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## **‘I’m Feeling Insecure’: Hearing Voices of Indonesian Airlines Passenger Handlers Speak Up about English Use Problems in Their Job**

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### **Abstract**

*The present study, hears voices of in-service airlines passenger handlers about conversations between them and passengers that occur in their work desks almost every day and their language problem. They will share their experience about conversations with passengers related to their job tasks or procedures, which are routine, and other non-procedural conversation topics which may occur several times. Data are gathered through in-depth interview with three in-service staffs from separated distinguished airports in Indonesia that already passed their first year working. This study reveals that in handling checking-in passengers the staffs need to be able to use English in order to demonstrate both procedural and non-procedural conversations. Dealing with their job, however, the staffs still find several language problems during the communication with English-speaking passengers which make them feel insecure. In this way, this article will present real report from in-service staffs that can be a valuable source for ESP teachers or practitioners, course developers, and researchers.*

**Keywords:** *passenger handling; English use; workplace English*

### **1. Introduction**

Cited from Fitouri-Trabelsi, et.al. (2013), the increasing growth of air traffic around the globe affects the complexity of today’s air transportation system and its “global actors” including “airports, airlines, air traffic control (ATC), air traffic management (ATM), as well as local actors (ground handlers, local suppliers...)”. What is needed is efficient coordination of all elements for operational efficiency improvement in order to achieve schedule punctuality and predictability, also low-cost operation of air transportation.

One of the ground handling operations playing an important role is check-in counters. Beside air transportation system that keeps growing, globalization which breaks borders between nations ease people from all around the world to immigrate and visit other countries more frequently. For this reason, among the employees who are in charge of passenger processing and assistance are also in increasing need of communication skill using English. Thus, vacancies offering job as airport frontline staffs obliged the

applicants to have good English proficiency to be strong preferable candidates. This is also confirmed by personnel manager of an airport management company at an international airport, that being profound English is strongly desirable (Cahyani, 2017).

Started in 2011, the awareness of aviation education forum in Indonesia has increased. Ministry of transportation worked together with private and public organizations managing big events such like summits and conferences in aviation management and education. Since that year, they continuously held the events annually until the current year (IATEC, 2018). In line with this, the users of air transportation service in Indonesia in 2017 have been significantly increased as great as 20.4% compared to the previous year (INACA, 2018) Additionally, there will be 14 new airports in Indonesia will have been operating by 2019 (Haryadi, 2018). This is definitely a positive update for aviation training institutions that have been also growing lately offering training program for aviation personnel candidates.

Although English is obviously a required skill for ground-handlers and considering the facts that: aviation

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industry has positive growth in Indonesia and aviation training attracts more attention in Indonesia, research about aviation-related English is still few in quantity. The researcher found three studies mainly related to flight attendants (Setyaningsih, 2009), (Baroto, 2017), (Andesta, 2017) but none of them discussing ground handlers except the author's preliminary study (Cahyani, 2017). In international scope, English for ground-handlers were studied by Cutting (2012), Lee (2015), and Ting (2010). However, researches about aviation-related English mostly discuss the communication between pilots and air traffic controllers. It is deemed that the use of English among the staffs working at check-in counters processing passengers just attracted a little concern from researchers. Thus, the researcher saw a research gap which needs to be investigated.

Reference (Cahyani, 2018) shows that appropriate material for ESP courses which focus on Ground Staffs profession is one of the challenges that needs to be solved. Thus, this current research intends to reveal conversation topics which occur between staffs (working at airport check-in counters) and passengers, and language problems if there is any by employing these problem statements: (1) what are procedural conversation topics that occur between check-in staff and passengers?; (2) what are non-procedural conversation topics which occur between check-in staff and passengers?; (3) do check-in staffs have any language problem in communicating with English speaking passengers? If yes, what are they?

### 2. Method

This study reports the voices of in-service check-in staffs in doing their job which is processing or assisting passengers in order to get into the correct gate for boarding the airplane.

