

Island Tourism Employees' Perceived Importance and Challenges of English Communication

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ABSTRACT

In the tourism industry the prominent role of English is inevitable as the communicative tasks involve tourism employees and tourists to cooperate with one another in order to attain successful communication goals. While research on English language use has been conducted upon other fields of tourism, there is a paucity in English language related studies associated specifically with island tourism industry. The present study is established based on the two objectives: (1) to identify the importance of English in performing communicative tasks among island tourism employees and (2) to identify the sources of difficulties encountered by the employees. Data were collected from 59 employees working in island tourism in Perhentian and Redang islands using questionnaire as the instrument. SPSS Version 22 was used to calculate the mean value and standard deviation of each item. Based on the analysis, English language is most important for the employees when enquiring about international tourists' information and needs and least important to refuse tourists' offers. In relation to language difficulties, the employees rated the skills to understand international tourists' foreign accents when they speak English and to use correct English grammar as most difficult as compared to other sources of difficulties in speaking English.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, English as a lingua franca, tourism, island tourism industry

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the industries that plays a pivotal role in a country's development. It is also an industry that has a vital role to increase a country's economic growth (Hanita, 2017). The uniqueness of every country is significant in its cultures, food and destinations. Malaysia is one of the Southeast Asian countries that receives international tourists annually and the statistics provided by Tourism Malaysia shows that in 2017 Malaysia recorded 25.9 million arrivals placing the country as the second most-visited South East Asian country after Thailand (Tourism Malaysia, 2018). As a result, this boosts Malaysia's economy and creates new employment opportunities for Malaysians.

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As part of the requirements of dealing with international tourists, employees in the tourism sector are required to equip themselves with good communication skills as they have to conduct numerous transactions which usually center around such aspects as accommodation, transportation and recreation for the tourists. Thus, tourism employees and tourists need to communicate in mutually-intelligible languages, one of which is English. Furthermore, the English language is deemed to be very crucial for service improvement in tourism industry (Božinović & Sindik, 2013).

Malaysia is a multicultural country in which the citizens speak different first languages – Malay, Chinese, Tamil, ethnic languages as well as English which is spoken by some of the older and younger generations. Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution recognizes the Malay language as the official language of Malaysia whereas English has been granted the status as a second language in the country (Thirusanku & Melor, 2014). English is taught at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education as a second language and with at least eleven years of English language learning experience, Malaysians are expected to have achieved a considerable level of competence in English and thus, able to use the language comfortably when communicating with others.

While English is not only important for academic or examination purposes, its significance in the employment sector is indisputable as each employee is expected to be able to communicate effectively with their clients as well as conduct various communicative functions (Mohammad Ali & Noor Aireen, 2012). Meanwhile, in the tourism industry the prominent role of English is also inevitable as the communicative tasks involve tourism employees and tourists to cooperate with one another in order to attain successful communication goals. The field of tourism industry in Malaysia is vast and it encompasses heritage, ecotourism, homestay, sports, coastal and island tourism, meetings and exhibition, food, golf, shopping and health tourism (Mosbah & Al Khuja, 2014). It is interesting to note that coastal and island tourism was included in the 10th Malaysian Plans under the tourism strategy development (Mosbah & Al Khuja, 2014). A report by Tourism Malaysia (2015) recommended language courses for tourism employees to enhance the communication skills of island-based employees in accommodation (resorts/chalets), food and beverages, travel agencies, recreation, transportation sectors and local communities. The proposal was a part of the repositioning plan to develop Perhentian Islands as a premier ecotourism destination in Malaysia.

