

Greek students' attitudes toward the role of ESP courses to their training in the tourism sector

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to examine the role of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) at tourism education programmes in Greek post-secondary institutions. The author investigates students' opinions regarding the objectives and the usefulness of ESP teaching to their training as professionals in the tourism market. The findings of the research were drawn, firstly, from a study of the Greek public tourism education and training system and, secondly, from a questionnaire survey conducted, aiming to investigate students' beliefs toward the role of ESP to their training. A percentage of 61,7% of tourism education students fully responded to the research, so that their answers could be used for the analysis and drawing of conclusions in relation to the research question that was posed. The results clearly showed students' needs for E.S.P. courses that are immediately related to tourism profession, providing them with a framework of reference for a more effective practice and helping them to handle difficult situations that are likely to encounter as professionals. It is suggested that the curriculum of ESP courses be restructured with a view to introducing more practice-oriented elements, allowing students to continually evolve as professionals in tourism industry.

Keywords: ESP courses, students' attitudes, practical orientation of ESP teaching, tourism education, tourism profession

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Tourism industry in Greece

Tourism is a multi-defined concept, and for this reason the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) implemented a project aiming to create a commonly accepted glossary including words for tourism. According to the UNWTO, tourism is defined as follows:

Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which imply tourism expenditure (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2008).

Tourism is one of the biggest industries in the world, including, according to Edgell [1] a wider variety of products and services than any other industry. It is also one of the basic sources of employment around the world with the United Nations Tourism Organisation mentioning that 1 out of 10 jobs are somewhat related to tourism industry. Bruner [2] characterizes tourism as "one of the greatest population movements of all time", as an industrial sector which is growing and expanding consistently.

Tourism is one of the most important sectors of the Greek economy and employment sector. In the mid-20th century, Greece welcomed the first recreational tourists, who visited Greece to discover not only its ancient civilization but also a culture and traditions different to their own. Also, in the early 1950s, the first concerted efforts establishment of the were made in the tourism industry with the reestablishment of the Greek National Tourism Organisation (GNTO), the state Organisation which laid the foundations for tourism policy development and implementation in Greece.

Tourism GDP (Gross Domestic Product) accounted for 6,8% of total GVA (Gross Value Added) in 2017. According to the Bank of Greece [3], the tourism industry employed 381 800 people in 2018, which corresponds to 10% of total employment in Greece, while total exports accounted for 43,3% of total service exports. Tourists from other EU countries accounted for approximately two-thirds of total

visits, an increase of 15,1% over the previous year. In addition, 31.3 million tourists visited Greece in 2019, making Greece one of the most visited countries in the world, thus contributing to approximately 25% to the nation's Gross Domestic Product.

1.2. Tourism Education in Greece

In the last decades, tourism has evolved into a dynamic economic field, requiring according to Littlejohn & Watson [4] the combination of high-quality service provision and increased labour productivity, which cannot be achieved without highly-trained personnel. From an educational perspective, this growing demand for highly skilled tourism employees leads to a growing demand for tourism education to adequately prepare the workforce to serve present and future needs of the industry.

In Greece, tourism industry constitutes one of the most significant factors for the employability and the development of national economy. The growth of tourism since the 1970s has led to the demand for highly skilled personnel since a significant factor in the tourism industry is undoubtedly the human resources. According to Tsartas [5], tourism education and training in Greece begins in the 1930s and continues their activities continuously until today as provided by a number of state and private-sector bodies at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary education levels. In 1936, the "Professional Hotel School" was established which was renamed in "School of Tourism Professions" as a state body in year 1937 supervised by the Ministry of Education. Public tourism education is provided at three educational levels:

In secondary education, by the Technical Vocational Schools (EPALs) supervised by the Ministry of Education, the Vocational Schools supervised by the Organisation of tourism education and training (OTEK) and the Vocational Schools supervised by the National Employment agency by the national Employment agency – Ministry of Employment (OAED).

