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English Language Communication Training Needs of Front Office Assistants of Hotels in Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract

In this study, English language communication training needs of Front Office Assistants were identified and described. Eight hotels of 4-star and 5-star rating in Kuala Lumpur participated in the survey, from which a total of 44 Front Office Assistants and 26 Managers responded. The main aim of the study was to determine which areas of job-based communicative activities deserve emphasis in a training programme for Front Office assistants. Also, the difference in perceptions between the Front Office Assistants and their managers regarding the training needs was explored. Data were collected via needs assessment questionnaire which requested a rating by the respondents of the proficiency level of Front Office Assistants on 35 communicative activities, and the relevance of these activities to the job of Front Office Assistant. The result was a description of the English language communication training needs of the subjects comprising the degree of training need for each communicative activity and the rank order of the activities according to training importance.

Introduction

The hotel industry is one that requires employees to be skilled in providing customer service through the medium of English. To do this effectively, an employee, especially one who has constant contact with customers, has to be competent in English language communication skills. In a research conducted by the Educational Institute of the American Hotels and Motels Association, 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.

Overall, guest service/relations training was most frequently cited as the training topic that would be most beneficial to employees, followed by leadership/supervision and sales/marketing.

These findings showed that competence in human relations/guest relations is considered the most important competency area that requires training. Although this survey was conducted in the U.S., it is safe to assume that such relationship building skills are just as important to hotels in Malaysia. For many hotels in Malaysia, the fact that guest relations are mainly facilitated through the English language, which is a second language in Malaysia, compounds the challenges of training in this area. A preliminary survey confirmed that the hotels in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) felt that it has become necessary to consider providing training to their front line employees in the area of English language communication skills, which are essential for upgrading the quality of customer service.

The aim of this study was to describe the English language communication training needs of Front Office Assistants (FOAs) of hotels in Kuala Lumpur. The hotels targeted were those in the 4-star and 5-star category. The main objectives were to:

1. Determine the relevance of 35 communicative activities to the job of FOA, as perceived by the FOAs and their managers.
2. Determine the proficiency levels of the FOAs in carrying out the 35 communicative activities in English, as perceived by the FOAs and their managers.
3. Derive the rank order of the 35 communicative activities according to training importance.
4. Compare the difference in perceptions between the FOAs and their managers as regards the relevance of the communicative activities and the proficiency levels of the FOAs.

Conceptual Framework

To ensure that training programmes planned are relevant to the needs of the sponsoring organisation (employer) as well as the training participant (employee), information on organisational, job, and employee training needs should be obtained and analysed. The process of obtaining and analysing these needs is called training needs assessment. According to Sredl and Rothwell (1987), “assessing needs is the single most important step in designing human resource development efforts.” It is the basis of all subsequent efforts in designing a training programme to avoid money being wasted in misdirected 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 (Fleishman and Quaintance, 1984, in Sredl and Rothman, 1987; Deden-Parker, 1980; Taylor and Lewe, 1990). This approach is commonly known as task analysis. Jobs are broken down into tasks, which are “discrete behaviours that could be objectively assessed and specifically taught” (Deden-Parker, 1980). Through task analysis, 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.

In corporate language training, job-related English language communication training falls within the domain of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which is essentially the teaching of language and communication skills for a specific vocational or academic purpose (Munby, 1978; Graham and Beardsley, 1986). Proponents of ESP, including Roe (1993), Munby (1978), Hutchinson and Waters (1987), and others have pointed out that the first step in any ESP programme is doing an analysis of learners’ needs. Approaches to English language needs analysis are many and varied, but ideas from the communicative school of thought seem to converge on the idea that analyzing what the learner has to do/perform in English is of paramount importance. This variable to be studied has been called the “communicative event” and “communicative activity”.

The language training designer is interested in the communication aspect of the employee’s job and tasks. He is interested to find out what communicative activities involving the use of English the employee has to participate in while performing his job. Adopting the same concept of breaking down a macro job into its smaller units of its component tasks, the job and tasks are analysed for communicative events which are then broken down into communicative activities. Thus, the communicative activities are essentially derived from the actual tasks the learner/employee is engaged in while carrying out his job.

Method

Twelve hotels were randomly selected from a list of 23 hotels in the 4-star and 5-star category, out of which eight agreed to participate. 44 Front Office Assistants (FOAs), the subjects of this study, and 26 managers of the Front Office department of the 8 hotels returned the questionnaire. The rate of return was 66.7% for hotels, 86.9% for managers, and 68.8% for FOAs.

