Successful and Unsuccessful Experiences of Employees in Singaporean Hotels During Intercultural Service Encounters:
Insights for Educating Japanese Students for the Hospitality Industry

Kyoko MORIKOSHI

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Contents

Ⅰ．Introduction

In the hope of boosting Japanese economy, the Japanese government finally took an active role in inbound tourism.　The Japan Tourism Agency（JTA）was established in October 2008 by the government and is working to enhance tourism-related measures. Their goal is to create a tourism-based nation.　Although the number of international visitors to Japan fell in 2009 because of the world-wide economic crisis, the government is expecting an increase in the number of foreign visitors. Hiroshi Mizohata, the commissioner of JTA, is aiming at the goal of 20 million foreign visitors by 2016.　However, there are many concerns in the Japanese hospitality industry. Can the companies in the industry provide quality service which will bring repeat guests from overseas? Are employees comfortable looking after international guests? Are there any challenges and difficulties for the employees during their intercultural service encounters? What are good ways to serve international guests? How should employees be prepared to provide good services to international guests?　In fact, some hotels and local communities have already started active discussions on how to serve international guests. However, it seems that most educational organizations are not offering adequate knowledge and training programs for students who will be working for international customers in the hospitality industry.

In Japan, it is often said that serving international guests is difficult and scary. Due to feelings of being uncomfortable in serving foreign customers, many employees tend to avoid

contact with them. As a result, the employee who can speak English or is good at languages will usually be responsible for all interactions with international guests. Many international brand hotels and big properties in Tokyo and other urban cities have many employees who can speak English. However, a limited number of the employees will be using English and handling international guests. This situation could hinder our goal of becoming a tourism-based nation. In addition, hotels in local areas have started hiring foreign workers, instead of training local Japanese in many cases. As Rakuten, Inc., （one of the leading internet shopping sites,）and UNIQLO CO., LTD（retailing company）have announced that they will hire more international employees; additionally, more and more companies will hire foreign workers or international students in Japan as a measure to serve international guests effectively. This solution will lead to fewer opportunities for local Japanese students who are struggling to find employment in a tight labor market. Japanese universities and colleges should educate students to have good language and intercultural communication skills to be competitive in Japan, as well as in the global market.

Understanding actual intercultural service encounters in the hospitality industry will disclose difficulties and problems which the employees will face. Feedback from their successful intercultural experiences will also help to provide better services for international guests. Thus, the purpose of this study is to seek successful experiences and difficulties/challenges during intercultural service encounters from the service providers' perspectives. For this research, interviews were conducted in Singapore, where English is used during intercultural service encounters quite often. In addition, Singapore is a multicultural nation with experience in successfully serving many international travelers every year. It is important to learn from experienced and successful employees in Singapore. Conducting interviews in Singapore will help the author to compare the research results of this study with the previous study outcomes conducted in Japan. Therefore, the study will provide us with some marketing ideas of special services and programs which attract international guests. In addition, the study results will tell us what kinds of training programs with respect to languages and cultures are needed in higher education.

Ⅱ. Literature Review

Ⅱ-1. Cross-cultural Encounters With International Guests

Companies in the hospitality field and professional researchers have already conducted surveys on customer satisfaction. Many studies have shown that the customer's perceptions toward service quality have cultural differences. According to the latest statistics from the Consumption Trend Survey for Foreigners Visiting Japan（2010）, western travelers rated higher than Asians on the satisfaction survey during their stay in Japan. Our local government, the tourism section of Hokkaido Government, also conducted a survey on foreign customer satisfaction. The results indicated that overall international guests in Hokkaido rated their satisfaction highly. They enjoyed tourist attractions and activities, as well as Japanese

food and shopping. However, international guests pointed out the negative points during their stay, which included lack of information, especially information in their native language, and that Japan was expensive. The questions were mostly related to tangible features of the hospitality industry, such as, facilities, access, and activities. Not many studies have been done on the quality of the service during intercultural service encounters in Japan.

