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PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION IN MULTILINGUAL SERVICE ENCOUNTERS: A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE FROM SABAH'S TOURISM INDUSTRY

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Abstract:

Persuasive communication plays a critical role in customer service interactions, particularly within multilingual and culturally diverse tourism destinations. Rather than treating persuasion as a set of transferable techniques, this study conceptualises persuasive communication as a sociocultural situated practice shaped by linguistic diversity, cultural expectations, and interactional norms. It explores how sociocultural factors shape the persuasive communication practices of frontline customer service employees in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, a key tourism hub in East Malaysia. Although research on intercultural communication and service discourse has expanded globally, empirical investigations focusing on persuasion in frontline service encounters in East Malaysian contexts remain limited. To address this gap, the study employs a mixed-method approach, combining survey data with semi-structured interviews involving frontline staff from the hospitality and tourism sectors. The findings indicate that persuasive communication is not only frequently used but also perceived as indispensable for achieving service-related goals such as managing complaints, recommending services, and maintaining customer satisfaction. However, sociocultural differences, including linguistic variation, culturally grounded expectations of politeness, and differing perceptions of value often give rise to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. These challenges were particularly evident in interactions with international tourists from China, Korea, and Europe, reflecting the diverse visitor profile of the city. Participants consistently highlighted the need for systematic training in intercultural communication, conflict management, and complaint handling to strengthen persuasive effectiveness. By illustrating how persuasive practices are mediated by sociocultural conditions in multilingual service environments, contributes to applied linguistics and workplace

communication research. The findings also offer practical implications for integrating sociocultural competence into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula and professional training programmes for customer-facing industries in Sabah and comparable tourism destinations.

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Intercultural Communication; Multilingual Customer Service; Persuasive Communication; Sociocultural Competence; Service; Tourism and Hospitality Industry



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Introduction

Customer service in tourism extends well beyond merely providing information. Frontline staff make decisions, manage expectations, handle complaints, and foster relationships, tasks that become considerably more complex in multilingual environments where persuasion must cross cultural boundaries. Kota Kinabalu exemplifies this challenge: a major tourism hub characterised by linguistic diversity and a near-complete lack of empirical research on how frontline staff engage in persuasive interactions. Most existing Malaysian studies focus on Peninsular Malaysia, leaving Sabah's distinctive communicative landscape largely unexplored.

Daily service encounters in Kota Kinabalu often involve English, Malay (including Sabah Malay), Mandarin, and indigenous or community languages such as Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, and Suluk, alongside other languages introduced through tourism and mobility (Banker & Banker, 1984; British Council, 2021; Hashim, 2024; Utsumi & Dino, 2025). While this linguistic diversity provides communicative flexibility, it also adds sociocultural complexity. Persuasive messages may be interpreted differently depending on customers' expectations of politeness, directness, efficiency, and relational engagement. As a result, this interpretive variability places significant interactional demands on frontline employees, who must continually negotiate meaning, adapt their communicative strategies, and balance service objectives with culturally appropriate interactional practices.

Frontline staff routinely operate across English, Malay, Mandarin, and local languages, including Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, and Suluk, while also accommodating international tourists' languages (Banker & Banker, 1984; British Council, 2021; Hashim, 2024; Utsumi & Dino, 2025). This flexibility is communicatively effective but carries pragmatic costs: customers from different backgrounds hold divergent expectations about politeness and directness, requiring staff to calibrate their communication to meet service standards while navigating cultural norms.

.Persuasive communication entails more than merely sharing information; it is a complex social skill. In applied linguistics, persuasive communication is increasingly seen as a socially embedded and relational practice rather than just a rhetorical or transactional ability. Contemporary research highlights that persuasion is influenced by sociocultural norms, pragmatic expectations, and interpersonal orientations that shape how messages are conveyed and understood (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021; McConachy & Liddicoat, 2022). In customer service contexts, persuasion often involves subtle techniques such as reframing customer concerns, offering alternatives, managing objections, and maintaining mutual face. These practices depend not only on linguistic competence but also on employees' capacity to interpret sociocultural cues and adapt their communication accordingly.

This study is rooted in two related frameworks: Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT), as expanded by Lantolf and Thorne (2006) to include language and communication, and intercultural pragmatics, as outlined by Ishihara and Cohen (2021) and McConachy and Liddicoat (2022). SCT provides the basis for understanding persuasive competence as a socially mediated skill that develops through participation in culturally specific activities, rather than as an inherent individual trait. Intercultural pragmatics then provides analytical tools for exploring how cultural norms, politeness conventions, and pragmatic expectations influence the creation and interpretation of persuasive discourse across different cultural groups. Collectively, these frameworks position persuasion not merely as a standalone communicative skill but as a socially embedded practice that arises through repeated engagement in multilingual service encounters. This perspective directly informs this study's design, data collection, and analysis.

