



A Survey of English Communication Difficulties Faced by Employees of the Front Office Hotel Department in Hotel Palembang

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ABSTRACT

English is an international language used to communicate with guests from various countries. Hotel guests vary, not only domestic guests but also foreign guests, therefore English communication skills must be possessed by hotel staff, especially in the front office to provide the best service to guests. Therefore this study aimed at investigating the difficulties faced by the hotel front office and the strategies used to overcome these difficulties. This study used quantitative survey methods. The sample in this study were 119 employees of the Front Office hotel department selected purposively. The data collection was done through a survey questionnaire. The results were analyzed by survey or data display, explanation, and conclusion. The results of this study revealed that (1) front office hotels get various kinds of difficulties in English communication; the aspect of cultural awareness (M=338.00), understanding guests' accents (M=333.00), the aspect of grammar (M=324.33), the aspect of self-confidence (M=321.00), then fluency aspect (M=313.67), pronunciation aspect (M=301.00), listening comprehension aspect (M=297.75), the voice quality aspect (M=273.00), and the vocabulary aspect (M=271.00). (2) The front office hotel employees' strategies for overcoming their English communication difficulties are including the achievement or compensatory aspect (M=348.20) followed by the avoidance or reduction aspect (M=322.25). The results of this research indicate that most of front office hotels faced difficulties in English communication with foreign guests and have strategies to overcome the difficulties, then also need English courses and training to handle foreign guests to improve their English communication skills.

Keywords:

English communication difficulties, English communication strategy, front office hotel.

1. Introduction

Communication is used to convey or obtain information from other people. Communication is defined as "the activity or process of expressing ideas and sentiments or of imparting information to people" in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (2004). Undeniably, the development of cutting-edge technology has made it possible for individuals to engage with one another on a global scale. Language is a crucial factor in intercultural communication. Language is necessary for communication and mutual understanding between people, especially in an international language. English is now widely used on a global scale and is an important part of our day-to-day activities. The major purpose of its utilization is to serve as a bridge between

individuals from various geographical and cultural backgrounds. English is an international language widely used in various industries and fields of work, and it plays a prominent role in today's era of globalization. Prachanant (2012, p. 117) defines English as the primary means of communication in a global world. In other words, English is a language that is widely used in the current era in a variety of activities and interests depending on the context of communication, such as in a variety of jobs or professions that require employees to have skills in English, and those who master it have an advantage. Especially in the hotel industry sector, which provides services and accommodation. Communication skills are important for staff or employees in expressing thoughts, suggestions, reporting, and talking with other staff in terms of coordination or front line; it is beneficial for communicating with customers (Goel, 2012).

Foreign visitors and residents in Palembang come to the hotel for a variety of reasons, including business, study, and of international events. Employees in the hotel front office department, such as receptionists and front desk officers, are the first to meet and interact with hotel guests. Therefore, good and effective English communication skills are needed in carrying out their duties. However, in reality, there are still many employees in the front office of the hotel who have difficulty communicating in English. The front officer often have difficulties understanding questions or requests from hotel guests and providing information or answering questions from guests in correct and effective English. In Ubon Ratchathani Province, Kijpoonphol and Linh (2021) investigated the demand for hotel receptionists to speak English. The data analysis revealed that hotel receptionists needed to work on their English listening skills when it came to particular areas, like visitors' needs and information, their accents, and problems. It was also determined that English speaking was a talent that needed to be urgently improved. Based on the results, hotel receptionists were required to enhance their English in order to better greet and welcome customers, provide information about hotel rooms and amenities, and suggest tourist attractions and local cuisine.

Difficulty in communicating in English can cause dissatisfaction with hotel guests and have an impact on the hotel's unfavorable image. It is drawn because the front desk staff's responsibilities include taking reservations, processing transactions, and imparting product expertise to customers. This is consistent with Widiningrum's (2010) that English is a universal language and that it is interesting to know that English is a need for communication in the hospitality sector. Additionally, Afrianto & Gulö (2019) concur that the ability of the front desk staff to communicate in English is crucial. It can be concluded that English in hotels is very necessary and it is important to have the skills to provide services to foreign guests who use English to communicate and convey what guests need while staying at the hotel.

