ESP TEST FOR HOTEL FRONT OFFICE: IS IT A NEED?

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Abstract

Expatriates staying in hotels in Surabaya have indicated vast growing in number. Critical question is "how is the staff's language competence to cope with this?" To make it sure, approach to hotel leaders and staff should be done for further investigation. Thus, this study examines (1) hotel leaders' perception towards the hotel front officers' English proficiency, (2) the need of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) test for hotel front office staff and (3) effort done to ensure good command of English of front office staff. For the purpose, a qualitative study employing a case study was conducted involving ten hotels and hotel leaders as well as front office staff. Source of data was derived from results of questionnaire, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and interviews. Actual needs on front officers' English

proficiency information were obtained from three ways; job-search websites, institutional e-mails and interview with hotel leaders. Results showed that specific English test to measure English proficiency for front office tasks did not actually exist since hotel leaders merely counted on the general interview during their recruitment process. Perceptions on their front office staff's English proficiency were still below the passing grade for all type of hotels. To establish an ESP test for front office staff, Target Language Use (TLU) for Speaking and Writing can be broken-down into the followings: 18 were extracted as TLUs for speaking and 7 items were extracted to serve as TLUs for writing. Finally, based on the obtained TLUs, 14 questions for speaking and 5 questions for writing were constructed for suggested ESP test for hotel front office staff.

Keywords

ESP Test, Front Office, Target Language Use (TLU), Speaking, Writing

1. Introduction

The growth of hotels in East Java has shown its significance in numbers and this goes along with the growth of hotels in Indonesia (Marhanah, S., & Mardhatilla, D.(2015) (Marhanah & Mardhatilla, 2015). One of the factors is the great interest of investors not only local but also foreign towards potential cities in East Java in the near future. This phenomenon is confirmed by the data from the Central Bureau of Statistics of Indonesia showing the trend of incline of hotel numbers in East Java as seen below:
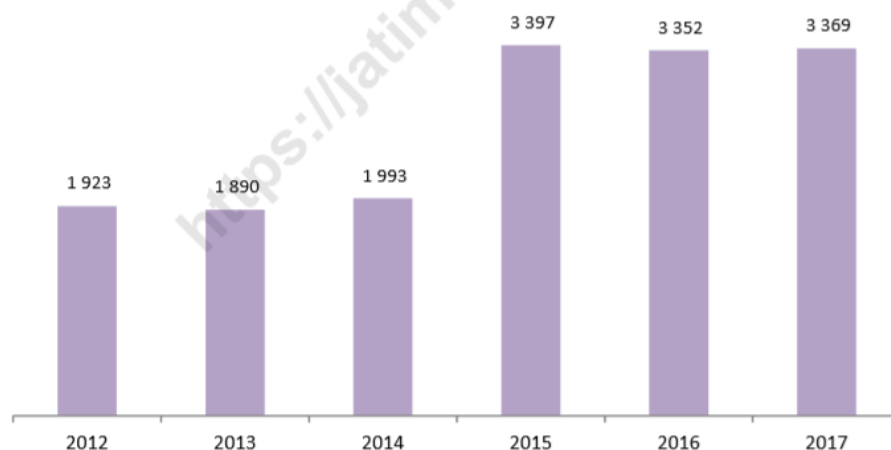

Figure 1: *Growth of Hotel Numbers from 2012-2017*

(Source: BPS Jatim, 2017)

From 2016-2017, there is an increase of 0.51% or 3.369 hotels have been built for one year. Additionally, this reflects conducive atmosphere of investment in this region. The increase of hotel numbers also seem to parallel with numbers of foreign guests coming to the

hotels. At least, 220.570 foreigners in 2016 have gained its numbers up to 247.166 in 2017. This means 12.06% of increase was gained in 2017.
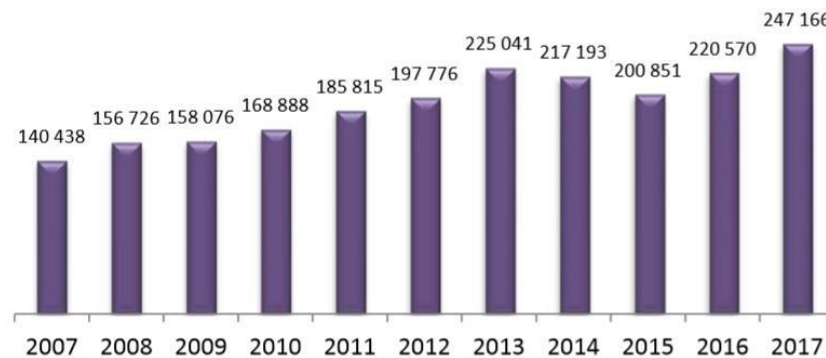

