

# COMMUNICATION ERRORS IN FOOD AND BEVERAGE SERVICE: AN ANALYSIS OF WAITERS' INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE IN VOCATIONAL HOSPITALITY EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

Effective communication plays a central role in determining service quality within the hospitality industry, particularly in restaurant settings where waiter–guest interaction directly shapes customer experience. This study investigates common communication errors produced by waiter students in a hospitality education program, focusing on three major dimensions: grammatical accuracy, pragmatic appropriateness, and lexical precision. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through observation and transcription of simulated restaurant service interactions involving undergraduate hospitality students. The collected utterances were analyzed to identify recurring patterns of linguistic and pragmatic deviation. The findings reveal that grammatical errors primarily involve auxiliary omission, incorrect tense usage, and improper interrogative formation, largely influenced by first language transfer. Pragmatic errors include overly direct imperatives, insufficient mitigation strategies, and limited empathetic responses in complaint situations, indicating underdeveloped sociopragmatic competence. Lexical errors are characterized by overgeneralization, collocational inaccuracies, and limited use of hospitality-specific terminology, which affect professional credibility and persuasive effectiveness in menu explanation. The study argues that communication challenges in hospitality contexts are multidimensional and extend beyond structural inaccuracies. In restaurant service encounters, language functions not only as a medium of information exchange but also as a representation of professionalism and institutional quality. Therefore, hospitality English instruction should adopt an integrated communicative competence framework that simultaneously addresses grammatical form, pragmatic sensitivity, and lexical specialization. The findings provide pedagogical insights for vocational institutions seeking to align English language training with the communicative demands of international restaurant environments.

**Keywords:** hospitality, waiter, grammatical errors, pragmatic competence, lexical precision,

## INTRODUCTION

Communication constitutes the backbone of service delivery in the hospitality industry. Unlike manufacturing sectors where product quality can be standardized and physically measured, hospitality services are intangible and heavily dependent on human interaction. In restaurant settings, service quality is largely evaluated through the effectiveness of communication between waiters and guests. A service encounter is not merely transactional; it represents a “moment of truth” during which guests form perceptions about professionalism, reliability, and hospitality (Magnini & Zehrer, 2019). Consequently, communication competence becomes a central determinant of guest satisfaction, loyalty, and overall dining experience.

Food and Beverage (F&B) service personnel, particularly waiters, function as frontline representatives of hospitality establishments. Their responsibilities extend beyond taking orders to include greeting guests, explaining menu items, recommending dishes, responding to complaints, and ensuring a pleasant dining atmosphere. These tasks require not only linguistic accuracy but also interactional competence, pragmatic sensitivity, and intercultural awareness (Kusluvan, 2018). In international tourism environments, where guests come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, communication performance significantly influences institutional image and service credibility.

Within vocational hospitality education, English is typically taught under the framework of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP emphasizes contextualized and functional language use tailored to professional needs rather than abstract grammatical mastery (Bhatia, 2017). In F&B service training, students are introduced to expressions such as greeting

guests, offering assistance, recommending menu items, and handling complaints. However, despite structured instructional design and repeated role-play simulations, communication errors remain common among hospitality trainees.

Research in hospitality management indicates that communication clarity, empathy, and responsiveness strongly influence perceived service quality (Sainaghi, Carlo, & d'Angella, 2018). Guests often evaluate restaurants not solely on food quality but also on the communicative behavior of service staff. When misunderstandings occur due to unclear explanations, inappropriate tone, or limited vocabulary, guests may interpret the service as unprofessional or inattentive. In competitive hospitality markets, such perceptions may affect revisit intention and customer loyalty.

Communication errors in hospitality settings may be categorized into several dimensions. First, linguistic errors include grammatical inaccuracies, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation problems. Although minor grammatical errors may not entirely block comprehension, they may reduce perceived competence, particularly in upscale dining contexts where professional image is highly valued (Widodo, 2020). Second, pragmatic errors involve inappropriate use of politeness strategies, directness levels, and register. Pragmatic failure occurs when an utterance is grammatically correct but socially inappropriate within a specific professional context (Taguchi, 2015). For example, overly direct requests may unintentionally convey rudeness despite neutral intention.