When the front officer interacts with guests, the front officer needs to be able to speak and listen. the front officer must avoid miscommunication with their guests as a front office. To avoid misunderstanding, the front officer must master

the variations in English word choice, grammar, pronunciation, spelling, and register. The front officer must also master language skills such as listening and speaking to provide clear explanations to the guests. Furthermore, the front office must maintain a positive attitude, be polite, and communicate with the guests in the appropriate language. Vocabulary needs to be sufficiently mastered in order to improve speaking abilities. In the process of learning a language, vocabulary plays a crucial role because without a strong vocabulary foundation, it would be challenging for language learners to talk fluently, and the front officer may even be unable to do so. Language learners would also struggle to obtain information or comprehend the meaning of a discussion without a working knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. According to Hasan (2016), learning vocabulary was one of the hardest things for pupils to do. Problems with speaking skills must also be taken into account in addition to vocabulary-related issues.

Despite the importance of mastering English, efforts are being made to improve employees' spoken English skills. The majority of the employees still have communication difficulties. Speaking difficulties can be brought on by a variety of factors, according to numerous specialists. For instance, Al Hosni (2014, p. 26) and Tuan and Mai (2015, p. 9) stated that speaking difficulties may be caused by four factors, namely (1) inhibition, students worry about making mistakes, (2) students not having any idea what to say, (3) low or uneven participation due to minimal discussion time in speaking class, and (4) using mother tongue excessively. The researcher thinks that this research is crucial because of the factors that influence how poorly employees can express themselves. As the hotel in Palembang is actively involved in tourism, the researcher selected a number of hotels there, ranging in star rating from 1 to 5, as the research location. Furthermore, because the front officers were thought to be worthy of study, researchers selected personnel from the hotel's front desk staff.

However, employees' English proficiency is still low as seen from several previous studies. In this study communication focuses on specific skills used in Front Office namely, speaking and listening skills in English, because a front office handles guests from guests arriving until guests leave the hotel, the front office as the face of the hotel must provide services in the form of good verbal communication and listen to guest requests and complaints properly. In addition, according to Sulastiyono (2011, p.63), the front office is a division of the hotel. It plays an important function and role in hotel activities. its role the job of this department is to sell or rent rooms to customers. Then the function is to give the information required by the customer not only provides all the requirements of the customer, but also address customer issues. Due to the amount of business activity carried out in this department, the front desk, is often referred to as the hotel's command center.

This study is to survey the difficulties faced in English by the hospitality industry from the perspective of the front office department staff. When English

is required at work, some communication issues may arise because employees may have minimal exposure to English; in other words, the front officer have few opportunities to utilize English for communication in real-life circumstances. As a result, these difficulties are related to this research. The goal of this study is to investigate the difficulties in communicating in English as well as the demands of staffs in the Front Office Department for English improvement. The researcher will conduct a study entitled "A Survey of English Communication Difficulties Faced by Employees of the Front Office Hotel Department in Palembang". By conducting this survey, it is hoped that it will be clear what difficulties are faced by employees. So that employees in the hotel front office department can improve their English communication skills, and in the end, an provide better and more satisfying services for hotel guests.

2. Methods

This study used a cross-sectional survey design. This means that the data is collected at one point in time. cross-sectional survey design is a survey design in which data for a sample are collected simultaneously (Creswell, 2012, p. 377). This study used quantitative survey methods. The population were all of the Front Office department staffs at the hotel in Palembang, the participants were from nineteen different hotels in Palembang, South Sumatra (one 1-star hotel, two 2-star hotel, seven 3-star hotels, seven 4-star hotels, and two 5-star hotels). The participants included 119 front office department staff hotels in Palembang. These include front office staff, concierges, and managers. This study employed purposive sampling. According to Sugiyono (2017, p. 85), purposeful sampling is a technique that is determined by particular criteria. The main instrument in this research study was a survey questionnaire. There were three sections to the closed-ended questionnaire. Closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires were used to collect the data for this study. Questionnaires made in the form of a google-form. In the questionnaire, the respondents were required to answer questions about their difficulties faced in English communication and how they solve the problem. The answer to all the statements was by choosing one of five items on a Likert scale – strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. Then the questionnaire was returned to the researcher within two weeks by appointment. In addition, the questionnaire was written in Indonesian to avoid misunderstanding.