As many studies, for example Dombi (2011), Jenkins (2012) and Nagy (2016) have emphasized the role of English as a lingua franca, the researcher deemed that it is highly appropriate to set out to explore the functions of English in the tourism industry. Satisfactory quality of communication between international tourists and the tourism staff will maximize the potential and perpetuate sustainability of tourism destinations. Good mastery of international languages enables tourist guides to solve problems experienced by international tourists (Berita Harian Online 8 April 2017) as well as impart essential knowledge about the diverse Malaysian cultures and traditions (Utusan Online, Feb 22, 2014). However, the statement averred by the former minister of tourism and culture, Datuk Mas Ermieyati that the industry requires more tourist guides who are multilingual due to the lack of tourist guides who are able to communicate in some international languages one of which is English (Astro Awani, 2017) highlights the current state of communication abilities of Malaysian tourist guides. Among the possible reasons that contribute to the lack of proficiency in English among Malaysian employees are inadequate preparation and training of workplace English (Mohamed, Mohd Radzuan, Kassim & Ali, 2017), English is learnt only because it is a compulsory

school subject rather than for personal achievement (Maizatulliza & Kielly, 2017), classroom practices and school and national level English examinations place more emphasis on testing students' reading and writing skills (Fauziah & Nita, 2002; Normazidah, Lie & Hazita, 2012). Therefore, tourism employees must equip themselves with good English communication skills as Malaysia has been a destination of choice among Europeans and Americans (Tourism Malaysia, 2018). The statistics of English speakers worldwide may serve as a strong basis to support the above claim. For example, in European countries English is the most widely spoken foreign language (38%) by 19 countries in which English is not their official language (European Commission, 2012) and in many American countries where English is used as an official and national language (One World Nations Online, n.d.). Tourism Malaysia (2019) has thus far recorded the arrivals of tourists from numerous Asian, American, European and Pacific countries, but while tourists from some of these countries are not the native speakers of English and perhaps only use English in certain occasions, the studies by Aldohon (2014), Ekayati and Saniaty (2018), Hashemi, Raftari and Javed (2014), Ong (2011) and Siti Noor Diana, Zulaikha Farhana and Ira Syaqira (2017) indirectly indicate that English is used in the realm of tourism between international tourists and tourism employees. In Malaysian tourism context, the consensus has been achieved between the decision makers that the employees need to be well-equipped with English rather than to have them use other foreign languages as the medium of communication (Selke, Hoon & Schaar, 2015).

While research on English language use has been conducted upon other fields of tourism such as hotel industry and medical tourism, the researcher observed that English-language-related studies associated specifically with island tourism industry still require more in-depth explorations. Therefore, in order to address the gap, the study is established based on the two objectives: (1) to identify the important English communicative tasks among island tourism employees and (2) to identify the sources of difficulties experienced by the employees.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Functions of English in Tourism

The role of English language beyond the classroom cannot be disputed as Graddol back in 1997 forecast that native speakers of English would be outnumbered by non-native speakers who use the language as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) by the 21st century. The broad uses of English are evident as it is one of the languages used in the science and technology, medical, business, education as well as hospitality and tourism fields, to name but a few. According to Graddol (1997), tourism represents a scenario of people's influx into a country whereby the requirement to use English becomes the most remarkable. Crystal (2003) cites examples of how the use of English has become visible in tourist locations and in fact it has also become an auxiliary language among tourists. Some tourist locations such as hotels, restaurants, shopping malls and credit card facilities do provide necessary information in the English version. Therefore, in the tourism industry English is learnt mainly for tourism employees to carry out specific tasks in which they have to deal with international tourists. Oliveira (2015) identifies the importance of English for tourism so as to increase awareness of cultural issues, differences and preferences as well as one's own environment and culture.