In Southeast Asian contexts, including Malaysia, communication is often characterised by relational politeness, indirectness, and sensitivity to social harmony (Haugh, 2010). However, service employees in Kota Kinabalu regularly interact with customers whose communication norms may differ along several specific aspects. These include norms of directness when in making requests or expressing dissatisfaction, expectations about the level of explanation or justification service providers should provide, and conventions for expressing complaints, ranging from highly indirect, face-saving formulations to explicit, transactional demands for resolution. It is important to recognise that such differences reflect tendencies observed across participant accounts rather than fixed or uniform cultural traits; significant variation exists within any cultural or national group. Persuasion in this context, therefore, becomes an ongoing process of intercultural negotiation rather than a fixed communicative technique.

Despite growing global interest in tourism communication and intercultural service encounters, the existing literature highlights four clear gaps that this study aims to address. Firstly, geographically, empirical research on service communication in Malaysia has mainly concentrated on Peninsular Malaysia, leaving Sabah's unique sociolinguistic environment, marked by the coexistence of English, Malay, Mandarin, and various indigenous languages along with high levels of international tourism, largely unexplored. Secondly, in terms of theory, current studies on persuasion in service contexts have typically relied on either rhetorical or politeness frameworks in isolation, without incorporating a developmental perspective on how persuasive competence is cultivated and maintained in multilingual workplaces. Thirdly, methodologically, the field has predominantly depended on either purely quantitative surveys or single-method qualitative approaches, with few studies utilising sequential mixed-methods designs that can capture both the prevalence and the sociocultural mechanisms underlying persuasive communication. Fourthly, regarding industry specificity,

research on intercultural persuasion rarely investigates frontline employees across different co-located service sectors; hospitality, tourism, and retail within a single multilingual destination, thereby limiting the applicability of findings to real-world service environments. These gaps collectively suggest that understanding how frontline employees in Sabah experience, apply, and face challenges in persuasive communication remains largely unexplored empirically.

Against this backdrop, the study investigates how sociocultural factors influence persuasive communication among frontline service employees in Kota Kinabalu, focusing on three areas: employees' conceptualisations of persuasion in daily work; the sociocultural challenges faced in service interactions; and perceived training requirements. Drawing on SCT and intercultural pragmatics, persuasion is conceptualised not as an isolated skill but as a socially embedded practice shaped by linguistic diversity, cultural norms, and interactional expectations.

This study examines the impact of social and cultural factors on staff's use of persuasion in Kota Kinabalu. To shape this investigation, the research is organised around the following questions:

1. How do frontline tourism staff in Kota Kinabalu conceptualise persuasion in their customer service roles?
2. What cultural and linguistic challenges do employees face when using persuasive communication with diverse tourist groups?
3. What kinds of training or support do employees identify as necessary for improving persuasive effectiveness in multilingual service settings?

This research makes three specific contributions to the field. First, it provides original empirical evidence from Sabah's multilingual tourism sector, a geographically and sociolinguistically underrepresented context, documenting the unique ways in which sociocultural factors disrupt persuasive communication: norms of directness, service expectations, and complaint expression. Second, it advances theoretical understanding by demonstrating the complementary explanatory power of Vygotskian sociocultural theory and intercultural pragmatics when applied together to persuasive competence in workplace settings, showing that SCT explains the developmental aspect of persuasion. In contrast, intercultural pragmatics explains its interpretive aspect. Third, it offers methodological evidence for the value of sequential explanatory mixed-methods designs in applied linguistics research on workplace communication, illustrating how quantitative survey data can identify patterns that qualitative interview data then clarify through sociocultural mechanisms. Collectively, these contributions enhance existing scholarship by moving beyond generic claims about the importance of cultural sensitivity to specify the pragmatic mechanisms through which intercultural misalignment causes communicative failure in frontline service encounters.

Literature Review

Persuasive Communication in Multilingual Service Contexts

Persuasive communication is crucial in-service jobs, especially in tourism and hospitality, where staff must influence customer decisions, manage expectations, and ensure satisfaction. In multilingual settings, persuasion involves more than choosing the right words; it also requires understanding social norms and cultural communication styles. Recent research now considers persuasion an interpersonal process, essential for building rapport, managing face, and aligning with customer values (Haugh, 2010; Ishihara & Cohen, 2021).

In service situations, persuasion occurs when staff recommend services, reframe problems, respond to complaints, and suggest alternatives. These tasks require balancing company goals with maintaining good customer relationships. Fan et al. (2021) found that linguistic style greatly influences customer satisfaction, especially across diverse settings. Their research shows that how a message is framed and delivered is more important than the content alone. Similarly, Vásquez (2011) notes that persuasion increasingly takes place on digital and hybrid platforms, so employees must be flexible in their communication. Importantly, strategies for digital persuasion often differ from those used in face-to-face interactions. Online interactions typically demand greater clarity, conciseness, and careful tone management, as nonverbal cues are limited; meanwhile, face-to-face encounters allow for quicker adjustments through body language and immediate feedback. These different pragmatic challenges emphasise the importance of frontline staff adapting their persuasive techniques across both digital and in-person service settings.

