Language barriers in hotels

How language proficiency influences perceived service quality

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ABSTRACT

In the hotel industry, which is highly international and therefore prone to language barriers, the interaction between an employee and a guest is very important as companies try to make them loyal to their brand and reap the benefits of guest retention. In this research, an experiment has been conducted to test the relationship between language proficiency (LP) and perceived service quality (PSQ). In a nutshell, a B2 level (Common European Framework of Reference, Council of Europe, 2001) emerged as the minimum requirement to perform above average and statistical analysis revealed that different indicators of PSQ are affected differently by a lack of LP.

Keywords

Language barriers, hotel industry, service quality.

INTRODUCTION

In today's business environment, international teams operating across international borders and different languages are a key feature (Henderson, 2005). The hotel industry is no exception, if not the most obvious example given its international character and its heavy focus on service provision. Services, in turn, are strongly related to communication – an area which is strongly related to and influenced by language (Harzing and Feely, 2008). The service encounter quality in hotels heavily relies on employee performance (Hoefnagels et al., 2014) and is therefore very prone to complications caused by language barriers. Since hotels operate internationally and cater for guests from all around the world, English skills are often required when working at the reception. However, in case of low levels of LP, constraints apply (Kroon et al., 2015) and both information as well as interactional factors such as empathy can get lost in translation resulting in an inferior service experience which negatively influences the guest's satisfaction. This in turn ultimately affects the hotel's financial success due to the effects of the service-profit chain (Heskett et al. 1994). Especially in the service industry such as the hotel business, guest satisfaction plays a vital role in assessing a firm's performance (Pizam, 1999). This is due to the numerous benefits high levels of guest satisfaction entail for the company's bottom line, namely the advantages of a high degree of guest loyalty. Guest loyalty constitutes a principal aim for many globally operating companies and is deemed to be the key to success in the customer experience market. Guest loyalty or retention encompasses several advantages, all contributing to an improved business performance: repeat purchases, increasing returns, diminishing marketing costs and positive word-of-mouth (Reichheld, 1996). Since guest loyalty is difficult to measure, the root determinant of guest satisfaction, PSQ, is most commonly used to measure performance and predict financial outcomes. Thus, this study focusses on the influence of language barriers on PSQ in a front office scenario.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Language plays a vital role in communication and one's ability to use language effectively, or lack thereof, is therefore of high interest to research and businesses evolving around communication as their means for successful operations. In studies on communication, language has been studied as a part of cultural differences and has been recognised as a barrier to successful communication (Spencer-Rogers and McGovern, 2002). With regard to research on business, culture has been the main research focus as well and has been studied widely, yet language on its own has been mostly disregarded in the literature (Henderson, 2005). Thus, whilst cultural studies prospered (e.g. Hofstede, 2001), language was regarded as one of many components of culture and rationalised away (Harzing, 2003; Harzing et al., 2011). In the past two decades, language has been reinstated in the field of (business) communication research and has increasingly gained attention as an influencer that is undeniably related to culture, yet needs to be studied separately from culture (Henderson, 2005; Cuypers and Ertug, 2015) in order to fully reveal the effect language has on communication.

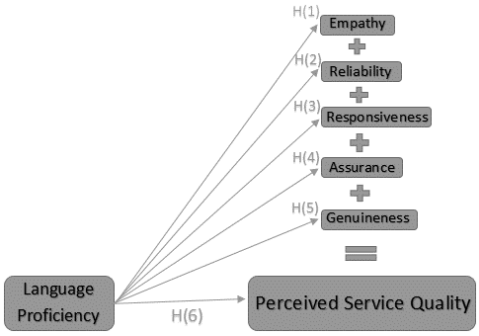
Alongside studies relating language to the business world, one stream in particular has emerged and given cause for concern, namely the existence of language barriers as a hindrance to successful communication. A language barrier in business communication can be interpreted as "the obstacles to effective communication, which arise if interlocutors speak different mother tongues and lack a shared language in which they all have native proficiency"(Tenzer et al., 2013, p.3). In a business setting, language barriers most often occur when one language, in most cases English, is adapted as the lingua franca, hence the language chosen to enable the communication between different non-native speakers and native speakers (Piekkari, 2006).

