

Strategies and Uses of English Conversation between Front Office Staffs and Foreign Guests in Five Stars Hotel Bangkok

Dr.Sarinrat Sertpunya

Business English Department, Liberal Arts Faculty,
North Bangkok University, 12130, Thailand

Abstract

The main aim of the qualitative research study was to examine the problems that arose between Thai hotel front office staffs, foreign guests and visitors used the services and facilities of ten major hotels in the Bangkok metropolitan area. The research focused was problems in cross cultural conversation, regard both language and cultural dimensions within the context of five starhotels in Bangkok. Strategies that hotel front staffs used to overcome such problems were also investigated.

The Sample in this study is concluded to 30 Front Office Staffs in Five Star hotels Bangkok 1.Hotel Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit, 2.JW Marriott Hotel Bangkok, 3. The Peninsula Bangkok, 4. Shangri-La Hotel Bangkok, 5. Mandarin Oriental Bangkok 6. Conrad Bangkok Hotel, 7. Grand Hyatt Erawan Bangkok, 8. Plaza Athenee Bangkok, A Royal Merdien Hotel, 9. The Sukhothai Bangkok Hotel, and 10. Centara Grand at Central Plaza Ladprao Bangkok . Only 3 Front Office Staffs from each five star hotels by the Front Office Manager for an interview.

If was found that most problems were easily surmountable, although their resolution depended upon the individual level of confidence and experience of each employee as well as their personality. No severe conflicts between the two parties were found. Minor annoyances and misunderstandings were two consequences of the problems.

This finding showed that the English learning strategies of the personnel varied from tutorial courses, engaging in self-study by reading books or watching English-language movies with the original soundtrack, and attempting to avail themselves of opportunities to speak with friends who were native speakers of English.

Non-verbal behaviors, accents, and cultural stereotypes wereimportant factors that determined the success or failure of cross cultural interactions. In addition, the strategies used by the personnel to ease the difficulties included asking guests to repeat what they said, to speak slower, to write the words down, to use body language or to call their supervisor or manager to assist in solving the problem at hand.

Keywords,

Development,English,Hotel Service Personnel, Listening and Speaking Skill, Task-Based Learning Activities

1.Rationale and Significance of the Problem

In the present era of globalization, knowledge of the English language is becoming more essential for people in different parts of the world. Since speaking and listening are the fastest and most convenient ways of communication, use of these skills in English to communicate with others is

an advantage in present day society. People who speak English fluently and correctly will have more opportunities to get jobs than those who cannot, especially in the Hotel Service area.

Although English listening and speaking skills are very important for communication, it is still found that the speaking ability of most second

language speakers is unsatisfactory. According to Aungwattanakul (2010.), most high school students have few opportunities for practicing English. It is the same at the vocational level when students are not provided with enough opportunities to develop their English skills, especially their listening and speaking skills (Sethasatian, 2012). Learners are still not capable of using listening and speaking skills in performing activities effectively (Kanchanasathit, 2011, Atirat, 2000 and Sethasatian, 2012). Also, Deeprom (2013) says that vocational learners cannot communicate well in a real situation because they do not have enough practice.

Because of the lack of listening and speaking abilities mentioned above, it causes problems for those students who work in hotel services. Forexample; the front office manager at JW Marriott Hotel Bangkok stated in an interview that the receptionists of the hotel still use English incorrectly in terms of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation when communicating with foreign guests. The English trainer at JW Marriott Hotel Bangkok also complained that the English ability of hotel personnel is quite weak, especially grammar. For example, the receptionists will always say “no have” instead of “don’t have”. According to the front office manager at Amari Watergate Bangkok, they are also concerned a great deal about the English listening and speaking skills of their personnel since their personnel are not confident when communicating with foreign guests.

In Chuensuwimon(2014) study’s it was found that the educational background of employees at the first class hotels in Bangkok is lower than a bachelor degree. As a result, they have problems in using English to communicate with the foreign guests. Apparently, there is a need for the hotel personnel to have English training in speaking and listening skills in order to provide better services to foreign guests.

