

Analyzing the Training and Internship Needs Assessment of Verbal Communication Skills amongst Hotel Practitioners

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Abstract

There is a need to expose the learners in the hospitality industry to real workplace requirement in terms of communication skills. In view of its importance, human resource managers, researchers and educators in the field of hospitality management or the hotel practitioners have to pay more serious attention to it. Thus, it is pertinent that both employers and potential employees have a consensus on what are to be instilled in the learners as this would prepare them for the actual hotel reception practices which in particular are the verbal communication skills. A needs analysis in the form of a questionnaire, distributed to the hotel managers and the interns involved help to identify the verbal communication skills that the interns require. These findings will also assist the curriculum designers in producing future hotel management professionals that can function effectively at their workplace.

Keywords: Communicative activities, Employees' needs, Employers' expectations, Hotel management Professionals.

1. Literature Review

In this era, travelling has prompted the hospitality industry to soar rapidly. With this development, communication skills cannot afford to be a means to hamper any form of discourse that may take place between the tourists or hotel occupants and the hosts played by the hoteliers, resulting in a profit loss. The requirement of communication skills and the ability to speak and write effectively in English are given prominence in this sector. Hence, it is of great significance that the hospitality language which entails the verbal communication skills of the hotel management professionals be looked into.

Meanwhile, Richardson (2008) explored undergraduate tourism and hospitality student's views of the industry as a career choice. In their view, the tourism and hospitality industry worldwide is facing the problem of attracting and retaining quality employees which has led to a shortage of skilled personnel and staff. Many different contributing factors have led to this problem. One of the problems as Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) stated is that most of the interactions between customers or clients and the hotel practitioners are in the form of face to face exchange and therefore the standard of service provided is of a main concern due to the exchanges made. As such, in view of its importance, students who are likely to pursue career in tourism and hospitality work-force must come into realization that communicative skills are seen vital to the work force.

There are also reports of many tourism and hospitality management graduates who have failed to enter the industry upon graduation (Richardson, 2008). Thus, such failures must be justified and it is of the interest of this study to actually look into what has triggered the mismatch between the tourism and hospitality aspirants and those industry players. Is it due to the fact that their poor communication skills have hampered them from being employed in this industry? This scenario leads to the facts that will perhaps justify the failure to meet the tourism and hospitality industry expectations.

Effective communication skills are highly needed in the hospitality industry. In a research carried out by the Educational Institute of the American Hotels and Motels Association in 1996, it was found that: "Training could most

improve the front office department, followed by the food/beverage service and housekeeping departments. Forty-four percent of respondents cited the front office department as the 'first priority' to receive training. These findings showed that competence in human relation/guest relation is considered the most important area that requires training".

Although this finding is based on a research conducted in the United States of America, it is safe to say that such training skills are important to hotels in Malaysia (Chan, 2002). Thus, for many Malaysians graduate students it is important to acquire adequate "soft" skills, particularly communication skills (in English) that will make them more employable, in addition to technical skills, since these skills are generally expected to be acquired at Higher Education institutions.

Therefore, this paper is concerned with the verbal communication skills of the interns who are potential employees of the hotel. More often than not, the potential hotel- post holders have been criticized for their lack of such skills despite the good technical knowledge they might have been imparted with during their classes. Technical knowledge is fundamental and its importance cannot be disputed, as this forms the general basis from which hoteliers work. However, technical knowledge alone does not distinguish the best graduate student from the rest.

In addition to this, as cited in Azizan (2007) Deputy Human Resources Minister Datuk Abdul Rahman Bakar states that it is this lack of soft skills such as communication skills, problem solving and team work skills which are largely responsible for the difficulty faced by some 90,000 young people in finding employment in Malaysia. Therefore, it is obvious that communication skills are complementary to the hard, technical skills and are an advantage to any graduate seeking employment. This is especially true in the case of potential employees occupying the hospitality industry as the desired attributes of being conversant and able to carry out verbal-related tasks effectively would cater to the industry's needs. According to Mehta & Mehta (2007) recent research on communication skills suggested that good communication skills are the keys to unlock the doors of success. Mehta & Mehta (2007) suggested that good communication skills are seen as vital and an added advantage. Any business organization will perceive professionals having strong hold on communication skills as an asset (Figure 1).