Recent research now includes digital and technology-based service interactions as part of persuasive communication. Lee and Oh (2024) point out that digital service settings require flexible approaches that balance clarity, efficiency, and sensitivity to relationships. These changes show that persuasion is a dynamic skill that is required to adapt to new service environments and customer needs.

Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Theory and Intercultural Pragmatics

Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT), as applied to language and communication by Lantolf and Thorne (2006), provides the main theoretical framework for this study. SCT suggests that higher-order cognitive and communicative skills, including persuasion, are not solely properties of the individual mind but are mediated through cultural tools, social interaction, and participation in historically situated practices. From this perspective, language is not simply a means of transmitting information but a culturally shaped tool through which social actions, including persuasion, are carried out. In customer service settings, this implies that persuasive strategies are not neutral techniques but are rooted in cultural understandings of politeness, authority, assertiveness, and relational engagement. Employees' persuasive abilities, therefore, develop through repeated participation in socially situated service interactions rather than through the acquisition of fixed linguistic rules.

Critically, SCT also highlights the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the space between what a learner can achieve independently and what becomes possible through scaffolded interaction. Applied to workplace communication, this idea emphasises the importance of structured training and mentoring in developing employees' ability to navigate complex intercultural persuasive interactions. This theme directly influences the findings on training needs.

The second theoretical pillar of this study is intercultural pragmatics, which examines how culturally situated norms govern the production and interpretation of communicative acts across different social and linguistic groups. Intercultural pragmatics moves beyond contrastive analyses of politeness systems to examine the dynamic, co-constructed nature of meaning in cross-cultural interaction (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). Successful persuasion, within this framework, depends not merely on grammatical accuracy or lexical choice, but on the speaker's capacity to read sociocultural cues and calibrate their communicative behaviour to match interlocutors' pragmatic expectations. When speakers hold divergent assumptions about

directness, face-saving, or relational engagement, communicative breakdowns can occur even when both parties demonstrate high linguistic proficiency. In service contexts, such misalignments carry practical consequences, including customer dissatisfaction, relational damage, and failed service recovery.

McConachy and Liddicoat (2022) expand this framework by suggesting that intercultural pragmatic competence involves both metapragmatic awareness, the ability to critically reflect on how cultural norms influence communication, and adaptive action, which is the capacity to adjust one's communicative strategies when interacting with culturally diverse interlocutors. This dual requirement is especially relevant in multilingual service environments, where employees must simultaneously balance institutional service goals, customer expectations, and the pragmatic norms of different cultural groups. Research on persuasion systems also identifies a variety of cognitive, linguistic, and contextual factors that influence persuasive outcomes (Braca & Dondio, 2022), supporting the idea that effective persuasion results from combining linguistic resources, cultural understanding, and responsiveness to the situational context.

Taken together, SCT and intercultural pragmatics offer a theoretically coherent and empirically productive framework for analysing persuasive communication in Kota Kinabalu's multilingual tourism context. SCT accounts for how persuasive competence develops through socially mediated participation, while intercultural pragmatics explains how cultural norms and pragmatic expectations shape the interpretation and effectiveness of persuasive discourse. These frameworks are operationalised in this study's research questions, data collection instruments, and analytical approach.

Intercultural Pragmatics and Persuasion in Tourism Settings

An emerging body of research has explored persuasive communication through intercultural pragmatics, especially within tourism and hospitality settings. These studies consistently show that cultural value systems influence how persuasive messages are perceived and assessed. For example, Zhang et al. (2025) found that Chinese tourists are more receptive to persuasive appeals centred on collectivist values such as group benefit, relational harmony, and respect for social hierarchy. These results underscore the significance of culturally appropriate framing in persuasive discourse.

Similarly, studies examining Korean consumer interactions suggest that clarity, efficiency, and explicit information are often prioritised over indirect or highly relational communication styles (Kim & Park, 2022). For service employees operating in Southeast Asian contexts, where indirectness and relational politeness are prevalent, these differing expectations may create communicative tension. Vásquez (2023) further notes that the increasing use of digital and hybrid platforms in tourism communication amplifies these challenges, as non-verbal cues and contextual signals are often diminished or absent.

Collectively, this research underscores the need for adaptive persuasive strategies that account for cultural variability in communication norms. Rather than relying on fixed persuasive techniques, service professionals must continually negotiate meaning and adjust their communicative approaches to culturally diverse customers.

Persuasive Communication in Sabah's Tourism Context

Despite the growing international literature on intercultural service communication, empirical research focusing on Sabah remains scarce. Existing Malaysian studies tend to concentrate on Peninsular Malaysia, offering limited insight into the distinct sociolinguistic conditions of East Malaysia. Sabah's tourism sector is characterised by daily interactions with tourists from China, Korea, Europe, Australia, and West Malaysia, making multilingual and intercultural communication a routine aspect of service work.

English commonly serves as a lingua franca in these encounters; however, relying solely on English does not eliminate pragmatic challenges. Service interactions in Sabah are shaped by the coexistence of multiple local languages and culturally informed communication practices. Employees must therefore navigate not only linguistic differences but also varying expectations regarding politeness, value negotiation, and service efficiency. Despite these realities, persuasive communication within Sabah's customer service sector remains largely unexplored in academic research.

