

Tourism Entrepreneurship and English Language Oral Proficiency: Exploring its Importance among B40 Communities

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine the significance of oral communication skills among B40 (low-income) entrepreneurs in the tourism industry on Langkawi Island, Kedah, Malaysia, an area of research that is notably underexplored in the context of B40 communities. A qualitative research methodology was employed in this study, utilising semi-structured interviews and observational techniques as primary data collection instruments. The research subjects were five local B40 tour guide entrepreneurs working on Langkawi Island. Research findings indicate that the vast majority of B40 tour guide entrepreneurs participating in the study place high importance on strong English oral proficiency. They unanimously agreed that this skill is crucial for effective communication with customers, which in turn plays a pivotal role in enhancing the development of their businesses. This consensus among the participants underscores the fundamental role of English language proficiency in the tourism industry, highlighting its undeniable importance as a tool for fostering improved customer interactions and overall business growth. The outcomes of this study are anticipated to serve as valuable insights for English education institutions to enhance their teaching methods, as well as for B40 tour guide entrepreneurs aiming to further develop their communication abilities, particularly in oral English. By understanding the specific needs, policymakers can develop targeted support programmes and initiatives to boost tourism on Langkawi Island, thereby contributing to the local economy and employment opportunities.

Keywords: Tourism Entrepreneurship, English Language Oral Proficiency, Communicative Ability, B40 Communities, Tourism Industry

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Language plays a crucial role in facilitating communication between tourists and employers within the tourism industry. Given the contemporary status of English as the prevailing international lingua franca, the majority of tourist establishments deem proficiency in English as a prerequisite, recognizing its substantial potential for advancing the growth and enhancement of the tourism sector (Nor Azyana & Lim, 2022). In light of English's ascendancy as the global lingua franca, it is necessary to establish a common language between employers and tourists to maintain the quality of hospitality services within the tourism sector. Neglecting the crucial role of the English language may lead to resource loss and constraints on the growth of

tourism organizations and their management, stemming from inadequate communication and knowledge sharing (Al-Saadi, 2015).

Malaysia is a preferred tourist destination due to its diverse cultural and natural offerings, affordable pricing, and the warm hospitality of local people, which extends a friendly welcome to both domestic and international tourists (Asgari & Borzooei, 2014). The growing number of international tourists necessitates tourism staff to have proficient oral English communication skills (Nor Syamimi Illiani & Ong, 2019). In addition to that, proficiency in the English language is necessary for international business deals and also for better communication and interaction between tourists and those involved in tourism activities (Neeley, 2012). For example, in Malaysia, tour guides and staff rely on the English language for a range of tasks. These include sharing information, responding to inquiries, offering guidance, and ensuring the well-being and contentment of visitors (Ekayati & Saniaty, 2018).

Problem Statement

The issue of inadequate oral English language proficiency among B40 tour guide entrepreneurs on Langkawi Island is a pressing concern, significantly hindering their ability to effectively engage with customers. Proficiency in English is not merely a desirable trait but a crucial necessity for these entrepreneurs. It serves as a fundament, allowing them to communicate seamlessly with international tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds, expand their outreach through more effective marketing strategies, and provide superlative customer service. This concern is underscored by a study conducted by Ibrahim et al. (2019), which emphasized the pivotal role of oral English proficiency for tourism entrepreneurs on Langkawi Island. Given the requirement to furnish detailed explanations and information to international tourists in English, language proficiency becomes paramount for their success.

Nonetheless, it is worth acknowledging that there exists a noticeable research gap concerning the English language oral proficiency of tourism entrepreneurs operating in the Langkawi Island. This gap emphasizes a significant deficiency in our comprehension of the importance of English within this particular context. Consequently, there is a compelling and pressing need for in-depth research and a comprehensive inquiry into the proficiency of the English language among individuals engaged in the local tourism industry (Nomnian, 2014). Such research is of paramount importance, considering the pivotal role that the English language plays in facilitating various tourism-related activities, impacting not only the local community but also the experience of international visitors. It ultimately contributes to the appeal of the destination and supports cross-cultural interactions, which are central to the tourism landscape.