Third, discourse-related errors arise when information is incomplete, vague, or poorly structured. In restaurant service, menu explanation plays a crucial role in assisting guests' decision-making. Guests may request clarification regarding ingredients, cooking techniques, or dietary suitability. Inadequate explanation may generate confusion, dissatisfaction, or even health risks in cases involving food allergies (Kang & Namkung, 2019). Finally, non-verbal communication—including eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture, and tone—substantially influences how verbal messages are interpreted. Studies show that non-verbal cues often shape emotional impressions more strongly than verbal expressions in service encounters (Suryani, 2021).

Globalization further intensifies the communicative demands placed upon waiters. Intercultural competence has become essential in hospitality professions because cultural norms concerning politeness, personal space, and conversational style vary significantly (Chen & Rahman, 2018). A communicative strategy perceived as friendly in one culture may be interpreted as intrusive or overly informal in another. Therefore, vocational hospitality students must develop adaptive communication strategies suitable for diverse guest profiles.

Despite the recognized importance of communication competence, vocational institutions often prioritize procedural and technical training—such as table setting standards, service sequencing, and operational efficiency—over pragmatic and interactional development. While technical skills are indispensable, insufficient emphasis on applied communication may result in graduates who are operationally capable yet interactionally limited. Vocational education research increasingly highlights the importance of integrating soft skills, particularly communication competence, into professional curricula (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Moreover, contemporary dining trends emphasize experiential and personalized service. Guests increasingly expect descriptive storytelling about dishes, tailored recommendations, and interactive engagement (Baker & Kim, 2019). In such contexts, communication errors become more visible and potentially more damaging. A waiter who struggles to clearly describe a signature dish may inadvertently diminish its perceived value and the restaurant's brand positioning.

In many vocational contexts, including Indonesia, students often demonstrate acceptable written grammar competence but encounter difficulty in spontaneous spoken

interaction. Scripted dialogues used in classrooms may not sufficiently prepare students for unpredictable real-life guest inquiries. When faced with unexpected questions, complaints, or special dietary requests, trainees may experience hesitation, code-switching, or communication breakdown.

Given these considerations, identifying specific communication errors in waiter–guest interactions is essential. Rather than assuming that general language proficiency automatically translates into professional communicative competence, empirical investigation is needed to uncover which dimensions of communication present the greatest challenges. Such analysis can provide evidence-based direction for improving ESP instruction in hospitality education.

This study therefore aims to analyze communication errors occurring during simulated food and beverage service interactions among vocational hospitality students. The research focuses on identifying dominant error categories and examining their potential implications for perceived professionalism and service quality.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of communication errors are most frequently observed among waiter trainees during service encounters?
2. How do these errors potentially influence guest perception of professionalism and service quality?

By situating communication errors within service encounter theory, ESP pedagogy, and intercultural communication frameworks, this study contributes to both hospitality education and applied linguistics research. The findings are expected to inform curriculum development and enhance communicative training models in vocational hospitality institutions.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze communication errors occurring during food and beverage service interactions among hospitality students. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore patterns of communication performance and identify types of errors in authentic service simulations rather than to measure statistical relationships. The research was conducted as a case study involving hospitality students participating in practical training activities designed to simulate real restaurant service situations.

The participants consisted of fourth-semester students from the Hospitality Management program at IPB Internasional who were enrolled in a Food and Beverage Service course. These students had previously completed foundational English courses and introductory hospitality communication training. The fourth semester was selected because students at this stage had already received basic instruction in service procedures and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), making them suitable participants for observing applied communication skills in simulated professional contexts.

