

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

It is estimated that Malaysia, in experiencing an astounding pace of development, is set to become an industrialised nation in the year 2020. Among the service industries, contributing to its growth is the hospitality industry because it is among the major economic forces in the country as it enables growth and creation of job opportunities, and has been identified as a key driver in the services sector.

The hospitality industry is growing exponentially during the coming years because Malaysia has a reasonably good infrastructure for transportation and communications against a rich backdrop of natural tourist destinations, attractions and national heritage. Statistically, according to the former Tourism Minister, Datuk Seri Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor (February, 2006 – February, 2008), tourist arrivals have increased tremendously from only 1.2 million arrivals in 1974 to 17.5 million arrivals in 2006 and a record 20.7 million arrivals in 2007. The country earned RM45.7 billion in foreign exchange for the Year 2007 following the record 20.7 million foreign tourist arrivals that surpassed the targeted 20.1 million set for the “Visit Malaysia Year 2007” (VMY 2007) campaign (The Star, 28/12/07). Likewise, hotels’ occupancy and average room rates (ARR) are expected to continue their record-setting streak in 2008 and potentially earn RM19 billion in revenue from foreign tourists. By 2010, tourist arrivals are targeted to likely increase to 24.6 million thus, generating gross receipts of RM59.4 billion and providing some 520,000 people with jobs (The Star, 08/09/2007).

The government and the business community realised that the key element of a successful hospitality industry is the continuing ability to attract and cater to the needs of travellers, both local and foreign. In order to be able to survive in this highly competitive industry, there is a need to identify the challenges and effectively address the shortcomings because neighbouring countries like Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and China are also successfully attracting many foreign tourists.

Looking on the positive side, this threat can be turned into an opportunity and one specific area that can be reviewed is the quality of service offered in the hospitality industry because it is part and parcel of the service industry. Poor customer service will eventually cause a low occupancy rate because guests will remember negative experiences twice as often as positive ones (Feiertag, 1999). Hence, in order to achieve this, it is essential for workers in the hospitality industry to have competent communication skills because it is necessary to ensure a high level of service quality so that the service delivery is efficient and will be able to meet customers' satisfaction. This is because a deficit in communication skills will significantly impair the hotel's ability to attract and encourage the expected influx of guests.

1.1 Background of study

Whether it is the corner *mamak* stall, Ah Chong's plumbing service, a giant supermarket or an established hotel, competition is very keen and survival depends on obtaining the competitive edge. Therefore, for the various business organisations in Malaysia that deal with customers, quality customer service provides the required

competitive advantage. In the hospitality industry, it is a known fact that what it is selling besides accommodation and food is quality customer service which means customers' satisfaction and comfort.

With the rapid growth in the field of hospitality, demand for more and more people in this sector is growing rapidly as we are all part of this dynamic industry. The spin-offs from this effect can be noted in terms of the numerous numbers of new colleges offering hospitality courses thereby creating more job opportunities for the population. Students taking such courses are now able to enhance their interpersonal skills and equip themselves with a strong background necessary to build a successful career in the hospitality industry as compared to students of the yesteryears. As such, it is important that they are competent in their jobs because they are the front-liners who can effectively lower the prevalence of dissatisfaction among tourists by delivering quality customer services.

One of the main criteria relevant to the need of ensuring quality customer service is the significant ability of the hotel's staff to communicate effectively and efficiently. As with all other customer-oriented industries, it is therefore crucial that the Front Office staff have acceptable levels of communicative proficiency due to the fact that they are in direct contact with the foreign tourists and guests upon their arrivals in the country. In the hospitality industry, English language is important because research shows that one in five people in the world is an English-speaker, almost 380 million

people speak English as their first language and more than 375 million people consider English as their second language (NST, 30/12/07).

In Malaysia, the English language was the medium of instruction and administration for some years before and after it gained independence in 1957. As the second official language, it enables Malaysia to keep abreast with the scientific and technological developments of the world. Hence, in view of the globalisation and internationalisation goals of the country, English language competency is of particular importance in the hospitality industry because it can help to put Malaysia on the international tourist map.

