

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ABILITY IN HOSPITALITY BUSINESS

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Abstract

Purpose – The main aim of this research is to explore the issue of the role of foreign language abilities in the hospitality industry, focusing on the perspective of employees and students. The differences between theoretical and practical knowledge that lead to incompetence in using foreign languages in the real sector are usually the main problem of employees and students preparing for their quality service. Therefore, in this paper, a review of recent research is made to analyze the possible changes that need to be made in order to become aware of the need for foreign languages as an essential element in a quality service at all levels of the hospitality industry.

Methodology – Foreign language proficiency in the hospitality industry involves the use of the specific hospitality language, which is the broad field of language for professional purposes. The research of this paper was conducted in the context of (1) investigating and comparing the attitudes towards the role of foreign language ability role of two different groups of respondents: Tourism employees and students attending the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management; (2) exploring the role of formal education on the quality of service performance.

It included a questionnaire that explored how and why the role of foreign language ability in the hospitality industry is important from the perspective of employees and students. After collecting primary data from the survey results, the authors analysed them statistically using descriptive analysis to describe the socio-demographic profile of the respondents and the variables, and Independent Sample t-test to determine the statistically significant differences in the means between the two groups of respondents and selected variables.

Findings – This case study examined two groups' attitudes toward the role of foreign language proficiency in the hospitality industry and the role of formal education on service quality. Examining the perspectives of two groups reveals that both groups are very aware of the importance of foreign language skills in their personal and professional lives. In addition, both groups perceived that the ability to communicate in a foreign language is important in achieving career advancement and a higher professional position.

Contribution – This research confirms the importance of foreign language ability in the process of offering quality service. Due to the ever-increasing competition, tourism employees and students of the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management must be aware of the constant need to train their foreign language skills according to the requirements of the workplace. The advantage of foreign language learning will lead to quality service in the hospitality industry and tourism in general, increase competitiveness and increase profits.

Keywords: foreign languages, ability, quality service, hospitality business.

INTRODUCTION

Appearing as a term in 1930 for the first time, globalization in the 21st century already sounds as a cliché. From “elimination of barriers of trade, communication, and cultural exchange” to semantically three-concept views of globalization as *transference* (“(...) an intensified transference or exchange of things between pre-constituted units, be they political, economic or cultural.”), *transformation* (“(...) globalization is a process of transformation that occurs at the systems level, and it affects this system as much as it affects the identity of the units.”), and *transcendence* (“globalization implies the transcendence of those distinctions that together condition unit, system and dimension identity. Globalization is neither inside out nor outside in but rather a process that dissolves the divide between inside and outside.”) (Bartelson, 2000).

In summary, all aspects provide the same basis for globalization - exchange. The exchange of trade, culture and people. Across borders, this exchange is also a part of tourism and its inseparable sector - hospitality. In this exchange process, it is important to understand the others (tourists, customers), their needs and desires in order to approach their culture and at the same time approach the host's culture. Leslie and Russell (2006) state that tourism companies must do everything possible to ensure their international competitiveness and maximize their traditional markets. They linked this statement to the fact that intercultural services are the interface between visitor and host, so the development of foreign language skills among tourism employees should be important.

Croatia is gradually and persistently positioning its image as an attractive and safe destination within the framework of Eastern Europe. Consequently, Croatia is participating in the rapid process of globalization, which is an unavoidable reality nowadays. According to Steve Jones (2019), globalization represents "a removal of barriers in trade, communication and cultural exchange" and this includes openness to other countries, overcoming barriers at every level - physical, psychological and cultural. An inseparable part of tourism is the hospitality sector, which includes all activities between customers and employees. Providing services at a high level of quality requires many skills and abilities as well as extensive knowledge, especially functional foreign language skills.

The hospitality industry offers a globalization reality in which the above exchange base can be analyzed through the need for intercultural and communicative exchange using the functional knowledge of foreign languages. This sector is represented by a wide range of services that include the activities of employees who must have many skills and abilities, as well as extensive knowledge to provide a quality level service while making customers satisfied and willing to spend money.

