

## **Teaching English to Food and Beverage Staff: Problems, Challenges, and Possible Solutions**

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**Abstrak** – English is undoubtedly one of the requirements in the hotel and hospitality industry. All hotel staff are required to be able to communicate in English, especially those working in international hotels. This also applies in Indonesia where some international hotels are operating in big cities such as Jakarta. Unfortunately, only a few of the Indonesian hotel staff, including food and beverage employees, have adequate English language competence. Therefore, English training is a must for those working in the hotel industry. The present study, then, was carried out to investigate the problems and challenges of teaching English to food and beverage staff because they communicate with Indonesian and international hotel guests very often, for example, during breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Careful observation was conducted to investigate the problems and challenges, i.e., language problems, trainees' speaking skills, and in-classroom- participation of each trainee. The findings revealed that most of the food and beverage staff could not communicate in English appropriately and accurately. They were not able to use proper expressions in particular situations with the hotel guests. Meanwhile, the challenges included the use of inappropriate 'fossilized' expressions. This implies that there should be solutions to overcome the problems and face the challenges of teaching English to food and beverage staff.

*Keywords: English, food and beverage staff, language competence*

**Abstract** - Bahasa Inggris tidak diragukan lagi merupakan salah satu persyaratan dalam industri perhotelan dan perhotelan. Semua staf hotel dituntut untuk bisa berkomunikasi dalam bahasa Inggris, terutama yang bekerja di hotel internasional. Hal ini juga berlaku di Indonesia dimana beberapa hotel internasional beroperasi di kota-kota besar seperti Jakarta. Sayangnya, hanya sedikit staf hotel di Indonesia, termasuk karyawan 'food and beverage' yang memiliki kompetensi bahasa Inggris yang memadai. Oleh karena itu, pelatihan bahasa Inggris adalah suatu keharusan bagi mereka yang bekerja di industri perhotelan. Penelitian ini dilakukan untuk menyelidiki masalah dan tantangan pengajaran bahasa Inggris kepada staf 'food and beverage' karena mereka sangat sering berkomunikasi dengan tamu hotel Indonesia dan internasional, misalnya saat sarapan, makan siang, dan makan malam. Observasi secara cermat dilakukan untuk melihat permasalahan dan tantangan yang ada, yaitu masalah bahasa, kemampuan bahasa Inggris peserta pelatihan, dan partisipasi di dalam kelas setiap peserta pelatihan. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa sebagian besar staf 'food and beverage' tidak dapat berkomunikasi dalam bahasa Inggris dengan baik dan akurat. Mereka tidak dapat menggunakan ekspresi yang tepat dalam situasi tertentu dengan tamu hotel. Sementara itu, tantangannya mencakup penggunaan ekspresi yang 'fossilized' yang tidak tepat. Artinya perlu adanya solusi untuk mengatasi permasalahan dan menghadapi tantangan pengajaran bahasa Inggris pada staf 'food and beverage'.

*Kata Kunci: Bahasa Inggris, staf 'food and beverage,' kompetensi bahasa*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

English has become widely used in various businesses over the last few decades, including in the hotel, hospitality, and tourism industries. According to Zahedpisheh, et al. (2017), a key component of providing high-quality services in these industries is English. The necessity of having a strong command of the English language at work is fully understood by employees in the tourist and hospitality sectors. To maintain a high level of professionalism, hotels must offer exceptional customer service. Thus, there is a huge need for highly qualified individuals with outstanding communication and English language skills (Lestari et al., 2017). This is in line with an earlier study conducted by Almomni et al. (2023) underlining that English has a favorable impact on how comfortable hotel customers feel staying in a hotel whose personnel speak English effectively. However, it was discovered that not all hotels hire staff members with pre-intermediate or higher English competence. For instance, word-by-word translation is spoken by the personnel of a five-star hotel in South Jakarta, Indonesia, which occasionally impedes communication (Nurdiana, 2023).



A study conducted by Fisharmawan and Andika (2019) in a hotel located in Central Java reported that the employees working for the hotel faced listening and speaking problems including difficulties in following communication, understanding instructions, being unconfident, difficulty in English word pronunciation, lacking vocabulary that impedes communication, and being clueless of how to start a discussion. Another study carried out by Sermsook et al. (2021) underlined the problems and needs analysis of English for the tourism industry in Thailand. The finding revealed that ‘an inadequate English ability is observable’ implying that the Thai working for the hotel, hospitality, and tourism industries need more English training to be able to communicate effectively in English. Taking the phenomenon into account, it is imperative to further investigate how English actually ‘works’ in hotel industries. For this reason, a series of English training was given to food and beverage staff working for an international hotel located in South Jakarta. Through the training, problems and challenges were identified. In addition, some possible solutions to the problems and challenges were tried out to look into how they solved the obstacles faced by the food and beverage staff formulated into the following research questions:

1. What problems were faced when teaching English to hotel staff?
2. What challenges were found when teaching English to the hotel staff?
3. What solutions can be offered to overcome the problems and challenges?