One of the many reasons why the English language is used far more now than ever before, has a lot to do with the fantastic rate at which telecommunications and technology have advanced. The rapid technological advancements have enable numerous English language training programmes gearing specifically for staff in the hospitality industry to grow steadily in recent years in Malaysia, primarily because employers have come to recognise the importance of developing effective and efficient communication skills of the staff concerned. Thus, workers in the hospitality industry need to be able to communicate effectively and efficiently through the English language because it is the *lingua franca*.

This is significantly important because, according to MATTA (Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents) president Ngiam Foon (2005 – present), there is a gradual shortage of competent English language workers in the hospitality industry, and if the decline is not arrested, then among the possible solutions to the problem might be to hire English-speaking workers from abroad (NST, 02/07/2007).

1.2 Statement of problem

This study focuses on the English language as the means of communication for the Front Office staff of a business class hotel because based on the given guests' comments, one of the main issues that the hotel guests regularly complained of, is pertaining to the problems of communication with the hotel staff due to their English language competency. The staff inability to respond efficiently to the guests' requests make the guests feel uncomfortable and thus caused the complaints. For the hotel being studied, the issue of English language proficiency is a major challenge because a large percentage of the hotel workforce does not speak English as their primary language.

In the targeted hotel that is being studied, it was noted that English language is used extensively by most of the guests even when English is not their official language. Over 90% of the communicative activities in the hotel is in English such as when giving instructions, explanations, answering queries, telephone calls, conveying messages and so on. As such, efficient communication is important because even hotel staff who have only occasional or limited contact with guests (e.g. room attendants, stewards and

kitchen staff) still need to communicate efficiently and effectively with their colleagues and superiors. The staff need to communicate efficiently because sometimes in high-pressured situations, immediate accurate responses and feedback are required to resolve problems arising from guests' complaints that are related to them whether directly or indirectly.

At the other end of the delicate scale are the Front Office staff who have constant and wide-ranging contact with guests and who therefore, need plentiful supplies of polite, fully comprehensible and tactful language. Hence, the hotel is increasingly recognising the importance of all their staff having competent language skills so that guests can receive courteous and efficient service in every single situation and at every single stage of their stay.

Effective service strategy such as proper greetings, remembering and addressing guests' name and handling guests' complaints effectively, will definitely give positive first impressions to the guests. Thus, in order to meet the required customer satisfaction standard, the Front Office staff of the business class hotel being studied is expected to be;

- competent in oral and written communication,
- competent in the prevention of conflicts with guests and
- competent in "recovery work." (what to do when things go wrong).

One may have personally witnessed instances whereby Front Office staff was not able to provide good customer service due to their language inefficiency. From observations done, it was observed that it was not done intentionally but sometimes, unknowingly, they used the language in ways that tended to offend the valued guests. Imagine the effect of a Front Office staff who responded to a complaint about the poor taxi service by saying;

"Sorry Sir, there is nothing much we can do about the poor taxi service."

It is a polite statement but it will practically irritate the annoyed guest and would cause the guest to think twice about staying in the hotel concerned. That problem can be avoided if the staff uses the proper communication skills to show empathy. Therefore, the staff concerned requires a lot of commitment, a positive attitude and an effective communicative competency in order to achieve the hotel vision statement which is "zero complaints."

For the Front Office staff of the hotel being studied, they are frequently reprimanded based on guests' comments and feedback pertaining to the issues of efficient and effective communication. As such, the need to improve their communicative proficiency can be summarised according to Hutchinson and Waters' concepts (1987 : pp 55-56) which are necessities, lacks and want;

a) **Necessities**

- The ability to converse accurately and proficiently in English with hotel guests, colleagues and superiors.
- The ability to receive and give correct verbal instructions and commands.
- The ability to read and understand memorandums, forms, reports and computer data required for their daily job tasks.
- The ability to write and fill in their reports and forms, and key-in computer data with minimal errors.

b) **Lacks**

- Lack of adequate competency of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing required to perform their daily job tasks efficiently.
- Lack of adequate competency of terms in English related to their working environment requirement.
- Lack of adequate competency of general English grammar and correct syntactic patterns needed for their daily work functions.

c) **Wants**

- The ability to communicate clearly and correctly in English with minimal errors.
- The ability to use their communicative proficiency for work and social purposes.
- The ability to be proficient in all the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing for their daily work and social requirements.
- The ability to expand their vocabulary and use of the right choice of words.