Figure 2: *Growth of Foreign Guests from 2007-2017*

(Source: BPS Jatim, 2017)

1.1 Role of Front Office in Hotel Industry

Having learned the fact of the increase numbers of both hotels and foreigners staying in, consequently, it gives significant impacts to hotel occupancy and competition among them is inevitable; not only battle in room rates but also service given to foreign visitors. When it comes to service, Front Office (FO) staff act out as front-liners that influence repeated comings of those foreign guests. One of the job descriptions of Front Office staff is communication (Tarmoezi and Manurung, 2000). Communication covers some tasks such as answering guest inquiries on hotel services, sales department and marketing for information request on guest room, as well as guest reservation. Those types of tasks are once completed, hospitable image can be obtained. Tewari (2009) points out some of the main functions relating to front office. They are (1) sales of rooms, (2) handling process of guest check-in, *(3)* keeping up room availability, (4) handling guests' complaints and queries, (5) bill issuing and taking payment, (6) giving information concerning the surrounding area, (7) coordinating guest services, and (8) bridging communication among departments in the hotel. Due to these significant roles, front office staff should be well-trained in order to be able to fulfil the tasks and can be a good server for guests by giving proper language for excellent service (Hollandsworth, 1987).

Language used by front officers is completely different from the language in daily basis. Furthermore, the language is specifically intended for front office contexts at hotels and consequently it differs from the language for other professions as Richterich's claim in language needs as language which comes from the use of language in the multitude of situation existing in social lives of individual groups (Richterich and Chanceler, 1984). In this

context, informal conversation is not allowed due to its difference. One example is as front officer addresses a guest for the very first time and surely the expressions are more formal. Such language need should be learnt and implemented as a formal greeting.

As a front-liner, front officer is the one who meets the guests and makes direct contacts with them. Communication should take place smoothly and thus the front officer must avoid miscommunication. By using proper language, the guests will see good reputation of the hotel and later it can bring them back to the hotel. As a result, mastering language skills are needed. This need is getting more crucial since the front officer has to face different kinds of guests with different backgrounds, different mother tongues, and different expectations that bring value to communication setting (Richard, 1976). In order to cope with this issue, front officer has to learn specific language to encounter any situations as a part of front office tasks in hotels.

In hospitality industry, customer service and customer satisfaction are the main keys to guests' stay experience. These two come together as customer service will not be achieved if customer service is not completely executed by the key front-liner; front officers. Some definitions have been made for customer satisfaction. Fulfilling customers' need becomes one parameter to be called as customer satisfaction (Pizam & Holcomb, 2008: 66) and meeting the guests' expectations as the quality of delivery plays important role in customer service. The elements can be tangible and intangible (Vallen & Vallen, 2009). One of the ways to improve customer service is through continuous feedback from the guests. In front office context, serving the guest with excellent communication is the fundamental elements which cannot be neglected. Since foreign guests grow in hotels in East Java, excellent English proficiency seems to be inevitable. The fact that more and more foreign guests are demanding in receiving clear explanations/ responses from front officers should become paramount considerations for hotels.

1.2 Urgency of Standard Competence of English

Due to the important role of front office at hotels, standards are supposed to be implemented especially in acquiring qualified staff. The first screening is at the recruitment phase in which employers can select those with high English proficiency. According to Lockwood (1999), standards are key element of any operations. More importantly, the business of hotel requires high level of hospitality. It deals with human where they have emotions, personal views or values that could effect to the hotel image. Different habits, various taste and even preferences towards hotel staff' service should be responded in a very good communication to get unforgettable memories over the stay. Key to successful customer satisfaction is to have standards in front office's recruitment stressing out more on English

proficiency. Furthermore, English competence should be acquired by the Front Office (FO) staff as the front-liner serving the overseas guests.

In the writer's preliminary observation and interview involving three and four star hotels in Surabaya, it was found out that all of them shared one common problem; their staff's English competence both oral and written. In the interview, Hotel supervisors and managers mentioned that there was an urgent need to improve their staff's speaking and writing competence for the purpose of excellent service in hospitality industries. Smooth communication between the customers and staff for the sake of the fulfilment of needs during their stay in the hotels was the important issue to address. In short, as long as the foreign customers can get what they need quickly, hotel service would be scored "good" or even "excellent". Thus, the ability to respond both in oral and written method became the focus in hotel business.

