

PRELIMINARY REPORT

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**ASSESSMENT AND
COMPARISON OF
TOURISM VOCABULARY
SKILLS IN ESL LEARNERS**

ABSTRACT: Teaching and learning English for professional purposes largely involves the acquisition of specialised vocabulary, with teaching methodology focusing on the development of understanding and usage of specific vocabulary items. Within the wide variety of professional purposes the language is acquired for, teaching learners of tourism and hospitality also requires a focus on a range of specific language skills, mostly based on understanding of diverse types of discourse and strong communication skills in varied language situations and contexts. English for professional purposes thus becomes more specific – English for Tourism and Hospitality – signalling a slightly different approach to teaching and learning, i.e. not heavily based on acquiring vocabulary skills, but shifting focus on strong communication skills and enhancement of the four elementary language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

This paper focuses on assessing and comparing receptive and productive vocabulary skills of learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), with a general hypothesis that learners with greater general language competences do not exhibit major problems in inferencing the meaning of specialised urban tourism vocabulary items.

For this purpose, we selected 10 vocabulary items in context sentences and conducted the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) test developed by Wesche and Paribakht (1996) with 1st years students of Tourism and Hospitality and students of Business Economics of the Libertas International University. The results obtained by descriptive statistics, Mann-Whitney U test and Spearman's rank correlation confirm our general hypothesis.

KEY WORDS: urban tourism vocabulary, English for Tourism and Hospitality, receptive and productive vocabulary skills, language competences, teaching and learning ESL

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is the key element in developing all four language skills (Pokupec and Njerš, 2014) as it underlies comprehension and provides fluency and eloquence in speech and writing. This is especially relevant in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), occupational or academic, as one of the key differentiators from the so-called “general English” is the specialised vocabulary element. Thus, learners of English for medical purposes, law, finance and other highly specialised industries will have to cope with a significant load of new and specialised vocabulary items, their grammatical and syntactic behaviour in context and other specific features pertinent to the specific area of study. However, when it comes to the industries of tourism and hospitality and their role in global economic development, it is fairly easy to assume that vocabulary pertaining to them will not have such a highly specialised character, due to the fact that these are global service industries and the language used for communicative purposes within them, whether in B2B or B2C communication, should have a more global character and be understandable to all users.

English for Tourism and Hospitality thus acquires an international, intercultural and cross-cultural character; it becomes a communication tool used worldwide and its vocabulary acquires features of clarity, simplicity and most of all comprehensibility, because in this industry it is evident that English in fact is a lingua franca or “common language”, and the industry evidences English as a global language (Crystal, 2003: 104-105). Language proficiency level of learners of English for Tourism and Hospitality is exhibited through strong communication skills, intercultural communication competence, marketing communication and other aspects of competences within these service industries, rather than in knowledge of specialised vocabulary.

Recent studies in ESP, especially in the tourism and hospitality industry also show the need to change the educational approach, shifting focus

on strong communication skills (Grižinić and Kostić Bobanović, 2011), the ability to anticipate guest needs and market demands, problem solving skills and critical thinking skills. We can assume then that, although vocabulary does underlie all language skills, teaching practitioners need to develop all the above stated skills in students just as much as they focus on specialised vocabulary.

The purpose of this paper is to emphasise the need in teaching English for Tourism and Hospitality at a tertiary educational level for developing strong communication skills in learners. This cannot be done without a comprehensive approach to teaching the fundamental language skills and focusing on all aspects of language, not just vocabulary. In order to meet the communicative demands of the tourism and hospitality industry, our learners need proficient levels of general language skills with which they overcome the difficulties in communication with ease. The vocabulary element, albeit highly significant, should be addressed with the same intensity as grammar, syntax, specific linguistic functions, language registers, etc.

