



## **Needs Analysis of Hotel Front Desk Staff: Considerations for ESP Course Design**

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### **Abstract**

While previous studies on needs analysis of hotel front desk staff tended to adopt a quantitative method (i.e., closed-end surveys), qualitative studies that carry out a formal needs analysis of front desk staff have been rare. In an attempt to bridge this gap, qualitative research methods, including

interviews and observations were adopted for data collection in the current study. In order to gain a thorough understanding of English skills needed by hotel front desk staff and their expectations about ESP course design, we conducted needs analysis of hotel front desk staff at international hotels in Vietnam. In particular, drawing on Woodrow's (2017) steps of needs analysis for ESP course design, English skills used and problems faced by Vietnamese hotel front desk staff were explored. A total of 15 hotel front desk staff and three managers from five different hotels were invited to participate in this study. The findings showed that speaking and listening skills are frequently used by hotel front desk staff, whereas reading and writing skills are less used. Thus, it is suggested that ESP courses could focus on listening and speaking skills. We found that the participants often encountered difficulties in listening in their workplaces such as understanding guests' accents and catching up with their speeds of talking, especially when dealing with guests' complaints and telephone conversations. Based on the findings, course syllabi that can be used by ESP instructors for training hotel front desk staff are provided in order to tackle those problems.

**Key words:** needs analysis, qualitative method, hotel English, English for Specific Purposes

## 1. Introduction

According to Otilia (2015), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) was formed based on the needs of business purposes and routine communication. To define ESP, Harmer (1983) emphasized ESP as "situations where the student has some specific reasons to learn a language" (p. 1). Likewise, Hutchinson and Water (1987) indicated that "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" (p. 19). Woodrow (2017) also has similar statement: "ESP may be considered as an approach to course design and teaching that target groups of learners who have a common goal or purpose in learning English" (p. 5). Thus, ESP is considered significant because it is based on learners' needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and it provides communication skills, which could be used in their workplaces (Evans, 1998).

In order to develop effective ESP courses, *needs analysis* is a significant step because it is "the foundation on which we can develop curriculum content, teaching and methods" (Otilia, 2015, p. 55). To understand what to do with needs analysis, Prachanant (2012) pointed out that needs analysis "involves seeking and interpreting information about learners' needs" (p. 119). In other

words, based on learners' needs, English teachers or trainers can better design a suitable syllabus for an ESP course (Basturkmen, 2010). Therefore, there is no doubt that ESP and needs analysis have a close relationship which should go hand in hand.

Considering the importance of needs analysis, an increasing number of researchers have carried out needs analysis in several disciplines such as business, engineering, nurses, and technology (Edwards, 2000; Gao, 2007; Spence & Liu, 2013; Saragih, 2014; Vo, Wyatt & McCullagh, 2016). In particular, due to the competitive nature in international hotels, numerous studies have been conducted to investigate skills needed by hotel front desk staff (also called 'receptionists') or EFL students who studied in tourism and hospitality areas (Brunton, 2009; Charunsri, 2011; Masoumpanah & Tahririan, 2013; Stapa & Jais, 2005; Vu, 2015; Yasmin, Sarkar & Sohail, 2016). These studies showed that hotel front desk staff need to equip the ability to communicate in English in order to accommodate the rising needs of international tourists. Over these years, while studies have investigated needs analysis of hotel receptionists in different Asian countries, few were conducted in Vietnam where hospitality industry has also been growing rapidly. Moreover, among these studies, many tend to adopt a quantitative method (i.e., closed-end surveys). Studies that carry out a formal needs analysis of hotel receptionists with a qualitative approach have been rare. To bridge these gaps in knowledge, the current study aims to adopt qualitative interviews to investigate English needs and problems faced by Vietnamese hotel front desk staff. It is hoped that the findings of this study can be useful to EFL educators and ESP trainers when they design courses for hotel front desk staff or future students in related fields.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Needs Analysis in Relation to ESP Courses**

According to Woodrow (2017), needs analysis is "the backbone of ESP course design" (p. 21). This is because the main aim of needs analysis is to identify the specific language needs and skills of the learners. Thus, the learners' needs are important factors for English trainers in terms of developing the content of ESP course. Likewise, Brown (2016) stressed that "the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation." (p. 4). It

means that needs analysis plays a vital role in ESP because data collected for needs analysis will be applied for course objectives and teaching goals of an ESP course.

