

CULTURAL CONFLICTS AT THE HOTEL FRONT DESK: A CASE OF ENGLISH FOR TOURISM

الصراعات الثقافية في مكاتب الاستقبال الفندقية:
اللغة الإنجليزية للسياحة

Nacéra BENALI REGUIEG
Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef
benalinacera78@yahoo.fr

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ABSTRACT :

People share some common cultural values that make them alike to a certain extent. However, they may give up communication when they feel that the other is different. Cultural conflicts may occur due to miscommunication and lack of understanding. In hotel industry, the front desk employees deal with people from different cultural backgrounds. Hence, it is essential to shed the light on the cultural dimensions at the workplace for effective communication. This study aims at identifying the cultural conflicts that the hotel receptionists encounter with native and non-native speakers of English customers. It is conducted in two stages. The first stage includes the secondary research-reviewing relevant literature, books, and related information. The second stage includes the primary research, which dealt with the collection of primary data through a questionnaire in form of needs analysis.

Keywords:

Cultural Conflicts; Hotel Receptionists, Intercultural Dimensions.

ملخص:

يشترك الناس في بعض القيم الثقافية التي تجعلهم متشابهين إلى حد ما، لكن قد ينقطعون عن التواصل عندما يشعرون باختلاف الآخر. قد تحدث الصراعات الثقافية نتيجة سوء التواصل وعدم فهم الآخر. ففي مجال الفندقية، يتعامل موظفو الاستقبال مع أشخاص من خلفيات ثقافية مختلفة. وعليه فمن الأهمية بمكان تسليط الضوء على البعد الثقافي في مكان العمل من أجل التواصل الفعال. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد الصراعات الثقافية التي يواجهها موظفو الاستقبال في الفنادق مع العملاء الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزية، سواء كانت هذه الأخيرة لغتهم الأم أم لغة ثانية. لقد شملت هذه الدراسة مرحلتين: تمثلت المرحلة الأولى في الجانب النظري المتعلق بالموضوع، أما المرحلة الثانية التي تتمثل في الجزء العملي فقد تضمنت جمع البيانات من خلال استبيان قائم على تحليل الاحتياجات.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الصراعات الثقافية ; استقبال الفندق ;الأبعاد الثقافية.

Résumé :

Les gens partagent des valeurs culturelles communes qui les rendent quelque peu similaires, mais ils cessent de communiquer quand ils se sentent différents des autres, ce qui provoque des conflits culturels causés par des malentendus. Dans le secteur d'hôtellerie, le personnel de la réception traite avec des visiteurs de différentes cultures et il est nécessaire de se concentrer sur les dimensions culturelles pour assurer une communication efficace. Le but de cette étude est d'identifier les types de conflits culturels rencontrés par les réceptionnistes avec des locuteurs natifs et non natifs d'anglais. La première phase de l'étude comprend la recherche secondaire, notamment la littérature, des livres et des informations connexes. La deuxième phase

comprend la recherche fondamentale sur l'ensemble initial de données au moyen d'un questionnaire sous la forme d'une analyse des besoins.

Mots-Clés :

Conflicts culturels ; réceptionnistes d'hôtel, dimensions interculturelles.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural conflicts are unavoidable in international organizations due to language difficulties as well as the different cultural values, norms and attitudes. In the hotel industry, the front desk employees are the first individuals to welcome the tourists who have diverse cultural backgrounds. Algerian Hotel receptionists are faced with two main challenges in their career: dealing with their customers cultural differences and mastering the English language, which is considered as a foreign language for them. This paper aims at exploring the cultural conflicts that the hotel receptionists encounter with native and non-native speakers of English customers. It sheds light on the importance of being aware of the cultural dissimilarities for an effective intercultural communication. The study is based on one research question: What kind of intercultural communication needs do Algerian front desk employees require at the workplace to avoid cultural conflicts?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Conflict and Intercultural Communication

People share some common cultural values that make them alike to a certain extent. However, they may give up communication when they feel that the other is different. *'Breakdowns in communication are a leading cause of conflict, and good communication skills are important to develop effective conflict solutions and negotiations'* (Silverthorne, 2004, p. 193). Hence, cultural conflicts may occur due to miscommunication and lack of understanding one another. International staff focuses on solving problems related to cultural conflicts to succeed in their business. Successful managers work on developing effective intercultural communication skills among the organization members. Communicating with non-native speakers in any language takes skill and experience. Priorities include understanding and accommodating different worldviews and cultural differences among consumers and employees, and developing intercultural communication competencies to suit a particular international environment.

