

Hospitality Meets Language: Addressing English Communication Barriers in Indonesian Hotels Based on TripAdvisor Guest Reviews

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Abstract. Effective communication is crucial in the hospitality industry. However, communication challenges between hotel staff and foreign guests may arise in countries where English is not widely spoken, such as in Indonesia. This study aims to identify the English language barriers encountered by Indonesian hotel staff during their interactions with foreign guests, drawing on insights from TripAdvisor guest reviews, and propose strategies to overcome these obstacles. Using a qualitative approach, 70 relevant guest reviews were thematically analyzed. The findings revealed three main barriers: poor comprehension, limited vocabulary, and a lack of fluency. These issues lead to miscommunication between guests and hotel staff, confusion, frequent repetition, service failures, and guest dissatisfaction. To overcome these language limitations, several strategies have been recommended, including the implementation of English training programs tailored to hospitality contexts, the use of visual aids, regular monitoring of guest feedback, and the utilization of technology-assisted communication tools. The proposed training materials focused on listening practice with diverse English accents, essential vocabulary, common expressions, and practical dialogues related to telephone communication, front office operations, restaurant and room service, and housekeeping interactions. Addressing these language issues is expected to significantly enhance service quality and foreign guest satisfaction in the future.

1 Introduction

Effective communication plays a crucial role in the hospitality industry. The ability to communicate in English is a significant aspect of this industry, especially when serving international or foreign guests. Moreover, English functions as a worldwide common language or global lingua franca [1], enabling hotel staff and guests from various countries to understand each other. However, communication challenges between hotel staff and foreign or international guests may arise in countries where English is not widely spoken, such as in Indonesia. Intercultural communication issues can also occur in hotel services, particularly when staff members lack adequate English proficiency [2] [3].

Limitations in English proficiency can lead to misunderstandings and dissatisfaction with hotel services. The main issues that hotel receptionists may face when communicating in

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English include limited technical vocabulary, difficulty in understanding different accents and dialects, challenges in responding promptly and appropriately in emergency situations, grammar, self-confidence, fluency, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and voice quality [4] [5]. Although many hotel staff in Indonesia are known for their friendliness and positive attitude, language barriers remain a significant challenge that directly impacts the perception of service quality.

Several previous studies have discussed the English issues faced by Indonesian hotel staff in relation to their English proficiency levels. These studies primarily involved hotel staff as respondents to gain primary data. For example, Ariyati analyzed the functions and barriers to using English by front office staff at hotels in Bali through in-depth interviews [2]. The results revealed that English played a crucial role in the front office for greeting and welcoming, registering, handling check-in and check-out, providing information, being a diplomatic agent, and being a problem solver. Another study by Taslim analyzed the ability of hotel employees to explain guest room facilities in English [6]. The data for this study were collected through interviews with employees from several hotels in Ogan Hilir, South Sumatra, observations, and documentation. The findings indicated that most employees possessed basic skills in using English but encountered difficulties in explaining room facilities in detail and professionally. Furthermore, a study identified the interference in the use of English by hotel and restaurant staff in the Candidasa tourist area of Bali [7].

In the digital age, online guest reviews can become an important data source for objectively evaluating service quality from a user perspective. Tripadvisor, one of the world's largest travel review platforms, provides authentic feedback from international guests that reflects their real experiences, including aspects of communication [8]. Nevertheless, there is still limited research that directly explores online review data to understand the challenges of English communication in Indonesian hotel settings. This study addresses the aforementioned gap in hospitality research by analyzing guest-generated reviews to identify real-world English communication issues faced by Indonesian hotel staff members. This study aims to identify the English language barriers encountered by Indonesian hotel staff during their interactions with foreign guests, drawing on insights from Tripadvisor guest reviews. Additionally, this study proposes strategies to overcome these challenges to improve service quality and foreign guest satisfaction.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Importance of English Language Proficiency for Hotel Staff

Good English language proficiency is essential for hotel employees. This helps prevent misunderstandings in communication between hotel staff and guests. When guests communicate in English, hotel staff are expected to respond appropriately. Language barriers influence service quality [2] which in turn negatively affects guest satisfaction. Communication issues are among the major categories of complaints, and language issues significantly contribute to guest dissatisfaction [9]. Furthermore, there is a positive correlation between hospitality workers' English ability and tourist satisfaction [10]. It can be highlighted that better language competency leads to higher customer satisfaction. Therefore, hotel staff should develop and maintain excellent English proficiency.