Several studies on the impact of culture on customers' perception towards service quality have been published outside of Japan. Hsieh and Tsai (2008) conducted a survey at international hotels in Taiwan and asked both Taiwanese and American guests to fill out a questionnaire. Using Hofstede's cultural perspectives, they analyzed what factors affected Taiwanese and Americans in order to evaluate hotel service quality. Based on the study of Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the SERVQUAL PZB model, their research results indicated that Taiwanese and Americans evaluated factors of service quality differently. Taiwanese consumers placed more value than American tourists on the "tangible," "reliable," "reaction," and "empathy" aspects of SERVQUAL. According to Tsang & Ap (2007), there are cultural differences between Asian and Western tourists' perceptions of relational quality service provided by guest-contact employees. The authors conducted a survey at Hong Kong International airport. They interviewed more than 700 international travelers about their perceptions of relational quality during their stay in Hong Kong. The survey results revealed that Asian tourists rated lower for relational quality compared to Western tourists. In addition, Asians preferred the basic and practical aspects of service, while Western tourists showed a preference for proactive and intangible aspects of service, such as, "made to feel welcome," and "willingness to help." Mattila (1999) also carried out a survey at hotels in Singapore in order to measure the role of culture and purchase motivation in service encounter evaluations. Mattila pointed out that there were no significant differences between Asian and Western "business travelers" when they rated the service encounter. She also added that this result was probably because of the goal-directed behavior of the business travelers as they tend to focus on the output of the service delivery, not the style or procedure of the service delivery. That is, business travelers in both groups see "efficiency (speed of service)" as more important than "the quality of the interaction." Unlike business customers, leisure travelers had different goals and motivations, and they were affected by culture-based differences. It was reported that Asian leisure travelers rated the service encounter and the overall service quality significantly lower than their Western counterparts. Mattila thought this result could be due to the higher expectations of people in the service-oriented Asian cultures. Not only cultural trends and national characteristics, but also the customer's purpose for their service purchases should be considered when providing quality service.

Barker & Hartel (2004) conducted exploratory interviews on the service experiences of culturally diverse customers in Australia. Their study revealed that employees' behavioral characteristics resulted in an inequitable service delivery. The characteristics were

summarized into four categories; 1) voice (unfriendly and/or sarcastic tone, slow speed, and loud volume), 2) suspicion/lack of trust (following customers around the shop, 3) avoidance (a lack of eye contact, and not acknowledging the customers' presence), and 4) no employee effort (not attempting to make contact or engage in small talk and not willing to go 'the extra mile'). On the basis of service provider behaviors, culturally diverse customers may perceive that they are the recipients of an inequitable service and their satisfaction may drop.

Warden, Liu, Haung, & Lee, (2003) conducted a survey online, basing on the study by Stauss and Mang. Previously, Stauss and Mang maintained that customers perceive intercultural service failures as less serious, because they attribute the error to cultural distance. Warden, et al. tried to verify this hypothesis by a computer assisted survey instrument (CASI), which was developed over the Web. The study was done in Taiwan and participants were drawn to the research Web site through a banner located on a commercial Web portal within a one week period. Respondents were asked to answer questions about four different negative restaurant service encounters: (1) domestic location with a positive outcome, (2) domestic location with a negative outcome; (3) foreign location with a positive outcome; and (4) foreign location with a negative outcome. Their research results did not support that the study hypothesis of "Consumers traveling outside their home culture setting will report lower seriousness ratings for failures than when the same failures are experienced in the home culture settings." However the results did confirm the second hypothesis of "Consumers traveling outside their home cultural settings will be more satisfied with failure recovery strategies than the same strategies implemented at home."

Ⅱ-2. Cross-cultural Encounter For Employees

Studies on intercultural service encounters from the service provider's perspective are also very important. Through interviews with service providers, Wang and Mattila (2010) conducted research on intercultural service encounters; that is, the situations where the customer and service provider do not share the same cultural background. The authors maintained that intercultural service encounters can be potential stressors for service providers resulting in negative emotions. These stressors can become actual stress depending on customer's characteristics, service provider's characteristics and service situation such as busyness. In addition, the authors described that there are two ways to cope with international customers for service providers. One is "problem-based coping" in which service providers try to solve customers' problems and satisfy them. The other is "avoidance coping;" that is, service providers escape the situation without personal effort or without considering the rights of their customers. Lastly, the authors proposed that previous experiences of service providers would influence how they handle intercultural service encounters.