The needs of learners who are confronting real situations in the workplace and those who learn English in a regular classroom are quite different. In a classroom, learners probably want to know how to use

language in communication. On the other hand, learners who have to use English at work need to know more about how to communicate effectively in real situations. To receive benefits in their job performance, teaching them English through Task-based learning activities is recommended. This approach will give them more opportunities to use language in carrying out their daily work.

Willis (2006) suggests teachers use the Task-based learning activities Approach in the classroom. Task-based learning activities can help teachers to focus on meaning and form as well. In addition, learners have more opportunities to use language when given a real world task. Since hotel personnel can use English language taught through Task-based learning activities in their real work and they will learn how to solve problems in communication by using knowledge learned through Task-based learning activities, the researcher is interested in developing English listening and speaking lessons to teach the hotel personnel through Task-based learning activities. The front office manager of JW Marriott Hotel Bangkok are quite concerned about the poor listening and speaking skills of their personnel and they have expressed a strong desire to improve the ability of the staff to speak English. Thus, the researcher will help them to improve their personnel’s English language performance by using constructed listening and speaking lessons based on Task-based learning activities. The learners will gain more confidence since they can use better language to communicate more effectively with foreign guests during their daily work.

2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To develop English listening and speaking lessons for hotel service personnel through task-based learning activities.
2. To track the improvement of the hotel service personnel through task-based learning activities.

3. Scope of the Study

3.1 Subject of the study

This study is confined specifically to 14 hotel personnel: 4 from the front office section, 4 from the housekeeping section and 6 from the restaurant section of the JW Marriott Hotel Bangkok.

3.2 Content of the Study

The contents developed are based on the course description of the English for Hospitality Industry (ENL462) offered at North Bangkok University and from needs of the hotel personnel.

3.3 Variables

Independent variable: English listening and speaking lessons for hotel service personnel through task-based learning activities.

Dependent Variable: Current English listening and speaking abilities of hotel service personnel

3.4 Length of the Study

This study would be done from November, 1st 2015 to April, 1st 2016.

4. Scope of Population and Sample

The population of this research were the hotel service personnel of JW Marriott Hotel Bangkok totally 265 personnel.

The samples of this research were the hotel service personnel of JW Marriott Hotel Bangkok that were confined specifically to 14 hotel personnel (Purposive Sampling). They were selected by the hotel manager according to their needs of training and were classified into three groups: (1) 3 females and 1 male from the housekeeping section, (2) 1 female and 4 males from the food and beverage section, (3) 3 females and 1 male from the front office section plus 1 volunteer from the food and beverage section. All three groups started learning English in Prathom 5 and studied English for an average of approximately 8 years. Each person has been working at the hotel for at least 5 years.

5. Definitions of Terms

5.1 Development: the process of constructing, teaching, evaluating and improving lessons in order to suit the level of learners.

5.2 English Listening and Speaking lessons for the hotel service personnel: A course syllabus developed for the hotel service personnel, which consists of the proto-syllabus and the lesson plans. The course objectives are set by following the course description of the English for Hospitality Industry offered at North Bangkok University (ENL462). The contents are selected from a variety of sources in order to serve the learners' needs. After the contents are designed, the entire lesson plans for teaching are constructed.

5.3 Task-Based Learning Activities: a process of learning activities following Willis (2006) task-based learning activities approach. It is composed of three steps: pre-task, task cycle and language focus. The first step is the pre-task. The instructor introduces the topic, vocabulary, function and expressions used in different contexts. The learners use the linguistic elements provided in the first step for practicing conversation and creating tasks. In the second step, the task cycle is to create a conversation in written form using given examples as guidelines. The researcher's role in this step is as a facilitator. The learners perform tasks both in pairs and small groups. After finishing writing a conversation, each group presents the conversation by doing a role play. While performing the tasks, they are assessed by the researcher and their peers. In the third step, the language focus, both the researcher and peers give comments to the group who performed the tasks about vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Each group has a chance to correct their language mistakes and practice more.

