

Challenges in English Communication for Hospitality Receptionists at Sheraton Hotel

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the English communication challenges faced by hospitality receptionists at Sheraton Hotel Lombok and the strategies they used to overcome them. This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, which was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' real experiences and perspectives regarding English communication difficulties in their daily workplace interactions. The participants were eight receptionists working at the front desk of Sheraton Hotel Lombok, selected using purposive sampling to represent variations in age, gender, educational background, and years of work experience. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes, and analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The findings revealed that the main challenges encountered were limited vocabulary, pronunciation and accent difficulties, and lack of confidence and fluency in speaking English. To address these challenges, the receptionists employed various communication strategies, including using simple English, employing body language and gestures, listening carefully to guests, politely asking guests to repeat information, practicing English regularly, and utilizing translation applications such as Google Translate. The findings have practical implications for English language training in the hospitality industry, suggesting that training programs should be designed to focus on situation-based communication, accent comprehension, and confidence-building activities rather than general English instruction alone. This study concludes that continuous English training and communication practice are essential for improving receptionists' communication skills and providing better service to international guests.

Keywords: English Communication, Hospitality Receptionists, Communication Strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry has become increasingly global, making English an essential language for communication between hotel staff and international guests (Prombut et al., 2024; Pinsirikul et al., 2023). As the international language of tourism, English enables receptionists to provide information, handle reservations, respond to complaints, and deliver professional services to guests from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Masoumpanah & Tahririan, 2013). Therefore, effective English communication is one of the most important competencies required of hotel

receptionists because it directly influences guest satisfaction and service quality (Mallia, 2022; Suardika, 2024).

Receptionists are the first point of contact in a hotel and play a significant role in creating guests' first impressions (Juliantari et al., 2023; Clarah et al., 2023). Their daily responsibilities require them to communicate clearly and confidently with guests in various situations, including check-in and check-out procedures, explaining hotel facilities, answering inquiries, and resolving guest complaints (Prombut et al., 2024). According to Hymes' (1972) theory of communicative competence, effective communication involves not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately in different social and situational contexts. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to the hospitality context, where receptionists must adapt their communication styles to accommodate guests from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Nabilla et al., 2025). However, in countries where English is used as a foreign language, many receptionists still experience communication difficulties when interacting with international guests. These difficulties may reduce communication effectiveness and affect the overall quality of hotel services (Clarah et al., 2023; Pinsirikul et al., 2023).

Previous studies have identified several English communication challenges in the hospitality industry. Internationally, Prombut et al. (2024) reported that speaking and listening were the most essential English skills for hotel receptionists, while understanding different accents remained one of the greatest challenges. Similarly, Pinsirikul et al. (2023) found that Thai hotel staff working with foreigners in Phuket Province experienced significant difficulties with pronunciation, vocabulary, and understanding guests' accents. Masoumpanah and Tahririan (2013) conducted a target situation needs analysis of hotel receptionists and emphasized the importance of situation-specific vocabulary and listening comprehension skills in hotel front-office contexts. Nationally, Clarah et al. (2023) found that hotel front office employees in Palembang experienced difficulties related to vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, confidence, and understanding guests' accents. Furthermore, Juliantari et al. (2023) found that receptionists' English competence varied depending on their educational background, work experience, and language training, emphasizing the importance of continuous English development programs. Arifuddin et al. (2020) also highlighted the importance of understanding idiomatic expressions for hospitality and tourism students, while Yusra et al. (2023) discussed the integration of supranational and national frameworks into tourism-related English courses in Indonesia.

Although these studies have provided valuable insights into English communication in hospitality settings, most of them employed quantitative approaches or focused primarily on identifying communication problems and required language skills (Prombut et al., 2024; Juliantari et al., 2023). Only limited research has explored, through qualitative investigation, the actual communication challenges experienced by receptionists in their daily workplace and the strategies they use to overcome those challenges, particularly in international hotels in Indonesia (Clarah et al., 2023). This indicates a research gap regarding the practical experiences of hotel receptionists when communicating with international guests in authentic workplace contexts. In addition, while previous studies have identified communication problems, fewer have examined how receptionists actively employ

communication strategies to manage these difficulties in real-time service interactions (Ardana & Murtono, 2025).

