

Using Apps to Improve Service Delivery in Malaysian Hotels: Guests' and Employees' Rationales

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Abstract: The paper considers a looming crisis for the important Malaysian tourism sector, namely, the lack of communication skills of hotel staff. There are a growing number of overseas visitors coming to this popular destination, yet hotel staff, polite as they may be, are increasingly unable to communicate effectively with them. Whilst this is acknowledged as being a worldwide phenomenon that ultimately leads to customer dissatisfaction, the authors believe it is exacerbated in Malaysia by governmental education policies that may seem biased in favour of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. In addition to other internal and external factors that currently put pressure on the hotel industry, Malaysia, unlike many other countries, permits foreigners to work in the hotel industry, and many of them arrive with a poor command of English. Hence the main objectives of the study are to improve understanding of both the communication problems within the hotel industry as well as the sentiment associated with using a technology based solution. The authors linked their aims to research questions which were formulated for both hotel staff and overseas visitors, and evidence was subsequently derived from the analysis of the responses received. As a solution to the communication problem, it is proposed that hotels should provide staff with hotel centred training in both English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as well as other key languages that are spoken by overseas visitors who are non-English speakers. In addition, a technological solution, in the form of an appropriate 'App', is proposed. Such an App could be used in a variety of ways to significantly improve communication, and ultimately, guest satisfaction.

Key words: Hospitality industry, intercultural competence, language barriers, mobile applications, mobile technology, training and development.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

The Malaysian tourism sector faced many challenges in 2014. Although, according to the 'Tourism Malaysia Official Corporate Website', tourist arrival figures remained robust, (up from 10 million in 2000 to over 25 million in 2013), several factors resulted in significant pressure on the national hospitality industry in 2014. Among the internal factors, the introduction of a minimum wage scheme plus preparation for the introduction of a 6% GST flat rate consumer tax in 2015 were among the tougher challenges. With respect to external factors, the Malaysian tourism industry has traditionally relied heavily upon overseas visitors. Both the disappearance of MH 370 on 8 March 2014 en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, plus the loss of flight MH 17 on 17 July 2014 over Ukraine en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, had a significant negative impact upon the number of tourists visiting Malaysia, with an ongoing effect on the hotel industry, e.g. less than 20% in arrivals from the key market China since April 2014. However, some countries show a growth in arrivals, e.g. Oman, Spain, and Russia (Tourism Malaysia, 2015).

Travel and tourism directly supported 724,500 jobs (5.3% of total Malaysian employment) and the trend is increasing (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2015). The arrival statistic included millions of repetitive Singaporean 'day trippers' who crossed the causeway between Singapore and Johor in Malaysia. The registered arrivals also included a significant number of 24 hour stopover passengers who stayed one night in Kuala Lumpur before continuing their journey from Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) or the Low Cost Carrier Terminal, KLIA2. For this reason, the number of overseas visitors who actually visited Malaysia for a holiday was, in reality, less than suggested by the impressive overall official tourist arrival statistics. Besides Singaporean, Indonesian and Thai tourists, increasing numbers of visitors from mainland China were represented in the arrival statistics. A significantly reduced number of mainland Chinese tourist arrivals were recorded subsequent to April 2014, which in turn led to reduced operational revenue in the hotel sector (Tourism Malaysia, 2015). With less cash in hand, hotels had fewer opportunities for product development and employee training. However, for a developing country, training and development is very important (Ashley, Caronline, De Brine, Lehr & Wilde, 2007).

Based on the current situation, the authors have provided suggestions below for the improvement of Malaysia's hotel industry. Despite the challenging internal and external factors that the tourism sector faces in Malaysia, it is anticipated that the proposed measures for communication improvement can be introduced without a heavy financial burden. The authors consider that a limitation in implementing measures for improving employee and guest communication relates to rapidly developing technology which could lead to very short future product and knowledge life cycles. However, a regular update of technology and continuous training should keep both the technology and hotel staff ahead of any such constraint.

A study by Kostic-Bobanovic (2007) identified intercultural communication apprehension as a construct that affects individual behaviour and lifestyle. The study concerned the behavioural change of an individual possessing knowledge of a foreign culture and having exposure to foreigners. Intercultural knowledge encourages a positive attitude when dealing with foreigners, which was also pointed out in later studies (Selke, 2014). Kostic-Bobanovic (2007) suggests that intercultural competence should be acquired to achieve efficient and effective communication in tourism.

Language barriers for tourists constitute a worldwide phenomenon. In a study on ESP, a needs analysis for the Jordanian Tourist Police was conducted, (Aldohon, 2014), which established that speaking and listening are the most important skills. General conversation, answering questions and solving problems, followed by providing services, were the dominating functions. The major problems were (i) foreign visitors speaking too fast in English, (ii) the use of inappropriate spoken English by police or tourists, (iii) inadequate vocabulary and phraseology by both groups, and (iv) the inability to use correct written grammar by both groups. The limitation of the study is that English is not the native language for Jordanians, and all observations relating to the quality of English are one sided, as no foreign tourists were included in the survey. In the Discussion section, there is no link drawn to 'Communication Apps' or other IT assistance tools. Nevertheless, the paper is still helpful in narrowing the scope of this research project and in establishing the questionnaire. Furthermore, the paper provides evidence of the existence of language barriers in the tourism sector.

