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The role of foreign languages in hospitality management

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Abstract

The paper addresses the subject of foreign languages in hospitality management under the scope of their significance for the Greek hospitality industry and their role in the hospitality management education. Multilingualism offers a competitive advantage to both companies operating in the global hospitality market as well as people who pursue a career in it. The data presented herewith derives from a quantitative research that targeted managers of luxury hotels operating in Greece and hospitality management students.

The key findings indicate a contradiction between theoretical acknowledgement of the importance of foreign languages in hospitality management and its practical promotion, particularly in regard to fluency in foreign languages, in service training initiatives and level of offered training courses. The paper aims to bridge the gap by showcasing up to date studies and presenting the special features of the Greek reality to promote further investigation of the field and to encourage specific action.

Keywords: *applied foreign languages, global hospitality management, education, evaluation*

1 Introduction

Taking under consideration the vast importance of tourism and hospitality industry for the economic prosperity of Greece (Atsalakis et al., 2014) and its people, hospitality management representatives have to strive to assure customer satisfaction, as the best way to assure profits and blooming business (Song et al., 2012), while at the same time young people interested in maximizing their chances of being employed in this prosperous yet highly competitive field have to be adequately trained to succeed in the global hospitality market place.

The role of foreign languages in the delivery of quality service is significant in that they are an important tool to make a guest feel at home, hence draw more brand loyalty and larger cash flows (Torres & Kline, 2013).

The current paper aims at highlighting the current needs of hospitality management in Greece in terms of efficiency in foreign languages, as the first step towards offering future hospitality

employees a competitive advantage through the development of successful higher education curricula and methodologies.

Therefore, in following the international literature will be reviewed, the research process the current paper is based on will be presented and its most significant findings as well as recommended concrete actions and future research will be highlighted.

1.1 Foreign languages and hotel guests' satisfaction

Everything that makes the guest's everyday life more convenient, such as communication, can affect the tourist demand according to Pulina and Biagi (as cited in Chassapopoulos et al., 2014). Torres & Kline (2013) have examined the effect of hotel employees' behavior to tourist satisfaction naming among others the importance of professionalism and friendliness as well as the ability to understand guests' needs and effectively solve any problems, while the overall importance of service quality to customer satisfaction and retention has been proven (Deng et al., 2013).

There have been international studies examining the consumers' language preferences. Holmqvist et al. (2014) have found that tourists who receive service in a language other than their first one are less likely to leave tips or to recommend the service to others. But even more important consumers tend to fear that they will not be correctly understood if using a second language, either because they do not trust their language proficiency level or because they judge some topics of communication as very important. According to Grewal et al. (cited in Holmqvist et al., 2014) feeling in control over the service the tourists are receiving affects their whole perception of the level of service received. Therefore, being allowed to express needs and wishes in the mother tongue relieves unnecessary tension. Language is also found to have an emotional correlation with the guests' attitudes (Holmqvist et al., 2014) regarding a sense of community with people who share the same language, and an identification with the company that uses it making them feel at home away from home (Poon & Low, 2005).

1.2 Global hospitality management in relation to foreign languages

Hotel information and reservations, customer service during holidays and after sales customer care are the key points of the tourism value chain (Weiermair, 2006) in the global market. Understanding the inbound tourist culture through the language (Zorina et al., 2014) and engaging in an open dialogue that uses both verbal and nonverbal tools to combat stereotypes and misunderstandings support a successful approach of the RATER service quality model factors, namely reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness (Czaplewski et al., 2002).

The so called hospitality language, hence "all linguistic expressions which relate to and represent hospitality concerns" (Blue & Harun, 2003) throughout the stay of the guest, follows some distinctive rules, such as the use of a rather fixed vocabulary of welcoming and serving a guest and the formal behavior rules – including accepted phraseology, idioms – slang, gestures, handling problematic situations, cultural interpretations to social issues, etc. - relating to the cultural background of each guest. Therefore problems in intercultural communication may arise if sufficient use of the target language is not accompanied by the ability to understand, think and act accordingly to the target culture (Knapp et al., 1987).

Foreign language skills have indeed been identified as important managerial skills by several researchers (Agut et al., 2003; Connolly & McGing, 2006; Çizel et al., 2007). Managers should be equipped with both communicative and intercultural competence to be able to adapt and excel in the competitive work environment and foreign languages are the way to avoid stereotypes and gain insight into foreign people's mentality (Zorina et al., 2014). As cited in Russel et al. (2004) fluency in foreign languages is also a key element in developing business links with overseas business partners or foreign colleagues. The Rwanda Skills Survey (2012) reports linguistic competence to be the most wanted skill in globally known tourist destinations, such as Mauritius and United Emirates of Arabia.

European Community has already expressed back in 2008 the need for advanced language skills in firms' higher management levels by "investing in language training or employing native speakers and ensuring good multilingual communication through the Internet."¹ However a pan European research published by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training - CEDEFOP (Strietska-Ilina & Tessaring, 2005) illustrates that foreign languages skills, often lack among tourism and hospitality staff. There has also been a discussion on the companies' need to apply a competency framework (Jeou-Shyan et al., 2011) for human resource management assisting them in recruiting, training and assessing staff with the necessary professional competencies.

