A CORRELATIONAL STUDY OF MALAYSIAN HOTELIERS' SELF-RATINGS OF GUEST INTERACTION SKILLS AND OCCUPATIONAL SELF-EFFICACY BEFORE AND AFTER GAMIFICATION EXPERIENCES

BY

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ABSTRACT

English is widely used in the hospitality industry. With rising standards of workplace English language requirements, the demands for good oral proficiency have become a major challenge to employees. This is evident from previous researches on issues and difficulties faced by hospitality staff during guest-host exchanges. While existing researches indicate that Malaysia's hotel industry faces similar challenges, there have been only few investigations on employees' interaction skills and self-efficacy. Malaysian hoteliers' perceptions of their own guest interaction skills and their relationship to occupational self-efficacy, have yet to be reported too. This study aimed to investigate Malaysian hoteliers' perception of their own guest interaction skills and occupational self-efficacy, as well as the relationship between the two, before and after gamification experiences. A survey was administered on 173 hoteliers from a hotel in Selangor, Malaysia and from a descriptive analysis done, it was revealed that all 173 respondents had below moderate to moderate perception of their guest interaction skills and occupational self-efficacy. 12 of the total respondents were then randomly selected to attend ESP classes with gamification as part of a one-group pretest-posttest quasi–experimental research. Analyses on the sample's ratings of their own guest interaction skills and occupational self-efficacy after gamification showed that there were positive correlations with a significant difference in how they perceive their guest interaction skills and occupational self-efficacy. The hoteliers were also found to self-rate their occupational self-efficacy higher than their guest interaction skills. The findings of this study convey to both ESP instructors and hotel managers that gamification should be used in classrooms and in-house trainings as it has positive influences on how hoteliers perceive their own abilities to perform their jobs and interact with their guests.

Key words: ESP, Guest Interaction Skills, Occupational Self-Efficacy, Gamification

خلاصة البحث

اللغة الإنجليزية هي اللغة الأكثر استخدامًا في مجال الضيافة. وارتفاع الحاجة إلى اللغة الإنجليزية في مكان العمل أصبح التّواصل المهني بهذه اللغة تحديًا كبيرًا للموظفين الذين يعملون في مجال الضيافة ويتضح ذلك في الدراسات السابقة التي تدور حول صعوبات وتحدّيات تواجه العاملين في مجال الضيافة أثناء التواصل مع الضيوف. وعلى الرّغم من وجود إشارات في عدد من الدراسات إلى أن صناعة الفنادق في ماليزيا تواجه تحديات مماثلة، غير أنّ عدد الأبحاث حول وجهات نظر العاملين نحو مهاراتهم في التفاعل وكفاياتهم المهنية قليل جدًّا، في حين أنّ تصورات منسوبي الفنادق الماليزية لمهاراتهم في التفاعل مع الضيوف وعلاقتها بالكفايات المهنية قضية تستحقّ البحث والدراسة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقق من تصورات العاملين في الفنادق الماليزية لمهاراتهم في التفاعل مع الضيوف وكفاءاتهم الذاتية المهنية، كما أنها تهدف إلى معرفة العلاقة بين الإثنين قبل وبعد تجربة التلعيب. لقد تم إجراء دراسة استقصائية على 173 من مسئولي الفنادق في سيلانجور، ماليزيا. ومن التحليل الوصفي الذي تم إجراؤه، تم الكشف عن أن جميع المشاركين البالغ عددهم 173 لديهم تصور أقل من المتوسط إلى المعتدل لمهارات تفاعل الضيوف والكفاءة الذاتية المهنية. وتم اختيار 12 من إجمالي المستجيبين عشوائياً لحضور فصول ESP مع تجربة التلعيب كجزء لمجموعة واحدة لإجراء الاختبار القبلي والبعدي من البحث الشبه التجريبي. أظهرت التحليلات التي أجريت على تقييمات العينة لمهاراتهم للتفاعل مع الضيوف وكفاءاتهم الذاتية المهنية بعد التلعيب أن هناك ارتباطات إيجابية مع فارق ملحوظ في كيفية إدراكهم لمهاراتهم فى التفاعل مع الضيوف وكفاءاتهم الذاتية المهنية. وأظهرت كذلك أن التقييمات الذاتية لمسئولي الفنادق لكفاءاتهم الذاتية المهنية أعلى من تقييمهم لمهاراتهم فى التفاعل مع الضيوف. أن نتائج هذه الدراسة ترشد مدربي ESP ومديري الفنادق إلى أنه يجب استخدام التلعيب في الفصول الدراسية والتدريبات الداخلية حيث إن له تأثيرات إيجابية على كيفية إدراك مسئولي الفنادق لقدراتهم الخاصة على أداء وظائفهم والتفاعل مع ضيوفهم.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts Teaching English for Specific Purposes.

