

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background to the Study

Foreign waiters have been coming to Malaysia in large numbers to seek job opportunities in the service industry for many years. Most come with no competency in Bahasa Malaysia and low competency in English. These are among the two main languages in Malaysia. Despite their inability to speak the target languages, they are expected to perform daily communication for work and social purposes almost as soon as they arrive. Malaysian Home Minister, Datuk Seri Hishamuddin Tun Hussein, stated that “as of December last year, there are some 2.4 million foreign waiters in Malaysia” that is about 20% of the total workforce (*The Star*, 18/03/2010).

In addition, the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) reports that “in Malaysia, foreign waiters can be employed in the manufacturing, construction, plantation, agricultural, services and domestic help sectors. These services sector consists of fourteen sub sectors: restaurant, launderette, welfare homes, cleaning services, wholesale/retail, goldsmith, barber, cargo handling, hotel, caddy in golf club, textile and spa/reflexology” (http://www.mida.gov.my/en_v2/index.php?page=employment-of-foreign-waiters).

According to the employment policies of MIDA, only nationals from specified countries such as South East Asia (e.g. Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines (male only), India, and Bangladesh) are allowed to work in approved sectors. Statistics, in the same fact sheet, showed that immigrants are under-represented in managerial and high-level sales positions

and where there are, their salaries remained lower than those of local waiters. Currently, a large percentage of the low-income jobs are held by full time foreign waiters compared to only a small percentage of local waiters. Nevertheless, work opportunities for foreign waiters are limited, therefore having relevant communication skills in the target language would be an important criteria in competing for a job placement.

In addition to that, competition for jobs in Malaysia is made stiffer each year as the Malaysian government is making serious efforts to reduce the number of foreign workers in the industries. “Industry players need to increase wages to retain their local workforce”, stated Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr S. Subramaniam (*The Star*, 7 August 2009). Moreover, the government, according to Dr S. Subramaniam, has put in place “the Train and Replace [is another] training programs where the Government provides training for the local waiters to prepare them to replace foreign waiters in strategic occupations favored by locals.” The Ministry, he said, “is also identifying several occupations in view of enhancing their image, working environment, working hours and improving their wages to attract more locals to replace foreign waiters” (Keynote address by the Minister of Human Resources on key human resources development strategies in building economic resilience at the 10th National Human Resources Summit, 27 April 2009).

According to Greeberg, Mac’as, Rhodes, and Chan (2001), literacy and fluency in a foreign language is related to economic self-sufficiency. Immigrants who are literate only in a language other than English are more likely to have non-continuous employment and to earn less than those literate in English. Thus, many foreign waiters are willing to learn English as a way to improve their standard of living and to stand a chance of extending their contracts and work permits. Attending English as a second language (ESL) classes on

the job is one way for those who have problems accessing language programmes outside of work. Yet, it appears that few employers, especially in the Malaysian context, provide this opportunity due to scheduling issues, cost, perceived lack of benefit to the company, and a sense that it is not their responsibility. For immigrant and foreign waiters who have no access to language learning programs, their only option is to learn English on the job and for most waiters this immersion method has proven to be quite successful (Burt, 2003).

1.1 Objectives of the Study

According to the linguistic prospect described above, this study drew up three objectives to focus the investigation into the communication difficulties faced by the foreign waiters in Malaysia and the strategies they use to overcome some of these difficulties. The three specific objectives of this study are:

1. To determine the communication difficulties foreign waiters face upon arrival in Malaysia.
2. To identify the communicative strategies the foreign waiters used to compensate for their low language proficiency within the first month of their arrival in Malaysia.
3. To describe other methods foreign waiters use to acquire proficiency in the target second language in the absence of formal ESL instruction.