Taking into account the above definitions, needs analysis in this study, refers to the needs of specific communicative events and functions of English language used by front desk staff or receptionists in the workplace such as four or five-star hotels in Vietnamese context. Thus, to conduct a formal needs analysis, the current study involves collecting information about the hotel receptionists' educational and professional knowledge as well as obstacles they encounter when answering questions, conversing with guests, providing information, solving problems, offering help, and so on.

To be more detailed about the process of needs analysis in relation to the ESP course, Woodrow (2017) presented eight steps of needs analysis for ESP course design (p. 29):

Step 1: Identify stakeholders

Step 2: Consult previous needs analysis and current research in the area

Step 3: Devise best methods of data collection

Step 4: Triangulate from multiple sources, situations, and methods

Step 5: Collect and analyze data (needs, wants, necessities, analyses of specialist discourse)

Step 6: Translate findings into list of communicative events

Step 7: Determine syllabus items based on the above

Step 8: Evaluate courses

Based on Woodrow's (2017) steps of needs analysis for ESP course design, this study conducted analyses from the first step (identify stakeholders) to the seventh step (determine syllabus items), which are considered crucial before a real ESP course is carried out. By conducting these analyses, we want to explore whether the English training provided at the hotels serves the needs of Vietnamese hotel receptionists. Furthermore, to offer suggestions to hotel managers or English trainers, the present research intends to investigate the time that hotel receptionists are available to join, contents they want to learn, and teaching methods they prefer.

## 2.2 Needs Analysis in Hotel and Tourism Industry

Over these years, needs analysis in hotel and tourism industry has been conducted in different Asian contexts such as Thailand, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Iran. These studies revealed that speaking and listening skills were considered more important than reading and writing skills. Besides, some even reported that the contents of ESP courses offered in college or university were not useful to skills needed at the workplace. In the followings, relevant studies are reviewed.

Conducted in Thailand, Brunton (2009) examined attitudes of both hotel employees and instructors toward hotel English and general English. The researcher invited 10 Thai hotel staff to participate in an eight-week English course. During the course, the researcher observed the students' attitudes toward the course and investigated their perspectives of such course. While 50 percent of the class assumed that they needed to concentrate on hotel English, the rest of the class preferred general English. The instructor, however, preferred specific hotel English because of the limited time and financial support. Regarding the English skills, the hotel employees indicated that speaking is the most important and used frequently at the workplace.

Investigating the English learning needs and problems of hotel front office staff in Chinatown, Bangkok, Charrunsri (2011) used survey questionnaires (with two open-ended questions at the end of the survey) as the main method to collect data. The study showed that speaking was the most important skill because it was used most of the time at the hotel. Meanwhile, listening skill was considered the most problematic skill for the front desk staff in phone communications. This is because their English levels are not enough to pick up the phones and they were not familiar with thick accents (e.g., Russian and Indian) and failed to understand some slangs. Based on the findings, the researcher suggested that the receptionists should improve their speaking and listening in order to provide clear messages to customers. Besides, the results would be helpful for hotel managers in terms of developing staff's English skills.

In the same context, Prachanant (2012) recruited 40 tourism employees who worked in five international tour companies in Thailand to fill out a survey. The finding showed that speaking and listening skills were significant for the employees' jobs. In addition, it was found that the staff had problem in listening. For example, they were not able to understand foreign accents, or they could not catch up with guests' speaking speeds.

In Jordan, Albakrawi (2013) carried out a large study in order to identify English language needs of secondary school hospitality students ranging from seventeen to eighteen years old. The participants included 146 students, 27 teachers, and 24 employees. Among the four English skills, the researcher found that listening exercises were highly needed, namely listening to one person talking and listening to orders and instructions. This study also reported findings with respect to the other three skills. In terms of reading skills, most participants needed to read advertisements, instructions, and brochures. Regarding writing skills, the students had limited competence in writing notes, applications, and beverage bills. Finally, as for speaking, students needed to talk with the guests at the hotel restaurant.

In Pakistan and Iran respectively, Masoumpanah and Tahririan (2013) as well as Yasmin et al. (2016) invited students majoring in hotel management to participate in their studies. Masoumpanah and Tahririan (2013) suggested that students majoring in tourism should equip effective communication skills for guest registrations and they need to master the four English language skills. Moreover, the researchers indicated that ESP teachers should combine core textbooks and supplementary books because different materials could serve different learners' needs. Yasmin et al. (2016) also highlighted the need of communication skills required by hospitality students. These two studies both showed that the students considered listening and speaking very important skills for their jobs.

