

Towards designing a course for the Front Office Department staff at Pakistani Hotels

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Abstract

English is a major medium of communication among guests and staff in four and five star hotels in Pakistan. However, due to complete absence of any English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) research in the Pakistani hotels, the hotel establishments have to suffice with non-customized English language courses at the hotel-run training centers. The present research aims at providing the ground for designing a tailor-made English language course for the Front Office Department staff. It identifies the key situations of guest-staff encounter and skills required by the staff to communicate with the guests in these situations. The data for this research was collected at eight 4 and 5 star hotels in Multan, Islamabad, Lahore, Faisalabad, Karachi, Peshawar, Bhurban and Quetta mainly through observation; interview was used as a supplementary tool. Two kinds of observation techniques were employed i.e. shadowing and participant observation. The results show that the need for skill of spoken interaction is common to all the staff, one major difference being in the channel, telephonic or face to face. Some personnel, that include Telephone Operator, Reservation Incharge, Concierge Incharge, and Business Center Secretary, need the note-taking skill while they are engaged in spoken interaction. Only one personnel i.e. Reservation Incharge needs two additional skills-reading and writing. Guest Relations Officer's (GRO) job is the most diversified and challenging of all. The research also suggests different steps to achieve the finale of the course design based on this research.

Key words: Target Situation Analysis, Course designing, English for Occupational Purposes (EOP)

1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of the problem

No research to date has been carried out in Pakistan to explore the hotels as potential sites of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) research. As a consequence of this lack, the hotel-run training centers have to suffice with the non-customized

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English language syllabuses that have very low surrender value. This research aims at identifying the situations in which the in-service staff of the Front Office Department , the staff with the highest amount of interaction with the guests, in the Pakistani four and five star hotels have to operate so that it can provide basis for carrying out further research for the purpose of designing a cost-effective and tailor-made course for the intended learners.

1.2. Defining the Front Office Department

Three major departments in the hotels are directly involved in providing services to the guests: Front Office Department, Food and Beverages Department, and Housekeeping Department. As soon as you head towards a hotel gate, you enter the services of the Front Office Department. The Front Office Department provides services to the guests through the following personnel:

1. Bell Staff: Bell Captain and Bellmen
2. Telephone Operator
3. Guest Relations Officer
4. Protocol Officer (Reception Desk)
5. Front Office Cashier (Reception Desk)
6. Reservation Incharge
7. Concierge Incharge (Concierge)
8. Business Center Secretary (Business Center)
9. Airport Supervisor (Airport Unit)
10. Driver

1.3. Review of the resources available for training the staff

Two kind of resources exist for training the hotel staff in Pakistan. The first source is the training departments themselves, established in all four and five star hotels. As per our investigation and information provided by the managers at different hotels, no research has ever been carried out in the past in Pakistan to systematically investigate the situations in which the staff has to interact with the guest and consequently no customized materials have been prepared. Due to this very handicap, the hotel-run training centers use EGP courses that are too broad to cater to the specific needs of the in-service staff. Some hotels have taken the bold step to hire the services of some experts: however, situation is not much different. The researchers, on the identification of the hotels, had some meetings with them. It was found that the resource persons were not properly qualified for the job.

The second source of learning for the staff can be books produced by some foreign authors: *Hotel English* by Ronna Timpa and Lyn Pizor (first published 2001) is such an attempt. It aims at training the hotel staff in communicating with ‘guests, co-workers and supervisors’ (p.1) which in Pakistani situation turns irrelevant as the staff needs English exclusively neither for communicating with co-workers nor with the management. Secondly, the course trivializes the concept of ‘communication’ in hotels.

Different elements as range of facilities offered , status, value and expectation of the guest tax the ability of a worker and offers challenges to perform in *a wide range of situations*. Then, a number of verbal and non-verbal elements contribute to what is called *communication*. The presently emerging need to understand the cross-cultural aspects of communication has complicated the phenomenon to much more extent. Mudie and Cottam(1999, p. 113) liken the service encounter with performance in theatre where “ every line, gesture, etc. is rigidly specified in the sacred script”. Any course that does not take all these aspects into account, cannot expect to achieve more than superficial goals.