These four gaps: geographical, theoretical, methodological, and industry-specific, define the precise scope of this study. Instead of making broad claims about the importance of intercultural communication, it offers three specific contributions: it provides original empirical evidence from a sociolinguistically complex and underrepresented context; it operationalises SCT and intercultural pragmatics as a combined analytical framework for analysing persuasive competence in multilingual workplaces; and it identifies the key pragmatic dimensions; directness norms, service expectations, and complaint expression that most consistently hinder persuasive outcomes in frontline service environments (see Figure 1).

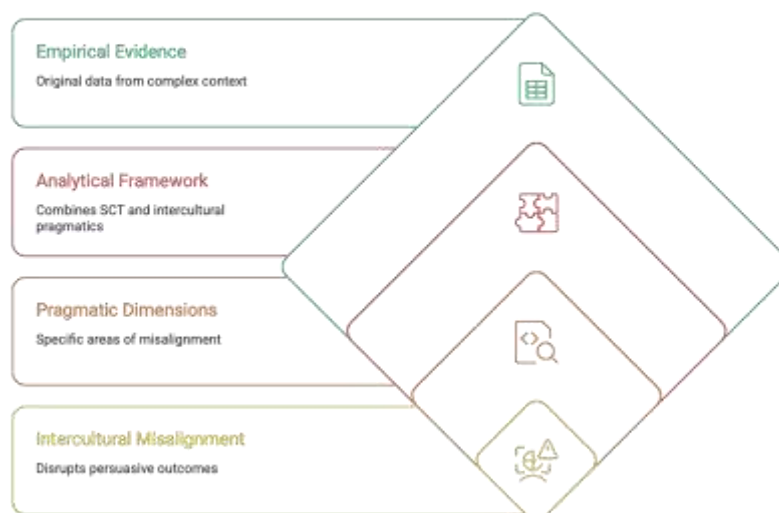


Figure 1: Persuasive Communication Framework

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which the researcher collected quantitative survey data and analysed them first, followed by semi-structured qualitative interviews to explain and contextualise the survey findings in greater depth. This sequence reflects the study's primarily qualitative orientation: the survey phase identified broad patterns in participants' perceptions and practices, while the interview phase provided the interpretive depth needed to understand the sociocultural processes underlying those patterns. This design aligns with the study's sociocultural theoretical approach, which emphasises participants' meanings, experiences, and interpretive practices as central units of analysis (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), and is well-suited to exploring how sociocultural factors are experienced and negotiated in everyday service interactions. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee, and all participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's objectives, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time.

In Phase 1, a structured survey was distributed to 20 participants. The survey questions were developed based on a review of existing literature on persuasive and intercultural communication in service settings, with additional input from subject-matter experts to ensure relevance to Sabah's tourism industry. Before deployment, the survey was tested in a small-scale pilot with three tourism staff to evaluate the clarity and suitability of the questions. Item reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which indicated acceptable internal consistency for the main scales. Survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, such as frequency counts and percentage distributions, to identify trends in the perceived importance and frequency of persuasive communication, the types and frequency of sociocultural challenges faced, and participants' self-reported training needs. These quantitative findings were then utilised to shape the thematic focus of the interview protocol in Phase 2.

In Phase 2, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 20 participants. Participant selection was based on purposive sampling, targeting individuals with direct, customer-facing roles in the tourism sector in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Participants were recruited through outreach to local hotels, tour agencies, travel counters, and retail establishments, with management's permission obtained prior to contact. The sample included front desk staff, hospitality employees, travel advisors, travel counter staff, and retail or sales personnel, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives on service encounters. Demographic information was collected to assess the sample's representativeness: participants were mainly aged 22 to 45 years, with a mix of male and female employees. They represented a variety of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds common in Sabah. All participants reported daily use of multiple languages in their work and regular contact with international tourists. The researcher chose 20 respondents to facilitate in-depth qualitative analysis and reflected the point at which data saturation occurred, as no new themes emerged in later interviews.

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually, beginning with open coding and then applying axial coding

to identify relationships between categories. Three overarching themes emerged from this process: (1) the perceived importance and frequency of persuasive communication. The semi-structured interview protocol included open-ended questions based on the three research questions, with additional probing questions developed in response to patterns identified in the survey data. Core interview topics covered participants' conceptualisations of persuasion in their daily roles, specific instances of cultural or linguistic misunderstandings, strategies for adapting persuasive communication to different customer groups, and perceived training gaps. Questions were informed by themes from the literature review, including politeness, pragmatic adaptability, and intercultural negotiation. Interviews were conducted in English, lasted between 30 and 50 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as outlined in the Research Design section above. Overall, the sample represented a broad cross-section of customer-facing employees in Kota Kinabalu's tourism industry, supporting the exploration of sociocultural factors in everyday persuasive service communication.