In post-secondary education provided by three different types of Vocational Training institutes (IEKs) which are supervised by the Ministry of Education, the Organisation of Tourism Education and training and the National Employment Agency. The IEKs constitute an intermediate stage between Secondary and Tertiary education.

In tertiary education, by the Technological Educational institutes (TEIs) and the Schools of Tourism at university institutions supervised by the Ministry of Education. Tourism Studies at University institutions at undergraduate level were introduced in the academic year 2017-18 at the University of the Aegean and the University of Piraeus. At postgraduate level, tourism studies were first introduced by the Hellenic Open University in the academic year 2000-01 and later by the university of the Aegean, the University of Piraeus and the University of Macedonia. Today a process of unite between the Universities and the Technological Educational institutes is in progress aiming to reduce the number of higher education institutes in Greece.

1.3. ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in tourism education

Tourism education has developed very fast in recent years in Greece which has straightly influenced ELT (English Language Teaching). Employees who work in tourism and hospitality industry are highly aware of its importance and the need to have a good command of English in their workplace. According to Robinson [6], English for Specific Purposes is a term that refers to teaching or studying English for a particular profession or for business in general. In fact, ESP is considered as a type of ELT and a goal-oriented language activity in which learners are required to obtain a specific purpose as a result of the learning process. Lorenzo [7] states that the difference between the ELT and ESP learners is that ESP learners are nearly aware of English but they are still required to learn the language in order to respond to the demands of various vocational or academic situations and develop a number of professional skills.

English for Tourism has been categorized under English for specific Purposes (ESP) which is an important area of specialization within the field of English language teaching and learning. Cravotta [8] mentions that English for Tourism and Hospitality is used for international tourism and service industry which is considered under the category of English for specific purposes and its practical application needs to be investigated. In fact, English for Tourism helps learners develop specific domains of language skills and apply them properly in the relevant tourism sectors such as Food and Beverage Services, Air Flight services, Hotel Services and Tour Guides. Regarding curriculum design for an English for Tourism courses, the basic objective should be for learners to be able to use what they have learned in order to perform their jobs more effectively. Some of the questions that have to be asked in order to set exact aims and objectives of the courses are the following: "What do the students need to learn?", "What topic areas need to be covered", "What aspects of language will be required and how will they be described" (Hutchinson & Waters, [9]). They also refer to teacher investigation of the

question words “why”, “who”, “when”, and “where” which are related to the nature of the learning situation and the specific target.

II. THE RESEARCH

2.1. Research methodology

2.1.1. Aims and objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of ESP to students’ training in the field of tourism and analyse the relationship between the knowledge and skills provided at post-secondary training institutions and students’ needs and expectations regarding ESP courses. More specifically the present research aims:

- to explore Greek students’ attitudes and beliefs toward the contribution of ESP to their training
- to identify students’ needs and expectations from ESP courses as well as the difficulties they might encounter in understanding the course material

2.1.2. Method and research tools

The research method that was applied for the implementation of the current study was a descriptive one, aiming to provide an accurate and total description of the situation and a realistic profile of Greek student’s perceptions on the role of ESP in tourism education. In addition, the descriptive method helped the researcher to gain insights for offering new proposals and recommendations to the problem in question.

2.2. Preparation stage

The preparation stage entailed a number of activities such as: identifying who will supply the information, define how the needed information will be obtained (determining the appropriate method of collecting the data), designing the sample plan and the data collection instrument.

For the present research a quantitative research method was applied which involves a statistical approach to research design. According to Creswell [10], quantitative research “employs strategies of inquiry such as experimental or surveys, and collects data on predetermined instruments that yield statistical data”.

