Exploring the development of front office instructional module from the experts' opinions

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

In the world of hospitality, the front office plays a crucial role as it is the first point of contact for guests entering a hotel. This makes front office operation (FOO) a vital subject in hospitality education programs, especially at community colleges. While there is a growing body of research on FOO, there's a lack of instructional modules designed specifically for community college students. To address this gap, a study was conducted to understand the need for developing a FOO module based on expert opinions. Using the analyze, design, develop, implement, and evaluate (ADDIE) framework, data from three experts were analyzed. Educators cited issues such as limited practice time, communication skill hesitancy, and struggles with term comprehension and pronunciation. Meanwhile, students encountered obstacles like inadequate practical equipment, unsupportive learning environments, and overwhelming syllabi. Nonetheless, educators acknowledged the potential of a FOO instructional module to enhance student learning experiences. This study emphasizes the significance of crafting a tailored module for community college students, paving the way for advancements in hospitality education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in the world [1]. The global hospitality industry has experienced a massive growth spurt over the past decade. As the third most important component of the service sector, the tourism sector directly contributed about 102.03 billion Malaysian ringgit to the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019 [2]. As an essential component of the hospitality and tourism industry, hotels in Malaysia have contributed to the country's economy in several ways. They increase employment opportunities, foreign exchange export earnings, investment, and GDP growth. Figure 1 illustrates a consistent and notable increase in the GDP contribution from tourism over this period, highlighting the sector's growing importance to Malaysia's economy. The impact of hospitality growth and contribution is also depicted in the Figure 1.

All over the world, the hospitality industry is known for being a catalyst for economic growth and socio-economic development through job creation. Accelerated changes in social, physical, and cooperative dynamics have influenced every country in the world to build its own growth strategy and hire skilled employees in order to reach a high degree of competence and expertise [3], [4]. In Malaysia, the hospitality industry contributes 6% to Malaysia's GDP and 23% to national employment, equivalent to 3.5 million jobs [5]. It is the third largest component of the services sector in 2020.

In Malaysia, the hospitality industry has experienced significant growth in recent years in line with the growth of the global hospitality industry. The hospitality industry has become the mainstay of the national economy. It is a people-oriented industry involving employers, employees, and customers. The hospitality industry is considered a thriving sector. Incredibly, more and more consumers are paying attention to quality and not just quantity.
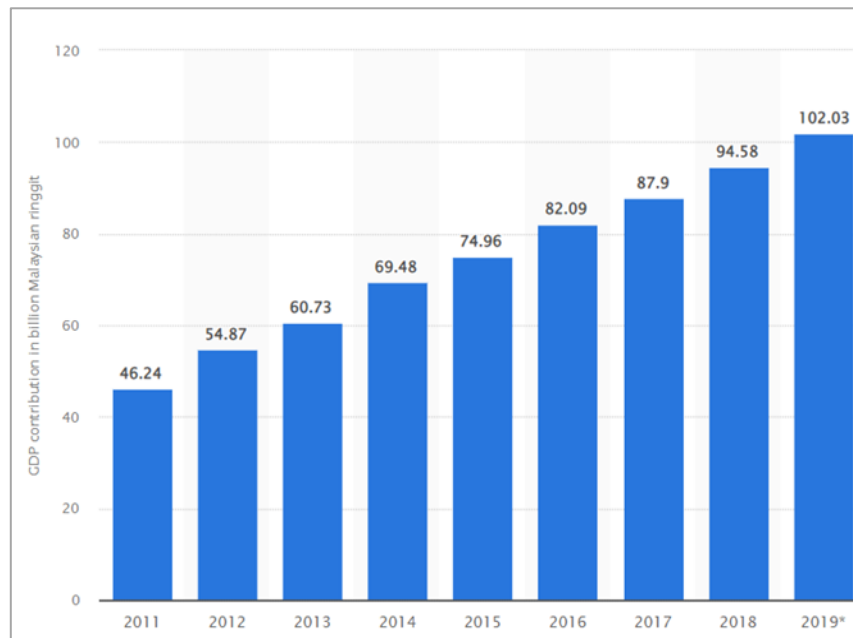

Figure 1. GDP direct contribution from tourism in Malaysia from 2011 to 2019 [2]

The hotel industry in Malaysia is developing due to the increasing contribution of tourism [6], which is also a growing trend in other nations where guest services are being improved [7]. Skills training such as cultural understanding, multitasking, customer service, and communication is critical in the hospitality sector to effectively deliver outstanding customer experiences [8]. In addition, companies across the board are looking for employees with a mix of hard and soft skills.