Operational Definitions

The authors believe that language barriers remain between overseas visitors and employees in Malaysian hotels, and an IT solution can be utilized to narrow the gap.

The operational definition for 'Language Barriers' follows Blume and Board (2013) who illustrated the problem of language constraints in stating that communication barriers occur when a language – with perfect or imperfect proficiency – cannot be shared among individuals, thus preventing these individuals from understanding the intended message and, hence, preventing the speaker and listener from achieving successful communication.

Wang describes a Communication App as being a mobile computer program application designed to run on smartphones, tablet devices and other mobile devices. Furthermore, communication through an App is defined as "the use of smartphones for the activities aimed at communicating with others." (Wang D., 2013, p. 218). The authors follow these definitions.

The application can be a 'Web App', 'Native App' or 'Hybrid App' and is designed to improve communication for the user, such as providing a dictionary, street plan, timetable and route plan for public transport, guidebook, menu plus any other requirement which a user – either an overseas visitor or an employee in a hotel – could find useful for overcoming barriers, to find directions, or to communicate successfully. Apps for tourists as a means of finding directions are readily available for cities, museums, shopping centres and many similar locations, and can be downloaded from specific sites, e.g. Google Play and Amazon Android App store.

Furthermore, intercultural competence, as part of communication competence, is described as: "ICC (intercultural communication competence) [involving] the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures" (Wiseman, 2002, p. 208).

From the corresponding author's experience as an expatriate in Malaysia, it was observed that international hotels in Kuala Lumpur employ a high number of foreign staff with low proficiency in English. Nonetheless the workers – predominantly in the service sector – are trained to behave politely. Their lack of English is often obvious, which may inconvenience guests in terms of communication. Staff from Nepal, Korea, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Indonesia constitute a high proportion of the workforce in the Kuala Lumpur and overall Malaysian international hotel industry. Notwithstanding the Philippines, English is not a second language in these countries.

English language training can be very challenging, as for example in the case of many Korean employees and trainees who come to Malaysia to both complete their education in the hospitality industry, and to improve their proficiency in English. Furthermore, many face to face interviews with both decision-makers from the 'Malaysian Association of Hotels', hotel managers, and consideration of the manpower forecast for hotels in Malaysia until 2016, has led to the conclusion that it is more important to have well trained staff with a good command in English than to have them capable of communicating in numerous foreign languages. Food and beverage (F&B) and Housekeeping are forecast to have the highest manpower demand in the foreseeable future. Employees in these departments also have a high frequency of face to face guest contact (Malaysian Association of Hotels, 2013). The overall worldwide existence of communication barriers, and the importance of the tourism industry for Malaysia, defines the scope of this paper on language barriers between overseas visitors and employees in international hotels in Malaysia. The research time frame lasted from 2012 until 2014, with the principal objective being to identify current issues in communication between overseas visitors and employees in the Malaysian hotel industry (with special focus on Kuala Lumpur as the capital and most important economic centre).

Literature Review

Many researchers and educators have highlighted the link between excellence in service quality and quality language skills (Lafrenz, 1991; Wang, 2001; Horng & Lu, 2006; Wenyuh, 2012). Wang (2001) focused on the perception of English among both hotel staff and managers in Taipei international hotels, where English is the most important foreign language. As a PhD thesis, this work makes a significant contribution towards the understanding of issues surrounding language barriers in the hotel industry.

The perception of foreign language learning amongst students in tourism-related industries was analysed by Leslie and Russell (2006). Their comparative study focused upon students from the UK and continental Europe. The paper's findings were most striking in that students from continental Europe demonstrated contrasting attitudes to their UK counterparts. Students from countries in which English is neither the mother tongue nor the second language are more highly motivated to learn foreign languages. The paper's findings support the overall observation that learners from countries with English as the native language, such as those from the USA, Australia, and New Zealand, are less motivated to learn additional foreign languages. Clearly, the need for foreign languages in such countries is not as great as local employees in international hotels have English as their mother tongue. In Malaysia the situation is somewhat similar, in that for most of the population, English is their second language; and a high proportion of local hotel staff possess good English proficiency. However, this number is declining due to the government's focus on the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, which is increasingly used as the sole medium of teaching in schools. This has resulted in a high rate of employment of non-English speaking local staff. Despite the mounting concern over declining English proficiency among young Malaysians, there remains low motivation to master additional foreign languages (The Malaysian Insider, 2014). Tuition in many foreign languages, including German, French, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Burmese, and Arabic, are available within the Malaysian tertiary education system. However, the low demand from local industry leaves learners without any specific motivation, and in consequence many become low performers. There have been a few surveys concerning the language needs of the hospi-

tality industry, which impacts upon employee performance in Malaysian hotels.

In the Malaysian context, one particular survey has been carried out to measure the linguistic performance of the workforce in relation to guest satisfaction (Rao & Abdullah, 2007). The data were collected from hotel guests in international hotels in Langkawi. However, the study did not include the perception of employees, which is questionable. It lacked a desired stringency, all for a study that contends itself merely to look at 5-star hotels, which normally have foreign language requirements. The same rules bind 4-star and some 3-star hotels. The data obtained, as well as the conclusions drawn in this study are, therefore, one-sided, especially as the study's primary location was Langkawi Island, a beach holiday resort where foreign visitors are just as likely to stay in less up-market hotels. Whilst the evaluation of foreign language speaking staff by overseas visitors in the lower star-ranking hotels may well conform to the views expressed by the cited guests, the views of guests from all relevant hotels should have been included in the survey by an appropriate sample.

