



The Analysis of the English Use and Barriers in Front Office in Hotels in Bali

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Abstract*

Communication is an essential element of the hospitality industry. Spoken and written communication skill is important for all hoteliers. The most important is the English skill. The significance of English skills from front office staff at hotels in Bali is a specific perception case occurring in the hospitality industry. In this case, communication skills, language skills, the willingness to understand guests' interests, and showing politeness are the leading factors in improving the quality of service. This study aimed at analyzing the function and obstacles in using English by the front office staff at hotels in Bali. Data were collected through depth interviews with the hotel front office staff. The results show that English plays an essential role in the front office for greeting and welcoming, registering, handling check-in and check-out, providing information, diplomatic agent, and problem solver. The obstacles faced in using English happening in the front office department should be minimized by providing special training to the staff. Besides, the obstacle in using English can also be solved by the collaboration between the government and educational institutions focusing on tourism study to graduate qualified students who are ready to face the real work practice and be the ones with excellent communication skills.

1. Introduction

The front office is one of the departments in a hotel playing essential roles. The important role of the front office is connecting hotel management and external parties (Wijayanti, 2019). Bagyono (2006) in his book entitle Hotel Front Office mentioned that front office is derived from English words that are front and office. Then front office can be defined as a department placed on the front side of an office or hotel. The area of the front office is the busiest in a hotel. This is

because almost all the hotel activities happen or occur in the front office department (Murdana et.al, 2017). The location where the front office is placed in a hotel is one of the departments that can be easily seen and reached by the hotel guests (Maiziva & Andri Sulistyani, 2017). Based on that matter, the front office is the crucial department in a hotel. The front office department is a medium of communication connecting the guests and all hotel departments and the hotel management. Referring to the definition of the front office, then front office staff are required to possess excellent communication skills to boost the function of the front office itself.

An excellent communication skill, both written and spoken skills, is highly needed by the front office staff to provide adequate and satisfying services to tourists or guests and other external parties. Good communication skills may lead to proper understanding and prevent misunderstanding that may occur during the communication between hotel management and guests. Specifically, communication using English is the basic skill needed by the front office staff. Damayanti (2019) stated that tourism and hospitality workers need to master English as an essential skill. In line with Damayanti (2019), Murdana et al. (2017) mentioned that English is one of the official foreign languages in the international scope used in all fields, such as the tourism sector, hospitality business, international affairs, politics, government, education, trade and business, media, and else.

According to Joseph and Munghate (n.d.), English in the tourism and hospitality sectors owns six significant roles. Those are mentioned below.

a. Communicative role

The first role of English in the tourism and hospitality sectors is being the communication medium among all the parties involved in the tourism sector and hospitality business.

b. Integrative role

English in the tourism and hospitality sectors plays the role of integrating and connecting all the people coming from different countries with different languages and cultures.

c. Lingua-franca role

This role is quite similar to the role of communication medium. English helps and eases tourists to communicate. A tourist can travel to different regions or countries, but she/he does not need to learn the languages used there since she/he masters English.

d. Relation-fostering role

English strengthens the relationship between one person to another because of the interaction and discussion that they do.

e. Economic role

Another significant role of English is in the economic field, especially business. English brings the cross-countries trading happens.

f. Functional role

English helps tourists and the local community to get the information they need.

The importance and crucial of English in the tourism sector and hospitality business requires people working in the sector of tourism to master sufficient communication skills using English, particularly for hotel staff in the front office department. Hotel staff is required to have the ability to communicate in English to give the best services to the hotel guests and make them satisfied which later will increase the revenue. English competence in tourism and hospitality sectors also affects the job placement, position, and also self-image (Damayanti, 2019).

Researches related to the use of English in the tourism and hospitality sectors as well the barriers and problems faced in using English have been discussed and conducted by some of the previous researchers. Prachanant (2012) discussed three major matters related to the use of English in the tourism and hospitality sectors which were the needs of English skills in the tourism and hospitality sectors, the function of English, and the problems in communicating