The survey results were analyzed, classified, and tallied on computer sheets/ the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) 25 version was used to examine the data after the questionnaires have been completed. Through statistical analysis of questionnaire data, which went beyond simple descriptive analysis, the data from questionnaires were examined. Arithmetic proportion and frequency distribution were the statistical tools utilized to analyze the data. (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, the outcomes were converted into the subsequent statistical values: The information about the general background was shown as frequency and percentage. The participant's level of agreement with their English communication difficulties. and scored using a five-point Likert scale. The score range from 5 to 1.

The options are defined into SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, and SD = Strongly Disagree.

3. Result

1. Demographic Data of the Participants

This section reports a descriptive analysis of the demographic data of front office department employees in Palembang. The results are presented in Table 3. As illustrated in Table 3, 119 employees participated in this study. The majority of sample employees in the front office department are 66 female (55,5%) and only 53 male employees (44,5%). Based on the educational level of the employees, the results show that most of the employees have Vocational High School as many as 51 people (42,9%), followed by a **Bachelor’s Degree as many as 33 people (27,7%)**, Senior High School as many as 19 people (16%), and others as many as 16 people (13,4%).

In terms of years of work experience in the front office department at various hotels in Palembang, the majority of employees have experience of two to three years as many as 53 people (44,5%), followed by less than one year as many as 41 people (34,5%), four to five years as many as 18 people (15,1%), and more than six years as many as 7 people (5,9%). Furthermore, based on their current position, the results show that the majority of employees come from Receptionists/Front Desk Agents as many as 77 people (64,7%), followed by Bellboys/Bellgirls as many as 13 people (10,9%), others as many as 9 people (7,6%), Reservationists as many as 7 people (5,9%), Front Desk Managers as many as 7 people (5,9%), Front Desk Supervisors as many as 6 people (5%). Furthermore, based on how often employees use English when handling foreign guests, the results show that the majority of employees handle foreign guests, namely Sometimes (51,3%), followed by Rarely (21%), Most of times (17,6%), Always (8,4%), and Never (1,7%).

2. Findings Based on the research questions

This part includes a descriptive analysis of the research findings in accordance with the two research questions. The data were analyzed and calculated using Mean score (*M*), Standard Deviation (*SD*).

Based on the first research question:

Table 1. English Communication Difficulties faced by Front Officer

Function	Problems	Mean		Standard Deviation
		Each one	Total	
Listening Comprehension	1. Difficulties understanding speech during telephone calls	338.00	297.75	27.500
	2. Inability to understand sentences when foreign customers speak English too quickly	276.00		
	3. Difficulties when paying attention during telephone calls	290.00		

	4. Difficulties with accuracy during	287.00		
Fluency	5. Low fluency in spoken English	315.00	313.67	3.215
	6. Long pauses in Spoken English	310.00		
	7. Inability to respond spontaneously	316.00		
Grammar	8. Producing grammatical errors when speaking	318.00	324.33	5.508
	9. Inability to use the plural form of nouns correctly	328.00		
	10. Inability to use the forms of verb tenses correctly	327.00		
Vocabulary	11. Inability to respond with inappropriate words	314.00	271.00	60.811
	12. Poor or insufficient vocabulary	228.00		
Cultural Awareness	13. Insufficient knowledge of the customer's cultural background	338.00	338.00	0.00
Self-Confidence	14. Low confidence and anxiety when speaking English	321.00	321.00	0.00
Accent	15. Difficulties understanding foreign accents	333.00	333.00	0.00
Pronunciation	16. Producing word stress misplacements	296.00	301.00	7.071
	17. Poor English pronunciation	306.00		
Voice Quality	18. Difficulty regulating the volume of their voice	266.00	273.00	7.165
	19. Problems with speaking too fast	268.00		
	20. Problems with speaking too slow	277.00		
	21. Inability to enunciate each consonant	281.00		

Based on Table 1 above, which table shows the results of data processing from the first research problem. The results show that front desk staff at hotels in Palembang have difficulties communicating in English, ordered from highest to lowest, it looks like this: First the aspect of cultural awareness (M=338.00), then the aspect of accent (M=333.00), then the aspect of grammar (M=324.33), then the aspect of self-confidence (M=321.00), then fluency aspect (M=313.67), then pronunciation aspect (M=301.00), then listening comprehension aspect (M=297.75), then the voice quality aspect (M=273.00), and finally the vocabulary aspect (M=271.00).

