

“How Can I Help You”?: Communication Skills of Front Desk Officers

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Abstract: This paper describes a study which investigated the communication skills of front desk officers at a Malaysian higher learning institution. Using verbal recordings, interviews and researcher’s observation and annotation, data was collected from conversation between administrative staff and international students in order to indentify the communication strategies used by the staff and the effectiveness of those strategies. The findings revealed that fillers, asking for confirmation and asking for clarification were the three most frequent communication strategies used. In general, the students were very satisfied with the communication skills of the officers due to their informativeness, courtesy and politeness. The findings from this study shall provide beneficial implications in enhancing communication quality and skills of front liners and service providers at higher education institutions.

Key words: Communication skills • Front desk officers • Higher learning insitutions

INTRODUCTION

As a fast developing country, Malaysia is never left behind in providing quality education. In 2007, the Malaysian Ministry of Education launched the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) aimed at making Malaysia a hub of higher education excellence in Southeast Asia and beyond by 2020 [1]. This policy has tremendously boosted the growth of student population at the Malaysian higher institutions. Not only the number of local students enrolled at local universities is higher, but the case is also similar with the number of international students. The British Council [2] reported that Malaysia plays an increasingly important role as a preferred destination for higher education in South East Asia along with Singapore and Hong Kong.

Similarly, Yeoh [3] highlights that over one hundred and twenty thousand foreign students have enrolled in Malaysian higher education as of 2016 and the number is expected to grow to two hundred thousand by 2020. This positive trend clearly shows the country’s dedication and efforts in providing quality education that have attracted these international students.

However, despite plausible achievements, there are still challenges to be overcome. Jusoh [4] highlighted that

Malaysia can be a more student-friendly country, which translates into student-friendly services and opportunities.

Hence, in order to achieve the aforementioned ambition by 2025, Malaysian Higher Education Ministry must ensure that they are prepared to embrace any challenges. These preparations are not only in terms of facilities and infrastructure but also in terms of the readiness of the universities’ administrative staff especially the front desk officers in dealing with foreign students.

Andrews [5] depicts a front office agent as the host with the customers being the guests. The responsibility of a front desk officer as a host is to ensure satisfying service to the customers who are regarded as guests. Knapp [6] defines the service desk as a single point of contact within a company for managing customers’ problems and service requests.

Administrative staff who handle the information counters at the higher education institutions do not only serve and assist existing international students, but also academic figures, VIPs and prospective students. Their interactions with these stakeholders would reflect the image of the university as a whole.

Yano [7] argues that it is the users of the language that develop communication to make interactions successful; whether it is for informing or instructing. Often times, this potential is constrained by the socio-cultural norms of the society where the language is used. With the current globalization and internationalization practices, what are the challenges for communication to be a comprehensive message tool for sender and receiver? Speaker's competency at communication is a question in point. This paper is not only interested to look at the process of oral communication, but also speakers' oral communication competency during discourse.

Previous studies on communication skills and customer service mostly focus on the hospitality industry, for example, English communication training needs of front office assistants in the hotels [8], airport desk [9] and health providers [10, 11, 12, 13]. There is a lack of research which focus on this issue at the Malaysian tertiary education institutions. One which attempted to do so was by Galea, Ishak & Marji [14]. Their study focused on the interactions of international students and local Malaysian library counter staff at a university in

Malaysia. It revealed that the communication strategies employed by both parties in attempts to communicate were code-switching, direct translation and repetition. The present study aimed to expand the realm of the research by analysing the communications skills of Malaysian administrative staff who handled the service counters at a higher learning institution.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted at a Malaysian higher learning institution. It aspired to determine how English oral communication skills are utilised by front desk officers in their daily interactions with international students. Effectiveness of English oral communication skills and customers' satisfaction were also analysed. Data was collected from the conversations between front desk officers and international students (henceforth known as customers) who required their services via verbal recording, interviews and researcher's observation and annotation. Communication strategies model outlined by Dornyei & Scott [17] was used as the framework for oral communication skills (Table 1).