Awareness of Intercultural Dimensions

Hofstede et al (2002) relate the intercultural dimensions to six basic social problems: identity, hierarchy, gender, truth, virtue and indulgence.

Identity (Individualism)

The problem of identity is important and has an impact on many aspects of communication. This dimension focuses on the degree to which a society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships. The issue of identity appears in different manifestations with different names such as individualist/collectivist, low-context/ high-context, universalist/particularist, specific/diffuse, internal/ external control cultures. The rich countries are somehow individualistic; however, the poor ones are collectivistic. Historically speaking, the term collectivism reflects poverty and limited resources, whereas the word individualism indicates wealth and abundant resources. *In very individualist societies, people may feel lonely and isolated, develop antisocial behaviors, or cling to illusions of group cohesion* (Hofstede et al, 2002, p.35). These differences show how crucial is the issue of identity in intercultural awareness.

Hierarchy Power Distance

The second intercultural dimension is Hierarchy or what is called 'Power Distance'. It represents the natural inequality between people. Some researchers tried to measure power distance between countries or regions. In Europe, many studies have revealed that the distance power between Northern Europe cultures and Southern Europe cultures is smaller than the power distance between its Eastern and Western cultures. Similarly, there is a separating line between Anglo American and Latin American countries. Hofstede (2002) adds that in high power distance cultures, there exist some common aspects:

- Those in authority openly demonstrate their rank.
- Subordinates are not given important work and expect clear guidance from above.
- Subordinates are expected to take the blame for things going wrong.
- The relationship between boss and subordinate is rarely close/personal.
- Politics is prone to totalitarianism.
- Class divisions within society are accepted.

However, poor power distance cultures the following may be observed:

- Superiors treat subordinates with respect and do not pull rank.
- Subordinates are entrusted with important assignments.
- Blame is either shared or very often accepted by the superior due to it being their responsibility to manage.
- Managers may often socialize with subordinates.
- Liberal democracies are the norm.
- Societies lean more towards egalitarianism

Hierarchy is related to wealth but not as identity is.

Gender (Masculinity)

This dimension relates the gender roles and the control of aggression. It has been remarked that all over the world, there is an unequal distribution between man and woman's roles in societies. This unequal distribution results in fighting instead of caring and cooperating. That is why a society where there is equal role distribution is called feminine, while a masculine society is a term given to a society where inequality is dominant. For instance, the cultures of the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries are very feminine, but those of Germany, Switzerland, and Austria are strongly masculine; Costa Rica and Portugal are feminine, but Colombia and most other Latin American countries are masculine; Thailand is feminine, but Japan is very masculine. Britain and the United States are also rather masculine (Hofstede et al, 2002, p. 37).

In order not to be confused with male versus female, alternative names are used: care-oriented versus achievement-oriented.

Truth (Uncertainty Avoidance)

This dimension shows how much a society prepares its members to deal with the unexpected, unknown, and surprising situations. A country with high uncertainty avoidance has low tolerance towards ambiguous circumstances. Germany as example is a society that relies on rules, laws and regulations. Germans plan everything carefully to avoid uncertainty, which makes it a country with reasonable high uncertainty avoidance compared to its neighbors. In a country with low uncertainty avoidance, people have more tolerance towards varieties and new experiences. Such countries have less rules and regulations and are ready for risk taking. For example, United States of American is a mixture of national cultures, which makes her a country with a relatively low uncertainty avoidance. *'Russia and the countries of the Balkans have cultures of strong uncertainty avoidance, as do Japan, Korea, Mexico, Belgium, and France. Germanic countries are very uncomfortable with uncertainty* (Hofstede et al, 2002, p. 38).

Virtue

This dimension is called *Long-term Orientation* as opposed to *Short-term Orientation*. Long-term Orientation exists when a society focuses on the future, while short term Orientation exists in societies where people give importance to the present and past (Hofstede et al, 2002, p. 39). This cultural issue is significant in the Asian countries. The non- Asian people find it difficult to adapt to this cultural aspect. Europeans and Americans give importance to truth, however Asian are concerned with Virtue.