It is the attitude of the authors that approaches to language teaching in professional study programmes at a tertiary level of education in Croatia are too similar to teaching approaches of other theoretical or practical courses within the programme, which do not lead to sufficient development of communicative skills in learners. Departing from the syllabi developed for ESP and reviewing some of the key assessment methods, we feel that, although not clearly stated in learning objectives, the learners are forced to focus on the acquisition of words and vocabulary items in order to “pass the course”, which makes them ignore the development of communicative competences. Also, there is not enough focus on the acquisition of productive/expressive vocabulary, meaning that students learn a specific amount of vocabulary items, without having the competence to use them properly, which in turn leads to a lack of vocabulary retention skills. According to Zhong (2014)

“knowing a word involves knowing the knowledge of the spoken and written form, morphological knowledge, knowledge of word meaning, collocational and grammatical knowledge, connotative and associational knowledge, and the knowledge of social or other constraints in use”. This knowledge can be achieved through the communicative approach to language teaching, explained by Richards (2006: 3):

Communicative competence includes the following aspects of language knowledge:

- ☞ Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions
- ☞ Knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g., knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication)
- ☞ Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g., narratives, reports, interviews, conversations)
- ☞ Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one’s language knowledge (e.g., through using different kinds of communication strategies).

There are a range of tests assessing vocabulary knowledge, focusing on different areas of knowledge such as size, breadth, depth, receptive, productive, etc. For the purposes of assessing specialised vocabulary inferencing skills and knowledge, we have chosen the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale, which measures both receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary items.

The Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) is a self-report assessment. It combines students’ self-reported knowledge of a word in combination with a constructed response demonstrating knowledge of each target word (Dougherty and Bravo, 2010). It is frequently used to measure students’ receptive and productive knowledge of selected vocabulary items. Receptive vocabulary

refers to passive vocabulary knowledge, i.e. the student is able to recognise a vocabulary item and understand its meaning. Productive, or expressive, vocabulary knowledge refers to the ability of students to use a specific vocabulary item correctly in speech and/or writing, which assumes knowledge not only of meaning, but of its “graphemic, morphemic, syntactic, semantic, collocational and phraseological properties” (Pignot-Shahov, 2012), which also constitutes depth of vocabulary knowledge.

The research we conducted shows that learners with previously acquired stronger general language skills are mostly more apt to infer the meaning of specialised tourism vocabulary than those students who lack general language skills, which facilitates their understanding of discourse in tourism and hospitality and enables them to acquire stronger communicative competences. The results also show the need to address the lack of general language skills prior to introducing students to the specialised aspects of communication in tourism and hospitality.

METODOLOGY AND DATA

The research has been conducted on 111 examinees: 67 female and 44 male students. 64 of them study Business Economics, while 47 study Tourism and Hotel Management.

When divided into groups, based on their previous knowledge, then 48 learners belong to beginners, whereas 63 belong to advanced learners.

The division into two groups of false beginners and advanced learners was done at the beginning of the academic year, based on the preliminary test provided by the Oxford Practice Grammar Intermediate (Eastwood, 2006) for both study programmes (Business Economics and Tourism and Hotel Management) in order to adapt syllabi to students’ levels of English knowledge. The group of beginners mostly demonstrated knowledge

pertaining to levels A1 and/or A2 according to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2011), whereas the group of advanced learners exhibited knowledge pertaining to B1 and/or B2.

The data have been statistically analysed through MS Excel and SPSS 21. Statistical analysis involves descriptive statistics: arithmetic mean, standard deviation, variation coefficient, graphic display of data, data grouping and inferential statistics. The following statistical tests have been used:

Mann-Whitney U test

Mann-Whitney test is used for testing equality of two distribution forms, that is when comparing two arithmetic means of two sets if theoretical assumptions for t-test are not met. (Šošić, 2006: 344)

Hypotheses are put forward:

H0: there is no significant statistical difference in average value of the observed variable between the two populations.

H1: there is a significant statistical difference in average value of the observed variable between the two populations.

The usual borderline level of significance is $\alpha=0,05$. Hypothesis H0 is accepted if the empirical significance level exceeds borderline value α . Otherwise, it is rejected.