#### 2.1. Research Design

This research employs qualitative approach that collects data from in-depth interview through voice note to be transcribed for data analysis. There are three staffs participating in this study, they have passed their one-year working experience as check-in staff in three different international airports in Indonesia who confirmed to be interviewed for this research.

#### 2.2. Research Participants

Due to the research ethic, the real names of research participants are not mentioned. The first research participant is Staff A, a female. She is a check-in staff in an international airport in Jakarta. The second research participant is staff B, female, a check-in staff in one of international airports Sumatra. And the third research

participant is Staff C, male, working as a check-in staff in Bali airport. All of them have been working as check-in staff for about two years. Staff A and Staff B studied in university for their S1 (undergraduate), meanwhile, staff C, she had a one-year informal education majoring Airlines Commerce. Three of them are between 20 – 25 years old and admitted that they handle English-speaking passengers every workday.

#### 2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collected through in-depth interview and related-document analysis. The interviews were conducted through voice note on whatsapp and then transcribed for further analysis. For analyzing the data, the researcher inductively interpret data to synthesize them and finally reached conclusion in data finding by employing qualitative data theory from Miles Huberman and Saldana (2013), which consisted of data preparation, coding, cross-case analysis. Meanwhile, to ensure data trustworthiness, triangulation of source is applied.

### 3. Findings

Working at check in counter involves several skills; communication skill is one of them. Additionally, dealing with allotted check-in time which is very limited, the effectiveness of communication is strongly required. Consequently, check-in staffs must consider how much time they have before passengers boarding their plane besides data filling into their check-in database system. Limited time, crowded situation and communication efficiency require them to work under pressures. These frantic situations become challenges for the staffs. Meanwhile, both passengers and staffs need a smooth and effective flow of communication for a successful check-in process. Regarding with the data collected, there are two categories of communication commonly occurred at check-in desk: procedural and non-procedural. The researcher also found that the staffs still encountered problems within their communication.

#### 3.1. Procedural Conversations in Airport Check-in Process

In doing their tasks, check in staffs must have accomplished obligatory tasks they cannot miss to ensure passengers and airplane security under international law. Information about passengers and their luggage must be well recorded in the system. Thus, there are several procedures that must be followed. Of course, communication becomes a crucial thing to bridge clarity between two parties. Staffs are obliged to master related rules, procedures and questions for security warranty in the first check. Besides, the staffs represent airlines' company in terms of service and professionalism. The table below displays the results of

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interview with participants: Staff A, B, and C, summarizing the conversation elements about check-in procedures they must put in the first place every workday.

**Tabel 1.** Result of Interview with Participants

No	Staff A	Staff B	Staff C
1	Greeting	Greeting	Greeting
2	Destination ticket	Destination ticket	Destination, ticket, id, and booking code
3	Baggage to check	Baggage to check	Baggage check and scaling
4	Fragile goods	Fragile goods, perfectly packed?	[confirmed]
5	Security questions (no liquid, electronic, phone, laptop, money)	Security questions (no liquid, electronic, phone, laptop, money, guns)	Security questions (power banks are not allowed to be included in the baggage)
6	Seat preference (emergency exit option)	Seat preference (emergency exit option)	Seating preference (which is payable), emergency exit option
7	Excess baggage	Excess baggage	Over baggage
8	Handing the boarding pass	Handing the boarding pass.	Handing boarding pass and claim tags
9	[confirmed]	Ensuring health condition	[confirmed]
10	[confirmed]	[confirmed]	Short briefing

The table above lists conversation topics between staffs and passengers mostly occurred related to check-in standardized procedures. These are familiar elements or topics that they communicate with passengers, to complete their information before boarding. The three participants agree that they usually begin with greeting and asking about departure destination. Further, Staff C informs that he used to check not only destination, but also passengers' ticket, photo id, and their booking code. Next, whether passengers bring baggage is an obligatory inquiry for the staffs to ask. Staff C adds that baggage scaling is another thing to report into the system, and

Staff A and B state that there will be another conversation coming up about baggage weight excess if they have such case.

