

Enhancing Hospitality in Malaysia's Tourism Industry through English Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry contributes significantly to Malaysia's economic development, with international tourists contributing significantly to its growth. While technological advancements and improved facilities have enhanced the sector, effective communication remains a key determinant of tourist satisfaction and sustainable industry performance. As the global lingua franca, English is essential for front-line tourism workers such as tour guides, receptionists, and service providers. This paper reviews existing literature to examine the issues and effects of limited English proficiency among Malaysian tourism workers in their interactions with international tourists. Findings reveal that low proficiency in English leads to reduced clarity and accuracy in information delivery, hinders problem-solving, and restricts meaningful engagement with tourists. Challenges commonly reported include difficulties in understanding diverse English accents, limited vocabulary, and the inability to construct grammatically correct responses. These barriers often cause miscommunication, frustration, and a decline in tourist satisfaction. Besides, the lack of adequate English skills reduces Malaysia's competitiveness in the global tourism market by limiting positive reviews, repeat visits, and overall destination appeal. Conversely, studies suggest that improving English proficiency among local workers enhances communication, strengthens customer rapport, and contributes positively to Malaysia's international reputation. The review highlights that English proficiency is not merely a communication tool but a fundamental factor influencing service quality, customer satisfaction, and operational efficiency in tourism. There is a need for further research and training initiatives aimed at developing a more linguistically competent tourism workforce to ensure Malaysia's continued growth as a competitive global destination.

Keywords: hospitality, tourism industry, English proficiency, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

In most countries, the tourism industry plays a vital role as one of the key economic sectors that contributes to growth and development. As of today, Malaysia's tourism industry has experienced rapid growth due to the adoption of advanced technology and the development of enhanced facilities. However, effective communication remains one of the most crucial factors in maintaining a sustainable tourism industry, particularly when interacting with international tourists. English is known as the lingua franca of the world. Hence, having an exceptional proficiency level in English is increasingly seen as a requirement in Malaysia's tourism industry, especially in front-line positions such as receptionists, tour guides, and service professionals.

This literature review seeks to delve into existing research and unravel the issues and effects of limited English

proficiency among local tourism workers with international tourists. Studies have shown how our local tourism workers have voiced their concerns that English is one of the most challenging areas for them due to limited English proficiency level (Kholidi et al., 2022). When language barriers occur, tourists may feel frustrated by the miscommunications and misinterpretations, leading to an average and discouraging trip.

Aim & Research Questions

The general aim of this paper is to investigate and unravel the issues and effects of limited English proficiency among local tourism workers with international tourists. The quest is guided by these three research questions:

Research Questions:

RQ1. How does English proficiency affect the ability of local tourism providers to communicate with international tourists?

RQ2. What are the key communication challenges faced by tourism workers in communicating with international tourists due to low English proficiency?

RQ3. In what ways do language barriers influence tourists' satisfaction and local tourism development?

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative approach paper utilizes the synthesis of data derived from reputable literature to address the central focus of the research that are guided by the three research questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will shed light on how the lack of adequate English proficiency among Malaysian tourism workers potentially leads to miscommunication, creating challenges among tourism workers and adversely impacts the growth of the tourism industry.

The Effects of Limited English Proficiency Among Tourism Workers on Communication with International Tourists

The lack of English proficiency reduces the clarity and accuracy of the information delivery to international tourists.

The studies reviewed generally agree that poor English proficiency among tourism employees significantly impairs the quality and clarity of information provided to foreign visitors. Hashemi et al. (2014) emphasised that low proficiency in English hindered tourism workers in Malaysia from providing meaningful interaction with tourists, as the employees would not be able to communicate properly in their native language. This often leads to misunderstandings, especially when information about services or itineraries is unclear. Therefore, they need to develop the necessary communication skills to deliver clear and accurate information during service interactions (Che Hassan et al., 2021). In addition, Hassan (2017) highlighted that failure in communicating important information, particularly on safety and services, leads to tourists' uncertainty and negatively affects their experiences. Furthermore, Syakier and Hanafiah (2021) added that tourist dissatisfaction stems from both informational gaps and the overall impression of the below par service.

This more comprehensive view of the role of language implies that the lack of English proficiency goes beyond misunderstandings, affecting overall tourist satisfaction.

Limited meaningful engagement and problem-solving that reduces overall tourist satisfaction

Overall, previous studies revealed that inadequate English proficiency among tourism workers leads to a decrease in overall tourist satisfaction, as it prevents meaningful engagement and problem-solving. Commonly, international tourists often faced communication difficulties, especially when asking for directions (Hashemi et al., 2014). The absence of effective communication in English can be hard for tourism workers. This limits their ability to address problems and provide appropriate solutions. Similarly, Che Hassan et al. (2021) stressed how the lack of effective verbal and non-verbal communication skills impairs the tourism workers' ability to build rapport with tourists, leaving them feeling frustrated and emotionally disconnected when their needs are not addressed.