Sizoo, Iskat, Plank, & Serrie (2003) examined the impact of intercultural sensitivity on employee performance in cross-cultural service interactions. Sizoo (2008) furthered the

same research in Hawaii, London and Florida. Their studies focused on the cultural sensitivity of employees who work with international customers by using a questionnaire. The major findings of the research are as follows. Interculturally sensitive employees provide international customers with better service and these employees are more attentive to the needs of customers from other cultures. In addition, interculturally sensitive employees will utilize suggestive selling more often, resulting in more revenue per international customer. Moreover, interaction with international customers will provide the employees with more satisfaction. The study also showed that hiring and developing interculturally sensitive employees improved the service environment of organizations (Sizoo, 2008). However, the research did not indicate that interculturally sensitive service providers are more motivated to work or to stay with the organization longer than employees with low sensitivity. Thus, Sizoo concluded that it would be beneficial for human resource managers to invest in testing for and training in intercultural sensitivity for employees involved in cross-cultural service encounters.

Another research on cross-cultural service encounters from the employees' perspectives was conducted by the Ching-Yick, T. & Suk-Ching, H. (2009). They interviewed frontline employees at several hotels in Hong Kong by using a Critical Incident Technique (CIT) and compared the results with previous studies completed in Western Hotels. Their interview research revealed that the employees in Hong Kong hotels blamed themselves for customer dissatisfaction, whereas respondents in Western hotels tended to consider the delivery system and the customers themselves as a major cause for customer dissatisfaction. Ching-Yick, T. & Suk-Ching, H. explained this main finding by using Hofstede's four dimensions of cultural differences. They pointed out "strong individualism" in Western culture and "high power-distance" in Asian culture contributed to the difference between the two groups. These cultural trends give companies and managers some ideas of who to hire and how to train their employees for higher level services. Detailed procedures of cross-cultural training were not discussed in these studies, so more research on employee training in the area of cultural sensitivity is needed.

In the past two years, Morikoshi (2010) has interviewed several Japanese employees who were working in the hospitality industry in Hokkaido by focusing on their English language usage in the work place and English learning experiences. The interview results indicated that Japanese employees had difficulties in using English and understanding different cultures during their intercultural service encounters. The amount of English usage and the frequency of intercultural communication in their work were limited.

Ⅲ. Hypothesis

The purpose of this study was to test the hypothesis that many employees feel serving international guests is more difficult than serving domestic customers. In addition, this study included semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions, so that employees'

successful experiences and negative experiences during the intercultural service encounters would provide a basic understanding of the current conditions of intercultural service encounters in Singapore.

Ⅳ. Methodology

Ⅳ-1. Survey design

The following survey questions developed by Wang and Mattila（2010）were used as the base for this study. The questions dealt with the service provider's experiences in serving international customers, comparisons of international and domestic customers, and any specific service failures. Some of the questions in the original survey were excluded for this study, but a few questions were added in order to find successful service experiences. A question on language and cultural training was also included in the hope of understanding the level of language education that the interviewees had gone through. The questions included in the interview were:

| Survey Questions |

Position:＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

⑴ How long have you worked in this company?

⑵ Can you describe what a working day is usually like? e.g. What do you need to do? How many customers do you serve?

⑶ How often do you work with customers from different cultures?

⑷ Did you find it more difficult or easier in comparison to serving domestic customers?

⑸ What is the difference in serving domestic versus foreign customers?

⑹ Could you describe the most memorable event that led to a dissatisfying experience for foreign customers? When was it? What was it like? Where was the customer from? What caused the foreign customer's dissatisfaction? Did you or your company offer compensations to that customer? Does this kind of event often happen? What were your thoughts and feelings regarding that situation at that time? What lessons about customer service did you learn from this event? Did it change how you interact with foreign customers afterwards?