Conducted in the Malaysian context, Stapa and Jais (2005) explored the expectations of tourism students at different colleges regarding writing skills needed in their workplace. The students in this study had finished a course related to English for occupational purposes and also had undergone training at several hotels. The results indicated that the students needed to improve their writing skills in terms of writing reports and emails. Besides, the majority of the students were not satisfied with the curriculum offered by the colleges. Therefore, the researchers suggested that writing courses at university should focus on skills related to job needs in order to prepare students to perform well in the workplace.

Based on the above studies, some gaps are worth noting. First, previous studies investigating needs analysis tended to adopt a quantitative approach, namely using closed-end surveys only (Albakrawi, 2013; Charrunsri, 2011; Masoumpanah & Tahririan, 2013; Prachanan 2012; Yasmin

et al., 2016). However, few have applied a qualitative approach to conduct needs analysis of staff working in tourism or hotel industries. Survey research might not provide enough information in terms of English language needed by the hotel receptionists (Charrunsri, 2011; Masoumpanah & Tahririan, 2013). Because of the limitation of the questionnaire and number of participants, the findings might not reflect all the needs of hotel or tourism staff. Being aware of such gap, the current study aims to adopt a qualitative approach through interviews and observations to collect data. It is important to find out how hotel receptionists use English at their workplaces from a more holistic perspective.

Second, most studies seemed to focus on students who studied in the tourism industry (Albackrawi, 2013; Brunton, 2009; Prachanant, 2012; Stapa & Jais, 2005; Yasmin et al., 2016), while only two studies collected data from hotel front desk staff (Charunsri, 2011; Masoumpanah & Tahririan, 2013). Gaining insights into English language needs of hotel front desk staff is crucial since it may provide us more insider perspectives regarding obstacles encountered in the real workplace settings compared to those reported by tourism majors.

Last, among the above studies, needs analysis of hotel receptionists has been conducted in different Asian contexts such as Thailand, Malaysia, Iran, Pakistan, and Jordan. However, few studies were conducted in Vietnam where hotel industry has been rapidly growing. Thus far, to the best of our knowledge, Vu's (2015) study was one of the few qualitative studies conducted in the Vietnamese context. Exploring communicative strategies used by hotel front desk staff in several hotels in Vietnam. Vu (2015) looked at how the staff communicated with the guests and found some communication strategies that the front desk staff often used such as making repetition, reformulation, minimal queries, and lexical suggestions. These are considered as language functions that Vietnamese hotel front desk staff used to communicate with guests. Moreover, she found that the content of audio materials used in college English textbooks for students to practice their English speaking and listening was not relevant to the communication skills needed in the workplace. Thus, she suggested that teachers need to make a change or innovation in the teaching of English to those who will work in the hotel industry.

Building upon Vu's (2015) study, this qualitative study intends to contribute to the growing literature on needs analysis of hotel and tourism industry. Taking into account the context of

Vietnam, it is necessary to investigate specific English needs and problems faced by Vietnamese hotel receptionists so that ESP training courses provided by the stakeholders or instructors can better meet the needs of the hotel and tourist personnel. Four research questions guided this study:

- 1) What English language skills are frequently used by the Vietnamese hotel front desk staff in their workplaces?
- 2) What difficulties do the Vietnamese hotel front desk staff often encounter in their workplaces?
- 3) How and in what way are they trained in college in terms of English skills? To what extent was the training helpful in terms of solving difficulties in English?
- 4) What kind of English course design can be provided to meet their needs?

### 3. Research Methods

#### 3.1 Participants

A total of 18 participants (four males and 14 females) from five different hotels in Hue City, Vietnam (four 4-star hotels and one 5-star hotel) were recruited from August, 2018 to October, 2018. These included 15 hotel front desk staff and three managers.

All the names of hotels will be presented with anonymous labels (e.g., Hotel 1, Hotel 2, Hotel 3, Hotel 4, and Hotel 5). In addition, the names of all hotel front desk staff will be labeled with a range of numbers (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, until Participant 15). As for three hotel managers, they will be called as Manager 1, 2, and 3. The number of the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Number of the Participants in the Five Hotels**

Hotel	Hotel Rating	Males	Females	Total number of participants in each hotel
1	4-star	1	4	5
2	4-star	1	3	4
3	4-star	1	3	4
4	5-star	1	2	3
5	4-star	0	2	2



### 3.2 Data Collection Procedures

Based on Woodrow's (2017) steps of needs analysis, we tried to identify stakeholders (Step 1) such as managers of the hotels and decided to visit and interview both managers and front desk staff in some hotels (Step 3). Of note is that the entire data collection was completed by the first author who was born and used to work in an international hotel in Vietnam and thus considered suitable to collect data.