On a similar note, Prachanant (2012) emphasizes the needs for tourism employees to use English for the purposes of communicating, negotiating and executing transactions with international tourists. It is indisputable that tourists come from different nationalities and have various language backgrounds which are not only limited to English. There are tourists who speak different native languages but use English for specific functions or in specific domains. The need to deal with tourists who speak different first languages is obviously a major challenge which is an indispensable matter that tourism employees have to confront with and must not be simply dismissed in order to provide outstanding services and accommodation to the tourists. Despite these language disparities, tourism employees must equip themselves with good language skills i.e. English communication skills as the language is perceived as a bridge that links them to tourists (Douglas, 2013). For example, sports tourism employees need to improve their English in order to provide excellent services to international tourists (Chanthathira & Suwanarak, 2017). Although there is a variety of linguacultural backgrounds of international tourists, English is widely used in the domain of tourism. For example, the tour guides in the Southeast Asian countries i.e. Malaysia and Indonesia communicate in English while carrying out their duties such as greeting tourists, describing things and places, asking questions, conveying and explaining information, reminding, and giving instructions and warning (Ekayati & Saniaty, 2018; Ong, 2011). Additionally, Khuong (2015) states that English is highly necessary in Vietnam to provide tourism services to international tourists. Her study also shows that students of tourism programs in Vietnam also undergo English for tourism training. In his study, Prachanant (2012) presents the needs to use English among tourism employees in Thailand mainly to deliver information, provide services and offer help. In another Southeast Asian country – Cambodia, Morrow (2015) reveals that English is used by international tourists who either speak the language as their first language or as an international language which substantiates the necessary use of English by Cambodian tourism employees. Thus, these few studies conducted in the Southeast Asian context highlights the importance of English in tourism industry particularly for communicative functions between tourism employees and international tourists.

2.2 Challenges Faced by Tourism Employees in English-Medium Communication

Using English as a medium of interaction in tourist-employee interaction is indeed a challenge which is experienced by tourism employees. Ratminingsih, Suardana and Martin (2018) carried out a need analysis among local tour guides based in two Indonesian villages which are promoted as tourism villages due to their multifarious attractions and activities. Most of the tour guides only received primary education while only three guides had an English education background. Despite the diverse job tasks they have to handle at work, English training appeared to be scarce resulting in limited ability in English communication. The Indonesian tour guides reported that although they could understand utterances delivered in English language, their limited English oral proficiency caused them to give minimal responses to tourists. Hence, the researchers proposed development of contextual based training materials to improve the tour guides' English speaking skill for a more meaningful learning outcome. Focusing on the same tourism activity – tour guiding, Douglas (2013) identified learning and target needs of students of the Tour Guides ESP Course through a survey and interview with ESP instructors, students and employers of tour and travel firms. Both students and

teachers viewed the skills of asking questions, answering questions, expressing oneself, conversing with native speakers and customers, and conducting workplace communication as the important learning and target needs. In the same study, tour guiding personnel were interviewed in which they professed that tour guides appeared to have an inadequate level of English competency as the language is more frequently used in tourism than other languages.

In another related field of tourism – the hospitality industry, Charunsri (2011) discovered that the most essential skill for front office staff was speaking skill with grammar skill being the least essential skill for them. Due to the various communicative tasks, the staff must equip themselves with good speaking skills as they also have to be able to speak spontaneously to hotel guests. However, the analysis indicates that the respondents had a high level of difficulty in conversing on the phone with their clients, explaining the reasons when mistakes occur, compromising mutual understanding, pronouncing English words, and speaking English by incorporating stress appropriately (p. 23). Meanwhile, Aldohon (2014) conducted a study in the Jordanian tourism context with a slightly different sample of respondents – tourist police. He discovered that when communicating in English with tourists, the respondents faced the problems of inability to use appropriate words and expressions, inability to incorporate adequate knowledge of grammatical structure, and inability to capture international tourists' quick utterances. In the Malaysian context, Siti Noor Diana *et al.*, (2017) interviewed alternative taxi (Uber) drivers who offer their services to both local and international travellers. In carrying out their duties, English is often used when responding to clients' messages, initiating conversations with passengers, communicating with international travellers, and providing information to passengers. Nonetheless, the drivers also faced difficulties in trying to comprehend English utterances spoken by native English speakers as well as non-native English speakers.

These studies provide significant insights into the problems faced by people employed in tourism-related job sectors. The important function of English language as a medium of communication in conducting tourism-related activities is irrefutable as it has become the language frequently opted by travellers (Douglas, 2013; Siti Noor Diana *et al.*, 2017). Apart from investigating the relevant uses of English in tourism activities, there is also a critical need to examine the problems faced by tourism employees. Such research will be useful for course and material developers to help them identify the necessary areas of English language functions and areas of incompetence experienced by tourism employees.