Another similar survey concerned the quality of hospitality in Malaysian hotels. Staff language proficiency was determined and the study concluded that proficiency was the major relevant factor that contributed towards guest satisfaction (Poon & Low, 2005). The published results should be considered as the bench mark for findings in the hospitality and communication sector.

Service quality is also the main concern of another research group (Mey Lau, Khatibi Akbar, & Yong Gun Fie, 2005). Their emphasis related to the different perceptions of the service, both by tourists and by hotel managers which were analysed in detail. Although the authors paid attention to the managers' concerns, (but regrettably not to those of the front-line staff), the survey was not representative, as all the 'randomly chosen hotels' were defined as 'luxury hotels'. However, the authors offered no definition of a 'luxury hotel', and there is no universal agreement on this classification.

Therefore, in this paper the research team uses the term 'international hotel' to include 3, 4 and 5 star hotels due to their similar foreign language requirements in the Malaysian context. Hence, the term 'international hotel' refers to a hotel that attracts many overseas visitors, although not necessarily internationally owned.

For a specific study relating to Malaysia, there is little relevant literature to cite. In a related field, there are an appreciable number of studies concerning foreign languages for specific purposes, such as in English, German and French. This type of research is relevant to the present study of language barriers and communication problems. Foreign language courses tailored for the tourism and hospitality industry exist in Malaysia, especially in the private colleges and universities, for example, KDU University College and Berjaya University College of Hospitality. Noor (2008) conducted a needs analysis regarding English for Commercial Purposes with the course coordinator from a Malaysian Polytechnic offering a Hotel and Catering course, and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The respondents included a group of final semester students undertaking the Hotel and Catering course as well as fifteen personnel from the hospitality industry. The findings revealed a gap between industry needs and subject content taught. An amended syllabus for Hotel and Catering students in the Malaysian Polytechnic concerned was then proposed. This study also indicated a need for better English among graduates to serve the needs of the industry. Other foreign languages were not taken into consideration.

Unsurprisingly, the research literature on Apps containing multilingual content has shown a significant increase during recent years. Kim and Lee (2014) explained the functionality

of multilingual information for migrants in Korea. The authors suggested that foreign language based Apps could help migrants to acquire knowledge and information. This viewpoint matches with the expectations of the authors. Kim and Lee conducted descriptive research which did not include any new empirical data to support their opinion. Whereas the knowledge and information acquiring process is the pivotal goal in this case, many studies relate to the use of an App as mobile learning tool (Gabarre & Gabarre, 2012; Tseng, Huang, Yu, & Lan, 2012). Tseng et al. (2012) provided a study of a context-supported Mandarin grammar learning system on the Android platform for use by Mandarin as Foreign Language learners in the mobile environment. The feature of selecting different situational contexts, (e.g. person, place, and activity), is also relevant in Kim and Lee's (2014) study. In the latest attempt, a Shenzhen (China) based company has developed an App for foreign language learning in nearly 100 languages, which could be used in appropriate hotel situations for guests, (Figure 1. is a screen shot of the App).

Other studies of mobile Apps for the hospitality industry include (Hyun, Lee, & Hu, 2009), Collins (2010), and Kwon, Bae and Blum (2013).

The authors believe that in Malaysia there exists an academic gap, for which this paper is intended to be an exploratory contribution. Within the Malaysian context, there is also a practical gap, as in the international context many 'Apps' are readily available and in use. At