Before the interviews, the first author contacted three hotel managers by sending emails to three Managers (Manager 1, 2, and 3) in three different hotels (Hotel 1, Hotel 2, and Hotel 3) and explained the purpose of the research. To allow the participants to better understand the nature of the interviews, the researcher showed a list of interview questions for a few front desk staff and managers, and received some suggestions which included making the interview questions shorter and translating all the questions from English to Vietnamese. Taking this advice, all the interview questions were translated and rewritten to become more concise in Vietnamese.

After the initial contacts, the first author visited three hotels mentioned above to carry out the interviews based on the time arrangements made by the managers. Of note is that some participants from Hotels 1, 2, and 3 did not want to join the interviews, so the first author selected two more hotels (Hotels 4 and 5) to increase the number of participants. The researcher followed the schedules arranged by the hotels. An average time of each interview was around 15 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, face to face, and tape-recorded. The researcher recorded the interviews by using two smartphones in order to prevent any loss of information. The researcher took notes and transcribed all the recordings after data collection, and then translated them into English. The total amount of transcriptions was 2,242 words.

One thing to be noted is that before individual interviews were conducted, the first author also planned to conduct on-site observation if permitted. However, only Hotel 3 gave permission to carry out observation and so observation was only conducted in this hotel with three participants. The researcher went to Hotel 3 for two days in the mornings to observe the staff for two hours per day. According to the manager in Hotel 3, many foreign guests often checked in on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Thus, the researcher visited this hotel for these two days from 8 to 10 A.M. to carry out the observation (Sep. 29 and 30, 2018). During the observation, in order to avoid making

the front desk staff uncomfortable and influencing the staff, the researcher decided to sit in the corner of the lobby of the hotel instead of standing at the front desk to observe the staff working and took notes every moment when they used English. Table 2 below shows the information of the interviews and observations.

**Table 2: Time and Places of Individual Interviews**

Hotels	Dates	Time	Places	Participants Interviewed (Observed)
1	Sep. 12, 2018	9:00 AM	Coffee shop	Manager 1
	Sep. 13, 2018	10:00 AM	Hotel lobby	Participant 1
	Sep. 13, 2018	10:30 AM	Hotel lobby	Participant 2
	Sep. 14, 2018	3:00 PM	Hotel lobby	Participant 3
	Sep. 14, 2018	3:30 PM	Hotel lobby	Participant 4
2	Sep. 18, 2018	3:30 PM	Hotel lobby	Manager 2
	Sep. 18, 2018	4:00 PM	Hotel lobby	Participant 5
	Sep. 19, 2018	3:30 PM	Hotel lobby	Participant 6
	Sep. 19, 2018	4:00 PM	Hotel lobby	Participant 7
3	Sep. 27, 2018	3:00 PM	Hotel lobby	Participant 8
	Sep. 28, 2018	8:30 AM	Hotel lobby	Manager 3
	Sep. 28, 2018	9:00 AM	Hotel lobby	Participant 9
	Sep. 28, 2018	9:30 AM	Hotel lobby	Participant 10
	Sep. 29, 2018	8:00 AM	Hotel lobby	Participant 8 (observed)
	Sep. 30, 2018	8:00 AM	Hotel lobby	Participants 9 & 10 (observed)
4	Oct. 3, 2018	3:00 PM	Hotel lobby	Participant 11
	Oct. 3, 2018	3:30 PM	Hotel lobby	Participant 12
	Oct. 4, 2018	3:00 PM	Hotel lobby	Participant 13
5	Oct. 6, 2018	3:30 PM	Hotel lobby	Participants 14
	Oct. 6, 2018	4:00 PM	Hotel lobby	Participant 15

As can be seen from Table 2, the time used for conducting interviews was usually at around 3 to 4 P.M or 8:30 to 10 A.M. This was because they usually did not have much work at these times since guests usually checked in and out in the early mornings (7 A.M) or afternoons (2 P.M). Thus, they might be more available to join the interviews at these periods of time without any interruptions. Of note is that since most of the interviews were conducted during the time when the participants were working in their hotels, for participants working at the same hotel, they were interviewed individually rather than in a focus group to allow more flexibility.

Before the interview, a demographic information sheet was provided to gather the participants' background information. Every participant answered their personal data on a hard copy prepared by the first author at a table located at the lobby of the hotel. Then, the researcher continued to

interview face to face with individual front desk staff. Although the interview questions were prepared in the list, the researcher applied semi-structured interviews in order to help the participants to “open up and express themselves in their own terms” (Mackey & Gass, 2015, p. 225). In addition, the researcher did not look at the paper to increase the flow of the interviews between the interviewer and interviewees.