To address this gap, the present study investigates the English communication challenges faced by hospitality receptionists at Sheraton Hotel Lombok. Using a qualitative descriptive approach through semi-structured interviews with eight receptionists, this study explores both the communication challenges encountered in daily interactions with international guests and the strategies employed to overcome those challenges.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly in hospitality education, by providing a better understanding of workplace communication challenges and practical communication strategies used by hotel receptionists (Arifuddin et al., 2020; Yusra et al., 2023). In addition, the findings may serve as useful references for hotel management, hospitality educators, and future researchers in designing more effective English communication training programs for hospitality professionals.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative method conducted at Sheraton Hotel Lombok. This method was chosen because it enabled the researcher to understand the phenomenon of English communication challenges from the participants' perspectives and to explore the meaning participants assigned to their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the language barriers faced by receptionists and the strategies they used to overcome them in their natural workplace setting (Agustin et al., 2025). According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), qualitative research is appropriate when researchers aim to understand a phenomenon based on the participants' perspectives and when the research questions focus on how and why people experience certain phenomena.

Research Participants

The participants in this study were front desk receptionists at Sheraton Hotel Lombok who regularly interacted with English-speaking guests. Sheraton Hotel Lombok was selected as the research site because it is an international chain hotel that serves both domestic and international guests, making it an appropriate setting for investigating English communication demands in a real workplace. The population consisted of approximately eight receptionists working in different shifts (Sampaio et al., 2025). Using purposive sampling, all eight receptionists were selected as the participants. The criteria for participant selection included: (1) employment as a front desk receptionist at Sheraton Hotel Lombok, (2) regular interaction with international guests in English, (3) willingness to participate in the study and provide informed consent, and (4) diversity in terms of age, gender, educational background, and years of work experience to obtain rich and representative data. The participants' years of work experience ranged from one to twenty-five years, ensuring a broad range of perspectives from both novice and experienced receptionists.

Research Instrument

The main instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and reviewed by the research supervisors to ensure content validity (Adamova, 2025). It was designed to collect information about the English communication challenges experienced by the receptionists, including limited vocabulary, pronunciation and accent difficulties, speaking fluency, and lack of confidence. In addition, the interview guide included questions about the communication strategies used by the receptionists to overcome these challenges while interacting with international guests. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' responses in depth, enabling the researcher to ask follow-up questions when necessary.

Research Procedure

The data collection procedure was carried out in several stages. First, the researcher obtained official permission from the hotel management to conduct the study at Sheraton Hotel Lombok. Second, the researcher identified potential participants who met the selection criteria and invited them to participate in the study. Third, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and their right to withdraw at any time. Fourth, the data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with each participant. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable and private setting, such as a quiet office or break room, to help the participants feel relaxed and confident while answering the questions. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. During the interviews, the researcher took written notes of the participants' important responses and asked follow-up questions whenever necessary to obtain more detailed information. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian to allow participants to express their experiences freely and comfortably. The interview responses were later translated into English for the purpose of data analysis and reporting. This interview method enabled the researcher to collect authentic data based on the participants' real experiences in the workplace.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The six phases included: (1) familiarizing with the data, which involved transcribing the interview recordings verbatim, reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain an overall sense of the data, and noting initial ideas; (2) generating initial codes, which involved systematically coding interesting features of the data across the entire dataset and collating data relevant to each code; (3) searching for themes, which involved collating codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme; (4) reviewing themes, which involved checking whether the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, and generating a thematic map of the analysis; (5) defining and naming themes, which involved ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and generating clear definitions and names for each theme; and (6) producing the report, which involved selecting vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, and relating the analysis back to the research questions and literature. Through these stages, the researcher identified patterns in the interview data and organized them into major themes, such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation and accent difficulties, lack of confidence and speaking fluency, and the communication strategies used by

the receptionists. Finally, the themes were presented descriptively and discussed in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework used in this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interview results revealed that receptionists at Sheraton Hotel Lombok faced three main English communication challenges: limited vocabulary, pronunciation and accent difficulty, and lack of confidence and fluency. To overcome these challenges, they employed several communication strategies. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants, providing a clear overview of their backgrounds.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	Educational Background	Years of Work Experience
CP	25	Female	Bachelor's Degree	3
NA	30	Female	Diploma	5
YD	35	Male	Bachelor's Degree	10
NK	28	Female	Bachelor's Degree	4
RS	45	Male	Senior High School	20
MA	32	Female	Bachelor's Degree	7
AF	27	Female	Diploma	2
SA	50	Male	Senior High School	25

Table 2 presents a summary of the main findings, including the challenges identified and the strategies used by the receptionists to overcome them.