After dealing with baggage, conversation goes on with some enquiries about fragile items and security questions. Staff A reveals that security questions are basically short interview about some possessions in passengers' luggage to pay special attention, to make sure that they do not break flight rules, and that the goods are perfectly packed so that it will not trouble the flight. The staffs usually ask whether the passengers have liquids, electronics, phone, laptop, money, guns, and staff C adds power bank in the list.

Seat preference is the next thing to ask about. Three of them experience the same thing about seating favorite which is usually asked by foreign passengers. In the interview, staff A states that, "Foreigners are usually tall in figure. They prefer sitting on the row right next to emergency exit because apparently it is more spacious," this statement is then confirmed by Staff B and C. However, in airlines company where Staff C is working at, to choose seat preference is payable. It is not included in the facilities offered. Thus, every airline may have different rule about this and the staffs must adjust to it.

Further, Staff B says that, "Health condition is a very important thing to ensure. They may feel sick, be pregnant, or need special treatment. So we have to ask." Staff A and C confirm that this is also included in the procedure. Although as far as they have worked, those two staffs hardly find foreign passengers who board the plane if they have health problems. Staff C experience one case when there was an English speaking passenger who was pregnant, and the staff must deal with conversation which is related to health issue. Staff C had to explain the procedure also requirements that the passenger must complete. Next, Staff A, B, and C agree that they will also need to hand boarding pass and claim tag. Staff C reports that staffs should not forget to provide a short briefing to the passengers. This is a sort of simple presentation to tell passengers about information they can see on their boarding pass such like: waiting time, gate, boarding time, seat number, etc.

For the findings which are not similar among those three participants, researcher has checked to ensure its validity and to confirm that they experience the same real things, marked as '[confirmed]' on the table above.

**3.2. Non-procedural Conversations in Airport Check-in Process**

Beside job-related conversation that is procedural and routine, at many times the participants experience moments when they get involved in conversations with passengers in their check in desk, which are out of the

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routine and unpredictable. Among the staffs, there have been stories regarding with passengers and their behaviors since check-in staffs are likely to handle various cases or even problems. Good and proper communication skill is the key, supported with politeness and patience. What follow is the stories from the participants in dealing with English-speaking passengers which are less-related to job procedures.

**Tabel 2.** Result of Interview with Staff

Research Participant	Non-procedural Conversation Topics
Staff A	How to spend time at the airport, possibility of visiting other terminals, surfing board rules, connecting flight that asked about their family members left behind at the previous airport because of flight delay.
Staff B	Small friendly talk, sport equipment rules, asking direction of the waiting room
Staff C	Unissued ticket problem, complaint about over baggage policy, surfing board or sport equipment rules, seating preference, pregnant mom (fit to fly issue), delaying and connecting flight problems.

Staff A admits that she has some experience related to non-routine conversations with passengers on desk during her working hours. For example, there is a case when some passengers had to wait for a long time before boarding, and they do not have any idea about what to do in the airport for spending their time. As a response to it, she explains about facilities in the airport such like lounge, food court, etc. Other experiences she can remember are: when passengers asked about the possibility of visiting other terminals, handling passengers with surfing board, and connecting flight inquiry. "I noticed some passengers asked about their family members who were left behind at the previous airport that was in Doha, Qatar, because of flight delay and they had to wait for them but they feel unsure about their arrival and because there is another departure coming up. So I have to explain about flight schedule system and tell them what I know, give positive answers so the passengers become worry-free."