2.2 Tripadvisor

Online review platforms (e.g., Tripadvisor, Booking.com, Google Reviews) serve as significant data sources for hospitality research by offering extensive amounts of user-generated

content that reflects real guest experiences, unsolicited feedback, and specific service elements such as communication, cleanliness, and responsiveness. Studies have demonstrated that aspect-based sentiment analysis and modern NLP techniques (including zero-shot learning) can extract fine-grained insights from these reviews, such as identifying how communication issues influence overall guest sentiment and satisfaction [11]. Online reviews also invite the analysis of hotel responses. Research into hotel reply strategies on Tripadvisor shows that managerial/written responses are an important part of digital reputation management and can mitigate negative effects when performed with rapport management principles. This supports the use of review texts and hotel replies as complementary data for studying communication challenges and reputational impact [12].

Tripadvisor is one of the largest travel review platforms in the world, providing user-generated content in the form of reviews and ratings of tourist destinations, hotels, restaurants, and various travel-related services. In the digital tourism landscape, Tripadvisor serves as a major source of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which significantly influences tourist behavior and decision-making processes. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) attributes such as review credibility, information clarity, and users' trust in TripAdvisor significantly affect tourists' behavioral intentions to visit certain destinations [13]. On the business side, Tripadvisor is not only a passive promotional tool but also a feedback platform that reflects customer satisfaction, complaints, and service quality. A case study on the InterContinental Bali Sanur Resort found that positive reviews on TripAdvisor, when combined with social media strategies such as Instagram marketing, helped strengthen brand image and improve customer loyalty [14].

Recent studies have also utilized Tripadvisor data for sentiment analysis, particularly aspect-based sentiment analysis, to identify specific service aspects that influence tourist experiences [15]. In terms of trustworthiness, reviews with a positive tone are generally perceived as more credible, although negative reviews remain important indicators of service shortcomings [16]. Moreover, user satisfaction on TripAdvisor is influenced by concerns about privacy and data security. Users are more satisfied and trust the platform when privacy practices are transparent and well managed [17]. In summary, Tripadvisor plays an important role in shaping tourist perceptions, influencing travel choices, and providing practical insights for the tourism stakeholders. It functions as both a platform for travelers to share their experiences and as a rich data source for researchers and tourism professionals seeking to enhance service quality and marketing strategies.

3 Research Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the English communication challenges hotel staff in Indonesia face. Qualitative research focuses on understanding social phenomena by exploring context, lived experiences, individual perspectives, and the meanings people assign to their realities [18]. Accordingly, this study sought to investigate English language barriers in Indonesian hotels and present the findings within a qualitative framework, emphasizing descriptive insights rather than numerical generalizations.

3.1 Data Collection

Guest reviews on TripAdvisor were used as the primary data source in this study to identify recurring themes related to language barriers during guest-staff interactions. The participants in this study were international or foreign guests who posted reviews in English on TripAdvisor (<https://www.Tripadvisor.com/>) regarding their experiences of staying in hotels

in Indonesia. Document analysis was employed as the research instrument. Furthermore, this study used purposive sampling, a qualitative research technique used to select individuals or documents that possess particular knowledge or experience relevant to the phenomenon under study [18]. Seventy guest reviews on Tripadvisor were selected based on their relevance to English communication, providing diverse perspectives on language-related challenges in hotel service interactions. The inclusion criteria for the selected reviews were as follows: written in English, focused on interactions between hotel staff and guests, and contained references to communication quality or language-related concerns. The reviews were drawn from several hotels located in various regions of Indonesia, such as Bali, Bandung, Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Lombok.

