



Teaching English for Tourism: Fostering the Development of Field-Specific Skills. A Case Study

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Abstract

The present study is part of a larger research on the impact of ESP acquisition among graduate students in Tourism at Babeş-Bolyai University. It reports the findings of a quantitative analysis carried out during the academic year 2018-2019 whereby the author seeks to identify a correlation between the field-specific language preparation (English for Tourism) of the graduate students in question and the rate of their employability in the travel trade or related (sub)fields. Additionally, the study provides information on both the professional and personal impact that the use of English for work and everyday life have had on the respondents.

Keywords: *ESP, hard skills, soft skills, language instruction, tertiary education.*

1. Introduction

It has become a truism to state that the current bulk of academic products and services (journal articles, book publications, lectures, conferences etc.) cannot be isolated from its “medium”: the English language. Whether English language proficiency is regarded as the means or the purpose of instruction, it is by now clear that its role in tertiary education is morphing still. Moreover, an attempt to measure the impact of LSP instruction on the students’ overall development of communicative skills for socio-professional integration brings forth a series of questions about the need to revisit certain key concepts such as: “employability”, “proficiency” or “development”:

- Is there a correlation between effective ESP instruction and the rate of graduate students’ employability?
- How does the graduate students’ language proficiency affect both their professional and personal development?
- How can we measure the graduate students’ professional and personal development?

These research questions have been addressed in an ongoing research project carried out by the author together with fellow lecturer Roxana Mihele and largely dedicated to the curricular (re)design of LSP classes at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. One of the objectives of this research project is to measure the impact that LSP courses have had on undergraduate and graduate students alike. [1]ⁱ The present paper reports on the findings from the second stage of our research and focuses on the development of graduate students’ hard and soft skills as a result of their participation in *English for Tourism* classes at our university.

2. Relevant literature

As ESP instructors, our target group is represented by young future professionals and, as such, our concern is to foster the development of their communicative skills in a foreign language so as to increase their chances of getting a job in the field (tourism, in our case) and to be able to respond to the linguistically-specific demands of the job in question. One of the challenges we had to face in the initial stages of our research project was agreeing on a comprehensive definition of the concept of “development” when it came to LSP classes and their effectiveness. We have decided to look into possible readings of the concept from three main perspectives:

- the development of English language proficiency in the ESP context;
- the development of employability skills;
- the development of social and emotional intelligence.

Despite the increasing interest in other languages [2]ⁱⁱ, the “global ‘triumph’ of English” [3]ⁱⁱⁱ (as it was proclaimed in the 1990s) is seeking new means whereby it survives a linguistically-competitive and shifting market. In HE, English is still. Meanwhile, the 2012 Report on Language Competences for Employability, Mobility and Growth issued by the European Commission clearly stated that: “Pupils should start *earlier in life* to learn foreign languages and *at least two* foreign languages should be taught to *all* pupils during compulsory education.” [5]^{iv} The EC Report also stresses the correlation between linguistic and employability skills, since: “Poor language skills are a serious obstacle to



seizing professional opportunities abroad and in enterprises or organisations active at international level.” [6]^v

In the field of tourism, as much as in any similar sector of the service industry, (English) language proficiency and communicative skills are widely acknowledged as advantages in the recruitment process or priorities in the process of professional development: “The importance of English in international tourism is well recognised. There is a dynamic commercially driven response to the need in the form of English language training provided as part of tourism training programmes and in the publication of English language course books designed particularly for those engaged in the tourism industry.” [7]^{vi}

ESP instructors have the possibility to witness and assist both the development of the students’ linguistic and field-specific skills and the dynamics of the specific field they teach for. The recent transition from “guaranteed lifelong employment” to “selfmanaged lifelong employability” [8]^{vii} has facilitated the configuration of a “pedagogy of employability” [8]^{viii}, of studies dedicated to employee attitudes or to field-specific/technical vs. transversal skills. Research shows that the whole repository of transversal and soft skills is gaining momentum to the detriment of the more limitative or normative technical skills especially in the service industry: “The quality of tourism product/service lies in intangible elements, including the interaction between employees and customers during the service encounter (Bailly and Léné, 2014).” [10]^{ix} In a study conducted by Marcel Robles, the role of soft skills is emphasised in both the academic field and in the workplace: “While technical skills are a part of many excellent educational curricula, soft skills need further emphasis in the university curricula so that students learn the importance of soft skills early in their academic programs before they embark on a business career (Wellington, 2005).” [11]^x

As the purpose of our project was to revise and redesign the LSP curricula at our university, we further explored the links between developing field-specific skills, fostering transversal and soft skills and strategic social and emotional learning (SEL). ESP learning goes hand in hand with the communicative approach which focuses on “authentic classroom interactions, peer collaboration, and co-operative pair and group work activities” [12]^{xi}. Hence, the pedagogy of “social and emotional learning” is especially suitable for language teaching and learning, where levels of emotional and social intelligence are predictors for (linguistic and communicative) performance in class as well as for transversal and soft skills (“applied” or “21st century skills” [13]^{xii}) needed in the workplace.