Among all the required professional skills and abilities, foreign language skills are essential in the hospitality industry. According to Tziora, Giovanis and Papacharalabous (2005) highlight the ability to understand guests' needs and solve problems effectively as important. Some authors studied customers' language preferences, and the results showed that tourists who do not receive a service in their native language are more likely not to tip or recommend the service and establishment to others (Tziora, Giovanis and Papacharalabous 2005). Furthermore, the same authors found out that language has an

emotional correlation with the guests' attitudes in relation to community of people who share the same language. Poon and Low (2005) conclude that identification with a company that uses the consumers' language makes them feel at home when away from home.

In continuance, Monod (1992; Embleton and Hagen 1992) discussed thirty years ago that "The knowledge not only of languages but also of the culture of different European nations (...), in short, a knowledge of others, is an absolute must." Therefore, knowledge is something needed to keep the conversation going and to help understand tourists/customers' needs. The assistance of customers developing multi-linguistic ability is very important, as well as being fluent in foreign languages (Tziora, Giovanis and Papacharalabous 2005).

1. THEORETICAL REVIEW

1.1. Functional knowledge of foreign languages (FL)

Through concepts such as the globalization process, the exchange of ideas, the encounter with new cultures and the need to reach out to customers in order to satisfy their needs, the dominance of the English language is already well known. This lingua franca is a key element of communication skills in the hospitality industry. Tourists' expectations and needs are understood and resolved through communication (speaking, reading, listening and writing). Oral skills are essential in first contacts, they help to build trust between a host and a customer, as well as to improve mutual understanding. According to Leslie and Russell (2006), good relationships cannot be maintained if the communication between a visitor and a host is not of good quality, especially verbal communication. They also state that some common languages are prerequisite for such communication, with the aim of talking to visitors in their own language, especially when problems arise.

Kostic Bobanovic and Grzinic (2011) state that English teaching has been revolutionized in the last 20 years by the explosion of business and communication technology. Because of this, attention has radically shifted from teaching English for academic purposes to teaching English for more specialized purposes. Their comparative study of student/employee perceptions of the importance of English language skills in the tourism sector has revealed, among other things, that some students have high levels of English language skills and confidence, but on the other hand, there are students who lack experience in the business world. People who work in tourism tend to be exposed to more complex terminology more often and are therefore more critical of their English language skills.

1.2. Foreign languages in hospitality business

The use of foreign languages in the hospitality industry has always been essential. The exchange of information between customers and employees in this sector, as well as the promotion of one's business and/or destination, is done through communication (oral or written).

Blue and Harun (2003) have already used the term hospitality language and offer its definition as "all linguistic expressions that relate to and represent hospitality concerns" during the guest's stay. All of this requires the use of a fixed specialized vocabulary from different areas of hospitality services - such as greeting, serving, resolving possible complaints, following formal rules of conduct, cultural interpretations of possible social issues, etc. Therefore, the language of hospitality is in its essence a specialized language consisting of accepted phraseology, idioms, and all expressions used to facilitate intelligible cross-cultural communication in which a hospitality employee has the ability to understand, think, and act accordingly in the target culture (Knapp, Enninger, and Knapp-Potthoff 1987).

In addition, Blue and Harun (2003) also consider the language of hospitality to be often formal, depending largely on the level of familiarity among participants. It includes the minimum skills that should be acquired: how to address a person; how to obtain and give necessary information; how to respond to questions/requests; how to use prompts; how to use gestures; how to deal with difficult customers; how to appease complainants. All of these skills are fundamental to forming a language of hospitality that is an essential part of its function and application in practice.

The authors of this paper introduce the term *functional foreign language skills* to describe the knowledge of the most commonly used foreign languages for specific purposes in their practical application - in the hospitality industry. Language barriers exist mainly in communication between employees in the hospitality industry and customers. A good command of specific foreign language skills can solve many problems and give confidence to both sides - employees and customers.