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient measures statistical dependence of two occurrences presented as pairs of rank variables. If those variables are numerical, they should be transformed into rank variables.

The value that correlation coefficient gets is within the range of -1 to 1. The closer the correlation coefficient is to value 1, the correlation is larger and positive. The lower it is and closer to value -1, the association is stronger and negative. For correlation values $-0,2 < r_s < 0,2$ it is considered that correlation is insignificant. (Šošić, 2006: 424)

Hypotheses on statistical significance of correlation are put forward:

H0: there is no significant statistical correlation between the observed variables.

H1: there is significant statistical correlation between the two observed variables.

FIGURE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF EXAMINEES ACCORDING TO AGE

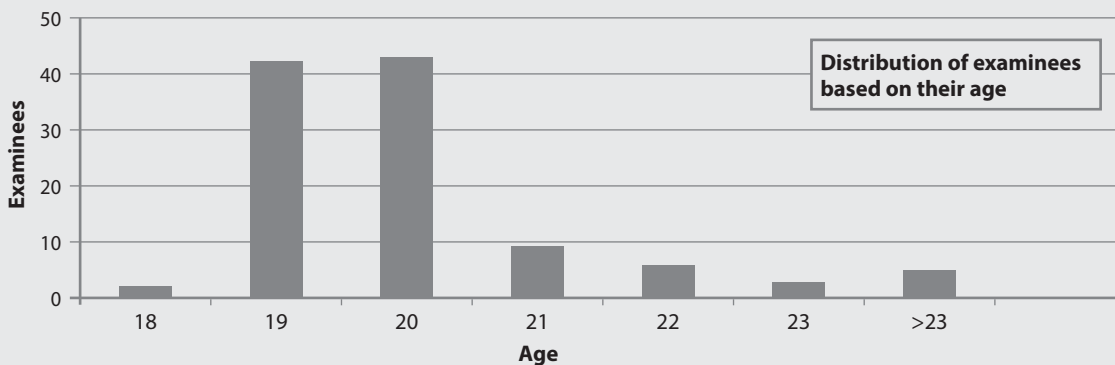
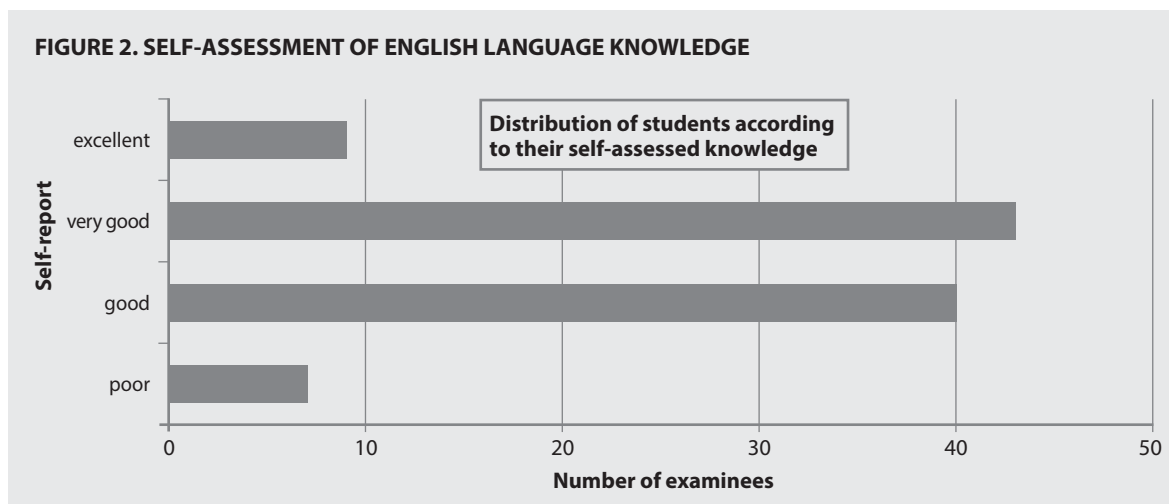


FIGURE 2. SELF-ASSESSMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE



The usual borderline level of significance is $\alpha=0,05$. Hypothesis H_0 is accepted if the empirical significance level exceeds borderline value α . Otherwise, it is rejected.