Table 1: Communication Strategies [17]

Strategy	Description
Message abandonment	Leaving a message unfinished because of some language difficulty.
Message reduction (topic avoidance)	Reducing the message by avoiding certain language structures or topics considered problematic language wise or by leaving out some intended elements for a lack of linguistic resources.
Message replacement	Substituting the original message with a new one because of not feeling capable of executing it.
Circumlocution (paraphrase)	Describing or exemplifying the target object of action.
Approximation.	Using a single alternative lexical item, such as superordinate or a related term, which shares semantic features with the target word structure.
Use of all-purpose words.	Extending a general, "empty" lexical item to contexts when specific words are lacking.
Word coinage	Creating a non-existing L2 word based on a supposed rule.
Restructuring.	Abandoning the execution of a verbal plan because of language difficulties, leaving the utterance unfinished and communicating the intended message according to alternative plan.
Literal translation (transfer)	Translating literally a lexical item, idiom, compound word or structure from L1 to L2.
Foreignizing	Using a L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonology and/or morphology.
Code-switching (language switch)	Using L1 word with L1 pronunciation or a L3 word with L3 pronunciation while speaking L2
Use similar sounding words	Compensating for a lexical item whose form the speaker is unsure of with a words (either existing or non-existing) which sounds more or less like the target item.
Mumbling	Swallowing or muttering inaudibly a word (or part of a word) whose correct form the speaker is uncertain about.
Omission	Leaving a gap when not knowing a word and carrying on as if it had been said.
Retrieval	In an attempt to retrieve a lexical item saying a series of incomplete or wrong forms or structures before reaching the optimal form.
Self-repair	Making self-initiated corrections in one's own speech.
Other-repair	Correcting something in the interlocutor's speech.
Self-rephrasing	Repeating a term, but not quite as it is, but by adding something or using paraphrase.
Over-explicitness (waffling)	Using more words to achieve a particular communicative goal than what is considered normal in similar L1 situations.
Mime (paralinguistic strategies)	Describing whole concepts nonverbally, or accompanying a verbal strategy with a visual illustration.

Table 1: Continued

Use Fillers	Using gambits to fill pauses, to stall and to gain time in order to keep the communication channel open and maintain discourse at times of difficulty.
Self-repetition	Repeating a word or a string of words immediately after they were said.
Other-repetition	Repeating something the interlocutor said to gain time.
Feigning understanding	Making an attempt to carry on the conversation in spite of not understanding something by pretending to understand.
Verbal strategy markers	Using verbal marking phrases before or after a strategy to signal that the word or structure does not carry the intended meaning perfectly in the L2 code.
Direct appeal for help	Turning to the interlocutor for assistance by asking an explicit question concerning a gap in one's L2 knowledge.
Indirect appeal for help	Trying to elicit help from the interlocutor indirectly by expressing lack of a needed L2 item either verbally or nonverbally.
Asking for repetition	Requesting repetition when not hearing or understanding something properly.
Asking for clarification	Requesting explanation of an unfamiliar meaning structure.
Asking for confirmation	Requesting confirmation that one heard or understood something correctly.
Guessing	Guessing is similar to a confirmation request but the latter implies a greater degree of certainty regarding the key word, whereas guessing involves real indecision.
Expressing non-understanding	Expressing that one did not understand something properly either verbally or nonverbally.
Interpretive summary	Extended paraphrase of the interlocutor's message to check that the speaker has understood correctly.
Comprehension check	Asking questions to check that the interlocutor can follow you.
Own-accuracy check	Checking that what you said was correct by asking a concrete question or repeating a word with a question intonation.
Response repeat	Repeating the original trigger or the suggested corrected form (after an other-repair).
Response repair	Providing other-initiated self-repair.
Response rephrase	Rephrasing the trigger.
Response expand	Putting the problem word/issue into a larger context.
Response confirm	Confirming what the interlocutor has said or suggested.
Response reject	Rejecting what the interlocutor has said or suggested without offering an alternative solution