In conclusion, not being able to speak English properly is a big issue for B40 tour guide entrepreneurs and the tourism industry on Langkawi Island. The study by Ying et al. (2018) found that when tourists cannot communicate easily due to the language barrier, they get upset and dissatisfied. This can make them less likely to come back or share their experiences when they return to their country of origin. Thus, fixing the problem of not speaking English well is important to make tourists happy and keep the island a popular tourist destination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism, Entrepreneurship, and the B40 Group

According to Lordkipanidze (2002), tourism entrepreneurship encompasses all commercial

ventures or activities, owned by individuals or small business partner groups, or by private or public companies with limited liability. Biswas and Mohammad Mamun-Or-Rashid (2018) argued that entrepreneurship in the tourism sector has many benefits for a nation, particularly in terms of fostering economic growth by creating new job opportunities, generating increased revenue and promoting regions, industries and companies. This highlights the vital role that entrepreneurship plays in the tourism industry and emphasizes the importance of developing innovative and unique ideas to achieve success in this highly competitive market (Crnogaj et al., 2014).

Entrepreneurship within the tourism sector is gaining increased recognition as a means to stimulate economic advancement in underdeveloped areas (Johannesson & Huijbens, 2010). Therefore, part of the focus of the study is on the B40 community and their role in entrepreneurship in the Malaysian tourism industry. In the government's attempt to have a firm grasp of the country's socio-economic landscape in their initiative to overcome the long-standing issue of poverty, the lowest 40 percent of the Malaysian population, characterised by a monthly household income not exceeding RM3,855 (equivalent to USD9,451 or less) is labelled as the "B40 group" (Rokisa, 2019). In this context, entrepreneurship within the tourism sector takes on added significance as it not only addresses the economic development of underprivileged areas but also has the potential to contribute to poverty alleviation by providing income-generating opportunities for individuals within the B40 group, ultimately aiding in the broader socio-economic development of Malaysia.

In summary, the studies conducted in the field of tourism entrepreneurship consistently demonstrate that it involves the initiation and management of businesses related to tourism. More importantly, these ventures have the potential to deliver benefits not only to tourists but also to the broader national economy, including the

English Proficiency in Tourism Industry

According to the EF English Proficiency Index (2022), Malaysia holds the 24 position among 111 countries, which indicates a notable level of English language proficiency within the nation. This ranking highlights Malaysia's commendable standing, placing it in the top quartile of countries surveyed and reflecting a relatively high proficiency level among its populace. Furthermore, it was found that Malaysia, among Asian nations where English is not the primary language, achieved the top ranking in terms of English proficiency (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012).

However, despite this favourable ranking, local research indicates that Malaysians continue to encounter difficulties when it comes to spoken English proficiency (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). This disparity suggests that while the country may receive positive assessments in certain aspects of English language competency, the practical, real-world spoken English proficiency experienced by Malaysians falls short of the expectations set by these rankings, pointing to a need for further investigation and potential improvement in language education and communication skills development.

Research conducted by the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) shows that English proficiency is among the top five talents sought by employers during the hiring process (The Star, 2022), which is evident that possessing English proficiency is crucial for individuals seeking employment and job opportunities in Malaysia. The demand for English proficiency in the labour market is not only indicative of the language's practical utility but also highlights its role as a valuable asset for enhancing one's employability and career prospects. In light of

this, the emphasis on English language skills becomes even more critical, with implications extending beyond individual job seekers to encompass educational institutions and language training programs that play a pivotal role in preparing a workforce with the skills demanded by the modern job market.