5.4 Listening and Speaking Abilities of Hotel Service Personnel : The ability to communicate, especially in listening and speaking when providing the hotel services of housekeeping, front office and food and beverage sections. Listening and speaking abilities can be accessed from real

performance by using the observation form after finishing each lesson. An interview is used for assessing learners' opinions on their listening and speaking abilities improvement and the effectiveness of the lessons after the course is finished.

5.5 Learners: the hotel service personnel at JW Marriott Hotel Bangkok of three sections: four front office personnel, four housekeepers and six food and beverage personnel.

6 Significance of the study

The researcher expected the following benefits from this research.

1. To provide a course syllabus for trainers or hotel managers to use for hotel personnel training to improve the communication skills of hotel service personnel.

2. To provide guidelines for further research on the use of the task-based learning activities approach.

7. Statistic for Data Analysis

The descriptive statistic that are the percentage, mean (μ) and the standard deviation (σ) are employed to analyze the data from the questionnaires, the lesson plans evaluation and the classroom observation.

8. Instrument

Two types of instruments, lesson plans and data collecting instruments were employed. The details of each instrument are discussed as follows:

8.1 lesson Plans

The fourteen English listening and speaking lesson plans were constructed by using task-based activities. The process of constructing the lesson plans included conducting a needs survey, designing a proto-syllabus and writing lesson plans.

8.2 A needs survey

The purpose of constructing a needs survey is to find out learners' needs and interests in learning English for their present career which is

hotel service. The needs survey consisted of 5 parts: personal information, learning and interesting content. The subjects of this study were asked to complete the needs survey. The needs analysis showed that the subjects wanted to learn English by creating tasks involving the use of English for communication at work. The learning style survey showed that 86% of the subjects are dependent learners in that they still wanted the researcher to correct their mistakes while performing their tasks. They also preferred doing pair work, group work and work with the instructor and the whole class. Regarding English communication problems, most of them had similar problems in that they were unable to get the main point across while having conversation with foreign guests. They also had problems with using appropriate words and correct grammar in making sentences. Besides this, they needed more pronunciation practice. The last part, interest content, were different depending on their jobs.

8.3 A proto-syllabus

A proto-syllabus is a framework for writing lesson plans used for teaching English listening and speaking skills to the subjects. In order to design a proto-syllabus, the curriculum and the course description of English for hotel service were studied and analyzed before setting the course objectives. There were three course objectives for this syllabus, which covered performing functions, communication and problem solving skills. The proto-syllabus was constructed based on the course objectives as mentioned

8.4 Writing Lesson plans

The 14 lesson plans were constructed by using a proto-syllabus as guideline considering the content validity, all lesson plans were checked by the thesis advisor and the co-advisor. They were implemented within 4 weeks from February 4th, 2001 to March 1st, 2001. For the reliability of lesson plans, the mean score obtained from the hotel supervisor, an English instructor from North Bangkok University and researcher were compared and they were similar at .908

Table 1: Details of Lesson Plans

Lesson	Content	No. of period	Tasks
	<u>For all sections</u>		
1	Giving Directions	2	Giving directions
2	Festivals in Thailand	1	Giving information
3	Hotel Services and Facilities	1	Answering about general hotel services and facilities
	<u>Housekeeping section</u>		
4	Room and Bathroom Features	1	Responding to the requests about room and bathroom features
5	Laundry service	1	Responding to the requests about laundry service
6	Dealing with complaints	2	Responding to the complaints
	<u>Food and Beverage Section</u>		
7	Taking orders (Room Service)	1	Taking orders and giving suggestion
8	Taking a reservation	1	Taking a reservation and giving information
9	Taking orders	1	Taking orders, giving suggestions and describing dishes
10	Dealing with complaints	1	Responding to the complaints
	<u>Front Office Section</u>		