RESULTS

Age

Distribution of examinees based on their age is shown in Figure 1. One of the examinees has not answered the question. The youngest of them are 18 years old (2 examinees), and the oldest is 31. 78% of examinees are 20 years old or younger. The average examinees' age is 20.14 with standard deviation of 1.74, i.e. variation coefficient of 9%.

Self-reported assessment of English language knowledge

Figure 2 shows results of how examinees self-assessed their knowledge of English. More than 83% of examinees have rated their knowledge as either good or very good. Only 7 of them have rated it poor, while 9 think it is excellent. 12 students did not feel competent for evaluating

their knowledge. If we attach mark 1 to modality "poor", 2 to "good", 3 to "very good" and 4 to "excellent", then the average evaluated mark is 2.55, with standard deviation of 0.76 and variation coefficient of 30%.

The highest level of language skills

Examinees evaluated in which of the four fundamental language skills they have the highest level knowledge: reading, listening, writing and speaking. They could choose multiple answers. The results are shown graphically in Figure 3.

Students have assessed that they are best at reading and listening, and weakest at writing.

Exposure to English language

Students have assessed how often they are exposed to the English language. 72 students are exposed to English every day, which the authors deem as a medium to low level of exposure considering the global spread of the English language, especially in today's wide-spread use of the internet, which is mainly English language-based. The results are shown in Figure 4.

FIGURE 3. HIGHEST LANGUAGE SKILL LEVEL

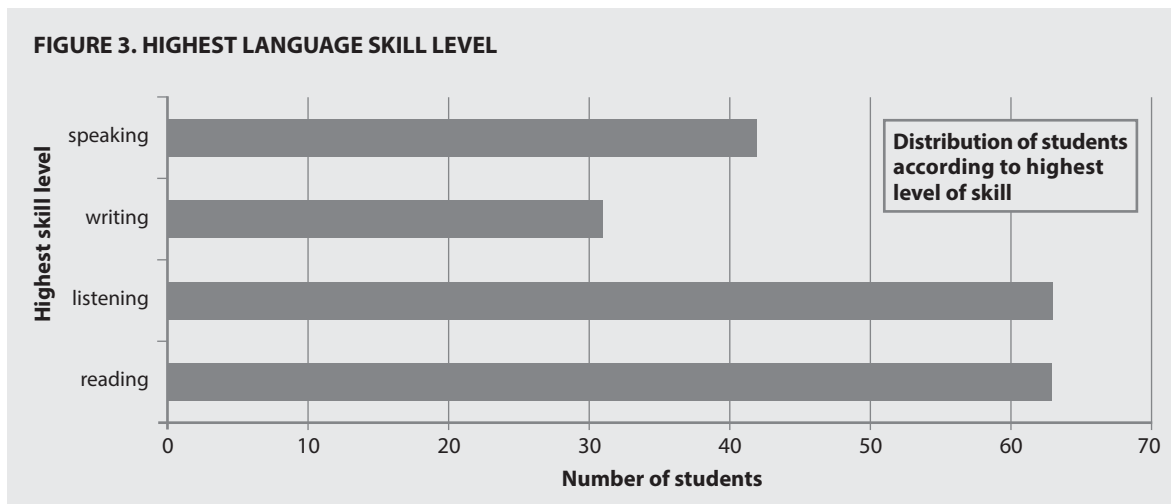
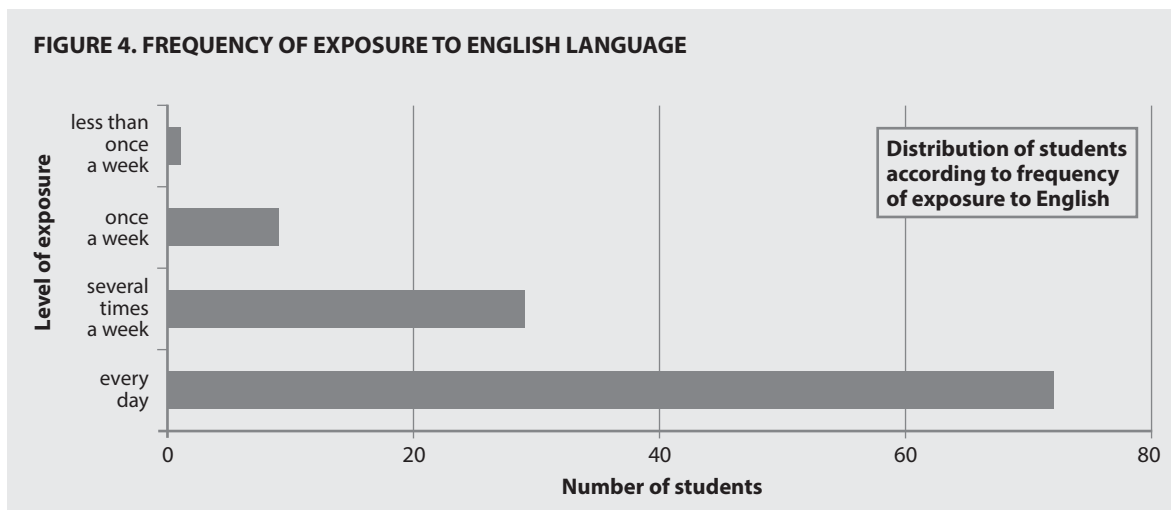