Taxonomy of Communication Strategies: This taxonomy was chosen for its' comprehensiveness as it reflects various other taxonomies of communication strategies to date [16]. Moreover, the current research aims to highlight communication skills portrayed by second language speakers, which is a similar area of language analysis that Dornyei and Scott [15] targeted for in the application of the taxonomy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Oral Communication Strategies Most Frequently Carried Out: In reference to Table 2 above, 17 out of 32 types of common English oral communication strategies were employed by the front desk officers in their interaction with customers. The data clearly depicted that fillers is the most frequently carried out communication strategy, with the frequency of 19 times (29.4%). Meanwhile, asking for confirmation and asking for clarification are the second and third most commonly used strategies with the frequency of 8 times (11.8%) and 7 times (10.3%) respectively. Fillers is one of the indirect strategies for processing time pressure-related strategies

[15]. Both asking for clarification and asking for confirmation are interactional strategies. Examples of fillers as found in the researcher's annotation and observation are presented below.

Table 2: Oral communication strategies most frequently used

Rank	Communication Strategies	Frequency	%
1.	Fillers	20	29.4
2.	Asking for confirmation	8	11.8
3.	Asking for clarification	7	10.3
4.	Repetitions	5	7.3
5.	Message abandonment	4	5.9
6.	Guessing	4	5.9
7.	Expressing non-understanding	4	5.9
8.	Code-switching	4	5.9
9.	Restructuring.	3	4.3
10.	Message reduction	2	2.8
11.	Use of all-purpose words.	1	1.5
12.	Literal translation	1	1.5
13.	Self-rephrasing	1	1.5
14.	Self-repair	1	1.5
15.	Asking for repetition	1	1.5
16.	Interpretive summary	1	1.5
17.	Message replacement	1	1.5
Total		68	100

Excerpt 1:

Front Desk Officer3	Err because right now, because err there was a lot, a lot envelope from the ~faculty, brother ~Dan received, and then umm,
Front Desk Officer3	And then, err, you have to come back..again..to check with Bro..

Excerpt 2:

Front Desk Officer2	((LIFTS GLANCE UP FROM PAPER AND LOOKS AT VISITOR)) Okay, For this one, your friend, must pay, the whole money first, After that after that two weeks within two weeks after back from the conference, So she must write a report, And attach with the-Er- original receipt, Er- any er- any attachment, Like er- [certificate] or-
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Excerpt 3:

Front Desk Officer5	You are the full time student.s But if if you ask your kuliyyah, if you ask your kuliyyah to register, f- err- this f- this, semester, l- it's by l- this semester, research [proposal-]
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Based on the shown excerpts, front desk officers used fillers like 'err' and 'umm'. Fillers were most probably used to stall and gain time to keep the communication going while they organized the following messages. Based on the words succeeding fillers, front desk officers clearly chose to employ fillers to avoid discontinuation in conversation, as stopping would interrupt communication.

Although fillers is not an ultimate problem-solving strategy, according to Dornyei and Scott [15], it "plays a significant role in problem management". The statement justifies the observed occurrences of fillers in the speech of the front desk officers as evident in Table 2. This study also identified similar high frequency fillers as found by Galea, Ishak and Marji [14] where librarians were found to fill pauses and gain time while interacting with students and at the same time keying in information into library database. Similarly, fillers were used to avoid communication breakdown.

Asking for confirmation is the second most commonly used communication strategy by the front desk officers. Dornyei and Scott [15] categorized this strategy as interactional strategy. Speakers requested confirmation to check whether the listeners have heard or understood them correctly [15]. This strategy could be seen in the excerpts below.