Speaking plays a fundamental role in communication and is considered one of the key language abilities (Yunus & Kaur, 2014). Thus, strong communication skills, problem-solving skills, English proficiency, interpersonal abilities, and adaptability are highly valued attributes in today's workforce. Therefore, proficiency in English is seen as valuable for tourism professionals because many tourists do not speak the national language, Bahasa Melayu (Ravantharanathe Rao & Syaharom Abdullah, 2007). Neglecting the significance of English proficiency can lead to resource loss and hinder the growth of tourism organisations and management because of communication and knowledge-sharing gaps (Al-Saadi, 2015).

In conclusion, the literature review emphasizes the critical significance of individuals prioritizing the enhancement of their English language proficiency, particularly in the context of the tourism industry, as this skill not only empowers them to thrive in the competitive job market but also substantially elevates their prospects for success within this dynamic and global sector. However, a significant gap in the existing body of knowledge is the absence of comprehensive insights into the importance of English proficiency among B40 tour guide entrepreneurs, highlighting the necessity for further research and exploration in this specific area of study.

METHODOLOGY

This research focused on the English language oral proficiency of the local tour guide entrepreneurs from B40 communities on Langkawi Island, Kedah. For this research, a qualitative research methodology was employed to examine the importance of English language proficiency and effective oral communication by tour guide entrepreneurs when engaging with international tourists. The data was gathered through a combination of semi-structured interviews and observations involving pertinent participants. The data obtained from semi-structured interviews were transcribed and categorized accordingly using thematic analysis. In short, by utilizing a qualitative research design, the study has gathered all relevant data to comprehensively address the research questions related to the significance of English language oral proficiency among tourism entrepreneurs on Langkawi Island. The choice of qualitative methods has facilitated an in-depth examination that directly addressed the research questions.

Participants

The study included five tourism entrepreneurs (tour guide) with 5 to 20 years of experience in the tourism industry, all based in Langkawi Island, Kedah. All five participants were low-income entrepreneurs (B40) who were conducting business primarily to increase their income, driven by the need to uplift their financial well-being and improve their socio-economic status. Information was gathered through interviews and observation, which were adapted to fit the research's needs and drawn from various sources. The composition of participants is presented as follows:

Table 1: The composition of participants

Entrepreneurs	Gender	Work Experiences	Education Background
A	Female	4 Years	Degree
B	Male	8 Years	Diploma
C	Male	16 Years	Diploma
D	Male	5 Years	Diploma
E	Male	11 Years	Malaysian Skills Certificate

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As tour guide entrepreneurs from B40 communities on Langkawi Island, it is imperative to have proficient English language oral skills to proficiently communicate with a diverse range of international tourists. This proficiency not only enhances their ability to share the natural and cultural wonders of Langkawi but also fosters positive interactions with visitors, leading to enhanced tourist experiences and potentially contributing to the island's reputation as a premier global tourism destination.

Promoting travel packages to international tourists

One of the main duties of a tourism entrepreneur is to promote the packages at scenic spots and explain the itineraries, and English can be a useful tool when dealing with international tourists. Limited English proficiency severely hinders an individual's ability to do so. During the interviews, Entrepreneur D stated that English is very important how his low proficiency hinders his ability to "effectively promote packages and activities to international tourists" and had to resort to "body language to convey information", which was "not effective". Entrepreneur E also emphasized the importance of being able to speak English well when promoting travel packages to tourists from other countries. With a good command of English, tourism entrepreneurs can describe the details of the packages on offer to the tourists, which is a big plus as tourists "want to know which packages suit them the best". He also cited his own experience when his own lack of proficiency led to "communication breakdown" and tourists "walking out of [his] agency".

The researcher's observation supported the participants' responses. In one instance, a group of five English-speaking tourists walked in and was served by Entrepreneur D at the counter. After a brief introduction of all the Langkawi packages on offer during which the group listened attentively, one of them enquired about recreational activities that were on offer in the packages, specifically scuba diving and wake surfing. Another enquired if the package she was interested in had enough free time for their own exploration. Entrepreneur D had trouble addressing their queries and could not give satisfactory answers to them. Despite them initially expressing interest in one of the packages, they left to look for another tourism agency.