Although this Venn diagram is the guideline for engineering discipline, it is also applicable to social science discipline as the basic of communication comprises oral, written and non-verbal skills. This includes the ability to deliver to a given audience, using appropriate styles and approaches, and an understanding of the importance of non-verbal cues in oral communication. Oral communication requires the background skills of presenting, audience awareness, critical listening and body language.

Recently a great deal of emphasis has been placed on Needs Analysis for occupation- specific purposes. English For Occupational Purposes (EOP) can be defined as the portion of the curriculum which prepares students for gainful employment in occupation ranging from low-skilled to sophisticated jobs in technical field (Stapa and Jais, 2005). EOP focuses on fulfilling the demand for workers by providing specific job training and skills through content based instruction activities in order to enhance basic skills development.

Thus, in order to gauge the relevance of such skills, it is necessary that a needs analysis is conducted on not only the students but also their future employees. This kind of analysis that is propagated by Robinson (1991), as cited in Suzana (2005) highlights the importance of conducting a target-situation analysis (TSA) apart from a present-situation analysis (PSA) since the merge of two analysis would provide a better picture of the learners' language requirements in relation to the targeted situation as well as providing the learners' proficiency level and their current language requirements at the beginning of a language program.

Some might argue that giving a narrow focus as opposed to a broad one as an aspect concentrated on an ESP course would only result in the students being restricted to function well only under a narrow context. However, it is vital that they are able to use the language that is familiar to their workplace environment and specific to their discipline since the lack of skills would only affect their performance. In fact, Kaur (2007) in analyzing the needs of language for a group of language learners acknowledged that narrowing the scope of language content resulted in a positive feedback from the learners themselves as they are contented that their wants and needs are fulfilled at the end of the program.

Chien, Lien and Kao (2008) noted that a successful ESP practitioner is responsible at providing the necessity and relevant background in the subject field, especially on some subjects totally different from English such as science and technology, so as to offer learners a successful and beneficial course. According to Harvey (1984), the target situation analyses are perceived as necessary because, "it (is) by analyzing the activities the learner (will) be required to perform in the foreign language that the course designer is able to determine the kinds of language and language related skills the students (need) to be trained in" This is further supported by Chan (2002), "assessing needs in the single most important step in designing human resource development efforts". An important part of

needs assessment is finding out what skills, content (subject -matter) and attitudes necessary for an employee to successfully carry out his job are lacking. Job information can be obtained by breaking down a job into discrete units of activity. This is noted as task analysis. Through the task analysis, the researcher or the training designer will be able to obtain specific information on what an employee has to do in order to perform his job well, following which the skills knowledge and other competencies can be specified.

On a recent development, Brunton (2009) puts forward the idea that needs analysis which highlights the perceived needs and wants and realistic or desired wants is very much fundamental to English classes of today and as such, there are bound to be mismatches of expectations and ideals among the wants of the students, instructor/s and stakeholders. This is further supported by Kaur and Clarke (2009) who pointed out that Human Resource employees are also responsible in providing training and development programme at the workplaces and thus, they are expected to be highly proficient in the language to ease communication in and outside workplace. In other words, it is pertinent that these stakeholders' views are taken into consideration in outlining a more suitable language programme for the future hotel employees particularly, the hotel front office assistants.

In fact, it is utmost important that the learners are made to be involved in the actual process of learning the language as based on a research conducted by Cowling (2007), he stated that students' explanation on their needs or wants of a certain language programme include the fact that their interests were hampered due to very little opportunities they had to actually use English language at work. Moreover, they did not seem to know what their business English needs are at present or in the future since the students themselves were not made aware of what actually constitutes a business English course they had to go through.

