the reduction strategies and achievement strategies. Reduction strategies involve meaning replacement, topic avoidance and message abandonment and are employed in communication with the intention of giving up a part of the intended communication objective. Achievement strategies on the other hand involve literal translation, code-switching, appeal, word-coinage, paraphrasing, restructuring and non-linguistic strategies. Speakers would utilize these strategies in order to maintain the initial communication objective and to narrow the communication gap.

On the other hand Tarone [10];[19]) proposed the interactional view of communication strategy (CS) where the focus is on joint negotiation of meaning between interactants. Thus indicating that speakers make conscious decisions based on their communicative intent and that if speakers do not have adequate linguistic resources to express themselves they will resort to a variety of communication strategies. Furthermore Tarone [10]) typology of Cs consists of lexical strategies such as paraphrasing (approximation, word coinage, circumlocution), transfer (literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, mime), and avoidance (topic avoidance, message abandonment).

Communicative strategies are also employed by monolingual interactants to compensate for the difficulties or inadequacies they may face when communicating with others. In short, communicators who may be incompetent in a target language would use communication strategies to reach a common goal or understanding. This further reflects Tarone, Cohen and Duma’s [20] earlier study of communicative strategies as “...a systematic attempt by the learner to express or decode meaning in the target language in situations where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been formed (pp. 76-90).”

Drawing on Tarone, Cohen and Duma’s theory, one can conclude that communication strategies are systematic attempts to reach a common goal or understanding among adults with low English proficiency who may use communication strategies such as holophrastic speech, single-word utterances and telegraphic speech commonly found among children. Fey, Long, and Finestack [21] explained that the holophrastic speech approach also known as single-word utterances convey an entire thought and may function as illocutionary acts of assertion, commanding or questioning. Body language in the form of gestures and facial expressions used clarify meanings more accurately.

Brown [22] used the term “telegraphic speech” (TS) to describe the stage of language development when children begin to combine words. Adult speech is considered to be ‘telegraphic’ if it shortened to the point that it becomes ungrammatical and sounds like a child’s telegraphic speech (for example: get book there). However, adult interlocutors would use facial expressions, eye contact and gestures to clarify meaning unlike children.
Though Tarone’s strategy typology appears to be similar to that of Faerch and Kasper’s [18], the difference is that Tarone places emphasis on both the speaker and the listener who are actively involved in using a variety of Cs to overcome any communication breakdown.

This paper focuses on language use and communication strategies employed by both international students and library front desk counter staff and draws on two complementary modes of analysis: qualitative ethnographic analysis of the practices of library front desk communication, and discourse analysis of front desk staff and international students’ talk. The authors analysed how library counter talk is organized to structure library front desk practices in order to identify and understand communication strategy use during library transactions.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research site and participants

This small scale study was conducted in the main library of a prominent local Malaysian public university based in the Klang Valley. Specifically, the research sites were the Circulation Counter and Readers’ Advisory Desk. The study is considered to be unique because the front desk staff and international students were observed and recorded while having conversation at the said locations.

The observation was carried out over four days and included thirteen male and female front desk counter staff working in shifts or taking turns, working in blocks of three hours. The ages of the staff ranged from between mid 20s to late 50s. They consisted of those with only six months work experience to very senior assistant librarians who have more than 25 years experience.

The study employed qualitative ethnographic methods and the authors were participant observers. The chief librarian gave the researchers permission to conduct the study and all the library staff were informed of the purpose of the study. In addition, when students approached the counters they were informed that the conversations were being recorded.

Ethnographic data was obtained through participant observation by observing the interactions between front-desk library staff with international students. We also occasionally participated in interactions with the front-desk staff in order to clarify meanings of observed practices. Discourse data was obtained from the recordings of the interactions at the Circulation Counter and the Readers’ Advisory Desk. Field notes were taken during the spoken interaction to record non-verbal other relevant information. Data were transcribed and analysed for language use and communication strategies.