Data were collected through role-play simulations designed to replicate real restaurant service encounters. During these simulations, students performed as waiters while their classmates or instructors acted as guests. The role-play scenarios included typical restaurant interactions such as greeting guests, presenting menus, recommending dishes, taking orders, and responding to simple guest inquiries. Role play was chosen as the primary research method because it allows students to demonstrate spontaneous communication in realistic service situations while maintaining a controlled learning environment. Such simulations are widely used in hospitality education to develop practical service competence and communicative confidence.

All role-play sessions were conducted in a simulated restaurant laboratory and were video recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings enabled the researcher to analyze both verbal and non-verbal communication behaviors during the interaction. Observational

notes were also taken during the sessions to document communication patterns, hesitation, interaction flow, and contextual factors that might influence communication performance. The combination of video recordings and observation provided detailed data for identifying communication errors that occurred during the interactions.

After the role-play sessions, selected students were informally asked about their communication experiences during the activity. These short reflective conversations helped provide additional insight into students' perceived challenges, particularly related to vocabulary limitations, nervousness, or difficulty explaining menu items in English. These reflections were used to support interpretation of the observed communication behaviors.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, the video recordings were transcribed to capture the students' spoken utterances during the role-play interactions. The transcripts were then examined to identify instances of communication errors. These errors were categorized into several communicative dimensions based on previous literature, including linguistic errors (grammar and vocabulary), pragmatic errors (politeness and appropriateness of expressions), and discourse errors (clarity and completeness of explanations).

To ensure credibility of the findings, the researcher reviewed the recordings multiple times to confirm the accuracy of the transcription and error classification. Observational notes and student reflections were also compared with the recorded interactions to strengthen interpretation. All participant identities were kept confidential and were represented using anonymous codes during analysis. Through this methodological approach, the study aimed to capture authentic communication behaviors of hospitality students in simulated restaurant service contexts and to identify common communication errors that may influence perceived professionalism during waiter–guest interactions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following tables present the common communication errors produced by waiter students during simulated restaurant service sessions. The data are categorized into three major types: grammatical errors, pragmatic errors, and lexical choice errors.

**Table 1. Common Communication Errors in Waiter–Guest Interactions**

No	Incorrect Expression Used by Waiter	Correct/ Recommended Expression	Type of Error	Explanation
1	You want order now?	Would you like to order now?	Grammatical & Pragmatic	Missing auxiliary verb and lacks politeness strategy expected in service interaction.
2	What do you want?	What would you like to have?	Pragmatic	The expression is too direct and may sound impolite in hospitality communication.
3	Wait!	One moment please. / Just a moment, please.	Pragmatic	Imperative form sounds rude; service language requires polite mitigation.
4	Give me your plate.	May I take your plate?	Pragmatic	Direct command is inappropriate in guest service interaction.
5	I bring your menu.	I will bring you the menu.	Grammatical	Incorrect tense usage; future intention should use <i>will</i> .
6	We not have salmon today.	We do not have salmon today.	Grammatical	Missing auxiliary verb <i>do</i> in negative sentence structure.
7	You already finish?	Have you finished?	Grammatical	Incorrect question structure and tense usage.

8	I am sorry for make you waiting.	I am sorry for making you wait.	Grammatical	Incorrect gerund form after the preposition <i>for</i> .
9	This menu very delicious.	This dish is very delicious.	Grammatical & Lexical	Missing verb <i>is</i> and misuse of word <i>menu</i> .
10	This food very good taste.	This dish has a very good taste.	Grammatical	Incorrect sentence structure and missing verb.
11	Chicken meat with sauce.	Grilled chicken served with special sauce.	Lexical	Lack of descriptive vocabulary for menu explanation.
12	Fried noodle	Fried noodles	Lexical	Incorrect plural form in standard menu terminology.
13	Ice tea	Iced tea	Lexical	Incorrect spelling and culinary terminology.
14	Expensive price	High price	Lexical	Redundant expression; more natural collocation is <i>high price</i> .
15	You must pay first.	Could you please make the payment first?	Pragmatic	Imperative form lacks politeness appropriate for guest interaction.