Therefore, it is vital that the interns' lacks, needs and wants of the language in the area of verbal communication skills are identified since they require such skills to function effectively at their workplace. As such, this study aims to investigate the verbal communication skills needs of the hotel front office assistants in relevance to their workplace requirement based on the perceptions of the interns and the Hotel Managers who supervised them.

2. Research objectives

This study aims to investigate the verbal communication skills needs of the hotel front office assistants in relevance to their workplace requirement based on the perceptions of the interns and the Hotel Managers who supervised them and what has triggered the mismatch between the tourism and hospitality aspirants and in the industry.

3. Research methodology

The research is designed by adapting the questionnaires from Chan (1998). The questionnaire was in the form of a needs-analysis survey and this was distributed to hotel managers in Penang where the interns have undergone their internship. In addition, the interns also were given a set of questionnaire in gauging their lacks and needs of verbal communication skills in their future profession.

3.1 Sampling design

The two sets of respective questionnaire were distributed to 12 managers and 30 interns who were attached at the hotels in Penang. These managers would have served the industry for a minimum of 8 to 10 years. The interns, having had 3 semesters of English Proficiency courses and a semester of English occupational purposes were then placed in the internship programme which takes them away from the university for the entire semester.

3.2 Research instruments

The sets of questionnaire were prepared in two sets which are meant for the managers (Set 1) and the interns (Set 2). Both sets comprise of two parts whereby the first part is designed to obtain some information about the respondents whereas the second part is constructed to gain information about the relevance and ability of the interns in verbal communication skills.

The items sought to identify the relevance of job related tasks which are exemplified in the form verbal communication skills of a front office assistant from the perception of both the managers and interns. Moreover, the ability of each intern in those skills were also assessed and rated by the managers and the interns.

3.3 Research design

In the questionnaire, the hotel managers were asked to assess the importance of verbal communication skills. They were asked to rate on a four- Likert scale with the following descriptors: "Least proficient", "Slightly proficient", "Mostly proficient" and "Completely proficient" which the researchers have conveniently labeled and categorized them into two discrete levels of ability; the low and high ability for the purpose of presenting the data. It should be noted however that the descriptors defined as "Low ability" would suggest that the interns do require full training as

compared to the high ability level which would suggest that only general/refresher training is required of them to undergo.

In addition to this, the questionnaire also sought to elicit responses in the forms of perceived ideas of the interns' verbal communication skills themselves. It is also the aim of the questionnaire to seek responses from hotel managers on the role and value of verbal communication skills in hotel management in order to gain some insight into their views on this important matter. Moreover, the managers were also asked to rate the interns' ability and the relevance of the skills to the front office assistants. They were asked to rate on a three- Likert scale with the following descriptors namely "Not Relevant", "Somewhat Relevant", "Very Relevant". Similarly, the interns are also given questionnaires that require them to indicate their awareness on how relevant the verbal communication skills are to their potential employment.

3.4 Data analysis

The analyses from the questionnaire were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 12.0. The frequency count and percentage were recorded the main statistical in this study.

4. Results

4.1 Managers' rate and view on the needs of communication skills for Hotel Front Office assistants (FOA)

4.1.1 Managers' rate of intern's ability in verbal communication skills

With reference to table 1, majority of the managers, 91.6% indicated interns showed a low ability in these 3 VCS which are arranging and informing guests of transport arrangements, entertaining VIP guests and explaining hotel procedures and hotel policies to guests. 67% of managers reported that conducting tours of hotel facilities as the interns' high ability.

4.1.2 Managers' view of the importance of Verbal communication Skills for Hotel Front Office Assistants

Based on table 2, 75% to 83% of the respondents viewed 4 skills as very relevant, which are answering customer enquiries, explaining difficulties / problems arising from work to manager, discussing ways to improve customer service with manager and discussing work –related matters.

There are at least 8 skills that are deemed not relevant by the respondent the percentage of those with similar view is very low; whereby only 1 to 4 respondents indicated as such. Some of these skills are arranging and informing guest of transport arrangements, entertaining VIP guests, answering customer enquiries on food or beverage orally, answering enquiries on fire escape route in the hotel, answering enquiries on local establishments like shops, tourist, attractions, banks, and answering enquiries on local cultures.

