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**UNIVERSITY OF KRAGUJEVAC
FACULTY OF HOTEL MANAGEMENT
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THE EL KNOWLEDGE AS A MEANS OF ENHANCING BUSINESS PERFORMANCE IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

Due to its importance for both service provision and tourism products promotion, a good command of English has become one of the main prerequisites of tourism and hospitality professionals. Examining the perceived needs and performance of tourism and hotel management students in Serbia would give a useful insight into areas seeking for improvement, contributing thus to the curriculum development and language knowledge improvement that would eventually influence the quality of in-service activities. This paper looks into tertiary education as a driving force of increased business performance and positions English language course at this educational level. Its aim is to examine the students' perceptions of their language knowledge and to find out the students' language needs and skills seeking for improvement. The subjects of the study are the students of the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja who have taken part in professional practice, while the data are driven by means of a questionnaire survey. The findings of the study provide significant insights into the ways of improving the language teaching process that would lead to effective mastery of the identified language skills, and ultimately enhancing students' future professional contribution.

Keywords: tertiary education, ESP, job demands in tourism, needs analysis, curriculum development

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Introduction

The successful business performance is directly dependable upon excellence in the skills specific of a particular workplace. As the English language knowledge can by all means be considered the primary skill in tourism and hospitality areas, regardless the level of organizational structure someone is to work at, the systematic work on developing and perfecting this skill would consequently lead to improved business performance.

It would be impossible to develop a language teaching programme that would contribute to developing language skill, without gaining a full insight into the needs of professions and workplaces in the fields of interest, in our paper those being tourism and hospitality. The best way to approach the future profession needs is by undertaking needs analysis. Most often, they are conducted with people having in-service experience in the field of interest. In this paper, however, we highlight that, in the case of the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, it is just as justifiable to employ needs analysis with students and obtain equally reliable results.

The aim of undertaking needs analysis within the business language teaching process is to find out the needs of a company, job and an employee and further define the language level that a particular profession demands. In such circumstances, the needs are not motivated solely by personal needs of an individual, but they mostly depend on extrinsic factors conditioned by workplace characteristics. Perceived in such a way, needs analysis are expected to contribute to the EL knowledge improvement, which would lead to an increased business performance, i.e. enhanced quality of tourism and hospitality products and services.

As a means of providing an insight into learners' needs and understanding of the business environment they are going to operate in, needs analysis is taken as the basis of educational policy creation and development. It is also used as a tool of educational process evaluation, which further implies that it should be employed not only in curriculum design (Richards, 2001), but in its development, as well.

The aim of this paper is to provide an insight into the needs of future tourism and hospitality professionals, having in mind the areas of interest

to those professions, as well as those in a need of improvement. In such a way, we will point out to the elements necessary for the perfection of the language skills needed at the future students' workplace, which would consequently influence the reconsideration of the EL curriculum at the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja. In so doing, a questionnaire is used as a data gathering tool, and the obtained data are analysed using statistical and descriptive methods.

Tertiary education as a driving force of increased business performance

As the final step in educating skilled professionals, it is expected that the tertiary education makes capable and knowledgeable experts who will contribute to the development of their area of interest, making thus contribution to developing the economy of a country. In our particular case, it would mean educating professionals who are to work in the fields of tourism and hospitality, who would be able to influence the development and act as a driving force of changes within these industries.