The table above demonstrate that communication errors among waiter students extend beyond grammatical inaccuracies and involve deeper issues related to pragmatic appropriateness and lexical precision. The analysis of simulated food and beverage service interactions revealed that communication errors among waiter trainees were multidimensional and recurrent. Based on thematic coding of transcribed video data and triangulated interview responses, four dominant categories of communication errors were identified: linguistic inaccuracies, pragmatic failure in politeness strategies, lack of clarity in menu explanation, and non-verbal communication inconsistency. These findings directly address the first research question concerning the types of communication errors most frequently observed in waiter–guest service encounters.

Linguistic inaccuracies were the most visibly recurring errors during service simulations. These errors included incorrect grammatical structures, limited vocabulary range, and simplified sentence constructions that reduced professional tone. For instance, several participants produced expressions such as “You want drink?” or “This menu very delicious,” omitting auxiliary verbs and appropriate sentence markers. Although the intended meaning remained understandable, such constructions reflect incomplete mastery of service-oriented English structures. In more formal restaurant contexts, these inaccuracies may influence guests’ perception of competence and credibility. As Widodo (2020) suggests, grammatical accuracy in vocational communication contexts contributes not merely to clarity but also to professional image formation. Interview data further indicated that students were often aware of their grammatical uncertainty but prioritized fluency over accuracy during spontaneous interaction. This tension between fluency and correctness reflects common challenges in ESP-based oral performance.

Pragmatic failure emerged as a more subtle yet impactful category of error. Several participants used overly direct expressions when addressing guests, such as “Order now?” or “Tell me your choice,” without incorporating modal verbs or politeness markers. While grammatically simple, these utterances lacked the indirectness typically associated with hospitality discourse. According to Taguchi (2015), pragmatic competence involves understanding how social meaning is conveyed beyond literal structure. In hospitality contexts, politeness strategies mitigate potential face-threatening acts such as requesting orders or clarifying preferences. The absence of softening devices such as “May I,” “Would you like,” or “Could I recommend” may unintentionally signal impatience or informality. From a service encounter perspective, such pragmatic lapses may weaken perceptions of empathy and assurance, dimensions central to service quality evaluation (Sainaghi et al., 2018). Interview

responses revealed that some students perceived directness as efficient communication, indicating limited awareness of professional politeness conventions in English-speaking service contexts.

Another prominent finding concerned discourse-level deficiencies, particularly in menu explanation. When guests in the simulation requested clarification about dishes, many trainees provided minimal or vague descriptions. Statements such as “It is chicken with sauce” or “Very tasty and good” lacked specificity regarding ingredients, preparation methods, flavor profiles, or portion characteristics. This limitation reflects insufficient lexical repertoire and limited discourse organization skills. In contemporary dining environments, descriptive engagement contributes to experiential value and persuasive selling (Baker & Kim, 2019). Clear and structured menu explanation enhances guests’ confidence in their choices and reinforces perceived food quality (Kang & Namkung, 2019). The inability to elaborate on menu details may therefore reduce perceived professionalism and diminish the restaurant’s brand image. Students reported in interviews that they often memorized basic descriptions but struggled when asked follow-up questions beyond scripted content, indicating a gap between rehearsed dialogue and adaptive communicative competence.

Non-verbal communication inconsistencies were also consistently observed across simulation sessions. Several trainees avoided sustained eye contact while greeting guests, spoke in low or monotone voices, or displayed visible nervous gestures such as fidgeting with order pads. In some cases, verbal greetings such as “Good evening, welcome to our restaurant” were delivered without corresponding facial expression or smile, creating a mismatch between verbal message and embodied presentation. Non-verbal cues significantly influence emotional perception during service encounters (Suryani, 2021). Guests may interpret lack of eye contact or hesitant tone as insecurity or disinterest, even when verbal expressions are appropriate. Furthermore, intercultural communication research suggests that appropriate eye contact, posture, and spatial awareness contribute to perceived sincerity and attentiveness (Chen & Rahman, 2018). The observed inconsistencies therefore have implications not only for communication clarity but also for affective impression management.