In terms of employee quality, most customers believe that receptionists must have excellent communication skills [9]. In addition, receptionists' talents include many practical skills, knowledge application, and dispositional skills [10]. In previous study [9], a summary of customer expectations related to first impressions and employee qualities is primarily associated with excellent personal presentation, communication, and problem-solving skills.

New graduates often experience cultural shock when they start an internship or begin working in the front office department. "*Students were not prepared for the real-life demands of the front office; it was overwhelming*," shared by one hotel manager. This issue is caused by the lack of experiential learning [11]. Another hotel manager emphasized, "*students lack sufficient experiential learning and practical application skillsets in college, which makes the transition to work challenging*." Moreover, the learning concept, primarily through group learning at community college, is less interactive [12]. Hence, lecturers should take this matter seriously to create a more enjoyable learning environment [12]. Moreover, there are three main reasons that contribute to students' lack of experiential learning in the front office subject. These included a lack of an enjoyable learning environment [12], impropriate learning environment [13], [14]; and limited facilities or teaching aids [15], [16]. It is undeniable that pupils lack enthusiasm to learn since they find the meagre material provided in class boring [17]. Chalk and talk will not help that much in assisting students to comprehend the subject. Therefore, a proper front office module should be embarked to ensure the students' learning process is fun and make them to be more enthusiastic while learning and practicing.

Nonetheless, the researcher conducted a survey of faculty at front office community college lecturers regarding the learning module. The results of the survey indicate that there is a lack of updated learning modules that align with the learning objectives for the front office course and that the learning resources for the course are not well documented. According to a literature search, there is a housekeeping module developed by Budhyani and Angendari [18], but no such module is currently available for the front office course.

According to Pratama *et al.* [19], high-quality teaching materials help teachers and students feel more comfortable in front office classes. Teaching materials that include dialogues with illustrations and various tasks can make students more interested in learning. To make learning modules meaningful, the availability of relevant teaching materials is very important. A well-designed module can promote student learning, allowing students to learn at their own pace. At the same time, teachers act as coaches by regulating students' prior knowledge, summarizing results, and providing summative assessments.

The research objective of this is to explore the need to develop the front office instructional module for teaching front office procedures among experts. From this objective, two research questions (RQ) are constructed: i) what are the needs in front office instructional module development for teaching front office procedures from the experts' opinions? (RQ1); and ii) what are experts' suggestions for the effective front office instructional module development for teaching front office procedures? (RQ2).

The front desk, often referred to as the front office (FO), is traditionally considered a hotel's hub for communications and transactions with its visitors. The front desk officer (FDO) has an undeniable impact on the day-to-day operations of a hotel and on the first and general impression guests have of the facility. Because FO's duties can be extensive, breaking down FO's functions by location and time can help to more clearly define FO's activities. First, front-of-the-house activities such as booking inquiries, collecting, and delivering information at check-in, and paying guest bills can be divided into FO functions. Second, FO functions can be divided into different phases of the visitor's stay, such as pre-arrival, arrival, occupancy, and departure, as illustrated by Baker *et al.* [20] in the form of a "guest cycle" as shown in Figure 2.