As it has been shown in the above discussion, the fact that the resources available for training the Front Office Department staff in the Pakistani hotels are not specific to their needs, necessitates an inquiry into the situations in which the implied staff is to interact so that a focused language course may be developed sometime in future.

2. Method

2.2. Instruments and subjects

The following methods were employed for the collection of data:

Observation

The data mostly comes from observation of as varied situations as was possible, supplemented by interviews. More than one kind of observation techniques were employed with a view to collect intensive data. The following techniques were employed for the purpose of observation:

1- Shadowing

‘To shadow someone is to follow everything they do for a block of time such as day, several consecutive days or one day a month’. (Dudley-Evans 1998, p.135). It aimed at observing the authentic communication that takes place between the guests and the staff. Shadowing workers have been the source of a number of very important aspects of guest-staff communication.

2- Participant observation

The researchers involved themselves in the workplace communication by assuming the role of *guest* as well as *staff*. We would like to thank all those hotels that allowed us to make observations in the capacity of *staff* at their respective departments. The researchers assumed the role of guest in face to face as well as telephonic communication. As many as 100 calls were made to different hotels.

● Interviews

Three versions of interviews i.e. management version, staff version and guest version were prepared. At each of our research sites, one Front Office Department Manager, one member from all the staff as found conveniently, and 10 guests were

interviewed. However, the researchers could not interview but just a single Airport Supervisor at Islamabad International Airport, Pakistan. The following kinds of interviews were conducted for the collection of data.

Non-directive interviews

This kind of interview has the benefit of getting at the heart of problems by giving the respondent complete liberty in speech. Such interviews were conducted with the hotel staff and visitors, especially during piloting. They have been found greatly helpful especially at the earlier phases of the inquiry.

Structured interviews

Another name for structured interview is *research interview* (Cohen and Manion 1980). As, this kind of interview has the advantage of greater reliability of measurement, so it was conducted with managers, staff, and guests all. Two kinds of items, fixed alternative items and open-ended items, were used in the construction of the schedules.

Semi-interviews

Sometime the interview shaded into an informal sitting with the staff. Such a way of data collection may not be accessible in some other EOP research settings. The administration of the Holiday Inn, Multan, was kind enough to allow one of the researchers an employee like status at the hotel, thus allowing entitlement to a number of things which is the prerogative of only the hotel staff. During meals at 1 O' clock and tea breaks at 4 O' clock, the researcher had a chance to get into such quarters of inquiry which would not have rendered themselves into other tools of research. These informal discussions helped clarifying a number of things about hotel operations and staff-guest communication.

● Training of the staff

One of the researchers had a chance to conduct some training sessions at one of the research sites that also was a source of valuable insights.

● Multiple researcher

Five individuals from our different research sites were requested to act as parallel researchers for the purpose of gaining a double-check on the observations made. Each of them was given training in the basics of this research (2 hours) and on-site observation (3 hours). This mode was used to increase the internal reliability of this research, which largely relies on observation.

1.2. Procedure

The research started with a pilot survey in June 2002. This piloting was aimed at identifying potential tools of research for this study. The following hotels were visited during July-August, 2002, for piloting purposes: Pearl Continental Hotel, Bhurban; Holiday Inn, Multan; Avari Hotel, Lahore and Serena Hotel, Islamabad. Then different

hotels in Pakistan were requested to allow the researchers to carry out research on their premises. Only the following five hotels consented to this proposal:

- 1- Holiday Inn, Multan
- 2- Marriott, Islamabad
- 3- Avari, Lahore
- 4- Holiday Inn, Islamabad
- 5- Serena, Faisalabad

The research began from the Holiday Inn, Multan, in July. It was extended to other sites later on. At each research site, the data was collected mainly through observation, however, it was supplemented by interviews. Three versions of interviews, namely, staff version, guest version, and management version were used. In all the above mentioned hotels, one member from the each category of the personnel of the Front Office Department, as identified in 1.2 above, was selected to be the respondent. No less than two hundred hours were spent observing the nature of the guest-staff communication.

3. Results

3.1. Summary of the model used for data analysis

The data analysis is based on John Munby's (1978) Communicative Needs Processor (CNP), a model for assessing the communicative needs of the language learner. Munby advocates to collect data on nine categories for successful building of a customized course. The model may be summarized as below.