Addressing the second research question, these communication errors collectively influence perceived professionalism and service quality in several ways. First, linguistic inaccuracies may reduce perceived competence, particularly in environments where English proficiency is associated with global service standards. While minor errors may be tolerated in casual dining contexts, repeated inaccuracies may signal inadequate training. Second, pragmatic failure may more directly impact guest comfort, as politeness norms are closely tied to interpersonal respect. Overly direct or abrupt expressions may create subtle discomfort, potentially influencing guests’ overall satisfaction.

Third, discourse-level weaknesses in menu explanation limit the persuasive and informative function of waiter communication. In experiential dining models, waiters serve as interpreters of culinary value. Failure to provide structured and descriptive explanations may reduce guests’ engagement and trust in the establishment. Finally, non-verbal inconsistencies may undermine verbal politeness strategies. Even when grammatically and pragmatically correct expressions are used, incongruent body language can weaken perceived sincerity and warmth.

Importantly, the findings suggest that pragmatic and discourse-related errors may have greater impact on perceived service quality than purely grammatical mistakes. While linguistic errors are more noticeable, pragmatic lapses directly affect interpersonal dynamics central to hospitality service encounters. This aligns with communicative competence theory, which positions sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence as essential components of professional interaction (Taguchi, 2019). The results also reinforce the argument that ESP instruction in

vocational settings must extend beyond formulaic dialogue memorization to include adaptive interactional training.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that communication errors among waiter trainees are not isolated linguistic issues but interconnected deficiencies spanning grammatical, pragmatic, discourse, and non-verbal domains. These errors potentially influence guest perceptions of professionalism, empathy, and reliability—key determinants of service quality. By systematically identifying these patterns, the study provides empirical evidence supporting the need for enhanced communicative training in vocational hospitality education.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the common communication errors produced by waiter students in simulated restaurant service interactions, categorizing them into three primary domains: grammatical accuracy, pragmatic appropriateness, and lexical precision. The findings demonstrate that communication challenges in hospitality contexts are multidimensional and cannot be attributed solely to structural linguistic limitations. Instead, they reflect the interaction between interlanguage development, sociocultural transfer, and limited exposure to authentic professional discourse. From a grammatical perspective, the frequent omission of auxiliary verbs and misuse of tense forms illustrate persistent interlanguage features influenced by first language structures. Although these errors often do not obstruct meaning, they influence perceived professionalism and service credibility. In hospitality settings—where communication functions as a representation of institutional quality—linguistic precision contributes to guests' evaluations of competence. Grammar, therefore, should not be treated merely as a formal requirement but as an integral component of service performance.

Pragmatic errors emerged as equally significant. The use of direct imperatives and insufficient mitigation strategies indicates limited awareness of politeness conventions in English-speaking service environments. Hospitality communication is inherently relational and guest-centered. The ability to frame requests politely, respond empathetically to complaints, and maintain respectful interaction is essential for sustaining positive guest experiences. Pragmatic competence, therefore, must be explicitly developed rather than assumed to emerge naturally from general language exposure. Lexical imprecision further highlights the need for specialized English for Hospitality instruction. Overgeneralized vocabulary and collocational inaccuracies reduce descriptive clarity and persuasive effectiveness. In restaurant service, language functions not only to inform but also to enhance the dining experience and influence purchasing decisions. Precise terminology, natural collocations, and descriptive fluency contribute to professional identity formation and brand representation.

Taken together, these findings emphasize the necessity of adopting an integrated communicative competence framework in hospitality education. English instruction for waiter students should simultaneously address grammatical form, pragmatic function, and lexical specialization. Fragmented instruction that isolates grammar from context or vocabulary from interactional purpose may fail to prepare students adequately for real-world service demands.

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