

Language Proficiency Evaluation Methods for Hotelier Applicants on International Cruise Ships: Striking a Balance Between Precision and Clarity

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Abstract

Proficiency in the English language is crucial for individuals seeking employment in the hospitality sector of international cruise ships. The recruitment process typically involves rigorous assessments of English proficiency administered by manning agency recruiters. Within the context of hotel management, an ongoing debate exists regarding the relative importance of linguistic accuracy versus communicative clarity. This study aims to shed light on the methodologies utilized by recruiters from cruise line agencies to assess the English proficiency of hotelier candidates and the specific linguistic competencies under scrutiny. Through interviews with six recruiters representing various manning agencies, valuable insights were obtained. The findings revealed a two-fold evaluation approach: oral assessments and online multiple-choice tests. The oral component, conducted face-to-face, focused on candidates' abilities to articulate self-introductions, describe their surroundings, follow instructions, and recount professional experiences. Conversely, the online tests evaluated candidates' basic English vocabulary and comprehension of terminology specific to the cruise industry. Interestingly, recruiters preferred fluency and amiability over grammatical accuracy or accent nuances, prioritizing the effective and warm delivery of messages. The implications of these findings suggest that candidates must exude confidence, fluency, and a hospitable demeanour. This underscores the crucial role of educators in preparing aspiring cruise ship hoteliers, who must tailor their instructional methods to enhance students' confidence in speaking English, instil hospitality values and expand their vocabulary relevant to the cruise industry.

Keywords: English language proficiency; communicative clarity; non-standard English.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the highly competitive hospitality sector, especially within the unique environment of international cruise ships, proficiency in English is paramount. As cruise ships serve a diverse clientele from across the globe, effective communication becomes a critical skill for hotelier applicants (Atikasari & Nurdiawati, 2019; Radic et al., 2020, 2021). English serves as the lingua franca, facilitating interactions not only with passengers but also among a multinational crew (Dissanayake, 2017; Molt, 2006). The rigorous selection process employed by manning agencies

underscores the necessity for candidates to demonstrate a high level of English proficiency, both in terms of accuracy and clarity.

Previous studies have explored various dimensions of English for Maritime proficiency. For instance, the study done by Sia & Said (2018) that explores the importance of Maritime English for seafarers and the study that was conducted by Gumay (2021), which analyses the validity and reliability of Maritime English Seafarers Proficiency Test. However, those studies were for limited to English for Maritime not English for hospitality for hoteliers in a

cruise ship. Thus, those studies leave a gap in understanding the specific linguistic requirements and assessment methods for cruise ship hoteliers.

The urgency of this study lies in addressing this gap, as the cruise industry continues to grow and evolve. According to the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), the global cruise industry is expected to welcome 30 million passengers annually by 2027, necessitating a large workforce proficient in English (CLIA, 2021). Given this expanding demand, it is crucial to refine the language evaluation methods used during the recruitment process to ensure that candidates possess the requisite skills to thrive in the dynamic and multicultural cruise ship environment.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a nuanced understanding of the evaluation methods employed by cruise line recruiters. Unlike previous research, which often conflated linguistic accuracy with overall proficiency, this study delineates the distinction between communicative clarity and grammatical precision. By examining the perspectives of recruiters from various manning agencies, the research offers valuable insights into the specific competencies deemed essential for cruise ship hoteliers. This focus on the practical aspects of language use, such as fluency, amiability, and industry-specific vocabulary, represents a novel approach in language proficiency assessment.

Furthermore, the findings of this study hold significant implications for educators and training programs aimed at preparing aspiring cruise ship hoteliers. By emphasizing the importance of confidence, hospitality values, and relevant vocabulary, educators can better tailor their instructional methods to meet the demands of the cruise industry. This targeted approach not only enhances the employability of graduates but also ensures that they are well-equipped to

deliver exceptional service in a global context.