The competence of oral and written English in Front Office Division becomes the substantial need which should be fulfilled and this becomes matters for those who want to be part of the team as Mountford's claim (1981) about needs as knowledge which should be learnt by learners since they are considered important by the company. The knowledge the applicants learn becomes requirements in order to be successful at job finding (Widdowson, 1981). Moreover, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point out the English language as the requirement in target situation, in this case, Front Office Division at Hotels.

Surprisingly, another finding from the interview was that they did not havea proper test which measures their English proficiency in front office contexts. They admitted that oral interview was the only way to check their speaking interview, meanwhile, writing competence referred to their application letters or curriculum vitae (CV). Interview session mostly asked about general information of the applicants which include; educational background, reason applying the position, and efforts to be considered eligible for the position. Length of interview varied from ten to thirty minutes. The questions did not relate directly to the front office tasks that they would perform later. Lastly, the interviewer decided the fitness of the applicants on the basis only from their interview and CV.

1.3 Research Purpose

From the process of interview and screening applicants' CV done by the hotel users, the writer could draw a temporary conclusion that the process did not really measure speaking and writing competence relating to the front office tasks on daily basis. From brief background above, therefore, this study aims to examine three important points; (1) to what extent hotel leaders' perception towards the hotel front officers' English proficiency, (2) whether English for Specific Purpose (ESP) test is needed for hotel front office staff and (3)

what effort should be done as the beginning step in ensuring good command of English of front office staff.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Research Design

In order to achieve the above purposes, the writer employed a qualitative study and used a case study approach. The qualitative study was applied since the research attempted to seek information on perception of hotel leaders upon their staff' English proficiency and acquire their responses upon the need of ESP test for their staff as well as investigating efforts done by the staff. Meanwhile, a case study approach was also applied since only ten hotels in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia committed to be a part of the research due to their availability.

2.2 Respondents

The respondents involved were ten hotels in Surabaya, East java, Indonesia. In the beginning, thirteen hotels were willing to join; however, three hotels could continue due to their availability. Meanwhile, the ten hotels remained consisted of two five-star hotels, five four-star hotels, and three three-star hotels. From the ten hotels, overall, there were forty respondents comprising hotel front office staff and hotel leaders.

2.3 Data Collection

Source of data was derived from the summary of job search websites, results of questionnaire, interview, Focus Group Discussion (FD). Some stages were also conducted to acquire data which then was analysed.

Stages

The followings were the stages conducted during the study:

First Stage

To make sure, English proficiency was one important requirement in order to become a front officer, the writer gathered information in three ways; job search websites, e-mails from hotels which cooperated with the writer's institution and interviews from hotel leaders. The efforts were just to confirm the consistency of requirement of English proficiency and to strengthen the solution should be proposed at the end of this study. There were two job search websites and data taken was from the websites within three months. The focus was only the applications for front office staff of hotels. Data from e-mails were drawn within six months. Unlike from the job websites, period of taking the data was twice longer since there were only limited numbers of applications for front office staff through e-mails. However, these

efforts should be done as a triangulation approach. Additionally, the interview to hotel leaders needed to conduct to serve as triangulation effort as well.

Second Stage

This stage was intended to build rapport among hotel leaders as the first entrance for the writer to get more solid data. Doing one on one interview with hotel leaders was really necessary not only as the entrance to their front office staff but also as an effort of getting confirmation on their staff' English proficiency, if proper test was given on recruitment's stage and tasks which required English.

Third Stage

Distributing questionnaire to hotel front officers was the next stage after getting permission from hotel leaders. This stage was to obtain information on hotel front office staff's specific tasks which required English as a part of need analysis of the Target Language Use (TLU).

Fourth Stage

Focus Group Discussion was done in two steps: with hotel leaders and with hotel front officers. They were conducted separately. This stage was to get confirmation for some issues which were still unclear drawn from the first interview and questionnaire.

Fifth Stage

The last stage was to make analysis from the results on interview, focus group discussion and questionnaire. Results of analysis were the basis of solution proposed in this study.

3. Findings and Discussions

As the first entrance, it was important to find out whether the requirement as front officers on English proficiency was explicitly stated in every job vacancy posted. This study used two job-search websites as confirmation.