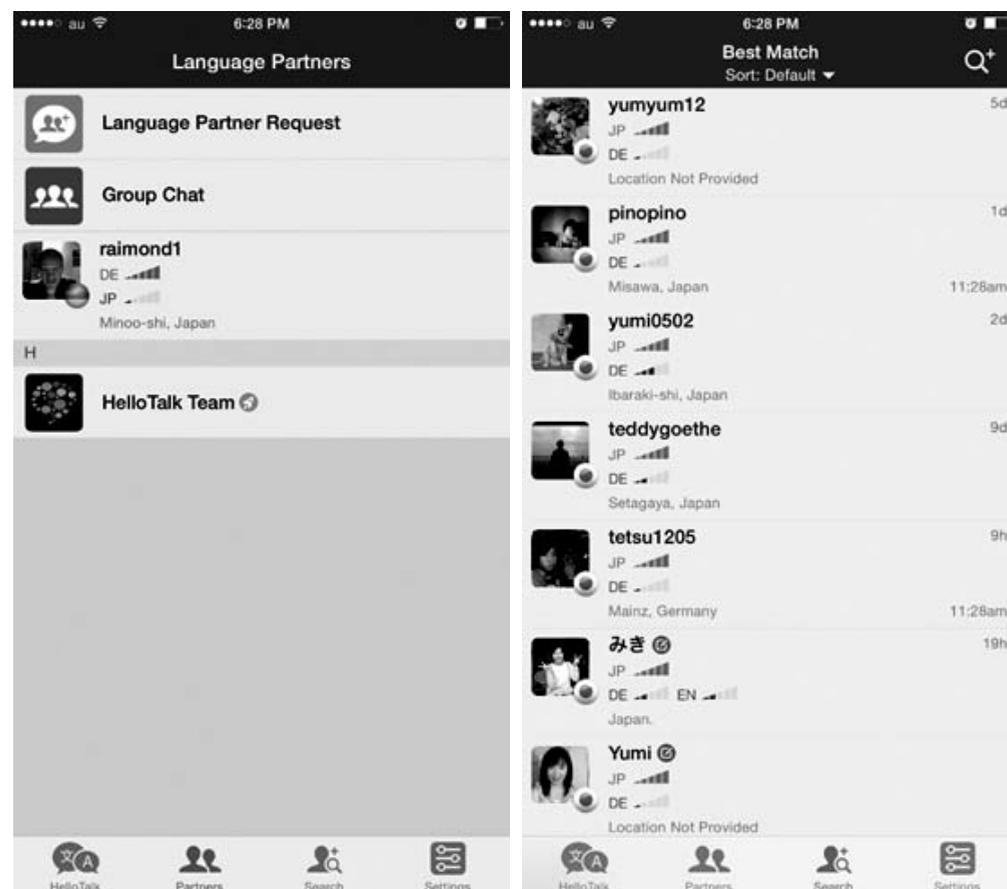


Figure 1. Screenshot of Hello Talk - Language Exchange Social Networking App, 2015

the 'Hospitality Industry Technology Exposition and Conference' (HITEC) 2015 in Austin, Texas, many companies exhibited tablet and smartphone application solutions with extended recommendations, e.g. having a smartphone compliant version of the hotel data file available for download on the website at the same making sure the hotel's website is mobile device compliant and having competent front line staff on-property who can deal with Guest TECH queries.

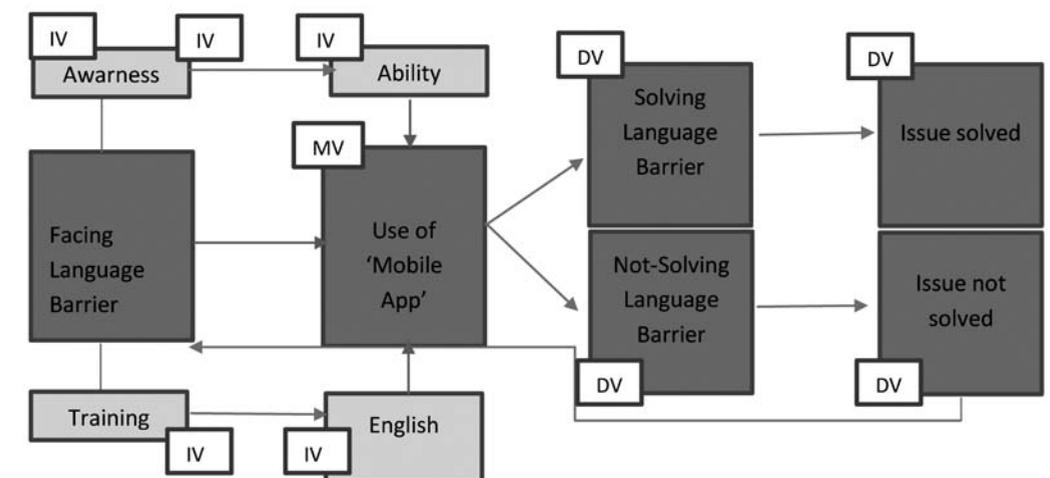
Conceptual Framework

From both the problem statement and the literature review, the factors relating to awareness of Mobile Apps and the ability to make use of them are very important. According to the literature, for hotel employees the important factors for successful Mobile App use are adequate training on handling, plus proficiency in English in case of need (IV). Mastering language barriers (DV) is dependent on the user's ability as well as the availability of a Mobile App (MV). Therefore the questionnaire is based on statements related to these factors.

Research Objectives

The authors identified three principal Research Objectives with respect to international hotels in and around Kuala Lumpur:

1. To provide data concerning language barriers in hotels;
2. To understand the mismatch in the perception of communication that exists between overseas visitors and employees;
3. To collect opinions from both responding groups regarding Apps as a tool for overcoming existing language barriers.



IV Independent Variable

DV Dependent Variable

MV Mediator Variable

Figure 2. Conceptual framework with measurements for Mobile App usage in hotels, situational use when language barriers encountered

Research Questions

Based on the Research Objectives, the following three Research Questions were formulated with respect to international hotels in and around Kuala Lumpur:

1. In which circumstances and to what extent do overseas visitors and hotel employees experience communication problems due to language barriers?
2. Is there any significant mismatch in the perception of such language barriers between overseas visitors and hotel employees?
3. How can Communication Apps help to improve the situation?

Methodology

The focus is upon the research objectives for international guests staying in Malaysian 3, 4 and 5 star rated hotels. Similarly, employees of such hotels were targeted. The guests should be between 18 and 70 years old and have stayed at least one night in the hotel. There was no educational or additional demographic requirements for guest participation in the study. This was consistent with the researchers' intention to assess the current situation faced by international guests and employees in Malaysian hotels. For the employees there were no specific demographic requirements (except for industry specific training). The population of the study could cover all guests and employees in the star rated hotels. For this study most respondents were approached in premises in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia that has the highest number of hotels and attractions which draw tourists to the city. Hence, it is a suitable area for the study.

For this study, convenience sampling was selected as a reasonable technique. The respondents were selected from hotels in Kuala Lumpur because it was inexpensive, efficient, and the sample population was readily available.