Instruments

Two instruments were employed across the two phases of data collection: a structured survey (Phase 1) and a semi-structured interview protocol (Phase 2).

The structured survey comprised 20 closed-ended items divided into four thematic sections: (1) attitudes towards persuasive communication in service roles; (2) frequency of employing specific persuasive strategies; (3) perceived sociocultural challenges faced during service interactions; and (4) training needs and support preferences. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The survey was provided in written form before the interviews and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Responses were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to identify group-level patterns, which then informed the interview protocol.

The interviews explored participants' experiences in detail, focusing on real examples of persuasion, cultural misunderstandings, different communication expectations, and strategies for different customer groups. The questions were based on themes from the literature review, such as politeness, adaptability, and intercultural negotiation.

Findings

This section presents the study's findings by combining survey data with interview insights. Results are organised into three main themes: (1) the importance and frequency of persuasive communication; (2) communication challenges and adaptations, including language barriers and cultural expectations; and (3) training and support requirements for effective persuasion. Participants describe persuasion as a daily part of their work, especially during negotiation, reassurance, or service recovery.

Perceived Importance and Frequency of Persuasive Communication

Survey results show strong consensus among respondents on the central role of persuasion in their daily work. About 80% strongly agreed that persuasive communication is essential and frequently used in customer communications. The rest agreed or were neutral, with none

disagreeing. This indicates that frontline employees view persuasion as a core part of effective service delivery.

Interview data confirmed this view. Participants described persuasion as routine and unavoidable in their work, especially when managing complaints, recommending services, handling special requests, or resolving dissatisfaction. Many referred to persuasion as a “daily practice” rather than a deliberate strategy, indicating it is embedded in their professional routines. One hospitality employee explained:

“Almost every situation needs persuasion... from explaining policies to calming guests when things don’t go as planned. You cannot avoid it.”

These accounts emphasise that frontline employees serve as sources of information, negotiators, and relationship managers. Persuasion is closely linked to upholding service quality and positive customer relationships, especially in challenging situations.

Sociocultural Factors Shaping Persuasive Communication

Linguistic Differences and Accommodation Strategies

A key theme from both survey and interview data is the impact of language variation on persuasive communication. Participants frequently highlighted language barriers as a significant challenge, particularly when engaging with international tourists with limited English skills. Customers from China and Korea were most often mentioned, although issues also occurred with visitors from other non-English-speaking regions.

To deal with these challenges, employees used simplified language, repetition, paraphrasing, and nonverbal strategies, such as gestures and visual aids. Although often effective, participants noted that linguistic accommodation alone did not guarantee successful persuasion. One tourism service employee observed:

“Even when I simplify my English, sometimes the message still doesn’t get through. They may understand the words, but not the intention.”

Sabah’s multilingual environment adds complexity to these communications. Employees often switch between English, Malay, Sabah Malay, Mandarin, and local languages based on the customer. While such flexibility can build rapport, participants noted that using the wrong language or making incorrect assumptions about preferences can lead to misconceptions or distrust. Unclear explanations were occasionally seen as lacking transparency, undermining persuasive efforts.

Cultural Expectations of Politeness and Value

Beyond linguistic accommodation, the data reveal a second, analytically distinct mechanism: the operation of cultural norms as interpretive filters that determine how persuasive acts are received, evaluated, and acted upon. The same communicative behaviour, a service recommendation, a policy explanation, a complaint response, can be seen as professional and

reassuring by one customer and as aggressive, evasive, or incompetent by another, depending on the cultural norms through which it is interpreted.

Participants revealed recurring interactional patterns across three specific dimensions: norms of directness, service expectations, and complaint expression. Regarding directness, some participants observed that certain customers, particularly those associated with European travel contexts, tended to favour explicit, efficient communication, stating preferences and grievances plainly and expecting equally direct responses. In contrast, other customers, especially those linked to East Asian travel settings, appeared to prefer more indirect, relationship-oriented exchanges, where they value face-preservation and tonal warmth over transactional efficiency. Concerning complaint expression, participants noted that some customers expressed dissatisfaction through formal, explicit complaint behaviour, while others conveyed displeasure through withdrawal, silence, or subtle signals that required careful interpretation.

It is important to qualify these observations carefully. Participants described perceived interaction patterns in their daily work, not making claims about the inherent traits of national or cultural groups. Variation within any group was significant, and participants themselves recognised that these tendencies were not universal. As one participant noted, assumptions based on a customer's apparent origin are often unreliable. The value of these accounts lies not in confirming cultural stereotypes but in highlighting the specific pragmatic elements, such as directness, expectation, and complaint style, where intercultural misalignments most frequently occur. For employees working within Southeast Asian norms of indirect relational communication, the need to switch quickly between these orientations presents a notable pragmatic challenge. One participant captured this tension precisely:

"If you are too polite, some customers think you are unsure. If you are too direct, others think you are rude. You have to adjust very fast."