1. Participant: Information in this category consists of 'identity', in Munby's term, of the learner. It includes information on age, sex, nationality etc. All this information may not be relevant in each situation: some time only one or two of them may apply. The information of *nationality* will be much relevant in our case where the Pakistani staff has to communicate with culturally different people.
2. Purposive domain: It refers to the identification of the exact purpose for which the language will be used: educational or occupational, in our case the latter.
3. Setting: This category relates to the information about *physical* and *psychosocial* setting of the place of work. From the host of categories identified by Munby, the following are relevant to our staff working in hotels:

Physical Setting

- Place of work (hotel premises in our case)
- Frequency of use of the language (high in our case)
- Duration (about eight hours in our case)

Psychosocial Setting

Aesthetic/refined, quiet, hurried, formal, hierarchic, conciliatory (as contrasted to argumentative)

4. Interaction: relationships between the interlocutors: relationship between the staff and the guest can be located somewhere in the range of consumer/producer, buyer/seller, customer/server

5. Instrumentality: It requires information on *medium of communication*, *mode of communication* and *channel of communication* that may be specified further as below:

- Medium of Communication: spoken or written (in our case both)
- Mode of Communication: monologue spoken to be written, monologue written to be read, dialogue spoken to be heard etc.
- Channel of Communication: face to face, telephonic, print(unilateral)
- 6. Dialect: in our case standard British/ American English

7. Target Level: It is to be specified with reference to *Dimensions* and *Conditions*, in Munby's own term. These two reference points can be further specified as under:

- Dimensions: size of utterance/text, complexity of utterance/text, range of forms and functions, delicacy of forms, flexibility of communication etc. which is to be determined after carrying out discourse and genre analysis of the spoken and written text as suggested in Section 4.2 (Step-1).
- Conditions: tolerance of errors, tolerance of lack of fluency etc. (very low in our case)
- 8.Communicative Event: This category relates to *what the learner has to do*: communicative activities, topics etc.

9. Communicative Key: This consists of *attitudinal tones* learner has to master. Some of the attitudinal tones relevant for the staff are: entertaining (as contrasted to tedious), sensitive/ discriminating, hoping, cautious(as contrasted to reckless), caring (as contrasted to different), modest (as contrasted to prideful), formal, friendly, courteous, sociable, pleased, patient, grateful, respectful, praising, regretting (as contrasted to unapologetic), temperate(as contrasted to immoderate), willing, active, concordant (as contrasted to dissentient), lenient (as contrasted to harsh), obedient, assenting (as contrasted to arguing)

3.2- Findings

Most aspects of Munby's CNP as Purposive Domain (Occupational purpose), Setting(hotel premises), Interaction (relationship between interlocutors i.e. customer/server), and Dialect (Standard British/American English) are common among the Front Office Department staff. Therefore, the following discussion will focus on two reference points:

1-Communicative Event: what the learner has to do

2-Instrumentality

- Channel of Communication: face to face, telephonic, print etc.
- Skills required¹, Spoken interaction (listening and speaking both), note-taking (while engaged in spoken interaction), reading, writing etc.

3.2.1 Bell Staff: Bell Captain and Bellmen

Communicative Event

The Bell Desk manned by a Bell Captain, Incharge of this Desk, and many Bellmen is set up nearest to the hotel door. The staff is involved in communicating to the guests in the following situations.

- Helping guests managing their luggage to the room while checking in
- Helping guests with their luggage in the event of checking out
- Delivering messages to guests
- Delivering guest mail

Instrumentality

Channel of communication: face to face

Skills required: spoken interaction

3.2.2 Telephone Operator

Communicative Event

Telephone operator's basic job is to give passage to different in-coming calls to different departments. However, beyond this job they may have to make wake-up calls and page guests. Telephone Operator in most cases carries out the following activities during his job.