Table 1: *The Need of English Proficiency on FO Application in Three Months of Search*

Job-search website	Number of FO Vacancy	English Proficiency	Percentage
https://id.jooble.org	19	19	100
https://www.jobstreet.co.id	22	22	100

The table above shows that undoubtedly hotels were really serious in looking for suitable front office candidates for their hotels. There were 19 vacancies as a front officer

from https://id.jooble.org and 22 vacancies from https://www.jobstreet.co.id. All of them require English proficiency as one of the conditions.

Specific request could also be noticed from additional information in the vacancies. Various words written were such as "fluent in English", "fluent in English both in oral and written", "good command of English; spoken skills much required", "Active English speaking", "good speaking and writing in English". It can be concluded that hotels needed the candidates to be able to speak and write in English. The question of to what extent those abilities were needed would be depending on the recruitment stage later.

Additionally, in six months, this study also found vacancies from institutional e-mails. It revealed that at least 11 e-mails were recorded and they showed English proficiency was written as one requirement to fulfil as front officer candidates. The e-mails were from three and four star hotels in Surabaya. More specifically, they also requested the candidates to have spoken and written skills of English. From the second source of data, it was confirmed that speaking and writing became two must-have skills.

From hotel leaders, the study also obtained strong confirmation that English competence became a paramount skill a front officer must have. In total, there were 10 hotel leaders shared the same thought for front officer's requirement. They all agreed that speaking was as the main competence. They also added writing skills would be suggested to support front office's tasks.

To sum up, the three elements consisting job-search website, institutional e-emails and hotel leaders' input confirmed that English speaking and writing competence were the competence hotel front office staff ought to possess because the daily task requires them.

The above findings at least gave the writer an assumption that the hotel leaders would select the best candidate and felt satisfied with their own recruitment. However, when investigated deeper through FGD and interviews, the findings were surprising since it can be temporarily concluded that the hotel leaders found actual abilities of their front officers. Perceptions were gathered from the ten hotel leaders which became the respondents of this study. The table below shows how the hotel leaders perceived their front officers' English speaking and writing ability.

Table 2: *Hotel Leaders' Perception upon their FO staff's English Proficiency*

No	Category	Score Range of English Proficiency	Passing Grade
1	5 star hotel (1)	75-80	80
2	5 star hotel (2)	75-80	80
3	4 star hotel (1)	60-70	70
4	4 star hotel (2)	60-70	70
5	4 star hotel (3)	60-70	70
6	4 star hotel (4)	60-70	70
7	4 star hotel (5)	60-70	70
8	3 star hotel (1)	60-70	70
9	3 star hotel (1)	50-60	70
10	3 star hotel (2)	50-60	70

This study involved two of five star hotel leaders, five of four star hotel leaders, and three of three star hotel leaders. The five star hotel leaders claimed that 80 was the passing grade for English proficiency. Different from the five star hotel, four star hotel leaders admitted that 70 was their passing grade and it was also similar for the three star hotels. All hotel leaders seemed to have the same voice. It can be seen from their statements in regard with the actual English ability of their front office staff. Five star hotel leaders gave a range of 75-80 of their front officers' English competence. Score below passing grade was also experienced by the four and three star hotels. Four star hotel leaders gave a score range of 60-70. Meanwhile, three star hotel leaders gave a score range 50-60. The worst gap between its passing grade score and the actual ability was from the three star hotel. When seeing the lowest score range, 50, the gap could reach 20 points.

The findings were surprising if they were compared to the requirement stated in vacancy and the expectation from hotel leaders. Of ten hotel leaders, seven of them further expressed they really needed the front office staff at the moment and they had to accept candidates with below passing grade due to the urgent needs. In addition, they admitted that there was not specific test of English which can measure the candidates' English competence in regard with front office tasks. At the interview phase, questions were given in English and only asked general knowledge about hospitality industry and information about the candidates' life.

Overall, from the actual English competence, the hotel leaders observed and found that efforts to upgrade their staff for better speaking and writing skills. They admitted that

programs to improve their English were deliberately done yet it took much times to acquire the expected results and at the same time they also had to do their routines serving the guests. This became another problem for the hotels to solve.