The FOAs were clerical level employees, reporting to the Front Office manager. They were also supervised by the assistant managers and duty managers.

The two groups of respondents rated the relevance of 35 communicative activities to the job of FOA on a three-point scale. Also, the FOAs rated their own proficiency in carrying out the activities in English, while the managers rated the FOAs' proficiency as a group. In addition to that, the respondents ranked the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) according to importance to the job of FOA. They also indicated in which language skills the FOAs should be trained in, should training be offered.

Table 1: Most important language skills for the job of FOA

Language skill	FOAs n=44 Percent	Managers n=26 Percent
Listening	46.3	65.3
Speaking	53.7	30.4
Reading	0	4.3
Writing	0	0

Table 2: Second most important language skill for the job of FOA

Language skill	FOAs n=44 Percent	Managers n=26 Percent
Listening	38.5	28.0
Speaking	43.6	64.0
Reading	5.1	4.0
Writing	12.8	4.0

Findings and Discussion

The four language skills

As expected, the respondents indicated that the aural-oral skills were most relevant to the job of FOA, followed by reading, and lastly, writing (Tables 1 and 2). Also, the respondents indicated listening and speaking as the main skills to be emphasised in training, if training were to be offered to the FOAs. However, many respondents (FOAs and managers) also chose writing as a skill to be emphasised (Table 3). This was an unexpected result, as writing was ranked as unimportant to the job of FOA. Although further investigation is needed to ascertain the reason for this "interest" in writing, a possible reason could be that the respondents view training not only as a means to improve skills for a current job, but also as a means to prepare for a future job (career development). In order to rise to supervisory and managerial positions, proficiency in writing would be of great help. This result has important implications for the training designer, as learners' communication needs and wishes which may or may not be related to their jobs, play a vital role in their motivation to learn (Yalden 1987). In a language learning environment especially, job-related "needs" must be balanced with learners' "wants" as this may play a crucial role in determining the success or failure of a language training programme.

Table 3: Skills to be emphasised in training for FOAs

Language skill	FOAs n=44 Percent	Managers n=26 Percent
Listening	45.5	80.8
Speaking	72.2	88.5
Reading	36.4	38.5
Writing	59.1	57.7

Table 4: Activities that are low in relevance to the job of FOA

Item no.	Communicative activity	Mean (FOAs) n=44	Mean (Managers) n=26
9	Answer customer enquiries on food and beverage by letter, e-mail or fax	38.5	28.0
16	Respond to complaints on food and beverage	43.6	64.0
30	Describe charts and graphs at meetings	5.1	4.0

(note: 0 = not relevant, 0.5 = somewhat relevant, 1 = very relevant)

Relevance of communicative activities to the job

By assigning weighted scores to the responses for each communicative activity, the mean score for each activity was computed and compared. The results showed that both the respondent groups felt that the activities, with the exception of three (Table 4), were relevant to the job of FOA. This showed that the activities in the questionnaire were clearly job-related.

A Student-t test of significance showed that the managers' responses differed significantly from the FOAs' on three activities (Table 5). Two of these activities had to do with communicating matters related to safety, and one had to do with reporting problems and difficulties. These activities (especially the first two) are low frequency but important activities. As the notion of "relevance" would include both the notions of "frequency" and "importance", it may seem that the managers had given more consideration to the "importance" aspect, while the FOAs had placed more emphasis on the "frequency" aspect.

Proficiency level

It was found that out of the 35 communicative activities, the FOAs rated themselves as "requiring further training" (having low proficiency) for 12 activities (Table 6). The managers on the other hand, felt the FOA's required further training in 27 activities (Table 7). The 12 activities selected by the FOAs were within the list selected by the managers.

Table 5: Activities whose means for relevance to job differed significantly between the FOAs and the managers' groups

Item no.	Communicative activity	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean (FOAs) n=44	Mean (Managers) n=26
12	Answer enquiries on fire escape route in the hotel	0.0008	0.65	0.87
22	Listen to managers' explanation on safety precautions	0.031	0.82	0.94
29	Explain difficulties/ problems arising from work to managers	0.015	0.80	0.94

(note: 0 = not relevant, 0.5 = somewhat relevant, 1 = very relevant)

Table 6: Communicative activities with means of 0.5 and above for proficiency level, obtained from the managers' responses

