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THE DESIGN OF TBECC (TEST OF BUSINESS ENGLISH COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE) FOR FRONT OFFICE STAFF IN HOTEL INDUSTRY: A CASE STUDY OF HOTELS IN SURABAYA, INDONESIA

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Abstract

Competition among hospitality industries in Indonesia has come to inevitable battle and, therefore, they must strengthen their front-liner staff for exemplary service due to the fact of the increasing numbers of hotels every year particularly in Surabaya, the capital of East Java Province and its role both for tourism and business. The role resulted in wave of expatriates coming to Surabaya and therefore strong English communication is considered important.

Initial survey showed that specific English test for Front Office (FO) staff recruitment in hotels did not exactly exist. For this purpose, a qualitative research employing a case study approach was conducted. The research involved 8 hotels in Surabaya and 40 participants comprising hotel leaders and FO staff. The important stages were conducted such as conducting Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with hotel leaders, distributing a set of questionnaire to Front Office leaders and staff, as well as enhancing clarity and confirmation through interviews. From those stages, the writer formulated the Target Language Use (TLU) of Front Office Division as basis to construct the Test of Business English Communication Competence (TBECC). Results showed that at least 18 of 26 items were extracted as TLUs for speaking and 7 of 10 items were extracted to serve as TLUs for writing. Finally, based on the obtained TLUs, 14 questions for speaking were constructed and for writing test, 5 questions measured competencies such as filling a guest detailed form, writing a confirmation letter, welcome letter and email of coordination, as well as replying a complaint and writing a thank you email to guests. Finally, recommendation to involve more hotels that receive a huge number of foreigners as their guests was also given.

Keywords

Hotel, Speaking, Writing Target Language Use (TLU), Test of Business English Communication Competence (TBECC), Front Office

1. Introduction

Surabaya, as the central city of East Java Province in Indonesia, has rapidly grown its economic condition for the past decade. Such condition occurs ever since the city is acknowledged as one the biggest center of business in the region. Conducive environment has also been successfully developed by the local government through the establishment of better transportation, new airport, and terminals for public. Consequently, there are many positive impacts earned by the city. More people from outside Surabaya invest their money and do business in this city. New businesses at least are created due to its attraction as a promising city which later, in turn, can return their capital a lot more than invested in the future. Not only as a center of business in East Java, Surabaya has also developed its tourism to increase local revenue. Realizing the prospects, the local government has also done tremendous efforts in shaping Surabaya as a tourist destination which offers culinary asset at the same time. In addition, such amazing developments in Surabaya has brought individuals not only from other regions in Indonesia but also foreign ones to stay both temporarily and permanently.

Huge wave of people from outside Surabaya coming to this city along with its growing business and tourism, without doubts, lead to the demands of hotels for them. Indonesia Hotel and Restaurant Association (IHRA) claims potential number of hotels keep on increasing year by year. At least, the association notes hotels grow up to 10 percent in average from 2016 to 2017. Though number of hotels has been continuously improving, average occupancy rate is not always parallel to it. Therefore, tight competition becomes inevitable especially on products and services. Competitive rates on hotel rooms, different facilities offered, better services than others given to customers and the like show how the competition has taken place.

Services in hospitality industry, in this regard, are closely related to the capacity of human resources at hotels that deal directly with customers. Seeing the fact that Surabaya is widely open for foreigners who come for business or leisure, English competence should be acquired by the Front Office (FO) staff as the front lines serving the overseas guests. In the preliminary observation and interview involving three and four star hotels in Surabaya conducted, it was found out that all of them shared one common problem; their staff's English competence both oral and written. In the interview, Hotel supervisors and managers claimed that there was an urgent need to improve their staff's speaking and writing competence for the purpose of excellent service in hospitality industries and seemed that . Smooth communication between the customers and staff for the sake of the fulfilment of needs during their stay in the hotels was the important issue to address. In short, as long as the foreign customers can get what they need quickly, hotel service would be scored "good" or even "excellent". Thus, the ability to respond both in oral and written method became the focus in hotel business.