Making people feel welcome is considered by Blue and Harun (2003) as a key to success in the hospitality industry. Furthermore, they note that in the context of an increasingly globalized world, there is a degree of standardization within the language of the hospitality industry. Global understanding of the functional aspects of hospitality language is a key element for the educational platform in hotels, hospitality and tourism high schools.

The connection between foreign languages acquired during the educational process and their application in the hospitality industry (or any other industry!) should be taken into account more than it is the case in Croatia today.

2. METHODOLOGY

The process of this research had several phases. The first one was connected to the authors' experience in teaching of foreign languages for specific purposes (LSP) and having the courses narrowly connected to professional language used in hospitality business. This first phase resulted to the main idea/title of this case study. The next phase was to determine two hypotheses of this research:

H1: There is a statistically significant difference between the importance of foreign language ability role in hospitality business and students and employees' perspective
H2: There is a statistically significant difference between the attitude of the respondents towards the importance of formal education and theoretical knowledge for quality service performance.

The following step was to make a survey that would try to obtain the answers needed for having quality results and conclusions. The survey consists of 55 questions divided into three sections – socio-demographic data, the questions exploring respondents' attitude towards the foreign language ability role (examining speaking, writing and listening skills) and the questions exploring the importance of foreign language abilities. Likert scale was used as a rating scale which indicated the answer options on a scale of 1-5 (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).

There were two groups of respondents divided in (1) employees working in hospitality business (Kvarner and Istria region) and (2) students attending the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management.

In total, 172 valid questionnaires were collected and analysed using descriptive analysis to describe the socio-demographic profile of the respondents and the variables, and Independent Sample t-test to determine the statistically significant differences in means between the two groups of the respondents and selected variables.

The questionnaire given to the above mentioned groups of respondents is divided into three main sections, the second of which revealed the results that proved that some foreign language skills can generally be taken for granted during formal education, but are very important in professional life. Foreign language skills are divided into reading, speaking, writing and listening. The questions intended to explore where, when, why and how respondents use foreign languages in their professional and personal lives.

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographic statistics

Characteristics	N (172)	
	Absolute	%
Sex		
Male	41	23.6
Female	131	76.4
Age		
17-25	101	58
26-35	26	14.9
36-50	41	23.6
51-65	4	3.5
Education degree		
High school	89	51.7
Undergraduate	59	34.7
Graduate	24	13.6

Table 1 (continued)

Characteristics	N (172)	
	Absolute	%
Current employment status		
Student – unemployed	66	38.5
Student – employed	27	15.6
Employed – public sector	22	12.7
Employed – private sector	57	33.2
Profession		
Director	20	10.8
Receptionist	16	10.5
Waiter	50	28.7
Other	86	50
Working experience in tourism/hospitality business		
1-5 years	106	62.3
6-10 years	30	16.4
10-15 years	20	10.8
>20 years	16	10.5

The majority of respondents are women (76.4%) and 23.6% of men. The age range included 58% of those in 17-25 years old, 14.9% from 26-35 and 23.6% from 36-50; only 3.4% belonged to the group of 51-65 years old. Regarding the education degree, 51.7% of respondents possess high school diploma; 34.5% have bachelor's degree and 11.5% possess master's degree.

The current employment status of respondents results in two major groups – 38.5% of unemployed students and 32.2% of employees working in private sector. The group of employed students (15.5%) and employees working in public sector are quite similar in numbers.

Furthermore, the profession performed by the respondents include high percentage of jobs in hospitality service while the half of the respondents belong to some other working places not belonging to hospitality/tourism business. Interesting fact is that more than a half of respondents are almost “the beginners“ in tourism/hospitality business with the duration of working experience from one to 5 years.

3. FINDINGS

In order to identify the importance of foreign language skills in professional life of respondents and their attitude towards foreign language abilities in general, the authors included different values (mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis).