This is further verified by Madon and Singh (2023) in their study where they discussed how pragmatic failures, such as inappropriate greetings or apologies, can contribute to misunderstandings in intercultural interactions by making tourists feel emotionally disconnected when their cultural expectations are not met. While these studies focus on communication issues related to English, Syakier and Hanafiah (2021) introduce a broader view of how tour guides' performance impacts satisfaction, suggesting that other aspects, such as attitude or behavior, can mitigate the communication gap even in the absence of English proficiency.

The Communication Challenges Faced by Tourism Workers in Communicating with International Tourists Due to a Lack of English Proficiency

Encountered challenges in understanding different English accents.

Based on the reviewed articles, one of the main challenges faced by local tourism workers when interacting with international tourists is the unfamiliarity with the various English accents spoken by individuals from different countries. Each country tends to have its distinct way of speaking English, influenced by its native language. Sulong et al. (2023) have demonstrated that these individuals have been in the field for a considerable amount of time. But some English accents remain challenging to understand due to their unusual pronunciation and speaking style.

Mohammad et al. (2022) supported that students in the Tourism Department reported that their lack of comprehension of a certain accent led them to misinterpret the customer's actual message. Similarly, Hassan and Tik (2019) also reported the same pattern of problems that caused communication breakdown between local workers and tourists due to their accents. An employee working in an international tour company for some time revealed that the challenges they encounter when dealing with customers include the struggle to understand slang and accents, as well as difficulty articulating clear pronunciation (Botir, 2024). However, some employees are more concerned that their unclear pronunciation and different English accents would make the tourists unable to understand their conversation (Suhaimi and Abdullah's 2017).

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Inability to construct grammatically correct responses hinders effective communication

The reviewed articles highlight that the inability to construct grammatically correct responses can negatively impact communication and customer relationships. Another challenge discussed in Hassan and Tik (2019) is the employees' performance task, which involves providing a correct grammatical response to customers, but their lack of knowledge hinders the interaction. Moreover, Suhaimi & Abdullah (2017) agreed that the interaction between employees and tourists was restricted and ineffective due to a lack of sufficient vocabulary. The limited vocabulary knowledge makes them unconfident, and they decided to learn a selected yet simple language or words to use while selling.

Others attempt to convey their message using straightforward language, hoping that customers will grasp the basic idea of what is being said or sold (Mohammad et al., 2022). Ultimately, it influences and affects their English fluency and confidence. The workers' confidence declines because they have minimal knowledge of the English language, which holds back their ability to communicate effectively with customers (Sulong et al., 2023).

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The Impact of English Language Barriers on Tourists' Satisfaction and Local Tourism Development

English language barriers negatively impact tourists' level of satisfaction

Most of the studies agree that tourists' satisfaction levels are negatively impacted by barriers of the English language. Maghsoodi Tilaki et al. (2017) identified a notable gap between the importance tourists place on communication and their actual satisfaction with it, indicating a key weakness in Penang's tourism industry that requires immediate attention. Latiff and Ng (2015) discovered that tourists were generally satisfied with the overall service quality in Kuala Lumpur, including the aspect of communication.

Ibrahim et al. (2019) reported that tourism has helped residents of Langkawi improve their English language skills through informal interactions with foreign tourists, leading to positive experiences for both locals and tourists. This suggests that positive impacts can be attained by diminishing the language barriers to increase the level of satisfaction among tourists. Abdul Zalil and Pek (2022) supported this perspective by referencing a prior study highlighting that foreign tourists often experience communication difficulties in countries where English is not the native language. In contrast, Chin et al. (2018) examined how service quality in Sarawak, specifically accessibility and accommodation, positively affects satisfaction, without addressing the English language as a factor.

English language barriers reduce market reach and competitiveness in the global tourism industry

Most of the studies reviewed suggest that poor English proficiency among service providers can lead to negative reviews and fewer repeat visits, which may potentially harm a destination's image and reputation. This, in turn, reduces its appeal and competitiveness in the global tourism market. Although there were still some elements of tourism service quality which require improvement, Latiff and Ng (2015) implied that tourists had intentions to revisit Kuala Lumpur and were willing to recommend the destination to friends and relatives. Ibrahim et al. (2019) found that the presence of foreign tourists enhances international competitiveness.

In Langkawi, improving residents' English skills has helped increase income in the service sector, especially in accommodation services like chalets and homestays. Although Chin et al. (2018) focused solely on two dimensions of service quality, accessibility and accommodation, their findings indicate a positive relationship between tourist satisfaction and revisit intention. This suggests that, beyond English language barriers, other service-related factors also play a significant role in enhancing a destination's market reach and competitiveness in the global tourism industry. Conversely, the studies by Maghsoodi Tilaki et al. (2017) and Abdul Zalil and Pek (2022) did not address this perspective, indicating a limited scope of study as they focus solely on specific aspects of tourism, rather than adopting a more comprehensive approach.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from the literature reviewed, organized according to the three research questions. The synthesis of previous studies highlights recurring patterns and points of convergence, while also noting areas where perspectives differ.

Effects of English Proficiency on Communication with International Tourists

The literature collectively indicates that limited English proficiency among tourism workers affects the clarity and accuracy of information shared with international tourists. Several studies agree that when workers are unable to express themselves effectively, misunderstandings are likely to occur, especially when conveying essential details related to services, safety, or itineraries (Hashemi et al., 2014; Che Hassan et al., 2021). These misunderstandings can create uncertainty for tourists and reduce their confidence in the service provided (Hassan, 2017).