In summary, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature by exploring the specific language proficiency evaluation methods for hotelier applicants on international cruise ships. Through a detailed analysis of recruiter perspectives, it highlights the importance of balancing linguistic accuracy with communicative clarity, offering practical insights for both recruitment practices and educational programs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theories of Language Proficiency and Communicative Competence

The concept of language proficiency encompasses a range of skills and abilities that enable individuals to effectively use a language for communication. Communicative competence is foundational in understanding these skills, breaking down language proficiency into four key components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Kuluşaklı & Genç, 2024; Vorweg, 2015). Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge of the linguistic code, including syntax, morphology, and vocabulary (Pinto-Llorente et al., 2017; Tarango & Machin-Mastromatteo, 2017). Sociolinguistic competence involves understanding the social context in which language is used, ensuring appropriateness and politeness (Subandowo, 2022; Tarango & Machin-Mastromatteo, 2017). Discourse competence is the ability to construct coherent and cohesive texts, while strategic competence pertains to the use of communication strategies to overcome potential breakdowns in communication (Allen, 2019; Wang & Xie, 2022).

2.2. Balancing Linguistic Precision and Communicative Clarity

A central debate within language proficiency evaluation is the balance between linguistic precision and communicative clarity. Effective communication goes beyond mere grammatical accuracy to include the ability to convey meaning clearly and appropriately in various contexts (Kadwa & Alshenqeeti, 2020; Marbun et al., 2023). Effective communication is the process of delivering messages between the sender and the receiver clearly, accurately, and can be understood by both parties. This communication occurs when the message delivered by the sender is received and understood correctly by the receiver according to the sender's intent. This perspective is particularly relevant in the hospitality industry, where the primary goal is to ensure that guests feel understood and valued.

In the context of cruise ship employment, the emphasis on communicative clarity over linguistic precision is supported by studies on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Seidlhofer (2005) argues that in ELF interactions, the focus shifts from native-like accuracy to mutual intelligibility and pragmatic effectiveness. Jenkins (2000) further supports this view, suggesting that in international settings, the ability to negotiate meaning and maintain conversational flow is more critical than adhering to native speaker norms.

2.3. Language Assessment in the Hospitality Sector

Language assessment in the hospitality sector often involves evaluating both oral and written skills. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011) highlight that effective communication in business, including hospitality, requires proficiency in genre-specific language and the ability to adapt language use to diverse cultural contexts. This adaptability is crucial on international cruise ships, where staff must navigate interactions with passengers from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Traditional language assessment methods, such as standardized tests, have been criticized for their limited ability to capture the dynamic and contextual nature of language use in real-world settings (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Instead, performance-based assessments, which simulate authentic communication tasks, are advocated for their ability to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of a candidate's communicative competence (Shohamy, 2001). In the context of cruise ship recruitment, such assessments might include role-plays, situational judgement tests, and interviews that reflect the specific demands of the job.

2.4. Industry-Specific Language Needs

The cruise industry has unique language requirements that extend beyond general English proficiency. As highlighted by Blue and Harun (2003), industry-specific terminology and the ability to comprehend and use this terminology accurately are critical. This necessity is echoed by Baum (2002), who emphasizes the importance of tailored language training programs that address the specific linguistic demands of various roles within the hospitality sector.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the methods used by recruiters from cruise line agencies to evaluate the English language proficiency of hotelier applicants. The qualitative approach is chosen to gain in-depth insights into the recruiters' perspectives and the specific competencies they prioritize during the assessment process. Specifically, this study followed a case study method, a research method in which the researcher explores in depth a particular program, event, activity, process, or individual within specific time and activity constraints (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study are six recruiters from various manning agencies that specialize in hiring personnel for international cruise ships. These recruiters have extensive experience in evaluating candidates for the hospitality sector and are familiar with the linguistic demands of cruise ship employment. The recruiters were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they have relevant expertise and can provide valuable insights into the language proficiency evaluation process.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face with the recruiters. The semi-structured interview format allows for flexibility in exploring specific areas of interest while maintaining a consistent framework across interviews. The interviews covered topics such as the assessment methods used, the specific language skills evaluated, and the relative importance of linguistic accuracy versus communicative clarity.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accurate data capture. The interview guide included questions on the following areas: Assessment Methods, the types of assessments used to evaluate English proficiency (e.g., oral interviews, written tests); Evaluation Criteria, the specific language skills and competencies assessed (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, fluency); Importance of Skills, the relative importance of different language skills (e.g., accuracy, fluency, pronunciation); Recruiter Preferences, preferences for certain linguistic traits (e.g., amiability, confidence) over others (e.g., grammatical precision); and Industry-Specific Requirements, the importance of industry-specific terminology and context in the evaluation process.