3.0 METHOD

The study was conducted among island tourism staff centred in Perhentian and Redang Islands in Terengganu, Malaysia. The main reason for selecting the two islands in Terengganu is due to the higher number of resort and recreation operators based on Perhentian and Redang Islands as opposed to other islands in the same state (Jabatan Taman Laut Malaysia, 2012; Terengganu Tourism, 2018). This study used a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach to describe the staff's perceptions of the important speaking skills used in island tourism-related communication purposes. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22 to calculate the mean value and standard

deviation of each item with regard to the importance of English language in island tourism communication and sources of difficulties in using English to communicate with international tourists.

Data were collected in a survey that utilized a part of the questionnaire adapted from Tangniam (2006) which is “The ground staff’s needs of English language speaking skills in their jobs” and Singaran (2016) which is “Problems in spoken english communication”. The questionnaires were deployed in their previous studies involving airport and information desk staff respectively whose duties included providing relevant information to international tourists which necessitated them to use English in order to speak to the tourists. The value of reliability coefficient of Tangniam’s (2006) study yielded 0.937 which was of high reliability. Prior to the full-scale survey, a pilot survey was conducted on 25 island tourism staff of the target population. The value of reliability analysis yielded from the pilot survey was .935. The only modification made to the questionnaire was rephrasing sentence structures of each item for a better level of intelligibility to the respondents.

Table 1 Reliability of Questionnaire

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.935	62

The survey was conducted for two weeks after the pilot survey which involved 59 island tourism staff. The researcher managed to obtain data from only 59 island tourism employees due the peak season in August on both islands and most employees were engaged in various tasks such as snorkeling and scuba diving trips. As the objectives of the study concern English for island tourism-related communication, the researcher deemed August as the most appropriate time to conduct the survey for the employees to relate to their own experience of communicating to international tourists in English. The employees’ job scopes encompass managing accommodation (resort), transportation (boat) and recreation (snorkeling and scuba diving) services. The majority of the respondents ($n = 51$) were of 18 to 39 years old and only two respondents are Indian while the rest are Malay. Based on the researcher’s observation, as Perhentian and Redang Islands are largely populated by Malay dwellers, the tourism sector on both islands are also dominated by Malay employees. Out of the 59 respondents, 21 received undergraduate education, 32 received secondary school education and 6 were educated only at the primary school level.

Table 2 Service Years of the Island Tourism Employees

Service Years	Percentage
Less than 5 years	57.6%
5-10 years	22.0%
11-15 years	15.3%
16-20 years	3.4%
21 years & more	1.7%

Based on the analysis, the majority of the respondents 57.6% have been involved in the island tourism industry less than five years followed by 22% of the respondents who have been working for five to ten years as island tourism employees. The least was one respondent who has more than 21 years of experience. While conducting the survey, the researcher discovered that some of the tourist guides have started working at a young age (below 18 years old). This might suggest an indication that there might be more tourist guides who have started working as tourism employees at an age when they should still be in school. The respondents were also asked whether they have attended any English courses related to island tourism or specifically their job scopes. The analysis shows that only 22% of the respondents have joined such classes either in college or at the workplace.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about the perceived importance of English speaking skills when carrying out specific tourism-related conversations with international tourists. The respondents rated the level of importance of twenty communicative situations on a Likert scale. The result of analysis of the 20 items is as follows:

Table 4 Level of Importance of English Communication Skills for Island Tourism Communication