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Mohd Azrul Azlen Abd. Hamid
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DECLARATION

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This dissertation is dedicated to:

My beloved mother and father & my precious daughter for their unwavering support and dua, and their unconditional love and sacrifice to make sure nothing stands in the way of my dreams,

&

My late maternal Grandfather, my first beloved Quran teacher, the strongest, most selfless and loving grandparent any child could ask for.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

The first chapter introduces the background of the study to investigate the relationship between guest interaction skills and occupational self-efficacy of hoteliers. The statement of the problem, the research purpose statement, and the research questions are also presented in this chapter. This chapter also explains the significance of the study and presents the definitions of key terms used in this research.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

English, a vital aspect in the tourism sector, is the most widely used and spoken language in hotels across the globe. The hotel industry is viewed as the leading outlet of the hospitality industry, generally serving people from various sectors and cultures. Thus, hotel staff are frequently expected to demonstrate excellent communication skills in the English language while interacting with guests. Based on the definition of *guest interaction with receptionists* proposed by Fernández-Amaya, Hernández-López, and Blitvich (2014), guest interaction skills can be referred to as the linguistic expectations in the employee-guest encounter or the communication that takes place between the employee and guest during employee-customer interface. Thus, guest interaction can be defined as a set of linguistic skills required for the successful communication process between the host and guest. Studies on service quality show that the majority of the dimensions related to the elements of service entailing human interactions involve attentiveness and perceptiveness (Chatzigeorgiou, Christou & Simeli, 2017), politeness of the employees (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988), civility and concern

(Winsted, 2000) and employees' listening behaviours (Eaton & Christou, 2000). Host-guest interaction experience has been frequently reported to be central to evaluating guests' (dis)satisfaction with the quality of services rendered (Handayaningrum & Setiawan, 2013). According to Averill (1982), the failure to receive appropriate mitigating information during employee-guest interaction causes frustration among customers.

Research in the area of guest interactions in the hospitality such as Ahmed and Scott (2014); Afrianto and Gulö (2019); Ampountolas, Shaw and James (2018); Fathy (2018); Green, Tanford and Swift (2018); Handayaningrum and Setiawan (2013); Nugraheni (2018); and Umasuthan and Park (2018) have all stressed the importance for hoteliers or hosts to improve their guest interaction skills. Other scholars like AlBakrawi (2013), Al-Tarawneh and Osam (2019), Erazo, Ramirez, Encalada, Holguin and Zou (2019), Ghosh and Ravichandran (2018), and Prachanant (2012) have commonly proposed that having good English language interaction skills would help employees to function well at the workplace and to ensure quality services are provided in the hotel industry as it would enable them to build customer relationship and offer excellent services to foreign visitors.

Proper training in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is inevitable for providing effective service in the tourism industry. Effective training can assist staff to accommodate their English proficiency to that of guests and facilitate to the success of communication. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), "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). Employees who work in the tourism and hospitality industry are highly aware of the need to optimise and master their English for efficient communication in their workplace. Consequently, while it is established that the guest

interaction skills are vital for service encounter to take place satisfactorily for both employees and the guests, previous researches in this area have also indicated the need for effective training to be provided to hoteliers so that they can successfully perform their job responsibilities (Albakrawi, 2013; Disilva & Arun, 2017). This can be achieved by adopting an effective teaching approach that enables English for Specific Purposes (ESP) practitioners to assist hoteliers in overcoming the challenges they face in terms of interaction skills. Hence, effective training initiatives from the managers must consider employees' self-efficacy. This is because employees' self-efficacy belief promotes work engagement which leads to enhanced work performance (Hirschi, 2012); thus, training programs that are focused on developing employees' self-efficacy beliefs are believed to be able to promote their engagement contributing to improved organisational performance (Tian, Wang, Zhang & Wen, 2019). Moreover, owing to such effective training programs, employees are more likely to execute complex tasks successfully. Therefore, the necessity for teaching English for professional purposes, specifically in tourism, is irrefutable.

