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ENGLISH ORAL PROFICIENCY AND TOURISM ENTREPRENEURSHIP: IDENTIFYING AND OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

In this millennium era, the English language proficiency of tourism entrepreneurs must be looked into and improved. This is due to the tourism industry's tremendous growth that requires mastery of the English language, as English is now widely acknowledged as the worldwide language of communication. In addition, due to the scope of their work that needs to interact with international tourists, it is essential for them to be able to communicate in the English Language. This study aims to discover the challenges faced by them and their way of having to learn, master the English language and overcome these challenges. This study will follow a qualitative approach where the researchers engaged in semi-structured interviews as preliminary data, interviewing two tourism entrepreneurs located in various parts of the tourist island of Langkawi. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the collected data and generate appropriate themes and sub-

themes for the study. The findings illustrated that tourism entrepreneurs operating on Langkawi Island encountered various obstacles with their English-speaking skills. These challenges included difficulties in understanding unfamiliar accents and the necessity for additional resources to effectively communicate with international tourists. The entrepreneurs expressed their desire for support in enhancing their English language proficiency. The data also revealed that these individuals overcame their difficulties by actively engaging in regular interactions with international tourists and making use of mobile applications to improve their ability to speak English.

Keywords: English proficiency, communicative ability, language barriers, tourism industry, entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The tourist sector plays a vital role in Malaysia's development and economic expansion, according to Hanita Hassan (2017). Malaysia continues to attract millions of foreign visitors annually, thanks to its diverse culture, delicious cuisine, and captivating travel destinations. Therefore, effective communication is crucial for the success of companies operating in the globalised tourism business landscape (Mantra et al., 2020). English, serving as the *lingua franca*, particularly in the tourism sector, facilitates improved communication and engagement between tourists and tourism personnel, as well as being necessary for international commercial transactions (Neeley, 2012).

English language fluency is equally important in the local Malaysian tourism business as it is in the worldwide workforce. The growing number of foreign visitors necessitates tourism staff to possess proficient English communication skills (Nor Syamimi Illiani Che Hassan & Ong, 2019). Recognising this, the organisations should acknowledge the significance of communication skills and incorporate language courses for tourism professionals into their development plans (Muh Azhar Kholidi et al., 2022). This initiative aims to enhance communication abilities within the tourism business and contribute to its overall growth.

Langkawi Island is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Malaysia. Situated on the west coast of Malaysia, it is an archipelago of more than 90 islands with the main island offering picturesque scenes and exciting activities such as diving and hiking. Yet, there is a lack of research on the oral English language skills of tourism entrepreneurs in Langkawi, creating a knowledge gap regarding the specific challenges they face. This study aims to bridge this gap by identifying the specific difficulties they encounter and proposing feasible solutions. By addressing these issues and offering practical recommendations, this study contributes to enhancing the quality of services provided by small entrepreneurs, thereby improving the overall visitor experience in Langkawi. Improving the English language proficiency of tourism entrepreneurs, is an urgent priority. Sustaining this success requires ensuring that tourism entrepreneurs possess sufficient oral proficiency, enabling them to deliver high-quality services to foreign tourists and encourage repeat visits. Consequently, it is common for tourism employees to prioritize the enhancement of their English language skills, as this can further stimulate the interest of foreign tourists in visiting Langkawi island.

Research Purpose

Tourism entrepreneurship holds significant potential for economic development, particularly for individuals engaged in the tourism sector as it not only generates employment opportunities but also fosters the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Radović-Marković & Živanović, 2019). At the same time, it also helps in facilitating cultural exchange between tourists and locals that can further foster the tourism industry. English proficiency, in particular, plays a crucial role in capitalizing on these opportunities. Ramyar et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of conducting additional research on English language proficiency within the tourism industry, indicating a clear need for further investigation in this area. They also indicated a notable lack of available studies on the significance of English language proficiency in the tourism industry, particularly in Malaysia, specifically in emerging tourism destinations. Despite the importance of the English language and its significance, there has been a lack of attention given to the specific needs of English in the tourism sector in recent years (Mantra et al., 2020). Above all, there has been limited exploration of the potential of tourism in promoting socioeconomic growth, language skills, and the preservation of cultural heritage within communities (Nomnian et al., 2020).