No.	Functions	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
1.	To inquire about international tourists' information and needs.	4.3559	0.88596	High
2.	To express gratitude to international tourists' compliments.	4.322	0.91803	High
3.	To welcome and greet international tourists.	4.3051	1.03814	High
4.	To make polite requests to international tourists.	4.3051	0.95148	High
5.	To negotiate for mutual interest with international tourists.	4.3051	0.93319	High
6.	To chat with international tourists.	4.3051	0.89547	High
7.	To make announcements to international tourists.	4.3051	0.89547	High
8.	To convey information about itineraries to international tourists.	4.2712	0.97963	High
9.	To clarify the questions asked by international tourists.	4.2712	0.9065	High
10.	To explain the reason for mistakes to international tourists.	4.2542	0.93943	High

No.	Functions	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
11.	To give instructions to international tourists.	4.2203	0.96611	High
12.	To bid farewell to international tourists.	4.2034	1.15639	High
13.	To offer assistance to international tourists.	4.2034	0.94284	High
14.	To provide travel information to international tourists	4.2034	1.07927	High
15.	To make apologies to international tourists.	4.2034	1.07927	High
16.	To offer tour activities to international tourists.	4.1864	1.04179	High
17.	To express empathy to international tourists.	4.1356	1.10575	High
18.	To speak on the phone with international tourists.	4.0678	1.04822	High
19.	To collect fees from international tourists.	3.8475	1.27054	High
20.	To make refusals to international tourists' offer.	3.678	1.47906	High

The interpretation of mean range from lowest to highest is based on Prachanant's (2012) interpretation in his study of use of English language in tourism which is specified in Table 5:

Table 5 Level of Importance of English Communication Skills for Island Tourism Communication

Mean range	Level
4.50-5.00	Highest
3.50-4.49	High
2.50-3.49	Moderate
1.50-2.49	Low
1.00-1.49	Lowest

The mean value of each item shows that the level of importance of English language use in island tourism is high for all the communicative functions. With the mean value of 4.3559, the function of English in asking about international tourists' information and needs is the most important. This is followed by expressing gratitude when receiving compliments from international tourists. Meanwhile, five communicative functions – welcoming and greeting, making requests politely, negotiating for mutual interest, chatting, and making announcements appear to have a similar mean value of 4.3051. Providing itinerary information and clarifying questions have an equal mean value of 4.2712. The data also yield a similar mean value of 4.2034 in four other communicative functions – expressing farewells, offering assistance, providing travel information, and apologizing. The communicative function with the lowest mean value is making refusals to the offers by international tourists. Overall, based on the data, the tourism employees rated English to be of highest level of importance in island tourism communicative functions.

The situation in which English is rated of paramount importance in comparison to other functions is the use of the language to ask for international tourists' information and needs. The possible reason why this item is considered more important than other communicative situations may owe to the main job scope of tourism employees as they have to be highly aware of and sensitive to tourists' needs and wants. In a study by Taylan Dortyol, Varinli and Kitapci (2014), one of the dimensions

that determine tourists' satisfaction is employees' friendly, courteous and helpful attitudes as they should provide special individualized treatment for tourists. Thus, in order to give satisfactory treatment to international tourists, tourism employees need to know not only information of the tourists but they also need to be aware of their needs and wants as well. All these functions are carried out by using English as a medium of communication. The second most important function is expressing gratitude to international tourists' compliments. When the tourism employees are given compliments by tourists and they thank the tourists in return for their praises, such act of appreciation helps to maintain host-tourist interaction. Compliments are generally interpreted as an expression of satisfaction (Khoo-Lattimore & Ekiz, 2014) and even though the speech act of complimenting extends beyond the mere purpose of praising (Grossi, 2009), it is a common courtesy to express gratitude upon given compliments by others. Using English to refuse tourists' offers is found to be the least importance among the tourism employees. One of the reason, as explained by Hiba Qusay, Salasiah and Raja Rozina (2011) is the difficulty in making refusals which is interpreted as making rejections to other interlocutors' offers, requests, invitations and suggestions. Refusals, as face-threatening acts, also place a speaker in predicament as he/she will impose a threat to the hearer's face (Shishavan & Sharifian, 2016). The degree of difficulty is intensified by the encumbrances of linguistic and pragmatic competence on interlocutors which is further complicated by the use of a non-native language (Hiba Qusay et. al., 2011). Hence, using English to make refusals appears to be of least significance in international tourist-host interactions.