By achieving the above communicative needs, the Front Office staff will be able to minimize the communicative problems that they faced daily in the course of carrying out their duties. This is because effective communicative ability forms an important part of their job that underpins all their other tasks and duties.

1.3 Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the English language needs of the Front Office staff of a business class hotel in Malaysia by determining the language skills required by the Front Office staff to perform their daily job tasks effectively and efficiently, and their perceived attitudes towards the language.

The study also attempts to identify the English language problems encountered by the staff in their daily course of work and hence, suggests the appropriate remedial steps and methods that can be used to overcome the problems.

For the hotel being studied, it is necessary to identify the communicative needs of the Front Office staff because language competency encourages cooperation and language incompetence causes confrontations either with guests or even with their co-workers. The reason for this is that the staff need to be able to prevent escalation of conflicts and disagreements with the guests. By keeping things under control, the guests will feel that they are being treated well and will eventually be regular guests. This is crucial because the hotel is dependent on repeat guests as stated by the Pareto

principle (1906) that 20% of the business is derived from loyal customers who churn 80% of the organisation's revenue. The Pareto principle (also known as the 80-20 rule) states that for many events, 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes (Pareto, 1906). For example, people tend to wear 20% of their most favoured clothes about 80% of the time, they spend 80% of their time with 20% of their acquaintances, 80% of their business sales come from 20% of their loyal clients etc.

Being a business class hotel, its focus is on the English language as the primary media of interaction and communication because the majority of the hotel's guests are foreign and local businesspersons whose medium of communication is mainly English. For the Front Office staff, competency in the relevant English language skills will enable them to perform their daily tasks with minimal errors. Therefore, the objectives of this study are;

1. To determine whether English language is necessary for the Front Office staff of a business class hotel, to perform their daily job tasks efficiently.
2. To evaluate the perceived attitudes of the Front Office staff of a business class hotel towards the English language.
3. To evaluate the English language needs of the Front Office staff of a business class hotel.
4. To identify the English language problems faced by the Front Office staff of a business class hotel, and suggest the appropriate steps and methods required to overcome the language problems.

In order to achieve the stated objectives, this study aims to answer the following research questions;

1. Is English language necessary for the Front Office staff of a business class hotel, to perform their daily job tasks efficiently?
2. What are the perceived attitudes of the Front Office staff of a business class hotel, towards the English language?
3. What are the English language needs of the Front Office staff of a business class hotel?
4. What are the English language problems encountered by the Front Office staff of a business class hotel, and the appropriate steps and methods required to overcome the language problems?

1.4 Significance of this study

Having the best hotel, in terms of its strategic location, food and amenities, means little if the staff is not providing the expected customer service to the valued guests. As such, the primary significance of this study rested on the broad topic of customer satisfaction in relation to effective communication. The study of customer satisfaction is "multidimensional" in that it crosses the bounds of anthropology, sociology, psychology and organizational development. Because of the far-reaching impact of "customer satisfaction," research from other disciplines can therefore do much to provide new perspectives and a broader context for understanding the study. As stated earlier, in order to survive, hotels not only have to attract new guests but must

also be able to retain existing ones and quality customer service is the main factor in enabling the hotel to make it happen.

By identifying the English language needs of the Front Office staff of a business class hotel in their daily course of work, it can therefore provide the conceptual framework upon which suggestions for appropriate remedial steps can be based. It is hoped that this study would be able to provide valuable information to aspiring job seekers who wish to make hospitality (in the Front Office) as their chosen career path. For the existing Front Office staff, they can refer to the study for use as a guide to identify their areas of weaknesses, and take the appropriate steps to remedy the situation.