Being a part of the tertiary education system, the studies of tourism and hotel management in Serbia are characterised by all those features specific to tertiary education in general. There are certain characteristics common to all tertiary level institutions that have undergone the Bologna process (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area - ESG), that call for an immediate attention and reaction of higher education institutions. Namely, the following are of utmost importance in developing market oriented education, which would increase the quality of performance at the future workplace: (1) curricula are developed in accordance with national needs and market demands, (2) multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary courses follow the needs of new professions, whose emergence is motivated by technological development, (3) apart from being equipped with necessary knowledge and skills, students are also provided with the applicability of the learned, which would enable them to meet workplace demands, and (4) students are involved in educational process as partners (Crosier & Parveva, 2013). Involving students as partners into educational process is probably one of the most radical changes that the Serbian tertiary level education has faced in recent years and this issue is not treated in the same way by all higher education institutions in the country. This has emphasised a complex role that students now have in the educational process. Namely, being direct beneficiaries of the educational process, they are seen as

stakeholders. Furthermore, as active participants, they are involved in quality assurance through memberships in institutional boards and quality assurance bodies, whereas the results of an educational process are directly dependable upon their performance (Marić & Pešić, 2015). Involving students not only in the very teaching process, but in making decisions connected with the organization of teaching could develop the feeling of involvement and consequently lead to the increased motivation of students.

The tertiary education in Serbia is yet to become an integral part of market-oriented competitive environment. In order to positively answer the needs of business environment and demands of the students' future jobs, there are some basic preconditions to be met for a successful operation of an educational institution. Those are a continual enhancement of quality of the very organization, its products and/or services and staff members (Marić & Pešić, 2015). All this calls for constant rethinking and readiness to change and adapt to new demands and situations.

English language at the studies of tourism and hotel management

As a course at undergraduate studies at most universities in Serbia, English language is academic in its nature. The aim of such teaching instruction is to enable students to read scientific literature in English, take part in scientific disputes, write essays, papers, thesis, etc.

On the other hand, the business demands that people working in the fields of tourism and hospitality have to meet are somewhat different. Business situations that call for an immediate use of the English language imply primarily vocationally oriented teaching instruction (Marinković & Pešić, 2015). Principally, it would involve the use of communicative skills. These could range from the most basic ones, e.g. giving different types of information to prospective or already existing clients, to more complex ones, such as giving presentations (e.g. products, services or company), dealing with complaints, and taking part at meetings or negotiations, which demands more subtle knowledge of language use.

As the development in the fields of tourism and hospitality depends to a great extent on the development of other industries and technologies, the EFL curriculum design asks for a continual assessment and adapting to all business changes. In order to offer the highest quality language education

to future tourism and hospitality professionals, it is necessary to get a thorough insight into workplace needs. For this purpose, the most suitable tool to employ is needs analysis.

The students' needs

The purpose of undertaking needs analysis is to collect information in order to define a goal of a certain process (Hamp-Lyons, 2001). Having in mind the interest of this paper, the first step of the needs analysis to be undertaken with the students of higher education institutions is the collection and analysis of data on the students' needs in order to set clear objectives of the language course(s). Brown defines the *objective* as 'precise statements about what content or skills the students must master in order to attain a particular goal'. The *goal* would be 'what must be accomplished in order to attain and satisfy students' needs' (Brown, 1995, pp. 21).

The foreign language (FL) which is taught at the non-philological universities is a language for special purposes. The aim of the FL instruction primarily depends on the nature of the subject matter of the studies, i.e. vocational subjects that are taught at the university. When talking about the education of managers in the fields of tourism and hospitality, a foreign language curriculum is conditioned not only by thematic context, but by prospective business situations as well. In other words, it is not only the language of hospitality and tourism that should be thought, but the business language specific to the situational context of these two industries. The purpose of learning an FL in a business context is to achieve a goal, while its successful use is seen as successful realization of business transactions or events. Competitiveness is a feature that, in an equal degree, characterises the relationships among companies as well as interpersonal relations within companies, among employees who seek career advancement. This suggests that the practical goal has primacy over an educational purpose, i.e. learning a language for its own sake.

The aim of business people to learn a language is not a good test result. Their test would be a business situation where the existence of a project or even that of the whole organisation depends primarily on them. Besides, their language learning goal may also be career advancement (Pešić & Radovanović, 2014). However, the teaching situation where a language is learned at universities is somewhat different. If the tertiary

education in Serbia is taken as a context, the main goal of language learning is still passing the exam. With this as the main drive of language learning, the aforementioned goals that characterise business people become only the secondary ones.

