The Impact of Language Barrier & Cultural Differences on Restaurant Experiences: A Grounded Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

The issue of language barriers is particularly critical during intercultural service encounters for ESL (English as a Second Language) customers. Customers may struggle to communicate what they want or even get necessary information regarding products or services. Through a qualitative study, based on a grounded theory approach, this study identifies issues that concern ESL customers in intercultural service encounters. The findings suggest that the language barrier generates negative emotional and cognitive responses, and prevents ESL customers from taking certain actions such as seeking necessary information or complaining about service failures.

KEY WORDS: grounded theory, language barrier, intercultural service encounter, ESL customers

INTRODUCTION

“The limits of our language” means the limits of our world.
-Wittgenstein, 1922, p. 149-

Increased globalization is forcing a growing number of business managers and employees to interact across linguistic boundaries (Lauring, 2008). Since language affects almost all aspects of everyday life, there needs more of a focus on communication barriers by researchers and practitioners engaged in international business and management (Henderson, 2005). The issue of language barriers is particularly critical during intercultural service encounters. Intercultural service encounters, where the customer and the service provider are from different cultures, is very common in the service sector, especially in the U.S. (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 2002). Such intercultural service encounters may be influenced not only by cultural differences but also by language barriers. The fact that most service providers in the U.S. only speak English may greatly affect international customers. Customers may find it difficult to communicate or even get necessary information regarding products or services.

Despite its importance, the effects of language barriers on ESL (English as a Second Language) customers’ service experiences have been largely neglected in academic research. Language is not only a medium of communication, but also linked to an individual’s identity
Applying this notion to the U.S. restaurant context, this study aims to investigate the impact of language barrier on ESL customers’ dining experiences in the U.S. Through qualitative and exploratory methods, this study will identify issues that concern ESL customers in intercultural service encounters and the results of this study will help restaurant firms to create a better service experience for ESL customers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is the key to a person’s self-identity. It enables the person to express emotions, share feelings, tell stories, and convey complex messages and knowledge. Language is our greatest mediator that allows us to relate and understand each other (Imberti, 2007). It can be defined as a system of conceptual symbols that allows us to communicate. It also provides us with a significant frame of reference and a relational context that sustains our identities (Imberti, 2007). The social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) focuses on the understanding of psychological processes driving intergroup discrimination. The categorization of in-groups versus out-groups can be generated when customers recognize certain cues, such as language, that delineate cultural differences (Brickson, 2000; Nkomo and Cox, 1996). Not being able to identify with other cultural groups may lead to negative attitudes towards such groups (Bartel, 2001). A sense of ignorance due to such differences can prevent ESL customers from interacting with domestic servers (Baker & Haretl, 2004). Consequently, the understanding of the link between language and social identity patterns is of great importance to the international business community. Surprisingly, literature is silent regarding the effects of language barriers on ESL customers. However, literature on intercultural service encounters and low literate consumers may be relevant.

Literature on intercultural services marketing seems to run counter to the notion of the social identification theory. While the social identification theory suggests that not being able to identify with other cultural groups leads to negative consequences, studies on intercultural services argue that customers adjust their service evaluation standards and tend to be more understanding in intercultural service encounters. For example, Strauss and Mang (1999) state that customers do not perceive inter-cultural encounters to be more problematic than intra-cultural encounters. Warden et al. (2003) agree with this notion and states that customers are more forgiving of service failures in the context of intercultural encounters. However, it is noteworthy that these studies do not examine the emotional and cognitive mechanisms that customers may go through when interacting with inter-cultural service providers.

ESL consumers can also be perceived as low literate customers in terms of their English skills. They struggle not only with reading and writing but also with listening and speaking English. Low literacy levels are associated with a range of negative market outcomes. Adkins and Ozanne (1998) identified problems encountered by low literate consumers ranging from choosing the wrong product to misunderstanding pricing information. Similarly, Viswanathan, et al. (2003) found that low literate consumers experience difficulties with effort versus accuracy trade-offs when making purchase decisions.