The process of guest arrivals and departures is a central spot of communication with guests at all stages of their stay in the hotel (from booking to payment of hotel bills). The process of guest arrivals and departures can be divided into five main activities. These five activities are essential tasks and operations related to guest services and accounting. Front office employees must be aware of guest services and accounting activities at all stages of the guest stay. Front office staff can viably serve the hotel visitors if they reasonably understand the flow of this process in a hotel. The guest arrivals and departures process represent a systematic front office operations (FOO) approach.
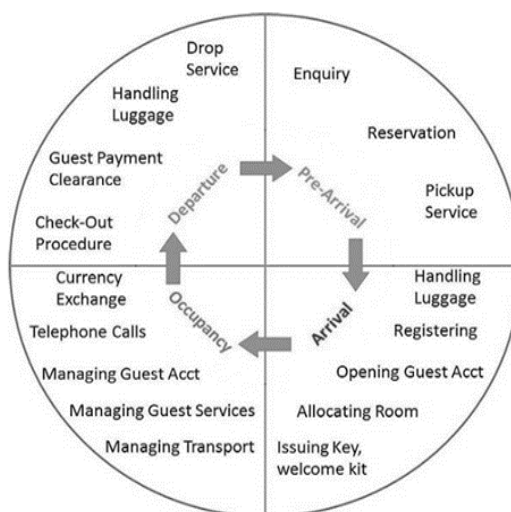

Figure 2. The guest cycle [20]

2. METHOD

The researcher selects to carry out qualitative research in which the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. A list of questions to be investigated without predetermined wording is used to direct this semi-structured interview. Furthermore, this method allows the researcher to react to the circumstances encountered, to informants emerging from all over the world, and no fresh ideas on the subject [21]. The data collection process involves lecturers of the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE) from different institutions which teach the FOO subject for community college students.

The purpose of the interview was to understand more about the activities used in teaching, and the challenges students faced. There were 10 open-ended questions about the teaching-learning process, teaching techniques, students' problems, teacher needs, and learning results made up the teacher interview guidelines.

In this investigation, three specialists have been chosen. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample while choosing informants from a homogeneous group who could provide a variety of information. The study's informants were chosen based on the criterion of academics with more than five years of experience in the hotel operation field and senior lecturers at community colleges. The first expert, currently based in Perak, has accumulated 13 years of working experience, with eight of those years specifically devoted to teaching the front office subject. The second expert, located in Pahang, boasts 19 years of working experience, with 13 of those years spent teaching the front office subject. The third expert, situated in Selangor, with a total of 20 years of working experience and 18 years dedicated to teaching the front office subject. Table 1 includes a list of the study's informants.

The procedures of the interview were carried out based on Figure 3 [22]. Figure 3 outlines the step-by-step process followed during the interview sessions. First, the interviewer confirms the background of the interviewee to ensure they are suitable for the study. Next, the purpose of the interview is explained to the interviewee, providing them with a clear understanding of what to expect. The interviewer seeks permission to record the conversation to ensure transparency and compliance with ethical guidelines. During the interview session, the discussion takes place based on the predetermined topics or questions. The interviewer guides the conversation while allowing the interviewee to express their thoughts and experiences freely. Finally, the interview concludes with the interviewer expressing gratitude and appreciation to the interviewee for their time and contribution to the study. This ensures a positive and respectful conclusion to the interview process. Finally, the data obtained from the interview protocol with three experts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti 22 software.

Table 1. Demographics of informants

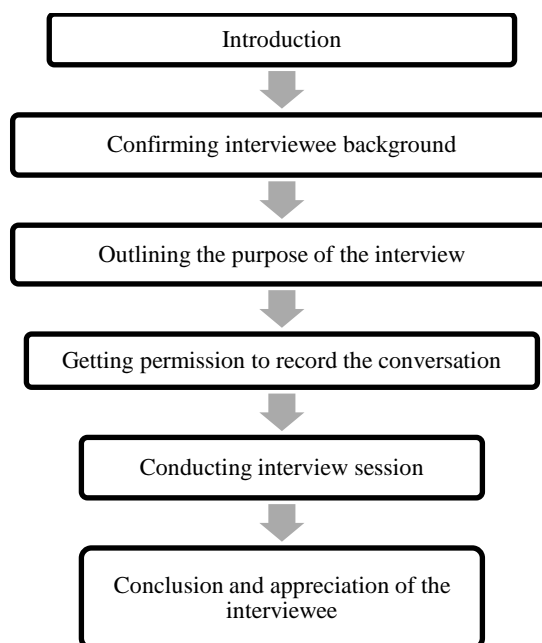| Number of experts	Working experience	Experience in teaching front office subject	Place of duty
Expert 1	13	8 years	Perak
Expert 2	19	13 years	Pahang
Expert 3	20	18 years	Selangor