To address the three research questions, the following theoretical frameworks for teaching English to food and beverage services were employed. As English for food and beverage service deals with English for particular goals, it would be necessary to discuss English for Specific Purposes or ESP. It is defined as English teaching and learning which aims to develop specific skills in specific contexts such as English for Hotel and Hospitality (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Therefore, what students or learners learn is language expressions, phrases, or vocabulary dealing with specific fields. Common language functions discussed for food and beverage service are, for example, welcoming guests, greeting guests, making a reservation, taking an order, etc.

One feature highlighted in ESP is needs analysis which is conducted to investigate what learners need to learn and thus, ESP is closely related to the learner-centered approach. It is also believed that ESP attempts to look into learners’ problems and challenges during the teaching and learning sessions. There are some types of information to collect for ESP (Hutchinson and Water, 1987; Basturkmen, 2010):

- a. Language skills  
Sample questions:
  - Which skills are important to your major/to your job?
  - Which skills are you (very) good at?
- b. Target situation analysis  
Sample questions:
  - Why is the language needed?
  - How will the language be used?
  - What will the content areas be?
  - Who will the learners use the language with?
  - Where will the language be used?
  - When will the language be used?
- c. Analyzing learning needs  
Sample questions:
  - Why are the learners taking the course?
  - How do the learners learn?
  - What resources are available?
  - Who are the learners?

Other than ESP, problems in oral communication skills, particularly in English, should be examined in the present study. Concerning language skills, oral communication skills may include vocabulary, fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and intonation (Brown, 2004). A previous study on problems in oral communication skills was done by Clarah et al. (2023) reporting that hotel employees working for a hotel in Palembang had some obstacles in spoken English. They covered most of the aspects of English-speaking skills including cultural awareness.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research, involving 24 research subjects, attempted to investigate the problems and challenges of teaching English to food and beverage staff working for an international hotel in South Jakarta. In addition, it delved into some solutions to overcome the issues. It was qualitative-based research as the data analyzed were non-numerical. As the present research focused on three aspects—problems, challenges, and solutions—careful observation of each session of the training and role play or simulation were employed to collect some data. The observation highlighted *language problems, trainees' speaking skills, and the in-classroom participation of each trainee.*

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study discusses problems, challenges, and possible solutions regarding teaching English to food and beverage staff. The issues cover language errors and language use inappropriateness. They also include trainees' English-speaking skills. The challenges include language 'fossilization' while the possible solutions discuss how the materials should be delivered and how English should be taught to minimize language errors, language inappropriateness, and language 'fossilization' as well.

### 1. Language problems

In this study, the language problems examined are language errors, language use inappropriateness, and the food and beverage staff's speaking skills. Most of the hotel staff who became the subjects of the research were in the lower level of English (A1). Therefore, their English was inappropriately used ranging from grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and language expressions of functions.

#### a. Grammar

English grammar has always been one of the top language issues in English language learning. Many Indonesian EFL learners have been struggling to learn English grammar, including the hotel staff. During the training, some common errors occurred such as the incorrect use of do/does/did, is/am/are, and have/has. The food and beverage staff often have a conversation with hotel guests during the meals. Some common phrases used when interacting with the hotel guests are:

- where you are from? (which is supposed to be 'where are you from?')
- how long you stay? (which is supposed to be 'how long will you be staying?')
- what you want? (the correct one is 'what would you like to order or what do you want to order?')
- what you recommend? (the correct one is 'what do you recommend?')

If we look at the examples, they tend to make a pattern of questions generated from a word-by-word Indonesian-English translation without considering tenses. Therefore, English tenses are one of the issues of the food and beverage staff in learning the language. This has confirmed a study conducted by Komara and Tiarsiwi (2021) underlining that tenses were one of the most problematic materials.

Research on grammar mastery was also done by Muhlisin and Salikin (2015) reporting that Indonesian EFL adult learners' mastery of English grammar was not successful yet. This finding was confirmed by a study carried out by Listia and Frebriyanti (2020) stating that Indonesian EFL learners had difficulties in English tenses mastery, particularly on perfect tenses.

#### b. Vocabulary

The problems had similar patterns to grammar—translating word-by-word from Indonesian to English language. Although they could communicate in English with the hotel terminology, it was inappropriately used. One of the situations the food and beverage staff often experienced was giving directions to the hotel guests. Most of them had no clues of how to give directions in English whereas the expressions of giving directions they had to know where the basic ones such as 'turn right', 'Turn left', 'go straight', or 'go along'. In addition, they had difficulties describing the hotel menu in English. Sometimes, the hotel guests wonder how the food or beverage they order is made. In this situation, the staff should be able to describe how a particular menu is processed. They need to learn how it is made, the ingredients used, and how it tastes. Therefore, vocabulary dealing with the hotel menu descriptions should be enriched.