It is evident that tourism entrepreneurs consider English oral proficiency to be of significant importance. They collectively recognize the instrumental role of proficient English communication in effectively promoting and explaining the various packages and activities to international tourists. As their roles often involve engaging with diverse customers, they emphasize that a strong command of English enhances their ability to convey comprehensive information, address inquiries, and engage in meaningful dialogue with potential tourists. Therefore, this

shared perspective emphasizes the pivotal role of English oral proficiency within the tourism industry, enhancing both their professional efficacy in cross-cultural interactions and the tourists' appreciation of the packages they offer.

Improving customer satisfaction

Effective communication skills in English are vital for tourism professionals to engage in a wide range of commercial and leisure activities, and it is imperative for them to continuously enhance their language proficiency (Nor Syamimi Illiani & Ong, 2019). This is particularly relevant for tour guide entrepreneurs, who are expected to ensure that their clients are content with the services provided. Entrepreneur A explained that “[being able to speak English] is essential to ensure [he] can provide excellent service to international tourists and enhances their overall travel experience”. Entrepreneur B agreed with this point, sharing the same thought by saying when engaging with international tourists, especially those from China or Japan, he “consistently utilize simplified English vocabulary and communicate through body language to effectively convey information while ensuring their clear understanding and overall satisfaction with the services provided”, a sentiment is that also shared by Entrepreneur C.

During the researcher's observation, it is evident that several entrepreneurs encountered difficulties in conversing with international tourists due to their limited English language proficiency. This limitation occasionally led to upsetting situations when attempting to meet the personal needs of these tourists. The entrepreneurs could only tell the tourists what was already in the pamphlets and brochures without being able to engage in a spontaneous conversation. This has severely limited their ability to provide great service to international tourists.

Hence, the significance of English within the tourism industry should not be undervalued. Strong English communication abilities among tourism entrepreneurs are crucial for delivering top-notch services and securing the prosperity of tourist destinations (Nomnian, 2014). This level of service not only boosts customer satisfaction but also contributes to the positive reputation and success of the tourism industry.

To sum up, the improvement of English oral proficiency is crucial to ensuring effective communication when presenting the diverse travel packages available and providing exemplary service to international tourists. This proficiency serves as a vital means to convey the details and highlights of these packages, helping potential travellers understand and make informed choices. It also improves tourists' satisfaction as their personal needs are taken care of, ultimately enriching the travel experience for tourists and contributing to the success of Malaysia's tourism industry on a global scale.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In conclusion, the pressing need to enhance the English language proficiency of tourism entrepreneurs, particularly within the B40 communities of Langkawi Island, cannot be understated. To ensure the sustainable growth of the industry, it is imperative that these entrepreneurs possess strong oral communication skills. This proficiency enables them to improve their income. Additionally, a deep understanding and appreciation of different cultures are essential, as this cultural competence enhances the visitor experience and makes international tourists feel valued and respected. Therefore, the importance of English language proficiency is generally recognized as one of the keys to enhance the quality of service provided

to international tourists, as echoed by both the insights from interviews and the observations made in the field. To ensure the sustainable growth of tourism entrepreneurship within B40 communities in Langkawi Island, it is imperative that these entrepreneurs continue to develop and enhance their English language skills, as well as understanding the vital role it plays in their success and the satisfaction of their visitors.

These innovative approaches not only attract tourists but also enhance the industry's competitiveness and sustainability, ultimately ensuring ongoing economic advantages for the nation. Hence, these studies collectively emphasize the multifaceted and pivotal role of tourism entrepreneurship in both domestic and international contexts, offering promising avenues for socio-economic development and poverty alleviation, particularly among underprivileged communities.

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