The fact that hotels did not have specific English test for recruiting front office staff triggered the writer to collect information the Target Language Use in the front office situation. Results of questionnaire and interviews to front office staff and hotel leaders were as follows:

TLU of speaking consisted twenty six (26) items where eighteen (69%) items were considered as TLUs for all hotels. They were as follows: addressing guests, asking guests' trip, asking about reservation to guests, explaining type of rooms to guests, asking about guests' room preference, asking about guests' length of stay, asking about additional service for the guests, responding to questions on tourism spots in the city, responding to questions on local food/culinary, responding to questions on directions, responding to guests' request on meeting room, asking the guest about preference of payment method, asking the guests on preference on currency for credit card payment of method, serving guests who wish to prolong their stay, serving the process of check out, serving the process of guests' payment, making small talks with guests, serving in-room check in of guests with special needs, and serving guests' complaints.

The TLU of speaking comprised of asking about guests' purpose of visit, offering welcome drink, conducting courtesy call after the guests check-in received 88%. 75% of the hotels admitted that asking the guest on preference on currency for credit card payment of method and giving morning call became their TLUs. Furthermore, only 50% of the hotels admitted offering guests as a hotel member and explaining facility as hotel member as the TLUs (Datu, Y. A., Limantara, S. W., Soelistiyowati, E., Hardjanto, T. D., & Fuadi, Y. (2019). The competences which earned full agreement from the respondents were addressing guest, asking guests' trip, asking about reservation to guests, explaining type of rooms to guests, asking about guests' room preference, asking about guests' lengths of stay, asking about additional service for guests, responding to questions on tourism spots in Surabaya, responding to question on local food/culinary, responding to question on direction, responding to a request on a meeting room, asking the guests about payment method payment, serving guests who want to prolong the stay, serving the process of check out, as well as responding guests' complaint. In the meantime, asking preference on drink and meals, offering welcome drink, conducting courtesy call after the guests check-in received 88% of agreement among the respondents. For 75% of agreement, respondents referred to tasks such

as asking the guest on preference on currency for credit card payment of method and doing morning call.

In writing competence, Focus Group Discussions were made as well as a survey to hotels. Results showed the writing target language use as items which needed to be considered in the test. The agreed TLUs for receiving 100% acknowledgement by all were writing the details of guests' stay and guests' preference in details, writing internal emails to their superiors as problems that need special attention occurred, writing a division report to managers, writing apology letters when mistakes happened during guests' stay as well as responding guests' complaint seemed to earn 100% agreement from all hotel respondents (Datu, Y. A., Limantara, S. W., Soelistiyowati, E., Hardjanto, T. D., & Fuadi, Y. (2019).

As the second rank of tasks that received 88% agreement from respondents was a task that dealt with writing emails for coordination to other divisions at the same hotel. Meanwhile 63% of respondent came to agreement on tasks such as writing emails to other hotels under the same group as well as writing a thank you letter after the guest' check-out.

Based on the Target Language Use (TLU) above, it can be broken down into tasks for each skill (Datu, Y. A., Limantara, S. W., Soelistiyowati, E., Hardjanto, T. D., &Fuadi, Y. (2019). The tasks were drawn from the competence required from a front-office division. Afterwards, questions were formulated that related a lot the competence and tasks. From the interview and questionnaire, at least, six competences became the guidance to breakdown the tasks. For Speaking, several tasks should be designed as a part of TBECC will be (1) to describe a picture, (2) to express an opinion, (3) to propose a solution, (4) to summarize and re-tell information, (5) to respond to a statement, and (6) to formulate questions based on the information given. Number of questions differed from the first, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth task. They were all based on the input from the respondents as well as the need when they had to give service as a front-liner. The first task was represented by only one question. Different from the second task, it had two questions to represent the competence expected. Meanwhile, the third task consisted of four questions since lots of responses were needed to respond complaints and therefore a staff should be able to give solutions. The fourth task was represented by two questions like the sixth task. Additionally, the fifth task required three questions in relation to a need of a small talk, reservation and greetings to guests. The breakdown can be seen in the following figure:
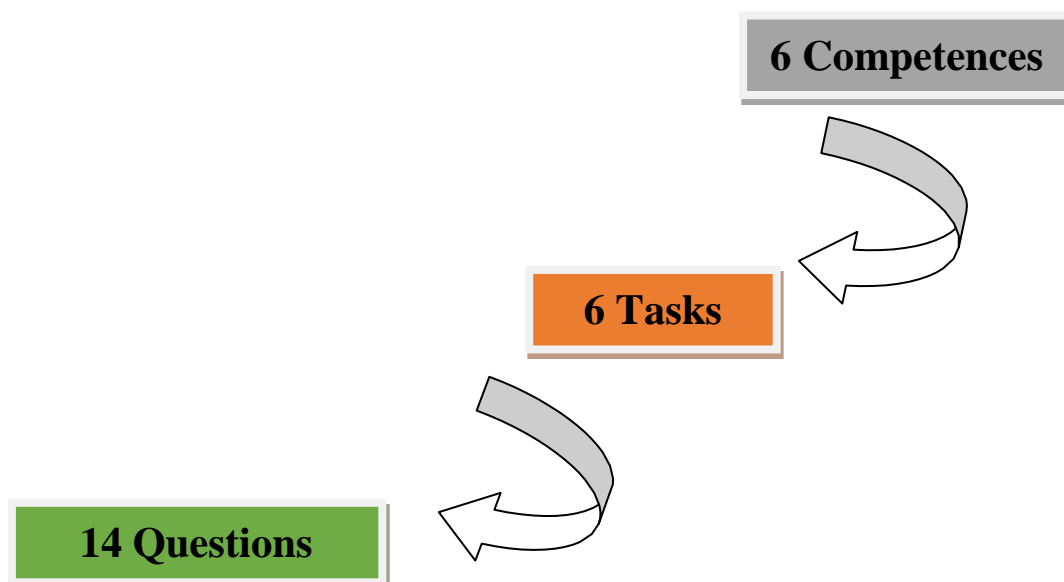
Figure 3: *Breakdown of TLU for Speaking Skills*