3. METHODOLOGY

Participants and Sampling

The population of the study consisted of hotel receptionists from different hotels in Algeria. They were selected to give data about their needs, lacks and necessities at the workplace. It is obvious that the population is geographically dispersed, thus, non-probability sampling was used to gather data. In non-probability sampling (also, known as purposive sampling), the selection of informants that may represent the target population is unknown (Cohen *et al.*, 2011) and they do not have equal chances in being selected. The researchers chose their participants purposefully and they were aware that the sample is not representative of the whole population; it represents itself only. Non-probability sampling comprises several types: convenience sampling, quota sampling, dimensional sampling, and purposive sampling and snowball sampling. In the present research, convenience sampling (also, availability sampling) was supposed to be the most appropriate sampling method for data collection because access to different hotels is time consuming and costs a lot. Cohen et al. (2011) described convenience sampling ‘—or as it is sometimes called, accidental or opportunity sampling—involves choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size has been obtained’ (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 155).

Convenience sampling is simple, easy and helpful as data can be collected in a short time. However, sampling error may be at a high level and the research may have little credibility. Researchers, in convenience sampling, seek the available access without the intention of generalizing the findings (Cohen et al., 2011). Since the convenience sampling was designated for the data collection, there was no determined sample size. Accessibility was the only criterion for the hotel receptionists sample size. This criterion brought the final sample size to twenty-seven receptionists working in twenty-five hotels from different regions in Algeria.

Research Instruments

Using quantitative data collection techniques, the data collection tool chosen for this study was the questionnaire. The questionnaire was primarily based on the theoretical background of this study that embraces literature review linked to cultural conflicts and intercultural dimensions. Its purpose was gathering information about:

1. Hotel reception employees experience at work.
2. Use of English in training and at the workplace.
3. Participants' views about the syllabi of the English for hotel reception.
4. Reasons behind cultural conflicts between a hotel receptionist and his customer.
5. The front office employees' intercultural communication needs at the workplace

Furthermore, it was designed to answer the general research question which was what kind of intercultural communication do the hotel receptionists need at the workplace so as to avoid cultural conflicts?

4. RESULTS

Question Item One: How important are these skills for a receptionist to carry out his job effectively?

Fig 02 discloses that all the language skills are important for the job of the front encounter.

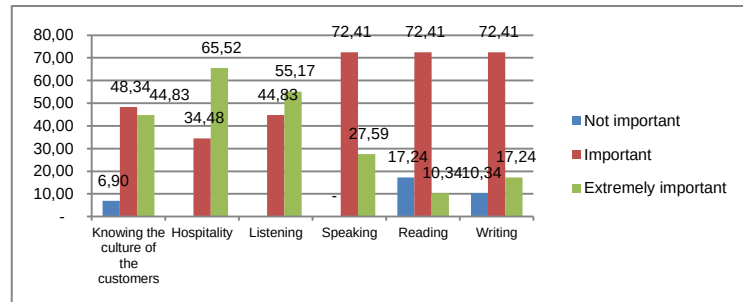


Fig 01. Receptionists' Views on the Importance of Language Skills

Question Item Two: Which aspects of English you need to improve?

Obviously, Fig 02 unveils that the hotel receptionists need to improve their speaking and listening skills as well as they are eager to know more about the cultures of their clients.

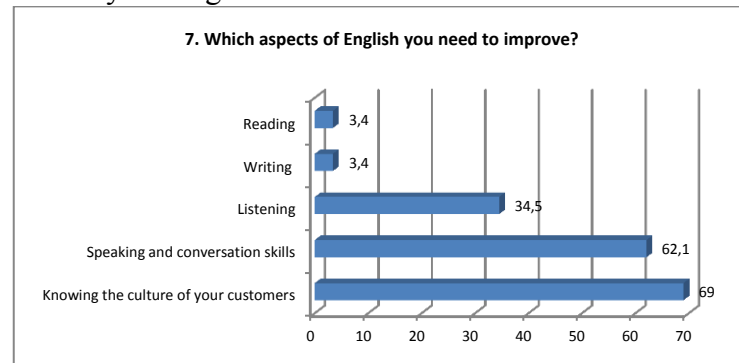


Fig 02. Aspects of English to be Improved

Question Item Three: Do you think that knowing about the culture of your customer helps you avoid cultural problems?