Excerpt 4:

Front Desk Officer2	((READS PAPER)) ((WITH EYES STILL ON THE PAPER)) So, the conference will be on-twenty first December next week? This fee is for- this semester?
Customer1	Er- Actually
Front Desk Officer2	((EYES STILL ON THE PAPER))Mhmm?

Excerpt 5:

Front Desk Officer3	Err so the form that you send to the, clinic, Already got signature from deputy dean and everything?
Customer 2	Yeah Ye I got from my head of department
Front Desk Officer3	Head of department, how about deputy dean?
Customer2	I think it was first the er did one official use I guess. It weh not the-
Front Desk Officer3	Wsh err- head of department and the other one is er for
Customer2	yeah
Front Desk Officer3	Deputy dean? You got both?

Excerpt 6:

Front Desk Officer5	Matric number?
Customer	Gi one seven one-
Front Desk Officer5	((CHECKS INTO COMPUTER)) One seven one?
Customer	Yes. Eight zero.
Front Desk Officer5	Eight zero?
Customer	One two.

In the excerpts shown above, the strategy of asking for confirmation can be observed during interactions. Asking for confirmation strategy was used by the front desk officers to check customers' understanding of explanation given earlier. Excerpt 5 shows how the front desk officers probed for accuracy of information by asking similar question twice. In excerpt 6, this strategy was used around digits to ensure precision on information received. It thus can be said that accuracy in receiving and delivering information is crucial to the front desk officers.

The third most frequently used communication strategy is asking for clarification, with a total frequency of 7 times (10.3%). Dornyei and Scott [15] describe this action as interactional strategy of requesting for explanation of an unfamiliar meaning or structure. Excerpts are shown below.

Excerpt 7:

Front Desk Officer3	What session?
Customer	Is it two thousand what semester two thousand sixteen- and fifteen- I think,
Front Desk Officer3	One- Last semester?
Customer	Last two semester? Um- two semester before, I'm in fourth from now X

Excerpt 8:

Customer	And they have already post, I filled the study leave form and submitted to them, The- the- friend, They have two- two- officers at the clinic, The front office where we deal with the documents, /Okay
Front Desk Officer3	So I just wanted to know whether
Customer	They sent to you or not.
Front Desk Officer3	But when- when you go- when you went to the clinic? Last week?
Customer	I went to- three, fa- I think three months ago
Front Desk Officer3	For study leave?

Excerpt 9:

Front Desk Officer2	((READS PAPER)) ((WITH EYES STILL ON THE PAPER)) So, the conference will be on-twenty first December next week. This fee is for- this semester?
Customer	Er- Actually=
Front Desk Officer2	((EYES STILL ON THE PAPER)) Mhmm?

Table 3: How Communication Strategies were Carried Out

Most Frequent Used Communication Strategies	
1. Fillers	<p>“...Er- original receipt, er- any er- any attachment, like er- [certificate] or-“ “Wait, last- um- pe semester...” “Um the first semester...” “Wsh err- head of department and the other one is er for” “Err because right now, because err there was a lot...” “...right now we receive a lot of wh err envelope, So...” ((LIFTS GLANCE UP FROM PAPER AND LOOKS AT VISITOR)) “Okay, for this one, your friend, must pay...”</p>
2. Asking for Confirmation	<p>((READS PAPER)) ((WITH EYES STILL ON THE PAPER)) “So, the conference will be on-twenty first December next week? This fee is for- this semester?” “One five one six?” “Head of department, how about deputy dean?” “Deputy dean? You got both?”</p>
3. Asking for Clarification	<p>“But when- when you go- when you went to the clinic? Last week?” “For study leave?” “What session?”</p>

In all three excerpts, it can be seen that front desk officers used interactional strategy of asking for clarification. In excerpt 7, they sought clarification of information by asking questions. While excerpt 9 shows how front desk officers use 'mhhh?' as a strategy to seek further explanation to what the customer was trying to convey. This again showed that accuracy of information is valuable to the officers.