The data collection techniques used in this study were as follows:

1. Conducting a manual search for relevant Tripadvisor guest reviews.
The initial search was conducted using the keyword “English” and most of the reviews collected were from the last five years.
2. Organizing the selected data for coding and analysis.
3. Maintaining ethical standards by using only publicly available reviews and anonymizing hotel names to ensure confidentiality.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved familiarizing with the collected data, creating or generating initial codes, searching for themes from codes, reviewing obtained themes, defining themes, identifying the most significant quotations, and writing up [19]. The data analysis steps are as follows:

1. Familiarization: Reading and re-reading the reviews to obtain an initial understanding.
2. Generating codes: Identifying sentences and phrases related to communication issues (e.g., “misunderstanding”, “confusion”, “barrier”, “don’t understand”).
3. Searching for themes: Grouping similar codes under broader themes such as “limited vocabulary” and “lack of fluency”.
4. Reviewing themes: Refining and combining overlapping themes for clarity.
5. Defining and naming themes: Finalizing thematic categories with clear labels.
6. Writing the report: Presenting findings with direct quotes from guest reviews.

In summary, the data were thematically categorized. The findings were then presented in accordance with the objectives of the study, and the conclusion was ultimately drawn.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 English Language Barriers Encountered by Foreign Guests during Their Interactions with Hotel Staff in Indonesia based on Tripadvisor Guest Reviews

A total of 70 guest reviews on Tripadvisor were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the English language barriers encountered by Indonesian hotel staff during interactions with foreign guests. They covered reviews of twenty-four hotels in Indonesia. The results showed

Table 1. English Language Barriers Encountered by Hotel Staff in Indonesia Based on Tripadvisor Guest Reviews

No	Language Barrier	Frequency
1	Poor comprehension	24
2	Limited vocabulary	20
3	Lack of fluency	7

both positive and negative reviews of the program. Most of them (fifty-one reviews) indicated the occurrence of English language barriers between foreign (international) guests and hotel staff in Indonesia. The rest revealed smooth interactions between foreign guests and hotel staff, leading to satisfactory English communication. The guests’ appreciation indicated that some hotels had staff with proficient English skills. The following are some of the positive reviews from the guests:

1. The staff had a good command of English, so there were no communication difficulties.
2. All the staff speak relatively good English! That is very comforting!
3. Excellent services by friendly English speaking staff, junior or seniors.

In relation to English language issues, the analysis unveiled three English language barriers faced by Indonesian hotel staff based on TripAdvisor guest reviews. The types of barriers and their frequencies are summarized in Table 1.

4.1.1 *Limited Vocabulary*

One of the issues identified was the hotel staff’s limited vocabulary. This barrier makes it difficult for hotel staff in Indonesia to understand and respond accurately to guest requests. This resulted in slower service and frustration among guests who felt that their needs were not met properly. The following are examples of excerpts from Tripadvisor guest reviews indicating limited vocabulary.

1. Communication is difficult with the room service staff and the hotel should invest in teaching basic English to their staff.
2. Staff english is limited - which makes communicating on some things difficult or impossible.
3. We had problem with the communication of front desk . We got lost in Ubud and called the hotel twice, but the staff did not speak English well enough to understand the uncomfortable situation my 89 years mom and I were in. It took us more than an hour to return to the hotel.

4.1.2 *Lack of Fluency*

Hotel staff who were not fluent in English often made it difficult for guests to understand them, and this lack of fluency disrupted smooth interactions. The following excerpts from guest reviews illustrate this issue:

1. Staff are at times a little inexperienced and some not fluent in English
2. None of the restaurant staff members spoke fluent English.
3. The English of the staff, both on the phone and in reception was not very good. There was some confusion as to whether we should pay \$30 per night for 3 rooms or \$30 per night per room.

4.1.3 Poor Comprehension

Hotel staff sometimes fail to fully understand guests' requests, causing incorrect service delivery. This poor comprehension might be due to limited vocabulary and inadequate listening skills. This led to incorrect orders, confusion, frustration, and a negative experience overall. Guests reported feeling confused and, in some cases, received incorrect services or responses from the chatbot. Poor comprehension was reported as the most frequent and impactful issue. The following guest review excerpts exemplify this barrier.