The competence of oral and written English in Front Office Division becomes the substantial need which should be fulfilled and this becomes matters for those who want to be part of the team as Mountford's claim (1981) about needs as knowledge which should be learnt by learners since they are considered important by the company. The knowledge the applicants learn becomes requirements in order to be successful at job finding (Widdowson, 1981). In the case of matching the needs of the company, there should be match between employment skills and job requirements (Betchoo, N.K., 2017). Moreover, Hutchinson and Waters (1996) point out the English language as the requirement in target situation, in this case, Front Office Division at Hotels.

In regard with competence which should be owned by the applicants, language competence was one of the elements of employability that belonged to the competitiveness of

indicators of soft skills, hard skills and competitiveness (SHC) performances (Hadiyanto, et al., 2017). These components come to the Hard skills category. Meanwhile, in the soft skills element, communication skills also becomes an important indicator of SHC performances since it involves the ability of using English both oral and written one.

Due to its importance, another finding from the interview was that these hotels had not had proper test to check the applicants' English competence. They claimed oral interview was the only way to check their speaking interview, meanwhile, writing competence referred to their application letters or curriculum vitae (CV). Interview session mostly asked about general information of the applicants which include; educational background, reason applying the position, and efforts to be considered eligible for the position. Length of interview varied from ten to thirty minutes. Finally, the interviewer decided the fitness of the applicants on the basis only from their interview and CV.

2. Problem Identification

From the process of interview and screening applicants' CV, the main problem can be identified that the process did not really measure speaking and writing ability relevant to the Front Office (FO) tasks on daily basis. Due to the fact, hotels did not have a specific test that can be used for staff recruitment of Front Office Department.

3. Research Objectives

Finding out the fact hotels did not have proper speaking and writing test for Front Office (FO), the writer intended to create a test which could measure the candidates' speaking and writing competence applying for FO positions. Since the test is intended to measure communication competence in business field particularly hotel business, this research aimed at:

- a. Describing stages of test construction intended to Front Office competence;
- b. Drawing Target Language Use (TLU) for both speaking and writing;
- c. Designing a Test of Business English Competence (TBECC).

4. Method

Test of Business English Communication Competence (TBECC) was designed based on some important stages conducted. They are:

- Document and library study

As basis to design the test, the writer collected relevant documents which could support as reference. The first document referred to a survey conducted by the

Business English Study Program of Politeknik Ubaya, Surabaya, East Java, in 2016. The survey involved companies where students of Business English conducted apprenticeship. Findings showed users expected the curriculum of Business English focused more on speaking and writing as the needed competence at the time. Another research by Datu (2016) involved sixteen vocational high schools and eighty five participants in Surabaya and Sidoarjo revealed that (1) low confidence level of the participants to speak English, (2) low level of speaking ability of the participants, and (3) participants' poor exposure of English. Datu and Rachmasari (2016) also addressed similar issues like low confidence level as well as poor speaking competence perceived by the participants involving those who took Public Speaking Subject.

Relevant to the above studies, Sekolah Vokasi Universitas Gadjah Mada (SVUGM), Jogjakarta, Central Java, designed a test called TEVocS (Test of English for Vocational Students) in 2016. The test covered the four skills namely Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing. Inputs for the test from companies were in regard with the addition of items for writing and reading competence, more various items in speaking and listening (Soelistywati, E., & Yuanti, E. E. , 2016).

- Field study

In this part, the process was divided into three stages namely Focus Group Discussion (FGD), distributing a set of questionnaire and interview. The FGD involved forty participants from eight different hotels in Surabaya, Indonesia. The profile of the hotels were two five-star hotels, four four-star hotels and two three-star hotels. The participants in FGD consisted of hotel leaders and Front Office staff. In this stage, the writer did need analysis to obtain information on tasks usually performed by the FO staff (Ellis and Johnson, 1994). The effort was systematically done since it dealt with the hotel system as suggested by Graves (2000) in defining need analysis.