Therefore, the purpose of this research study is to investigate the barriers and challenges faced by tourism entrepreneurs in developing and maintaining English oral proficiency and to identify effective strategies to overcome these challenges. By understanding the specific language-related obstacles encountered by tourism entrepreneurs, this study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on the importance of English oral proficiency in the field of entrepreneurship and provide practical insights and recommendations for enhancing language skills to improve communication effectiveness and customer service.

Problem Statement

The lack of English language skills among tourism entrepreneurs poses a challenge, impacting their ability to effectively communicate with customers. English proficiency plays a crucial role for tourism entrepreneurs as it enables them to communicate with international tourists, expand their marketing reach, and provide excellent customer service. Ying et al. (2002) emphasized the negative impact of language barriers on the satisfaction and experience of international tourists. Their study revealed that encountering communication difficulties due to language barriers often resulted in frustration, stress, and dissatisfaction among tourists. Consequently, this can lead to a decline in repeat visits and negative word-of-mouth promotion.

Furthermore, this issue carries significant implications as the tourism industry increasingly relies on English as a global language for communication with visitors and business partners (Ravantharanathe Rao & Syaharom Abdullah, 2007). For example, entrepreneurs felt a strong desire to enhance their speaking skills the most because they frequently need to communicate verbally in English during their interactions (Nomnian, 2014). Hence, it is imperative for tourism entrepreneurs to possess strong oral and written English skills in order to effectively navigate and compete within the industry. Insufficient proficiency can result in communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, and, ultimately, missed business opportunities. Therefore, it becomes crucial to gain insights into the factors that contribute to low English proficiency among tourism entrepreneurs and devise strategies to overcome these barriers, ensuring the industry's enduring competitiveness and sustainability.

Consequently, it is essential to carry out research that focuses on the oral English proficiency levels of tourism entrepreneurs. This

research aims to identify and emphasize the particular areas of concern and challenges faced by these entrepreneurs in their oral English communication. By pinpointing these issues, appropriate actions can be taken to effectively tackle the identified challenges and provide specific support and interventions to improve the English proficiency of tourism entrepreneurs specifically in Langkawi Island. Therefore, this study aims to discover the challenges faced by them and their reasons for having to learn and master the English language, based on the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by tourism entrepreneurs on Langkawi Island in achieving proficient oral English language skills?
2. How can the challenges of oral proficiency faced by tourism entrepreneurs in Langkawi be overcome?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges in Attaining Good Oral Proficiency in the English Language for Tourism Entrepreneurs

The competencies of tourism industry in interactions with clients are instrumental in delivering satisfactory services (Aizzat Mohd. Nasuridin et al., 2015). Being a service industry, the capability of tourism entrepreneurs to connect with their clients, namely tourists directly influences tourists' experience during their trip. Positive experiences not only inspire revisits but also motivate tourists to share their favourable encounters, ultimately raising awareness and generating interest in the destination (Gani & Damayanti, 2018).

Therefore, studying the challenges faced by tourism entrepreneurs when using English as a means of communication is crucial for improving communication quality in the industry and designing effective training programs. This phenomenon occurs because individuals who encounter challenges in speaking English fluently have the potential to communicate effectively in the language and overcome any challenge that hampers their ability. Indeed, numerous previous studies (e.g., Fujita et al., 2017; Al-Saadi, 2015) have demonstrated the existence of multiple linguistic challenges frequently encountered

by tour guides in their day-to-day professional activities. For instance, research conducted on local tour guides at the Aceh Tsunami Museum (Gani & Damayanti, 2018) demonstrates that Indonesian guides often encounter difficulties in communicating effectively in English when interacting with international tourists. One of the main obstacles they face is their limited knowledge of English vocabulary, which makes it hard for them to express themselves when introducing tourist spots or addressing queries by tourists who speak a different language. These challenges pose difficulties consistently to tourism entrepreneurs and must be overcome in order to successfully carry out their duties and responsibilities.