After obtaining approval from division heads or supervisors, employees were approached and asked to complete the survey, which took no more than 20 minutes. 200 employees in 3 star, 4 star, and 5 star hotels in Kuala Lumpur were asked to complete the questionnaire. The employees were questioned either at their place of work or in hospitality colleges, and the researchers obtained assistance from respective lecturers in distributing the questionnaires to hospitality students who had already completed an extended hotel internship. Only 153 questionnaires were considered valid, as 47 left more than 50% of the questions unanswered.

A parallel group of 200 international randomly selected overseas visitors were asked to complete the questionnaire. If potential respondents appeared to be native English speakers or did not stay in the star-rated hotels, they were not pursued to complete the questionnaire, and this group was thereby filtered out due to their potentially skewed perspective. The respondents were approached by the main researcher with the assistance of two students at several tourist sites, e.g. KLIA, public coffee shops in the city, and in shopping malls. Hotel managers were not approached to obtain approval for data collection in hotels, as the researchers considered guest-related in-house surveys to be too aggressive. For Chinese tourists, a Mandarin version was translated and prepared in advance. From this group, 163 questionnaires were considered as being valid. Therefore, the data of the first 150 respondents in each group was selected for analysis. Whilst authors were aware that an uneven distribution statistical analysis would have been feasible, for the presentation of different perceptions, a simple descriptive statistic was sufficient and, hence, an even distribution analysis was chosen. Tables

1-4 compare 150 employees' opinions with those of 150 overseas visitors.

Interval scale was used to measure the main concept in this research. This included the rating of communication between guests and employees. The questions in this section were derived from a previous study by Selke (2014) and slightly amended. Anonymity of all respondents was highly assured.

Data Analysis

Part A: Respondents' Demographics

Data relating to foreign guests was collected randomly at three locations in Kuala Lumpur, i.e. the city area, KLIA, and KLIA2. Although Singaporeans generally possess a very good command of English, and make-up the majority of international visitors to Malaysia, (approximately 50% in 2013), they represent only 10% of the guest sample. This was because many of them refused to participate in the survey. This paper was structured in a manner that highlighted some overall language and communication problems between overseas visitors and hotel employees. As low English proficiency can often exist among hotel employees, a possible sampling bias averages out. Hotel staff were also selected randomly with questionnaires being distributed in hotels and in hospitality colleges. The researchers ensured the re-

Table 1. Country of origin of hotel employees and hotel guests

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
Malaysia	72	China	81
Indonesia	15	Korea	7
Bangladesh	7	Brunei	12
Iran	7	Nigeria	12
China	23	Japan	6
Korea	12	Germany	3
Nepal	8	France	2
Philippines	5	Taiwan	2
Germany	1	Iran	8
		Russia	2
		Singapore	15

Table 2. Major foreign language proficiency (besides self-proclaimed mother tongue)

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
English	121	English	112
Indonesian	7	Russian	2
Bengali	6	German	1
Arabic	4	Japanese	1
Mandarin	11	No Foreign Language	34
German	1		

Table 3. Employee position/guest status

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
Hospitality Student	78	Foreign Tourists	92
Trainee	21	Business Travellers	21
Full Time Employee	41	Foreigner with Resident Permit	15
Part Time Employee	10	Foreign Students	22

Table 4. Employee department and area of hotel in which guests encountered a language barrier (most recent)

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
F&B	82	F&B	58
Front Office	30	Front Office	35
Housekeeping	8	Housekeeping	16
Marketing	-	Marketing	-
SPA	-	SPA	15
Reservation	13	Reservation	-
Concierge	16	Concierge	26
Others	1	Others	-

Table 5. Type of hotel (3 star, 4 star, 5 star)

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
3 Star	73	3 Star	88
4 Star	49	4 Star	39
5 Star	28	5 Star	23

spondents' validity by confirming with them that they had previously undergone internship or other form of practical training in hotel front line work. The enumerators in the hospitality colleges were instructed to hand out the questionnaire only to those aforementioned students who had completed their internships.

It became clear that most language barriers occurred in the F&B area, followed by the Front Office and the Concierge Desk. The frequency of interaction between guests and staff was highest in these Departments. One respondent described the misunderstanding in the following manner: Sometimes guests speak too fast or not clear to service staff, especially if the request is very detailed. Another situation could occur if a guest had been drinking and the service staff requested the guest to leave the bar at closing time. This is one example of a situation for which employees should receive adequate language training.

The overwhelming majority of respondents among employees were in the 20-29 years age range. Among guests, there was no significant dominant age range, and the data indicated a somewhat homogeneous tourist profile (Table 6).

Table 6. Age range of employees and guests

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
20-29 years	125	20-29	31
30-39 years	18	30-39	37
40-49 years	5	40-49	60
>50	2	>50	22

Table 7. Country of origin of guests /language used most frequently during face to face contact

Guests	Number	Foreign Language	Number
China	81	English	112
Korea	7	Mandarin	38
Brunei	12		
Nigeria	12		
Japan	6		
Germany	3		
French	2		
Taiwan	2		
Iran	8		
Russia	2		
Singapore	15		

Table 8. Language barrier occurrence encountered by employees and guests

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
Never	-	Never	23
Seldom	42	Seldom	43
Sometimes	93	Sometimes	84
Often	7	Often	-
Always	8	Always	-

Part B: Language Use and Barriers

Although the diversity among the sample group of overseas visitors was high, the foreign language most commonly used for communication with hotel staff was English. However, many Chinese tourists successfully communicated in Mandarin, which illustrated the increasing significance of Mandarin as an important language for the Malaysian tourism industry (Table 7).