1. I requested for 2 sunny side up from the cook at breakfast and was responded with a confused look. After restating my request, only one sunny side up egg was served. Therefore, I clarified that I wanted two, and there should still be one more. The cook acknowledged my request and, to my surprise, returned with two eggs instead of one. Similarly, I requested more room coffee packets, and the staff brought only a single pack. Again, I gave up and went along with it.
2. Communication was also very bad, everyone had an extremely basic understanding of English, so lots of confusion ordering something and receiving something else.
3. The staff need to be trained in comprehending instructions in the English language.
4. The staff on lot of occasions didn't understand on what we were saying. Perhaps all staff members need to undergo English training!
5. I ordered room service since I was tired and told room service that I would like to pay with credit card 3 times. The food arrived, and the man said that he needed to pay cash because he had no deposit at the hotel. I paid Agoda for the hotel, so no deposits were taken. I told the man that I requested credit card payment. He left and came back asking me to go with him to the front desk to pay with a card. I asked, Do n' t you have a wireless machine ? No reply. So, I went with him to the front desk at the lobby, and I spoke to the duty manager, who was very apologetic because they had six wireless machines, and room service did a bad job, and the language barrier was an issue.
6. Their lack of English led to my Muslim wife being served pork bacon even though we had explicitly asked for "beef".

4.2 Strategies to Overcome The English Language Barriers

Several strategies have been proposed to overcome these English language barriers. They were as follows:

1. The implementation of English training programs tailored to hospitality contexts
The main strategy proposed to address the English language issues was the implementation of English training programs tailored to hospitality contexts. This was also recommended by guests based on their reviews. The suggested training materials focused on listening practice with diverse English accents, essential vocabulary, common expressions, and practical dialogues related to telephone communication, front office operations, restaurant and room service, and housekeeping interactions. In the hospitality industry, English expressions and conversations typically cover a wide range of guest service situations, such as greeting and welcoming guests, offering help, providing information or directions, making or responding to requests, taking orders, handling telephone communication, dealing with reservations and check-in/check-out procedures, managing complaints, giving suggestions or recommendations, and expressing

thanks or farewells. Mastering these expressions was found to be crucial for delivering friendly, professional, and efficient services to guests in various situations. Additionally, the training content should integrate vocabulary, pronunciation drills, and fluency, as they mutually reinforce each other: an extensive vocabulary supports fluency and understanding, while clear pronunciation boosts clarity. Furthermore, role-play simulation was regarded as one of the best methods for practicing English in this context.

2. The use of visual aids

To support communication with foreign or international guests, visual aids were introduced as a complementary tool. Examples included bilingual menus with descriptive food images, color-coded maps of the hotel or surrounding area, translated labels on amenities, pictorial signs, and infographics. Bilingual menus with descriptive food images were particularly helpful for foreign guests who may not understand local terms. Visual communication resources are expected to help reduce misunderstandings and improve the overall guest experience.

3. The regular monitoring of guest feedback

Continuous monitoring of guest feedback was another strategy to overcome the language issues. This was necessary to identify areas for improving communication. By regularly collecting and analyzing guest reviews and comments, both verbal and written, management can assess the effectiveness of existing communication practices and training programs. This feedback-driven approach allowed for timely adjustments and targeted interventions, ensuring that communication gaps were proactively addressed to maintain service quality.

4. The utilization of technology-assisted communication tools

To make communication easier with foreign guests, hotel staff could use technology-assisted communication tools. These include mobile translation applications, digital concierge services, and smart devices that support multiple languages. These technologies enable staff to translate and interact in real time, helping them to overcome language barriers more efficiently. This improved guest satisfaction and boosted staff confidence in handling various guest needs.