Overall, previous studies suggest that language is more than just a communication tool (Imberti, 2007; Lauring, 2008) and can influence different aspects of the service encounter for ESL customers. Accordingly, it is essential to better understand how language barriers affect ESL customers’ service experience.
METHODOLOGY

Given the exploratory nature of this study, grounded theory was adopted as the methodological framework for data collection and analysis (Charmaz, Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Qualitative interviews were used as the main source of data. The face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Korean, averaging an hour in duration. An interview protocol consisted of 15 questions probing the interviewees regarding their typical restaurant experiences in the U.S., which included their interaction with service providers, service failures and complaint experiences, overall satisfaction, and intention to return. During the interviews, the interviewees were asked additional questions and comments. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed in Korean. Nine interviewees were recruited for this study by reference sampling. The profile of interviewees is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Time spent in the US</th>
<th>Status in the U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
<td>Tourist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Resident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>4 weeks</td>
<td>Tourist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>Tourist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6 weeks</td>
<td>Tourist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>Tourist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First order and second order data were extracted following coding procedures based on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Van Maanen, 1979). At the initial stage, open-coding enabled us to stay close to the raw data. We also labeled and coded any meaningful statements in the transcription. The second stage applied selective coding to synthesize large amounts of data and to identify main themes. During this stage, the constant comparative method was used to compare within and across interviews as an iterative interpretation of data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Next, theoretical coding procedure was conducted to capture the first order data. The themes identified in the previous stage were used as a basis to develop abstract levels of theoretical coding. A model that explains the phenomenon discovered in the first order analysis was developed by investigating the relationships between each theoretical codes. During this process, dimensions and concepts developed by the data were compared with prior literature to facilitate interpretation of the data. Incorporating the findings from these procedures, the final conceptual model was developed based on a sequence of the dining process (see Figure 1). Every coding and analysis was processed in Korean and later translated into English.

Taking into account the interpretative nature of grounded theory, the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) – credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability – were used to tackle the trustworthiness issue. Trustworthiness was achieved by ensuring referential adequacy and preparing sufficient description of the data. Additionally, each interviewee was asked to read the Korean transcript of his/her own interview.
FINDINGS

In the first order analysis, 46 themes were identified which fall under the categories of 1) language 2) cultural differences 3) sensing problems 4) emotional and cognitive reactions 5) coping behaviors 6) evaluations 7) experience and knowledge (See Table 2). Some key findings are discussed in the following section.

Table 2. First order themes and second order concepts with representative quotes

1) Language:
   - Speaking: “I didn’t know how to order in English. I didn’t even know how to say simple things like ‘I want this…””
   - Listening: “Sometimes, I don’t understand because the server talks too fast.”

2) Cultural differences:
   - Ordering system (customization): “Unexpected things…, like ‘how would you like your eggs?’ then I really have no idea what to say…”
   - Menu (type of food): “I don’t know what kinds of bread and dressings there are to choose from.”
   - Paying system: “Why do they always make us wait? What can’t we just pay at the cashier?”
   - Relationship between customer & employee: “They are too friendly…they don’t respect us enough.”
   - Service style: “They seem to check on us too often.”

3) Sensing problems:
   - Communication: “Obviously, we (service provider and I) struggle to communicate with each other.”
   - Accuracy: “Then I can’t get the information I need... I question whether I heard correctly…”
   - Purchase decision: “So I just end up ordering whatever because I don’t know…”

4) Emotional/cognitive reactions:
   - Emotional response: “Not being able to communicate doesn’t end there …it makes me feel stupid and I get embarrassed…”
   - Cognitive response: “So I get confused… what am I supposed to say at this point?”

5) Coping behaviors:
   - Ask/not ask: “I just don’t bother to ask again to the server.”
   - Complain/not complain: “I don’t bother to complain…”
   - Blame self/other: “Somehow I end up blaming myself for not knowing…”

6) Evaluations:
   - Satisfied/dissatisfied: “I am usually satisfied as long as the food tastes good…”

7) Experience & knowledge:
   - “Once I learn the system, like the ordering system, then I do better next time.”