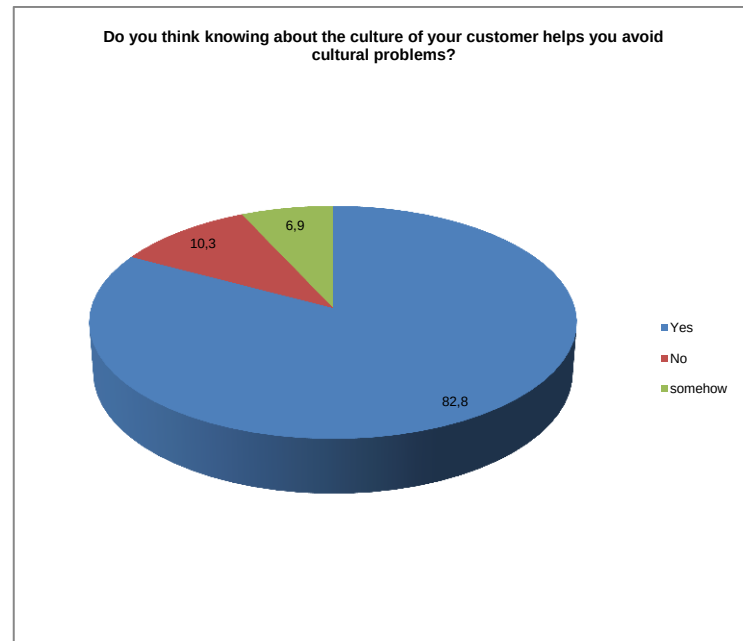


Fig 3. Cultural Conflicts Avoidance

Fig 03 indicates that 82.8% of the hotel receptionists think that if they have some knowledge about the culture of their customers, they will avoid cultural misunderstandings.

Question Item Four: What kind of intercultural communication skills to be improved at work?

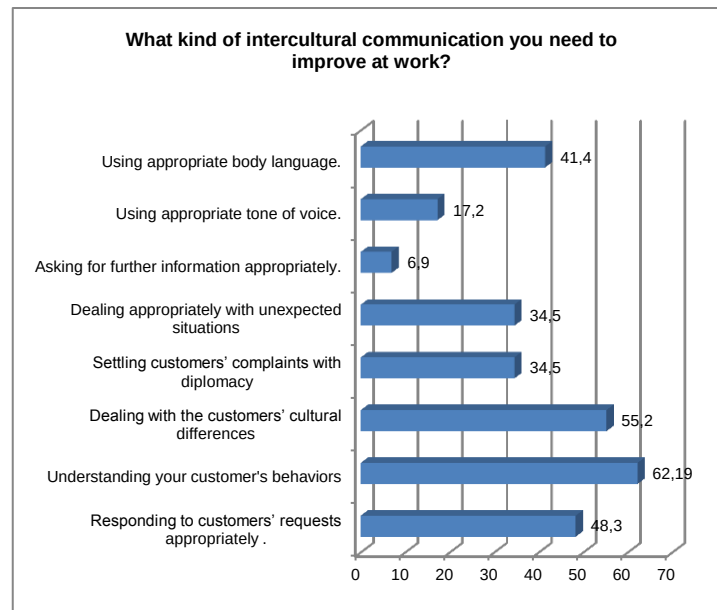


Fig 04. Intercultural Communication Skills to be Improved

When asked about the intercultural communication skills that need to be improved, the respondents classified the skills as follows:

1. Understanding customers' behavior
2. Dealing with customers' cultural differences
3. Responding to customers' requests appropriately
4. Use the appropriate body language
5. Dealing appropriately with the unexpected situations and settling customers' complaints with diplomacy
6. The appropriate use of voice tone
7. Asking for further information appropriately

Question Item Five: Is mastering the English language sufficient to avoid misunderstandings with your customers?