This illustrates the mechanism of face threat calibration: employees must simultaneously assess the customer's cultural frame, anticipate how a given communicative act will be interpreted within that frame, and select a strategy that achieves the institutional service goal without triggering face threat. This is not a simple matter of politeness selection; it requires real-time intercultural inferencing under interactional pressure, a competence that is rarely formally supported.

Communication Breakdowns and Their Consequences

The consequences of pragmatic misalignment are not just interactional but also institutional and emotional. Breakdowns occurred not because of linguistic incompetence but due to the clash of different cultural frameworks that govern service expectations, face, and communicative intent. Customers misunderstood offers as deceptive, interpreted indirect phrasing as evasion, or saw promotional language as pressure; each instance reflected a failure of intercultural pragmatic alignment rather than a lack of language skill.

In high-stakes encounters, these misalignments escalated: complaints were lodged, managerial intervention was sought, and the relational fabric of the encounter was damaged. A hotel front desk officer described the affective dimension:

“When guests are unhappy because they misunderstand us, it affects us emotionally. We want to help, but sometimes culture and language make it very difficult.”

The emotional weight is analytically significant: employees are institutionally responsible for outcomes influenced by sociocultural factors largely beyond their control. Participants attributed failures not to personal shortcomings but to structural differences between their own communication norms and those of their customers, confirming that persuasive failure in intercultural service encounters is primarily a sociocultural issue rather than a language proficiency problem.

Training Needs for Enhancing Persuasive Effectiveness

Training data reveal a gap between the sociocultural complexity of employees' communicative demands and the institutional support available to them. All participants (100%) identified a need for systematic training; 95% reported no formal preparation for the intercultural persuasive challenges they routinely face. Through the lens of SCT's zone of proximal development, this indicates that employees operate at the outer limits of unaided competence without the mediational scaffolding needed to develop higher-order intercultural persuasive skills.

To address these gaps, participants recommended various forms of practical training. Scenario-based workshops were proposed as an effective way for employees to engage with realistic service interactions and practise adaptive persuasive strategies in a controlled setting. Reflective practice modules, including guided discussions and feedback sessions, could help staff critically analyse their own communicative choices and explore alternative approaches. Additionally, role-play exercises focusing on complaint management and intercultural negotiation would enable employees to develop specific micro-skills, such as tonal modulation and strategic phrasing, while receiving targeted feedback. Online or hybrid learning modules featuring authentic case studies and interactive simulations may complement on-site training and cater to diverse learning preferences. Incorporating these targeted modules into ongoing professional development programmes can help close the training gap and better prepare staff to meet the complex persuasive demands of multilingual tourism service environments.

Three distinct training needs were identified through analysis. First, participants highlighted intercultural awareness training, specifically understanding the communicative norms, politeness expectations, and service values of major tourist groups from China, Korea, Europe, and Peninsular Malaysia, as the most urgently required support. This aligns with the mechanism described earlier: without a framework for interpreting customers' cultural norms, employees cannot reliably adjust their persuasive strategies to avoid face threats or pragmatic misalignments.

Second, complaint management was recognised as the highest-stakes context for persuasive communication, combining emotional intensity with maximum cultural variability in expectations. Without training, employees tend to rely on improvised, trial-and-error responses in exactly the situations where communicative failure is most costly.

Third, participants called for the development of specific pragmatic micro-skills: tonal modulation, strategic phrasing, paraphrasing, and rapport-building. These are not generic

communication skills, but the operational tools through which face management and intercultural alignment are enacted in real time. Their absence from current training provision confirms that existing workforce development frameworks have not yet engaged with the sociocultural complexity of persuasive communication in Sabah’s multilingual service environment.