Through descriptive statistical analysis, the most important variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: **Descriptive statistical analysis of foreign language skills (n = 172)**

SKILLS	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
READING	3.69	.571	-.177	-.010
The most common media I read in foreign language are books	2.31	1.186	.721	-.266
The most common media I read in foreign language is Internet (web, e-mail)	4.59	.794	-2.315	5.728
The reason/motive for reading in foreign language is education	3.80	1.026	-.536	-.150
The reason/motive for reading in foreign language is fun (music, movies, fiction, Internet surfing)	4.56	.781	-2.190	5.418
The reason/motive for reading in foreign language is up to date with the latest news	3.71	1.148	-.466	-.719
The reason/motive for reading in foreign language is business correspondence	3.93	.977	-.354	-.900
The reason/motive for reading in foreign language is professional literature	3.29	1.227	-.150	-.866
The texts I read in foreign language are easy to understand	4.00	.809	-.402	-.455
When I read the texts in foreign language I use web translation tools	3.02	1.233	.107	-.998
WRITING	3.51	.553	.336	-.549
My reasons of writing in foreign language is business	3.38	1.386	-.342	-.021
My reasons of writing in foreign language is education	3.83	1.146	-.854	.296
My reasons of writing in foreign language is hobby and fun	3.87	1.081	-.854	-.691
The most difficult part when I write in foreign language is spelling	3.56	1.185	-.421	-.515
The most difficult part when I write in foreign language is using tenses correctly	3.75	1.114	-.518	-.692
The most difficult part when I write in foreign language is using vocabulary related to my job	3.39	1.157	-.255	-1.290
I use foreign language in writing in business correspondence (e-mails, letters,...)	3.36	1.376	-.196	-1.052
I use foreign language in writing in education and courses (Power Point, making notes,...)	3.31	1.272	-.166	-1.082
I use foreign language in writing in hobby and fun (advertising, greeting cards and flyers)	3.30	1.312	-.261	1.208
I learnt to write in foreign language in school	4.27	1.021	-1.372	-1.388
I learnt to write in foreign language at work	2.67	1.548	.291	-1.385
I learnt to write in foreign language during language courses	2.53	1.535	.386	.600
My writing abilities and skills in foreign language are...	3.66	.867	-.595	.745

Table 2 (continued)

SKILLS	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
SPEAKING	3.54	.550	.025	-.002
My speaking abilities and skills in foreign language are..	3.77	.866	-.691	-1.097
Occasions when I speak the most in foreign language is at work	3.49	1.465	-.485	-1.408
Occasions when I speak the most in foreign language is on business travels	3.44	1.479	-.542	-.798
Occasions when I speak the most in foreign language is during my language courses	2.90	1.507	.014	-.539
The best way to improve speaking abilities and skills in foreign language is attending language courses	3.40	1.287	-.373	.738
The best way to improve speaking abilities and skills in foreign language is formal education	3.26	1.078	-.044	1.947
The best way to improve speaking abilities and skills in foreign language is working abroad	4.55	.703	-1.340	-.464
The best way to improve speaking abilities and skills in foreign language is communicating with foreign buisness partners	4.38	.833	-1.375	-.521
When I speak in foreign language, my biggest problem is to find appropriate words	3.38	1.050	-.133	-.933
When I speak in foreign language, my biggest problem is lack of vocabulary	3.28	1.131	-.273	.775
When I speak in foreign language, my biggest problem is to feel unsecure	3.14	1.263	-.178	-.844
LISTENING	4.04	.594	.074	-.438
My listening abilities and skills in foreign language are...	4.12	.811	-.827	-.726
The most frequent foreign language I listen at work/school	3.65	1.336	-.606	2.955
The most frequent foreign language I listen on language courses	2.49	1.477	.403	-.682
The most frequent foreign language I listen on buisness travels /vacations	3.59	1.367	-.664	-.447
The most frequent foreign language I listen on TV	4.41	.960	-1.780	-.588
Listening to foreign language the biggest obstacle for me is when someone is talking too fast	3.41	1.199	-.369	12.738
Listening to foreign language the biggest obstacle for me is the accent of a person	3.21	1.104	-.371	18.211
Listening to foreign language the biggest obstacle for me is poor vocabulary	2.68	1.168	.291	2.976

The mean value in all four analyzed skills presents the same respondents' attitude. Both groups agree that listening (4.04), speaking (3.54), writing (3.51) and reading (3.69) are important. Considering the fact that 51.7% of respondents possess high school degree, the mean value for the variable that expresses the attitude towards personal opinion about foreign language abilities is considerably high and self-confident – in all skills the

respondents consider their abilities very good despite the fact that certain obstacles in foreign language acquisition are declared.