Throughout the field of language barriers, the effect on business performance, or dimensions thereof, has been researched in numerous settings. This includes, for example, trust building in multinational teams (Tenzer et al., 2013), the communication between headquarters and transnational subsidiaries (Harzing and Feely, 2008), international acquisition (Cuypers and Ertug, 2015) and mergers (Kroon et al., 2015). All of those researchers have concluded that language barriers adversely affect all parties involved, hence both the more and less proficient speakers as well as superiors and subordinates alike, significantly. The effects touch upon multiple, very different dimensions: uncertainty on the employee's part (Feely and Harzing, 2003), fewer career prospects, feelings of constraint and lower status, and anxiety on the less proficient speaker's part (Kroon et al., 2015) and impressions of dealing with someone who is less intelligent, less competent (Piekkari, 2006) and less efficient (Harzing et al., 2011), and the feeling of mistrust (Feely and Harzing, 2003) on the more proficient speaker's part. Clear interrelations between the use of language and the perceived professionalism (Holden, 2008) and perceived competence (Piekkari, 2006) have been established as well. Despite the

general agreement, Buckley et al. (2005) point out that language alone does not ensure effective communication, whilst at the same time acknowledging its key role.
A red thread throughout the above-mentioned research is the fact that all authors have exclusively studied relationships between employees (whether they were working together as equals or not) and thereby neglecting other relationships between employees and non-employees. Consequently, regarding the hotel focus of this paper, the need for research on how language barriers influence the relationship between a service provider and a customer became evident.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1: Conceptual model



The individual hypotheses can be summarised as follows: H(1-6): There is a positive, linear relation between the level of LP and (the respective dimension of) PSQ (for further explanation of its composition see "Operationalisation of measures").

METHODOLOGY

In order to reject or confirm the hypotheses, a quasi-experiment (henceforth also referred to as „experiment") was conducted in which a service encounter was simulated. This was done with the help of video clips containing an image and an audio track. These clips were then embedded into a questionnaire, so participants could rate the service encounter and provide personal data about themselves.

Sample

The sampling method used was convenience sampling via social media which is a non-probability sampling technique. This technique is adequate for the experiment, since anyone can potentially be a guest in a hotel and therefore judge the service quality based on their personal perception. In addition to that, all speakers of English, regardless their level of proficiency, can participate, since the effects of low or high LP can be detected by both non-proficient and proficient speakers alike (Sliwa and Johansson, 2014).
The minimum sample size was calculated using the formula 15 + 15*number of cells (van der Zee, 2014). In this case, each experimental condition, i.e. each level of LP, represents one cell which means the result of the equation is 105 (=15+15*6). In total, 156 participants were registered. Out of this sample population 51 identified as male, 104 as female and one preferred not to say. 68 were native speakers of German, 29 of Dutch and 32 spoke English as their mother tongue. The remaining 27 spoke a total of eight different mother tongues. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 70 and the average age was 27,45. The proficiency level of the sample population based on participants' own indication can be broken down as follows:

Table 1: Proficiency level breakdown

Level	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2	Native
Number	2	1	20	25	44	39	25

The average participant had undertaken two trips to a non-English speaking country other than their own and experienced three check-ins during the last twelve months, which makes for a reasonable enough qualification to assess the simulated service encounter.

Context and scenario

The service encounter is exemplified by a check-in procedure in a hotel. This specific setting was chosen due to its high suitability regarding the proposed research, since: (1) the hotel industry is a highly international sector in which the problematic scenario at hand, namely a language barrier affecting the perception of a service encounter, occurs frequently and is of importance to operations, (2) a check-in is a rather common service encounter with which people are most likely to have experience with (Hoefnagels et al., 2014) and (3) front-line employees have been found to have a high influence on the PSQ (Hartline and Jones, 1996).
In every scenario, the content was controlled with the help of scripts and any difference in information quality purely resulted from the respective level of English and was not manufactured into the script. In other words, all six check-ins were identical as far as content was concerned and only the level of English spoken by the receptionist varied.

Design

The experiment was developed in two steps: Scripting and recording. The scripts were designed by the researcher, who is a hotel management student and has extensive experience as a receptionist, and a language teacher. The scripts were designed in order to not only match, but also incorporate the criteria on which foreign speakers are assessed according to the CEFR. In this way, the content of the scripts was also designed in order to cover different levels of difficulty ranging from standard topics such as asking about someone's well-being to intricate and industry-specific topics like explaining an implication of the hotel's reservation system to the guest. In a sub-step, another script was created which contained precisely the same information as the others, but in bullet points and in Dutch. This script was used by an English teacher at the ROC Nijmegen in a class room setting in which six students were asked to do a role play in English which was recorded. These recordings were then used to analyse the speech of real learners of English and compare it to the respective scripts. The scripts for the experiment were then adjusted regarding the respective speech patterns, sentence structure, vocabulary range, control of grammar and pronunciation. By doing so, the scripts' authenticity was increased.
For the recording, one speaker of each proficiency level was recruited. All speakers were female, in order to eliminate differences in gender as an uncontrolled variable, and spoke Dutch as their mother tongue, in order to eliminate socio-linguistic factors related to different accents as an uncontrolled variable. The scripts were rehearsed and the speakers were coached by the researcher during the recordings. The recordings were audio only in order to eliminate further variables such as body language, attractiveness and race. The audio track was combined with a cartoon image that showed a reception and a female person behind it. Like Hoefnagels et al. (2014), the researcher kept the guest's speaking turns to a minimum in order to minimise their influence on the participants' perception. In order to eliminate vocal cues, the guest's speaking turns were displayed in the form of subtitles.