4.2 The interns' Rate and View on their ability in Verbal Communication Skills

4.2.1 The interns' rate on the relevance of verbal communication skills to the Hotel Front Office Assistants

Based on Table 3, the interns perceived that they possess a high ability in 5 out of 15 verbal skills listed as compared to their poor ability in the rest of the verbal skills. The highest percentage which is 66.7% lies in the task of presenting ideas at meetings with managers, indicating the interns' lower ability in this skill.

4.2.2 The interns' rate on the relevance of verbal communication skills to the Hotel Front Office Assistants

Based on Table 4, 60% of the respondents indicated that answering enquiries on fire escape route in the hotel as one of the highly relevant skills. The majority of interns viewed that all the VCS are very relevant to their future employment. The interns reported that there are certain skills that they think are not required of their profession. These can be seen in the 33.3 % number of respondents who indicated the irrelevance of acquiring some of these skills i.e. answering customer enquiries on room rates orally, answering customer enquiries on food or beverage, answering enquiries on fire escape route in the hotel as well as presenting ideas at meetings.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that the possibility of being underexposed to these communicative tasks in their classroom could have resulted in a majority of the managers' agreeing that these interns possess a low ability in the verbal communication skills especially where it involves a wider range of skills. An explanation to this is that these interns are not able to practice these skills except when they are on their internship.

There are some agreements in the choice of relevance for the verbal communication skills listed among the two different groups of respondents. The need to perform job related tasks such as listening to customers' enquiries, explaining hotel procedures and giving an oral report are just some of the common skills required in the hotel industry, to cite a few. In responding to customers or hotel guests, there are certain skills that the interns have to improve on as well as while communicating in tasks dealing with co-workers and managers.

On the other hand, the explanation behind the high number of interns are in agreement regarding the high relevance of many communicative activities could be due to the fact that they have had to deal with hotel guests in English language and in doing so, they have to not only answer questions put forward to them but also explain hotel procedures and policies apart from providing relevant answers to enquiries made by the hotel guests on local cultures or even local establishments in the vicinity. As such, the short stint of being an intern has succeeded in providing them such experience.

Another reason to why these interns do require such skills is due to the fact that their profession often necessitates them to be interacting with supervisors, peers and subordinates. These activities include discussing with these people work-related matters, giving oral reports to their employers apart from discussing ways to improve customer service and work efficiency with the hotel managers. In short, much as they are aware of the relevance of each skill, they seem to differ in the opinion from the managers. This goes on to suggest that these interns have to be further exposed to such job-based communicative activities and the level of exposure has to be taken into consideration when the university is training and preparing them for the industry.

In short, the results also indicated that these interns still lack the knowledge in identifying which skills are highly relevant to their future profession since most of their views do not really coincide with those of the managers' in terms of the high relevance of VCS.

6. Conclusion

It can be seen that there are some mismatches between the skills that are required for the profession and the ability of the interns. The interns seem to view that they are of a higher ability in at least five skills, despite the view of the hotel managers who seem to think otherwise. The lacks and needs of the interns have to be fulfilled to match the tourism and hospitality management industry requirement. Therefore, it is vital to encompass all groups such as students, faculty and staff in a university setting and evaluate their views when assessing students' academic language needs as each group may have different views (Zhu and Flaitz, 2005).

There is a need to accommodate the lacks and needs of these interns in the language courses offered by university, thus, balancing ESP and general English language proficiency for students to ensure maximum effectiveness of the move from learning to real-life situations in preparing them for an effective workplace. It is quite surprising since these are the basic core business involved and part and parcel of the communication skills of their profession. As such, these misconstrued perceptions need to be corrected.