11	Reservation and Checking-In	2	Making reservation and checking-in
12	Telephoning	1	Answering the phones and taking messages
13	Checking-out	1	Checking-out
14	Dealing with complaints	1	Apologizing to the complaints
Total	14	17	14

The first 3 lessons were designed for all sections. The rest of the lessons were implemented for different sections. The teaching procedure was based on task-based learning activities that consisted of 3 steps, pre-task, task cycle and language focus (Willis, 2006). In the pre-task step, the instructor introduced the topic, vocabulary, function and expressions used in deferent contexts. The learners used the linguistic elements provided in the first step for practicing conversation and creating the tasks. In the second step, the task cycle was to create the conversation in the written form using given examples as guidelines. The researcher's role in this step was as a facilitator. The learners performed tasks both in pairs and small groups. After finishing writing a conversation, each group presented their conversation by doing a role play. While performing the tasks, they were assessed by the researcher and their peers. In the third step, the language focus, both the researcher and peers gave comments to the group who performed the tasks about vocabulary, grammar used and pronunciation skills. Each group had a chance to correct their language mistakes and practice more. All three steps were employed in each lesson plan until the end of the study.

During and after finishing teaching, some problems appeared. In the first lesson, the learners had problems with time constraints. The hotel provided 60 minutes per period, as a result the learners did not have enough time for practicing, preparing the tasks and discussing the language mistakes and it negatively affected the learning process. Thus the hotel administrator allowed the

researcher to expand the teaching time per period from 60 to 90 minutes. Another problem was that the learners could not pronounce words correctly, so the researcher gave them more time for practicing pronunciation. In the second lesson, which was about doing peer assessment the learners could not give comments on language mistakes. The instructor had to guide them how to do it. In terms of content, there were some lessons that needed content added to make the learners have a chance to practice more. For example tag questions were added in lesson three and knowledge of a.m., p.m. was added in lesson five. In some lessons, the learners needed to practice more, thus more vocabulary and expressions were added such as lesson 6, lesson 10 and lesson 14. At the same time some lessons were long and not suitable with the time provided, so they were reduced such as lesson 6, lesson 10 and lesson 13. Besides this, in some lessons, the tasks were separated and not meaningful such as lesson 9, lesson 11 and lesson 12, so they were combined together. Lastly, in each lesson the learners were asked to do the same tasks, which became a little boring, so the researcher gave them choices in changing some parts of doing tasks to make them more interesting.

8.5 Data Collecting Instruments:

There were three types of data collecting instruments: (1) lesson plan evaluation form; (2) classroom observation and (3) interview.

8.5.1 Lesson plan evaluation form

The lesson plan evaluation form was a tool used for assessing the effectiveness of the English listening and speaking lessons developed. The 4 main parts of each lesson plan consisted of objectives, content, procedure and task. Each lesson plan was assessed by 3 people, the hotel supervisor, an English instructor from North Bangkok University and the researcher, for each teaching period using this form.

The effectiveness of each lesson plan is determined by the following mean score interval.

Mean score	Effectiveness
4.50 – 5.00	Very effective

3.50 – 4.49	Effective
2.50 – 3.49	Moderately effective
1.50 – 2.49	Fairly effective
0.50 – 1.49	Least effective

Mean of the passing criteria was 2.50

8.5.2 Classroom observation

Classroom observation was employed for assessing the learners' task performance focusing on their English listening and speaking skills. The learners were assessed by the researcher and their peers for each class. The learners were not only being evaluated in class, they were also evaluated by the manager of each section while performing their duties two weeks after the teaching and learning were finished.

The speaking and listening of the lessons is determined by the following mean score interval.