A special questionnaire was designed as a data collection instrument, aiming to achieve three main objectives:

- to translate the required information into a set of specific questions that the participants to the research will be willing to answer
- To minimize response errors arising from misinterpreted questions

The questionnaire was a structured one with closed-end questions. It was divided into three parts: the first part contained questions related to participants’ personal features such as gender, age, working experience in the tourism industry and level of English competence. The second part of the questionnaire contains questions aiming to investigate objectives and content of ESP courses in tourism education programmes and the third part investigates students’ attitudes toward the position of ESP in tourism education programmes and the interrelationship between theoretical and practical training.

The sample included 37 students of post-secondary tourism education programmes in Greece, of which 5 did not provide full answers and, therefore, the latter were not taken into account to the results analysis. Students filled out the questionnaires during the first twenty minutes of class of an ESP course according to written instructions they were given as well as some verbal clarifications in order to avoid misunderstandings. The statistical data gathered from the questionnaire were analysed using the programme of statistical analysis IBM SPSS 19 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The main results of the research with respect to the students’ opinions are presented hereafter.

III. SURVEY RESULTS

In this section, the results from the participants’ replies to the questionnaire are shown. The questionnaire consists of 18 questions and the results are presented separately for each question. From their replies, the researcher gathered the following results:

3.1. Part one: Personal Features

1. Gender of respondents

From the students questioned, 5 (15,6%) were men and 27 were women (84,4%).

2. Age of respondents

The majority of respondents, that is 23 persons (71,9%) were between 20 and 29 years old, 6 of them (18,7%) were between 30 and 39, and only three of them (9,4%) were between 40 and 49.

3. Professional experience in tourism industry

With regard to their professional experience in the field of tourism, the greatest percentage of the respondents (62,5%) stated that they had some experience while 37,5% of them had no experience in the tourism market. Of those who answered positively, ten of them (50%) had less than a year of

working experience, one of them (5%) from 6 to 9 years and only two (10%) had more than 10 years of working experience.

4. Level of English language competence

With respect to their level of English language competence, 15 persons (48,4%) were at beginners' level, one out of four (25,8%) were at intermediate level, six of them (19,4%) at advanced level and only two had a proficient level.

Part Two: Objectives and content of ESP courses in tourism education programmes

1. The main objectives of ESP teaching

The majority of the participants (96,9%) believe that the main objective of the course is to teach basic English tourism terminology. In addition, most of them (87,5%) consider that tourism terminology would help them encounter practical problems that are likely to arise during their work in tourism industry. Almost half of them believe that ESP learning would help them improve their communicative skills, as a necessary prerequisite in tourism industry.

2. ESP courses should contribute to improving students' intercultural skills

Respondents also commented on the contribution of ESP toward intercultural skills development, that is closely related to job market requirements. 90% considered that ESP should play a significant role in cultivating students' intercultural knowledge and skills that would help them encounter cultural differences as future professionals in the field of tourism industry.

3. Generally speaking, I am satisfied with the didactic approach applied in ESP courses

Judging by their answers to the above question, their opinions are contradictory and ambiguous. To be more specific, 19 participants out of the 32 (59,4%) expressed their satisfaction concerning the methodology applied by the teachers, one third of them did not provide an answer, and, finally, three of them expressed their dissatisfaction by the teaching approach that is applied in the particular courses.

4. Assessment methods should aim at assessing the necessary skills (social, intercultural, communicative) required by professionals in the tourism industry.

A question that is directly related to the methodology applied by English instructors at ESP courses concerns the assessment methods of students' performance. The majority of the participants (56,3%) expressed the need for new assessment methods that would evaluate the skills required by professionals working in the tourism industry. On the contrary, seven of the participants (21,9%) have not formulated an opinion on

5. Difficulties, if any, that you encounter in understanding the class material

The three thirds of the participants (75%) stated that they do not actually encounter any problems in understanding the class material, whereas 25% provided a positive answer to the above statement.