The data consisted of 180 minutes of tape recorded conversations. The conversations were transcribed using the Transcription Convention Keys adapted from Schiffrin [23]. The following transcription conventions and notations were used:

- . full stop denotes a complete turn
- AL Assistant Librarian
- L Librarian
- IS International student
- ALM Assistant Librarian Male
- ALF Assistant Librarian Female
- ISM International Student Male
- ISF International Student Female
- LM Librarian Male
- LF Librarian Female
2.2 Data

The data highlighted strategies used by both the front desk counter staff and the international students as conversation partners during a twelve hour observation at the library. The dominant language used among the librarians is Malay and the dominant language among the international students is English. The staff at the Circulation Counter are bilingual with minimal English proficiency, while the staff manning the Reader’s Advisory desk were more proficient in English.

3. Results and discussion

Our analysis and observations of communication encounters between library front desk staff and international students revealed interesting findings. The library staff at both the Circulation Counter and the Readers’ Advisor Desk provided a number of different services to the international students. We identified five main types of activities in library services encounters. The core activities were: extending the period of borrowed books, borrowing books, returning books, paying fines for overdue books, asking for directions and or assistance and or seeking advice. The communicative styles could be classified as non-intervening, explanatory and direct in nature.

3.1 Types of communication strategies

The analysis of the discourse between library counter staff and international students based on Tarone and Faerch and Kasper’s communication strategies framework revealed the use of six types of strategies such as holophrastic speech, telegraphic speech, code switching, repetitions, use of fillers and literal translation.

3.1.1 Holophrastic strategy

The findings show that library counter staff used holophrastic strategies frequently where common words used indirectly represented a whole sentence that acted as ‘cues’. In addition, counter staff employed a second language word which is semantically similar to the targeted lexical item. This seemed to adequately create a common understanding between the library staff and the international students. These one-word sentences revolved around common English words that appeared to be the common lexical item for both the assistant librarians and foreign students as illustrated in excerpts 1, 2 and 3.

The library staff preferred a simple straightforward style of communicating in understanding, clarifying, and verifying the needs and concerns of the students. The authors noticed that ‘cue’ words were very frequently used to understand the communicative purpose and intent of each interaction.

The English words which functioned as common lexical items were return, renew, borrow and extend as illustrated in excerpts 1, 2 and 3 below.

Excerpt 1
1 ALF : Return? (while nodding)
2 ISM : Yes. (ISM1 passes the book to the librarian and walks away)

The communication between the female assistant librarian and male international student was very brief. It appears that the assistant librarian was able to guess straight away that the student’s intention was to return the book. This could be due to the routine experience in dealing with library patrons. Thus we see the assistant librarian uttering a one-word question “return” with a rising tone which was immediately understood by the international student who replied “yes” affirmatively. Interestingly, ALF nodded her head while speaking as an indication to confirm what she believes the student wanted to do.
Excerpt 2
1 ALF : Borrow? (smiles at the student who is carrying a pile of books coming from the direction of the shelves)
2 ISF : Yes. (nods and smiles)
3 ALF : (librarian processes the books and hands over the books to the student. No conversation takes place)
4 ISF : Thanks. (walks away)
5 ALF : Smiles and nods.

Excerpt 2 is another example of the use of the holophrastic strategy by both the interactants. At the counter, the assistant librarian ALF observed that the international student was carrying books. The assistant librarian predicted that the student wanted to borrow the books. Therefore, the holophrastic word “borrow?” is used and the student replied “yes” which showed his intent. ISF receives the books from the librarian and thanked her. The librarian responded with only a nod and a smile.

Excerpt 3
1 ALF : Renew? (no smile)
2 ISM : Yes. (nods twice as a mark of confirmation)

Excerpt 3 reveals another type of communication at the Circulation Counter that is of renewing book loan. The communication in excerpt 3 like excerpt 1 was very short and the assistant librarian again correctly guessed his client’s intention. He asked “renew?” and the student replied “yes” while nodding showing that he guessed right and the nod is a gesture to confirm the service required.