Figure 3. Interview procedures

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of interview data, the findings of the study obtained from three informants produced three themes for RQ1 and four themes for RQ2. In answering RQ1, three broad themes had been cropped up, which are: i) problems in teaching and learning FOO; ii) the importance of learning FOO; and iii) current teaching strategies of FOO.

3.1. Theme 1: problems in teaching and learning front office operation

Front office operation is one of the main subjects presented in the Hotel Operation Program. This subject is taught in community college, which is for 3rd-semester students. Three objectives that are listed in this syllabus are: i) to show the operation of the front office department in the hotel; ii) to comply with the standard operating procedure (SOP) in carrying out tasks in the front office department; and iii) to show an ethical and professional attitude in handling guests at the front desk of a hotel.

During interview sessions, students encounter various challenges in learning FOO. All three lecturers identified several common issues related to teaching and learning FOO. These include a lack of adequate practical equipment [23], insufficient time for practice [24], an unsupportive learning environment [13], [14], low confidence in communication skills [25], limited industry experience [26], inadequate lecturer training [27], difficulty in comprehending terms [28], challenges in pronouncing terms [28], scarcity of teaching aids [29], a heavy syllabus [30], and a lack of creativity [30]. These emerging issues are depicted in schematic diagrams presented in Figure 4.
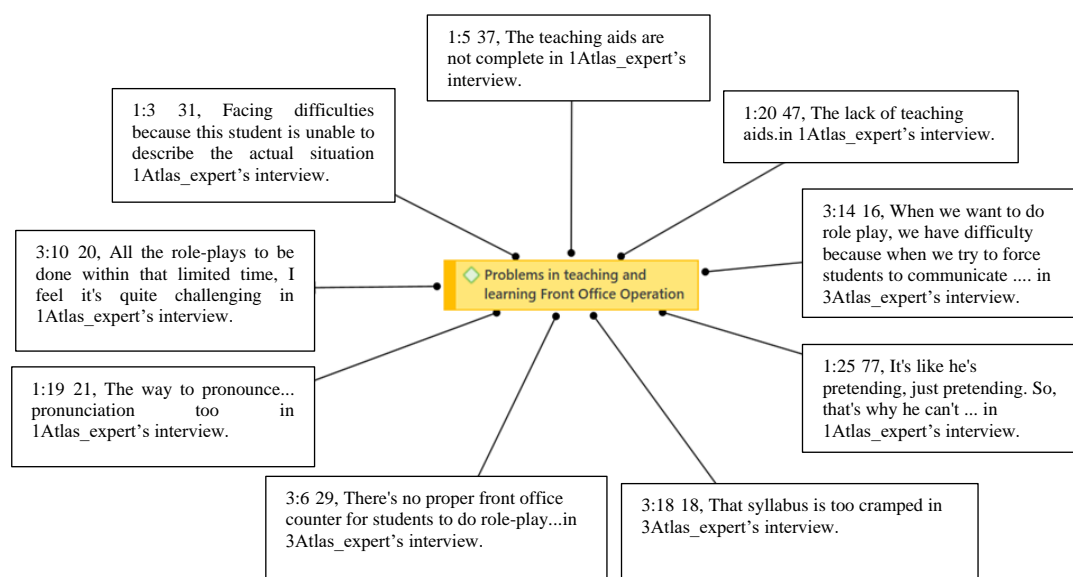

Figure 4. Problems in teaching and learning FOO theme

One of the issues raised by the interviewees is the lack of sufficient practical equipment. A study conducted by Islam [23] also highlighted this concern, noting that technical and vocational institutions often struggle to provide adequate practical equipment, leading to delays in completing practical courses. This shortage of equipment poses a significant obstacle to hands-on education in such institutions. Another problem identified by the interviewees is the insufficient time allocated for practice. Ahmed *et al.* [24] supports this observation, indicating that the allotted time for practical training is inadequate. This limitation may hinder students' ability to engage effectively in active learning methods, which rely heavily on hands-on experience. Furthermore, the interviewees pointed out the issue of an unsupportive learning environment. Previous studies [13], [14] also underscores the importance of conducive learning environments in facilitating holistic student learning experiences. Therefore, it is crucial for institutions to prioritize the development of such environments to enhance the educational outcomes for students.