⑺ Could you describe the most memorable event that led to a satisfying experience for foreign customers? When was it? What was it like? Where was the customer from? What brought the foreign customer's satisfaction? Does this kind of event often happen? What were your thoughts and feelings regarding that situation at that time? What lessons about customer service did you learn from this event? Did it change how you interact with foreign customers afterwards?

⑻ From your experience or observation of other employees, what contributes to good service for foreign customers? Could you give an example?

⑼ What training（including on-the-job training）, if any, have you had regarding serving

foreign customers?

What (foreign) language/English training (including on-the-job training), if any, have you had?

(10) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience serving foreign customers?

Nationality (Singaporean)

Sex: □Male □female

Age: □20-30 □31-40 □41-50 □51-60

Education: □high school □ 2 year college (polytechnic) □ 4 year university/college
              □graduate school □technical school □other

Ⅳ-2. Data collection

Interviews were conducted in September 2010. Interviewees were those who currently work in the hospitality industry in Singapore as full time staff or as trainees under the profession conversion program. Some of them were taking the Master of Hospitality Administration – Executive Program at UNLV (University of Nevada, Las Vegas) Singapore Campus. They were recruited through personal networks. All of them were working at the hotel in Singapore and had frequent contacts with international guests. Fortunately, interviewees belonged to seven different properties including luxury hotels, business hotels and a service apartment; so that the results would reflect a variety of working environments in Singapore. The interviews were conducted in the hotel lobby or on the UNLV campus. The interviews were recorded by the IC recorder with permission of the interviewees.

Table 1. Interviewee profile

Interviewee	Gender	Age Group	Position at Current Job	Period
A	F	20-30	Sales/Customer service	2 years
B	F	20-30	Front Desk Manager	5 months
C	M	31-40	Trainee	1 year
D	M	20-30	Guest Service Agent	7 months
E	F	20-30	Guest Service Agent	1.5 years
F	F	41-50	Trainee	15 months
G	F	41-50	Trainee	1 year
H	F	31-40	Guest Service Agent	6 months
I	F	20-30	Front Desk Agent	6 months

Ⅴ. Results

Interviewee profile

Table 1 showed the interviewees' profiles and answers the first question. The interviewees were mostly female and in the age-group of 20-30. Including the interviewees who were interning at the hotel, all of them were in the position of direct contact with guests.

Many of them just started their jobs in the hotel and only a few interviewees had several years of working experience in the hospitality industry.

Interactions with guests

Regarding questions two and three, interviewees in this study had similar responses. All of them had direct contact with international guests every day. They were working mainly at the front desk, dealing with checking-in and checking-out, answering questions about the local area such as about shops and restaurants, and taking care of guests' requests. They also handled occasional complaints from the guests.

Difference between international guests and domestic guests

The feedback from questions four and five was quite different from what was expected before the interviews. Only one out of nine interviewees stated that serving international guests was more difficult than serving domestic guests. The interviewee described the difference between contacting international guests and domestic guests as follows. "It is easy to deal with local people (Singaporeans) because I speak the same way, and I know a lot of things about Singapore, so I can talk to them more easily. It is easy to get along. However, foreign customers sometimes can be difficult, especially Arabs. One incident was when I met an Arab male. I wanted to shake hands with him, but people in their country do not shake hands with females. So he didn't shake my hand, instead he put his hands on his chest. Then I realized I wasn't supposed to touch his hands…"

Three individuals responded with an opposite point of view, that is, they said that it was more difficult to provide service to domestic customers. These three interviewees thought that domestic guests were more demanding. One of them also pointed out that international guests can be forgiving more often. The other five interviewees indicated that international and domestic guests were the same in terms of difficulty when serving them. They added that, "it all depends on the customer's personality, so it does not matter if he/she is an international or domestic guest." There were not many differences in the service procedures between international guests and domestic guests. One interviewee described the difference as："international guests look for something basic, while domestic guests ask for something extra." The other described the difference as: "When explained clearly, international guests would understand, but domestic guests wouldn't."