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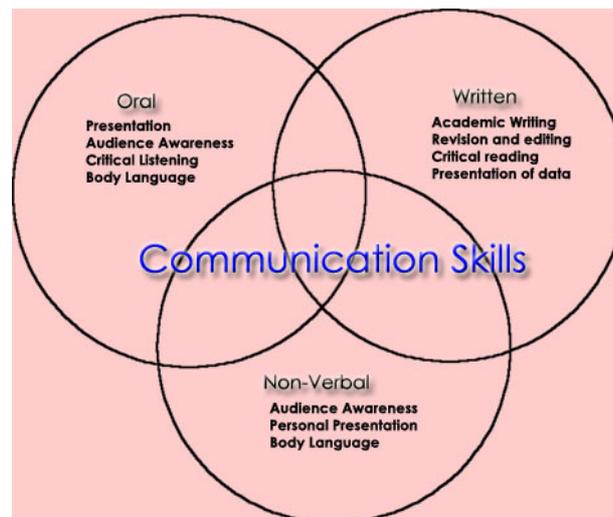


Figure 1. Venn diagram of Good Communication Skills by Mehta and Mehta 2007

Table 1. Managers' Rate of Intern's Ability in Verbal Communication Skills

	LOW ABILITY		HIGH ABILITY		Total	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Conduct tours of hotel facilities	4	33.3%	8	66.7%	12	(100.0%)
Arrange & Inform guests of transport arrangements	11	91.6 %	1	8.3%	12	(100.0%)
Entertain VIP guests	11	91.6%	1	8.3%	12	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on room rates orally (in person or through the telephone)	7	58.3%	5	41.7%	12	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on food or beverage orally (in person or through the telephone)	6	50%	6	50%	12	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on hotel facilities orally (in person or through the telephone)	6	50%	6	50%	12	(100.0%)
Answer enquiries on fire escape route in the hotel	6	50%	6	50%	12	(100.0%)
Answer enquiries on local establishments like shops, tourist, attractions, banks etc	7	58.3%	5	41.7%	12	(100.0%)
Answer enquiries on local cultures	7	58.3%	5	41.7%	12	(100.0%)
Explain hotel procedures and hotel policies to guests	11	91.6%	1	8.3 %	12	(100.0%)
Present ideas at meetings with managers	8	66.7%	4	33.3%	12	(100.0%)
Discuss work –related matters with managers	8	66.7%	4	33.3%	12	(100.0%)
Give an oral report regarding work matters to employers	10	83.4%	2	16.6%	12	(100.0%)
Discuss ways to improve customer service with manager	7	58.3%	5	41.7%	12	(100.0%)
Discuss ways to improve work efficiency with manager	9	75%	3	25%	12	100.0%

Table 2. Managers' view of the importance of Verbal communication Skills for Hotel Front Office Assistants

	NOT RELEVANT		SOMEWHAT RELEVANT		VERY RELEVANT		Total	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Conduct tours of hotel facilities			6	50%	6	50%	12	(100.0%)
Arrange & Inform guests of transport arrangements	1	8.3%	7	58.3%	4	33.3%	12	(100.0%)
Entertain VIP guests	1	8.3%	3	25%	8	66.7%	12	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on room rates orally (in person or through the telephone)			6	50%	6	50%	12	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on food or beverage orally (in person or through the telephone)	2	16.7%	5	41.7%	5	41.7%	12	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on hotel facilities orally (in person or through the telephone)			3	25%	9	75%	12	(100.0%)
Answer enquiries on fire escape route in the hotel	4	33.3%	2	16.7%	6	50%	12	100.0%
Answer enquiries on local establishments like shops, tourist, attractions, banks etc	3	25%	6	50%	3	25%	12	100.0%
Answer enquiries on local cultures	2	16.7%	5	41.7%	5	41.7%	12	100.0%
Explain hotel procedures and hotel policies to guests			4	33.3%	8	66.7%	12	100.0%
Present ideas at meetings with managers			4	33.3%	8	66.7%	12	100.0%
Discuss work –related matters with managers			4	33.3%	8	66.7%	12	100.0%
Give an oral report regarding work matters to employers			6	50%	6	50%	12	100.0%
Discuss ways to improve customer service with manager	1	8.3%	1	8.3%	10	83.3%	12	100.0%
Discuss ways to improve work efficiency with manager			5	41.7%	7	58.3%	12	100.0%
Present ideas at meetings with managers			4	33.3%	8	66.7%	12	100.0%
Explain difficulties / problems arising from work to manager			3	25%	9	75%	12	100.0%
Describe graphs /charts at meetings			5	41.7%	7	58.3%	12	100.0%
Discuss work related matters	1	8.3%	1	8.3%	10	83.3%	12	100.0%