This descriptive analysis revealed that the foreign language abilities development and its everyday acquisition is obtained through listening foreign languages on TV (4.41), speaking foreign languages with business partners (4.38), writing in foreign languages for fun and hobby (3.87) and reading in foreign languages by surfing Internet where the main reason is fun (4.57).

In Table 3 there are variables with aim to reveal the respondents' attitudes towards the importance of having foreign language abilities while working in tourism industry. The importance of skills is the continuation of previous research in Table 2.

Table 3: Descriptive statistical analysis of respondent's attitudes (n = 172)

IMPORTANCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE ABILITIES IN TOURISM INDUSTRY	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
	4.26	.441	-1.486	4.091
Good foreign language listening skills are very important in the tourism industry	4.79	.585	-3.306	.740
Good foreign language speaking skills are very important in the tourism industry	4.81	.552	-3.870	7.186
Good foreign language reading skills are very important in the tourism industry	4.54	.712	-1.620	12.253
Good foreign language writing skills are very important in the tourism industry	4.47	.760	-1.255	3.224
Good foreign language communication skills are very important in the tourism industry	4.84	.500	-4.268	5.796
Knowing lots of tourism-specific words is very important in the industry	4.65	.722	-2.479	-.266
Being confident when using foreign language is very important in the industry	4.75	.563	-2.968	5.728
It will be difficult to get a job in the tourism industry if I don't have a good level of a foreign language	4.41	.857	-1.697	-.150
It will be difficult to become a manager if I don't have a good level of a foreign language	4.52	.841	-2.253	5.418

The variables in the above Table are focused on foreign language skills' usage in professional surroundings in tourism industry. The mean values of all variables are high (from 4.41 to 4.84) showing the awareness of the respondents regarding the importance of foreign language skills' usage on their job together with the awareness that getting the job in the tourism industry (4.41) or advance to the position of manager would not be possible if the good level of a foreign language is not achieved (4.52). Furthermore, there is another significant fact showed in the above Table and it considers strong agreement

of the respondents that the skills such as speaking (4.81), listening (4.79) and reading (4.54) are the important ones while working in tourism industry.

The values of skewness and kurtosis coefficients for most of the variables are out of the suggested range from -1 to +1, what indicates that the data are not normally distributed. The authors were aware of the fact that the nature of this case study would result in the mean values of two extreme opposites – (strongly) disagree or (strongly) agree in the majority of the variables.

To the statistically significant differences in means between the two groups of the respondents and selected variables the Independent Sample t-test is performed. It should be emphasized that the parametric test was performed despite the significance of Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk's test of normality ($\alpha=0.05$; $p < 0.000$). According to Pallant (2020), "scales and measures used in the social sciences have values that are skewed, either positive or negative. This does not necessarily indicate a problem with the scale, but rather reflects the underlying nature of the construct being measured" (p. 58). Therefore, we consider t Tests as robust methods when analyzing non-normally distributed data on a large sample size such as in this study.

The Levene's Test test was conducted to determine whether the variances of the two samples are approximately equal.

Table 4: **Levene's Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	
		F	Sig.
Formal education	Equal variances assumed	.147	.702
	Equal variances not assumed		
Occasions when I speak the most in foreign language is at work	Equal variances assumed	3.023	.084
	Equal variances assumed		

The significance values are .702 and .084 (greater than .05) what indicates that the Levene's Test is not significant, so equal variances are assumed. To test the equality of means the t-value and significance value are observed.

