

Talking about guests' complaints

by Jamie Keddie

Level: Intermediate / advanced

Section/subject: ESP > Hotel and tourism > Skills > The ability to talk about guests' complaints

Time needed: 90 minutes

Objectives/summary: Through the use of an authentic interview with a hotel manager, this lesson aims to build up the vocabulary which is necessary to talk about guest complaints in hotels.

Example vocabulary: To deal with a complaint; billing disputes; to solve a problem; demanding guests; customer service

Procedure

① Dictate the following questions:

- How do you deal with complaints - is there a standard process?
- What is the strangest complaint that you have ever had to deal with?
- How often do you have to deal with complaints?
- What is the most common type of guest complaint?
- Who are the most demanding guests?

② Give out text (*Interview with hotel manager, Sara Grau* – Worksheet 1)

Students write the dictated questions in the spaces that are provided above the answers appropriately.

Question order – c, d, a, e, b

③ While students carry out the above exercise, give them the meanings of words upon demand but don't allow yourself to get drawn into detailed discussions about meaning (for example, avoid lengthy explanations of the difference between *handle a complaint* and *deal with a complaint*).

[NB: We often encourage students to deduce meaning from context. This is a good skill for language learners to be aware of. However, in many cases, when learners ask for word meanings, they are actually looking for confirmation. In other words, they have *already* attempted to work out what a word or item in context is and now they are turning to the teacher to find out whether they are right or wrong.]

④ Get students to hide their texts and play *memory collocation pairs* (see Worksheet 2). Rules: -

- Cut up the cards (Worksheet 2)
- Place them all face down randomly on a table / on the floor
- Players take it in turn to turn over two cards. If the cards have a matching collocation (e.g. *customer + service, to handle + a complaint*), the player keeps them.
- If the cards are not matching, the player turns them back over. Players should, of course, attempt to remember the position of cards for subsequent turns.
- When all cards have been picked up, the player with the most pairs wins.

[NB. It is important that players realise that all collocations in the game have come from the text – *Interview with hotel manager, Sara Grau*. The idea is that during the game, players will have to constantly refer back to the text in order to find the collocations and thus settle any disputes that arise.]

Collocations (answers): -

Air-conditioning
Billing disputes
Customer service
Demanding guests
Expect a discount
Hotel occupancy
The hospitality industry
The room next door
Things go wrong
To break down
To complain about ...
To deal with a complaint
To handle a complaint
To solve a problem

⑤ Have students recall the six questions that were dictated at the beginning of the lesson from memory. Pair up students and have them interview each other. Encourage them to use new language. During the interviews, mingle with pairs, take a mental note of any interesting points that arise and invite individuals to share them with the rest of the class afterwards.

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Interview with hotel manager, Sara Grau

Sara Grau has been manager of NH Numancia, Barcelona for 8 years.

Add the questions in the spaces provided.

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Nearly every day. Handling complaints is a big part of the hospitality industry. More or less every employee in my hotel that comes into direct contact with guests – sometimes even the cleaners – will have to be able to deal with guest problems of some nature. It doesn't mean that there is anything wrong with my hotel. It's just the nature of the job. Things will always go wrong and people will always find something to complain about.

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That's a difficult question. There are so many to choose from. Perhaps noise. Sometimes a guest is trying to sleep and in the room next door, a party's going on. Or things breaking down – air-conditioning, televisions, stuff like that. Also billing disputes. A guest might deny that he made a phone call that he is being charged for.

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Employees are trained to be apologetic and understanding and of course to look for a way of solving the problem. Not all problems can be solved immediately and then the employee will have to consider other solutions. For example, if a guest is complaining about noisy neighbours, it may be possible to move him to another room, depending on hotel occupancy. I have often said that there are two types of guest – those that complain at the time of a problem and those that complain later when they get their bill. The distinction is important because the former generally want solutions whereas the latter are often looking for compensation.

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Without doubt, Americans. They expect a very high level of customer service, and if they don't get it, they will let you know.

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A few years ago, an elderly gentleman complained about the view from his room. He was unhappy because he couldn't see the sea. Now we don't advertise a sea view anywhere and it seems that he was making this assumption purely because my hotel is in Barcelona. I offered to look for another room in a different hotel for him but he wasn't interested. He said he had decided to stay but he would expect a discount. He then went on to complain about the size of the soap and the fact that there were no plants in his room. Sometimes I think that some guests actually enjoy complaining.

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Memory collocation pairs

to deal with	to handle	the hospitality
customer	disputes	to solve
next door	demanding	down
wrong	a complaint	things go
billing	hotel	a problem
the room	service	conditioning
guests	to break	industry
a complaint	occupancy	air-
to complain	expect	a discount
		about ...