The three excerpts illustrates that communication at the circulation counter appear to be very brief and both service seekers (international students) and service providers (assistant librarians) appeared to understand one another with the service providers able to provide the right service to their clients. Common lexical words such as return, borrow and renew were frequently used and these words are semantically common in library services. Therefore, it can be seen that the employment of the holophrastic strategy helps both parties to establish successful interaction.

The excerpts reveal that the assistant librarians correctly guessed the intention of the international students who came to the circulation counter for assistance. Our observation reveals that this is due to two reasons. One is the strategic location of the circulation counter and second, the ability of the assistant librarians to observe and read body language and or behaviour in order to predict the client’s needs. The assistant librarian observes where the students are coming from. Discussions with the librarians confirmed our observations that book-carrying students who enter through the main entrance have two intentions either to renew the book loan or to return the books. On the other hand, book-carrying students who come from the library floor to the circulation counter usually want to borrow books. We consider this a communication strategy. Dornyei and Scott’s [24] taxonomy separated three basic categories: direct, indirect and interactional strategies. Based on Dornyei and Scott’s ([25]) it appears that the assistant librarians employed the indirect strategy which according to Dornyei and Scott ([25, p. 198] “are not strictly problem-solving devices”. It can be seen that the act of observing the students “do not provide alternative meaning structures, but rather facilitate the transference of meaning indirectly by creating the conditions for achieving mutual understanding: preventing breakdowns and keeping the communication channel open”. They concluded that “although indirect strategies are not meaning-related, they play a significant role in problem management” [25, p.198] and this appears to be so in the case of the assistant librarians we observed. We noted that the librarians were able to anticipate the intention of the service seekers by using the correct choice of words. This saves time and communication is more efficient. Finally, we concur with Dornyei and Scott [25] who argue that “if the term “communication strategy” is used in an extended sense they are a valid subcategory of CSs” [25]. The assistant librarians were pro-active in observing and analysing their potential clients’ intentions and needs and then use the information to directly deal with the client’s needs. Excerpts 1, 2 and 3, shows that the
assistant librarians were able to provide effective services to the clients by applying indirect strategies when communicating.

In addition, the use one-word exchanges reflected four speech acts employed by the students; the utterance act allowed a student to state his intentions, the propositional act allowed a student to assert his intention such as returning, borrowing or renewing a book, the illocutionary act allowed a counter staff to interpret the request from his or her client, for example for a book return, renewal or loan and the perlocutionary act where the message was intended for one to do something, for example when a counter staff processed a book and fulfilled his or her client’s intention. The above examples illustrates that transactions were successful with just a single word exchange and without any small talk or exchange of pleasantries.

3.1.2 Telegraphic speech strategy

Our findings show that library counter staff and international students converse using very short and simple sentences which consist of not more than 4 words for each turn during interactions when the occasions required the asking or replying to questions. Such telegraphic communication consists of syntax that reflects the edited versions of grammatically correct sentences but without grammatical wordings or endings according to grammatical rules and syntax formation. These sentences were a often combination of words without articles and prepositions.

Again familiar ‘cue’ words or jargons such as ‘renew’, ‘return’, ‘borrow’, and ‘extend’ were used to bridge the communication gap in syntax structure for understanding.

Excerpt 4 clearly exemplifies this phenomenon.

**Excerpt 4**

1. ALM : You want renew?
2. ISF4 : Yes, renew.
3. ALM : How many times?
4. ISF : Twice already.

Excerpt 4 highlights the use of telegraphic speech as a strategy during the interaction between an assistant librarian and his client. The assistant librarian began the conversation by directly asking his client’s intention “You want renew?” and the client replied “Yes, Renew”. The assistant librarian probed further about the status of the books that was to be renewed “How many times?” and the client understood the question and answered “twice already” indicating that he had previously renewed the book twice. A library has its own rules regarding book loan and in this case a book can only be borrowed for a month and then renewal is allowed up to a maximum of three times.