Summary of Findings

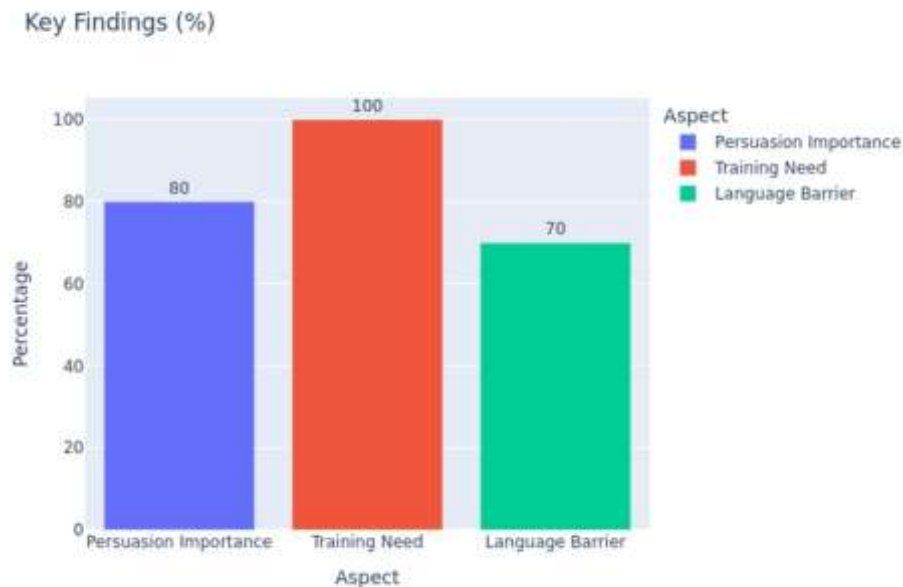


Table 1: Key Findings from the Present Study

Across the three themes, the findings converge on a single analytical conclusion: persuasive communication in Kota Kinabalu’s multilingual tourism context functions as a strategic relational resource through which frontline staff negotiate service expectations, manage face-sensitive interactions, and navigate the structural tension between institutional service goals and culturally variable customer norms (see Table 1). The mechanisms through which sociocultural factors shape persuasive outcomes are identifiable and consistent: language variation operates not merely as a proficiency barrier but as a pragmatic and relational signal; cultural norms function as interpretive filters that determine how persuasive acts are received; and face management constitutes the central communicative challenge of intercultural service interaction. The unanimous identification of training needs confirms that these challenges are structural rather than individual, and that addressing them requires institutionally embedded, socioculturally informed professional development; a finding with direct implications for the discussion that follows.

Discussion

Persuasion is a core feature of frontline service work in multilingual tourism contexts, and participants consistently viewed it as a routine occupational demand rather than an optional skill (Vásquez, 2011; Haugh, 2010). The findings extend existing scholarship by demonstrating that persuasion in Sabah’s tourism sector is driven by ongoing sociocultural negotiation rather

than fixed rhetorical techniques, requiring continuous adaptation to customers' linguistic repertoires, cultural expectations, and interactional preferences.

Interpreted through the lens of sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), these findings confirm that persuasive competence is not a static, individually held skill but a socially mediated capacity that is enacted, tested, and refined through repeated participation in culturally situated service encounters. Employees do not simply apply pre-learned persuasive formulas; rather, they engage in dynamic, context-sensitive meaning-making that is shaped by the cultural tools, interactional norms, and social expectations operative in each encounter. This positions persuasive communication in multilingual tourism as a situated practice formed by local norms, values, and expectations consistent with SCT's broader claim that all higher-order communicative capacities are fundamentally social in origin.

A central finding is that sociocultural factors mediate persuasive effectiveness well beyond language competence. Communicative breakdowns stemmed not from vocabulary or grammatical gaps but from mismatches in pragmatic expectations, consistent with research in intercultural pragmatics (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021; McConachy & Liddicoat, 2022). Misalignment occurred along three recurring dimensions: norms of directness, where indirect phrasing was interpreted as evasiveness; service expectations, where customers' assumptions about justification diverged from employees' institutional framing; and complaint expression, where the form and intensity of dissatisfaction varied in ways employees found difficult to anticipate. These are patterns observed across specific interactions, not generalisable claims about cultural groups; participants themselves acknowledged considerable within-group variation.

However, it is important to recognise that several studies have documented cases where linguistic accommodation alone has led to successful outcomes, especially when language proficiency gaps were the main barrier to communication. For example, in service encounters, aligning cultural expectations, simplifying language, and using repetition or visual aids enabled clear exchanges and customer satisfaction (Fan et al., 2021). By considering these alternative findings, this study recognises that, while pragmatic alignment and cultural sensitivity are often necessary for successful persuasion, there are situations where targeted language adjustments can sufficiently bridge communicative gaps. This nuanced perspective highlights the interaction between language accommodation and sociocultural mediation in determining persuasive effectiveness.

The multilingual environment of Kota Kinabalu complicates persuasive communication. While employees showed linguistic flexibility by switching between English, Malay, Mandarin, and local varieties, linguistic accommodation alone did not guarantee positive outcomes. Participants stressed that customers' perceptions of trust, sincerity, and value were determined by cultural evaluations of service behaviour. This is consistent with Holtgraves and Lasky's (1999) view that persuasive power depends not only on content but also on how authority, politeness, and motive are interpreted within social contexts. Thus, persuasion in multilingual service encounters is a culturally mediated practice rather than a set of transferable techniques.

The findings strengthen SCT's explanation of workplace communicative development. Participants' persuasive repertoires seem to have developed naturally through accumulated service experience, aligning with SCT's view that competence arises through mediated participation (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). However, SCT also highlights the ZPD: without

scaffolded support, learners cannot move beyond the limits of unaided experiential learning. The reported lack of structured training is therefore not just a practical issue but a theoretical one; employees are managing the full complexity of intercultural persuasive interaction without the mediational support SCT considers essential. Trial-and-error methods are both inefficient and potentially counterproductive in high-stakes situations.

Participants identified training needs point to the need to integrate pragmatic and intercultural components into employment communication development. The strong demand for training in intercultural awareness, conflict resolution, and complaint management reflects recognition that persuasive communication becomes most complex during emotionally charged interactions. These findings echo previous studies supporting context-specific training that moves beyond general language proficiency to address pragmatic routines and culturally situated discourse patterns (Goh & Baum, 2022; Li & Song, 2024). In the context of Sabah's tourism industry, such training should prioritise scenario-based learning which reflects real service encounters, enabling employees to practice adaptive persuasive strategies in safe, instructional environments.