Referring to the specific difficulties of those answered positively to the above question, the basic difficulty mentioned by most participants (87,5%) is their knowledge gap in the English language. In addition, half of them (50%) are not satisfied by the number of teaching hours which they consider to be insufficient. Three of the participants find difficulties in understanding the English terminology related to tourism and, finally, two of the students mentioned that they did not take enough practice on the course's material and, consequently, they forgot it easily.

6. Applicability of knowledge acquired at ESP courses to tourism professions increases student motivation toward ESP learning

With regard to this question, 25 out of 32 participants (78,1%) responded positively, expressing their preference regarding a professional orientation of ESP courses and their connectivity to tourism industry. On the contrary, 5 out of 32 participants did not formulate an attitude for this question, and only two (5,3%) do not agree with the connectivity of ESP courses to tourism profession.

7. English instructors should have some working experience in the tourism industry

The above question refers to English instructors and to what extent working experience in tourism industry is considered necessary for ESP teaching. It is obvious that the vast majority of them (93,7%) are of the opinion that professional experience in the tourism industry is an asset for teaching English for tourism, whereas two of them (6,3%) have not formulated a clear attitude.

8. Team work activities contribute to students' social skills development, as a major skill required by professionals in the tourism industry

With regard to the role of team work activities to the learning process, three out of four students (75,5%) recognize their contribution to team spirit and social skills development, five of the participants (15,6%) have not formulated a clear attitude and, finally, three of them have negative opinion on the subject.

9. Project assignment is necessary, so that students practise the theoretical knowledge they have acquired from ESP courses

Most questionnaire respondents (78,1%) recognize the importance of project assignment as a teaching instrument that provides them with the opportunity to put in practice the theoretical knowledge gained from ESP courses, four of them (12,6%) responded negatively, while three respondents (9,4%) are indecisive.

10. The use of New Technology is strongly recommended at ESP courses

As far as the role of New Technology is concerned, the results have shown that their attitudes are contradictory, with 18 of the respondents (58,3%) considering necessary the use of computer-based activities. Besides, one out of four has neutral attitude, while the percentage of the respondents who have expressed a negative opinion on the subject amounts to 3.

3.3. Part Three: The position of ESP courses in tourism education programmes -interrelationship between theoretical and practical training

1. Your overall attitude on the contribution of ESP courses to your training as professionals in tourism industry

Regarding the overall students' attitude on the usefulness of ESP courses to their training in the field of tourism, the vast majority of the respondents (84,4%) believe in the significance of ESP courses to tourism professions, the rest of them (15,6%) have a neutral attitude, whereas none of the participants expresses negative opinion with regard to the role of ESP to their training.

2. Training stage at which ESP should be taught

With regard to the level of studies at which ESP should be taught, their opinion is absolutely clear with the vast majority of the students (96,9%) to believe that ESP should be taught throughout their studies, whereas only one student believes that it should be taught during the first semesters of the tourism training programme.

3. ESP should be taught as an autonomous component in tourism education programmes

Another relevant question was whether ESP should constitute an autonomous component in tourism education programmes or it should be taught through the practical courses offered in tourism education programmes. Their opinions regarding the particular question were contradictory, with half of them (51,6%) to believe that English for tourism should be taught through the practical courses offered by tourism education programmes and the other half to support that English for tourism should be taught as an autonomous component in tourism education programmes.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study investigated students' attitudes on the usefulness of ESP to their training as professionals in the tourism industry. Regarding the objectives of ESP courses students believe that, apart from providing knowledge on English terminology, they should help them handle practical communication problems they are likely to meet as professionals in tourism market. There is also a clear view concerning the need for practice-oriented education adding to the knowledge and skills acquired at the course.

To this context, students were of the opinion that English instructors should have some working experience in the tourism industry that would help them to relate English terminology to the profession. They would also like the assessment methods to help them develop their communicative, social and cultural skills that are closely related to the profession. Finally, they consider very important team work and project assignment as didactic instruments that would provide them with the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge acquired at ESP courses.