FIGURE 4. FREQUENCY OF EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE



Vocabulary Knowledge Scale test

Students were offered 10 different sentences with a unit of specialised vocabulary taken from texts regarding urban tourism. They were subject to the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) test developed by Wesche and Paribakht (1996) aimed at measuring receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge in examinees. The VKS

test was modified in the way that for each of the vocabulary items a context sentence was added, with the purpose of assessing examinees' inferencing skills as well as their knowledge of the vocabulary item itself. This addition is significant, because of our hypothesis that students with a higher degree of general English language skills would have higher vocabulary inferencing skills, i.e. they would be more apt to infer the meaning

of a specialised vocabulary item than those with poor general language skills.

For each of these units of occupational vocabulary they had to mark a number from 1 to 5, an option which would indicate their level of understanding the item. The option 1 indicated lack of understanding, options 2 – 4 indicated different levels of receptive vocabulary knowledge and option 5 indicated productive vocabulary knowledge. The options to choose from were as follows:

1. I don't remember having heard this word / expression before.
2. I have heard this word / expression before, but I don't know what it means.
3. I have heard this word / expression before and I think it means _____
(explanation, synonym, translation)
4. I know this word / expression. It means _____
(explanation, synonym, translation)
5. I am able to use this word / expression in a sentence, e.g.: _____ (if you choose this answer, please fill in the sentence 4.)

For the purposes of more accurate results, our examinees comprised students of first year of their respective study programmes, so we could make sure that their previous knowledge was mainly what in English language teaching is called “general” knowledge, as opposed to specialised. Also, the selected vocabulary items had not been introduced to students during the course of their specialised study programme, prior to testing.

The vocabulary items introduced in the test were taken from scientific and/or professional papers on urban tourism: *urban regeneration* (Couch, Fraser & Percy, 2003), *storytelling* (Hsu, 2009), *host city* (Rogerson and Visser, 2012), *heritage conservation* (Naumov, 2014), *intangible cultural assets* (Lee, 2007), *urban landscapes* (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2012),

accessible tourist routes (Frankini, 2013), *hallmark* (Ashworth and Page, 2001), *cosmopolitan cities* (Rogerson, 2006), *tourism pressure* (Overbeek and Terluin, 2006).