Additionally, research findings also unveil the limited oral English proficiency of Thailand tourism industry, leading to minimal responses given to tourists despite being able to understand them (Prachanant, 2012). These insights provide valuable insight into the deficiencies of the local tourism industry and its personnel. However, it is undeniable that English, being a *lingua franca* and the most used language in the world, is indispensable as a communication medium in conducting tourism-related activities (Douglas, 2013; Siti Noor Diana Mohd Kamaruddin et al., 2017). Given tourists' preference for the language, it is essential that more is done to understand the aspects of tourism entrepreneurs' poor English proficiency as well as devise suitable strategies to remedy these shortcomings.

Ways to Overcome the Challenges in Achieving Good Oral English Proficiency

Being proficient in oral English is essential for effective communication in academic and professional contexts. However, language learners often face various challenges in developing this skill. According to Douglas (2013), some tour guides choose to enrol in Business English courses to improve their language skills and effectively communicate in their job markets. However, the effectiveness of these courses depends on how well they meet the learners' specific needs. A good course should consider what the learners require, their goals, and their expectations, so they can gain the necessary skills to excel in their profession. This approach helps learners develop a rudimentary mastery of the language and communicative competence, enabling them to communicate more effectively and efficiently with their

clients. Therefore, the course content and teaching methods should be customized to meet the learners' needs, ensuring they acquire and develop language skills optimally.

Moreover, several strategies are readily available to assist learners to overcome the challenges of improving their English proficiency. Leveraging technology such as speech recognition software and online language exchange platforms can offer immediate feedback and opportunities to practice conversations (Ahmed, 2019). Through repetition of common phrases and social expressions, it gives learners a solid foundation and confidence to progress to longer exchanges. Engaging in group-based activities, such as discussions and debates, can also prove beneficial in enhancing oral English proficiency by fostering social interaction via a common topic of interest (Nunan, 1991), which makes the whole process less stressful and more engaging. Lastly, establishing a supportive and inclusive learning environment that values diversity and acknowledges learners' strengths and challenges is vital for nurturing confidence and motivation among language learners (Cummins, 1994). By employing a combination of these strategies, learners can develop the necessary skills to effectively communicate in oral English.

METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative research, and the data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews with relevant participants.

Participants

The participants comprised of tourism entrepreneurs on Langkawi Island, Kedah, who have been working in the tourism industry for 5-20 years. The participants present data from a study that aimed at identifying the challenges faced by tourism entrepreneurs in developing oral proficiency and exploring potential strategies to overcome these challenges. Four participants were selected, and their experiences, perspectives, and recommendations were gathered through interviews. The findings shed light on the common obstacles faced by interviewees and propose effective methods for enhancing their oral proficiency.

Instrumentation

This study utilizes a qualitative approach with, a semi-structured interview, to explore the challenges faced by four participants in developing their oral proficiency and to identify strategies to overcome these challenges. The researcher aims to describe the participant's experiences and perspectives related to oral proficiency rather than measuring their performance during the interview. The focus is on capturing emerging themes and insights regarding the participant's oral proficiency development and the strategies they have employed and recommend to overcome the identified challenges. The study also considers the participant's second language background, as it may influence their approach to oral proficiency development. The researcher emphasizes the importance of understanding the participants' subjective experiences rather than solely focusing on objective performance measures.

Semi-Structured Interview

This study uses semi-structured interviews because the researchers believe that the participants' perspectives are important and should be systematically collected (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The semi-structured interview protocols are designed to concentrate on the challenges faced by tourism entrepreneurs in their workplace regarding oral proficiency and ways to overcome them. The composition of participants are as follows:

Table 1

The Composition of Participants

Entrepreneurs	Gender	Education Background
A	Male	High school
B	Male	High school
C	Male	High school
D	Male	Diploma

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the thematic analysis conducted on the interview with tourism entrepreneurs in their workplace regarding oral proficiency challenges

and ways to overcome them, a few main themes and sub-themes were identified. The evidence from the semi-structured protocols supported the existence of these main themes and sub-themes. When it comes to language difficulties, the employers found it challenging to understand tourists' foreign accents when they speak English; they needed support material during conversations with international tourists; and they were unable to speak English fluently and confidently.