For each task, criteria were also composed, yet different elements of criteria appeared were also different in accordance with the need for each item. The criteria for Task1 consisted of three elements; pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. However, for Task 2, an addition of three elements, cohesion, took place since it challenged a more competence for a test-taker when expressing opinion. Task 3 needed more complex understanding and required more complex sentence construction and therefore it had more elements for the criteria; adding relevance of the context as well as the completeness of the context. However, in Task 4, besides pronunciation, it appeared that two elements of criteria were enough for the task. They were pronunciation, relevance of the context and completeness of the context. Task 5 related to statement responding, relevance of the context, pronunciation and grammar were the criteria needed for the task. Lastly, for the last task, it only required pronunciation, relevance of the context as well as the grammar. For the writing part, the breakdown can be seen in the following table (Datu, Y. A., Limantara, S. W., Soelistiyowati, E., Hardjanto, T. D., & Fuadi, Y. (2019)

Table 6: *Breakdown of TLU for Writing Skills*

Question	Task	Competence	Criteria
1	Fill a form based on the information given	Filling a detailed form about a guest	Relevance of the Context
2 – 3	Write letters	Writing a confirmation letter Writing a welcome letter Writing an email of coordination	Grammar Relevance of the Context Quality and variation of the sentences Vocabulary Organization
4 – 5	Respond to written letter	Replying a complaint in written form Writing a thank you email	Grammar Relevance of the Context Quality and variation of the sentences Vocabulary Organization

4. Conclusion and Suggestion

Increasing number of hotels and foreign guests in East Java should be in line with good quality of customer service from front office staff. Exemplary customer service may result in maximum customer satisfaction indicated with repeating guests' coming to the hotels and better image of the hotels. In the meantime, front office staffs as the front-liner in hotels play very important roles since they make the first contact with guests. The medium used to respond feedbacks, questions, queries from guests is English.

Speaking and writing as the main skills should be owned by these front office staff were found below the passing grade determined by hotels. One of the causes was hotels still did not have proper English test to measure the competence of their staff. General interview in English was conducted yet had not measured their English proficiency. From these findings, English for Specific Purpose (ESP) test should be a solution as a part of recruitment process. Combining the interview with the ESP test for front office can be a means of selecting candidates with sufficient English proficiency. The interview can serve as a tool to examine candidates' confidence and attitude when responding the question. Afterwards, for specific test for front office tasks, ESP test can be given to measure their speaking and writing competence in front office contexts.

Due to time limitation, this research was only covered some parts of hotels in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia and focused only on the competence required in Front-office division and the category of the hotels were also limited to 3-star, 4-star and 5-star hotels. Therefore, results still cannot be generalized for other cases in designing an ESP test for hotels.

It is suggested that respondents for further research should be the same category such as the same star of hotels. Further investigation on whether they have written documents which show passing grade of English proficiency required for them to pass. Furthermore, adding more number of hotels and respondents can help give better results and perspective on the study.

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