Table 2. Summary of Findings: Challenges and Strategies

Challenges	Number of Participants	Strategies	Number of Participants
Limited Vocabulary	4	Using Simple English	5
Pronunciation and Accent Difficulty	7	Body Language and Gestures	4
Lack of Confidence and Fluency	5	Listening Carefully	3
		Asking Guests to Repeat Information	3
		Practicing English Regularly	3
		Using Translation Applications	2

Limited vocabulary was identified as one of the most frequent difficulties, mentioned by four of the eight participants. Receptionists needed a wide range of vocabulary to handle varied situations such as check-in/check-out, explaining hotel facilities, and handling complaints, but sometimes lacked the appropriate words. As CP explained, "I think the biggest challenge for me is vocabulary because I do not only communicate with guests during check-in. Sometimes I also interact with guests in restaurants, at the pool, or when talking about topics like nature and tourism." This suggests that hospitality receptionists require not only general English but also situation-specific vocabulary related to hotel services, local tourism, and various guest inquiries.

Pronunciation and accent difficulty emerged as the most dominant challenge, reported by nearly all participants (seven out of eight). Guests from different nationalities spoke with varying accents and speaking speeds, which sometimes made comprehension difficult. NA noted that "every guest has a different accent based on their country," while YD reported particular difficulty with guests from France and fast-speaking guests from Singapore. Several participants indicated they had to actively adjust their listening and speaking style to accommodate different accents. This finding highlights the complexity of international communication, where receptionists must be prepared to understand a wide range of English varieties.

Lack of confidence and fluency affected five of the eight participants, particularly when speaking with fluent native English speakers or when needing to respond quickly. CP stated that she "sometimes feels nervous" when talking to native speakers, though described it as manageable, while NK observed that confidence issues were more common among less experienced or intern receptionists. This suggests that confidence is closely linked to both experience and the frequency of real communication practice.

To manage these difficulties, participants reported using several communication strategies: using simple English (5 participants), body language such as gestures and facial expressions (4 participants), listening carefully (3 participants), politely asking guests to repeat information (3 participants), practicing English regularly (3 participants), and using translation applications such as Google Translate (2 participants). These strategies were often combined—for example, simple English paired with gestures and repetition—to reduce misunderstandings and maintain smooth guest interactions. The use of multiple strategies simultaneously indicates that receptionists actively employ a range of communicative resources to bridge the gap between their English proficiency and the demands of service interactions.

These findings indicate that pronunciation and accent variation, limited vocabulary, and low confidence are the central barriers to effective English communication among hotel receptionists, consistent with prior research. The prominence of accent-related difficulty supports Clarah et al. (2023) and Prombut et al. (2024), who similarly identified understanding guests' accents as a key challenge in front-office communication—this study extends that finding by showing it as a persistent, daily workplace issue rather than an occasional classroom concern. The diversity of accents encountered at Sheraton Hotel Lombok, an international hotel, reflects the global nature of the hospitality industry and the need for receptionists to develop listening comprehension skills across various English varieties.

The vocabulary findings align with Masoumpanah and Tahririan (2013) and Clarah et al. (2023) in emphasizing the need for situation-based, hospitality-specific English rather than general English proficiency alone. The participants' experiences demonstrate that vocabulary limitations become particularly problematic in non-routine interactions, such as discussing local tourism attractions or handling complex guest requests. This finding reinforces the importance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in hospitality education, as proposed by Arifuddin et al. (2020) and Yusra et al. (2023). Similarly, the confidence-related findings support Clarah et al. (2023) and Juliantari et al. (2023), though this study suggests that experience alone does not fully resolve confidence issues—continuous practice and real communication exposure remain necessary even for experienced staff. This is evidenced by the fact that some

participants with substantial work experience still reported feeling nervous when speaking with native English speakers.