Communication was demonstrated to be limited and matched the research questions. Most hotel employees and international guests had occasionally faced communication problems due to language barriers (Table 8).

Both groups were asked to answer a semi-open-ended question by describing the situation that they had encountered. The situations with most recurrences are summarized in Table 9. Employees were most concerned over the inability of guests to communicate in English. Guests were most concerned with employees' low proficiency in English. The findings in this section partly correspond with those of a study by Aldohin (2014) in the Jordanian context, as mentioned above.

Table 9. Significant situations generating language barriers/communication problems

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
Guest cannot speak English	62	Employees cannot speak English	65
Guest with poor English	48	Employees with poor English	50
Slang and Accent	32	Slang and Accent	15
When the guest is angry	8	Employees speaks too fast	20

Table 10. Strategies for coping with language barriers (choices were given)

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
Smartphone Use	29	Smartphone Use	63
Use simple English	55	Use simple English	32
Body language	23	Body language	38
Ask for help	35	Ask for help	8
Speak slowly	8	Speak slowly	9

Respondents were asked to answer a semi-open-ended question by ranking the coping strategies that they used. The results demonstrated that the majority of employees resolved communication problems by using simple English, whereas the majority of guests made use of modern technology in the form of a smartphone or tablet device (Table 10).

Part C: Rating of Communication

Based on a Likert Scale ranging from 'Not Performed' (0), 'Extremely Poor' (1), 'Below Average' (2), 'Average' (3), 'Above Average' (4), and 'Excellent' (5), the following scores were calculated.

Both respondent groups rated communication as 'Above Average', which included many other aspects than the direct face-face interaction during services received by the overseas visitors or provided by the employees. Since in Part B both groups were asked to state if they faced language barriers when dealing with each other, it became apparent that direct communication between them remained flawed. In many hotels in Malaysia, the provision of F&B menus and other information in English is now regularly well executed (Tables 11.1 and 11.2).

Part D: Perception toward Communication App

Minimising language barriers between hotel employees and overseas visitors is important to ensure a good and productive work environment in all dealings with foreign guests. Without proper communication, it is not possible to understand a client's wants or needs, or how best to offer care and attention. Therefore, the authors wanted to understand more about the perception of a Communication App among employees and guests.

The respondents were required to rate the aforementioned Communication App in English as an efficient tool for enhancing guest satisfaction in Kuala Lumpur. Based on Table 12, the majority of both groups accepted the idea of a Communication App with only English content.

Table 11.1. Employee rating of the communication quality between employees and overseas visitors (foreign language proficiency self-proclaimed)

Statement	Score	Interpretation
01. My English proficiency	3.2	Average
02. Guest English proficiency	4.0	Above Average
03. Communication in other language	3.2	Average
04. General Hotel Information in English	4.55	Excellent
05. General Hotel Information in other foreign language	3.7	Above Average
06. Information on F/B in English	4.95	Excellent
07. Information on F/B in other language	3.4	Average
08. English Communication between you and foreign guests(overall)	4.6	Excellent
09. English Communication between you and your co-worker	4.95	Excellent
10. Information in English on tourist sites	4.35	Average
11. Information in other language on tourist sites	3.85	Above Average
12. Information on Public Transport in English	4.4	Above Average
13. Information on aforementioned aspects in the national language Bahasa Malaysia	3.85	Above Average
14. Information on aforementioned aspects in the foreign language of the dominant foreign guests' clients in your hotel	2.85	Average
15. The hotel's readiness to provide staff with specific foreign language proficiency if a major problem occurs (Does the hotel has a central register of all foreign languages spoken among staff?)	2.85	Average
Average	3.91	Above Average

Table 11.2. Guest rating of the communication quality between employees and overseas visitors

Statement	Score	Interpretation
01. My English proficiency	4.2	Above Average
02. Staff English proficiency	4.1	Above Average
03. Communication in other language	3.4	Average
04. General Hotel Information in English	4.2	Above Average
05. General Hotel Information in other language	3.3	Average
06. Information on F/B in English	4.4	Above Average
07. Information on F/B in foreign language	3.1	Average
08. English Communication between you and Hotel Staff(Overall)	4.4	Above Average
09. English Communication between you and your other guests	4.5	Above Average
10. Information in English on tourist sites	4.3	Above Average
11. Information in other languages on tourist sites	3.4	Average
12. Information on Public Transport in English	4.0	Above Average
13. Information on aforementioned aspects in the national language Bahasa Malaysia	3.6	Above Average
14. Information on aforementioned aspects in your mother tongue	3.2	Average
15. The hotel's readiness to provide staff with the needed language skills if a major problem occurred.	3.4	Average
Average	3.89	Above Average

Table 12. Rating of practicability of a Communication App in English

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
Very poor	-	Very poor	-
Poor	8	Poor	23
Acceptable	69	Acceptable	89
Good	50	Good	31
Very Good	23	Very Good	7

Table 13. Rating of practicability of a Communication App in a language other than English

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
Very poor	16	Very poor	8
Poor	7	Poor	7
Acceptable	54	Acceptable	45
Good	52	Good	53
Very good	21	Very good	37