A lack of confidence in communication emerged as the fourth issue highlighted by the interviewees. Communication skills hold particular significance in the hospitality sector, especially for frontline employees who directly interact with guests. According to Parasnis *et al.* [25], effective communication can boost employees' confidence and enhance their interpersonal skills, leading to better customer relations. This underscores the importance of communication skills for frontline staff.

Furthermore, the lack of industry experience was identified as another challenge by the interviewees. In the study by van der Bijl and Oosthuizen [26], it was emphasized that technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college lecturers require both qualifications and industry experience to effectively prepare students for the workforce. Lecturers without industry experience may struggle to incorporate real-life scenarios into their lessons, hindering students' practical learning. Therefore,

industrial training for lecturers is essential to improve their competence and enhance their ability to bridge the gap between classroom learning and industry expectations.

Additionally, the need for technical skills training to enhance educators' competency was highlighted as the sixth issue. As noted by Rosly et al. [27], TVET lecturers should undergo skill training, participate in industrial attachments, obtain professional certifications, and engage in training of trainers (TOT) programs to cultivate a highly skilled workforce. This multifaceted approach ensures that educators are equipped to impart practical knowledge effectively and foster innovation among students.

Limited teaching aids have emerged as another challenge highlighted by the interviewees. Research by Ahmed et al. [24] noted that sometimes there is a shortage of materials and utensils for practical exercises, which hampers students' ability to complete their tasks effectively. Additionally, Rusticus et al. [29] emphasized that the lack of supporting materials can negatively impact student motivation and participation in class activities. Moreover, Nair and George [31] underscored the importance of well-organized online course materials to effectively engage students.

Conversely, TVET hospitality college students may struggle with understanding and pronouncing terms in the course, particularly in front office subjects where all SOP and terms are in English. This presents challenges for students with limited proficiency in English, making it difficult for them to read, speak, and communicate with foreign guests. Nazira and Syafei [32] highlighted the importance of English speaking and listening skills for receptionists in this field. Furthermore, Ramli and Adnan [28] identified various speaking difficulties among hospitality students, including a lack of vocabulary, comprehension difficulties, grammar issues, pronunciation challenges, and fluency problems. These findings suggest that grade eleven hospitality students face speaking challenges in hotel front office settings.

The syllabus and curriculum are crucial factors in producing quality graduates [30]. Shereni [33] emphasized the importance of enhancing the practical content of the curriculum to equip TVET institutions with the skills necessary for the hospitality sector. In line with these insights, the current study identified the syllabus as another area of concern that requires attention.

Furthermore, a lack of creativity in teaching front office subjects was highlighted by the interviewees. Singh et al. [30] stressed the importance of transitioning from traditional teaching methods to more innovative approaches, incorporating technology. Lugosi and Jameson [34] echoed this sentiment, advocating for the use of innovative teaching techniques to effectively engage students. Utilizing technologies such as recorded lectures, online platforms, educational videos, and online materials enables enhanced delivery and flexible engagement for students [35], [36]. These approaches can enhance the learning experience and better prepare students for the demands of the hospitality industry.

3.2. Theme 2: the importance of learning front office operation

Understanding the SOP for tasks in the front office department is crucial. This department serves as the initial point of contact for guests, shaping their impression of the hotel and influencing their satisfaction during check-in [37]. Additionally, services provided by the front office department directly impact customer satisfaction [38]. Interpersonal skills, such as communication, and technical skills are vital for front office staff [39], [40]. Research by Chalupa and Chadt [41] highlighted essential interpersonal skills including problem-solving, flexibility, teamwork, professionalism, empathy, effective communication, and emotional resilience. During the interview sessions, various codes emerged related to the significance of learning FOO, encompassing the importance of the department, technical skills, and interpersonal skills. These findings are illustrated in Figure 5.