Ultimately, it is for the betterment of the Malaysian Front Office workforce so that they can produce value-added work when they know the importance of being competent in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as vocabulary knowledge and grammar competence. The four key areas that they can focus on are as per the stated research objectives mentioned earlier;

1. To determine whether English language is necessary for the Front Office staff of a business class hotel, to perform their daily job tasks efficiently.
2. To evaluate the perceived attitudes of the Front Office staff of a business class hotel towards the English language.

3. To evaluate the English language needs of the Front Office staff of a business class hotel.
4. To identify the English language problems faced by the Front Office staff of a business class hotel, and suggest the appropriate steps and methods required to overcome the language problems.

Finally, this study is considerably significant because of the scarcity of research materials that are available locally pertaining to the specific subject matter. Most of the available texts and researches on hotels focused specifically on the broad topic of hospitality, hospitality and management, and quality customer service. As such, it is hoped that this study can act as the stepping stone for a more in-depth and extensive research in the near future pertaining to the English language needs of Front Office staff of a business class hotel, in the context of the Malaysian workforce.

1.5 Approach adopted for this study

As mentioned, this study sought to determine the communicative needs of the Front Office staff of a business class hotel in the context of the Malaysian workforce. The communicative needs were evaluated based on the staff responses to given questionnaire, face-to-face individual and group interviews, observation of the staff at work for a duration of six (6) months and supplementary data obtained from documentary research.

The approach adopted for this study is exploratory and descriptive in nature incorporating both the quantitative and qualitative data for use in the statistical analysis. It is conducted in the form of a research strategy because according to Denscombe (1998: 7), researchers who adopted the “research strategy” approach are able to use the whole range of methods within the strategy: questionnaires, interviews, documents and observation.

1.6 Scope and limitation of study

This study was carried out on a business class hotel located in Petaling Jaya in the state of Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia. The chosen hotel was rated as a four-star business class hotel by the local tourism board. The target population of the study was the Front Office staff of the hotel with positions ranging from doorpersons to assistant managers. As such, the very nature of this study and its research design brought up various assumptions and limitations. This study was based on the assumptions that the language needs of the Front Office staff of the chosen hotel can be considered as credible examples of similar language needs required by Front Office staff of other hotels across the country.

The numbers of Front Office staff being studied were also not significantly large as compared to bigger hotels and thus, limit the scope of this study. The limitation of the study was that, it was focused on the sample of the chosen population and was thus, confined to the responses from the said sample. Due to the constraint of time, the

duration of this study was limited to a period of approximately six (6) months. As such, the study was not able to cover a bigger sample size by involving more hotels with a bigger number of respondents. Due to the said limitations, it was therefore, not the purpose of this study to make general conclusions about all Front Office staff in general. Although, the study covered the entire Front Office staff which comprised both sexes with various ethnic backgrounds and diverse interests, it was not the purpose of this study to draw sweeping conclusions about how other Front Office staff of a particular ethnicity, sexual orientation or sex, think, feel, or react.

1.7 Description of the hotel being studied

The hotel being studied is a stand-alone unit owned by C.P (S.E.A) Group of companies and it was officially opened in 1998. It was rated as a four-star business class hotel by the local tourism board. The hotel is located within the prestigious Damansara area in Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia. It is an international business class hotel that caters to the needs of foreign and local business travellers as well as leisure holiday-makers.

It has three hundred and eighty-eight (388) well-appointed and impeccably fully furnished rooms and suites. All the rooms are equipped with the latest state of the art wireless broadband services which allow guests high speed wireless Internet (WI-FI) connectivity from anywhere within the hotel's premises. The service is complimentary for guests staying in the hotel but chargeable at the rate of RM60.00 for eight (8) hours of usage for walk-in guests.