Students who chose answers 3 and 4 had to provide an explanation of the meaning of the vocabulary item. Students who chose answer 5 had to demonstrate their ability of the productive knowledge of the vocabulary item, i.e. had to use it in their own sentence.

The average value of the selected answer is 2.55 with standard deviation of 1.15 and variation coefficient of 45%. The distribution of answers is seen in Table 1.

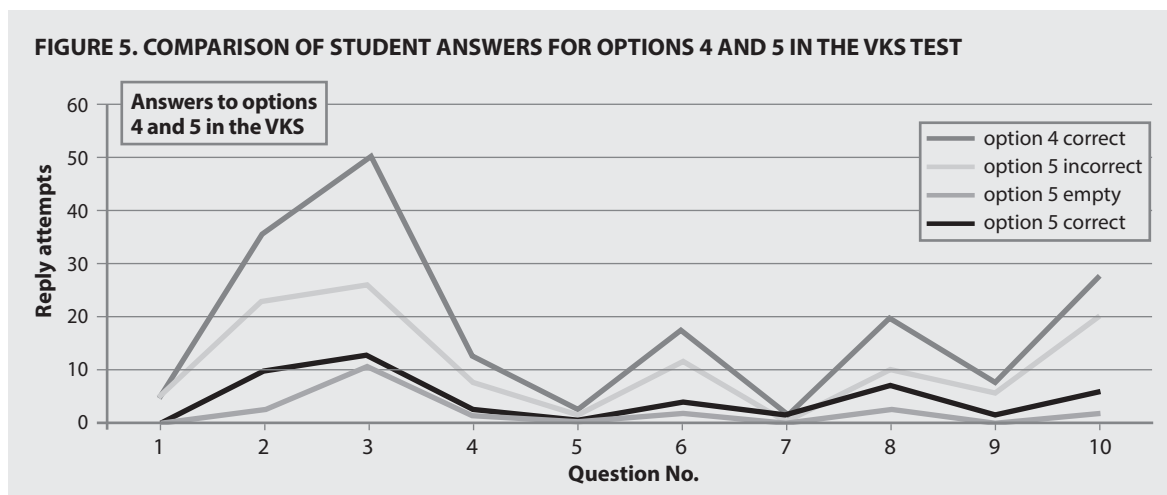
Most students have chosen number 2, which means that they have come across the expression, but they do not remember its meaning. To the total of 480 questions they have chosen answers 3, 4 or 5 and explained the expression. 274 expressions (57%) have been explained correctly, while 206 of them (43%) have been explained incorrectly.

As regards the attempts to showcase their productive vocabulary knowledge of the specific items, from the total of students who answered option 4 correctly, i.e. were certain of the meaning of the item and provided a correct explanation, only 26 % provided a correct answer to option 5. 61% of them answered option 5 incorrectly and 13% didn't attempt to answer option 5. The comparison of their replies is shown in Figure 5.

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS IN THE VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE SCALE TEST

OPTION	NUMBER OF ANSWERS
1	216
2	391
3	240
4	192
5	48

FIGURE 5. COMPARISON OF STUDENT ANSWERS FOR OPTIONS 4 AND 5 IN THE VKS TEST



Gender and Vocabulary Knowledge Scale test

In the second part of the questionnaire, examinees were supposed to choose one of 5 options for the expression. Men were more often choosing options which stand for better understanding of the given expressions. On average they would choose level 2.70, while women would choose 2.45. Mann Whitney U test is designed to test statistically significant difference at level choosing based on gender. P-value is $p=0,069$ which is greater than $\alpha=0,05$, therefore we cannot conclude that male students generally assess their knowledge as better. We can conclude that there is no statistically significant difference at choosing of knowledge level of male and female examinees.

