Headline	Only if they speak English		
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Description	From the third quarter of next year, new foreign workers have to clear an English proficiency test before they can be qualified as a skilled worker. This will also lower their foreign worker levy.		

Only if they speak English ...

SINGAPORE — It could be the next best thing to outright requiring all foreign service staff to be conversant in English, for those tired of encountering sales assistants and waiters who don't speak a word of it.

From the third quarter of next year, work permit holders in the retail, food and beverage and hotels sectors will need to pass an English language proficiency test in order to qualify for skilled levy status.

It passes the buck, literally, to employers who pay just $150 a month for the skilled workers levy but $240 for the unskilled levy.

And while some industry players applaud this, others lament the cost of training.

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FOREIGN SERVICE STAFF

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The Manpower Ministry will partner NTUC Learning Hub and the Workforce Development Agency to train workers, and they are anticipating a two- to three-times increase in demand for English classes. More details of the tests will come next year.

The move, said Restaurant Association of Singapore Ang Kiam Meng, will force employers to look "more proactively" at the communication problems of foreign service staff. "It will encourage the restaurateur to upgrade their non-speaking English workforce ... As a whole it's positive for the industry," he said. But he wondered if it would prove an "extra (cost) burden" for employers.

At the Migrant Workers Centre, which yesterday saw its first batch of foreign workers graduate from a basic English course, subsidised fees are under $200 a person.

Businesses have other concerns. "Half of our workers will not make it (past the test) and might not be able to continue to work. We're going to face problems," said Ms Christine Chan, human resource manager at Riverview Hotel.

The affected half are mainly the backend staff who do not deal with customers. "When we employed them, we did not expect them to speak good or simple English," she said, pointing out that the hotel might not be able to convert all those who fail the proficiency test to unskilled worker status, as there is a quota for unskilled workers too.

And with the integrated resorts opening, "if we send staff for the English course, if they improve their competency, will they continue to work with us or move on? Cannot make them sign bond, right?" said Ms Chan.

How would the move affect companies' hiring decisions — would they give priority to those proficient in English, or willingly hire first and train later?

"The more enlightened businesses will train their staff before putting them in the frontline," said Singapore Chinese Chamber Institute of Business senior sales and marketing manager Chew Kheng Fui — while another option could be to ensure frontline staff pass the proficiency test but resign to paying the unskilled levy for backend staff.

Or would employers turn to hiring more Singaporeans? "I wish it could but I don't think it will happen," said Mr Chew. "Getting foreigners to do the job will still be much more cost effective. Employers will just be more selective in hiring foreigners that can speak better English — so maybe the Filipinos have the advantage, compared to mainland Chinese."

Minister of State (Manpower and Trade and Industry) Lee Yi Shyan said: "We want to encourage employers to look at it as building a more productive workforce ... If they look at how much better service they can provide, that should incentivise them to send the workers for the programme.

"The cost in training is a small factor. Whether local or foreign, you have to continue to train our workers ... Otherwise, if we stand still in our skill level, our economy will not be competitive."

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AND ALICIA WONG