Role of Language to Make or Break a Tourist Experience in a Cross Culture

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Abstract: *This paper presents a review of the literature relevant to the topic of intercultural communication in the hospitality industry. English has become the accepted "lingua franca" of international business, and this is referred to by others as the "built-in bias" of the English language (Munshie and McKie, 2001). The hospitality industry is a prime example of this, and it has become accepted practice for customer-facing hotel staff to be able to speak English to come extent, regardless of the country in which the hotel is located. It is much less likely for an English receptionist to speak Spanish, for example. One expert has pointed out that frequently non-verbal communication can be misinterpreted. For example, normally a handshake is brief but in Spain it may be prolonged for several seconds. This does not show deep personal warmth as it might somewhere else. Welch et al (2005:11) point out; intercultural communication can actually be "an irritating reminder of what may be involved in crossing foreign cultures, and managing in a cross-cultural environment."*

Keywords: non-verbal communication, lingua franca, cross-cultural

1. Introduction

The issue of language barriers is particularly critical during intercultural service encounters for ESL (**English as a Second Language**) tourists. Tourists may struggle to say what they want or even get necessary information regarding products or services. The findings suggest that the language barrier generates negative emotional and cognitive responses, and prevents ESL tourists from taking certain actions such as seeking necessary information or complaining about service failures in a hotel or a place of visit. Intercultural service encounters, where the tourist and the service provider are from different cultures, is very common in the hospitality sector. Such intercultural service encounters may be influenced not only by cultural differences but also by language barriers. The fact that most hotel service staff mostly speaks English may greatly affect ESL tourists. The paper focuses on the understanding of psychological processes driving intergroup discrimination. The categorization of in-groups versus out-groups can be generated when tourists recognize certain cues, such as language, that delineate cultural differences. Not being able to identify with other cultural groups may lead to negative attitudes towards such groups. A sense of ignorance due to such differences can prevent ESL tourists from interacting with domestic hotel servers. Consequently, the understanding of the link between language and social identity patterns is of great importance to the international hospitality business community. ESL tourists can also be perceived as low literate customers in terms of their English skills. They struggle not only with reading and writing but also with listening and speaking English.

Based on extensive primary research, businesses should increase their awareness of the importance of cultural diversity in communication and develop a better understanding of how individuals relate to each other across language and cultural barriers. Commentator (Verluyten, 1997) has provided evidence of the importance of intercultural training and awareness in this process, the lack of which can lead to "disastrous" results.

2. Literature Review

It is generally accepted that the places and spaces where tourism happens operate as settings for the performances of both service providers and tourists, helping to establish the precise character of a tourism product and its performance. These settings are culturally constructed (Crang, 1997) but often due to participants reading from different scripts and performing mismatched roles (Sizoo et al., 2005), inconsistencies in service experiences arise. As a result, service providers tend to provide "pre-established, if rarely tightly fixed, social definitions of the settings being produced and consumed" (Crang, 1997, p.143) and it impacts on service delivery. One further complication is that the ascribed characteristics of employees in terms of gender, ethnicity, cultural capital, age and so on become an important part of the role-playing process. These influence the way employees' understand the script and hence deliver the performance. At the same time, the visitor brings to the performance his or her own frame of reference (cultural background, education, and experience). Therefore, the role of the tourist in this cultural construction is that he or she "is a party to the determinants of the service performance, and thus, the text of the interaction is all important" (Ryan, 2002, p.21).Consequently, of particular importance to the social constructionist is the influence of language on the service encounter.

Overall, previous studies suggest that language is more than just a communication tool (Imberti, 2007; Lauring, 2008) and can influence different aspects of the service encounter for ESL customers. Accordingly, it is essential to better understand how language barriers affect ESL customers' service experience.

3. Methodology

Qualitative interviews were used as the main source of data. The face-to-face, semi structured interviews were conducted in ESL international tourists averaging an hour in duration. An interview protocol consisted of 15 questions probing the interviewees regarding their typical hotel experiences in

Delhi, India, which included their interaction with service providers, service failures and complaint experiences, overall satisfaction, and intention to return. During the interviews, the interviewees were asked additional questions and comments. Nine interviewees were recruited for this study by reference sampling. The profile of interviewees is presented in

Table 1: Profile of Interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Time spent in the DELHI	Type of Tourist
Participant 1	F	34	4 months	Patient
Participant 2	M	25	3 months	Research scholar
Participant 3	F	33	3 weeks	Tourist
Participant 4	M	47	1 week	Business traveler
Participant 5	M	58	2 weeks	Writer
Participant 6	F	22	6 weeks	Tourist
Participant 7	M	30	3 weeks	Tourist
Participant 8	M	29	2 months	Tourist
Participant 9	F	31	5 days	Athlete

During this process, dimensions and concepts developed by the data were compared with previous literature to allow interpretation of the data. Adding the findings from these procedures, the final conceptual model was developed based on a sequence of the experience (see Figure 1). Every coding and analysis was processed in individual ESL participants' language and later translated into English.