Table 6 Level of Difficulty in Using English Experienced by Island Tourism Employees

No.	Function 1: Greet international tourists			
	Sources of Difficulties	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of Difficulty
1.	Understand international tourists' English accents.	3.2203	1.4028	Moderate
2.	Comprehend the meaning of English words.	3.1356	1.34495	Moderate
3.	Use correct English grammar.	3.1017	1.19906	Moderate
4.	Pronounce English words correctly.	3.0678	1.33732	Moderate
5.	Understand international tourists' speech.	3.0678	1.27123	Moderate
6.	Use appropriate English words.	3.0508	1.38245	Moderate
7.	Develop confidence in speaking in English.	2.8305	1.35383	Moderate
No.	Function 2: Convey information to international tourists			
	Sources of Difficulties	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of Difficulty
1.	Understand international tourists' English accents.	3.1186	1.31418	Moderate
2.	Use appropriate English words.	3.1017	1.25526	Moderate
3.	Use correct English grammar.	3.1017	1.21336	Moderate
4.	Understand international tourists' speech.	3.0847	1.26339	Moderate
5.	Pronounce English words correctly.	3.0339	1.28608	Moderate
6.	Comprehend the meaning of English words.	3.0339	1.36415	Moderate
7.	Develop confidence in speaking in English.	2.9153	1.36821	Moderate

No.	Function 3: Talk on the phone to international tourists			
	Sources of Difficulties	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of Difficulty
1.	Use correct English grammar.	3.0339	1.25898	Moderate
2.	Understand international tourists' English accents.	3.0339	1.24521	Moderate
3.	Use appropriate English words.	2.9831	1.34538	Moderate
4.	Pronounce English words correctly.	2.9661	1.35145	Moderate
5.	Understand international tourists' speech.	2.9492	1.22367	Moderate
6.	Comprehend the meaning of English words.	2.9322	1.32437	Moderate
7.	Develop confidence in speaking in English.	2.7119	1.28722	Moderate
No.	Function 4: Explain about recreational activities to international tourists			
	Sources of Difficulties	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of Difficulty
8.	Use correct English grammar.	3.1017	1.26892	Moderate
9.	Understand international tourists' English accents.	3.0508	1.27879	Moderate
10.	Comprehend the meaning of English words.	3.0339	1.33863	Moderate
11.	Understand international tourists' speech.	3.000	1.31306	Moderate
12.	Pronounce English words correctly.	2.9492	1.30548	Moderate
13.	Use appropriate English words.	2.9153	1.36821	Moderate
14.	Develop confidence in speaking in English.	2.678	1.23792	Moderate
No.	Function 5: Explain about tour packages and services to international tourists			
	Sources of Difficulties	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of Difficulty
1.	Understand international tourists' English accents.	3.1186	1.31418	Moderate
2.	Use correct English grammar.	3.0339	1.2726	Moderate
3.	Comprehend the meaning of English words.	2.9661	1.32569	Moderate
4.	Pronounce English words correctly.	2.8814	1.30099	Moderate
5.	Understand international tourists' speech.	2.8814	1.24685	Moderate
6.	Develop confidence in speaking in English.	2.8136	1.26593	Moderate
7.	Use appropriate English words.	2.7797	1.30077	Moderate
No.	Function 6: Give directions to specified locations to international tourists			
	Sources of Difficulties	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of Difficulty
1.	Use correct English grammar.	3.0508	1.26523	Moderate
2.	Understand international tourists' English accents.	3.0169	1.2797	Moderate
3.	Understand international tourists' speech.	2.9661	1.2726	Moderate
4.	Use appropriate English words.	2.9153	1.35555	Moderate
5.	Pronounce English words correctly.	2.9153	1.32987	Moderate
6.	Comprehend the meaning of English words.	2.8644	1.37035	Moderate
7.	Develop confidence in speaking in English.	2.7627	1.29107	Moderate