Based on the second research question:

Table 2. English Strategy Used by the Front Officer

Function	Problems Solving	Mean		Standard Deviation
		Each one	Total	
Achievement or Compensatory Strategies	1. Asking customers to spell out words	337.00	348.20	22.053
	2. Asking customers to use easy word	353.00		
	3. Asking customers for repetition in alouder voice	315.00		
	4. Asking customers to speak more slowly	353.00		
	5. Repeating words or phrases with asystem of tones	310.00		
	6. Making a request for clarification	334.00		
	7. Directly asking customers about theirproblems	385.00		
	8. Literal translation into the first language	362.00		
	9. Asking for help with translation	363.00		
	10. Using a dictionary to translate unfamiliar words	333.00		
	11. Circumlocution (using indirectwords or roundabout expressions)	342.00		
	12. Word coinage (making up own newwords)	327.00		
	13. Using general words or items	368.00		
	14. Paraphrasing	372.00		
	15. Approximation	369.00		
Avoidance or Reduction Strategies	16. Changing the topic when they feelthey lack the knowledge to understand customers	349.00	322.25	53.674
	17. Focusing on keywords to get the overall message	314.00		
	18. Only paying attention to what they have understood	313.00		
	19. Pretending to understand the conversation	313.00		

Based on the above Table 2 which shows the results of data processing from the second research question indicates that the front office staff of hotels in Palembang City is faced with Problem-solving for communication difficulties in English is represented by the 'Achievement or Compensatory' aspect (M=348.20) followed by the 'Avoidance or 'Reduction' aspect (M=322.25).

4. Discussion

The results revealed that the agreement level rated by the Front Office who communicated with foreign guests at a neutral level of the agreement include cultural awareness and the Front officer's insufficient knowledge of the customer's cultural background. In this case, the front office staff lacks awareness of cultural differences from foreign guests, because cultural differences are an important aspect of communication. Cultural competence is even more important for the tourism and hospitality sectors, as the industry welcomes customers from different cultures . Cross-cultural conflicts should not be taken lightly.

Rude and high-pitched language may be commonplace in one culture, but unusual and offensive in another. Daily communication errors and misunderstandings due to language differences, cultural background differences, exclusive behavior of expatriates, and other attitudes that are inconsistent with the local cultural setting can lead to prejudice and are very likely to occur. In the global realm itself, the world is moving towards multicultural societies where everyone is of a different race and lives in different cultural backgrounds . One of the factors is the lack of awareness of cultural differences among front office staff, probably due to their school or university education background, and the lack of English instruction, including cross-cultural understanding. English communication and cross- cultural understanding are linked, enabling good communication across cultural differences. Cultural perceptions are relatively related to educational level, as shown by the findings of Patak and Wello (2018). A group of graduate students who participated in this study showed that some of them had a high degree of cultural awareness. However, the majority of diploma classes have moderate cultural awareness, and many have low cultural awareness.

Undergraduates and master's graduates clearly indicated that both groups had moderate cultural awareness. However, problems can arise when people from different cultural backgrounds misunderstand each other. This is due not only to language barriers but also to cultural differences. Therefore, it is important not only to speak a foreign language but also to be aware of the cultural differences that exist in different countries. The required cultural competence is the ability to work effectively with people from different cultural, ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds. For example, holding English classes and learning about cross-cultural understanding. The Indonesian government strongly believes that knowledge of English is necessary for the future of children in this country. Unfortunately, many Indonesians study English mainly at a conceptual level, but social and linguistic factors that hinder their English communication skills prevent them from effectively using and applying English

in their daily lives. Fox (2008) states that sociolinguistic skills are important for successful communication in the tourism industry.