Those of them who have chosen answers 3, 4 or 5 had to explain the meaning of the words given. In 54% of cases (119 out of 222) male students have offered the correct answer, while female students answered correctly in 60% of cases (155 out of 258). Mann Whitney U test has been used to establish the difference on answer accuracy among men and women. P-value is $p=0,449 > 0,05$ therefore we must reject the hypothesis that there is statistical difference in answer accuracy.

Study course selection and Vocabulary Knowledge Scale test

The students of Business Economics have averagely been choosing answer level 2.31, and the students of Tourism and Hotel Management 2.90. Mann Whitney U test has shown that the difference is statistically significant, because $p<0,001$. We can conclude that the students of Tourism and Hotel Management think that their knowledge is better than the knowledge of the students of Business Economics.

After having chosen levels 3, 4 or 5 and explaining the expression, the students of Tourism and Hotel Management were more accurate in their answers than the students of Business Economics. The students of Tourism had 67% of correct answers, while the students of BE had less than half, only 46% of correct answers. Since p-value of Mann Whitney U test is $p<0,001$ we can conclude that the students of Tourism and Hotel Management are better at understanding the given items.

Difference in English knowledge between beginners and advanced learners

The students-beginners have chosen lower answer levels (2.29) than the students in the

advanced group (2.74) in the second part of the test. Since $p=0,008<0,05$ we can conclude that the answers chosen by the advanced level students is statistically significantly better.

The students-beginners answered 47% expressions correctly, while advanced level students explained 63% of expressions accurately. The difference is statistically significant and $p=0,014 < 0,05$.

Correlation of assessed knowledge Vocabulary Knowledge Scale test

The existence of correlation between the assessed knowledge and the chosen answers is analysed by Spearman's correlation coefficient. Positive values $r=0,453$ and $p<0,001$ have been achieved. We conclude that there is a statistically significant moderate correlation between the assessed knowledge and the chosen answers in the second part of the test.

We also tested the correlation between the assessed knowledge and the accuracy of their answers in case when students chose answers 3, 4 or 5 and were supposed to give a correct answer. Spearman's correlation coefficient is $r=0,398$ and $p<0,001$, so the conclusion is that there is a statistically significant moderate correlation between the assessed and presented knowledge. The students who assessed their knowledge as better had more correct answers in the test.

Correlation between exposure to the English language and Vocabulary Knowledge Scale test

Spearman's correlation coefficient between the assessment of knowledge and the exposure to the English language is positive and relatively weak $r=0,298$, and $p=0,003<0,05$. The students who are exposed to English more often have evaluated their knowledge as better than those whose exposure is rare.

The positive correlation coefficient is $r= 0,287$ ($p=0,002<0,05$) and it has been gained between the exposure to English and the selection of levels,

as well as between the exposure to English and correct answers with $r=0,334$ ($p<0,05$)

Correlation between age and the vocabulary knowledge scale test

The correlation between the age of examinees and the chosen level of understanding the given expression has not been established, and neither has the correlation between the age of examinees and providing the correct answers. ($r=0,078$ i $p=0,415>0,05$)

DISCUSSION

Regarding the part of the questionnaire aimed at establishing the level of inferencing vocabulary item meaning (VKS), most students opted for the answer 2 (I have heard this word / expression before, but I don't know what it means.), indicating a low level of receptive vocabulary knowledge. There certainly is a difference between vocabulary inferencing skills in students with poor general knowledge of English (beginners) and advanced general knowledge of English; however, the choice of answer 2 showcases the level of comprehensibility of the tested vocabulary items mentioned above, which can lead to the assumption of the nature of tourism and hospitality vocabulary tending towards clarity and understandability.

It is noteworthy that students had most difficulty in inferring meaning of the item "intangible cultural assets" and that they mostly made a mistake in attempting to explain "accessible tourist routes". The former item contains two "difficult" words: intangible and assets – two concepts which are rarely present in the acquisition of general English language during primary/secondary school education, and which do not frequently appear in students' exposure to language. The latter term is confusing, because a number of students attempted the explanation, because they were mostly familiar with separate words from in the item: accessible, tourist, routes, but were

unfamiliar with the specific meaning of accessible in tourism context, which refers to people with disabilities, and explained the item incorrectly.

