

The importance of foreign language skills in the tourism sector: A comparative study of student perceptions in the UK and continental Europe

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Abstract

There is little doubt that skills in the language of another country are invaluable when communicating with people from that country. This is nowhere more apposite than in the context of the cross-cultural interface between tourism enterprises and visitors. However, the need for such skills in the UK has gained little attention, even in the key area of tourism. UK-based research that has been undertaken reinforces this view and also established the attitudes and perceptions of tourism students to the study and development of foreign language (FL) skills. In contrast, other EU countries reputedly have a greater awareness of the need for these skills and commitment to developing them which leads to speculation that tourism students in continental Europe would have contrasting attitudes to their UK counterparts. Subsequent to review of the importance of FL skills in the tourism sector the findings of research undertaken to investigate this hypothesis are presented. Significant variations between UK and non-UK students are identified not the least of which is the comparatively weak attention given to FL skills development in the UK. In concluding, the implications of the findings are discussed and concerns raised over the need to address evident weaknesses in order to enhance career options and tourism management in the UK. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The international crises and terrorist acts witnessed since 2000 have served all too well to remind everyone, not least those businesses which seek to meet the needs of tourists, just how vulnerable tourism demand is for any one particular destination. Thus, tourism businesses need to do everything possible to ensure their international competitiveness and maximise their traditional markets, which is all the more vital given the highly competitive global market within which destinations are increasingly vying with each other for a share of the market. This is particularly true of the countries in Europe, especially those in the west, which

have gained substantially from international visitors—predominantly other Europeans—for well over a century. However, Europe's share of international tourist arrivals has declined in latter years as the marketplace has expanded and competition increased, a trend which has significant implications for the countries of Europe.

It might be expected, given the marketplace within which tourism enterprises now operate, coupled with the inter-cultural services interface between visitor and host, that the development of foreign language (FL) skills amongst the potential workforce would be a matter of course. This is applicable across all of Europe, and thus there is an explicit need for FL skills throughout the region, as illustrated by their major European market segments (see Table 1).

As Monod (1992, p. 15) argued over 10 years ago: 'The knowledge not only of languages but also of the culture of different European nations, ..., in short, a knowledge of

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Table 1
Arrivals of non-resident tourists

Country	Austria	France	Germany	Greece	Italy	Netherlands	Spain	UK
Austria	—	385	10,145	60	964	1238	195	645
France	4042	—	10,787	4607	48,350	77,279	18,925	108,006 (1)
Germany	809	845	—	107	1030	2590	423	1713
Greece	475	602	2395	—	823	655	115	2772
Italy	1894	2861	9801	242	—	1376	2086	2460
Netherlands	(3)	455	2657	(3)	343	—	259	1939
Spain	232	3280	7876	92	1898	1892	—	9500
UK	1268	16,274	14,182	1618	7186	5859	8562	—

Notes:

1. Combined UK/Ireland visitors.
2. Arrivals at national borders, 2000 only.
3. Austria and Greece classed as other Europe Visitor Numbers for 2001—972,500 (actual figure).

Source: WTO Yearbook of Tourism Statistics, 2003.

others, is an absolute must.’ A view affirmed by the UK Secretary of State for Education and Employment, emphasising the importance of FL learning: ‘There is no doubt that, despite the dominance of English as a world language, the ability to speak another language—or several languages—is increasingly important in our competitive and global economy.’ (Blunkett, 1998, p. 1) This echoes the European Union’s stance on the importance of FLs in the curriculum and that an accent should be put on developing multi-linguistic ability as opposed to a student being fluent in only one FL (Leslie, 1993a, b; Richards, 1995). This view is supported by many employers in the tourism sector as Davies (1999) and Leslie et al. found, for example, and as one visitor centre manager expressed: ‘The main thing is to be able to hold a conversation and understand guest/customer’s needs.’ (2004, p. 263) A minority of organisations preferred fluency, e.g. a function of their field of business, in a call centre dealing with emergencies, for example: ‘Fluency is paramount.. because some customers can be in crisis.’ (2004, p. 263)

This advocacy of the need for FL skills and correlating support by tourism employers brings into focus the place of FL study in tourism courses. Recognition of this leads to a study to investigate this area (Leslie, Russell, & Forbes, 2002), the findings of which catalysed research, as noted above, into the views and needs of tourism employers. A number of concerns emerged from these studies over the development of, and the need for, FL skills in the UK, not the least of which, as discussed below, were the implications of such concerns on the current and future competitiveness of tourism in the UK. Subsequently, we began to question whether the situation in the UK was similar across continental Europe. To further the study, research was then undertaken to investigate the position of FL studies in tourism courses across Europe and the perceptions of the respective students to the development of FL skills with the primary objective of establishing whether there are substantial differences in opportunities and student attitudes. This article presents the findings of this

latest stage of what, in effect, is now a longitudinal study into FL skills and the tourism sector. First, however, it is necessary to set the background to and context for these findings commencing with a discussion of the value of FL skills in the promotion and delivery of tourism services. This leads on to establishing support for and the benefits attributable to FL capability in business generally and tourism specifically. Subsequently, key factors relating to tourism employers, and the situation relating to undergraduate tourism programmes, in the UK are brought into the discussion.

2. FL skills in tourism

It is evident, especially with regard to the area of customer service and international visitors (potential or actual), that in the UK there is all too limited attention to, and promotion of, the value of FL skills amongst the staff of tourism businesses and organisations (see Russell & Leslie, 2002; Watson, 1992). In the UK, little progress has been made in recent years despite initiatives to address the issue. For example, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has recognised the importance of modern language skills, identifying the significant advantage that foreign companies have due to their ability to communicate in FLs (see Hagen, 1988). In the tourism sector, both the British Tourist Authority (BTA, 1990) and the EU have sought to promote FL skills. The ongoing lack of progress is well exemplified in the outcomes of the Nuffield Enquiry (2000) and in the UK press (see Leslie et al., 2002). In the UK, it has been argued that English is the international language, further that most Europeans speak English; a convenient view, reflective of the general attitude towards the personal development of FL skills which, as noted, is poor (see Davies, 1999). However, despite popular perceptions to the contrary, it is not the case that across Europe most people speak English. In the recently enlarged European Union of 25 member states only 47% speak English and that includes the populations of Ireland and

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