Item no.	Communicative activities with means of 0.5 and above (managers' list)	Mean (Managers) n=26
1	Conduct tours of hotel facilities	0.64
3*	Entertain VIP guests	0.66
4	Listen to customer enquiries	0.63
5	Listen to customer complaints	0.76
7*	Answer customer enquiries on room rates in writing (by letter, e-mail or fax)	0.68
8*	Answer customer enquiries on food and beverage orally (in person or through the telephone)	0.64
9*	Answer customer enquiries on food and beverage in writing (by letter, e-mail or fax)	0.74
11*	Answer customer enquiries on hotel facilities in writing (by letter, e-mail or fax)	0.70
12*	Answer enquiries on fire escape routes in hotel	0.70
13	Answer enquiries about local establishments like shops, tourist attractions, banks, etc.	0.56
14*	Answer enquiries on local cultures	0.58
15*	Respond to customer complaints on hotel services	0.70
16*	Respond to complaints on food and beverage	0.83
17	Respond to complaints on rooms	0.66
18	Explain hotel policies and procedures to guests	0.67
22	Listen to managers' explanation on safety precautions	0.60
24*	Present ideas at meetings with managers	0.62
25	Discuss work-related matters with managers	0.58
26	Give an oral report regarding work matters to managers	0.58
27*	Discuss ways to improve customer service with managers	0.68
28	Discuss ways to improve work efficiency with managers	0.68
29	Explain difficulties/problems arising from work with managers	0.58
30*	Describe graphs and charts at meetings	0.80
31	Read memos from managers	0.58
32	Read circulars, notices from management	0.56
33	Relay important information to coworkers	0.52

35 Read books, magazines and journals to improve job knowledge and skills 0.58
 (note: 0 = not relevant, 0.5 = somewhat relevant, 1 = very relevant). The items with asterisks above are also those with means of at least 0.5 derived from the FOAs' responses (see Table 7).

Table 7: Activities with means of 0.5 and above for proficiency level, obtained from the FOAs' responses

Item no.	Communicative activities with means of 0.5 and above (managers' list)	Mean (Managers) n=26
3	Entertain VIP guests	0.60
7	Answer customer enquiries on room rates in writing (by letter, e-mail or fax)	0.53
8	Answer customer enquiries on food and beverage orally (in person or through the telephone)	0.60
9	Answer customer enquiries on food and beverage in writing (by letter, e-mail or fax)	0.67
11	Answer customer enquiries on hotel facilities in writing (by letter, e-mail or fax)	0.55
12	Answer enquiries on fire escape routes in hotel	0.65
14	Answer enquiries on local cultures	0.52
15	Respond to customer complaints on hotel services	0.51
16	Respond to complaints on food and beverage	0.66
24	Present ideas at meetings with managers	0.56
27	Discuss ways to improve customer service with managers	0.50
30	Describe graphs and charts at meetings	0.72

(note: 0 = not relevant, 0.5 = somewhat relevant, 1 = very relevant)

Table 8: Activities whose means for proficiency level differed significantly between the FOAs' and the managers' groups.

Item no.	Communicative activity	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean (FOAs) n=44	Mean (Managers) n=26
1	Conduct tours of hotel facilities	0.02	0.47	0.64
4	Listen to customer enquiries	0.00	0.34	0.63
5	Listen to customer complaints	0.00	0.42	0.76
15	Respond to customer complaints on hotel services	0.04	0.51	0.70
16	Respond to complaints on food and beverage	0.04	0.66	0.83
17	Respond to complaints on rooms	0.05	0.47	0.66
18	Explain hotel policies and procedures to guests	0.04	0.48	0.67
22	Listen to managers' explanation on safety precautions	0.03	0.40	0.60
25	Discuss work-related matters with managers	0.04	0.41	0.58
27	Discuss ways to improve customer service with managers	0.04	0.50	0.68
28	Discuss ways to improve work efficiency with managers	0.02	0.47	0.68
31	Read memos from managers	0.02	0.36	0.58
32	Read circulars, notices from management	0.03	0.36	0.56
33	Relay important information to coworkers	0.05	0.31	0.52
35	Read books, magazines and journals to improve job knowledge and skills	0.03	0.38	0.58

Moreover, the managers rated the FOAs' proficiency significantly lower than the FOAs rated themselves (Table 8). This could mean the managers felt the FOAs were not performing up to expectations, or the FOAs had a higher confidence in their own ability than the managers did.