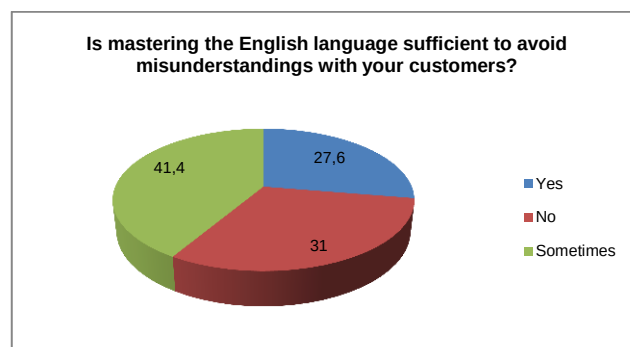


Fig 05. Role of Mastering English in Cultural Conflicts Avoidance

As presented on Fig 05, 27.6 % of the participants consider that mastering the English language is sufficient to avoid cultural conflicts with their customers; however, 41.4% contrasted the first opinion and 31% stated that having a good command of the English language helps sometimes the receptionist avoid in cultural conflicts.

Question Item Six: How important is knowing the culture of your customer?

Fig 06 below shows that none of the participants opted of the unimportance of knowing the culture of the customer for an effective communication. All the answers varied between important (55.2%) and extremely important (44.8%).

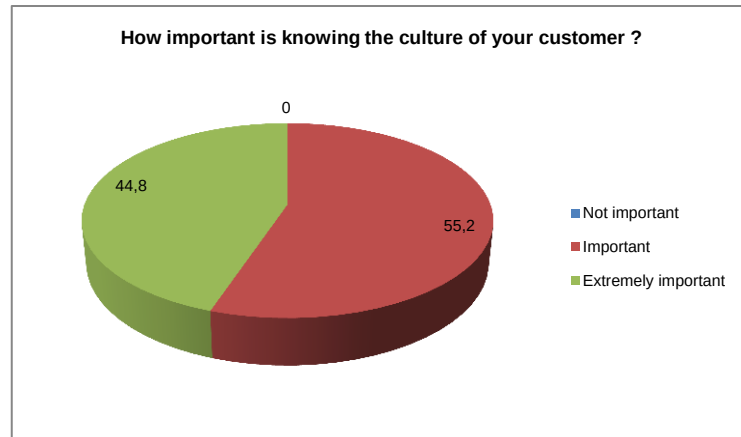


Fig 06. Knowing the Culture of Others

Question Item Seven: Do you find difficulties in communicating with people from different cultures though you master the English language?

When questioned if they had difficulties in communicating with people from different cultures though you master the English language, only 10.3% reported that they did not go through communication problems; 41.4% opted for yes, and 48.3% selected sometimes. The results presented on Fig 06 unveil that most of the respondents had some difficulties in dealing with clients from different cultural backgrounds though they master the English language.

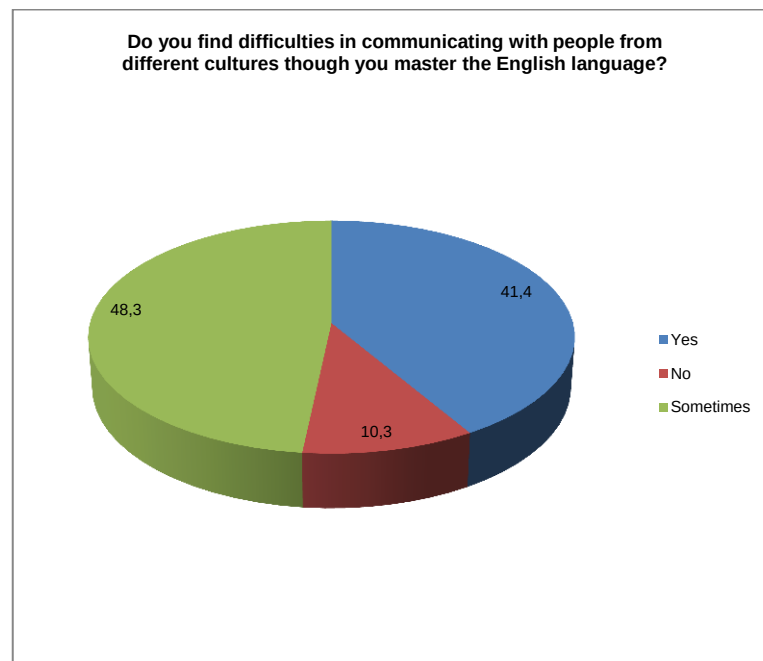


Fig 07. Difficulties in Communicating with People from Different Cultures

Question Item Eight: If yes, these difficulties are due to:

As a continuation to the previous question, the participants were asked to state the reasons behind the communicative difficulties with people from different cultures; their answers were classified as follows:

