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Constructing a competence model for international professionals in the MICE industry: An analytic hierarchy process approach



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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to construct a competence model for educating and evaluating English-proficient international professionals for the MICE industry in Taiwan. An initial competence framework extracted from the existing literature was decomposed into a hierarchical structure for analytic hierarchy process (AHP) analysis. AHP through pairwise comparisons by 11 experts was utilized to determine weight values of competences pertaining to the development of a content-based English-medium educational program for international MICE professionals. The overall prioritization of competences solicited by AHP provided practical and research implications for prioritizing training needs with consideration to contextually-specific factors of a different setting under investigation.

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1. Introduction

The past decade has seen sustainable growth of the meeting, incentive, convention, and exhibition (MICE) industry in the form of hosting mega-events and constructing massive centers in the Asia-Pacific region, including Taiwan (Hing, McCabe, Lewis, & Leiper, 1998; Ministry of Economic Affairs, Taiwan, 2008; UFI, 2011a; Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). UFI, The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry (formerly named the Union des Foires Internationales), revealed in its December 2011 data that Taipei ranked 7th among all Asian cities in terms of the amount of available exhibition floor space (UFI, 2011b). Taiwan has also improved its ranking at the International Congress and Convention Association from 35th in 2008 to 27th in 2011 (CNA, 2012; ICCA, 2012). The economic value of the convention industry in Taiwan was estimated at approximately of US\$ 300 million (NT\$8.7 billion) in 2012. Government spending on the plan of developing Taiwan into an Asia MICE base amounted to US\$76 million (NT\$2.2 billion) from 2010 to 2012 (CNA, 2012). The ongoing expansion on convention venues and numbers of international expositions has brought with it the challenge of preparing students for careers in the industry on the rise (Ministry of Economic Affairs, Taiwan, 2008).

Aside from growing demands for MICE workforce resulting from the continuous construction of convention properties and expansion of international events, increased globalization has led to a need for greater number of trained international professionals to provide professional service to participants and visitors from all over the world (Davies & Brown, 2000; Tsai, 2013). The English language is the current lingua franca for international communication. Hence, in addition to training and staffing an adequate number of skilled MICE personnel, the cultivation of English-proficient MICE professionals will be an

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add-on to internationalize Taiwan's MICE industry (Her, 2007; Tsao, 2011; Tsai, 2013). Despite a general academic response to educational practices and research on human resource development in the fields of hospitality, tourism and international business, there has been very little written on the topic of MICE education and much less on professional training for the cultivation of international MICE professionals. In view of the tourism and economic contributions of international MICE activities to the host destination, identifying essential competences for international professionals in the MICE industry constitutes a topic of great importance for upcoming large-scale events hosted in Taiwan, China, and other Asian countries. The thrust of the present study, therefore, was to test and develop a group decision-making model, termed the analytic hierarchy process (AHP), used to prioritize essential competences that international professionals in the MICE industry should acquire in order to meet the language and professional demands of the industry on the rise. The overall prioritization of competences for international MICE professionals would provide a reference for curriculum and training program planning, as well as a mechanism for evaluating and selecting a professional workforce to serve in a diverse international MICE arena.

The model was constructed in the context of an Applied English Department of a tertiary setting in Taiwan, especially English major students who are exposed to academic track options of tourism or international business. However, the model can move beyond this to assist in generating the relative weights of competences considered important to the effective operation of any large-scale event held in other non-English speaking countries. In sum, the specific purposes of this study are as follows:

1. To construct a comprehensive competence model for international MICE professionals based on the existing literature and expert opinions for analytic hierarchy process (AHP) analysis.
2. To synthesize, through the application of AHP, a set of prioritized core competences and competence indicators that may be used as a reference for designing training programs, as well as a mechanism for selecting qualified international professionals for the MICE industry in Taiwan.

2. Literature review

2.1. Professional English language education and the event industry

Taiwan's determination to promote business tourism and incentive travel has signaled a major impact on the development of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) in tourism-related education to meet the rapidly rising market demand driven by economic, social, and technological advancement (Her, 2007; Chang & Hsu, 2010). In Taiwan, the formal and informal learning of English has taken place in a variety of ways as expanding educational opportunities for personal and professional growth (Chern, 2002; Nunan, 2003; Oladejo, 2005; Her, 2007). Amongst all the notable approaches to English language teaching, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been the most influential method within the Chinese societies since 1980' (Sun & Cheng, 2002; Chern, 2002; Hu, 2005; Oladejo, 2005; Ye, 2007; Pan, 2010). To address different communicative needs of disparate disciplines and professions, a great deal of research has been done about improving communicative competences of students enrolled in English for general purposes or English for specific purposes programs in the Chinese context (e.g. Anderson, 1993; Yu, 2001; Rao, 2002; Chern, 2002; Liu, 2005; Hsu, 2011; Spring, 2012).

During the last two decades, research on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Professional Purposes (EPP) and content-based English-medium instruction in the Chinese context has grown rapidly (e.g. Tsui, 1991; Chia, Johnson, Chia, & Olive, 1999; Pang, Zhou, & Fu, 2002; Chang, 2005; Zhang, 2007; Yuan, 2009; Tsao, 2011). Expanded from the general umbrella term of business English, a plethora of ESP/EPP curricula or syllabi have been constructed in disparate business contexts, such as trade, finance, investment, economics, tourism, hospitality, to name a few (Pang et al., 2002; Chew, 2005; Abdel Ghany & Abdel Latif, 2012; Li & Li, 2013). The development route of ESP or EPP, along with the proposition that English is a necessary result brought by the demand of internationalizing the MICE industry, has extended to event management, trade fairs and the convention industry (Tsai & Davis, 2008; Zeng & Yang, 2011; Tsai, 2013). Adhering to a traditional approach, the learning of ESP for non-English major students, including those in the fields of tourism, hospitality and event management, is merely one or two subjects studied (Chia et al., 1999; Kim, 2006; Chen, Chiu, & Lin, 2011; Hsieh, 2013). The vast majority of research on ESP/EPP course planning, therefore, has focused on probing into the linguistic and communicative competency via genre analysis, corpus analysis or need analysis to meet the demands of the learners (Ibrahim & Mahmoud, 2010; Nelson, Devardhi, & Tadesse, 2012). Little consideration, however, has been paid to the development of professional competence frameworks for shaping content-based and English-medium instruction programs from a cross-disciplinary perspective. In the current decade, the topic of English for the MICE industry has been recognized as an independent branch of ESP appearing in the era of economic globalization and trade internationalization (Zhu, 2009; Zeng & Yang, 2011). However, literature targeting on identifying competences for international professionals in the MICE industry is grossly inadequate. The current study is articulated in an effort to address the lack of research and practical evidence regarding identifying a professional competence model for international MICE professionals in Taiwan. As noted earlier, the proposed model and methodology may be extended to further studies on shaping international MICE

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