From Staff B's perspective, she often experiences small talk with passengers in friendly topics such like when there was a passenger commenting about the city where the airport is in. In an interview with her, she said, "Sometimes passengers ask about location of a particular place inside the airport. These are easy to handle. But, I have had an experience when an English speaking passenger attempted to persuade me to agree

about over-baggage fee that she wished not to pay. I cannot answer anything, I just smiled." She also adds that once she handled a passenger who brought a bicycle which is not a common case. Other cases she met were passengers in between their connecting flights.

Meanwhile, Staff C once dealt with a problem that is unissued ticket that had him explain company regulations. Another case is related to overweight baggage which ended up in debate. He tells his story in Indonesian language (which is then translated in English), "This passenger brought a 40-kilogram baggage and agreed to pay no matter how much money will cost her, which is still unacceptable because maximum weight is 32 per baggage. There a debate happened. I explained that the rule is clear, but she did not want to hear me. Then, I had an argument that weight a common man can lift is basically no more than 32 kilograms. So if she cannot accept it, she cannot fly with us. This rule is strict for the sake of everyone's safety." The staff also had an experience with pregnant woman who did not bring a "fit to fly" letter, which is a letter of permission from doctors approving that a person's condition is safe to be in air travel. Other cases he handled were complaint of flight delay which might cause them miss their next connecting flights. He adds, "Passengers were worried if they could not catch the next flight because of delay. In fact, they still have time, but not as much as when the plane is on time. This was what I told them."

### 3.3. Language Use Problem

Being asked if they had enough confident with their English communication skill, the three staffs participating in this research agree that they are still not confident enough and still have problems. They feel that they should have serious attempt in order to communicate better. They realize that being profound in English is very important for their job. Communication problems that they ever encountered vary. However, on top of those problems, the most difficult situation is actually when they meet passengers who speak poor English and cannot speak Indonesian language. The staffs communicate with them using sign language, or simple written version of English.

Staff A reports that she feels pretty good and safe in English communication for doing routine talks, but not in the non-routine ones, and she says "For routine communication I think I can handle it pretty well, but for topics that sound unusual in my ears, sometimes my heart is pounding so fast, I am afraid that I cannot respond them appropriately. I also feel difficult in understanding British accent; it sounds very strange for me. But, yeah, I think I have been handling every passenger with all my best so far." Experience makes

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her confidence increased although at many times she still feels that she can communicate 'better than this'.

Another story comes from Staff B. There was a moment when she felt difficult in communicating a case in English. "I often feel nervous when foreign passengers come approaching my check-in desk. The case is, I am an Indonesian speaker, when I speak in English I feel that my interlocutor could not really understand what I mean. This experience gets me down. I know I actually am not good in English communication, and there are a lot of things I need to improve about English especially vocabulary. I understand English but it is difficult for me to respond statements." For exemplification, she remembers she failed to communicate well when she had to explain about baggage policy, "There were several guys speaking English carrying bikes into airplane and I had to explain about the policy which confused me, I cannot talk properly since the policy is very complicated for me."

Staff C also experiences problems, stating that he often feels insecure, when he has to face foreign passengers speaking in fluent and fast English even though he is quite experienced as check in staff. He adds, "I feel that my brain is just like frozen when seeing crowd in front of me. Crowd and noise just worsened everything. Even sometimes I cannot answer simple issues just because of many people complain and talk continuously before me." In addition, he feels that English skill needed for check in staff should not be limited solely to procedural conversation, "I know that we have routine questions that we ask to passengers, but it is not enough. There are many cases beyond procedures that require us to speak in better English." There was a case, an English speaking passenger who is a pregnant mom, she does not have a letter of permission, that in a crowded condition, somehow I can barely explain anything, then, I was warned by my supervisor since I was not giving a necessary assistance for her."

### 3.4. Language Use Problem in Procedural and Non-Procedural Conversation

Three research participants in this current study do not have any problem about conversation which is related to normal procedure. When passengers happen to be very simple, fit, and do not bring anything which should be specially treated, the process can be very short, not much conversation occurs between them and passengers. Related to routine check-in procedure, accumulated information from the three participating staffs are: greeting, destination check, baggage, fragile goods, packaging, security questions, seating preference, boarding pass and claim tags, and health condition.