3.3. Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Guest et al., 2012). The following steps were taken in the data analysis process. Familiarization, reading and re-reading the transcripts to become familiar with the content. Coding, generating initial codes from the data. Codes represent meaningful segments of the data related to the research questions. Theme Development, collating codes into potential themes and gathering all relevant data for each theme. Reviewing Themes, refining the themes to ensure they accurately reflect the data and are coherent. Defining and Naming Themes, clearly defining each theme and developing a detailed analysis for each. Writing the Report, integrating the themes into a coherent narrative that addresses the research questions.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the researcher used data source triangulation. Data were triangulated by comparing the perspectives of different recruiters to identify common themes and discrepancies (Patton, 2015).

4. FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a comprehensive understanding of the English language proficiency evaluation methods used by recruiters for international cruise ship hotelier applicants. The analysis of the interviews conducted with six recruiters highlighted several key themes: the dual assessment approach, the focus on communicative clarity over linguistic precision, and the importance of industry-specific terminology and interpersonal skills.

4.1. Dual Assessment Approach

The recruiters employed a two-fold evaluation method, consisting of oral

assessments and online multiple-choice tests. The oral component, conducted face-to-face, was designed to gauge the candidates' practical communication skills. Recruiters emphasized the importance of this component in assessing the candidates' ability to articulate self-introductions, describe their surroundings, follow instructions, and recount professional experiences.

"The face-to-face interview is crucial because it allows us to see how candidates handle real-time communication. We ask them to introduce themselves, describe their previous jobs, and even role-play some scenarios they might encounter on the ship (R02, interview, 10 January 2024)."

The online multiple-choice tests, on the other hand, focused on evaluating the candidates' basic English vocabulary and comprehension of terminology specific to the cruise industry. This component ensured that candidates possessed the foundational language skills necessary for their roles. Another recruiter mentioned:

"The online test helps us assess their basic understanding of English and industry-specific terms. It's more about ensuring they have the necessary background knowledge to start training (R04, interview, 10 January 2024)."

4.2. Emphasis on Communicative Clarity

A significant finding was the recruiters' preference for fluency and communicative clarity over grammatical accuracy and accent perfection. Recruiters consistently highlighted the importance of candidates being able to convey their messages effectively and warmly, as this directly impacts passenger experience and satisfaction.

"Fluency and the ability to engage passengers warmly are far more important than perfect grammar. We look for candidates who can communicate clearly and make passengers feel comfortable and

valued (R01, interview, 10 January 2024)."

This preference aligns with the industry's need for staff who can interact seamlessly with a diverse clientele, ensuring smooth and positive exchanges despite minor linguistic inaccuracies.

The ability to understand and use industry-specific terminology was another crucial competency identified by recruiters. Given the unique environment of a cruise ship, where specific jargon and procedures are commonplace, recruiters stressed the necessity for candidates to be familiar with this language.

"Knowledge of cruise industry terminology is essential. Candidates need to understand terms related to safety procedures, hospitality services, and day-to-day operations. This ensures they can perform their duties efficiently and understand instructions without confusion (R05, interview, 10 January 2024)."

Beyond linguistic abilities, recruiters valued interpersonal skills and confidence highly. Candidates who demonstrated confidence in their speaking abilities and exhibited a friendly, hospitable demeanor were preferred. These traits were seen as indicative of their potential to provide excellent customer service and adapt to the dynamic cruise ship environment.