Mean score	Listening and Speaking Quality
25.01 – 30.00	Excellent
20.01 – 25.00	Very good
15.01 – 20.00	Good
10.01 – 15.00	Moderate
5.01 – 10.00	Moderate
0.01 – 5.00	Fair Poor

8.5.3 Interview

Interviews were also used for assessing the effectiveness of the course by asking the learners' opinions. The purpose of using the interview was to have direct feedback from the learners, as well as assessing their performances in class. The interview was a structured type, which consisted of questions asking about the effectiveness of the lessons and the improvement of their listening and speaking skills learned through task-based learning activities.

8.6 Lesson plan adjustment

The researcher had adapted and modified some parts of the lesson plans to suit the learners' needs. The adjustments were done as a whole lesson and in each section as well.

As a whole lesson, the first adjustment was to expand the time teaching per period from 60 to 90 minutes. At the beginning of the course, the learners were not familiar with the task-based learning activities process and they needed more time to discuss the language mistakes in the language focus step. They also needed time to practice their pronunciation and writing skills.

For each section, there were some adjustments. The four section adjustments were: (1) reducing the number of activities; (2) adding more vocabulary and expressions to be used; (3) combining the related tasks together and (4) giving learning choices in changing some parts of doing tasks to make them more interesting. The time practicing conversation in some lessons needed to be reduced, such as lesson 6, lesson 10 and lesson 13. Since the dialogues prepared for the learners to practice were of many kinds in each task, and because of time constraints in practicing, the instructor needed to select some dialogues for the learners to practice and the rest the learners could practice by themselves. During the learners' task-based learning activities performance, some of the learners came up with questions about vocabulary and expression beyond what the researcher had prepared for them. Therefore, the adjustment for vocabularies and expression was done during the teaching learning process. For example, in lesson 6, lesson 10 and lesson 14, which were about dealing with complaints for all three sections, the researcher needed to be well-prepared and have a lot of knowledge of vocabularies and expressions. In addition, some of the tasks should have been combined together to make them more meaningful to learners and make them more appropriate for them to work as a group; therefore, some tasks were adjusted before the researcher presented the lessons. For example, lesson 9 mixed 2 tasks: taking orders and explaining dishes. Lesson 11, mixed taking a reservation and checking-in. And lesson 12, mixed answering a phone call and taking a message. In order to make the given task more interesting, the learners could change the names of the persons and places, and change the time to make it related to their real job. For instance in lesson 8, which was about taking a reservation, the instructor changed the name, time and place in taking a reservation; the instructor changed the name, time and place in taking a reservation in each

task. For lesson 12: telephoning, the instructor differentiated tasks by changing the names and the messages.

Based on the lesson plan adjustment above, the teaching period of 14 lesson plans using 14 periods was extended to 17 periods for the 14 lessons.

9. Data collecting

There were three types of data collecting instruments: (1) lesson plan evaluation form; (2) classroom observation; and (3) interview. The lesson plan evaluation form was employed by the researcher, the hotel supervisor and an English instructor from North Bangkok University during the 14 teaching periods. The second instrument, classroom observation was conducted by researcher assessment and peer assessment during 14 teaching periods. The third instrument, interview, was conducted by the researcher only at the end of the last teaching period.

10. Data analyzing

The descriptive statistic that are arithmetic mean (μ) and the standard deviation (σ) are employed to analyze the data from the questionnaires, the lesson plans evaluation and the classroom observation.

11. Summary of the Study

The objectives of this study were : (1) to develop an English listening and speaking lessons for hotel service personnel through task-based learning activities and (2) to track the improvement of the English listening and speaking abilities of hotel service personnel. The subjects consisted of 14 hotel services personnel who were from 3 different sections classified as front office section, food and beverage section and housekeeping section at JW Marriott Hotel Bangkok. The lesson plan evaluation form and classroom observation were employed to assess the effectiveness of the course and the learners' speaking and listening skills respectively. At the end of the teaching process the interview was constructed to obtain the points of view of the learners about the effectiveness of the course and the improvement of their listening and speaking skills. The statistics employed were arithmetic mean (μ) and standard deviation (σ). The results

reveal that the 14 lesson plans were effective and helped the learners to improve their listening and speaking abilities from good to very good and excellent levels.