However, the specific teaching situation at the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, where students do professional practice during summer months, goes in favour of organising the course of English Language. Namely, doing professional practice at well known travel agencies, hotels both in the country and abroad and Air Serbia, enables students to face particular demands of their future profession, while still at studies. This allows them to see the need for the English language learning and understand the real needs and demands of the future workplace, which can positively affect their motivation for learning. The insight could be attained in direct interaction with clients, by observing employees with in-service experience, or in conversation with the employed in those companies or organisations where they are in practice. Such empirically based opinion and experience could be of primary importance for making decisions on EFL teaching curricula. In situations where students have a direct insight into a future business situation, we believe that an advantage in undertaking needs analysis should be given to students over professionals already working in the field of interest. The main reason for this is that students, as ELT beneficiaries, are more interested in quality education and thus more motivated to estimate the future profession needs and point out to the imperfections in their knowledge, i.e. areas seeking for an improvement. In this sense, the objectives of the foreign language teaching programme at non-philological universities should be defined by the results of needs analysis (Nedeljković, 2007).

The purpose of the current research

Given that the Bologna process has made the students equal partners in the educational process, the needs of the student's population have been drawn to the centre of a teaching process. Though their primary motivation for learning is passing exams, they are still interested in high-quality education, as it directly contributes to their know-how and skills necessary for their future profession.

The purpose of this study is to examine the attitude of tourism and hotel management students towards the importance of the English Language for

their future profession and define the language skills and functions of utmost importance for their future profession. The undertaken needs analysis is also intended to be a proper evaluation of the material used in the EL teaching process at the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja.

Instrument

To pull the data of interest, we use a mixed-type questionnaire. As a matter of fact, 12 out of 14 questions are evaluation questions, employing the 5 point Likert scale, with 1 and 5 signifying the lowest possible and the highest possible value, respectively. One of the questions is of a multiple choice type, whereas one is an open-ended question. According to the type of information they draw, all the questions can be grouped in two sections – those providing information on the importance of the English language for delivering the quality service in tourism and those evaluating the topics of importance for the future workplace. The obtained data are analysed using statistical and descriptive methods.

Subjects

The target group of this research is the successful students of Year 2 and Year 3 at the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja. The notion *successful* means that they are regular in passing their exams and that they have scored 8 or more in EL exams so far. The reasons for aiming at this group of students are twofold. On one hand, they have already finished two cycles of professional practice, and, on the other, being successful students, their opinion is found to be a valid one and a most helpful in addressing the treated issues.

Results and Discussion

The question No. 1 concerns *the importance of the English language for the future profession*. The results show that 80.7% of subjects find the English language of extreme importance for their future profession, while 15.8% finds it very important. 3.6% of subjects find the English language of little importance for their future profession.

Although it is expected that the Year 2 and Year 3 students are aware of the importance of the EL for their future profession, it should be noted

that around 15% of subjects does not maintain this course of utmost importance, and around 4% thinks that it is not very important.

Question 2 aims at finding out the subjects' opinion concerning the degree in which *the EL knowledge would improve the level of quality of services delivered in the areas of tourism and hospitality*. There are no subjects who believe that the EL knowledge has no influence on the service quality. There are 1.8% of subjects who say that the degree of such influence is small, 7% describe this influence as moderate, 33.3% believe that it is strong and 57.9% of the subjects maintain that the EL knowledge most strongly influences the quality of services.

Such results are encouraging, as they imply the awareness of the importance of EL knowledge for future profession, and at the same time, they should indicate the strong extrinsic motivation for language learning, which is one of the strongest driving forces of language learning at this level.

Subjects are further asked to *evaluate the level of their EL knowledge*. The results show that 1.8% of subjects think that they are at A1 level (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)) or to be beginner users of EL. 36.9% of subjects consider themselves to be A2 or elementary level of EL proficiency, while 61.4% of subjects believe to be at B or Intermediate level of the EL proficiency.