The communication difficulties investigated in Research Objective 1 refers to the difficulties they face in communicating with fellow waiters, their employers, and their customers who are neither Malaysian nor are their countrymen. As mentioned earlier, foreign waiters are often expected by their employers to function within their work environments with or without the necessary linguistic skills. Therefore, in order to retain their job, the foreign waiters resort to ad-hoc strategies that can work immediately when

communicating on the job. The identification of these strategies is the focus of Research Objective 2. Research Objective 3 seeks to identify initiatives taken by the foreign waiters to further improve their proficiency in the target languages (English and Malay) in order to fulfill the expectations of to their employers or to secure higher paying jobs after being in the host country for a longer time.

1.2 The Research Questions

In order to meet the objectives set in Section 1.1, relevant information will be obtained through the use of a set of instruments which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

The information required will be based on the following research questions:

1. What are the communication difficulties faced by foreign waiters who have limited English proficiency upon arrival in Malaysia?
2. How do the foreign waiters who have limited proficiency in English communicate on the job?
3. What methods do the foreign waiters employ to acquire further competency in the English language without accessibility to commercial language learning programs?

The description of difficulties (Research Question 1) the foreign waiters face in daily interaction with people around them when they first arrived in Malaysia will include a discussion on the miscommunications and misunderstandings resulted from the limited target language proficiency. Daily communication in the early stages would involve dealing with issues such as immigration matters, terms of employment, wages, and accommodation.

Research Question 2 will focus on the immediate alternative methods used by the waiters to overcome the language problems which they face on the job and how sufficient are those methods in helping the waiters perform their duties, and satisfying their employers so that they would be retained on their jobs. Therefore, miscommunication and misunderstandings at the work place will be highlighted to support the important role of target language proficiency. Finally, Research Question 3 will provide insights into the types of strategies foreign waiters employ more in their efforts to further improve their proficiency in the target language in order to stay employed or to be more marketable for higher paying jobs.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Understanding the communication problems faced by foreign waiters who make up a high percentage of the manpower in Malaysia is important as it can help the responsible authorities understand some consequences of breakdowns in communication, and misunderstandings due to language deficiencies. The consequences of misunderstandings due to the language problems can cause issues such as the physical abuse of maids, the non-payment of wages, and breach of basic employment contracts can be serious enough to lead to political tension between countries involved. Findings of this study will enable the researcher to suggest appropriate ways to prevent and resolve those conflicts and also help the authorities concerned to provide appropriate pre- and in-service language learning programs for foreign waiters. The findings will also add on to the existing literature on language learning strategies that support learning a foreign language in its own natural context where it is spoken. In addition, the findings of this study will add on to the existing literature on communication strategies which interlocutors may employ when they lack sufficient proficiency in the target language of communication.

1.4 Limitations of the Study

In order to be feasible, the scope of the present study had to be confined to be carried out within specific limitations. Firstly, this study focuses solely on waiters whose first language is not Bahasa Indonesia. This is because Bahasa Indonesia is a variety of the Malay language. Thus Bahasa Indonesia speakers would have some common linguistic elements that would aid understanding and hasten the acquisition of the target language. In contrast, speakers with no knowledge of Malay or Bahasa Indonesia would face more challenging difficulties in communication. Similarly, the participants are selected from those with little or no knowledge of the English language. There is a method behind limiting the participants to those who are, at the onset of this study, not able to communicate through Malay, Bahasa Indonesia or English. This will serve this study to meet its main purpose of investigating into the language learning and communication strategies of the foreign waiters observed here.

Although a larger sample size will help in increasing the reliability of the data gathered and the validity of the findings, the sample had to be kept small due to the time frame and scope of this study. Getting subjects willing to participate and cooperate is one of the initial problems faced during the observation process. In addition to that, some may not have job security and may leave at anytime during the observation process (Harding, 2009). Therefore there is a practical limit to the size of the sample engaged in this present study.

1.5 Summary

This chapter has outlined the communication problems among foreign waiters who come to Malaysia seeking employment even though they lack proficiency in the language used in host country. It sets up the background for the investigation which will involve data

obtained from real time interactions in authentic job settings. The following chapter will expand on the literature discussed in the introduction to this study in addition to other relevant literature that will help support the hypothesis on issues related to communication strategies in the job setting and the level of success in language acquisition in informal learning environments.