To sum up, based on the permissions of the five hotels, the researcher was allowed to interview each staff member for around 10 to 15 minutes, including using the first two minutes for demographic information, and 13 or 14 minutes for interviews. However, Hotel 1 allowed the researcher to interview the front desk staff for around 20 to 25 minutes each person. Thus, we were only able to conduct individual interviews with four front desk staff members at Hotel 1 for longer periods of time individually.

### **3.3 Data Analyses**

In this study, two data sets were collected: (1) interviews and demographic information sheets; (2) observation field notes. To analyze interview data, three main steps were adopted by following Woodrow's (2017) steps of needs analysis (from 4 to 6). First, we tried to listen to all the recordings multiple times and transcribed verbatim with total 3,236 words (Step 4). Next, we summarized and categorized all the transcriptions (Steps 5 & 6). Last, based on the previous steps, some themes emerged and were compared with research questions 1 to 4 accordingly. Regarding the demographic information sheets, the researcher created a table and filled the information from 15 participants with five different categories such as sex, age, education, major, working experience, and English proficiency. By doing this, the researcher would see the information of the participants clearly and these would be helpful for the researcher in terms of analyzing the data.

In terms of observation, two steps were adopted for analysis: 1) translating and reviewing the field notes, and 2) identifying some main points. The total number of words taken during and after the observation was 298 words in English. During the analyses, the notes were highlighted and compared with the interview transcripts to identify main themes discussed by the 18 participants.

In sum, analyses included interview transcripts and demographical information sheets as primary data and observation field notes as secondary data. Mackey and Gass (2015) noted, “triangulation

involves using multiple research techniques and multiple sources of data in order to explore the issues from all feasible perspectives” (p. 233). Thus, triangulation was used in this study to compare multiple means of collected data, including interviews, the participants’ work diaries and notes, as well as brochures from the five hotels. In addition, to ensure descriptive validity, the researcher interviewed different parties, namely, hotel front desk staff and managers. It is hoped that such triangulation could support the validity and reliability of qualitative research and minimize the occurrence of the errors (Cowling, 2007).

#### **4. Findings and Discussions**

In this section, to answer each research question, the findings are presented first, followed by the discussions.

##### **1.1 Use of English Language Skills**

The majority of participants including the hotel front desk staff and managers stated that listening and speaking were highly used for their jobs instead of reading and writing. The following excerpts were taken from interviews in Hotels 2 and 3 showing the importance of listening and speaking skills in their workplaces:

When the guests check in at the front desk, I usually ask their booking number and check information on the system. Then, I start to do some simple tasks like confirming their booking and reminding them the time they check in and out. [Participant 6; Sep. 19, 2018]

We have to introduce the hotel’s services to the guests when they stay at the hotel such as airport pick-up and shuttle to tourist destinations. [Participant 7; Sep. 19, 2018]

When the guests book the rooms, we need to introduce the differences between many types of hotel rooms (standard rooms, superior rooms, deluxe rooms, suites, and connecting rooms). We also explain these types of rooms when the guests book via phone calls. [Participant 8; Sep. 27, 2018]

In this study, we found that the frequently used skills were speaking and listening, similar to the findings in Charrunsri's (2011) and Pruchanan's (2012) studies which revealed that the hotel front desk staff and tourism employees emphasized the wide use of these two skills in their workplaces. To be more specific, the Vietnamese hotel front desk staff usually communicated with international guests in communicative events such as answering questions, offering help, solving problems, and giving information. Based on the above tasks indicated by the front desk staff, it can be seen that listening and speaking skills are considered main tasks that should be included in ESP course curriculum.

We also noticed that while most front desk staff indicated listening and speaking skills are more important than reading and writing, one manager from Hotel 1 did not think the same way. Hotel Manager 1 explained that in some situations, if the hotel front desk staff were wrong in writing emails or they misunderstood reading documents, the consequences would be considered serious. Thus, this manager stated that reading and writing should not be ignored and these skills are equally crucial as listening and speaking. For reading and writing skills, the participants reported that they sometimes needed these skills to write emails or read guests' feedback on booking websites.

#### **4.2 Difficulties that the Vietnamese Hotel Front Desk Staff Encountered**

Various kinds of challenges were reported by the participants. The following excerpts showed the participants' difficulties in detail. First, the hotel front desk staff mentioned difficulties listening to guests' accents and catching up with their speeds of talking.