using English faced by 40 tourism workers in tour and travel agencies in Thailand. The data analyzed in the research were obtained using questionnaires. The analysis was done to find out the frequency, percentage, average, and deviation standard. The results of the analysis showed that the most needed and used English skills in tourism and hospitality sectors were speaking, then followed by listening, reading, and the last one was writing. Besides, the research also found out that the function of English that commonly used in the tourism and hospitality sectors were (1) giving information, (2) providing services, (3) offering help, (4) asking for cooperation, (5) answering questions and solving problems, and (6) general conversation. Other results were the problems of using English faced by the respondents that were (1) the difficulties in understanding guests' English accents, (2) vocabulary and expressions that were out of contexts, (3) the limitation of English vocabulary mastery, and (4) the lack of grammar competence. Those four problems represented all the English skills; speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Damayanti (2019) also investigated the significant roles of English in the tourism and hospitality sectors. The library research concluded that English plays a significant role in conducting communication in the tourism and hospitality sectors including the communication between the tourists and tourism workers and the communication for business and economic purposes. English unites all people with different backgrounds. This significant role of English causes the requirement of English communication skills for all the tourism and hospitality workers as the basic skill. The English mastery of the tourism and hospitality workers, especially the hotel staff or other business sectors in tourism also influenced the job placement, positions, and self-image.

A similar point was also researched by Khabib (2019) describing the role of English in the tourism sector. But the research was more likely to focus on higher education students. Khabib (2019) investigated the students' motivations to learn English as well as to come across the problems and difficulties experienced by the students in improving their English. Khabib (2019) revealed that students utilized the internet to explore and learn English. That is not surprising since, in this digital era, the internet provided easier access to learning for everyone. That easy access to learning through the internet leads the students to look for and find out learning sources and all information that they need which cannot be found in books or libraries. Moreover, tourism agencies and workers in the tourism and hospitality sectors do the same things in doing communicating with business partners all over the world since it is many ways easier, faster, and cheaper.

Another research related to the role of the front office had been done by Maiziva & Andri Sulistyani (2017) at Hotel Grand Zuri Pekanbaru. The research was a qualitative descriptive focusing on the roles and obstacles faced by the hotel receptionists in providing services to the hotel guests. The data of the research were gained through observation and depth interviews which lead to the conclusion. Maiziva & Andri Sulistyani (2017) found that the receptionists of Hotel Grand Zuri Pekanbaru carried out double positions as the operator, reservation agents, cashier, and information center. This was done by the hotel management to minimize and decrease the cost because the hotel management did not need to recruit new staff to fill the available positions in the front office department. The hotel receptionists experienced some problems that were lack of focus because of the concurrent works, fail to remember the basic tasks, missing the break times, problems in communication with foreign guests cause of the limited English skills. The hotel receptionist found it difficult to explain and provide information to the foreign guests when they asked them to provide the information.

Based on the previous researches, then the research was interested to provide and supply information that was still missing. This research aimed at analyzing the function and problems faced by the front office staff in doing communication using English in hotels in Bali. The data

were taken by interviewing the front office staff of three hotels in Canggu, Sanur, and Kuta. The results of the interview were transcribed and analyzed to get a comprehensive and deep conclusion.

2. Research Methods

This research was carried out using a qualitative approach, specifically using the descriptive qualitative method. Somantri (2005) stated that qualitative research is an approach in research focusing on the process, phenomena, and authenticity. The qualitative approach describes the results of research that are gained in a systematic, detailed, original, and objective way. The data used in this research were obtained through an interview, observation, as well as literature study. The interview method is a process of gaining explanations to collect information by asking and answering questions which can be done face to face and also via telecommunication media. An interview can be done by using the guidance in the form of a list of questions or without any guidance. The researcher does the interview directly with respondents to get valid and reliable data. Meanwhile, the observation method is an activity of gaining information needed to present the real pictures of an event or moment or phenomenon to answer the research questions, to understand humans' behaviors, and to evaluate or give feedback towards the measurement. The researcher commonly visits the research setting to do a direct observation.

In this study, the interview was done with three front office staff at three hotels around Canggu, Seminyak, and Sanur. The researcher was guided by an interview guide in the form of a questions list. But during the interview, the researcher added questions based on the respondents' answers. Besides using interview technique, the data was also collected through a literature study which was done by collecting relevant data from many pieces of literature, such as books and articles that were published in academic journal. The gained data then were analyzed by grouping or categorizing them into two main parts that were the functions of English and the problems faced in using English by the front office staff in hotels in Bali. The results of the analysis then were described objectively and in detail.

3. Discussions (Bold 12)

The results of the analysis are described into two main categories; the function of English in delivering the services of the front office and the problems faced by the front office staff to communicate in English.

The Function of English

One of the hotels that were being the objects of this research was Rimbun Hotel Canggu located in the Kuta area. This hotel is considered a newly established hotel since it was established in July 2019. The researcher interviewed one of the front office staff. Based on the interview, it was stated that in the front office department there are some divisions, such as receptionist, guest service agent, guest relation officer, butler, and bellboy. The respondent said:

“Yes, in the front office department, there are several divisions. There are receptionists, guest service agents, guest relation officers, butler, and bellboy. Each of us has our responsibilities.”