The results of the Independent t-test are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: **Independent t-test results**

Variable	Employees in tourism (mean)	Students (mean)	t-test	Sig. (s-tailed)
I Formal education	4.02	3.81	1.989	.048
II Occasions when I speak the most in foreign language is at work	3.74	3.23	2.319	.022

The results of the independent t-test show that the mean differences between employees in tourism and students are statistically different in final variable ($p < .05$).

The first hypothesis (H1) of this study explored the importance of foreign language ability role in tourism and hospitality business from students' and employees' perspective. The following statements were given to be evaluated by the respondents: good foreign language listening skills are very important in the tourism industry; good foreign language speaking skills are very important in the tourism industry; good foreign language reading skills are very important in the tourism industry; good foreign language writing skills are very important in the tourism industry and good foreign language communication skills are very important in the tourism industry.

Analyzing the data of the foreign language ability role in tourism and hospitality business writing (84 respondents; 48.8%) and speaking (86 respondents; 50.0%) considered it very important as well as listening (80 respondents; 46.5%). The importance of communication ability exceeds all previous statements with 152 respondents (88.4%) who strongly agree that communication is the crucial ability in hospitality business.

To strengthen second hypothesis (H2) of this study, some of a survey questions are taken in consideration and with the application of frequency analysis (FA), the authors tried to conclude if the formal education (theoretical knowledge) represents the crucial point for employees'/students' foreign language ability development. The following statements were submitted to frequency analysis: the reason/motive for reading in foreign language is education; my reason for writing in foreign language is education; I use foreign language in education and courses, I have learnt to write in foreign language in school and the best way to improve speaking abilities and skills in foreign language is formal education.

The significant number of respondents (59; 34.3%) agrees that their reason of writing in foreign language is education process and 58 (33.7%) of them strongly agrees with it. Very high number of respondents (99; 57.6%) strongly agrees that have learnt writing in foreign language during their education. Writing skill for educational purposes is followed with reading skill where 52 (30.2%) of them agrees and strongly agrees that the education represents the motivation for reading in foreign languages. On the other hand, only 26 (15.1%) respondents strongly agree that can improve speaking abilities and skills in foreign language through the formal education.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This case study aimed to explore the importance of the role of foreign language ability in the tourism and hospitality industry from the perspective of students and employees, and to reveal the respondents' attitudes on whether formal education and theoretical knowledge of foreign languages are the crucial point for the development of foreign language skills and their application in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Using descriptive analysis and Independent t-test in interpreting the survey variables, the authors analyzed the importance of foreign language skills (listening, reading, writing,

and speaking) from the respondents' perspective. Listening comprehension skill represented the variable that had the highest mean and was considered the most important. Listening production comprehension was also related to several variables that included obstacles in the listening process such as speaking quickly and different accents. The authors found that both groups of respondents were quite confident about their personal opinions of their own foreign language skills. They rated them as excellent and very good. This result shows that they are not insecure about knowing foreign languages in their private and professional life.

Moreover, everyday foreign language acquisition refers to listening to a TV, speaking with business partners who come from abroad, writing for fun and as a hobby, and reading by surfing the Internet and exploring social media. When examining the variables that focus on the use of foreign language skills in the professional environment of hospitality and tourism, the mean values of all variables are high. These results show that the awareness of the respondents regarding the importance of using foreign language skills in their profession is at a high level.

Consequently, the results also show the high level of awareness that getting a job in the tourism industry and advancing to the position of a manager depends on good foreign language skills. All 172 respondents strongly agree that speaking, listening and reading in foreign languages are essential skills to be successful in the tourism and hospitality industry. In addition, knowing many tourism-specific words in the hospitality industry is very important, and all respondents consider it very important to have confidence in using foreign languages in business.

Formal education is considered as an important variable for acquiring satisfactory foreign language skills, especially writing and reading skills.

Further research could emphasize the importance of foreign language acquisition through formal education. Good foreign language skills lead to quality service in the hospitality industry and tourism in general, increase competitiveness and boost profits. Therefore, educational institutions should create and/or update their lifelong learning programs that focus on developing and improving foreign language abilities.

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