"We look for candidates who are not just good in English but also confident and personable. The ability to engage with passengers, show empathy, and maintain a positive attitude is critical for success on a cruise ship (R01, interview, 10 January 2024)."

The findings suggest that language training programs for aspiring cruise ship hoteliers should focus on enhancing fluency, confidence, and interpersonal skills, alongside teaching industry-specific terminology. Educators should incorporate practical communication exercises and role-plays to prepare students for real-world interactions on cruise ships. By aligning training methods with the recruiters' preferences, candidates

can be better equipped to meet the demands of the cruise industry.

"The face-to-face interview is crucial because it allows us to see how candidates handle real-time communication. We ask them to introduce themselves, describe their previous jobs, and even role-play some scenarios they might encounter on the ship (R04, interview, 10 January 2024)."

"Fluency and the ability to engage passengers warmly are far more important than perfect grammar. We look for candidates who can communicate clearly and make passengers feel comfortable and valued (R01, interview, 10 January 2024)."

"Knowledge of cruise industry terminology is essential. Candidates need to understand terms related to safety procedures, hospitality services, and day-to-day operations. This ensures they can perform their duties efficiently and understand instructions without confusion (R05, interview, 10 January 2024)."

"We look for candidates who are not just good in English but also confident and personable. The ability to engage with passengers, show empathy, and maintain a positive attitude is critical for success on a cruise ship (R06, interview, 10 January 2024)."

By focusing on these identified themes, the recruitment process for cruise ship hoteliers can be refined to ensure the selection of candidates who are not only linguistically capable but also equipped with the interpersonal skills necessary for success in the unique environment of a cruise ship.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal critical insights into the methods used by cruise line recruiters to evaluate the English language proficiency of hotelier applicants. These insights not only highlight the dual approach of oral assessments and online tests but also underscore the preference for

communicative clarity over grammatical precision and the importance of industry-specific terminology and interpersonal skills. This discussion section will contextualize these findings within existing theories and empirical research, providing a comprehensive understanding of their implications.

The preference for communicative clarity over grammatical accuracy among recruiters aligns with the theoretical framework of communicative competence proposed by Vorwerk (2015). According to their model, effective communication encompasses grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. The recruiters' emphasis on fluency and amiability highlights the importance of sociolinguistic and discourse competencies, where the ability to convey messages clearly and engage meaningfully with passengers takes precedence over strict adherence to grammatical rules. This preference is further supported by research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Seidlhofer (2005) and Pietikäinen (2020) argue that in ELF interactions, the primary goal is mutual intelligibility rather than native-like accuracy. In the context of cruise ships, where staff interact with a diverse and international clientele, the ability to maintain conversational flow and negotiate meaning effectively is crucial. This practical approach to language use ensures that communication remains effective, even if it deviates from standard grammatical norms.

The dual assessment approach, combining oral interviews and online multiple-choice tests, reflects a comprehensive strategy to evaluate both practical communication skills and foundational language knowledge. The oral component allows recruiters to assess real-time language use, as highlighted by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011), who emphasize the importance of professional communication skills in business contexts. This approach ensures

that candidates can articulate self-introductions, describe their surroundings, follow instructions, and recount professional experiences, all of which are essential skills for effective job performance on a cruise ship. The inclusion of online tests to evaluate basic vocabulary and industry-specific terminology ensures that candidates possess the necessary background knowledge. As Blue and Harun (2003) and Baum (2002) suggest, proficiency in industry-specific language is crucial for effective performance in the hospitality sector. This dual approach provides a balanced evaluation of both general language proficiency and specific knowledge relevant to the cruise industry.

The recruiters' emphasis on interpersonal skills, such as confidence and a hospitable demeanor, highlights the importance of the affective dimension of communicative competence. Richards (2006) argue that effective communication involves not only linguistic and pragmatic skills but also the ability to interact positively and empathetically with others. In the hospitality industry, where customer satisfaction is paramount, the ability to engage warmly with passengers and provide exceptional service is as important as linguistic proficiency. This finding is consistent with Kim and Oh's (2011) research, which underscores the impact of effective communication skills on job performance in the hospitality sector. The ability to create a welcoming atmosphere and build rapport with passengers enhances their overall experience, making interpersonal skills a critical component of the evaluation process.