The findings of the study examined and reported on the various factors that influence the oral proficiency of tourism entrepreneurs. These factors encompass all the challenges that affect their ability to communicate verbally in an effective manner. Simultaneously, the findings of the study also presented several strategies that can be employed to overcome the challenges affecting oral proficiency. These strategies serve as potential solutions to address the difficulties encountered by tourism entrepreneurs in their oral proficiency. There were various reasons for the participants' use of effective approaches to enhance English oral proficiency in the context of tourism entrepreneurship. These reasons included the belief that such approaches improve the quality of service practice by creating an enjoyable and engaging working environment while maintaining effective skills. The chosen methods were also aligned with research objectives.

Challenges Faced by Tourism Entrepreneurs on Langkawi Island in Achieving Proficient Oral English Language Skills

Discussing the challenges faced by tourism entrepreneurs is important because the tourism industry relies more and more on English as a global language for communicating with international tourists and business partners. The challenges they face act as a barrier to providing efficient service to their customers. Hence, understanding tourism entrepreneurs' linguistic concerns is an important step to overcoming a long-standing issue and enhancing the quality of tourism in the country.

Unfamiliar English Accent

The interviewees expressed that they found it easier to understand an English accent that they were more used to compared to an accent that

they were less familiar with. One of the respondents mentioned that:

“I have difficulty understanding the speech of international tourists, especially those from China”.

Being familiar with different accents affects how well tourism entrepreneurs understand languages and makes communication easier and more successful. Siti Noor Diana Mohd Kamaruddin et al. (2017) conducted interviews with alternative taxi (Uber) drivers in Malaysia who cater to both local and foreign travellers. During client messaging, initiating conversations with passengers, interacting with international tourists and providing information, English is commonly used. However, the drivers faced challenges in understanding English words spoken by both local and international English speakers (Nor Syamimi Illiani & Ong, 2019).

Therefore, the familiarity of accents does have an impact on how well tourism entrepreneurs understand languages, and it plays a role in making communication easier and more successful.

Support Material for Explaining Activities to International Tourists

These tourism entrepreneurs mention that they frequently offer pre-made forms or brochure to make it simpler for international tourists to understand and comprehend the information. One of the respondents highlighted that:

“I encounter difficulties in effectively communicating in English, thus, I tend to frequently prepare brochures that aid in facilitating the process of explaining the range of services we offer. These brochures serve as helpful tools in enhancing my ability to convey information accurately and efficiently. In reality, my proficiency in English also improves as a result of engaging in this practice on a daily basis. Each brochure not only includes visual aids, but also incorporates written content in the English language. This combination of visual and textual elements contributes significantly to enhancing my language skills”.

According to Nor Syamimi Illiani & Ong (2019), this issue is about the challenge of using English when doing certain communication

tasks for international tourists. These tasks include telling them about fun things to do and letting them know about different tours and services available.

Difficulty Speaking English Fluently and Confidently

Some tourism entrepreneurs have basic English skills, while some struggle to communicate in English at all (USM, 2010). One of the respondents explained that:

“While I possess the ability to communicate in English, I must admit that my fluency level falls short of that of a native English speaker. Although I can hold conversations and understand the language proficiently, there may be occasional instances where my command of English may not match the level of a native speaker.”.

Consequently, being able to effectively utilise oral proficiency will improve the interaction between tourism entrepreneurs and their international tourists, resulting in a more enjoyable experience for the guests.

Overcoming Oral Proficiency Challenges Faced by Tourism Entrepreneurs in Langkawi

Several different strategies have been suggested to assist tourism entrepreneurs in overcoming these challenges. These strategies encompass a variety of approaches and techniques designed to address the specific difficulties encountered by interviewees during their language learning journey.