4.3 Discussion

The findings revealed that the low English proficiency of hotel staff negatively impacted the guest experience, particularly in terms of communication. Three language barriers were identified: poor comprehension, limited vocabulary, and a lack of fluency. These language issues often lead to misunderstandings, confusion, service failures, and guest dissatisfaction. The analysis identified poor comprehension as the primary communication challenge faced by hotel staff when they interact with foreign guests. This barrier most frequently resulted in guest dissatisfaction. This was particularly evident in several guest reviews that described the repeated communication breakdowns. For example, one guest detailed an incident during breakfast where a simple request for two sunny-side-up eggs led to confusion and multiple delivery errors, ultimately requiring the guest to repeat the request several times with unsatisfactory results. Similarly, the same guest experienced a misunderstanding when asking for additional coffee packets, but received only one and eventually gave up on the request. Another guest recounted a serious mistake caused by language barriers: his Muslim wife was mistakenly served pork bacon despite her explicit request for beef. The guest emphasized the urgent need for hotels to hire qualified staff with adequate language skills to improve service quality.

This study aligns with previous research emphasizing limited vocabulary as an issue encountered by hotel staff. Clarah et al. identified limited vocabulary as one of the main challenges faced by hotel employees in Palembang, ranking it alongside other significant barriers such as cultural awareness and understanding guests' accents [5]. This limitation hampers the staff's ability to convey information accurately and respond appropriately to guest inquiries, thereby increasing the risk of communication breakdowns and negatively impacting service quality.

Furthermore, this study supports the theoretical framework that language barriers impact service quality, subsequently leading to decreased guest satisfaction [2]. Therefore, enhancing the language skills of hospitality staff is crucial for improving the overall guest experience and reducing negative feedback. The results of this study underscore the importance of English language training programs tailored to Indonesian hotel staff within the hospitality setting. The proposed training modules cover common hospitality scenarios, such as handling reservations, check-in and check-out procedures, managing guest complaints, restaurant and room service, and housekeeping interactions. Each module emphasized key vocabulary, functional expressions, and listening comprehension practice. To further enhance communication skills, staff are exposed to various non-native accents and commonly used phrases in international contexts, which is expected to reduce misunderstandings during guest interactions in the future. The training framework also integrates role-playing and simulation activities to build confidence and intercultural communication competence among hotel employees. For example, role-play activities and pronunciation drills will help staff recognize and respond more effectively to frequently misunderstood expressions reported in guest complaints.

Improving English proficiency can reduce misunderstandings and miscommunications, enhance service accuracy, and elevate the overall guest experience, which are key factors in maintaining competitiveness in the global hospitality market. Positive interactions lead to favorable online reviews, which enhance the hotel's credibility and attract potential guests. Conversely, limited language skills can lead to miscommunication, incorrect services, and guest dissatisfaction, resulting in negative reviews that damage trust and deter bookings. Thus, investing in language training not only improves service quality but also positively impacts the hotel's reputation in the digital realm.

5 Conclusion

This study explores English communication challenges between foreign or international guests and Indonesian hotel staff, drawing insights from Tripadvisor guest reviews. The results of the study revealed both positive and negative reviews. These findings indicate variations in language competence across different hotels. Positive reviews highlight smooth interactions and enhanced guest experiences. In contrast, the negative reviews indicate that English language barriers remain a significant challenge for Indonesian hotel staff, affecting communication, service efficiency, and guest satisfaction. The findings indicate that English language barriers include poor comprehension, limited vocabulary, and lack of fluency. These issues lead to miscommunication between guests and hotel staff, confusion, slower communication, frequent repetition, service failures, and guest dissatisfaction. To overcome these barriers, this study recommends several strategies, such as the implementation of English training programs tailored to hospitality contexts, the use of visual aids, regular monitoring of guest feedback, and the utilization of technology-assisted communication tools. Furthermore, the proposed training materials focus on listening practice with diverse English accents, essential vocabulary, common expressions, and practical dialogues related to telephone communication, front office operations, restaurant and room service, and housekeep-

ing interactions. By addressing these English language issues, service quality and foreign guest satisfaction are expected to improve significantly.

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