It was challenging to catch up with the speeds of native speakers because they sometimes talked so fast. Besides, it was difficult to hear the accents from non-native speakers like Korean, Thailand, and Japanese. [Participant 1; Sep. 13, 2018]

My local accent is heavy and it influences my accent when I speak English. Thus, it is hard for guests to understand my speaking. Thus, I needed to improve my speaking more. If there is an English class at the hotel, I will join and the teacher can help me to adjust my accent. [Participant 2; Sep. 13, 2014]

Second, having insufficient vocabulary to describe room's items and lacking confidence in solving guests' complaints were also the difficulties reported by the participants. See below for the excerpts:

When the guests called on the front desk line and ordered some personal belonging items such as a sewing needle, I did not figure out immediately. Hence, I needed to go to their room and asked them again. Besides, because of my English limitation, I just asked the guests some simple questions when they checked out. I might talk to visitors more if I am more confident in my speaking. [Participant 2; Sep. 13, 2018]

I have difficulty in solving the guests' complaints. I was sometimes embarrassed because my speaking in this situation was not professional and clever enough in order to control the guests' anger. [Participant 15; Oct. 6, 2018]

Third, the participants also reported that answering questions related to local history was another challenge. For example,

I had difficulty answering some questions related to historical knowledge. For example, they asked me what is special in the imperial city, Hue. To answer exactly, I need to research carefully. Besides, I was also embarrassed to think about the vocabulary in this field to explain for the guests. [Participant 13; Oct. 4, 2018]

The above difficulties, namely listening to guests' accents and catching up with their speeds, not only happened to the Vietnamese hotel front desk staff, but also happened to Thai front desk staff. Prachanat (2012) showed that the tourism employees in Thailand found it challenging to understand different accents from native or non-native English speakers. In our study, we found that in order to deal with this problem, some participants might use clarification strategy. For example, Participant 2 noted that if she did not understand what the guests ordered in the phone calls, she would go to the guests' room and asked what they wanted directly. Others might use strategies such as repetition or confirmation strategies when they could not understand the guests' request at the front desk. For instance, Participant 3 would ask the guests to write down or repeat the questions if they did not understand what the guests said.

Moreover, strategies such as clarification, repetition, and confirmation used by the participants in this study were noted in several previous studies. For instance, also conducted in Vietnam's context, Vu (2015) mentioned that these strategies were the communicative strategies that hotel front desk staff often use to interact with foreign guests when they do not understand what the guests said. Communicative strategies such as repetition and clarification have important functions of verifying information and sharing understanding between the interlocutors (Kaur, 2010; Mauranen, 2006; Pitzl, 2005). Thus, it can be recognized that the front desk staff often use such functions in communication by asking the guests to repeat their requirements when the information was not clear enough. In addition, regarding the strategy, 'request for confirmation', found in this study, prior research showed that it was done in order to make sure that the information provided by the guests had been received and understood correctly (Björkman, 2011; Cheng & Warren, 2007; Jamshidnejad, 2011). Taken together, Vu (2015) stated that repetition, confirmation, and clarification have useful functions such as asking for or checking information, checking spellings and numbers, as well as giving directions and instructions. Therefore, these language functions helped the hotel front desk staff to understand the information from the guests to avoid any misunderstanding.

In this study, some of the hotel front desk staff reported that they did not learn enough English vocabulary related to hotel management when they were at university, similar to the findings in Vu's (2015) study. Vu (2015) found that college English textbooks for hotel staff did not seem to meet the communication skills needed in the workplace. This made hotel front desk staff embarrassed when giving their guests related historic information. Because of this difficulty, some staff stated that they needed to learn everything from the beginning over the period of pre-service training at the hotel.

As for the ability of introducing historic places, Charunsri (2011) also revealed that the hotel front desk staff in Chinatown area in Thailand did not have sufficient vocabulary to describe these places when being asked by the guests. Hence, it is important to note that for front desk staff, they need to have knowledge about the local history and travel information to order to respond to the guests when being asked. Although understanding local history or tourism information does not seem to be the main responsibility of a hotel front desk staff, having this ability will help hotel front desk staff better communicate with international guests.