3. The study

Our research project on measuring the impact of ESP instruction on both the professional and personal development of students from Babeş-Bolyai University was divided into three main stages: (a) identifying undergraduate and postgraduate students’ expectations from ESP classes; (b) quantifying the impact of ESP courses on graduate students’ overall development; (c) correlating previous findings with the employers’ expectations regarding graduate students’ linguistic profile and communicative skills. The present paper offers an overview of the second part, with a special focus on graduate students’ responses to a questionnaire administered between April 15th - May 12th 2019.

3.1. Data collection and sampling

The 17-item questionnaire (16 closed questions, 1 open question) collected 30 responses from tourism graduates of Babeş-Bolyai University. The questionnaire was administered online and it addressed only the graduate students who had chosen *English for Tourism* as a mandatory course at the B.A. level. The quantitative data resulting from this research stage are particularly important for the research members as they provide useful information on the relevance of ESP classes on future employees’ rate of success in finding a job and performing in the workplace.

Respondent profiles include mostly young female subjects who possess a language certificate and have an upper-intermediate level of English language proficiency. Equally notable is the fact that almost 1/3 of the respondents are currently living abroad (5 out of 30 in an English-speaking country) and only 9 out of 30 subjects are working in tourism.



age	21-25 23.3%	25-30 63.3%	30-35 13.3%	+35 -		
sex		male 23.3%			female 76.7%	
academic degree	B.A. degree 46.7%		M.A. degree 46.7%		PhD 6.6%	
language certificate		yes 73.3%			no 26.7%	
level of language proficiency	A1 3.3%	A2 -	B1 6.7%	B2 40%	C1 30%	C2 20%

Table 1. Respondent profiles

3.2. Main findings

A significant percentage of 86.7% use English as part of their professional routine, mostly in connection with productive activities such as writing emails and job-related materials, as well as face-to-face or mediated interaction with other people.

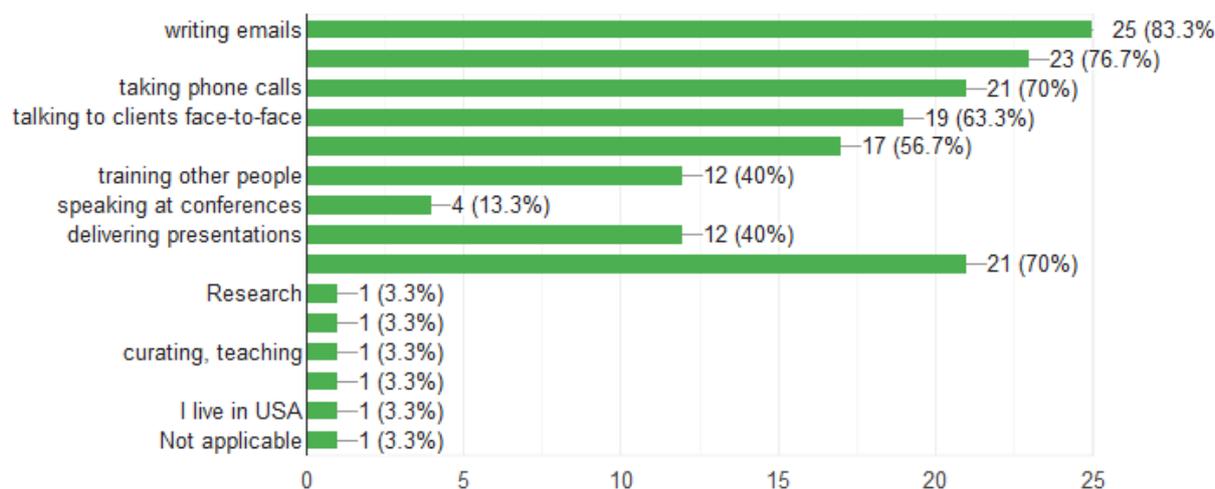


Fig.1. Activities and tasks linked to use of English for professional communication