Table 9: Rank order of communicative activities according to training importance

Rank	Items in order of training importance (FOAs' list)	Items in order of training importance (managers' list)
1	3	5
2	15	15
3	24	4
4	14	28
5	12	12
6	27	27
7	13	17
8	5	22
9	17	29
10	8	18
11	18	26
12	21	25
13	28	13
14	7	11
15	1	24
16	10	7
17	11	35
18	16	33
19	26	21
20	4	10
21	9	14
22	22	32
23	25	3
24	29	34
25	33	1
26	35	31
27	34	8
28	19	2
29	20	20
30	6	23
31	2	16
32	31	19
33	32	6
34	23	9
35	30	30

(note: items = item numbers of communicative activities as listed in the questionnaire (see Appendix))

It is to be commented here, however, that low proficiency ratings of FOAs in any of the activities did not necessarily make those activities high on the agenda for training. Proficiency level has to be seen in conjunction with the relevance- to-job ratings before an objective decision can be made on whether training in a certain activity is required.

Rank order of activities

The product of the proficiency and relevance scores of an FOA for a particular activity represents the magnitude of training need (0 = no need, to 1 = critical need) of the FOA for that activity. Subsequently, the mean of these scores for the whole group of FOAs would indicate the overall training importance of that activity for the group of subjects. The 35 activities were thus ranked according to the value of their respective product mean scores (Table 9). Furthermore, the activities were categorised according to their training importance based on the magnitude of their product mean scores (Table 10). From the FOAs' responses, it was found that all except two of the activities came under the category of "reasonable need for training". Two activities appeared in the "limited need for training" category. From the managers' responses, 23 activities came under the "reasonable need for training" category, while 12 were in the "high need for training" category. No activity fell into the "critical need for training" category.

Table 10: Range of means for activities from the FOAs' and managers' lists

Mean	Item number of communicative activities	
	FOAs' list	Managers' list
0 – under 0.25	23, 30	Nil
0.25 – under 0.5	32,31,2,6,20,19,34,35,33,29,25,22,9,4,26, 16,11,10,1,7,28,21,18,8,17,5,13,27,12,14, 24,15,3	9,6,19,16,23,20,2,8,31,1,34,3,32,14, 10,21,33,35,7,24,11,13
0.5 – under 0.75	Nil	
0.75 – 1.0	Nil	
(note: 0 – under 0.25 : limited need for training 0.25 – under 0.5: reasonable need for training 0.5 – under 0.75: high need for training 0.75 – 1.0: critical need for training)		

Conclusion

The design of an English language communication training programme for FOAs of hotels in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) should take into account job-based communicative activities and their level of training importance. The results of this study are aimed at assisting the training designer in deciding which communicative activities, and hence which skills and content are to be emphasised. Their purpose is to provide useful information to aid the trainer to design an effective programme that is calculated to yield the best results within time and budget constraints.

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Appendix: List of communicative activities

ITEM NO.	ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES
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A. Communication with customers/guests

- 1 Conduct tours of hotel's facilities
- 2 Arrange and inform guests of transport arrangements
- 3 Entertain VIP guests
- 4 Listen to customer enquiries
- 5 Listen to customer complaints
- 6 Answer customer enquiries on room rates orally (in person or through the telephone)
- 7 Answer customer enquiries on room rates in writing (by letter, e-mail or fax)
- 8 Answer customer enquiries on food and beverage orally (in person or through the telephone)
- 9 Answer customer enquiries on food and beverage writing (by letter, e-mail or fax)
- 10 Answer customer enquiries on hotel facilities orally (in person or through the telephone)
- 11 Answer customer enquiries on hotel facilities writing (by letter, e-mail or fax)
- 12 Answer enquiries on fire escape route in the hotel
- 13 Answer enquiries on local establishments like shops, tourist attractions, banks, etc.
- 14 Answer enquiries on local cultures
- 15 Respond to customer complaints on hotel services
- 16 Respond to complaints on food and beverage
- 17 Respond to complaints on rooms
- 18 Explain hotel policies and procedures to guests

B. Communication with managers

- 19 Fill up printed forms and log books
 - 20 Listen to managers' explanation of work processes
 - 21 Listen to managers' explanation of hotel policies, procedures, and management decisions
 - 22 Listen to managers' explanation on safety precautions
 - 23 Listen to instructions from managers
 - 24 Present ideas at meetings with managers
 - 25 Discuss work-related matters with managers
 - 26 Give an oral report regarding work matters to managers
 - 27 Discuss ways to improve customer service with managers
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- 28 Discuss ways to improve work efficiency with managers
 - 29 Explain difficulties/problems arising from work to managers
 - 30 Describe graphs and charts at meetings
 - 31 Read memos from managers
 - 32 Read circulars and notices from management

C. Communication with coworkers, and other activities

- 33 Relay important information to coworkers
 - 34 Discuss work-related matters with coworkers
 - 35 Read books, magazines, and journals to improve job knowledge and skills
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