Table 14. Rating of the cost for a Communication App in MYR

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
MYR 2.00	22	MYR 2.00	22
MYR 4.00	8	MYR 4.00	8
MYR 6.00	7	MYR 6.00	21
MYR < 10.00	12	MYR < 10.00	14
Free of Charge	101	Free of Charge	85

Table 15. Preferred information and services in a Communication App (multiple answers allowed)

Employees	Number	Guests	Number
Local Travel Tips	17	Local Travel Tips	17
Maps	150	Maps	143
Translator	87	Translator	76
F&B tips	86	F&B tips	136
Emergency no.	54	Emergency no.	87
Language Option	32	Language Option	54
Recreation Spots	34	Recreation Spots	24
Laws and Rules	9	Laws and Rules	16
Public Transportation	147	Public Transportation	150

Both groups had a very positive attitude toward a Communication App which includes besides English also other languages (Table 13). The majority of both respondents group prefer a 'Free of Charge' Communication App (Table 14). Among the most desired information available in any Communication App, the categories most frequently chosen by both responded groups were marked maps, public transport related facts, and F&B related tips most often. This was followed by a translator tool and emergency contact numbers (Table 15).

Discussion

The responses received to the Research Questions indicated similar perceptions of language proficiency amongst hotel employees and international hotel guests. Both groups perceived existing language barriers, whilst simultaneously having an overall good service perception. This is not a contradiction, as the holistic service experience comprises of many facets. In the discussion, the authors' focus is on the face-to-face language barriers, as they occur (Table 8, 9, 10). Our study reveals issues that originated from the lack of adequate language and communication skills. As Table 6 indicates, most employees are under 30, and approximately half of them are Malaysian (Table 1). Many foreigners from countries with low proficiency in English are now entering the labour market in the hospitality sector. Malaysia is, in this respect, an exception, where foreigners have the opportunity to legally undertake employment with low qualification requirements, including work in the service sector. Most countries, on the contrary, forbid foreigners from legally taking up employment in the service sector, e.g. Japan and China. However, the scarcity of a young labour force to serve the needs of hotel guests in Malaysia (as well as neighbouring Singapore) is the significant reason that candidates with very low English proficiency are often hired (Kelly OCG, 2015). Hence, staff training and development is a current need. During the process of data collection, the authors met Korean waitresses on a trainee program, who explained that they were undertaking training in Malaysia to assimilate English, although they did not receive any specific English for purpose tuition, their English being 'learnt by doing'.

For most guests, language barriers and communication problems occur in the F&B outlets (Table 4). In Table 11.1 employees rate their own English proficiency as 'Average', as in Malaysia it is no longer the norm that young people possess adequate English language skills due to a shifting focus in the national school curriculum towards Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. For the Malaysian hotel industry, this tendency, combined with a high level of employment, provides a negative impact. There is a significant risk that the service experience received by overseas visitors will become badly impacted by language barriers. Although, in Table 11.2, guests rate employees' English proficiency as being 'Above Average' some language barriers remain (Table 8).

As Table 7 shows, international guests communicate almost solely in English and Mandarin. The trend of English as a global language has been well documented and the results correspond with this observation. It is also of interest to understand the emerging importance of the Mandarin language. As Table 1 indicates, Chinese tourists are very important for the Malaysian hotel industry. For many other languages, which the authors initially believed would be shown as being important in Malaysia's international hotel industry, the evidence based on the data does not support this assertion. However, some employees expressed interest in learning additional languages, with Mandarin being the most desired, followed by French. French remains the key foreign language that hotel professionals would most often like to master, as it traditionally is the language used in top-class hotels and has a well-known influence in cuisine. The world's top hotel schools in Switzerland routinely provide French language courses, and private hospitality colleges in Kuala Lumpur also provide various foreign language courses.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Kuala Lumpur hotels regularly hire staff with foreign language proficiency, as, for example,

during the annual 'Arabic Season', hotels in the Golden Triangle invariably have Arabic speaking Front Office staff available; (information obtained during interview with hotel front line managers). Almost constantly throughout the year, the majority of foreign tourists arriving in Malaysia are from China. Hotel staff frequently express a desire to learn Mandarin to improve their future career prospects, and it is becoming a major foreign language in the global tourism, leisure and creative industry.

However, with regard to the low proficiency of English, some comments are added to this paper. To overcome a downward trend, the authors recommend ESP classes for the front line staff in all major Malaysian hotels. ESP has become an innovative activity within the teaching of English as a foreign or second language movement (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). ESP must be seen as an *'approach to language learning (not as a product), which is based on learners need and directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning'* (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 19). For Malaysia, there is an overwhelming and increasing demand for English, and currently, the level of English is in decline (The Malaysian Insider, 2014). Many employee respondents in the survey rated their English as being far below the standard generally required for international hotels, and this problem also extends to official brochures, menus and forms. It is clear that there exists a significant need for improvement, and cooperation with universities and 'Industrial Training' programmes is one obvious ways to narrow the gap. As many hotels often already cooperate with tertiary education organizations for the training of front line staff, such partnerships could be extended to include ESP language instruction as a primary goal. In addition, other languages could be taught, such as Arabic to cater for the growing number of tourists from the Middle East.