It is therefore quite clear that a holistic didactic approach to English for tourism is required that should help students gain a deeper understanding of the multidimensional role of ESP courses and acquire knowledge of main issues regarding the tourism professions. More specifically, the results of the study indicated the need for a more systematic approach to English for tourism teaching that is closely related to the tourism market and the actual needs of those working in the tourism industry. For an efficient educational system to be developed, it is imperative that the demands of the tourism industry be taken into account. Hence, it is suggested that English for tourism modules be constructed as a more articulate system that would closely connect the tourism education system with the industry's needs.

Based on the findings of the research the following proposals are recommended that could be taken into account by curriculum designers aiming to improve the quality of tourism education programmes. The didactic methodology that is suggested is based on the principles taken from the following approaches:

Humanistic teaching approach

The student is considered as a subject contributing himself to the improvement of his skills and not as a passive object receiving passive knowledge by the teacher.

Furthermore, special emphasis is laid on sentimental intelligence development that is related to the learning outcomes.

Communicative approach

This approach is based on the communicative function of language and its various pragmatic elements so that efficient communication is achieved in different situations.

Cooperative approach

The concept of team work is very important aiming to social and communicative skills acquisition and the development of students' team spirit.

Social constructivism

The learning process is considered to be a social act contributing to knowledge acquisition based on previous experiences, knowledge and motives that students bring in class. Learner autonomy is a key element in this approach and the basic objective for students is "to learn how to learn".

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

Greek students' attitudes toward the role of ESP courses to their training in the tourism sector

PART ONE: Personal features

Please provide the following information and put a tick accordingly

1. Gender

Male Female

2. Age

20-29 30-39 40-49

3. Do you have any professional experience in the field of tourism?

Yes No

If so, please specify years of working experience

Less than a year

1-5 years

6-9 years

More than 10 years

4. Level of English language competence

Beginner

Intermediate

Advanced

Proficient

PART TWO: Objectives and content of ESP courses in tourism education programmes

1. The main objectives of ESP teaching (You may check more than one answer)

To offer students basic knowledge of English terminology on tourism

To help students develop their communicative skills, as a necessary prerequisite in the tourism industry

To help students handle cultural differences which are likely to encounter as professionals in the field of tourism

To help students deal with practical problems they are likely to encounter in their career in the tourism industry

2. ESP courses contribute to improving students' intercultural skills

Yes No Don't know

3. Generally speaking, I am satisfied with the didactic approach applied in ESP courses

Yes No Don't know

4. Assessment methods should aim at assessing the necessary skills (social, intercultural, communicative) required by professionals in tourism industry.

Yes No Don't know

5. Difficulties, if any, that you encounter in understanding the class material (You may check more than one answer)

I encounter difficulties in understanding English for Tourism terminology

Yes No

If so, please specify difficulties:

English terminology is difficult to understand

Teaching hours are not sufficient enough

I do not take enough practice on the course's material. As a result, it is easy to forget it.

I have some knowledge gaps in the English language

6. Applicability of knowledge acquired at ESP courses to tourism professions increases student motivation toward ESP learning

Yes No Don't know

7. English instructors should have some working experience in the tourism industry

Yes No Don't know

8. Team work activities contribute to students' social skills development, as a major skill required by professionals in the tourism industry

Yes No Don't know

9. Project assignment is necessary, so that students practice the theoretical knowledge they have acquired from ESP courses

Yes No Don't know

10. The use of New Technology is strongly recommended in ESP courses

Yes No Don't know

PART THREE: The position of English for Tourism in tourism education programmes - interrelationship between theoretical and practical training
Please read the following statements and put a tick appropriately

1. Your overall attitude on the contribution of ESP courses to your training as professionals in the tourism industry is:

Positive Negative Neutral

2. Training stage at which ESP should be taught

At first semesters of your studies

At last semesters of your studies

Throughout your studies

3. ESP should:

constitute an autonomous component in tourism education programmes

be incorporated in practical courses of tourism education programmes