#### c. Pronunciation and Intonation

As English is a foreign language in Indonesia, Indonesians might encounter difficulties pronouncing English

words properly. The trainees' L1 has interfered with the way they pronounce English words, including the intonation. It has seen notable interference from the Indonesian to the English language. For example, a salient Indonesian intonation was identified when the trainees were asking a question, but it was not in a proper English question form (because the structure was incorrect).

- You live where?
- Make it hot, can? (a request)
- You want? (which means 'Do you want some tea?')

#### d. Language functions and expressions

Food and beverage service consists of a service sequence. Each sequence implies a particular language function. Here are some language functions in English for food and beverage service.

- Greetings
- Welcoming guests
- Making a reservation
- Escorting guests
- Taking an order
- Giving a recommendation
- Ordering food/drinks
- Checking guest satisfaction
- Billing
- Closing

Each language function has its language expressions. Welcoming guests, for example, could be represented by language expressions below.

- Welcome to XYZ Hotel. How may I help you?
- Welcome to ABC Hotel. How may I assist you?

When it comes to the use of proper language expressions in food and beverage situations, many of the staff, who took the training, showed their real language competence. When greeting the guests, for instance, they could not differentiate between 'good night' and 'good evening'. Another situation is when taking the hotel guest orders. The language expression they use very often is 'What do you want to order?' instead of 'What would you like to order?'. It is not a mistake, but there is no language politeness there. When the guest is making a reservation, they *love* saying 'before' every time they say 'Do you have a reservation?' so they say 'Do you have a reservation before?' which in Indonesian language means 'Sudah reservasi sebelumnya?'

#### e. English speaking skills

Employing the scoring rubric below, the trainees' speaking skills were assessed. Out of 24 trainees, only three of them could reach 3 for each of the descriptors namely fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and details. The rest scored between 1 and 2 for each descriptor.

Table 1. Scoring of English-Speaking Skills

	Fluency	Pronunciation and accent	Vocabulary	Grammar	Details
<b>5</b>	Smooth and fluid speech; few to no hesitations; no attempts to search for	Pronunciation is excellent;	Excellent control of language features; a	Accuracy & variety of	Excellent level of description; additional

## 2. Challenges

There was a salient linguistic phenomenon during the English training called language fossilization. Fossilization refers to the process in which incorrect language becomes a habit and cannot easily be corrected (ZhaoHong Han, 2004, Fossilization in Second Language Acquisition, Multilingual Matters Ltd. Clevedon). Here are some examples of language fossilization that occurred when the trainees practiced the language.

- Do you have reservation *before*?
- *Where you from*?
- How *'meysis'* you? (which means 'How may I assist you?')
- *What you have?* (which means 'What do you have (menu)?')
- How about chamomile tea? *You want?*

In the first training session, those expressions were often used when the trainees were having a simulation or a role-play of a waitperson and guests. Then, they were given two months to practice the appropriate expressions. In the end, they kept using the inappropriate ones.

## 3. Classroom participation

Most of the trainees participated actively in all classroom activities. The sole obstacle was they sometimes had to leave the class due to their job responsibilities. During the training, role-playing was their favorite activity to improve their English because they had an opportunity to experience real-life situations. Simulation or a role-play

has been proven to be an effective method of teaching English to hotel employees (Mayasarah, 2017). They can be waiters, waitresses, or hotel guests with the real menu available in the hotel. With all of the teaching aids such as the restaurant, café, and lobby lounge menus, tables, and chairs like in the restaurant, café, and the lobby lounge, the trainees felt that 'they were working', not learning English.

## 4. Possible Solutions

With all the language issues and the trainees' speaking skills, here are some possible solutions that might be useful for teaching English to food and beverage staff.

- Teachers should make careful observations of language problems by making a list of terminology and expressions that are inappropriately used but are crucial for food and beverage staff.

- Compile all the language problems (mistakes/errors) that the staff often make.
- Create as many speaking activities as teachers can which give the staff a lot of opportunities to use correct and appropriate expressions and vocabulary dealing with English for food and beverage services. This aims to enrich the staff's language expressions and vocabulary to be able to communicate with hotel guests and to minimize language fossilization.
- Make a list of a language function sequence to organize the materials so that they can be delivered neatly and systematically.
- When doing the role-play, make sure the trainee's voice is clear and loud so that teachers can take language notes every time she/he uses incorrect expressions and vocabulary.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, teaching English to food and beverage staff in a five-star hotel could be challenging as most of the participants/trainees' English was at A1 level (beginner). The teacher must be able to be an observer when teaching English to the hotel staff taking notes of all language errors the staff make. They need to learn from the errors so that they can improve further and minimize language fossilization.

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