Using Mobile Apps to Improve English-Speaking Skills

For example, by implementing this strategy, interviewees can improve their language skills and effectively tackle the linguistic obstacles they face. This is because using technology like speech recognition software and online language exchange platforms can give users instant feedback and chances to practise conversations (Ahmed, 2019). One of the respondents highlighted that:

“I think the use of modern apps can help us speak better English, especially for those who are new to the tourism sector”.

Enhancing their English language Skills by Engaging in Conversations with International Tourists While Providing Services

Engaging in consistent practise enables tourism entrepreneurs to enhance their proficiency and fluency in the language, ultimately leading to improved speaking skills. One of the respondents highlighted that:

“I struggled with speaking English, but my proficiency improved significantly after becoming part of the tourism industry. By engaging in frequent conversations with international tourists, I gradually gained mastery over the language”.

According to Ida Bagus et al. (2020), if an individual possesses English language skills, it is advantageous for them to consistently utilize and apply those skills in every conversation, as this will contribute to the continuous refinement and mastery of those linguistic abilities. Hence, tourism entrepreneurs should also prioritize the practice of utilizing English language skills, as this approach has a beneficial impact on their ability to communicate effectively in English.

Needs of English Language Training

Tourism entrepreneurs’ desire for English language training shows their recognition of the need to improve their speaking skills, which can help determine the most suitable teaching methods (Nomnian, 2014). In addition to that, the tourism entrepreneurs acknowledged the necessity of English language training to enhance their oral communication skills in order to effectively operate their businesses in the tourism sector (USM, 2010). One of the respondents claimed that:

“I would like to enhance my English conversation skills, possibly through training or practice, so that I can communicate more in English”.

LIMITATIONS

The study encountered certain limitations regarding the recruitment of participants for interviews. It is necessary to interpret the findings

of this study cautiously due to certain limitations. The researcher specifically sought volunteers from the tourism entrepreneurship sector, aiming to include individuals with varying years of work experience. Additionally, a diverse range of English language speaking proficiency levels was sought in order to accurately assess the participants' level of expertise in the language. Next, the study had a relatively small sample size, meaning that the number of participants involved was limited. Other than that, the study was conducted exclusively on a single island, which restricts the generalizability of the results to a broader context. However, the observed patterns of findings align with those of other researchers in the field. This preliminary study indicates that participants can actively participate in generating conversations when the task is suitably designed.

REFLECTION

To conclude, it is vital to conduct research that specifically examines the oral English proficiency levels of tourism entrepreneurs in Langkawi Island. This research seeks to identify the specific challenges and difficulties these entrepreneurs encounter in their English communication skills. As practitioners in tourism field, by gaining a deeper understanding of these issues, what we learned is that appropriate actions need be taken to tackle these challenges and provide tailored support to enhance the English proficiency of tourism entrepreneurs. The significance of this research lies in the development of strategies that cater to the unique needs of this group, fostering their language growth and facilitating their success within the tourism industry.

Reflectively, it was learnt that the tourism entrepreneurs need support to enhance their oral English proficiency so that they could communicate their services well to the tourists. The challenges that they faced such as not being able to understand the different accents of English and not being able to explain their services well had driven some of them to come up with visuals that could serve to facilitate the two-way communication between the tourists and the entrepreneurs. This strategy was reported to have facilitated their interaction with the tourists. It was also learnt that the entrepreneurs learnt to improve their spoken English on-site or on the job through frequent interactions

with tourists. Having learnt from these findings, a way forward to enhance tourism entrepreneurs' oral skills in English is by engaging future entrepreneurs in short two-in-one courses which enhance the development of attractive visuals and brochures to display services which in turn become the aids for practicing the use of tourism-specific English terminologies and utterances in the form of role play, simulating actual tourist-entrepreneur interaction scenarios. Additionally, as a short term measure, the development of specific digital applications to do the job of deciphering and interpreting foreign accents can further facilitate them to communicate their services on the spot better.

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