Successful and unsuccessful experiences

Three interviewees did not have unsuccessful experience with international guests. It may be because their working experiences were relatively short, such as several months to one or two years. Some incidents which led to dissatisfying experiences were not specific to cultural differences, but were the same as everyday complains. Their service failures happened when they were not able to meet the guest's requests, such as, not providing an ocean view room, or the hotel washing machine causing a problem with the guest.

The only cultural incident reported was because the female interviewee's overly friendly attitude may have offended the guest from a different country. Although the interviewee and the guest shared the same ethnic origin, her westernized behavior could have irritated her guest. The guest complained about her behavior, and got along better with a male employee after this incident.

The interviewees had successful experiences when they provided what their international guests had wanted and when interviewees tried to work hard to provide the service. One of them reported that she was able to satisfy an international guest just by giving information on the local area and recommending the places to visit. Another interviewee described an incident where an international guest was very pleased because the employee helped him when he was sick. Moreover, the interviewee was able to satisfy a walk−in international guest when the employee helped him to find another hotel to stay in because the hotel was full. These successful experiences also seemed not particular to the international guests. These experiences can be also applied to domestic customers.

What contributes to good service for foreign customers

Some of the interviewees pointed out the importance of foreign language skills and knowledge of different cultures. Some comments were: "Language skills and knowing different cultures will be helpful when serving foreign customers." "Standing in their (foreign guest's) shoes, that is, understanding their feelings is important. Smile and make them feel comfortable. Build a relationship which is not too close but makes them feel comfortable."

Another indicated that building a good relationship through interactions was significant. Some of their suggestions were: "Calling them by their names and greeting them are important. Respecting their privacy is also important." "Smile, simple gestures like thank you, and greeting by their names are helpful." "Try to make more conversation to make them feel comfortable." "Make them feel comfortable."

Being an efficient service provider also contributes to serve international customers. Some of the comments from the interviewees were: "Go extra−miles." "When we cannot provide what the guests want, provide alternatives." "Provide travel recommendations." "Being calm is very important." "We should treat international guests and domestic guests equally."

Language and cultural training

Two interviewees from the same hotel answered that there were in−house training sessions on different cultures. They learned basic knowledge of different cultures, for example, the gestures which have positive or negative meanings depending on the cultures. One reported that she was given a chance to take on−line foreign language lessons by the hotel. There were no in−house training sessions on language and intercultural communication skills in the other properties. Some interviewees mentioned the possibility of taking such training programs outside the properties.

Other comments

An interviewee who was working in the service apartment, where many guests stayed

longer, indicated the importance of having specific knowledge needed for their guests. Since some of her guests looked for an apartment or house for a longer stay, they asked specific questions about real estate. She needed to have basic knowledge of how to find an apartment in Singapore.

Ⅵ. Discussion and Conclusion

Although Japanese employees, whom the author interviewed previously, felt serving international guests was difficult and had trouble using English language, the interview results in Singapore were different from Japanese interview results. That is, this study did not support the hypothesis of "many employees feel that serving international guests is more difficult than serving domestic customers." Interestingly, many interviewees in Singapore felt that serving international guests and domestic guests are the same. Some interviewees even felt that international guests are easier to deal with than domestic ones because domestic guests can be very demanding. The difference between Japanese employees and interviewees in Singapore may be due to the frequency of the contacts with international guests. For many Singaporeans, it is very natural to meet guests from different cultures and communicate in English. The condition of Singapore which has topped the world competitiveness in 2010 on IMD WORLD COMPETITIVENESS YEARBOOK 2010 was clearly different from that of Japan. Singapore has internationally developed quickly and has been successful in many different fields. In addition, Singapore is such a multicultural nation, having been successfully handling many international travelers every year. However, serving international guests is still a very special experience for many Japanese employees. Their contacts with international guests were not main parts of their jobs and their English usage was also limited. If Japan had working conditions with more international guests and if the employees had many intercultural service encounters before, the answers could have been different. Is Japan able to follow the path which Singapore went through? It will take a lot of time for Japan to be like Singapore, but some changes are definitely needed in Japanese companies in the hospitality industry. The results from this study may not directly apply to Japanese hotels and companies in the hospitality industry, but they are significant information for Japanese and people in other Asian countries. It is hoped that Japanese employees will get used to interacting with foreign guests and become confident in serving them. Many Japanese employees in the hospitality industry already have the passion and ability to provide quality service. They just need to build confidence in intercultural service encounters.