1. They have little knowledge about the cultures of their clients
2. Right use of body language
3. Lack of vocabulary
4. Right choice of words
5. Right use of voice

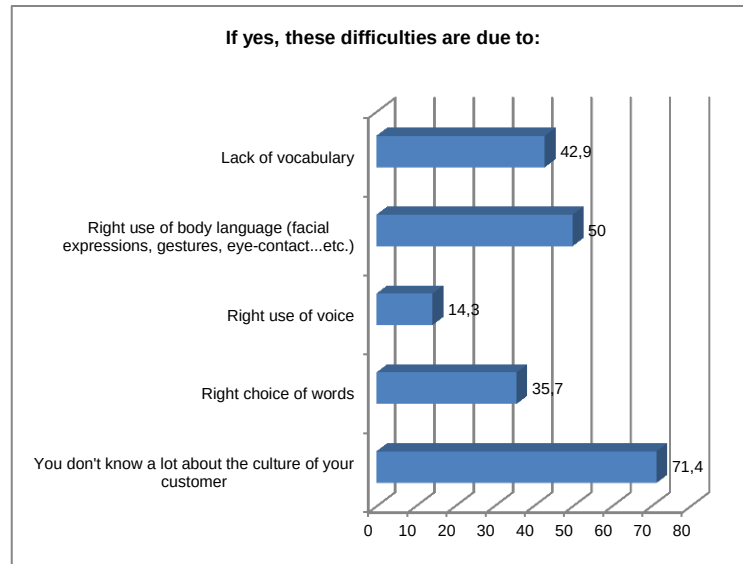


Fig 08. Difficulties in Communicating with People from Different Cultures
Question Item Nine: Have you ever had a problem with a customer because of cultural misunderstanding?

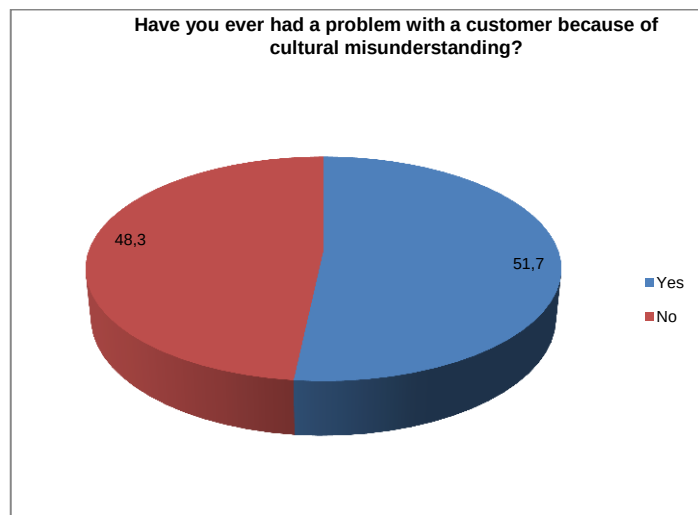


Fig 09. Problems with Customers
Question Item Ten: If a misunderstanding happens at the work place, do you try to use your cultural knowledge of the other to solve the problem?

In question 10, the participants were asked if they refer to the customer cultural background if a misunderstanding occurs; 37% opted for sometimes, 27.6% chose rarely, 17.2 selected always and 17.2% picked never.

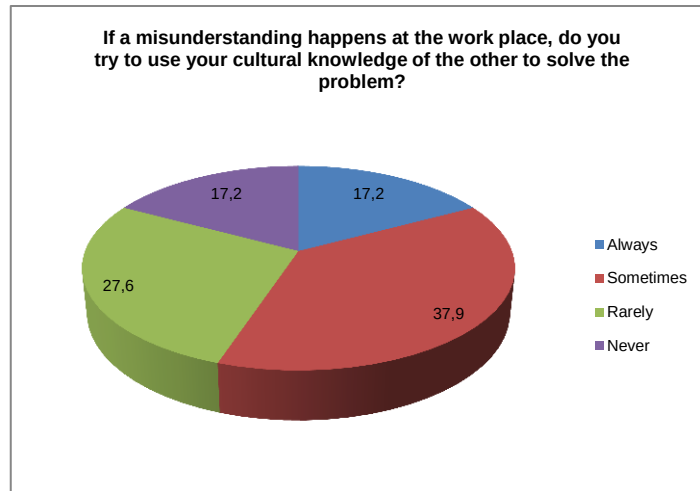


Fig 10. Use of Cultural Background

Question Item Eleven: Do you think that the customers' cultures should be induced in the English syllabus?