All informants unanimously agreed on the significance of FOO as a crucial subject in hospitality education, given the pivotal role of the front office department within the hotel industry. This importance has been underscored by Shahrabani et al. [42], emphasizing that the front office serves as the primary point of contact for guests. FOO not only imparts technical skills but also nurtures interpersonal skills, as highlighted by Chalupa and Chadt [41]. Jawabreh et al. [43] further emphasize the equal importance of these skills in contributing to customer satisfaction. Moreover, communication skills emerged as a key focus during the interviews. Athirah and Ariffin [44] stress the importance of enhancing communication quality and front desk skills among frontline staff, crucial for effective interactions with guests. Given the requirement for regular interaction with guests in the front office department, proficiency in communication, both in Malay and English, is essential for students during their practical training. For instance, informant two (R2) and informant three (R3) had mentioned that front office could build interpersonal skills.

R2: *"Skills for procedures check-in, check-in and check-out, check-out, then provide personalized services to guests in the hotel."*

R3: *"Being able to shape a student's social skills in terms of speaking, interacting, when meeting people, he or she is able to be a very hospitable person."*
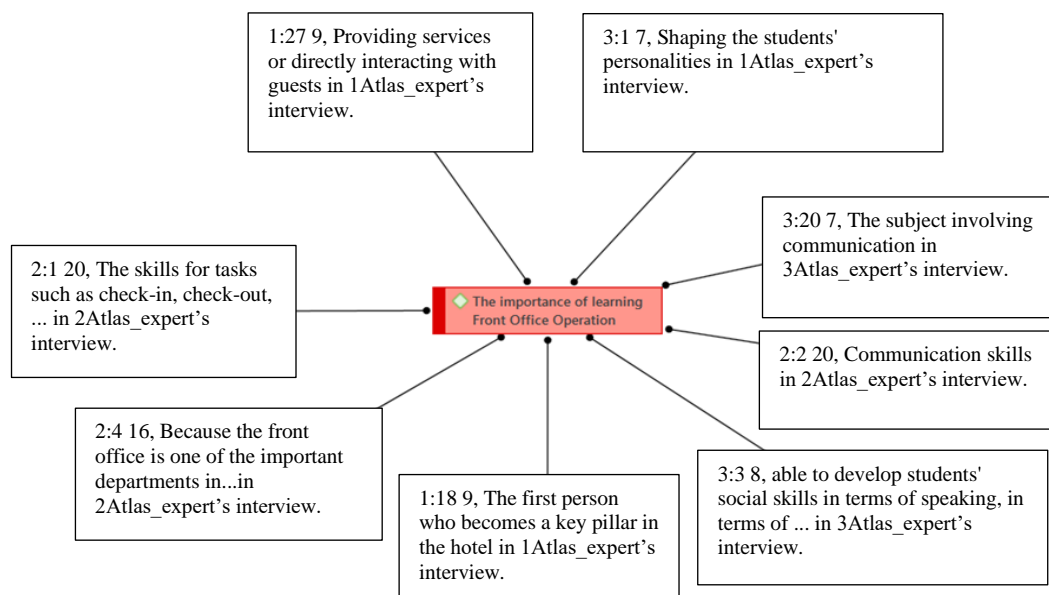
Figure 5. The importance of learning the FOO theme