The hotel's facilities comprises an elegant pillarless ballroom, ten function and meeting rooms, a health club, a dance club, a hair salon and beauty centre, and a Business centre with the full range of secretarial services. There are three main restaurants for continental dining as well as Japanese and Chinese cuisine. For the sports enthusiasts, there is a gymnasium, a tennis court, an indoor table-tennis and an outdoor swimming pool which is equipped with a Jacuzzi. For golf enthusiasts, the Civil Service Golf Club (KGPA) is just across the road in front of the hotel alongside the Kuala Lumpur Golf and Country Club (KLGCC).

Other in-room facilities are the bedside control panel, remote-controlled television set with ASTRO and Vision 4 services, in-room minibars and safeboxes. For the suites, there are microwave ovens, refrigerators and comfortable sofas. For the presidential suite, there is a jacuzzi, a 34-inch plasma television set, a hi-fi set, a separate guestroom with attached bathroom and a dining cum meeting room within the suite.

The hotel has managed to achieve numerous outstanding awards. Among the awards received were for the Best Chinese Restaurant for the year 1999 and 2004, the Best Cigar Divan for the year 2003 and 2004, the Best Four-Star Business Class hotel for the year 2003 and 2004 and the Best Asian Cuisine Chef for the year 2005 and 2006. The most recent achievement was winning the Hospitality Asia's Platinum Award for the Best Four-Star Business Class hotel in Malaysia for the year 2005 and 2006. This award is internationally recognised as a symbol of excellence in the hospitality industry. This is considered as a tremendous achievement because the hotel has won the award

for four consecutive years (2002 - 2006). This is a feat which no other hotel in its class has ever achieved before. It reflects the hotel's dedication to deliver unrivalled services and unforgettable experiences.

1.8 Definition of Terms

The following are definitions of some of the hotel's terms quoted directly or indirectly during the course of this study as used by the Front Office staff of the said hotel being studied;

Arrival report - The number of guests arriving on a specific date and the requirements of their reservations.

Average Room Rate - (ARR) The revenue from the rooms obtained by dividing the net room revenues by the number of room sold.

Assistant Concierge - An employee who supervises the bellmen and doormen of the hotel and who is responsible for handling the guests' luggages and items.

Back of the house - Operating departments of the hotel where the employees have minimal contact with the guests (e.g.: stewards and kitchen staff),

Block - The number of rooms set aside for guests who have confirmed their bookings to stay at the hotel.

Book - The sale or reservation of a room made in advance prior to arrival.

- Check-out** - The procedure followed by the Front Office staff when a guest vacates the room and is ready to settle the room bill.
- Connecting room** - Adjoining room with connecting door.
- Concierge** - A person who provides information and services for the guests such as delivery of mails, newspapers, arranging tours, airlines reservations etc.
- Departure report** - A report on the number of guests checking out on a particular date.
- Folio** - The details of the transactions (the bill) of the guest who has stayed at the hotel.
- Front of the house** - Operating departments of the hotel whereby the staff are in direct contact with the guests.
- Function list** - A list of all the functions for a particular date to which meeting rooms or function rooms have been set aside for the said event.
- Log book** - A book for recording all the necessary information and activities for the staff to refer to and/or to take the necessary follow-up actions.
- Mystery shopper** - A mystery guest enlisted by the management to evaluate the efficiency of the staff of the hotel.
- No-show** - A guest who did not show up or cancel the reservation that has been made.
- Occupancy** - The percentage of occupied rooms derived by dividing the number of rooms occupied by guests against the total number of available rooms.
- Occupied rooms (OC)** - Rooms that have been sold and are occupied by the guests.

Out-of-order (OOO) - A guest's room that cannot be assigned to a guest because of some defects.

Porte cochere - Covered arrival area at the hotel's main entrance.

Profile - A profile consists of details pertaining to a guest, company, agent, source and group.

Rack rate - The published room rate with no discount.

Reg card - The form for registering the guest's data such as name, address, payment method, signature and the type of room assigned.

Turnover - A measure to describe the number of staff joining or leaving the hotel employment.

Valet service - Chargeable car parking services provided to guests of the hotel

VC - A vacant clean room.

VD - A vacant dirty room.

Walk-in - A guests who arrives at the hotel to take a room without a prior reservation.