As can be read from the below statistical results, the great majority of the front office employees (86.2%) think that culture should be induced in the English syllabus.

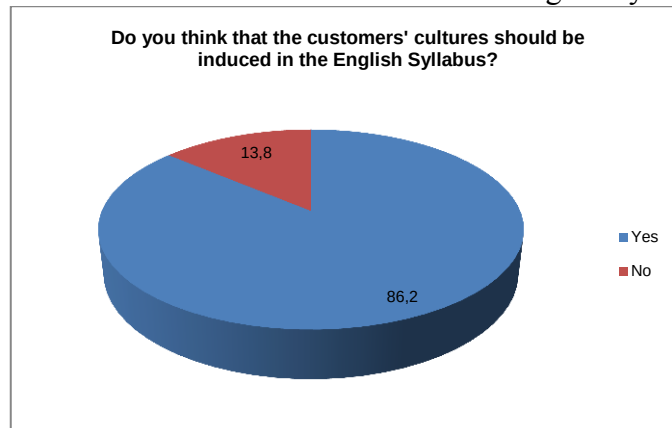


Fig 11. Integration of Culture in the English Syllabus

Question Item Twelve: When dealing with a customer, do you take into account that he/she belongs to:

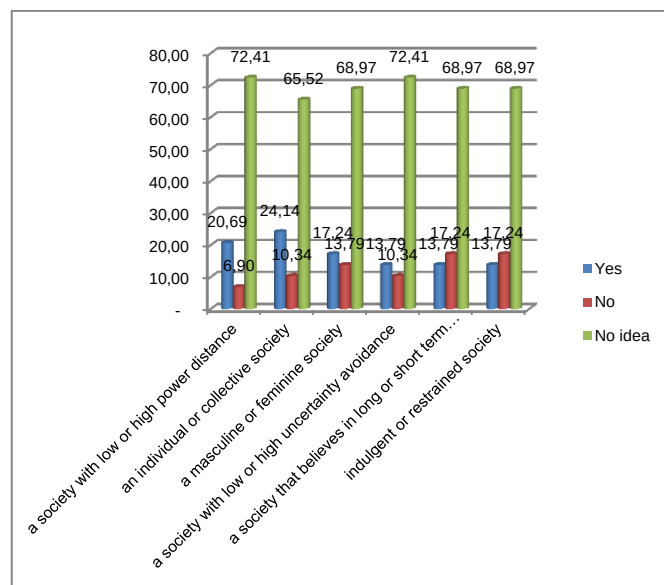


Fig 12. Intercultural Dimensions

Responses to this question item, as shown in Fig 12, revealed that most of the participants have no idea about the intercultural dimensions. Hence, they do not take into account the society the client belongs to if a cultural conflict happens.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Visitors of Algerian Hotels

In this study, nationalities were used as a criterion to teach culture because in research on cultural differences, nationality—the passport one holds—should therefore be used with care. Yet it is often the only feasible criterion for classification [...] Using nationality as a criterion is a matter of expediency, because it is immensely easier to obtain data for nations than for organic homogeneous societies. (Hofstede et al, 2010, p. 21). Accordingly, ESP decision makers should focus on the intercultural dimensions of the nationalities with high rate and which are classified as follows:

1. USA
2. Turkish
3. UK
4. Chinese
5. Indian
6. Japanese

The ESP syllabi in training institutes would not exclude the cultures of the other nationalities; however, they would provide general overviews about the societies they belong to as an attempt to encourage their return to the hotel.

Importance of Specific Language Aspects

According to the receptionists' experience, the ESP syllabuses would emphasize some skills over others such as hospitality, listening, speaker and culture over reading and writing. In same regard, Blue and Harun (2003) found out that '*Hospitality language should be included in all professional hospitality programmes at least so as to raise awareness of issues in cross-cultural communication*' (87). They stated that '*the teaching of hospitality language, either pre-service (in further and higher education institutions) or in-service (organised by hotels' own staff development departments), seems to have been relatively neglected*' (ibid). Similarly, the research of Mei-Yuit, that aimed to identify the areas of communicative skills that should be highlighted in a training for front office assistants, showed that the respondents specified listening and speaking as the central skills to be emphasized in training. In terms of the importance of specific skills in front office, Hai-yan & Baum (2006) confirmed that "*communication (oral) skills*" are the most important skills for hotel receptionists in China (p. 515).