From an applied linguistics perspective, this study adds to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) research by showing that occupational persuasion is a multidimensional skill. Effective persuasive communication requires linguistic resources, sociocultural awareness, and pragmatic flexibility. The evidence suggests that ESP curricula and vocational programs should feature explicit instruction in persuasive framing, politeness strategies, and intercultural norms relevant to tourism and hospitality.

To demonstrate a practical application, a socioculturally informed ESP module for tourism staff could include a unit titled "Persuasive Interaction in Multilingual Service." This unit might combine real-world case studies, scenario-based role-play, and reflective tasks focused on adapting persuasive strategies for different cultural expectations. For instance, a lesson could guide learners through analysing authentic service encounters, identifying how language choices and sociocultural cues affect customer responses, and practising modifications in tone, politeness, and rationale for recommendations. By embedding such modules into the syllabus, the connection between sociocultural theory and day-to-day communicative practice is made explicit, bridging the gap between scholarship and workplace needs. This would better prepare learners for the demands of multilingual workplaces.

Persuasive communication in multilingual service environments is fundamentally dependent on context and culture. Success relies not on using universal methods but on understanding meaning within different cultural frameworks. Tackling this through focused training and curriculum design is crucial for enhancing service quality, employee confidence, and customer satisfaction in Sabah's tourism sector (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Suggested Training for Effective Persuasion

Conclusion

Persuasion in multilingual tourism service functions as a sociocultural practice, enacted through ongoing adaptation to linguistic diversity and culturally informed expectations. The findings confirm that persuasion is deeply embedded in everyday service interactions and is recognised by employees as a critical occupational competence. It operates not as a discrete technique but as a dynamic, context-sensitive practice shaped by linguistic repertoires, cultural norms, and pragmatic negotiation.

Challenges were most consistently associated with sociocultural misalignment rather than linguistic limitations. Divergent expectations across three specific dimensions, directness norms, service expectations, and complaint expression, shaped how customers interpreted persuasive acts. These findings reinforce scholarship that regards persuasion as a sociocultural practice, while expanding this perspective with empirical evidence from East Malaysia, a linguistically diverse and underrepresented tourism context.

From a theoretical perspective, the study affirms the dual explanatory value of sociocultural theory and intercultural pragmatics as complementary frameworks for analysing persuasive communication in multilingual workplaces. SCT accounts for the developmental dimension of persuasive competence, demonstrating that it emerges through socially mediated participation in situated service encounters rather than through the acquisition of fixed linguistic rules (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Intercultural pragmatics, in turn, explains the interpretive dimension: how cultural norms, politeness conventions, and pragmatic expectations shape both the delivery and reception of persuasive discourse across cultural groups (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021; McConachy & Liddicoat, 2022). Together, these frameworks reveal that persuasive communication in multilingual service settings is simultaneously a developmental achievement and a culturally negotiated practice. Participants' reports of the absence of structured training highlight a critical gap between workplace communicative demands and institutional support mechanisms; a gap that SCT's concept of the zone of proximal development suggests can only be bridged through deliberate, scaffolded instructional intervention.

The findings carry important practical implications for workforce development, education, and policy. There is a clear need for targeted professional training that integrates intercultural awareness, pragmatic competence, and persuasive communication strategies specific to tourism and hospitality settings. Training initiatives should prioritise culturally informed conflict resolution, complaint management, and service recovery, particularly for interactions

involving major tourist groups such as visitors from China, Korea, Europe, and Peninsular Malaysia. Scenario-based and experiential learning approaches are especially recommended to enhance employees' pragmatic adaptability, confidence, and overall effectiveness.

For ESP and vocational education, the findings suggest curricula should go beyond basic language skills to include culturally relevant persuasive routines, authentic discourse practices, and interactional strategies specific to Sabah's service industries. At a policy level, tourism stakeholders can utilise these insights to improve frontline communication standards and promote Sabah as a destination recognised for cultural sensitivity and high-quality service.

Several avenues for future research follow from these findings. Comparative studies across Malaysian regions would illuminate how persuasive strategies vary across sociolinguistic contexts; customer-perspective research would offer a more complete account of service interaction dynamics. The role of local indigenous languages in persuasive communication remains unexplored, as does the effectiveness of targeted training interventions within instructed-pragmatics frameworks. Such research would deepen understanding of persuasion as a sociocultural practice across multilingual tourism environments.

This study is subject to several methodological limitations. The sample included 20 frontline employees in Kota Kinabalu's tourism sector, which restricts the generalisability of the findings to larger populations or other regions. Data relied on self-reported perceptions and retrospective accounts, raising the possibility of response bias and selective recall. The lack of customer perspectives and direct observation of service encounters further limits the triangulation of results. While every effort was made to ensure a diverse and relevant participant group, future research should overcome these limitations by using larger, more representative samples, incorporating multiple participant perspectives, and employing observational or experimental methods.

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