For some hotels, the front office department is an essential part of the accommodation or hospitality industry since it is responsible to communicate directly to the hotel guests (Yulanda & Putri, 2017). Since the big responsibility, the front office department is said as the brain or the heart and the center of all the operational activities happening in a hotel. This is supported by the statement of a respondent that can be seen below.

“In my opinion, the front office department is the brain of the hotel. If there was no front office, all the hotel activities would be stunted because the hotel guests need hotel staff to provide information and else.”

As it is mentioned by one of the informants that in the front office department there is a division namely guest relation officer or GRO who is responsible to make the hotel guests feel comfortable. Besides, the guest relations office is also responsible to provide any kind of information needed by the guests, such as when the hotel guests ask about the recommended tourist destination or booking flight tickets. In this case, the guest relation officer plays the role of information center. Then guest relations office is required to do the best and make the guests feel comfortable. Furthermore, guest relation offices should be friendly to all hotel guests.

As the information center, the guest relation office should understand all things related to the operation of the hotel as well as understand guests' needs. Based on that case, communication is needed, especially communication using English. As mentioned by Joseph and Munghate (n.d.) that one of the roles or functions of English is the communicative role/ interactive role that is being the most important role of English in the tourism and hospitality industry. English is the means of communication between tourists and those who work in the industry. When people all over the world come and visit a tourist destination, then their native languages cannot be used to communicate since it will be hard to understand by other people. In this case, English plays its role as a means of communication.

Importance of English skills is also needed by the front office staff to do check-in and check-out procedures for the hotel guests, especially foreigners. One of the respondents mentioned that the check-in procedure in a hotel is as follows.

“ It is started with a greeting as we welcome the guests. Then we ask the guests their reservation status. The next step is asking the guests to fill the registration form or guests' identity form. While waiting for the guests to fill out the form, we contact the housekeeping department to get information about the readiness of the room. If the room is not ready yet, we ask the guests to wait for a while. When it is ready, we escort them to the room. The bellboy will escort the guests to their room.”

Based on the interview quoted above, it is clearly described that the standard operating procedure that should be applied by the front office staff from the guests' arrival until the guests reach their room. Those procedures require adequate English skills as the means of communication between the hotel guests and the front office staff. It started from the beginning is welcoming and greeting the guests in which the front office staff needs to be friendly, polite, and attractive. In this process, the front office staff should welcome and greet the guests using English. That is why English skills are needed to make the best first impression in the guests' hearts and first impressions commonly are the most memorable moments for the guests. If the front office staff welcomes and greets the guests with broken and impolite English then it will create a bad impression leading to a bad brand image.

After that, the front office staff should proceed with the registration process in which the front office staff should perform the procedure of registration including deciding the room for the guests to stay in, the prices, and ensuring the payment method. In this stage, excellent English reading skill is needed. The front office staff should be able to read English texts on the guests' documents, such as passport, hotel booking, itinerary (if any), as well the hotel brochure and sources (types of rooms, payment method, payment status, and else). A mistake in understanding English texts may lead to the hotel operational badly. An example is when the front office staff does not understand the payment status, it will be a problem if the guests have checked in without any deposit of payment. Based on that matter, the front office staff should be able to read and understand English texts as well as be familiar with the terminologies commonly used in settling

payment to prevent any errors or making a wrong decision. Take an example, the terminology of pay at the hotel, pay by the travel agent, and deposit that need understanding.

After checking in, the front office staff should monitor the guests' activities during their stay since the hotel is responsible for the hotel guests' needs during their stay. All the hotel staff, especially the front office staff should be able to respect the guests including respecting their needs and even their problems and complaints as mentioned by the respondent of the interview.

“Skill that should be mastered in the tourism industry is helpful and respectful. So we need to be ready to help and provide things that the guests need. Besides, we also respect all the guests' complaints. We should not get mad at the guests when they complain to you.”

It can be seen that the role and function of English in the front office department is used to solve the guests' problems and complaints (Yulanda & Putri, 2017). That is a common practice for the front office department to deal with the guests' complaints. When dealing with the guests' complaints, the front office staff should master adequate English listening skills. Each guest comes from a different country with a different English accent and pronunciation. This is when the front office staff's English skill is needed. Besides, they should also be able to provide a diplomatic answer which then the front office department plays its function as the diplomatic agent. This means that the front office staff should perform diplomatic actions to maintain the mood and tension of the guests. The diplomatic skill of the front office staff should be supported by adequate or even excellent English skills. It will be trouble when the front office staff is not able to understand the guests' complaints because the front office staff will not be able to provide and offer the proper solution. It also affects the hotel's brand image. That is why the front office staff is required to master English skill that is not only able to understand formal language, but also informal language, including slang.