These information are in line with the procedure proposed by Ashford, et.al (2013) about seat selection, baggage, security question, and boarding document, even completing procedure stated by Lee (2015) which mentions that check in process consists of document checking, seating, and luggage yet not mentioning boarding pass and claim tags. The three staffs are used to deal with those routines, and expect that the passengers will respond with answers which they are familiar enough for them. However, problems come when they hear unexpected unfamiliar responses from passengers.

Another issue is about non-procedural conversation. Before thinking about how to respond, unpredictable questions and topics make it difficult for them to get along in the conversation already. In addition, they have to respond issues related to company rules; this thing even makes it harder. The three staffs in this current study inform several topics which are out of normal-flow condition in check in counter based on their experience. Passengers asked them questions related to: places in the airport, flight information, tickets, baggage policy, seating, health condition, and others (small talk). Most of the times, they feel uneasy because they are unsure about what they have heard, leading to communication problems.

As cited from Basturkmen (2006), in using language for specific purposes, learners must have two basic approaches. The first approach is general core, which learners or users must be knowledgeable of the functional words which are frequently used in general conversation. After that, the next step is specialization, which means that learners or users must be competent in understanding and using specialized words in their particular discipline. Based on the information provided by the three staffs participating in this study, they are adequately familiar with specialization, but not in language use in more general scope, shown by their difficulty in listening to general words or expressions out of their routine situation.

Robles (2012) notes that without a qualified skill of communication, there is a little possibility for someone to be successful in his or her job, because communication belongs to soft skills needed in today's workplace. Communication influences interpersonal relation that Wellington (2005) in Robles (2012) recommends to emphasize in the training as early as possible before people jumping into business world or employment. The problems faced by the three staffs are their lack of English communication skill, which means that their soft skill is still in need of improvement to be successful in their workplace. The core of this communication problem is vocabulary mastery. They admit that they are in need of hearing and using more

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English words to support their work, to be familiar and to able to catch, understand, and respond utterances in English.

Coxhead (2013) mentions that vocabulary in English for Specific Purposes is the words which are specialized and used in a particular discipline. In the area of airport and airlines, airport staffs must be knowledgeable with words related to air travel, airport and what is in it, travel document, etc. The range of vocabulary could be from simple to complex. Technical vocabularies, another term of specialized words, Nation (2008) in Coxhead (2013) stated, can be studied and broaden through “consultation with experts in a particular field, working with specialized dictionaries, developing rating scales, and using techniques from corpus linguistics”. Additionally, since Kron (2008) also agrees that knowledge of a particular field is tightly bounded to the specialized language of that field and in the environment, staffs’ knowledge about related traveling documents, environment, facilities, and company rules in their workplace should be put in the first place, too.

### 4. Conclusion

Communication is a vital part in any work setting, as one of soft skills supporting success of any occupation. Language skill is one of fundamental elements in communication. In today’s world, English communication skill becomes top demand in global industry such like airlines companies. If the employees handling customers are not able to communicate well, this may cause unwanted problems related to customer satisfaction and company image. On the other hand, from another perspective, what is threatened is the loss of job satisfaction among the employees.

Good language training is one of the keys of success. Not just preparing learners to own specific language competencies, the success of English for Specific Purposes course is also when such course can train the learners to be independent and motivated. On top of that, English for general communication is very important as basic language skill before ESP. In this way, learners will be able to use the language broadly, not just isolated for routine conversation.

English for Airlines purposes in Indonesia is in need of development. One of the goals must be directed to help learners own dependable English communication skill in their workplace. The pride of air travel development must be in balance with a proper quality of education. Thus, teachers, curriculum designers, practitioners, policy makers, learners, and stakeholders must work hand in hand to reach better education output, strengthened by research works in the area which today is still rarely done.

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