- Transferring incoming calls to different departments
- Taking down messages
- Upgrade and down grade guest room facilities
- Blocking and releasing Do Not Disturb (DND) rooms
- Providing information on guest reservation
- Answering call from a broken down elevator
- Helping guests in dialing international calls for guests

Instrumentality

Channel of communication: telephonic

Skills required: spoken interaction and note-taking

3.2.3 Guest Relations Officer (GRO)

Communicative Event

Guest Relations Officer's (GRO) main function is to assist, inform and entertain guests. The GRO, often a female, offers the following services to the guests:

- Welcoming and bidding farewell to guests

- Offering assistance in checking in and out
- Arranging airline reservations and confirmations
- Escorting VIP's to functions
- Familiarizing hotel facilities offered, as well as local entertainment, to the guests
- Accompanying guests for sightseeing and shopping

Instrumentality

Channel of communication: face to face and telephonic

Skills required: spoken interaction

3.2.4 Protocol Officer (Reception Desk)

Communicative Event

Protocol Officer checks-in the guests who

- might have made prior reservation
- might not have made prior reservation

He also issues duplicate keys to the guests, if they happen to misplace them.

Instrumentality

Channel of communication: face to face

Skills required: spoken interaction

3.2.5 Front Office Cashier (Reception Desk)

Communicative Event

Front Office Cashier carries out the following guest-contact tasks.

- checking out the guest
- handling requests for currency exchange or change

Instrumentality

Channel of communication: face to face

Skills required: spoken interaction

3.2.6 Reservation Incharge

Communicative Event

Reservation Incharge makes room reservations. In this process, s/he is involved in the following activities:

- making new reservations
- making amendments in the previous reservation, as desired by the guest
- reading letters/ faxes requesting booking
- responding to letters/ faxes requesting accommodation

Instrumentality

Channel of communication: telephonic/ print

Skills required: spoken interaction, note-taking, reading and writing

3.2.7 Concierge Incharge (Concierge)

Communicative Event

Concierge is a sort of *errand boy*. The Concierge Incharge extends the following services to the guests.

- making reservation
- booking and confirmations of reserved seats
- arrange theatre/cinema tickets etc., as required by the guests
- free packaging

Instrumentality

Channel of communication: face to face and telephonic

Skills required: spoken interaction and note-taking

3.2.8 Business Center Secretary (Business Center)

Communicative Event

The Business Center Secretary provides the following services to the guests.

- Delivering in-coming fax/telex to the guests
- Attending to the requests for outgoing fax/ telex
- Handling typing requests
- Handling photocopying requests
- Handling requests for printing of cards/stationary
- Handling requests for private offices, conference rooms etc
- Handling guest air mail and sea-freight services
- Making appointments
- Renting out equipments

Instrumentality

Channel of communication: telephonic and face to face

Skills required: spoken interaction and note-taking

3.2.9 Airport Supervisor (Airport Unit)

Communicative Event

Airport Supervisor, usually a male, carries out the following guest-contact activities during his job:

- Welcoming hotel guests (with prior reservation)
- Suggesting the travelers who might be landing without any reservation to

- stay at their hotel
- Entertaining guests if the shuttle is not readily available

Instrumentality

Channel of communication: face to face

Skills required: spoken interaction

3.2.10 Driver

Communicative Event

The guests normally talk to the Driver about the following.

- Distances and ways to different places
- Some unfamiliar objects they happen to observe on the way

They also pass short orders with respect to driver's driving.

Instrumentality

Channel of Communication: face to face

Skills required: spoken interaction

4. Discussion

4.1. Conclusions

1. None of the staff except Operator, GRO, Reservation Incharge, Concierge Incharge, and Business Center Secretary use telephonic channel. Only the GRO, Concierge Incharge and Business Center Secretary make use of both the channels i.e. face to face and telephonic.
2. Only one member among the staff, the Reservation Incharge, uses print channel.
3. All the staff belonging to the Front Office Department requires the skill of spoken interaction to a varying degree.
4. Only the Reservation Incharge needs reading skills and writing skills. They have to read the letters/ faxes from the prospective clients requesting booking and have to respond accordingly.
5. Note-taking (while engaged in spoken interaction) is needed by the Operator, Concierge Incharge, Reservations Incharge and Business Center Secretary only.
6. There is a general attitude of neglect towards hiring multilingual staff in the Asian hotels as pointed out by Lovelock (1996) also. It was hypothesized that the visitor's landing on the airport without any prior reservation may easily be attracted by greeting and talking to them in their respective languages, which was practically tested at the Islamabad International Airport, Pakistan, when one of the researchers, on behalf of one of an Airport

Supervisor talked to a French group of travelers in French. A survey, later on, was conducted the results of which show that almost 79% guests, belonging to other than English speaking countries, wished to be talked to in their respective tongues. How much may the multilingual staff cost is a matter of further consideration. However, money spent thus will at least be justified in view of the increased volume of business.