4. Analysis

In the first order analysis, areas were identified which fall under the categories of 1) **language** 2) **cultural differences** 3) **sensing problems** 4) **emotional and cognitive reactions**

4.1 Table 2

1) Language malfunctions
- Speaking: "I didn't know how to order in English. I didn't even know how to say simple things like "I want this….'"
- Listening: "Sometimes, I don't understand because the server talks too fast."

2) Cultural distance
- Ordering system (customization): "Unexpected things…, like 'how would you like your eggs?' then I really have no idea what to say…"
- Menu (type of food): "I don't know what kinds of bread and dressings there are to choose from..."
- Paying system: "Why do they always make us wait? What can't we just pay at the cashier?"
- Relationship between customer & employee: "They are too friendly…they don't respect us enough."
- Service style: "They seem to check on us too often."

3) Sensing problems
- Communication: "Obviously, we (service provider and I) struggle to communicate with each other."
- Accuracy: "Then I can't get the information I need... I question whether I heard correctly…"
- Purchase decision: "So I just end up ordering whatever because I don't know…"

4) Emotional/cognitive reactions
- Emotional response: "Not being able to communicate doesn't end there …it makes me feel stupid and I get embarrassed…"
- Cognitive response: "So I get confused… what am I supposed to say at this point?"
- Ask/not ask: "I just don't bother to ask again to the server."
- Complain/not complain: "I don't bother to complain…"
- Blame self/other: "Somehow I end up blaming myself for not knowing…"

4.2 Inferences

- All interviewees pointed out language barrier as the main reason for stress. Interviewees mentioned that the difficulties in expressing themselves or understanding what the servers were saying were the main problems. Due to such obstacles, they blame themselves for the problems they encounter unless the service failure was severe and obvious.
- ESL tourists across all cultures want to be approved of by others and free from unnecessary constraints, or positive and negative "face", respectively. Spanish and German tourists found that if hotel staff as being interested in descriptions of their own culture, they subsequently felt encouraged to communicate more but, if they felt their positive face was threatened by them showing a lack of interest in their cultural background, they were more reluctant.
- Miscommunication and the difficulties in obtaining accurate information on the menu items are the main sensing problems that ESL customers encounter. This, in turn, affects their purchase decisions because they are not well-informed about the products and procedures.
- Emotional responses that ESL customers experienced most often were anxiety, fear, and embarrassment. They were anxious due to a lack of knowledge such as not knowing the type of food, or not knowing what to answer when servers asked questions. Fear was mainly related to "face consciousness." The interviewees were afraid that they were going to be embarrassed in front of the server or their friends, and embarrassment is the emotion they experienced when they lost face.

5. Evaluations

All nine interviewees pointed out that their expectation level is relatively low in terms of service. Since they do not enjoy interacting with service providers due to language barriers, evaluations are based more on other tangible such as when it was salient that the server was rude "discrimination," thus reacting negatively.

5.1 How to Deal with Intercultural Language Barrier by Hospitality Sector?

Learning a second language, not just English as is normally the case, is important in today's working environment within the hospitality industry. A lack of cultural awareness especially can lead to barriers of miscommunication. For example, Spanish customers could potentially be seen as rude or overly direct by English receptionists who do not

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understand the cultural differences. The receptionists therefore often apply their own cultural background to the interaction and, as a result, expect a sometimes unreasonably high level of politeness. Communication can be significantly improved by efforts to raise intercultural awareness and sensitivity in the hospitality sector.

- *Show some emotion:* Most emotions, such as excitement, joy, fear, frustration, and anger, are universal. Some cultures are more or less restrained in their expressions, so stay within customers' comfort zone. Follow the customer's lead.
- *Slow down, but don't shout:* Even if a customer understands English, different people have different levels of fluency. Staff may be speaking or introducing new concepts so fast that everything becomes a blur to them. Slow down, but avoid cranking up the volume. ESL customers who don't comprehend your words probably aren't hearing impaired.
- *Draw a picture to communicate an idea:* Some people prefer to see things, as opposed to hearing about them, so even the most rudimentary drawing can be much more helpful than trying to repeat words over and over. Also, finding a picture from a magazine or showing a customer a chart or graph can speak much more clearly than words.
- *Show without so much tells:* Some customer prefer to experience a product for themselves. If possible, let the person try out the product or service.
- *Ask for help:* If others are around who speak customer's language, don't be shy about asking for their assistance. People who are bilingual are often willing to translate for those who aren't, whether you're in a store, office, airport, hotel, or some other location. If hotel has a bilingual employee, all the better.
- *Double-check your customer's understanding:* If staff is unsure whether client has understood his message, try to confirm meanings by asking the question a different way or having him or her explains information back to you.
- *Be patient:* The key to overcoming any language barrier is to exercise patience. It's not staff or the customer's fault that they can't speak each other's language.
- *Maintain your sense of humor:* Overcoming language barriers can be frustratingstaff, as well as for your customer. A smile can help break the tension and make communicating easier.