The study originally sought to delineate special ways to provide quality service to international guests. However, the results reveal that employees should be a professional service provider for both domestic and international guests. In other words, employees should treat domestic and international guests equally. The interviewees suggested that employees should be sensitive to guests' needs and provide what their guests want. Building

a good relationship with guests is also important to provide a good service. By "Going extra-miles," employees should be efficient in their work. These characteristics are needed to provide service to both domestic and international guests. These suggestions from the workers in the hospitality industry are all very precious and useful for us. Companies and firms in the hospitality industry should constantly work on their employee training to help them become more efficient workers.

One specific suggestion about cultural issues was that having foreign language skills and understanding different culture were very useful. Not all workplaces provided training programs, but these skills apparently helped the employees when serving international guests. Japanese employees did not have many chances to learn foreign languages and intercultural communication skills once they started working. As Hearns, Devine and Baume (2007) indicated that there is no explicit call for intercultural or multicultural learning skills to be developed within the higher educational curriculum; therefore, many Japanese students do not develop intercultural communication skills at universities and colleges. Thus organizations in higher education should provide training programs which are useful in real working settings. Not only foreign language major students but also more generalized students who are majoring in business, economics and other specific fields should build communication skills in English. How to motivate them and how to build students' confidence in English are the two major concerns for Japanese educators. It will be beneficial for companies to hire employees who are good at languages and sensitive to different culture. Thus social pressure to have good language skills for better jobs may be needed to help motivate the students in Japan.

Ⅶ. Limitations

The number of interviewees was small and the study included trainees at the hotels so that the results of this study cannot be generalized. The working experiences of the interviewees were limited as they had worked only several months to two years. They may not have had enough experiences to answer the questions properly. These facts influenced the outcomes of this study.

Ⅷ. Suggestions for Future Research

This study was conducted in Singapore where English was used as an official language and a variety of people from different cultures lived in harmony. Meeting international guests and using English to provide service were not special for most Singaporeans. However, the conditions in Japan or other Asian countries are very different from Singapore. Thus, further study should be conducted in counties like Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand where English is used as a foreign language and intercultural service encounters are less frequent. Such research will reveal what is necessary to provide quality service to foreign

guests. Moreover, this study did not discuss how employees dealt with service failures when interacting with international guests. Therefore, questions about service failure recovery strategies during intercultural service encounters should be included in future studies. Becker (2000) maintained that the service recovery behavior of empowerment is appropriate for American style countries, but it won't satisfy Asian people because "saving face" is important. For Asian cultures, managerial intervention is more appropriate than the effort of frontline workers. Becker's findings should also be examined in the future research.

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[Abstract]

Successful and Unsuccessful Experiences of Employees in Singaporean Hotels During Intercultural Service Encounters：
Insights for Educating Japanese Students for the Hospitality Industry

Kyoko Morikoshi

The author interviewed hotel employees in Singapore regarding their successful and un-successful experiences during their intercultural service encounters. Contrary to the author's expectation, the employees in Singapore did not feel that serving international guests is more difficult than serving domestic guests. Many felt that serving international and domestic guests is the same; that is, international guests and domestic guests can be both difficult and easy. Some interviewees even felt that international guests are easier and more forgiving. In order to provide quality service to international travelers, foreign language skills and cultural sensitivity are helpful. Providing what international customers want, being attentive to international guests, and being an efficient service provider will contribute to successfully serving such guests. These facts can also be applied to domestic customers. This pilot study provides some valuable insights for hospitality related compa-nies in other countries in Asia.