The Way Oral Communication Strategies Were Employed: Based on the three most frequently used communication strategies of the front desk officers, this research also seek to explore the structure of how these strategies are being carried out during oral communication.

Data in Table 3 above is taken from its context to put more focus on individual utterance of communication strategies. Fillers were uttered mostly in the form of 'err' and 'umm'. It could be seen that these forms of fillers were used by the front desk officers to gain time in explaining, to keep the conversation going. They also used 'wait' as fillers which explicitly stalled the conversation. Other forms of fillers include 'so' and 'okay'. Similar patterns were found by Abd. Ghafar [16] in a study on communication strategies of proficient and less proficient ESL speakers. Abd. Ghafar [16] finds that proficient ESL speakers use more diverse set of discourse markers which function as fillers to fill pauses. However, the same cannot be said of this study due to the small sample size.

It is also found that the front desk officers used the interactional communicational strategy of problem-related strategies mostly by asking questions. Referring to Table 3, majority of the strategies of asking for confirmation and asking for clarification came in the form of questions. It is clear that such communication challenges rooted from the lack of information provided by the customers. By asking questions, the front desk officers could explicitly counter their communication difficulty.

There is however a remote instance of asking for clarification by uttering 'mhhh?'. In this situation, 'mhhh?' is not part of the turn taking but rather to seek further explanation from the customers as evident from the observation transcription (refer to Excerpt 9).

Effectiveness in Solving Customers' Queries: The current study also aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the English oral communication skills of the front desk officers in resolving customers' queries. Effectiveness is determined by looking at whether or not arising problems are solved, issues are rectified and questions are

answered. When asked whether the customers had their issues resolved, the respondents claimed that the front desk officers helped them with all of their issues.

One respondent explained that his issue has been rectified, but he still had to come back to the office for a follow-up. On this he said;

Yes. Yes. ((REFERRING TO RECTIFIED ISSUES)) I got the- I didn't get the letter, letter is gonna be-... I'm getting. Certification letter, but it's gonna be in two days' time. I'm gonna come back and get it.

Another respondent mentioned:

It is good ((GIGGLES))... ((SHAKES HEAD)) Ummm its okay ((GIGGLES)) I think it's okay.

The examples above portray the effectiveness of communication skills of the front desk officers. Communicational challenges are addressed even when the actual problem or task could not be solved immediately.

Customer's Satisfaction on the Services Received: The study also aimed to elicit customers' satisfaction of the front desk officers' English oral communication at the service counter. Based on the interviews, all the customers expressed their satisfaction on the officers' communication skills. Below are some of the responses;

- C1 *Hh- because, why was actually I attended to and then she- she was had good courtesy, so- and I was happy with the whole conversation*
- C2 *Umm cuz= she politely umm asked and tell what I= have to= done have to done after the conference*
- C3 *(YES)) Because, she talked to me at what- I- I came from she- have um informing, well*
- C4 *Um. Yes. She umm ... she gave... the solution, umm, ... then... steps.*

Majority of the respondents shared the same opinion that they were satisfied with the front desk officers' English oral communication skills. In summary, the customers' satisfaction is based on accuracy of information, courtesy and politeness.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the use of communication strategies by front desk officers at a higher learning institution. All of the front desk officers involved were second language speakers of English and use English professionally as part of their job as administrative staff.

The study found that three most frequently used communication strategies are fillers, asking for confirmation and also asking for clarification. The officers used a lot of questions to help them confirm and clarify uncertain information during interaction with the customers. Based on the interviews carried out, all of the customers expressed satisfaction in the communication skills of the front desk officers. Majority of the customers mentioned that their problems were solved, issues were rectified and questions were answered. This is an indication of effectiveness of communication skills of the front desk officers. It could be seen that their satisfaction emanated from the informativeness of the front desk officers, as well as their courtesy and politeness.

The findings from this study shall provide beneficial implications in enhancing communication quality and skills of front liners and service providers at higher education institutions.

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