From the perspective of Communication Strategy Theory (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997), the strategies identified in this study – simple English, repetition, clarification, body language, and translation tools—can be categorized into several types of communication strategies. These include reduction strategies (simplifying language), achievement strategies (using gestures and translation tools), and stalling strategies (asking for repetition). The participants' use of these strategies demonstrates their active efforts to maintain communication despite language limitations. This finding aligns with Syahid et al. (2024), who found that practical training such as role-play improves fluency and confidence among hotel receptionists. Participants also indicated a need for more hands-on training focused on accent comprehension, complaint handling, and hospitality-specific vocabulary, suggesting that workplace training is most effective when tied to real service situations. Husin et al. (n.d.) similarly emphasized the importance of English communication skills training for hotel front office employees.

These findings can further be interpreted through Hymes' (1972) theory of communicative competence, particularly the Setting and Scene, Participants, and Ends components of the SPEAKING framework. The hotel front-desk context (Setting and Scene) demands accurate, polite, and efficient communication across varied service interactions; the linguistic and cultural diversity of guests (Participants) requires receptionists to continuously adapt their communication approach; and the communicative goal of guest satisfaction (Ends) is achieved through the strategic use of simplification, repetition, and non-verbal cues despite existing language barriers. The SPEAKING framework also highlights the importance of the Act sequence (the content and form of messages), the Key (the tone and manner of communication), and the Instrumentalities (the channels and forms of communication, such as face-to-face interaction, telephone calls, and the use of translation applications). This comprehensive framework underscores that communicative competence in hospitality contexts involves not only linguistic knowledge but also sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competencies.

Comparing the findings with previous international research, the challenges identified in this study are consistent with those reported by Prombut et al. (2024) in Thailand and Pinsirikul et al. (2023) in Phuket, suggesting that English communication difficulties are a common issue in hospitality industries across Asia where English is used as a foreign language. Similarly, the strategies employed by the receptionists in this study align with those reported by Clarah et al. (2023) in Indonesia and Masoumpanah and Tahririan (2013) in Iran, indicating that front-line hospitality staff worldwide employ similar coping mechanisms to manage English communication challenges. This cross-cultural consistency suggests that the nature of English communication challenges and strategies in the hospitality industry is shaped by the universal characteristics of service interactions with international guests, rather than being entirely context-specific.

Overall, the study confirms that communicative competence for hospitality receptionists extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include contextual, interpersonal, and purposive dimensions of language use. This reinforces the argument that English training for hotel receptionists should be designed as practical,

workplace-based English rather than general language instruction alone. The findings also suggest that training programs should incorporate awareness and practice of communication strategies, as strategic competence is an essential component of effective communication when linguistic knowledge is limited (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Oxford, 1990).

CONCLUSION

This study found that receptionists at Sheraton Hotel Lombok continue to face several challenges in using English to communicate with international guests, namely limited vocabulary, pronunciation and accent variation, and low confidence and fluency. These challenges made it more difficult for receptionists to explain hotel services, respond to guest inquiries, and handle complaints clearly and efficiently, with accent variation among guests from different countries identified as the most persistent obstacle. To overcome these difficulties, receptionists relied on several communication strategies, including using simple English, employing body language and gestures, listening carefully, asking guests to repeat information, practicing English regularly, and using translation applications. Among these strategies, using simple English and body language were reported as the most frequently used and effective approaches, as they allowed receptionists to maintain communication even when vocabulary or comprehension was limited.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its application of Hymes' (1972) communicative competence framework and Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) Communication Strategy Theory to the analysis of hospitality communication. The findings demonstrate that effective communication in the hospitality context requires not only grammatical competence but also strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence. The study contributes to the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by providing empirical evidence of the specific language needs and communication strategies of hospitality professionals, thereby informing the design of ESP curricula for hospitality education. The findings also have practical implications for hotel management, suggesting that English training programs should focus on practical, situation-based communication skills, accent comprehension, and confidence-building activities rather than general English instruction alone. Although Sheraton Hotel Lombok already provides English training and support for its staff, the findings indicate that more practical, situation-based training is still needed – particularly training focused on understanding diverse accents and handling real hotel-service scenarios. These results suggest that effective communication in the hospitality context depends not only on linguistic competence but also on continuous practice and workplace-based language support. Future studies are recommended to involve a larger number of participants or additional hotel settings, and to employ complementary data collection methods such as observation or questionnaires, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of English communication challenges and strategies in the hospitality industry.

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