As regards the difference in inferencing skills between students of Business Economics and Tourism and Hotel Management, the authors noticed that the impact of affinity towards the study of tourism and motivation during testing played a significant role in establishing the difference. The students were tested by their own teachers, and a large group of students of Business Economics were tested prior to their official exam. We think this fact might have affected their dedication and motivation to take time to attempt answering all the questions and provide explanations. Affinity towards tourism and hospitality industry certainly plays a role in showing interest and being more prone to showcase knowledge of vocabulary within the context.

In general, students with advanced skills in general knowledge of English assessed their knowledge as very good or excellent, were more exposed to English language and showed better skills in inferring meaning of the selected vocabulary items.

In relation to the students' attempts to demonstrate their productive knowledge of the selected vocabulary items (attempts to answer option 5 in the VKS test), the results show a discouraging situation, because only 26% of those students who knew the meaning of the vocabulary item were able to use it properly in a sentence. This is also evidenced by students' self-report on the highest level of language skills (Figure 3), whereby they felt most confident in receptive language skills (reading and listening comprehension), rather than productive skills (speaking and writing). We might assume that there is a lack of overall effort in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to develop productive vocabulary knowledge in students, which needs to rely heavily on assessment methodology, i.e. our assessment methods need to be aimed at students' use of language rather than recognition elements.

Our research is limited with the number of students tested, which was limited to 1st year students of two study programmes carried out by Libertas International University. Our limitations also refer to the selection of only 10 vocabulary items pertaining to the specialised field of urban tourism. However, these items were selected on the basis of two criteria: 1. that the students had not been familiarised with them during the course of their study programme thus far and 2. that urban tourism is a topic rarely or insufficiently covered by the English language courses within the two programmes.

CONCLUSION

A solid background in general knowledge of the English language leads to better understanding and higher level of development of vocabulary skills. Without undermining the vocabulary element in language teaching (as we have mentioned earlier, vocabulary knowledge underlies proficient language use), teaching methodology needs to shift focus from vocabulary items per se and include and equally represent other language elements, such as morphology, grammar and, especially syntax. This will not only lead to depth of vocabulary knowledge, but will enhance students' productive vocabulary skills.

In English for Tourism and Hospitality, the specialised vocabulary element is not as vast as in other specialisations of ESP, such as English for Medicine, for Law or Finance. Most vocabulary items can be inferred from previously acquired language knowledge and skills, and those which are highly specific can easily be dealt with and incorporated within the course design along with efforts on the part of the teacher to immediately develop their productive use, i.e. depth of vocabulary knowledge.

The English language for Tourism and Hospitality within the scope of ESP is highly specific, not as much in its specialised vocabulary, but in

its functions. Our students need to be able to correspond with customers and clients, they need to readily answer questions and provide advice to a varied group of language users, they need training in intercultural communication and the laws of verbal and non-verbal communication, they need to develop proficiency and eloquence in both B2C and B2B communication, they need excellent presentation and marketing skills and, depending on which field in the tourism and hospitality industry they specialise in, they need specific skills to meet the demand on the labour market.

The spread of English as a lingua franca, i.e. English as a global language is permeating the tourism and hospitality industry, which is no surprise considering that it is in this very industry that people of all cultures and backgrounds

meet; people whose mother tongue is mostly not English and who use it in a much simpler way with one major purpose: to effectively communicate with others. In this environment, it is also obvious that there is no room for difficult and highly specialised vocabulary, because this would impede the main purpose of English language use in the industry. With this in mind English language teachers who teach for the tourism and hospitality industry should rethink how they approach their teaching and where their focus lies in developing learning outcomes for their students. Some of us will only need to redesign our approach to include more practice for productive vocabulary knowledge development, while others may want to change the entire concept from teaching materials to assessment methods.

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