12. Discussion of Results

12.1 The effectiveness of the English listening and speaking lessons for the hotel service personnel

The results reveal that the 14 lessons were effective. This means that the lessons developed in this study suited the needs of the learners. There are several reasons that can be cited to strongly support the success of the first objective, which was to design lessons for hotel service personnel. First, the results from the needs analysis were used to shape the curriculum in order to make it more suitable for the needs of learners. The skills they wanted to improve and the problems they had at work were taken into consideration while conducting the proto-syllabus. The learners had the opportunity to participate in selecting the contents of their study. From the needs analysis, the learning styles of the learners were considered when planning activities.

Second, task-based learning adapted from the type suggested by Willis (2006) was conducted. Task-based learning activities allow the learners to use their working experiences while doing tasks. This helps the learners to have more confidence in showing their abilities since they have background knowledge about the content they are using. In addition, they were stimulated and challenged with the problems or situations related to their current job and they needed to find solutions by using their background knowledge and the new knowledge obtained from taking the course developed for this study. They practiced using the target language in communication while doing the tasks that simulated real tasks. The ways the learners learn through task-based learning activities as mentioned above is strongly supported by Kenny and Savage (2010) who studied language teaching in difficult circumstances.

12.2 The improvement of the learners' English listening and speaking abilities

The results show that the English listening and speaking skills of all the learners were improved. The reasons for this improvement are discussed as follows. The Task-based learning activities lesson was considered a learner-centered curriculum. Learning through task-based learning activities, the learners decided their own task starting with making a play and preparing their own task. While performing tasks, they were assessed by their peers and the researcher. The learners would discuss and correct the language mistakes by themselves. This step is considered self-assessment. Observation indicated that the learners were enthusiastic and enjoyed participating in the tasks. Performing activities through task-based learning activities enhanced the English skills of learners. Besides, having performance assessment in class, the learners were also evaluated by the manager of each section while performing their duties two weeks after the teaching and learning were finished. The results of the evaluation by the hotel manager of each section showed that the English listening and speaking skills of the personnel who took the class with the researcher has been improved and met the passing criteria (50%). The scores obtained were closed to the scores done in class and some of the learners' scores were even higher than the scores were performed in class. This is supported by the findings of several researchers who succeed in using task-based learning activities in their studies such as Watanamara (2011), Deeprom (2013) and Sricharoen (2013).

13. Recommendation

Based on this study, the researcher makes the following recommendations:

13.1 Recommendations for hotel administrators

The study of English lessons for hotel through task-based learning activities might be conducted in different branches of the same hotel and the improvement of the English skills performance might be compared between branches to improve the standard of services.

13.2 Recommendations in learning and teaching

13.2.1 Pre-task step

In order to enable the learners to perform tasks well, the instructor should provide the learners with study skills and social skills. If the group has different knowledge levels, the instructor should place good learners and poor learners in the same group. So, the good learners can help the poor learners learn.

13.2.2 Task Cycle

The instructor should give the learners more time in preparing their tasks. They need time to think and bring in the input they have just learned to blend with their working experiences to form tasks.

13.2.3 Language focus step

The language focus step, which is the last step of task-based learning activities, was not conducted according to the limitation of time for teaching. It is an important stage that can help the learners to find their own mistakes and correct them, which is considered to help them improve their learning. Therefore, this stage cannot be neglected. The instructor should provide learners enough time for doing this stage.

13.2.3 Recommendations for further research

13.2.3.1 Further research on the development of English lessons through task-based learning activities for the other business areas such as airline, hospitals, banks, companies, factories, department stores, hypermarkets, etc, should be conducted to improve the listening and speaking abilities of the learners for use in their daily work.

13.2.3.2 There should be a follow-up study of the learners who learned English lessons for hotel through task-based learning activities based on the findings of this present study.

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