3.3. Theme 3: current teaching strategies of front office operation

The current teaching strategies for FOO encompass four main approaches: demonstration, role-playing, video demonstrations, and formative assessment. All informants unanimously agreed on the effectiveness of the demonstration method in teaching FOO topics to students. Employing demonstrations as a learning strategy facilitates a smooth teaching and learning process [45]. Informant R2 emphasized that through demonstrations, students grasp the SOPs of the front office department more easily. Furthermore, role-playing as a teaching strategy enhances students' confidence, communication, and skills [46]. This assertion is supported by R3's observation that students comprehend the SOPs better through role-playing activities. Subsequently, students practice these procedures independently until they achieve mastery. Additionally, according to R1, formative assessments such as quizzes aid in students' comprehension of front office concepts and terms. Buddrick [47] has also underscored the significance of employing formative assessment methods in hospitality courses. These findings are synthesized in Figure 6.
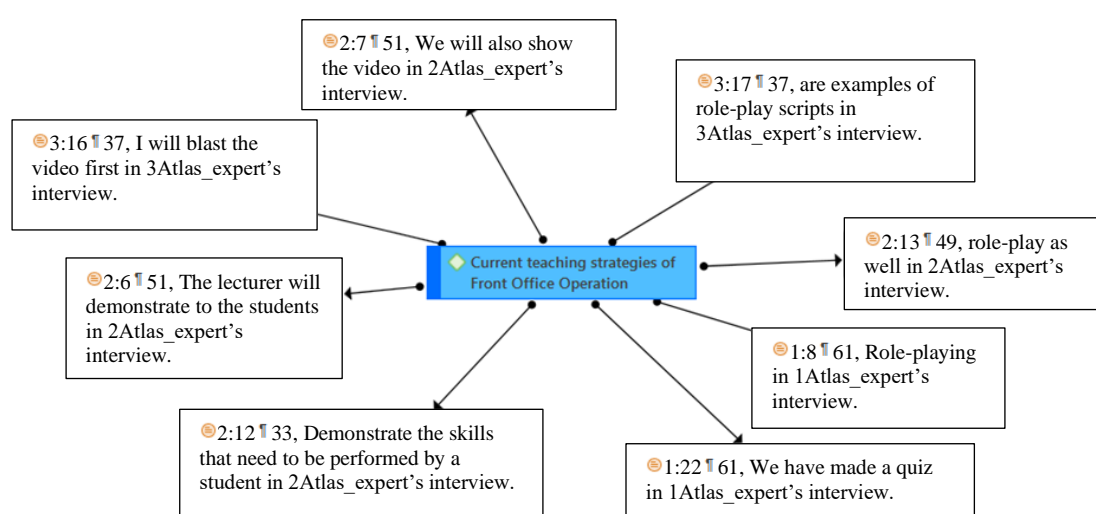
Figure 6. Current teaching strategies for FOO theme

In addressing RQ2, the informants were queried about suggestions for enhancing the teaching of FOO subjects and the essential components for developing an effective FOO. The informants' recommendations can be categorized into three main areas: media, content, and technology elements. Regarding the media element, all informants concurred that videos could significantly aid students in understanding the SOPs for the front office. As highlighted by Hasan *et al.* [48], YouTube videos serve as a motivating tool capable of improving speech delivery, pronunciation, intonation, grammatical skills, listening skills, and addressing personal language challenges. Similarly, Amin *et al.* [49] noted in their research that video demonstrations enhance student understanding and performance in learning skills. Both R1 and R3 suggested incorporating various video procedures into the module. Additionally, R1 proposed developing the module in digital format for greater accessibility.

R1: "*I also suggest that we have video procedures included ... to make it easier for students to understand each procedure that needs to be done, done by the learner.*"
R3: "*...those videos on YouTube are actually very helpful.*"

In the content element category, R1 proposed integrating various scenario activities into the module for each subtopic, such as reservation, check-in, and check-out. According to Gracenea *et al.* [50], well-defined learning scenarios benefit both teachers and students, while Patiar *et al.* [51] suggest that real-life scenarios aligned with theory and practice support active learning. Additionally, Brennen [11] highlights the importance of providing different scenarios to help students apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations. On a related note, R2 stressed the inclusion of dialogues alongside various scenario activities to aid students in understanding and practicing different situations. As Bradford [52] suggests, scripted dialogues enable students to improvise and enhance their confidence, imagination, or knowledge in their staff role. Moreover, R1 recommended incorporating quizzes into the module to assess students' understanding of the topics, even though no scores are assigned for formative assessment purposes.