### 4.3 Mismatch between Education and Occupation in terms of English Training

Among the 15 staff, only four of them majored in the field of tourism, namely Participants 3, 4, 7, and 10. However, all of them said that what they studied at college could not be applied to the current working situations. For example, Participant 7 mentioned that instructors at college focused more on English reading skills. When they were college students, they did not have many chances to practice English speaking and the teachers focused more on theory than practice. Thus, lacking sufficient English training, they felt embarrassed when they talked to foreign guests. Similarly, Participant 10 also mentioned, “we learned many things related to tourism; however, it was not specific to the job of a front desk staff, it was too general. Thus, we needed to relearn at the hotel before becoming an official staff” [Participant 10; Sep. 28, 2018]. This implies that there is a big difference between what they learned at college and what they did at the hotel. Such gap should be considered when designing for an ESP course. For instance, most participants revealed their learning experience of using a hotel registration system called *Smile* (a system used at all the hotels and designed in English format) in the pre-service period. They noted that they needed to learn how to enter the guests’ information and check available rooms on the *Smile* system and considered it extremely important to be familiar with such a system in their jobs than those learned at college or university.

Regarding the four English language skills, there was no specific English course organized at these 4- and 5-star hotels for improving their English speaking and listening skills. To our surprise, communicating with the guests at the front desk and in phone calls were the only ways that hotel front desk staff could practice their speaking and listening skills.

Speaking of writing emails, some participants mentioned that they were not willing to respond to some emails which involved complex contents. These types of emails require high English competence and so they were afraid of doing such task. They admitted that they needed to improve this skill. Thus, email writing and correspondence in English should be included in the ESP course for hotel front desk staff.

We don’t usually write emails. We just write some normal emails to reply their bookings if necessary. Some emails have serious problems like guests’ complaints, the manager usually handle these. [Participant 15; Oct. 6, 2018]



The disconnection between college training and current job duties in the workplaces could also be found in previous studies (Vo et al., 2016; Masoumpanah & Tahririan, 2013; Vu, 2015; Yasmin et al., 2016). For instance, Vo et al. (2016) pointed out that the English language teaching at the university did not meet the IT staff's needs in the workplace and nor did they have many chances to practice their speaking skills when they were at university.

In sum, according to the participants in this study, working in an environment where English is used most of the time, they obviously have the opportunity to use English. However, they still needed to have an English course to improve their speaking and listening with the focus on email writing and correspondence, answering phone calls, as well as presenting historical knowledge in English. Besides, they considered it necessary to learn how to solve guests' complaints. It is hoped that by offering such training, the front desk staff could use English fluently and be familiar with their job duties in the pre-service stage before turning into in-service staff.

#### **4.4 English Course Design**

As for the content of an English course, all the participants suggested that the English trainers should emphasize on speaking and listening skills. This finding is also found in the Prachanant's (2012) and Albakrawi's (2013) studies. These findings suggested that English activities designed in the ESP course need to be related to what front desk staff face at their workplaces including communicative and interactional skills. In addition, the front desk staff reported that they needed to improve their writing skills, namely email writing and correspondence. Similarly, the majority of the participants (98%) in Stapa and Jais's (2005) study agreed that writing formal letters and reports were the two important skills that the hotel front desk staff needed to improve. Thus, these writing skills should be emphasized in the ESP course.

For the time duration, 1.5 to 2 hours were suggested for each lesson and it was recommended that the course could last for three months for comprehensive ESP training. Moreover, the class needs to be divided into two days per week because their working hours are different between the day shift and night shift, and so one day can be arranged for the day shift staff while another day for the night shift staff. The specific information about the contents and teaching methods provided by all the participants are summarized and presented in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Contents Wished to Be Included in a Hotel English Course**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Contents</b>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting acquainted with accents from native and non-native English speakers. (Native speakers' accents like British English and American English; non-native English accents like Indian English or English used by other Asian people can be included for practice).</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practicing how to deal with guests' complaints and giving solutions.</li> <li>• Learning some tips about how to make polite, professional apologies when the guests are angry.</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning vocabulary about local histories and global cultures. Local histories can be related to any popular tourist attractions near the hotel; global cultures can be related to some potential countries: France, England, USA, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and China.</li> <li>• Learning the names of the equipment in hotel rooms (e.g., needle, thread, ice pack, hair dryer, bath linen, floor mat).</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning how to write emails, reply to guests' emails, and learn some useful grammar in writing emails.</li> </ul>

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

This study aimed to conduct English needs analysis of hotel front desk staff at five international hotels. A total of 18 participants were recruited from Hue City, Vietnam. The findings showed that listening and speaking skills were used frequently in their workplaces. Besides, the participants wished that they could improve their English listening and speaking skills in order to deal with guests' complaints, catch up with guests' speaking speeds, and comprehend different accents in face-to-face or telephone conversations.