It is obvious that the answers are rather different with the level of language proficiency ranging from A1 to B2, which implies that after 13 to 14 years of language learning, the subjects still belong to a rather heterogeneous group.

It would be interesting to compare the results with those obtained in academic 2013/2014 (Pešić, 2016), when the EL knowledge level of the students was tested and the results showed that 73% of the student population were of B level, while 27% of students were of A proficiency level.

Such results are in line with the ever present trend of lowering the level of knowledge with every freshmen generation, at least as far as the EL is concerned. We are of the opinion that the situation would dramatically be

improved by introducing standardised tests of EL that would become a compulsory part of all educational levels in Serbia.

Question 4 considers *the preferable level of language knowledge that would meet the future job requirements*. Most subjects (54.4%) believe that Upper-Intermediate level is the most preferable for successful management of tourism and hospitality business operations. 36.8% are of the opinion that an advanced level of language knowledge is necessary, while only 8.8% say that Intermediate level would satisfy their business needs.

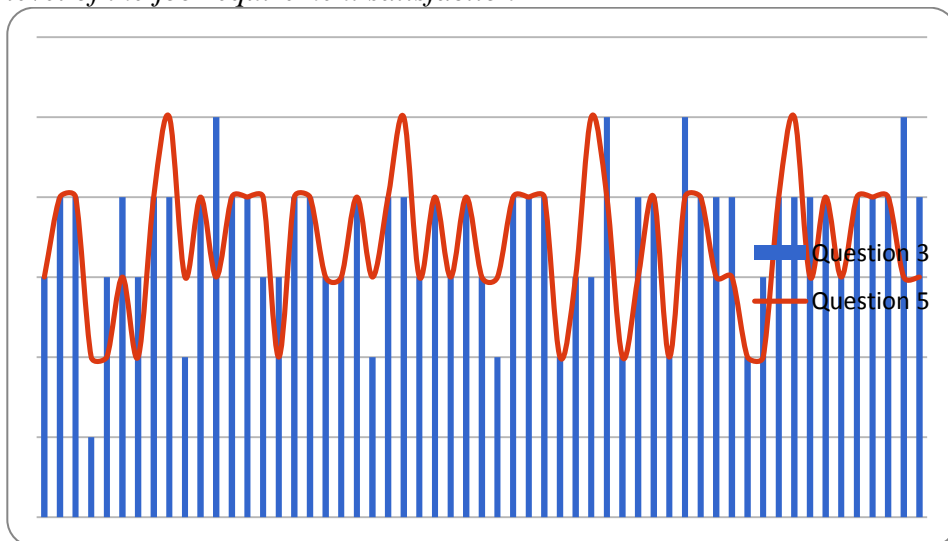
The obtained results again point out to a high degree of awareness of the importance of self-improvement, which only adds to the above raised issue of students' motivation.

As far as the estimated degree in which *the current level of language knowledge satisfies the needs of their future profession* is concerned, most subjects (43.9%) say that the level of satisfaction is strong. 33.33% of the subjects believe that this level is moderate, while 15.8% say that it is small. Only 7% of the subjects say that their language knowledge totally satisfies the needs of their future job.

It would be interesting to compare the data gained by this question with those obtained by Question 3. Namely, by computing the Pearson correlation coefficient, which indicates a moderate positive correlation of 0.6182, we can see that the current level of the students' language knowledge moderately correlates with the estimated level of the future job requirements. However, the obtained data show that 15.79% of subjects underestimate their language level, or, in other words, they estimate their language level to be lower than the level in which they believe it would satisfy the needs of their future profession. At the same time, 22.81% of subjects believe that their knowledge would not in the proper way satisfy the needs of their future profession. 38.6% of the subjects believe that the current level of their language knowledge would satisfy their job requirements.