Language

All interviewees pointed out language barrier as the main reason for stress. Interviewees mentioned that the difficulties in expressing themselves or understanding what the servers were saying were the main problems. Due to such obstacles, they blame themselves for the problems they encounter unless the service failure was severe and obvious.
Cultural differences

Most of the cultural differences in the dining experience reflected the different restaurant systems in the U.S. and Korea. Customization (ordering system) was the main difference that Korean ESL customers found “difficult.” This is surprising considering prior studies suggest that customization leads to higher satisfaction, more positive attitude, and greater willingness to pay more (Goldsmith & Frieden, 2004). However, Korean customers found customization to be stressful. Korean customers are not familiar with customization such as choosing different kinds of bread, cheese, or salad dressing. In fact, they are not familiar with or enjoy being asked what options they preferred.

Another major cultural difference that surfaced was the service style of American servers. They mentioned that American servers were too friendly and not formal enough. This may be due to the “power distance” that are familiar to Koreans and not Americans. Power distance is “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organization within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.” (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p.45). Korean customers, who have a high power distance culture, especially in the food service industry, perceive the social position of the customers to be higher than front-line service providers (Mattila, 1999). Thus, Korean ESL customers find it different and even unpleasant that American servers treat their customers as equals.

Sensing problems

Miscommunication and the difficulties in obtaining accurate information on the menu items are the main sensing problems that Korean ESL customers encounter. This, in turn, affects their purchase decisions because they are not well-informed about the products and procedures.

Emotional/cognitive reactions

Emotional responses that ESL Korean customers experienced most frequently were anxiety, fear, and embarrassment. They were anxious due to a lack of knowledge such as not knowing the type of food, or not knowing what to answer when servers asked questions. Fear was mainly related to “face consciousness.” The interviewees were afraid that they were going to be embarrassed in front of the server or their friends, and embarrassment is the emotion they experienced when they lost face. According to Ho (1979), face is defined as the reputation and the credibility one has earned in a social network. Prior studies show evidence that Asians are more face-sensitive than Westerners (Ho, 1991). On the other hand, their cognitive response was mainly confusion which comes from not knowing how to react to unexpected situations or when they don’t understand what the servers were saying.

Coping behaviors

Coping behaviors are closely related to sensing problems and are largely affected by emotional responses. Interviewees identified embarrassment, fear, and anxiety as the emotions they encounter. Their coping behaviors such as not asking the server or not complaining unless the service failure is severe may reflect their behavioral responses to such emotions. Their coping behaviors were severely affected by the server’s attitude. When the server was attentive, ESL customers were encouraged to ask the server questions or to complain if there were problems. However, when the server was unfriendly, they were reluctant to do so. Since service recovery to customer complaints increases satisfaction and loyalty (McCollough, et al., 2000),
training employees regarding cultural backgrounds of ESL customers and educating them to be more attentive and friendly is essential.

**Evaluations**

All nine interviewees pointed out that their expectation level is relatively low in terms of service. Since they do not enjoy interacting with service providers due to language barriers, their evaluations are based more on other tangible attributes. However, when they were treated badly, such as when it was salient that the server was rude, they seemed to perceive it as “discrimination,” thus reacting negatively.

**Experience and Knowledge**

For ESL customers, the dining experience process counts toward their experience and knowledge which later guides them through their next dining process. The more experience they gain, the less likely they will encounter problems or even feel a negative emotional response. However, the language barrier still remains until their English skills improve.

**Figure 1. Final conceptual model**

![Final conceptual model]

*Note. Arrows indicate sequential relationships*

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES**

English is a unique language. Especially to Koreans, English means more than just a foreign language. The Korean education system requires Koreans to learn English as a mandatory course. Therefore, not being able to speak English may generate shame and speaking English well may evoke pride for Koreans. Future studies can observe ESL Koreans in other non-English speaking countries to broaden the scope of this study.

Koreans are North-East Asians with certain cultural characteristics. They share cultural values such as high power distance, high collectivism, and high face concerns. Future studies can observe how cultural factors affect the impact of language barrier by comparing Korean ESL customers to other ESL customers from different cultural backgrounds, such as Hispanic ESL customers. The interviewees of this study mentioned about “losing face” and “feeling
embarrassed” which led to their coping behaviors such as “not complaining.” However, Hispanic ESL customers might not be as concerned about “losing face” and may feel more “angry” than “embarrassed” which may lead to different coping behaviors such as “complaining.”

Lastly, interviewees of this study showed different levels of dining experiences in the U.S. as well as different levels of prior dining experiences in Korea. The female interviewees were more experienced than their male counterparts.

REFERENCES


