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Description	The language gap between the local consumers and foreign service staff has led to some urging the Government to consider implementing an English Language proficiency test.		

POINT OF VIEW

SATISFACTION NOT GUARANTEED ... YET

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Will employers be willing to take the step to equip service staff with adequate communication skills? TODAY FILE PHOTO

FOR years, poor service standards in Singapore have been a bugbear for consumers here. And of late, grouses have largely centred around the growing numbers of foreign service staff here who have trouble communicating in English.

The hunt for solutions to the language gap among foreign service staff and local consumers has led to some urging the Government to consider implementing an English language proficiency test — much like what foreign domestic helpers have to go through — as a prerequisite for companies looking to hire foreigners.

It is a move businesses are resisting. The justification from employers: Such requirements are too "painful" for businesses to bear and would also dramatically shrink the manpower pool further in an industry where they are having to look beyond our shores because few locals are willing to take the jobs up.

Already, sourcing for manpower is proving a bigger challenge in the aftermath of foreign worker quotas in the service industry being lowered as of June this year, they add.

But as the Government, over the years, continues to stress to Singaporeans the importance of maintaining a high level of English proficiency, why should service firms be allowed to bring in workers who are not equipped with a basic grasp of the language?

The situation is even more befuddling considering these foreign workers' poor language skills could tarnish the reputation of the tourism industry — a significant sector of Singapore's economy.

That something has to be done about the standoff between local consumers and foreign staff over the language issue is evident.

The question, though, is what could answer consumers' increasingly louder calls for the service industry to up their game without forcing companies to adopt the "painful" suggestions that have been raised.

The solution — at least in the food and beverage sector — could lie in getting companies to scrap service charges in favour of a tipping system.

At the end of your meal in a restaurant, your bill, in most cases, includes a 10 per cent service charge - regardless of whether the services rendered are worthy of reward.

Having to pay for services that are found wanting is one reason why brickbats continue to fly at foreign service staff.

With tips, the equation becomes much simpler.

For employees, it is a straightforward motivation to up their game.

Having communication problems with customers would inevitably mean they will not get tipped.

As a result, more of them could take the initiative to upgrade their language skills to deliver better service.

Although it is no panacea for the conundrum — considering the lack of a tipping culture among locals — it could at least take the heat away from service industry players who have argued that service standards have not dipped, but rather, consumer expectations have risen.

In addition, tipping could even solve — in the long run — the perennial problem service companies face in attracting locals to the workforce.

Since some have argued previously that service is a two-way street and nightmare customers have played a part in unsatisfactory service delivery from staff, it is then time for consumers to put their money where their mouths are.

You have a duty to tip when services rendered are commendable, but you also have the option to walk away if services levels are wanting.

For businesses, now is the time to make a choice.

With reports highlighting that only a small proportion of service charges go to employees' pockets, many companies are unwilling to forego the revenue from service charge receipts.

But pit this against accepting "painful" measures — such as the language proficiency prerequisite tests, or forking out money to send existing staff for unsubsidised language classes — employers, what's your call?