In another report of the European Business Forum for multilingualism² it has been acknowledged that although the English language will remain the lingua franca, it is not enough to offer a company and its staff the key to excellence. Furthermore, the cultural awareness and breaking of stereotypes is promoted when it is enriched by more cultures than the ones expressed through the person's first and second language (Sindik & Božinović, 2013).

1.3 Foreign languages in tourism education

A UK based research (Leslie & Russel, 2006) demonstrated that 83% of European tourism administration students were in favor of obligatory foreign language learning as part of their studies since such linguistic skills are very important in the tourism sector. The research also indicated that travelling or working abroad and the high rates of participation to European student exchange programs do help international students value the importance of foreign language learning; 96% believed that fluency in more foreign languages offers better job aspects. Current international research by Ghany & Latif (2012) has brought to light students' complaints on the content of their foreign language courses in relation to their future career needs hence underlying the importance of such courses to be attended independently of the tourism management program.

Students who wish to enter a tertiary level hospitality management department in Greece have to pass a standard type of test to prove adequate knowledge of one foreign language. The curriculum of hospitality management studies includes courses in two foreign languages, namely English and usually German or French. The courses stretch during the first two years of study

¹ EC Business Forum for Multilingualism (2008, July 11). Recommendations from the Business Forum for Multilingualism established by the European Commission. Retrieved 25/10/2015 from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-08-497_en.htm?locale=en

² EC Business Forum for Multilingualism (2008, July 11). Recommendations from the Business Forum for Multilingualism established by the European Commission. Retrieved 25/10/2015 from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-08-497_en.htm?locale=en

and conclude with a single semester specialized tourism terminology course for both chosen languages. The curriculum (Dimou, 2008) is normally focused on effective business communication, study abroad or job applications and interviews and tourism reports' analysis in the foreign language.

Christou (1999) has investigated the Greek tourism administration students' beliefs on the skills they acquire during their studies. The general notion was that English did not pose any special difficulties since the majority of them had already learned the language at younger age. However they perceived difficulties and uncertainty regarding the satisfactory for their business purposes use of the other taught language modules.

1.4 Research questions

In the light of the above mentioned and the lack of any recent studies mapping the respective situation in Greece currently a quantitative research has been developed to address the importance of fluency in foreign languages by the Greek hospitality industry, to record the hospitality management students beliefs on the matter as well as their assessment of the received foreign languages for tourism training.

2 Methodology

Aiming at examining the variables of foreign languages policies in both hospitality management tertiary education and in the hospitality industry two separate questionnaire surveys were conducted.

In the first survey an online questionnaire consisting of 19 questions excluding demographics was produced and delivered through e-mail to 150 selected four and five star hotels in Athens, Thessaloniki, Chalkidiki, Corfu, Crete and Mykonos. Of them 92 have been edited it online but 47 returned completed. (Response rate 31.3%).

The e-mails included a cover letter explaining the scope of the research and its confidential character and were addressed to the Human Resources and the Guest Relations Managers of the selected hotels.

The questionnaire aimed at examining the role of foreign languages in the hospitality industry by recruitment and selection, training and development and evaluation, identifying the most important foreign language skills and the significance of intercultural communication skills, as well as recording their suggestions for improvement policy.

In the second survey the hospitality management students of the T.E.I.s of Athens and Thessaloniki were targeted through a questionnaire which was developed based on the results of the first survey.

It included only nine questions on the subjects of importance of foreign languages for tourism, significance of oral, written and intercultural skills, assessment of the provided foreign language training and suggestions for improvement performance.

It was forwarded online to the hospitality management students of the T.E.I.s of Athens and Thessaloniki and was answered by 103 students.

3 Results

Almost 70% of the participating hotel managers stated that efficiency in foreign languages by recruiting is proved by an official language certificate, while for 14.89% a time period spend abroad for studies or work was also interpreted as proof for foreign language efficiency.

Fluency in oral communication (91.50 %) was named as the most important skill for future hotel managers, followed by the so called hospitality language (83%) and intercultural skills (65%). The need for a multilingual hotel website as well as the importance of multilingualism by telephone or email communication on the other hand has been reported by a mere 3%, underlying the predominance of English. The lack of fluency in foreign languages can result – according to their answers- in wrong understanding of guest's needs (80%), possible intercultural misunderstandings (20%) and to customer loss and negative advertising (12.77%).

In general, the respondents appeared rather satisfied by their staff's linguistic skills (76%), although they acknowledged (approximately 50%) the necessity of further improvement. At the same time 74.47% fails to have a company policy for in service foreign language training, mainly due to lack of time during high season (34.29%) as well as a low prioritization of the need to do so (34.29%) followed by lack of money (17.14%) and specialized trainers (8.57%).

The remaining quarter of the respondents implements in service training seminars in the workplace (100%), funded international internship programs, while they also tend to use asynchronous e-learning methods (8.33%).

The wide majority of the hotel managers (83%) affirmed the need to participate in the long term planning and evaluation of foreign languages for tourism curricula.