Communication App

In Malaysia, the acceptance of mobile apps to improve service satisfaction is currently increasing, such as within the taxi industry, where several apps are available. Globally, there are many such apps available for use by residents and tourists alike, e.g. for the Tokyo public transport system. During the early 2000s, the Kuala Lumpur Ritz Carlton Hotel was the first to offer a hand phone to guests that was pre-loaded with many of the relevant numbers for services and assistance, which was effectively a forerunner of the Communication App. Unfortunately, international guests at the time did not make significant use of the device, as it was generally considered that carrying two mobile devices was unreasonable. Therefore, easily downloadable Apps could bring service and business improvements to hotel guests by avoiding the necessity to carry two mobile devices. The existing trend to instil comprehensive quality management throughout the hotel industry should also include the application of Management Information Systems (Abukhalifeh & Mat Som, 2012). Apps can also provide an opportunity to provide assistance to both overseas visitors and hotel staff in coping with foreign languages. Food and beverage menus stored and updated on mobile devices will be more advanced and continuously available in various foreign languages, and thereby overcome the necessity of having multi-lingual staff permanently on duty. For example, the Sama-Sama Hotel (formerly the KLIA Pan Pacific Hotel) uses Touch-Pads instead of traditional hard copy menus. Any training for hotel front line staff should incorporate a distinct element of practicality, as their current coping strategy, used in cases of communication problems arising, is by the use of simple English, as illustrated in Table 10. Most guests used their smartphone as an alternative strategy in handling such issues. This strategy is often employed in the F&B outlets where

guests have significantly more time and the freedom to use any device at their convenience. However, employees are often specifically barred from making use of their mobile devices during working hours. In the future, management should rethink such strict policies, and develop a strategy that integrates the latest technology in their service operation, as illustrated in Tables 12 to 15.

The adoption of Communication Apps in the hospitality industry with the intended purpose of reducing language barriers would be welcomed by hotel employees and foreign guests alike. Rapid development of the global environment has stimulated the need for change in the hotel industry. New technologies should significantly reduce or even eliminate the communication barrier that often occurs when two parties do not speak a common language, and also help them to obtain additional information. This amply illustrates that the relationship between travel and technology has the capacity to grow even stronger than it has in the past.

The above results contribute towards constructing the standards associated with strengthening employee's language proficiency, towards consolidating appropriate language required for professional tasks, and towards improving the quality of service in Malaysian hotels. In reality, hotel branches belonging to a global brand can synergize their research and development costs for such an App by undertaking joint efforts. As most employees and guests would undoubtedly prefer to have a free of charge App, recurring costs could be passed on to the advertisement and additional services sub-heads. An App as a tool for helping to bridge any language or communication barriers also has the potential to customize guest needs and wants. In addition, such an App can also deliver real-time reporting for mobile concierge solutions.

A recent trend was discovered by the authors' co-lecturer in Hong Kong in 2015. The Mira Hotel has taken the lead in providing all guests with free telephone usage as well as Wi-Fi connectivity via a complimentary mobile device. The handy smartphone clones guests' in-room phone and connects them to the hotel and the world at all times. Complimentary functions include unlimited local and international calls to 25 popular destinations (including US, Canada, China, Germany, UK, France, Australia, Singapore, Japan and South Korea), 4G data connectivity with Wi-Fi tethering, plus a direct link to 'My Mira' personalized concierge, in-room dining, and room-to-room calls (<http://www.themirahotel.com>).

For repeated hotel stays, the Guest Relations Department could provide additional information in the App relating to guest preferences. A well working App, with additional information on museums, art galleries, concerts, and cultural activities, could undoubtedly also promote the tourism industry. The National Art Gallery of Malaysia, for instance, has shown interest in such an App for promoting their activities (information obtained during a discussion with the Director of the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, May 2014). Additionally, there may also be some attendant risks, such as the challenge of getting guests to 'engage' with this technology and the current general lack of knowledge of the existence of such mobile services.

Limitations and Conclusion

The number of questionnaires distributed was limited to 200 for both groups, which could be increased to a percentage ratio of actual overseas visitors by nationality in future research. A further limitation is that, whilst a recommendation has been made to use a Communication App, no trial has been carried out to verify the assumptions of either the respondents or the researchers relating to the feasibility of using such an App in the Malaysian context, and this could be included in future research.

From the data analysis, it is concluded that Malaysian hotels are increasing their focus towards two major groups of tourists in terms of quantity and revenue, i.e. tourists from the Middle East and Mainland China. Future language and cultural awareness training for hotel staff should focus on the two highly desired foreign language skills. The current rapid development of Apps for communication and navigation also has potential to provide significant improvements in the hotel industry.

Furthermore, after this study revealed weakness in the communication practise among the two observed groups, further research could investigate the relationship of demographic factors to the rationales on handheld devices. Such a study could include analysis of the relationship of independent variables awareness and ability by guests to use Apps; as well as training and English proficiency level by employees to facilitate Apps (IV) and the mediator variable (MV), i.e. to use such Apps for solving the issues (DV). However, in this paper the research focused on circumstances of language barriers, mismatches in communication, and rationales concerning Apps in the hotel environment.

The quality of English language attained by hotel employees is also of increasing apprehension, with concerns being raised by senior hotel managers over the level of proficiency. Staff should be trained in English specifically for the hospitality industry, which should eventually result in an improved Return on Investment. The end goal has to be for hotels to increase the service quality provided to their overseas visitors whilst also enhancing their stay by making it a uniquely rewarding experience. Well trained staff will have the capability to handle handheld devices for the best benefits for the hotel and guests.

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