All the subjects believe that *the EL knowledge can influence the possibility of their future employment*. The achieved results describe this possibility from moderate to very strong. Namely, 14% of the subjects believe this possibility to be moderate, 35.1% believe it to be strong, while 50.9% find it very strong.

Graph 1: *The current level of language knowledge and the estimated level of the job requirement satisfaction*



Source: *The author's research*

The answers to this question are directly related to the level of students' motivation for language learning. The figures imply that the motivation should be very high.

The results drawn by the question on *the degree in which the EL knowledge is important for job advancement* also point out the importance of the EL knowledge. Here 61.4% of the subjects believe that climbing career ladder very strongly depends on the EL knowledge. 29.8% of the subjects find this dependence to be strong, 7% thinks it is moderate, while 1.8% says that there is a small degree of dependence between the two.

Such figures can go in favour of increased motivation. Namely, as one of the first problems graduates in Serbia encounter is getting a job, and further, being treated in accordance to their capabilities, such results are encouraging and point to the self-improvement orientation of the subjects.

When we come to *the level of self-confidence that the subjects experience in EL communication*, the obtained information suggests a positive result. Namely, 7% of the subjects show a very strong degree of self-confidence, 40.4% show a strong degree of self-confidence, 35.1% say that they are

self-confident to a moderate degree, 12.3% expresses a small degree of self-confidence, while 5.3% lack self-confidence in communication.

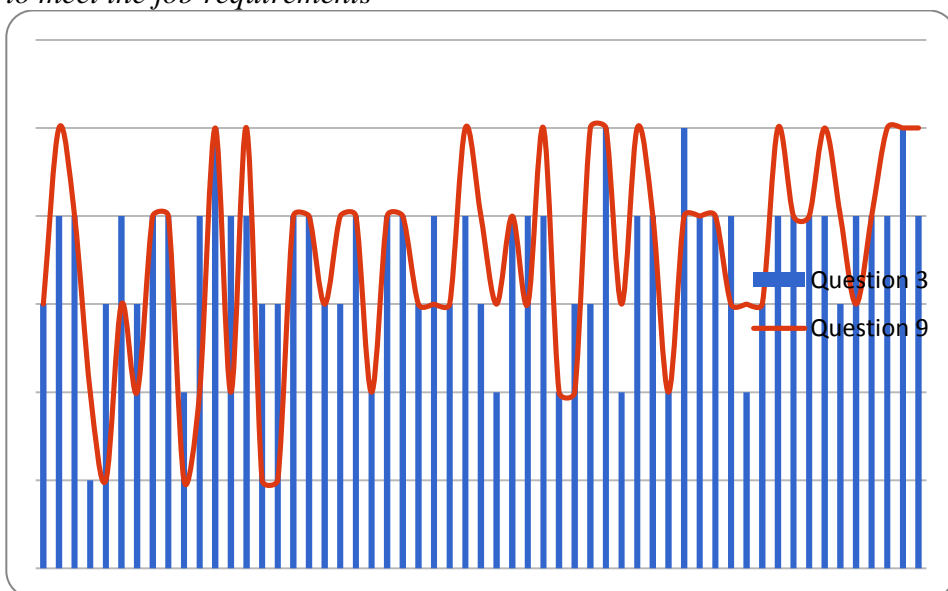
These findings are encouraging, as self-confidence is one of the most important affective factors in language learning and a most important prerequisite for the overall performance. However, regardless the positive trend in results, it is the role of a teacher to help students build and increase the level of self-confidence.

Question number 9 addresses the level of success in which the subjects handled the communication with EL speakers during their professional practice, i.e. *how well they met job requirements during the professional practice*. The obtained data show that 22.8% of subjects find the way in which they handled the communication with clients in EL during their professional practice totally satisfactory. The same number of subjects finds the success of communication to be a moderate one. 33.33% show large extent of satisfaction with their ability to meet job requirements. 14% of subjects express a small degree of satisfaction with their ability to communicate in real-life business situations, while 7% of the subjects find the same ability to be unsatisfactory.