Based on the findings, we offer some research implications for future research and course design for hotel English. First, this study only recruited 18 participants from international hotels. It is suggested that more participants from local boutique hotels can be invited in order to gain more insights into needs and problems faced by front desk staff from different hotels. Next, limited observation was conducted in this study and thus it is suggested that future researchers could observe and record conversations between front desk staff and guests in the hotel lobby if permitted. Last but not least, drawing on Woodrow's (2017) eight steps of needs analysis for ESP course design, this study only conducted analysis from Steps 1 (identifying the stakeholders) to 7 (determine syllabus items) and did not carry out a course for evaluation (Step 8). Thus, it is recommended that English courses can be offered at the hotels in order to examine whether English

skills taught in these courses can serve the hotel front desk staff's needs. Future research can perhaps utilize the course syllabi that we provided in the Appendix to explore the effectiveness of the course design.

According to the findings, some pedagogical implications for English course design are suggested. First, for tourism or hotel majors in college, they should spend more time practicing speaking and listening skills in order to be prepared for their future careers. Besides, they should spend more time on their internships at the hotels since the findings of this research stated that the trainings at the hotel are more practical than those provided in the universities. Second, for English teachers or EFL trainers, they should create some activities for learners to practice listening and speaking skills in order to help them reinforce these two skills. For example, the ESP instructors can apply multimedia and group discussions to increase learners' chances of practice (see the Appendix). Finally, the English course design needs to be flexible because hotel receptionists often have little time for language learning. The course can be designed based on the concepts of 'real contents' and 'carrier contents', mentioned by Basturkmen (2010). According to Basturkmen, *real content* demonstrates pedagogical goals that the learners hope to be better of their language skills (e.g., dealing with guests' complaints, dealing with booking confirmation, or listening to phone calls with different accents). Meanwhile, *carrier content* is "the means of delivering the real content" (p. 59) meaning that teachers or trainers could use texts or activities to carry out the real contents (e.g., pair/group discussions, role-plays for face to face booking, or listening to radios and filling in the gaps). To simulate the real workplace situation in an international hotel, we suggest that these two concepts can be integrated for course development. For a more comprehensive course design, we present a three-month course, hoping that it will be helpful for ESP teachers when giving training related to hotel English (see the Appendix).

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## Appendix

### Course Syllabi for Hotel Front Desk Staff

**Course duration:** Three months

**Duration of each class meeting:** 1.5 to 2 hours per class

**Notes:**

1. It is suggested that two classes per week with the same content can be provided so that all the hotel front desk staff who work on day and night shifts can attend the class.
2. Let learners know the content on one day before the class so they can prepare for the class effectively. For example, the learners can prepare for their presentation in the next class.

#### Month One

Week	Contents	Activities
1	Greetings and introductions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show some useful phrases for greetings</li> <li>• Listening tasks (listen to dialogues between guest and hotel front desk staff)</li> <li>• Role plays (work in pairs)</li> </ul>
2	Hotel booking confirmation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice taking notes of guests' booking</li> <li>• Role plays (work in pairs)</li> </ul>
3	Giving directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show some helpful vocabulary related to directions (e.g., <i>turn left, turn right, go straight, go across, go up, go down, go through</i>)</li> <li>• Role plays (work in pairs)</li> </ul>
4	Reviewing Weeks 1, 2, and 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and practice</li> </ul>

#### Month Two

Week	Contents	Activities
1	Learning writing emails in English in the field of hotel industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show some email samples for booking, giving apology, confirming information, or introducing hotel services</li> <li>• Discuss in groups and share experiences in writing English emails</li> <li>• Practice writing English emails and present it, then discuss and point out some mistakes</li> </ul>
2	Learning local cultures (Hue culture)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group presentation (each group chooses one famous tourist attraction in Hue City and present in the class)</li> <li>• Discuss in groups (question and answer)</li> </ul>
3	Learning foreign cultures (American and European cultures)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group presentation (each group chooses one culture and present in the class)</li> <li>• Discuss in groups (question and answer)</li> </ul>

4	Reviewing Weeks 1, 2, and 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and practice.</li> </ul>
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Month Three		
Week	Contents	Activities
1	Listening to phone calls with different accents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening tasks</li> <li>• Fill in the gaps</li> <li>• Activity: guessing different accents</li> </ul>
2	Learning essential equipment in hotel rooms and types of hotel rooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present target vocabulary (hotel equipment and rooms)</li> <li>• Provide related documents</li> <li>• Activity: describe and guess the equipment</li> </ul>
3	Dealing with guests' complaints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show some common complaints from guests</li> <li>• Discuss and share experience. Give solutions to each situation.</li> <li>• Role plays</li> </ul>
4	Reviewing Weeks 1, 2, and 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and practice.</li> </ul>