Problems Faced in Using English

There must be a lot of problems faced during the hotel operation's daily activities, especially in terms of communication. Verbal communication skills affect people's quality of work. Good verbal communication, according to Soenardi (2011: 8) is divided into four skills that are listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Soenardi (2011: 8) stated that listening is a skill to understand uttered by other people in the forms of words, phrases, sentences, or discourse, such as spoken talks, speech, lecture, etc. Speaking skill refers to an indicator of verbal communication quality including English skills. This skill is affected by self-confidence to talk and speak naturally, honestly, appropriately, and responsibly by putting away the negative feelings, such as being shy to talk and speak. Speaking skill is a skill to express thoughts and opinions with sounds of language and words in the complete language arrangement, such as phrases, sentences, and other spoken communication forms. Speaking is one of the four English skills; listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Speaking skill is the ability to produce sounds to express thoughts, opinions, feelings, and desires to other people.

The problems that are commonly faced by the front office staff in communicating using English are as follows.

- a. The front office staff cannot control the guests' speed in talking or speaking. The front office staff cannot catch up with the guests' messages.
- b. The front office staff does have any chance to repetition to the guests to clarify their talks.
- c. The front office staff is not able to recognize and understand the “signs” made by the guests that make the front office staff does not get the meaning. For example, when the guests ask a question, the front office staff thinks that the guests explaining. This is a big communication problem between the front office staff and the guests.

- d. The front office staff is not able to interpret the messages uttered by the guests well so misinterpretation is raising.
- e. The front office staff is not able to stay focused for some reasons.

The problems faced by the front office staff in using English to communicate with the guests are caused by limited opportunities to use English. This is because the front office manager prioritizes the staff who have the ability to speak English fluently to deal with the guests. So the front office staff with limited English skills do not get the opportunities to communicate using English. Moreover, the front office staff is not confident in talking and speaking in English since they are afraid of making grammatical errors. They think that making a grammatical error is a big mistake.

Sometimes, the hotel guests use slang or idioms to talk and it becomes a great challenge for the front office staff to understand. The front office staff finds it difficult to understand slang, idioms, and other informal forms of language. Since then, the front office staff should learn slang, idioms, and other informal forms of language because the hotel guests often use them in daily conversation. By mastering both formal and informal, the front office staff can communicate with the hotel guest in a friendly situation.

4. Novelities

Based on the results of the data analysis, that were found out that problems faced by the front office staff when delivering services to the hotel guests. It can be concluded that the greatest challenge faced by the front office staff is the limited opportunities for them to practice and communicate using English when talking to the hotel guests. That is the novelty of the of this research.

5. Conclusion

English mastery for the front office staff is an essential and basic skill. The front office staff should be able to communicate using foreign languages, especially English since the front office staff is the one responsible for dealing and communicating with hotel guests coming from all over the world with different native languages. Based on that fact, the front office staff should master excellent English including the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. English as the international language is essentially needed in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Excellent English skill helps the front office staff to conduct communication with the hotel guests and provide the best services. It affects the desires of the guests to come back and stay in the hotel because they feel comfortable and satisfied with the services. Excellent English skill also helps the front office staff to run the daily operational works smoothly.

The problems that are commonly faced by the front office staff in communicating using English are related to the confidence to communicate using English that can be overcome with a lot of practice. The front office staff should not be shy or afraid to communicate using English since the English skill will improve as it is used. The greatest challenge in communicating using English is the difficulties in understanding the idioms and slang uttered by the guests. To overcome that challenge, the front office staff is suggested to listening to TV, broadcasting, talk show more often. Another challenge faced is the limited opportunities for the front office staff to use English in communication. The suggested solution is practicing English skills with friends or co-workers and when there is an opportunity to use them, the front office staff is ready.

Based on the importance of English skills in the tourism and hospitality sectors, then the society, government, and educational institutions in the tourism field need to prepare the outputs with high competence and excellent English skill. The collaboration among government, tourism and hospitality stakeholders, and educational institutions plays a significant role in developing

regulations on the improvement of the quality of tourism and hospitality human resources which will lead to growth and development of the industry. Besides, the tourism and hospitality stakeholders need to conduct training for staff to improve their English knowledge and skills.

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