For the second stage, the writer also distributed questionnaire to all participants comprising Front Office staff and managers. The purpose was to obtain the Target Language Use (TLU) which became the basis of constructing Test of Business English Communication Competence (TBECC). This process became the next-step process of needs analysis which identified more specific language needs at the FO Division (Richards, J. C., P, T., & P, N., 1992).

The last stage was to conduct interview as a means of clarifying or reconfirming what had been uttered during FGD and written in the questionnaire. All information from FGD, questionnaire and interview were then analysed and extracted the language needs into TLU for the two skills; speaking and writing.

5. Results and Discussions

FGD and survey were conducted in eight hotels. During FGD, hotel leaders were invited to get information on which department that used English competence the most frequent and kind of situations that FO staff usually used English in their day-to-day operations. To strengthen the findings in FGD, questionnaires were also distributed to forty respondents from those eight hotels. The respondents were all from Front Office (FO) Departments. Then, results of FGD and survey were in a form of TLU both speaking and writing.

TLU of speaking consisted twenty six (26) items where eighteen (69%) items were considered as TLUs for all hotels. They were as follows: addressing guests, asking guests' trip, asking about reservation to guests, explaining type of rooms to guests, asking about guests' room preference, asking about guests' length of stay, asking about additional service for the guests, responding to questions on tourism spots in the city, responding to questions on local food/culinary, responding to questions on directions, responding to guests' request on meeting room, asking the guest about preference of payment method, asking the guests on preference on currency for credit card payment of method, serving guests who wish to prolong their stay, serving the process of check out, serving the process of guests' payment, making small talks with guests, serving in-room check in of guests with special needs, and serving guests' complaints.

Meanwhile, TLU on asking about guests' purpose of visit, offering welcome drink, conducting courtesy call after the guests check-in received 88%. 75% of the hotels admitted that asking the guest on preference on currency for credit card payment of method and giving morning call became their TLUs. Furthermore, only 50% of the hotels admitted offering guests as a hotel member and explaining facility as hotel member as the TLUs. Detailed TLUs of speaking can be seen below:

Table 1: TLU of Speaking

Skill	No.	TLU	Percentage
SPEAKING	1	Address guests	100%
	2	Ask guests' trip	100%
	3	Ask about reservation to guests	100%
	4	Explain type of rooms to guests	100%
	5	Ask about guests' room preference	100%
	6	Ask about guests' length of stay	100%
	7	Ask about purpose of visit	88%
	8	Ask about additional service for guests	100%
	9	Respond to questions on tourism spots in Surabaya	100%
	10	Ask preference on drink and meals	88%
	11	Offer welcome drink	88%
	12	Respond to questions on local food/culinary	100%
	13	Respond to questions on direction	100%
	14	Respond to a request on meeting room	100%
	15	Ask the guest about preference on payment method	100%
	16	Ask the guest on preference on currency for credit card payment of method	75%
	17	Offer guests as a hotel member	50%
	18	Explain facility as hotel member	50%
	19	Serve guests who want to prolong the stay	100%
	20	conduct courtesy call after the guests check in	88%
	21	Do morning call	75%
	22	Serve the process of check out	100%
	23	Serve process of guests' payment	100%
	24	Make small talk with guests	100%
	25	Serve in-room check in of guests with special needs	100%
	26	Serve complaints	100%

Besides speaking, results of FGD and survey to hotels showed TLUs of writing which have to be considered in designing TBECC. The agreed TLUs for receiving 100% acknowledgement by all were writing the details of guests' stay and guests' preference in details, writing internal emails to their superiors as problems that need special attention occurred, writing a division report to managers, writing apology letters when mistakes happened during guests' stay as well as responding guests' complaint.