If the front office staff have cross-cultural understanding and good communication skills, foreign guests will receive excellent service and there will be no misunderstandings in communication. This line with Patanasorn et al. (2018) emphasized that service quality and guest satisfaction depend on the staff's English communication skills. emphasized that service quality and guest satisfaction depend on the staff's English communication skills. Therefore, hotel reception staff must be able to understand specific languages, be aware of cultural differences, understand the differences when dealing with each situation within the scope of their duties, and have the ability to communicate in English. Aside from the lack of awareness of culture, difficulties in the aspects of listening comprehension, fluency, and grammar are also faced by hotel front office employees. The front officer faced difficulties including understanding speech during telephone calls, inability to understand sentences when foreign customers speak English too quickly, difficulties when paying attention during telephone calls, difficulties with accuracy, low fluency in spoken English, long pauses in Spoken English, inability to respond spontaneously, producing grammatical errors when speaking, inability to use the plural form of nouns correctly, inability to use the forms of verb tenses correctly, and inability to respond with inappropriate words. One of the must-have English communication skills is listening comprehension, when customers talk directly or over the phone, the front officer must listen carefully to and accurately grasp the information and requirements of the customer, not make mistakes. Of course, when staff learn English at school, they also learn aspects of good listening, fluency, and grammar. According to Nunan (2015), mastery of a language's sounds, vocabulary, and grammar is considered a sign of second language skills, also known as language skills. It is believed that a learner will be skilled in using language to communicate after these components are learned. Even if fluency and grammar are lacking at times, it's important to be able to understand communication between staff and guests. But understanding grammar is also important to be able to overcome other difficulties in communicating in English. According to Batstone (1994), grammar is necessary to establish effective communication and without the ability to use grammar in many situations, communication will be severely impaired.

Furthermore, Subasini and Kokilavani (2013) state that misunderstandings between people from different cultures can be avoided by using correct grammar. Many people also say that using correct grammar can increase credibility. Therefore, it can be concluded that grammar can be a fundamental factor in helping students to communicate and develop professionally in the target language. However, according to Wilkins, as reported in Milton et al. (2010), "Without grammar there is nothing to convey, without vocabulary, there is nothing to convey." In other words, for language learners, learning grammar is not as important as learning vocabulary to be able to communicate in the target language. This means that mastering a variety of vocabulary can help overcome

English grammar difficulties, by learning the pros and cons of grammar, employees can have a reason not to study grammar in depth depending on their learning needs. For example, students in a hospitality and tourism degree program may not have as strong a desire to learn the complex structures of the English language as students in a degree program. The English language program does this because they know the students' learning needs are at least basic English conversation skills with foreigners or tourists. Making some grammar mistakes may not be a big deal for hotel staff as long as they are fluent and can still understand their speech.

Employees of the Front Office hotel department in Palembang consider that they experience problems during English communication with their foreign customers. Obviously, the results are consistent with the study of Firharmawan and Andika (2019), which shows that hotel employees at Meotel Hotel Kebumen have problems communicating in English. The hotel employees discussed their limited vocabulary and mastery of English grammar about their difficulties understanding spoken English accents from foreigners. Foreign guests from various countries certainly have different English accents, some are native speakers such as America, Australia, and some are non-native speakers such as Korea, China, Thailand and so on. As in Jeharsae's research (2014), revealed that Thai employees communicate with native English-speaking customers and Thai employees who communicated with non-native English-speaking customers. English is widely used as an international language.

The results of this study are consistent with previous studies (Jeharsae, F, 2014; Yutthapirut et al., 2016; Chaichana et al., 2017; Prachanant, 2018; Firharmawan and Andika, 2019) regarding English communication problems faced by hotel employees in Kebumen and Thailand, including Front Office and international customer service division employees in Thailand. The most common problems are (a) listening comprehension, (b) grammatical errors, (c) limited vocabulary, (d) inability to understand various foreign accents, (e) low fluency, (f) difficulty in pronunciation, (g) lack of cultural awareness, (h) and lack of confidence. However, the results of this study also indicate that the communication problem of employees of the front office hotel is not at a serious level because none of the subjects strongly agree with the issues stated in the questionnaire. The fact that the participants did not completely agree with the issues raised in the questionnaire also indicated the worst problems these employees had, who did not perform well or encountered difficulties at work at a high level.