5.2 Fighting Travel Fears of ESLTourists

Many people have fears surrounding travel. But with so many amazing places to visit in this world, fears that hold you back are limiting you from experiences more than they are protecting you. People who are worried about traveling to countries where they don't speak the language. Not being able to communicate can not only be frustrating, but sometimes it can even be a bit scary.

a) Communication Basics
- Tourist try to learn a few words ahead of time, like please, thank you, hello, good-bye. This will go a long way in showing the locals tourist is trying. A phrasebook can help, but remember that one won't necessarily understand the response he gets. Write down names of cities, the hotel one chose, and any attractions one is planning to visit. It

helps to show a taxi driver or someone you're asking directions from if you have it written down since it's unlikely that you will pronounce it correctly.

- English is the universal language of travel. Sometimes signs at tourist attractions are even written in both the local language and English. If one is traveling to a destination that is used to dealing with tourists, one will find locals who speak at least a few basic words of English. But when one speak to them, remember to speak slowly and clearly (NOT louder) and use simple vocabulary. One of the few words almost universal is "toilet." In the US people often ask where to find the bathroom or restroom, but that's not so easily understood for someone whose native language isn't English. But even in the middle of Southeast Asia, people understand the word toilet.

b) A big part of communication is in body language
- Hand gestures and miming work well. When trying to order food, if you can't tell what kind of meat something is, moo like a cow; flap your arms like a chicken, swim like a fish. Don't worry about looking silly, you will be understood and the person selling the food will probably be even more friendly to you. Recently while traveling, my husband and I were looking for toilet paper. When the store clerk didn't understand, my husband mimed wiping himself. Maybe a bit embarrassing, but he got his point across and the clerk burst out laughing. So instead of letting the fear of not knowing the language take over, just make a game out of it. Also try drawing. Andy and his wife were in a taxi in Rajasthan trying to get to the castle, but the driver didn't know what they were saying. So Andy quickly drew a castle. The driver laughed and nodded, and then brought them to the castle.

c) Someone else has been there before you
- Read online travel forums for reassurance. Chances are there are plenty of other people who have traveled to the destination one is thinking of going. Search through the questions to see what people are saying about how easy it was to get around without knowing the local language. If someone else traveled there and figured out a way around the language differences, you can do it too. Just keep telling yourself that, and once you get there, you'll believe it. Afterwards, you'll feel great that you met a challenge head on and succeeded. It's one of the many reasons I love to travel.

It might seem impossible to travel to a country with a different language and sometimes a completely different alphabet, but remember how much of the world learns English. Even in less educated parts of the world, people who work in some sort of tourism job will most likely know a few phrases of Basic English. Simple hand gestures, miming, drawing, and pointing go a long way towards **breaking through the language barrier**. Don't let a fear of not speaking the language hold you back. Just think of it as another part of the journey, and enjoy the ride.

6. Conclusion

The person you are, your experience, your identity, your personality are all the effects of language. This means that we can only express our experiences to ourselves and to others by using the concepts ingrained in our language, so that our thoughts, our feelings and how we represent our behaviour are all **'prepackaged'** by language. The scripted service performance will be influenced by the linguistic abilities of both employees and tourists. Not being able to speak English by ESL customers may generate shame and negative feeling. Both language and bodily praxis can be learnt by service employees to create a perception of authenticity. For example, hospitality employees are not just selling a smile but also the deep acting of emotional labour, such that a smile is not just painted on, but rather comes from the heart. Such smiles are evaluated subsequently by visitors as 'authentic'. From this perspective, emotions displayed by others are not the private possessions of the individual mind, but are the property of relationships.

7. Areas for Future Studies

- *Cultural diversity:* The best practices for enhancing cultural diversity resulted in establishing a cultural diversity committee, **a language bank or a cultural event**. Additionally, customs are the most appealing cultural attribute which the workforce wants to discover from other cultures. Cultural diversity has been considered in the hospitality business but is not carefully implemented. Therefore, there is a strong need for more education and training on cultural diversity in the future.

- *Cultural distance:* It is a vital component of international tourism and multinational companies. Using cultural distance methods or other measurement tools, organizations will be more aware of their employees, their cultural back-ground and possible cultural distances. When they have measured the differences and similarities between employees and customers, they know which things to emphasize and change, as well as what things to take into consideration in order to become more knowledgeable of the impact of linguistic footprints on culture distance.

- *Cultural variability: In* the hospitality industry diverse cultures infuse on a daily basis. There are several contrasts between employees or between a customer and an employee in the hospitality organization. Cultural diversity management is necessary in order to understand the variability of cultures that initially appear inside the organization. It is important to recognize cross-cultural behavior if the company wants to have a competitive edge in the hospitality industry. Cultural differences can appear in verbal or nonverbal communication, social interaction, personality, gender, class or education. They impact human behavior and how employees execute tasks.

The resulting linguistic barriers are confusing, frustrating or downright embarrassing. When communication is such a struggle, providing efficient, let alone personalized or friendly service, is practically impossible. In the global world of hospitality, language barriers impact not only how hotels communicate with customers, but how staff talk to one another and how teams located across the world share information.

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