Skills that Need to be Improved

The informants' answers showed that more importance should be given to cultures of hotel customers, conversation skills and listening because they were thought to be the weaknesses of the participants. In designing an ESP syllabus, one needs to know '*the necessities the learner lacks*' (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 56). Blue and Harun (2003), in their research entitled *Hospitality Language as a Professional Skill* noticed that the hotel receptionists lacked general knowledge of the surrounding area and they believed that this lack merited close attention.

Cultural Misunderstandings

Nonnative speakers of English may think that having a good command of English is a key to successful communication; however, the current study indicated that 41.4 % of hotel receptionist have a different opinion. They met difficulties in communicating with people from different cultural background though they master the English language. Goa (2002) claimed that a '*bilingual person is not invariably to be bicultural, and then to try to prove the prominence of cultural issues in language contact by analyzing the relation between language and culture*' (p.113). Equivalently, Reisinger explained that the service quality in tourism and hospitality industry relies on the '*positive perception*' of individuals that provide services and rest on the personal '*cultural profile*' and '*cultural standards*' that define '*high quality services*' (2011, p. 343). Hotel front office employees will not reach successful intercultural communication unless they are aware of the cultural conflicts that may arise at the workplace due to the cultural differences.

Intercultural Communication Difficulties Reasons

According to the participants, they faced communication difficulties because of four main reasons, which should be taken into consideration when designing a syllabus for the front desk trainees:

- ✓ Lack of knowledge about the culture of the customer
- ✓ Lack of vocabulary
- ✓ Right use of body language (facial expressions, gestures, eye contact...etc.)
- ✓ Right choice of words

Important is Knowing the Culture of the Customer

The majority of receptionists opted for the paramountcy of having some knowledge about the client's culture. The syllabi taught in the National Institutors of Hotel Management and Tourism do

not refer to teaching culture. This result supports the previous findings and boosts the necessity of teaching culture to the hotel reception trainees. Consequently, it is high time that teachers of English for hotel reception think of designing a quarter syllabus that accentuates the intercultural dimensions. Some studies, such as Taylor and McArthur (2009, p. 13), showed that hospitality management students lacked knowledge of culture (food and customs) which made them not sufficiently prepared to enter the globalized hospitality work setting.

Intercultural Communication Skills to Improve at Work

Noticeably, hotel receptionists need to improve some intercultural communication skills. The skills the respondents opted for the following skills:

- ✓ Responding to customers' requests appropriately.
- ✓ Understanding customer's behaviors
- ✓ Using body language appropriate

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Speaking English fluently helps the receptionists perform their job effectively, but it is insufficient to avoid cultural misunderstandings because most of the receptionists have no idea about the intercultural dimensions. The study offered some suggestions to design a syllabus of English for the front desk employees and trainees based on an intercultural approach here are some of them:

- **An Intercultural Syllabus Design:** The mostly needed intercultural skills at the hotel front desk are:

- Understanding their clients' behaviors
- Dealing with their clients' cultural differences
- Using the body language appropriately
- Responding to customers' requests appropriately

The teachers of English for hotel reception may adopt an intercultural approach to teaching English for receptionist through including the intercultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede.

- **A Continuous Needs Analysis:** Needs Analysis should be conducted repeatedly at the workplace and throughout the training period so that to get valuable feedback on the effectiveness of any suggested syllabus.

- **Improving intercultural Skills:** Employees or trainees should be exposed to different cultural situations, favored by authentic material, during their training. This exposure may help them lessen the cultural misunderstanding occurrence or deal with it appropriately in case it happens.

8. CONCLUSION

In Hotel industry, cultural conflicts avoidance is part of good quality service that encourages the hotel guests to come back. The findings of the study revealed the hotel receptionists do not need to master the four language skills only, but they should understand their clients' behaviors, deal with their cultural differences and use the body language appropriately to reduce cultural conflicts at the front office. The participants have no idea about the intercultural dimensions, which impede their intercultural Communication. Hence, the current study suggests the inclusion of Hofstede's intercultural dimensions in English for hotel reception syllabi.

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