Individuals' performance at the workplace can be directly influenced by their self-efficacy level. According to Bandura (1986), "self-efficacy is people's judgment of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance" (p. 391). Similar to Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy, occupational self-efficacy is the belief or judgement made by individuals on their abilities to carry out the specified tasks involved in their jobs (Jungert, Koestler, Houlfort & Schattke, 2013; Rigotti, Schyns & Mohr, 2008; Schyns & Sczesny, 2010). While occupational self-efficacy can easily be affected by individuals' own experiences and has strong association with personality traits (Schyns & Von Collani, 2002), occupational self-efficacy has been shown to have its correlations with career satisfactions and job

performance (Jungert et al., 2013; Machmud, 2018). More evidence linking self-efficacy to individuals' job performance include, for instance, Stajkovic and Luthans (1998), whose overall findings of their meta-analysis examining the relationship between self-efficacy and work-related performance revealed that self-efficacy was strongly and positively associated with work-related performance. Self-efficacy also shows a positive correlation between specific variables such as team potency and individual performance (Monteiro & Viera, 2016), workplace engagement, positive orientation and job performance (Alessandri, Borgogni, Shaufeli, Caprara & Consiglio, 2015), and intrinsic motivation and job performance (Çetin & Askun, 2018). According to Chhajer, Rose and Joseph (2018), when employees have a high level of self-efficacy and optimism, they commit fully to their job, investing cognitively, emotionally and physically, demonstrating an exceptional work performance.

Self-efficacy is also a significant predictor of language performance; therefore, it is crucial to consider pedagogy to reap the maximum benefit from teaching interaction skills to the hoteliers. This is because self-efficacy belief is considered to be a significant source of motivation for learners (Fahim & Nasrollahi, 2013). Krashen (1982) asserted that for successful mastery of oral communication skill, learners need to be highly motivated, confident in self, have an appealing self-image, and low anxiety. Blumenthal (2014) affirmed that while learners' self-efficacy is impacted by both internal (personal traits) and external (environmental) factors, external factors such as learning approaches and instructional strategies play a vital role in increasing or decreasing learners' self-efficacy. This is confirmed by Naderi and Ashraf (2013) who demonstrated that active learning instruction of listening comprehension had a significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' self-efficacy. Engaging and enjoyable learning activities utilised in teaching boost learners' self-efficacy and motivation, consequently leading

to a significant increase in performance. Thus, employing an instructional strategy that develops individuals' self-efficacy contributes more to language learning, particularly oral interaction skills.

While there is an array of language teaching approaches, gamification, has been validated in a scores of researches for its effectiveness in educational settings, especially in language teaching and learning. Gamification of education is referred to as the use of game elements and mechanism in non-game contexts for its efficiency in creating an engaging learning environment across various age groups, cultures, and contexts (Kim, Song, Lockee & Burton, 2018). It is an approach based on the belief that learning outcomes and learners' behaviour is directly influenced by instructional content (Landers, 2014).

Student engagement and motivation have always been a challenge to the educators and finding a means to tackle this issue has long been their primary concern. Despite some conflicting results of its application in educational contexts, gamified learning is recognised among educators as a potential tool for dealing with these challenges through its game-design elements. Because of its competition mechanics, fun components and immediate feedback, gamification is likely to foster engagement and motivation, two conditions that appear to be fundamental to the language acquisition. Several studies found in the literature vouch for the positive effects of gamification on language learners, for instance, enhanced extrinsic motivation, participation and performance (Mekler, Brühlmann, Tuch, & Opwis, 2017), reinforced motivation and significant improvement in vocabulary (Boyinbode,2018), improvement in academic writing (El Tantawi, Sadaf & AlHumaid, 2016), motivation and engagement (De-Marcos, Domínguez, Saenz-De-Navarrete, & Pagés, 2014), and reduced boredom and poor attitude, increased motivation and speaking skills (Alfulaih,

2017). Hence, considering the evidence put forth in the literature on the benefits of gamification in language teaching and learning, this strategy can assist educators in obtaining the desired outcomes from ESP teaching and learning.

While a great deal of research reported on hoteliers' language needs and wants, the review on literature shows a lack of evidence in terms of Malaysian hoteliers' perceived guest interaction skills and their occupational self-efficacy. Numerous research exists on the relationship between self-efficacy and organisational behaviours such as work engagement, job satisfaction, job commitment, and job performance in various organisational settings. However, the literature review revealed that while the relationship between Malaysian hoteliers' self-efficacy and work performance has been an underexplored area, the available research on self-efficacy is inconclusive, with only some studies showing a positive relationship between self-efficacy and work performance, some demonstrating a negative relationship and others showing no relationship between the variables. It is also found that while an abundance of research has explored gamification in various life domains and environments, including the work and workplace, research on the application of gamification in the workplace, especially on teaching ESP for hospitality professionals, is scarce and even more so in the context of Malaysia. Furthermore, the review of the literature shows that several of these research report negative and conflicting results. Therefore, investigating the self-ratings of Malaysian hoteliers' guest interaction ability and occupational self-efficacy before and after language classes with gamification can help the researcher identify their perceived level of guest interaction skills in the English language and their belief in their ability to carry out job-specific tasks, and if there are any significant differences between their perception before and after the classes with gamification experiences. Moreover, investigating the relationship between hoteliers' perceived guest interaction

skills and occupational self-efficacy before and after a series of English language class with gamification can help answer if hoteliers' perception of their guest interaction skills is associated with their occupational self-efficacy.