While basic vocabulary and non-verbal gestures are sometimes used to bridge these gaps, they are often insufficient for more complex interactions, such as resolving complaints or explaining safety procedures. Syakier and Hanafiah (2021) add that the effects of language limitations go beyond individual exchanges, influencing tourists' overall perceptions of service quality and professionalism. Taken together, these findings suggest that English proficiency is not only a technical skill but also a key factor shaping the quality of tourist experiences. However, the literature also notes that positive attitudes and attentive behavior by tourism workers can, to some extent, offset the negative effects of language barriers, indicating that communication is shaped by both linguistic and interpersonal elements.

Communication Challenges Faced by Tourism Workers

The studies reviewed reveal two interrelated communication challenges. The first involves difficulties in understanding the diverse English accents spoken by international tourists. Even workers with moderate proficiency may struggle when tourists use unfamiliar pronunciation, slang, or idiomatic expressions, leading to misinterpretations or incomplete exchanges (Sulong et al., 2023; Hassan & Tik, 2019). These challenges are particularly evident in fast-paced service environments where workers must respond quickly and accurately.

The second challenge relates to the workers' own language production. Many employees lack the vocabulary and grammatical knowledge needed to construct accurate and professional responses. As a result, they tend to rely on simplified language or memorized phrases to convey basic ideas (Suhaimi & Abdullah, 2017; Mohammad et al., 2022). While this strategy allows for minimal functional communication, it limits the depth of interaction and may reinforce perceptions of low service quality. Over time, these difficulties can reduce workers' confidence, creating a cycle in which low proficiency leads to reduced communication, which in turn hinders further language development (Sulong et al., 2023).

These two challenges, understanding tourists' speech and producing clear responses, prove the dual nature of communication barriers. Workers not only face external obstacles in comprehending different accents but also internal barriers linked to their own language limitations. This synthesis suggests that improving communication effectiveness requires a dual approach: enhancing listening comprehension and building expressive skills.

Language Barriers, Tourist Satisfaction, and Tourism Development

There is broad agreement in the literature that English language barriers have implications for both tourist satisfaction and the broader development of local tourism. Several studies indicate that when tourists experience frequent miscommunications, their satisfaction levels tend to decrease, as confusion or unmet expectations negatively affect their overall experience (Maghsoodi Tilaki et al., 2017; Abdul Zalil & Pek, 2022). This dissatisfaction can result in negative reviews or reduced likelihood of repeat visits, which in turn can harm a destination's reputation.

However, other studies present a more nuanced view. Latiff and Ng (2015) found that in Kuala Lumpur, tourists were generally satisfied with services despite some language barriers, suggesting that other factors, such as hospitality or infrastructure, can compensate for linguistic shortcomings. Similarly, Chin et al. (2018) highlight that accessibility and accommodation strongly influence satisfaction, even when communication issues exist. This indicates that language proficiency is one important dimension among several that contribute to the overall tourist experience.

At the community level, Ibrahim et al. (2019) report that regular interaction with international tourists can gradually improve workers' English skills, which then creates a positive feedback loop: better communication leads to better service, which attracts more tourists and generates higher income. Synthesizing these findings, it appears that while English language barriers pose significant challenges, they are not insurmountable. When combined with improvements in other service areas, language training can play a pivotal role in enhancing both tourist satisfaction and the competitiveness of local tourism destinations.

Overall, the findings suggest that English proficiency plays a critical yet interconnected role in shaping communication effectiveness, tourist satisfaction, and the growth of local tourism. While language barriers remain a persistent challenge, they can be addressed through targeted interventions such as training, exposure to diverse English accents, and complementary service improvements. This highlights the need for a balanced

approach that recognizes language as a core component of tourism service quality while also considering other factors that influence the overall tourist experience

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shown that there is a strong relationship between the quality of effective communication with international tourists and the English language proficiency of local tourism workers. It is clear to say that English proficiency is critical to the growth of Malaysia's tourism industry. Apart from depending on technology and facilities to contribute to tourism growth, the ability to communicate effectively with international tourists is still a critical aspect in providing excellent service and bridging existing gaps in the sector. Limited English proficiency might result in the misunderstanding of critical information, restricting meaningful engagement and effective problem-solving, which will ultimately lead to tourists' dissatisfaction.

As mentioned by Saptiany and Putriningsih (2023), English proficiency goes beyond being just a communication tool but a critical determinant of service quality, customer satisfaction, and operational efficiency in the tourism industry. Furthermore, the ability to understand various foreign accents is also essential for maintaining smooth and respectful conversation. Improving English proficiency among tourism workers can result in various benefits such as positive tourist reviews, repeat travels, and a stronger global reputation. To ensure more coherent and accurate information, future research should investigate the influence of high English proficiency in the tourism industry, as well as techniques and initiatives to instil English language skills in local tourism workers. Addressing these gaps can contribute to the development of a more linguistically competent workforce, hence improving Malaysia's standing in international tourism.

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