Procedure

Due to the online distribution of the survey via a URL, experimental settings were up to the individual participant and only required a smart device. This was done to facilitate

participation and achieve the striven for sample size. This comes, however, at the price of relinquishing control over the exact experimental setting, thus whether the participant was in a quiet room and concentrating on the experiment or maybe riding the bus and being exposed to other noise as well. Data was collected for the duration of three weeks.

Operationalisation of measures

The concept of PSQ was operationalised by comparing existing models of PSQ (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Brady and Cronin, 2001; van Iwaarden et al., 2003) and attributes commonly used by linguists (Mulac, et al., 1974; Zahn and Hopper, 1985; Giles and Billings, 2004; Sliwa and Johansson, 2014) to describe the effects of accents. The derived indicators are: empathy, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and genuineness. These aspects together describe the concept of PSQ. They are further operationalised and explained to the participants with the help of the following definitions:

Table 2: Definitions of dimensions

Empathy	The speaker cares about the guest and provides individualised attention. She is courteous and enthusiastic. She conveys positive emotions.
Reliability	She executes her job accurately and dependably, meaning she is precise and you can count on her.
Responsiveness	She willingly helps out and delivers promptly. She is active, lively and talkative.
Assurance	She seems to be competent, intelligent, educated and confident, and she conveys that she is knowledgeable and trustworthy.
Genuineness	She appears to be sincere, honestly meaning what she says and she is honestly interested in providing the best service possible.

The definitions as well as translations were available to the participants throughout the entire experiment in order to prevent complications caused by confusion or language barriers.

The dimensions were measured by having participants rate them on a seven-point semantic differential scale with the following descriptors: “Very low” – “low” – “slightly lower than average” – “average” – “slightly higher than average” – “high” – “very high”.

The concept of LP was operationalised by using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) which divides non-native speakers into six levels. These are from lowest to highest: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 (Council of Europe, 2001). The CEFR is one of the most influential frameworks in the field and has been used by multiple researchers in the field of linguistics in a business context (Cuyper and Ertug, 2015) and confirmed regarding its soundness as a measure of LP.

Analysis

Since the experiment aims to describe one outcome variable (PSQ) which is continuous, encompasses one predictor (LP) which is categorical, is made up of several categories (six levels of proficiency) and all participants are exposed to all experimental conditions i.e. all six levels of LP, a one-way repeated measures ANOVA was chosen (Field, 2013).

FINDINGS

PSQ ratings were calculated by adding up all values of all five dimensions per level and dividing them by five.

Mauchly’s test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, $x^2(14) = 47.833$, $p = .000$, therefore degrees of freedom were corrected using Huynh-Feldt estimates of sphericity ($\varepsilon = 0.91$). The results show that the PSQ was significantly affected by the level of LP, $F(4.56, 706.87) = 121.893$, $p = .000$, $\omega^2 = ,31$. Alternatively, multivariate tests could be reported. The results show that the PSQ was significantly affected by the level of LP as well, $V = 0.74$, $F(5, 151) = 83.888$, $p = .000$, $\omega^2 = ,31$.

The figure below visualises the PSQ scores per level of LP.

Figure 2: Total PSQ

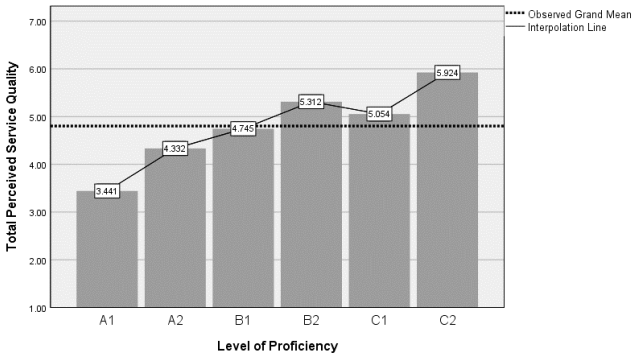
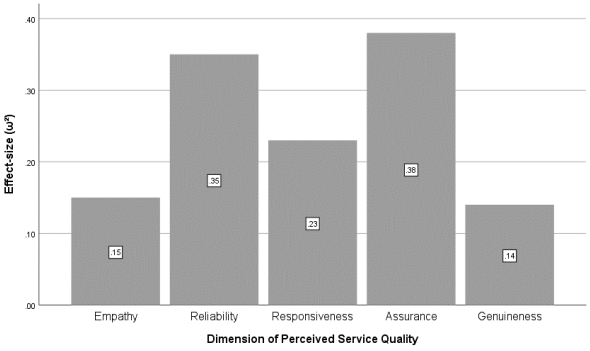


Figure 3 demonstrates the effect-size for each dimension of PSQ individually.