Comparing the perceived ability to meet the requirements of the future profession (Question 5) with the real ability to meet the job requirements (Question 9), we try to find out if the subjects' estimations concerning the level in which their language knowledge is able to satisfy the needs of their future profession are confirmed in the real-life situation. The Pearson correlation coefficient shows the moderate positive correlation of 0.5088. This further means that the subjects are only to a certain degree able to benchmark their language knowledge, and that data obtained in such a way are not totally reliable. Although the degree of correlation is not high, the Question 5 was worth asking, as it raises students' awareness of the necessity of thinking about the usefulness of the gained knowledge and making direct connection of the learnt with their future job requirements. Developing such a way of thinking, i.e. strategic thinking (Pešić, 2016, Brown, 1995, 2001, Chamot, 2005, Wenden, 1991) about language learning, has in its final end self-conscious and autonomous learners, which is of utmost importance at the tertiary level of education. The benefit does not concern language learning only. Namely, other university courses are also to see an advantage in it.

Comparing the current level of language knowledge and the ability to communicate successfully in a professional surrounding (Question 3 and Question 9), also gives a moderate positive correlation, with the Pearson coefficient of 0.6312. This means that the current level of EL knowledge proves to be sufficient for successful task completion.

Graph 2: *The estimation of the language knowledge level and the ability to meet the job requirements*



Source: *The author's research*

Graph 2 shows that 31.58% of the subjects underestimate their language knowledge, compared to the demands of a real-life situation. At the same time, 22.81% of the subjects show the inability to relate the current level of language knowledge with the job demands, i.e. they overestimate the level of their language knowledge. It means that such estimations should not be taken for granted.

The problems that the subjects encountered in communication during professional practice can be classified into two groups. The first would be the problems of personal, i.e. affective nature, and the second group would refer to the problems concerning language knowledge. There are two problems of the affective nature that stand out – anxiety and the lack of self-confidence. The problems that suppose the imperfections in language knowledge are: the lack of lexis (e.g. the knowledge of ESP

vocabulary items or giving specific information), inability to make understanding happen (e.g. inability to understand the speaker), uncertainty due to the lack of grammar knowledge, the lack of fluency, problems in understanding different accents, and the speed of delivery.

The problems of affective nature point to the lack of practice in communication skills. This could be the consequence of practicing language in large classes of up to 50 students, or unwillingness to take part in class discussions, which would contribute to lowering the level of anxiety in 'controlled' conditions. A possible solution is to reconsider the number of students per one group. Another possibility is to motivate students to actively contribute to the teaching process. The language knowledge related problems also point to the lack of communication skills. In this sense, a possible solution could be building strategic thinking about the learning process and developing students' autonomy in learning.

The following set of questions deals with the specific language skills and linguistic areas that are of importance for successful performance in the fields of hotel management and tourism. The obtained results would directly influence the EL curriculum design, i.e. the choice of topics, and language skills and functions to be included in the EL course at the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja.

The *most needed skills for the future working place* are speaking and listening comprehension, reported by 80.7% of the subjects, followed by translation (64.91%), writing (57.89%) and reading (49.12%).

The same *skills are evaluated as the ones in the need of improvement*. The results point out that speaking is the skill that requires the largest degree of improvement (50.88%), followed by listening comprehension and translation (40.35%), writing (33.33%) and reading (31.58%).

The following are proven to be *the most important elements of the workplace English language use*: professional lexis (75.43%), general English knowledge (70.18%), business correspondence (61.4%) and the proper knowledge of grammar (43.86%).

Table 1 shows the degree of *importance of the examined language functions for successful performance* of the employees in the fields of tourism and hotel management. They are as follows: report writing,

giving detailed information on sights, contract drawing, answering complaints, giving detailed information on hotel services and facilities, language of meetings, checking-in language, checking-out language, negotiating, telephoning, giving detailed information about food and designing a website in English.