In measuring the impact that English language proficiency has had on their employability and professional success, an overwhelming number of 29 out of 30 subjects agreed and strongly agreed with the statement: “English-language instruction was important in getting my job”. Interestingly enough, a slightly smaller number of respondents (24 vs. 28) felt that they have learnt domain-specific relevant vocabulary in the university vs. in the workplace. This is partially surprising as more than half (53.3%) of the graduates interviewed had studied 6 semesters of *English for Tourism* at university. As for the correlation between language proficiency and personal development, the results were predictable and matched our expectations regarding the possibility that (foreign) language competence is directly proportional with positive self-perception and level of confidence, as shown in the figure below:



On a scale from 1-5, how much do you agree with the following statements?

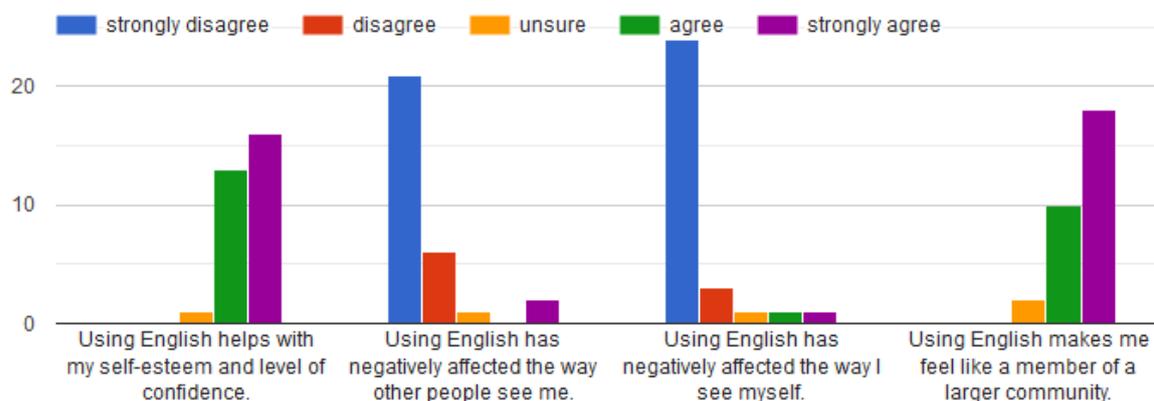


Fig. 2. Percentage of respondents with specific attitudes to the impact of English on personal development

Last but not least, the answers to the open question (“Could you say a few words about the relevance of your English-language academic instruction on your daily personal & professional activities?”) indicate the following:

- graduate students generally value the importance of ESP classes focusing on communicative activities that could boost fluency, facilitate use of English and improve oral skills;
- respondents point out the role of English as a “medium” for communication in a “multicultural context” or for work in a “global company”;
- there are recurrent references to the social and emotional impact of English on the subjects’ personal development and perception indicated by the frequency of certain adjectives (“confident”, “happy”, “important”), of nouns (“courage” or “relevance”) or modals (“must”, “should”).

4. Conclusions

Based on the findings from this stage of our research, we can conclude by addressing at least two recommendations for the process of curricular redesign we aim at. The first has to do with revising our list of intended learning outcomes by way of including more items that target the development of soft skills and of social and emotional intelligence, alongside hard skills. The second has to do with devising strategies, methods and instruments to make sure these intended learning outcomes can actually be measured against the actual learning outcomes. The next stage of our research (dedicated to mapping the perspective of the employer market) is expected to offer us a more comprehensive view on our role as ESP instructors in the professional and personal development of the future professionals.

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- [1] ⁱ Previous results dedicated to identifying the expectations of undergraduate students from LSP classes are presented in Mihele & Păcurar in *The Romanian Review of Geographical Education*, 2019.
- [2] ⁱⁱ See Graddol 2006:15.
- [3] ⁱⁱⁱ Graddol 2006:10.
- [4] ^{iv} Report 2012:2.
- [5] ^v EC Report 2012:1.
- [6] ^{vi} Coleman 2010:8.
- [7] ^{vii} Luka 2015:76.
- [8] ^{viii} Pegg et al. in Luka 2015:76.
- [9] ^{ix} Luka 2015:76-7.
- [10] ^x Robles 2012:453-4.
- [11] ^{xi} Gkonou & Mercer 2017:8.
- [12] ^{xii} Gewerts qtd. in Robles 2012:458.