Table 6 presents island tourism employees' difficulty in using English when performing the selected communicative functions of greeting international tourists, conveying information to international tourists, communicating on the phone with international tourists, explaining about available recreational activities to international tourists, explaining about tour packages and services to international tourists, and giving directions to specified locations to international tourists. The data reveals that the difficulty level of seven identified sources of difficulties in performing the six communicative functions is at moderate level. In carrying out three of the functions - greet international tourists, convey information to international tourists, and explain about tour packages and services to international tourists, the most significant source of difficulty is identified as international tourists' English accents with the mean value 3.2203, 3.1186, and 3.1186 respectively. Their English accents which are influenced by their mother tongue seems to be the main hindrance to the tourism employees' abilities to comprehend their utterances. Perhentian and Redang Islands continually receive a huge number of international tourists every year i.e. 107, 442 in 2017; 93, 181 in 2016; and 68, 111 in 2015 and there is a high possibility that these tourists communicate with island tourism employees in English in different foreign accents that may result in difficulties and confusion among the employees. Matsuura, Chiba, Mahoney and Rilling (2014) discovered from their earlier experiment that a more familiar English accent was easier for speakers to comprehend as opposed to an English accent that was less familiar to them. Hence, familiarity of accents does have effects on language intelligibility and contribute to the ease and success of communication.

In performing the following tasks – talking on the phone to international tourists, explain about recreational activities to international tourists, and give directions to specified locations to international tourists, the data shows ability to use correct English grammar has the highest mean value – 3.0339, 3.1017, and 3.0508 respectively. Hence, it can be interpreted that the employees deemed the grammatical structure of English language is somewhat a challenge to master. The fact that grammar is a difficult concept among non-native speakers of English is undeniable because a lot of research pertaining to grammatical errors committed among ESL learners has been conducted. In the oral context Ting, Mahanita and Chang (2010) who examined grammatical errors in Malaysian ESL students' oral communication discovered that the students made grammatical errors in prepositions (20.67%), questions (14.89%), articles (10.53%), plural form of nouns (7.06%), subject-verb agreement (7.06%) and tenses (6.55%). Meanwhile, Aldohon (2014) and Prachanant (2012) report that insufficient knowledge of English grammar and structure was one of the problems experienced by some employees working in the tourism sector. Therefore, the idea that may be deduced from the studies is that non-native English speakers encounter difficulties in using English grammar in their interactions.

The data have shown that English language is deemed of a high level of importance in performing communicative functions among island tourism employees when communicating with international tourists. Despite the importance of English language, the employees also encountered difficulties which were rated at a moderate level. The two main sources of difficulties are identified as international tourists' English accents and English grammar.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The present study explored island tourism employees' perceptions of importance of English language for communicative functions in island tourism and sources of difficulties in using English language when communicating with international tourists. The findings reveal that the employees perceived English language to be an important lingua franca to communicate with international tourists. Based on the analysis, English language is most important for the employees when enquiring about international tourists' information and needs as well as to express gratitude when receiving compliments from international tourists. In relation to language difficulties, the employees rated the skills to understand tourists' foreign accents when they speak English and to use correct English grammar and structure as more difficult as compared to other skills of English language communication. This study has addressed the gap in English for Specific research by providing insights into the importance of English for island tourism communication as well as difficulties encountered by the employees in using the language to interact with international tourists. The researchers hope that the findings of the study will benefit ESP content and material developers who are working very closely with the tourism industry particularly tourism and hospitality students and employees. However, there is still limitation within this study appertain to the sample size, population and method of data collection. The researchers recommend future studies to conduct a similar study on a larger sample size or in different islands. In addition, future studies should vary their methods of data collection for example by collecting data using a qualitative research design e.g. interview, observation in order to gain more in-depth insights into the needs of island tourism employees and challenges experienced by them for improvement of their English communication skills. A similar type of study also should cover a larger sample size and include research participants in different populations.

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