The two interlocutors in excerpt 4 appear to be very direct. It can be seen that both do away with pleasantries such as conversation opening (greetings) and closing. The assistant librarian’s opening “You want renew?” lacks a question tag ‘do’ and preposition ‘to’ and this shows that the assistant librarian was not concerned with the grammatical structure of his question. His question was short and concise and understood by his client. The assistant librarian asked “How many times?” and this question may perplex others but it was easily understood by the international student who promptly said that he had already renewed his book loan twice. This suggests that the library counter staff had low language proficiency and Brown[22] explains that telegraphic speech is similar to children’s language development and when adults use such combination it shows low command of second language proficiency.
3.1.3 Code switching

Our findings revealed occasional use of code switching where Malay and English were used. This was noticeable particularly when international students had knowledge of the Malay language as illustrated in excerpt 5.

**Excerpt 5**

1. ISM : for this one thank you very much
2. LM : okay
3. ISM : terima kasih (thank you) [code switch]
4. LM : sama sama (you are welcome) [code switch]

Excerpt 5 shows an international student wanting to close the conversation and to thank the librarian. The international student thanked the librarian in English and then switched to thanking the librarian in Malay. This finding is consistent with that of Barredo [26] whose study on code switching among Spanish-Basque bilinguals found that bilinguals used code switching as a strategy to negotiate the development of the conversation. This switch of language can be viewed as a way of showing appreciation to the librarian whose mother tongue is Malay apart from demonstrating that he understands Malay.

Excerpt 6 illustrates a conversation at the circulation counter. From the researchers’ observation, conversations seldom took place at the Circulation Counter between counter staff with international students. A conversation would exist when counter staff needed to do more than carrying out simple instructions involving book return, renewal or loan. It usually involved an international student requiring assistance, clarification or directions. Conversations were more commonly found at the Reader’s Advisory desk where students required assistance, directions or advice.

The following is an example of a conversation at the Circulation counter.

**Excerpt 6**

1. ISM : Good morning
2. ALF : (Nodded)
3. ISM : I want this journal, but I can’t find it.
   : The serial number is… (pointed to piece of paper and read out serial number)
   : But I can’t find it b..
4. ALF : Is this journal or book?
5. ISM : Journal.
6. ALF : You have found location for journal?
7. ISM : Yes..I found location but can’t find book…
8. ALF : (Turned to colleague) journal mana ya? (Which journal is it? Colleague: (answered in Malay)- luar sana (Out there)
9. ALF : (pointed to the right) out there.
10. ISM : oh! The journal is out there?
11. ALF : nodded
12. ISM : The buku? (book)
13. ALF : Buku (book)
14. ISM : Yes, where buku (book)?

The above transaction shows the application of code switching at word level in the conversation. The context of the conversation revolved around the international student who came to reader’s advisory desk to seek assistance from the librarian to find a journal article and also a book that he himself could not find. In line 8 we see the assistant librarian turning to her colleague to ask about the location of the journal. She code-switched from English to Malay. In this situation the use of code switching was meant to establish solidarity between co-
workers and to exclude the international student from the conversation. This is finding is consistent with that of Avarez-Caccamo [27] who suggests that code switching is used to indicate group membership and local identification where in this case they were library employees. Apart from that the use code switching appears to be functioning as means of sustaining a conversation as seen in lines 12, 13 and 14.

3.1.4 Repetition

Repetition is a communication strategy employed by second language (L2) speakers in their conversation where the conversation consist of repetition of lexical and or syntactic items by L2 speakers.

Excerpt 7
1 ISF : check the number volume three sorry 1986
   : I’m not sure about the volume
2 LF : volume three issue three [lexical repetition: comprehension check]
3 ISF : journal is psychology of marketing
4 LF : journal title psychology [lexical repetition: comprehension check]
5 LF : pages which one you want
6 ISF : pages one nine three
7 LF : one nine three to [lexical repetition: comprehension check]

The librarian repeated the student’s sentence “volume three issue three” as seen in line 2. In this case the repetition can be seen as a way of seeking confirmation while she was keying in the information into the database in order to retrieve the requested journal. Other repetitions of confirmation included “journal title psychology” in line 4 and page number “one nine three” in line 7. Another use of lexical repetition is as a comprehension check for conversational maintenance between the librarian and her service seeker. Ting and Lau [28] point out that this feature is frequently used among L2 speakers.