In terms of avoidance strategies, the agreed level of agreement changed the topic when the front officer felt the front officer lacked knowledge to understand customers, and there were three strategies that were rated at a neutral level by this group, namely focusing on keywords to get the message across, paying attention only to what the front officer understand, and pretend to understand the conversation. Multitasking is a special art in the work of the hotel front desk

department, which requires various skills such as communication skills, computer skills, etc. For strategies to focus on keywords to get the message as a whole and only pay attention to what the front officer understands, it can be used as a strategy to overcome difficulties in English communication, by getting keywords or paying attention to what is understood, it will make it easier for front office employees to catch what guests want. Based on the data found in the study, hotel front desk staff in Palembang use a variety of strategies, both achievement or compensation strategies as well as avoidance or reduction strategies at the same neutral level of agreement.

This finding is similar to the findings of Prachanant (2018) also showing that most hotel staff members in Buriram province perceived the achievement or compensation strategy to be the most used, followed by stalling or time-gaining strategies and avoidance or reduction strategies, respectively Achievement or compensation strategy is used as high level for hotel staff members in their job. This result is clearly supported by Jeharsae (2014), who stated that achievement or compensation strategies ranked at the highest mean total score of 3.18, while avoidance or reduction strategies have the lowest average score of 2.77. It should be noted that during communication, hotel front office employees solve communication problems by directly asking customers about their problems, approximation by using another word that means almost the same as what guests said, paraphrasing messages, using general words or terms with my guests, asking for help with translation, literal translation into first language, asking customers to speak more slowly, asking customers to use easy words, and Circumlocution. This shows that the front officer have a strong intention to achieve communication goals rather than giving up on communication efforts.

This is also consistent with Jeharsae, F (2014), , the results revealed that both groups of Thai employees used both achievement strategies and avoidance strategies. The most commonly used achievement strategies employed by both groups were directly asking their customers what the front officer did not understand seeking a clarification request, making something explicit through paraphrasing, making generalizations by using general words or terms. both groups also used avoidance or reduction strategies, which were focusing on keywords, and changing the topic when the front officer felt that the front officer did not have enough knowledge or failed to understand their customers, and suggested that communication strategies are also used to improve communication effectiveness even when there is no problem in interaction. This indicates that the front officer have a strong intention to achieve communication goals rather than neglecting their efforts to communicate and demonstrate a high level of trust and willingness to communicate effectively and ensure collaborative communication with customers in multilingual settings. The scale's higher level of agreement regarding the use of spoken communication strategies could be because the customers communicate with come from a variety of English-speaking countries. the front officer can overcome some communication problems by using effective oral communication strategies.

5. Conclusion

Based on the research findings and discussions, it can be concluded that the biggest problem facing hotel front desk staff in speaking English in Palembang City is cultural awareness, understanding foreign guests' accents, and aspect of grammar. Then, the solution to the problem of difficulty in speaking English by hotel front desk staff in Palembang City is achievement or compensatory Solve. Front office employees of the Hotel department in Palembang who communicate with foreign guests experience some problems with English communication. The main problem the front officer face is cultural awareness, understanding of foreign guests', and the aspect of grammar, aspect of self-confidence, aspect of fluency, aspect of pronunciation, listening comprehension, the voice of quality, and vocabulary.

Even though employees experience difficulties during these interactions, the front officer strives to achieve their communication goals as seen from the use of several communication strategies. Employees of the Front office Hotel department in Palembang use several strategies, including achievement strategies and avoidance or reduction strategies. In terms of achievement strategies, the top strategies with the highest are directly asking customers about their problems, approximation by using another word that means almost the same as what guests said, making something explicit through paraphrasing, using general words or terms with my guests, asking for help with translation, literal translation into first language, asking customers to speak more slowly, asking customers to use easy words, Circumlocution, asking customers to spell out words, making a request for clarification, using a dictionary to translate unfamiliar words, Word coinage, asking customers for repetition in a louder voice, and repeating words or phrases with a system of tones.

In order to improve the level of English communication proficiency of Front office employees of the Hotel department in Palembang, it is important for Human Resources Development and course trainers to seriously focus on the actual and existing problems of employees so that the training courses and materials can be adapted and best suited to front office employee problems. department. English and the importance of having English skills. Both employees and course trainers should note that communication strategies are part of using language and using communication strategies is not an indication of communication failure, but can increase communicative effectiveness. Therefore, by learning and practicing the use of appropriate communication strategies, the level of confidence and English communication skills of the Front office employees of the Hotel department in Palembang can increase.

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