Effect-sizes are considered to be low for a value smaller than 0.1, medium for a value smaller than 0.6 and large for a value greater than 0.14 (Field, 2013). However, these are merely guidelines, which is why effect-sizes should be interpreted within their respective context (Field, 2013).

Figure 3: Effect-sizes



DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

By looking at the results, it becomes evident very quickly that there seems to be a nearly linear increase per level in PSQ. In other words, as the level of LP increases, so does the perception of service quality - with the exception of one. Surprisingly, the service provided by the C1 speaker was consistently perceived as of lower quality (or less empathetic, less reliable, etc.) than the service provided by the B2 speaker. Apparently, something other than the level of LP (which was undeniably accurate) has led participants to perceive the speaker as providing a slightly inferior service compared to the B2 speaker. This emergence lends support to the theory that all the variables that are not controlled for in this experiment (intonation, cadence, colour of voice, tone) can still make it or break it.

When looking at effect-sizes, one can easily see that all of them are large (≥0,14) (Field, 2013). However, in order to interpret them in a real-life context, comparing the effect-sizes amongst each other is a great deal more purposeful. An obvious observation that can be made are the by far largest effect-sizes of assurance ($\omega^2 = ,38$) and reliability ($\omega^2 = ,35$). These results reconfirm the findings of numerous researches about the effects of language barriers such as lower perceived intelligence, competence, efficiency, professionalism and trust (Feely and Harzing, 2003; Piekkari, 2006; Holden, 2008; Harzing et al., 2011; Tenzer et al., 2013). On the lower end, empathy and genuineness have very comparable effect-sizes ($\omega^2 = ,15$ and $\omega^2 = ,14$ respectively). Despite these values still qualifying as large

effect-sizes (≥0,14), they are rather small compared to the other dimensions. This may again be due to these traits being strongly influenced by intonation, but could also have been counterbalanced by the fact that all speakers were coached into sounding as hospitable as possible. It thus seems to be the case that the effect on these traits can be mitigated by trainings for voice and demeanour, although it cannot be denied that language does indeed have a significant influence. Lastly, responsiveness scores roughly in the middle between the other four (ω^2 = ,23). It can therefore be interpreted as merely being affected moderately, but also as being difficult to assess. After all, the promptness aspect of responsiveness was controlled by the scripts and therefore fairly equal among all scripts. The willingness to talk and the degree to which they were active, lively and talkative differed in the choice of words and time to formulate the answers (e.g. pauses or "uhm"s). One could thus argue that due to this a difference was perceived, but that the subtleness of it may have led participants to simply choose an in-between rating without further consideration.

In light of these findings, the question arises what minimum level of English would be desirable in order to perform well at the reception. Examining the results, two different interpretations are possible: On one side, one could look at the grand mean and determine that, across the board, a B2 level is required in order to perform above average among all non-native speakers. On the other side, one could strictly take into account the semantic scale and conclude that merely an A2 level is required in order to perform above average, since the value 4 stands for "average" and is exceeded by the A2 speaker. However, the latter interpretation has severe short-comings for real-life application as the coaching of the speakers and socially desirable responding may have driven the rating up. In addition, given the fact that this research aims to be of use to 4*+ hotels, simply performing "just above average" is not enough. Experience-focussed hotels compete on high service quality and use it in order to differentiate themselves from the competition. For them, it is therefore decidedly more interesting to perform above average in their competitive set or, in other words, compared to what else is out there. Consequently, orienting performance assessment on the average among speakers (hence, the grand mean) is the more appropriate decision. In addition to that, since different effects were observed for different dimensions of PSQ, attention has to be paid not only to the level of English, but also to a speaker's performance regarding those quality dimension when speaking English.

With regard to further research, it would be interesting to pair service providers with different levels of LP with guests with different levels of LP in an attempt to find out the best matches. This would enable the researcher to make assumptions about what the effects of distance in proficiency are and how to adapt to the guests in order to accommodate them, which is in line with current practices at hotels.

Based on the experimental design and the sample population certain limitations like limited transferability to reality or compromised representativeness apply to this study's findings. For further elaborations on these as well as more in-depth information about this research, please refer to the full version of this thesis by clicking here.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Joshua Wagner was an undergraduate student working independently under the supervision of Marina Staneva-Brinkman. The topic was proposed and developed by the student and the research was executed all by himself. This included the design and execution of the experiment, the analysis and interpretation of the results and the conclusions.

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