1.3 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Tourism is an indispensable part of the service sector in an economy and is a fundamental pillar of global economic growth. It generates 10 percent of the world's total employment representing one in every ten jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2019). In 2019, the industry's total contribution accounted for 10 percent of the global GDP (Lock, 2020 *a*), directly contributing approximately 2.9 trillion USD to the world's GDP (Lock, 2020 *b*), making it one of the largest economic sectors worldwide.

As the 3rd most significant contributor to the country's GDP, Malaysia's tourism industry contributed around 5.9 percent to the total GDP in 2018 (Hirschmann, 2020). In 2019, the country recorded approximately 26.1 million tourism arrivals, contributing to the country's economy with RM86.14 billion in tourist receipts (Chin, 2020). In a study conducted by Tang and Tan (2015) on the effects of the tourism industry on the economic growth rate of Malaysia from the year 1975 till 2011, it was revealed that the country's economic rate co-integrated with the industry both in the long and short-term periods.

The hotel industry plays a vital role in Malaysian tourism by providing accommodations to tourists. The growth in tourism in Malaysia has resulted in a gradual increase in the number of hotels established across the country. According to CEIC data, Malaysia has 3,403 hotels with 259,698 rooms by March 2020 (CEIC, 2020). In the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, it was reported that there were 224 hotels in the third quarter of 2018, providing 40,559 rooms in the city (Lee, 2019). The massive influx of

tourists to the country has led Malaysia to place a huge emphasis on potential employees' abilities to communicate well with their guests in English, as the tourist arrival continues to grow and the services offered at hotels keep on developing and changing steadily to address the needs of the visitors. As a destination of choice among Europeans and Americans, the Malaysian tourism industry necessitated their employees to be equipped with good English communication skills (Tourism Malaysia, 2018). Thus, in response to the industry's demand to have more proficient workers competent in communication skills, institutions and academic bodies are determined to equip graduates with employability skills. Shariff (2013) reported that several of Malaysia's higher academic institutions, including both public (Universiti Malaya (UM), UiTM, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) and private institutions such as Taylor's University College, Segi University College, Damansara Utama College and Limkokwing University of Creative Technology have established hospitality programs including those at diploma level. Additionally, following the footsteps of the larger institutions, and gear up this process, two hotel sectors in Malaysia, Berjaya University College and Legend International College, have also decided to offer courses on hospitality education.

In addition to hospitality education and in-house training, ESP courses such as English for Communication (EC) are offered by Malaysian Polytechnics, EC and English for Hospitality Purposes by University Utara Malaysia (UUM), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) such as Effective Workplace Communication by UiTM, and EAP and EOP are also offered by International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). With numerous courses offered in the country, there is, however lack of evidence in the literature investigating the impact

such ESP courses have on individuals' oral proficiency. This is evident from Talif and Noor (2009), who posited that English proficiency programmes in Malaysia are reviewed every three to five years as a general practice**.** Furthermore, while previous studies focused on the relationship between self-efficacy and performances in a language in general as well as specific skills such as writing, its relation between speaking performance has little attention paid to by researchers both in and out of hospitality settings, despite being an essential aspect of language learning. Therefore, this study will explore guest interaction skills of Malaysian hoteliers, their level of occupational self-efficacy and if each of these variables correlates with one another before and after English classes with gamification, and how their perception of both variables varies, if at all, after gamification based English language classes.

1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The English language plays a prominent role in international tourism in the twenty-first century, and those who are in it need to be well-equipped with English. While scholars such as Al-Tarawneh and Osam (2019), AlBakrawi (2013), Erazo et al. (2019), Ghosh and Ravichandran (2018), and Prachanant (2012) have all acknowledged that it is essential for students and employees in the Tourism and Hospitality to have good English language skills, studies that focused on Malaysian hoteliers' language needs are hardly found (Ahmed & Scott, 2014).

A review of literature also shows that recent studies conducted on ESP for hospitality had focused mainly on investigating needs analysis of learners such as those by Kaharuddin, Hikmawati and Arafah (2019), Novita and Refnaldi (2019), Ratmanida, Fatimah, Al-Hafizh and Chair (2019); and developing English for Hospitality learning materials in studies such as Phopayak and Ayudhaya (2019), Prabandasari, Sutarsyah