In the technology category, all informants agreed that incorporating technology such as immersive reader could enhance the module. This tool has the potential to improve students' speaking skills, particularly in terms of pronunciation for front office terminology and dialogues. Rostan study [53] also highlights the effectiveness of various media and modern applications in facilitating the teaching process and enhancing students' speaking abilities. Moreover, added by R1 said that this module also can be developed in the form of digital. The interviews with experts revealed a need for alternative teaching modules to be developed to facilitate the teaching and learning process of front office procedures. R1 and R3 both support this idea. As a result, the emerging codes are summarized using schematic diagrams in Figure 7.

R1: "*Immersive reader is very helpful and I'm sure the student would prefer that he can be heard straight away from the term we're saying.*"
R3: "*I think that the function of the immersive reader can really help. So at least they can hear he or she got the right pronunciation.*"
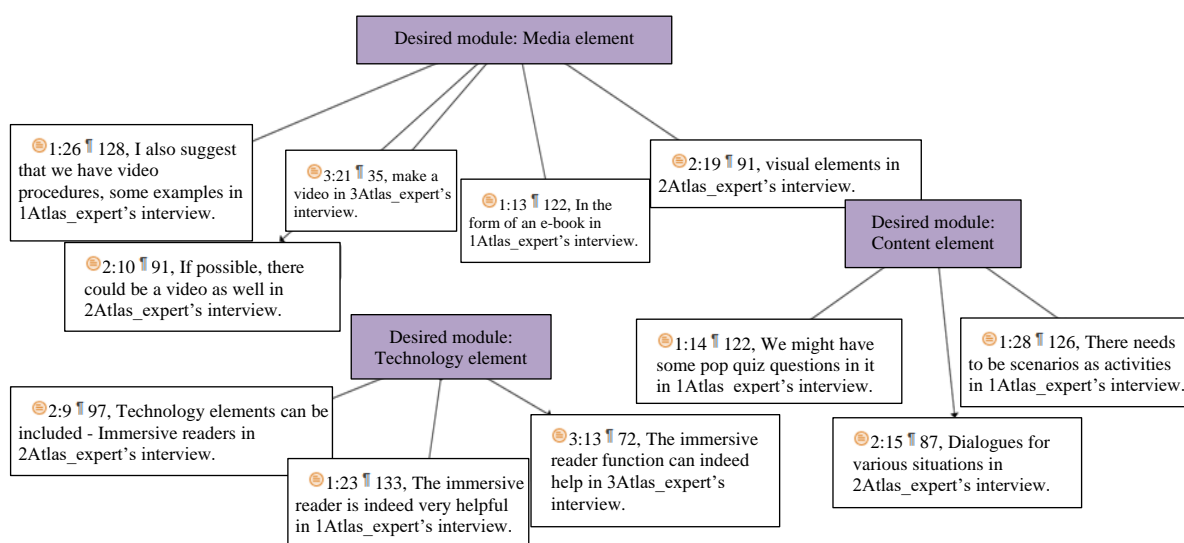R1: "*...in a more organized and structured digital form.*"

Figure 7. Desired module with three themes

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of the needs analysis report highlight issues related to teaching and learning FOO subjects at community colleges. These issues were discussed under three main themes: problems encountered in teaching and learning FOO, the importance of learning FOO, and the current teaching strategies employed for FOO. Generally, the lecturers involved perceive FOO as a challenging subject to impart experiential learning to students effectively. To address these challenges, an effective front office instructional module will be developed based on the suggestions of experts. Despite the perceived difficulty of the subject, lecturers believe that students can master FOO through hands-on learning experiences. The module will integrate learning theories such as learning by doing, situated learning, and the Kolb experiential learning cycle to enhance students' understanding of FOO. In conclusion, integrating learning by doing into the module will enable students to actively monitor their learning progress. This practical learning approach has the potential to enhance students' learning outcomes and equip them with 21st-century skills. Combining learning by doing with innovative learning technologies is expected to have a positive impact on student learning experiences.

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