Target Language Use (TLO) of Writing

Table 2: *TLU of Writing*

Skill	No.	TLU	Percentage
WRITING	1	Writing the details of guests' stay	100%
	2	Writing guests' preference in details	100%
	3	Write an internal email to their superiors when facing a problem that need special attention	100%
	4	Write a division report to manager	100%
	5	Write emails to other hotels which are under the same group	63%
	6	Write emails for coordination to other divisions at the same hotel	88%
	7	Write emails to guests for confirmation of their stay before their coming	75%
	8	Write a thank you letter after the guest check-out	63%
	9	Write an apology letter when mistake seem to happen during the guests' stay	100%
	10	Respond guests' complaint	100%

Based on the the Target Language Use (TLU) above, it can be broken down into tasks for each skill. For Speaking, several tasks should be designed as a part of TBECC will be (1) to describe a picture, (2) to express an opinion, (3) to propose a solution, (4) to summarize and re-tell information, (5) to respond to a statement, and (6) to formulate questions based on the information given. The criteria can be seen in table 3:

Table 3: Breakdown of TLU for Speaking Skills

Question	Task	Competence	Criteria
1	Describe a picture	Describing room types	Pronunciation Grammar Vocabularies
2 – 3	Express an opinion	Explaining local places and local delicacies	Pronunciation Grammar Vocabularies Cohesion
4 – 7	Propose a solution	Offering additional services at the hotel Offering welcome drink Offering solution for complaints	Pronunciation Vocabularies Cohesion Relevance of the Context Completeness of the Context
8 – 9	Summarize and Re-tell Information	Asking about room preferences	Pronunciation Relevance of the Context Completeness of the Context
10 – 12	Respond to a statement	Greeting guests Asking about the reservation Making small talk Responding to a complaint Doing morning call	Relevance of the Context Pronunciation Grammar
13 – 14	Formulate questions based on the information given	Asking about food preferences Asking about the payment method	Pronunciation Relevance of the Context Grammar

For Writing, necessary task should be involved in the design will be as follows:

Table 4: Breakdown of TLU for Writing Skills

Question	Task	Competence	Criteria
1	Fill a form based on the information given	Filling a detailed form about a guest	Relevance of the Context
2 – 3	Write letters	Writing a confirmation letter Writing a welcome letter Writing an email of coordination	Grammar Relevance of the Context Quality and variation of the sentences Vocabulary Organization
4 – 5	Respond to written letter	Replying a complaint in written form Writing a thank you email	Grammar Relevance of the Context Quality and variation of the sentences Vocabulary Organization

6. Conclusion and Suggestions

The absence of standard test for hotel industry in Surabaya, Indonesia will at least be able to create less competitive service in the respective area. More particularly, Front Office Division as the important front-liner should serve its best in order to achieve excellent service that lead to increasing rate of occupancy in hotels.

For this reason, a qualitative research involving stakeholders from hotels in Surabaya was conducted. Several stages of Focus Group Discussions were made in order to get Target Language Use (TLU) both for speaking and writing skills necessary to help Front Office staff in their daily basis operation with purpose of leaving positive image from customers staying at their hotels. To obtain detailed information and to make sure the TLU, the writer also distributed a set of questionnaire containing items of potential TLU on which all hotel practitioners gave their inputs.

Both FGD results and questionnaire finally gave 26 TLUs for speaking and 10 TLUs for writing. From which, the Test of Business English Communication Competence was designed. The criteria was also made in line with the expected outcome of the staff desired by the users. For better use of TBECC, the test was transformed into software version called

TBECC 1.0 that shows the first version of the test. Additionally, in order to get more valid TLUs, bigger scope of participants is strongly suggested so detailed TLUC can be obtained to create better TBECC.

Not only a matter of much of time invested, this research also has another limitation; number of hotels involved as participants. The participants were only limited to two five-star hotels, four four-star hotels and two three-star hotels. The next research should involve five-star hotels and more four-star hotels which can be the representative of hotel industries assumed as the most frequently English use at the FO department due to the fact that much bigger chance of accepting expatriates seeking for better hotel services.

It is also recommended that the test can have more relevant criteria in measuring speaking and writing competence of the FO candidates since not all elements in speaking and writing are needed based on the FO competence required on their daily basis performance. Furthermore, validity of test constructed shall be conducted to make sure the consistency of measurement and results of the test relevant to the FO competence.

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