Table 1: *The importance of certain EL functions for the successful employee performance in hospitality and tourism*

Language Functions	1	2	3	4	5
1. Contract Drawing	10.52	5.26	5.26	21.05	57.89
2. Language of Meetings	10.52	5.26	10.52	19.79	57.89
3. Report Writing	10.52	5.26	0	31.58	52.63
4. Designing a Site	5.26	10.52	21.05	19.79	47.37
5. Negotiating	10.52	5.26	10.52	10.52	63.16
6. Answering complaints	10.52	5.26	5.26	21.05	57.89
7. Telephoning	10.52	10.52	5.26	10.52	63.16
8. Checking-in Language	5.26	10.52	10.52	26.32	47.37
9. Checking-out Language	10.52	10.52	5.26	26.32	47.37
10. Giving detailed information about food	10.52	10.52	10.52	26.32	42.11
11. Giving detailed information on sights	10.52	10.52	0	19.79	63.16
12. Giving detailed information on hotel services and facilities	10.52	5.26	5.26	21.05	57.89

Source: *The author's research*

It is interesting to note that all the topics included in the EL Curriculum at the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja are scored as very important. Even the one at the bottom of the scale is supported by 67.16% of the subjects, which does not call for further rethinking. Namely, all these topics or the language functions should be kept as a part of the ELT curriculum. The issue that might be worth thinking of is the very instruction, i.e. the methodology that should be employed.

Conclusion

The examination of the perceived needs and performance of the students of hotel management and tourism has given a useful insight into positive sides and areas seeking for improvement in the EL instruction, whose

treatment would improve the students' performance both at classes and in the future professional setting.

The results of the research imply that there is a high level of awareness of the importance of the EL knowledge for the future profession. The fact that encourages is the high degree of students' motivation for language learning, their self-confidence and orientation to self-improvement. All of these are further indicators of the students' willingness to participate actively in the learning process and thus make their own contribution to the results of the teaching process. As a consequence, a better performance at the future workplace could be expected.

The first problem identified by the research results is the fact that the surveyed students still belong to a rather heterogeneous group, which means that after 13 or 14 years of EL instruction, their levels of the EL knowledge still greatly differ. A possible solution would be to introduce standardised tests of the EL that would become a compulsory part at all educational levels in Serbia. Apart from giving an objective insight into students' knowledge, these would increase the motivation for language learning.

The second problem that the results point to is the large number of students involved in the EL classes. Namely, depending on the class type this number fluctuates between 50 and 100. Such a situation makes it impossible to actively involve all students in communication, which further results in the lack of self-confidence and underdeveloped communication skills. To prevent the possible consequences, it is necessary to reconsider the number of students sitting in the EL classrooms.

The problems that the students encountered in practice, while communicating in English, could be divided into the problems of affective nature and those caused by the imperfections in language knowledge. Both groups further indicate the insufficient level of communication skill development. This calls for an immediate reaction, as communication is a basic tool in the fields of tourism and hospitality. However, it should be noted that such a state is not only the consequence of teaching instruction. There are other factors, such as deficiencies in the previously gained language knowledge which raise the affective filter, causing thus blockage in communication. Building strategic thinking about the learning process and developing students' autonomy in learning

could lead to lowering the affective filter and the level of anxiety in performing in English leading thus to a better achievement.

As far as the language skills and functions are concerned, being the most important for the professions in tourism and hospitality, speaking and listening comprehension call for further perfection. It is important to note that the students highly estimate translation.

The students put almost equal weight to professional lexis, general English knowledge and business correspondence, while the proper knowledge of grammar is not highly estimated.

When we come to language functions, it is important to note that the functions demanding developed writing skills are highly rated. This is especially important having in mind the fact that writing as a language skill was not given primacy.

Finally, it should be noted that the current EL curricula the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja are positively evaluated, as all the examined topics and functions proved to be of significant importance.

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