In addition, some English teachers believe that fluency is considered more important than accuracy because if teachers focus on accuracy and often correct students' errors, students will be afraid to speak in English (Gumbaridze, 2013; Savaşçı, 2014). It means that when teachers give too much corrections to the students' speeches, they will lose their

confidence in speaking in English (Hartono et al., 2022; Ramadhani, 2020). Therefore, some teachers consider that English as a foreign language students will build accuracy when they use English frequently and do self-correction (McDonough & Sato, 2019). In other words, the more they practice their English, the better their accuracy will be.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that language training programs for aspiring cruise ship hoteliers should prioritize practical communication skills, industry-specific terminology, and interpersonal abilities. Traditional grammar-focused curricula may not adequately prepare candidates for the demands of the cruise industry. Instead, educators should incorporate elements of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Richards, 2006), which emphasizes interaction and the practical use of language. Role-plays, situational judgment tests, and real-world communication exercises can help students develop the confidence and fluency needed for effective job performance. Additionally, integrating hospitality values and customer service principles into language training can ensure that candidates are not only linguistically proficient but also capable of delivering exceptional service.

This study provides valuable insights into the English language proficiency evaluation methods used by cruise line recruiters. The findings highlight the importance of balancing linguistic accuracy with communicative clarity, the necessity of industry-specific terminology, and the critical role of interpersonal skills. By aligning training programs with these priorities, educators can better prepare candidates for successful careers in the dynamic and multicultural environment of international cruise ships. The theoretical underpinnings and empirical support for these findings underscore the importance of a holistic approach to language

proficiency evaluation, one that encompasses practical communication skills, industry-specific knowledge, and the affective dimensions of interaction. This approach ensures that candidates are well-equipped to meet the unique demands of the cruise industry, ultimately enhancing passenger satisfaction and operational efficiency.

6. CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the English language proficiency evaluation methods used by recruiters for hotelier applicants on international cruise ships. The findings reveal a dual assessment approach, combining oral interviews and online multiple-choice tests to gauge both practical communication skills and foundational language knowledge. Recruiters prioritize communicative clarity and fluency over grammatical precision, emphasizing the importance of conveying messages effectively and warmly. Additionally, industry-specific terminology and interpersonal skills, such as confidence and a hospitable demeanor, are deemed crucial for success in the cruise industry. While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The sample size is relatively small, consisting of only six recruiters from various manning agencies. This may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of recruiters in the cruise industry. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data from interviews, which may be subject to biases and inaccuracies. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample, as well as incorporating additional data collection methods, such as observations of the recruitment process.

The findings have significant implications for both recruitment practices and language training programs. For recruiters, the study highlights the importance of a balanced evaluation approach that assesses both practical communication skills and industry-

specific knowledge. Recruitment practices should continue to prioritize fluency, clarity, and interpersonal skills to ensure that candidates can effectively interact with passengers and provide exceptional service. For educators and language training programs, the study underscores the need to focus on communicative competence and practical language use. Training programs should incorporate elements of communicative language teaching (CLT) and provide opportunities for students to engage in real-world communication exercises, role-plays, and situational judgment tests. Emphasizing hospitality values and customer service principles can further enhance candidates' readiness for the cruise industry.

Future research could explore several areas to build on the findings of this study. First, a larger-scale study involving a more diverse sample of recruiters from different regions and types of cruise lines would provide a more comprehensive understanding of language proficiency evaluation methods. Second, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effectiveness of different assessment approaches and their impact on job performance and passenger satisfaction. Additionally, research could investigate the specific language training needs of different roles within the cruise industry, such as housekeeping, food and beverage service, and guest relations. This would help tailor training programs to the unique linguistic demands of each role. Finally, exploring the use of technology in language assessment, such as virtual simulations and AI-driven evaluation tools, could offer innovative solutions for improving the accuracy and efficiency of language proficiency assessments.

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