3.1.5 Fillers

The use of fillers in communication is part of time gaining strategy in communication. The following excerpt illustrates the use fillers in service provider – service seeker interaction.

Excerpt 8
1 ISF : two one oh author is G R Dow Dow Dowling
2 LM : Hmm Hmm Dowling [filler]

The student mentioned the name of the author and the librarian used the filler “hmm hmm” (line 2) to fill pauses and to gain time while typing the author’s surname into the database. It appears that the librarian thought it was necessary to reply to the student’s query where he provided the author’s name to the librarian. However, it is clear that the surname Dowling was the most important fact that the librarian was looking for as she only repeated Dowling. Here, the librarian was being polite by acknowledging it with fillers “Hmm hmm” to agree with the student while keying in relevant author information into the library database.

3.1.6 Literal Translation

The researchers noticed that the counter staff engaged in one-word sentences or multi word utterances which appear to be the literal translation of Malay words to English words. Literal translation strategy was mostly employed by the assistant librarians who worked at the circulation counter. Examples of these are presented in table 1.
Table 1: Literal translation Bahasa Malaysia to English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactions with Malaysians (MS)</th>
<th>Interactions with international students (IS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 AL – Pinjam? MS – Ya.</td>
<td>AL – Borrow? IS – Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 AL – Sambung? MS – Ya</td>
<td>AL – Extend? IS – Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 AL – Matrix card (Not kad matrik)</td>
<td>AL – Matrix card?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 AL – RM2.60 denda</td>
<td>AL – RM 2.60 fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 AL – Nak pulangkan. MS – Ya</td>
<td>AL – You return. IS - Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 AL – Nak pulangkan ke?</td>
<td>AL – You want return?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Literal translation from Malay to English enables the assistant librarians to communicate effectively with English speaking clients. The use of literal translation is common and this is because most of the assistant librarians were admitted to the service with only high school certificate equivalent to A-level. They have a low command of the English language and therefore engaging in literal translation helps them to communicate with international students. The assistant librarians appear to have a set of translated lexical items that they could use when communicating with international students. This study identified the use of different literal translation terms and phrases than Ting and Lau’s [28] study where they reported that there were only two instances of the use of literal translation as a communicative strategy.

4. Conclusion

This small scale qualitative study has provided the researcher with data referring to the interaction between international students and front desk library staff in a university in the Klang Valley. The findings of the study has shown that various communication strategies were used during the interaction as indicated by other researchers and provides a small step in the body of knowledge in the context of communication between library employees and international students seeking services and assistance. The findings reveal that (A) the core activities included; period of extension of borrowed books, borrowing books, returning books, paying fines for overdue books, asking for directions and or assistance and or seeking advice and that the communicative styles could be classified as non-intervening, explanatory and direct in nature, (B) the most common strategies employed were holophrastic strategy, telegraphic speech, code-switching, repetition, use of fillers, and literal translation as discussed in the results and that English and Malay were used occasionally in library counter talk.

In addition, communication strategies were employed by both the counter staff and international student in their communication. English was the preferred language of communication between counter staff and international students and there were instances where international students switched from English to Malay to thank the librarian at the Reader’s Advisory Desk. It was evident that the staff manning the Circulation Counter could survive with a few literal translation phrases; however the librarians at Reader’s Advisory Desk must have a higher level of English language competency than at present. This is because communication at the Reader’s Advisory Desk involves a more complex structured and good command of English. Therefore the research has
highlighted the lack linguistic and customer service abilities and the requirements in terms of the training of library staff. Hence it is recommended that the library staff be equipped with specific language skills relevant to their job’s needs in particular face-to-face communication in English so that the library employees can understand international students’ needs. Furthermore, library employees must also be equipped with communication strategies so that they can use these strategies to their benefit in performing their duties and finally adequate training should be is given on the etiquette of counter service skills and techniques because the lack of proper customer service can have unfavourable impacts on the library itself and ultimately the impact will be on the university where critical feedback can have serious consequence on student enrolment.

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