

**The Sunday Times, pg 10
30 August 2009**

Get them to pass English test before issuing work permit

[Special report: Chinese nationals & the language barrier]

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The lack of a benchmark to gauge English language proficiency when hiring foreign front-line staff is what's ailing the service industry, said insiders, experts and MPs.

A minimum standard of English should be set for foreign service staff and the Government has to take the lead and enforce it, they said.

Mr Tony Du, 53, president of the Tian Fu Club, a social networking club for new Chinese immigrants, said the complaints about China service staff signalled that some employers are not hiring the right people for the job.

Mr Du, who runs an investment and human resource consulting company, is all for the authorities setting guidelines to regulate the quality of front-line service staff.

For instance, the authorities could make it compulsory for foreign service staff to know a list of 50 commonly used work-related English phrases before granting them their work permits.

The Sichuan native, who has been a Singapore citizen for 15 years, said: "I believe employees are willing to take the test. They want to be fit for their jobs too. Right now, the problem is there are no clear guidelines on English standards for the industry."

Currently, there are no specific prerequisites on English proficiency for foreign workers joining the service sector.

A Ministry of Manpower (MOM) spokesman said employers decide on their own needs for specific jobs, including language requirements. Human resource consultants felt that firms seldom gave staff adequate training.

Mr David Leong, managing director of PeopleWorldwide Consulting, said not many companies have induction programmes or basic English competency courses for foreign staff.

Some companies may shorten the training period as they need their new hires to start work immediately, said Mr Josh Goh, assistant director of corporate services for The GMP Group, a human resource firm.

"The faster learners will be able to grasp the language but the slower ones will have to learn the language on the job," he said. His company has helped place 700 China workers

in various companies, mainly in the food and beverage as well as retail sectors. It offers English training courses for China workers.

Last October, the Singapore Retailers Association (SRA) started a 30-hour training and assessment programme for service staff. It is not an English course but is designed to help service staff use the language more confidently and effectively.

To date, 127 retail workers have satisfactorily completed the programme. Another 84 workers are undergoing the programme. Half of the participants are China workers.

Ms Lau Chuen Wei, SRA's executive director, noted that there was an increasing interest in the programme, but added that "it is certainly not by leaps and bounds".

"We don't envisage the numbers to explode dramatically unless it is made mandatory for all service workers, locals or foreigners, to have a minimum competency in spoken English," she said.

She supports the idea of having an English language competency test for foreign service staff before they are issued their work permits.

"If domestic helpers need to pass an English language competency test even though most of the time their interaction is confined to the household within which they work, what more a service worker who interacts with a larger community?"

MP Yeo Guat Kwang felt it was fair that foreign service staff be trained and certified.

"After all, when companies hire locals, they often require workforce skills qualifications too," said Mr Yeo, who is the president of the Consumers Association of Singapore and co-chairman of the Customer-Centric Initiative, which helps local companies to raise their service standards.

Labour MP Halimah Yacob agreed. She said: "The idea of a free market, letting an industry set its own terms...it does not always work.

"In this case, the outcome will affect the quality of our service staff here. If Singapore wants to be a tourism hub, then there should be some regulation."