4.2. Recommendations: Suggestions for course design

This paper may be regarded the first step towards designing a customized course for the Front Office Department staff of the hotel industry staff in Pakistan. However, in order to achieve the finale of a tailor-made course, much further research is needed which may be carried out systematically as suggested below.

Step-1 The first thing to be done is to analyze the discourse that takes place among the guests and the staff in all the situation as pointed out in the sections named Communicative Event. This discourse takes place in three channels: face to face, telephonic, and print.

Face to face and telephonic interaction may be analyzed applying the models of discourse analysis. Intuitions may have to be borrowed from Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) model of discourse analysis. This model developed on classroom interaction is based on Halliday's (1961) rank-scale model. Sinclair and Coulthard employ the following five categories in their analysis- moving from highest to the lowest- lesson, transaction, exchange, move, act. We may use the following categories: communicative event, transaction, exchange, move, act- moving from the unit highest in rank to the lowest. Practically speaking, the analysis may be carried out as follows: based on the communicative events as identified above, first, transactions will be marked. Then within each transaction, exchange types; and within each exchange, move types; and finally within each move; act types will be identified. However, it may be pointed out that Sinclair and Coulthard's categories may not be able to provide an exclusive source of analysis and problems may be faced especially with respect to exchange and act types. Defining new exchange types and acts will be a challenging job which may, however, be accomplished by invoking the functional criteria. One major portion of effort then will have to be dedicated to cross-cultural aspects of non-verbal communication. Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen (cited in Trenholm 1995) have shown that some aspects of non-linguistic behavior may be same across the cultures. However, they maintain, a number of non-verbal behaviors still are *not international* which has very strong pedagogical implications for the staff working in hotels that are often frequented by multi-cultural people from all over the world.

We suggest that the analysis of letters/ faxes (print channel) may be carried out in the light of the genre analysis tradition. Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) may prove the best sources in this respect.

Step- 2 Designing the syllabus

- Essential differences in the discourse of different staff members may lead to designing separate syllabuses for all the staff. Nonetheless some points of homogeneity may unite the staff members into some groups.
- Inventory of the syllabus: Units of organization may be situational i.e. checking in a guest. All the communicative events as to be found in Section 3 above may serve as situational units. These situations would of course be woven around different *functions* in Wilkin's (1976) sense, equivalent to possible exchange types as requesting, eliciting etc. These functions will be realized through different structures roughly equivalent to acts or moves. Thus the final form of inventory will be composed at least of three elements. Selection of skills and relative focus on each skills will be set in accordance both with Communicative Event and Instrumentality.
- Grading/ Sequencing: Trainees in the hotel environment are exposed to different jobs in gradual steps. The same criteria may be adopted in grading/ sequencing of the content of syllabus itself. The other useful criteria may be 'frequency of tasks' to be carried out by the staff.
- Final parameters may again need to be set in view of particular learners at different hotels: Pilbeam's (1979) formula $TSA-PSA = Needs$, may suffice for this purpose.

Step-3 Materials designing and testing

- Learner preferences must be given a judicious place in designing of every aspect of this course. Secondly, any de-motivational material, as cited by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), should also be avoided. The researchers will partially side here themselves with Hutchinson and Waters who canvass to adopt ESP as an 'approach' than 'product'. However, we propose to incorporate authenticity, taking care of the underlying skills at the same time.
- Activities should be 'task-based' in Prabhu's (1987) sense. However, his extreme inductivism may be avoided in favor of a middle way- "consciousness-raising", as proposed by Rutherford and Smith (1985) in order to avoid the danger of unbearably slow development as it may otherwise be the case. Secondly, errors may fossilize for the eradication of which the hotel-run centers, being run on the principle of cost-effectiveness, may not show enough patience.
- No activity should go beyond the time limit of 45 minutes because this is the average time available for the training sessions in the hotel-run training centers.
- We strongly recommend to pilot the materials before use.
- No hotel in Pakistan has adopted any means of evaluation: it is strongly recommended that a specific test battery to evaluate the performance of the staff may be developed. Douglas (2000) may be extremely helpful in this respect.

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