Table 3. The Interns' Perception on their ability in Verbal Communication Skills

	LOW ABILITY		HIGH ABILITY		Total	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Conduct tours of hotel facilities	11	36.7%	19	63.3%	30	(100.0%)
Arrange & Inform guests of transport arrangements	17	56.7%	13	43.3%	30	(100.0%)
Entertain VIP guests	18	60%	12	40%	30	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on room rates orally (in person or through the telephone)	11	36.7%	19	63.3%	30	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on food or beverage orally (in person or through the telephone)	16	53.3%	14	46.7%	30	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on hotel facilities orally (in person or through the telephone)	17	56.7%	13	43.3%	30	(100.0%)
Answer enquiries on fire escape route in the hotel	14	46.7%	16	53.3%	30	(100.0%)
Answer enquiries on local establishments like shops, tourist, attractions, banks etc	12	40%	18	60%	30	(100.0%)
Answer enquiries on local cultures	19	63.3%	11	36.7%	30	(100.0%)
Explain hotel procedures and hotel policies to guests	20	66.7%	10	33.3%	30	(100.0%)
Present ideas at meetings with managers	20	66.7%	10	33.3%	30	(100.0%)
Discuss work –related matters with managers	18	60%	12	40%	30	(100.0%)
Give an oral report regarding work matters to employers	20	66.7%	10	33.3%	30	(100.0%)
Discuss ways to improve customer service with manager	20	66.7%	10	33.3%	30	(100.0%)
Discuss ways to improve work efficiency with managers	18	60%	12	40%	30	100.0%

Table 4. The Interns' rate on the relevance of verbal communication skills to the Hotel Front Office Assistants

	NOT RELEVANT		SOMEWHAT RELEVANT		VERY RELEVANT		Total	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Conduct tours of hotel facilities	5	16.6 %	11	36.7%	14	46.7%	30	(100.0%)
Arrange & Inform guests of transport arrangements	4	13.3%	9	30%	17	56.7%	30	(100.0%)
Entertain VIP guests	7	23.3%	11	36.7%	12	40%	30	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on room rates orally (in person or through the telephone)	10	33.3%	9	30%	11	36.7%	30	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on food or beverage orally (in person or through the telephone)	10	33.3%	8	26.7%	12	40%	30	(100.0%)
Answer customer enquiries on hotel facilities orally (in person or through the telephone)	5	16.7%	10	33.3%	15	50%	30	(100.0%)
Answer enquiries on fire escape route in the hotel	4	13.3%	8	26.7%	18	60%	30	(100.0%)
Answer enquiries on local establishments like shops, tourist, attractions, banks etc	10	33.3%	6	20%	14	46.7%	30	(100.0%)
Answer enquiries on local cultures	9	30%	9	30%	12	40%	30	(100.0%)
Explain hotel procedures and hotel policies to guests	5	16.6%	11	36.7%	14	46.7	30	(100.0%)
Present ideas at meetings with managers	8	26.7%	7	23.3%	15	50%	30	(100.0%)
Discuss work –related matters with managers	10	33.3%	10	33.3%	10	33.3%	30	(100.0%)
Give an oral report regarding work matters to employers	5	16.7%	11	36.7%	14	46.7%	30	(100.0%)
Discuss ways to improve customer service with manager	8	26.7%	7	23.3%	15	50%	30	(100.0%)
Discuss ways to improve work efficiency with managers	7	23.3%	11	16.7%	12	40%	30	(100.0%)