Respectively the students that participated in the research did not appear very satisfied with their offered studies, especially in regard to training of oral expression (50.5%) and listening comprehension (47.6 %) as well as cross cultural communication skills (36.9%). Moreover, they ascertained the role of international student exchange programs, integration of new technologies, longer training hours and mainly (59.2%) longer apprenticeships in the hospitality management sector, as the main tools to successfully improve their foreign language skills and intercultural competence.

It is mentioned that approximately 36% of the student respondents reported to have learned only one foreign language. Although they were not asked to name which one, one can safely presume - taking under consideration relevant data for Greece - that it is English.

4 Discussion

The results affirm the research questions in regard to recognition of the importance of fluency in foreign languages for tourism by both targeted populations, and do not contradict previous international studies. However, they have raised some points, that need further interpretation.

On one hand the majority of hotel managers hesitate to undertake any in service training initiatives, even though they are not totally satisfied with the degree of efficiency in foreign languages for tourism of their personnel. Their rationale is the expenditure of time and money, however foreign languages for tourism competences influence the level of customer satisfaction, hence raise the company's long term financial profits.

On the other hand, the significantly high percentage of hospitality management students' speaking only one foreign language, presumably English, also raises doubts as to which extend they truly understand the role of multilingualism when pursuing a career in the global tourism and hospitality industry. Intermediate knowledge of English is not anymore a competitive advantage to any company that wishes to progress in the current economic environment.

The tendency of most young people to acquire their first foreign language certificate early in their teenage years as well as the widely accepted fact that foreign language teaching in Greece is largely exam- oriented, in contrast to applied knowledge, further affects the level of foreign language fluency and their ability to respond to the hospitality market demand for high quality services.

The offered type of foreign language courses inside the framework of the hospitality management studies, as depicted in the students' replies, stresses the need to establish a stronger, more dynamic curriculum and methodology that will aim at producing highly competitive hospitality managers able to succeed in the flexible and competitive hospitality market.

Currently hospitality industry extends their digital strategy to the future through the implementation of responsive websites and the maintenance of social media accounts. Consumer-Generated Marketing is also changing the way companies seek out customers, but the necessity to address the global market's differentiated needs in their own language and culture specific patterns, has still to be acknowledged by the majority of Greek hotel managers.

During the interpretation of the findings it has become apparent that future research should aim primarily at the academic community and not at hospitality industry, due to its strongly profit oriented character and its reluctance and time limitations to contribute to similar surveys. Although the research has reached its aims, due to time limitations it was conducted only on a small sample of the population and it has not been possible to edit data under a geographic allocation factor. Designing a research that uses probability sampling among all educational institutes providing hospitality management studies in Greece is the authors' upcoming plan to generalize the results and gain a better understanding on how to promote applied learning of foreign languages for the hospitality sector.

5 Conclusions

Foreign languages play an important role in global hospitality management. International research has indicated their participation in the raising of customer lifetime value for the hospitality industry as well as of successful careers for future management personnel.

The need to develop a competitive advantage in tourism and hospitality is even more important in Greece that suffers under severe economic depression. The three axes for future action - as perceived through the current study – are for the Greek state to invest in foreign languages for tourism awareness and training, for educators and information technology specialists to collaborate on the development of up to date educational material making use of new technologies and the latest trends in education and for the hospitality industry to manage human capital so as to correct staffing and proficiency shortfalls in regard to foreign languages.

Many young people turn to hospitality industry to combat unemployment. Fluency in more than one foreign languages is a competitive advantage in the global hospitality market taken for

granted the undermining of other tourism occupational skills by fluency in foreign languages and intercultural competence as proved in the international literature. Parents and children should be made aware of the required skills and the Greek state could encourage international inter-school collaborative projects and implement a framework for the certification of knowledge of foreign languages acknowledging their role in the education of the new generation.

Young people have grown up surrounded by the modern technology of digital media and have developed adequate technology skills. Nurturing a tertiary level of hospitality management studies that includes a well planned foreign languages methodology could be the key to efficient language learning. Web 2.0 educational tools and virtual worlds (Second Life), open learning management systems (LMS) and massive open online courses (MOOCs) are some of the tools to gamify foreign language learning, therefore promote motivation and active involvement, while at the same time offer targeted hospitality language curriculum. Similar methodology and tools could be used by the organization of in service training seminars shifting the barriers of time and money costs and maximizing performance.

As eloquently illustrated in the literature review language barriers do block the way of a hospitality industry's long term success and as the global market of tourists and tourism employees increase, so does the demand for high quality foreign language for tourism specialized skills.

An ongoing cooperation between hospitality industry and hospitality management education could facilitate the planning and evaluation of foreign languages for tourism courses that depict the concrete needs students are most likely to face in their career. Lectures of human resources managers and possibility to longer apprentices to hotels abroad could empower the young students with valuable expertise and experience on the working environment conditions and demands.

The field of foreign languages in hospitality management has yet to be investigated in Greece and it is the authors' firm belief that more studies should be carried out to evaluate and propose content and methodology.

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