

Language Skills as a factor of quality in the Greek Hotel enterprises. A comparison study of various hotel categories.

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Abstract

Considering that communication in the service sector constitutes a basic criterion of quality, the knowledge of foreign languages from the hotel personnel, constitutes an essential element of quality in the services provided. In the international tourism, Greece occupies the 13th place in the World (UN.WTO, 2006), and receives each year over 14,2 millions travelers, the majority of which is tourists. In the present study, what was calculated, initially, was the main foreign languages of tourists in Greece, having as a base the annual arrivals; on a later stage, a primary research was conducted for the estimation on the level of knowledge and also the use of foreign languages in hotels, as well as in the provided services within the hotels. Having as a base the results of the first research, it was realized that 70% of the main foreign languages of tourists are English, German, French, Italian and Dutch. At the same time the primary research in hotels, showed that the level of knowledge of foreign languages of hotel staff in Greece, is particularly high. It was found that in the majority of hotel personnel, as well as in the individual departments, the level of communication (with regard to the Language skills) is particularly satisfactory, a fact that shows the high level of services provided in the Hotel sector.

Keywords: International Tourism, Greece, Communication, Languages, Quality.

1. Introduction

In the international business the knowledge and use of foreign languages constitutes a condition for the communication and effective collaboration of the contracting parts. In the international tourism the knowledge of foreign languages constitutes an essential condition for the effective and good communication with the customers, as well as a factor of quality of the services provided. In Greece, a country which receives each year more than 14,2 millions of tourists, the use of foreign languages in the Hotel accommodations is necessary and particularly important.

Globalization of world economy has resulted in many changes as far as the way business and travel is conducted. Extensive competition, from the part of businesses, due to multinational corporations' expansion, as well as the diversity of tourists, proves to be the main effects of this changing environment. This automatically imposes the need for employees in the tourism industry to possess skills to manage this diversity. Moreover, in

this changed environment, customers are becoming more sophisticated, experienced and demanding; thus quality has become one of the key business pressures. (Keating & Harrington: 2003)

Another fact creating pressure for improved quality in service is the vulnerable tourism demand for any particular destination. (Russell & Leslie: 2004) Terrorist attacks, severe weather conditions are a couple of factors threatening tourism demand. Even in the case of turbulent situations, there is always another place to travel to. Thus, it is all more important that, in terms of supply, the tourism sector is doing everything possible to ensure its competitiveness. (Russell & Leslie: 2004)

Whereas the issue of customer quality has been extensively researched, the factor of communication and especially the use of foreign languages in the hospitality, has received very little attention, despite its great importance. (Aitken & Hall: 2000) (Martin & Davies: 2005) A number of studies though state that the hospitality industry in some nations such as U.K, New Zealand, Mauritius and China (Martin & Davies: 2005; Aitken & Hall: 2000; Russel & Leslie: 2004; Juwaheer & Ross: 2003; Tsang & Qu: 2000) face the lack of knowledge in foreign languages from the part of employees. All these, address the issue of poor language and communication ability of staff, as one of the main drawbacks to offering quality of service in the hospitality and all emphasize on the importance of education and training in combating this problem. Lack of language skills rates even higher in English speaking countries, because there seems to be a reluctance in learning any other foreign language, as English is regarded, worldwide, as the international language of business. The study by Martin and Davies (2005) shows that only 29 out of 100 hotel respondents (working at hotel telephone reservation line) in Scotland, were able to communicate in French, whereas only 19 could speak German. Moreover, 27 respondents tried to find someone else to speak in French and 23 in German. Finally, in both cases, five hotel respondents put down the phone on hearing a foreign speaker. (Martin & Davies: 2005)

Hotel call reservation staff are not the only ones in need of foreign language knowledge. Employees working at reception and service (front line staff) should also possess language skills, as their posts are based on a face-to-face interaction with guests. In the case that such skills are lacking, there is a need for employers to provide training and education for staff. Unfortunately, even though it is easy in theory, practice tends to be a different issue. Training and education for employees requires a great deal of economic resources, as well as time off duty, which is not an easy fact to face from the employer's perspective.

Due to the nature of hospitality industry, as well as any other service sector companies, will at some point have disappointed customers, for any one reason; this is inevitable. It is on these occasions though that recovery becomes very important. It can be the case that customers whose complaints are satisfactorily resolved, often become the company's most loyal clients, even more than those that have never been dissatisfied. (Kotler: 2000).

2. Quality and foreigner languages

The quality of offered services in Hotel units depends on a number of factors. These factors can be subjective or even objective (Pompl, 1997). Objective factors are reported as elements that are independent from the customer and are measurable. Such characteristics in tourism can be technical characteristics (as is the size of rooms), timely characteristics (as is the duration of stay), typical characteristics (as observation of

data that is reported in the prospect and lists), characteristics on the services provided (as observation of hours of departure) etc the subjective factors escape from the limits of possibilities of measurable characteristics, thus, create serious problems in the functional measurement.

Generally in the management of tourist services, it is three basic parameters that play a decisive role: a) The nature of tourist services, b) the human resources and c) the quality of services management. (Velissariou 2000)

The human factor in the service sector and more specifically in hotels, constitutes the basic factor of quality (Becker W. S., Wellins R. S. 1990). The right training of human potential in hotels must include, necessarily, programs for learning foreign languages, particularly in hotels that receive foreign tourists.

In the service sector, A. Parasuraman et al (1985), drew up a list including ten criteria of quality, which can also be applied in the sector of hotels, and are outlined below.

1. Access. The customer must have access in the services without problems of waiting, delays, distant points, inadequate hours etc
2. Communication. Services should be in a language comprehensible by the customer. In the sector of tourism this criterion also takes into consideration an additional dimension, which is the linguistic differences between tourists.
3. Education. The employee, who will come in contact with the customer, must have the essential knowledge, so that he/she can fully serve the customer.
4. Politeness. The employee should be characterized from politeness and eagerness to serve the customer.
5. Reliability. The enterprise, but also the personnel should be well disposed and seek the service of the customer.
6. Responsibility. The level of services offered and expected benefits, must be high.
7. Responsiveness. The employee should show interest and act immediately to any complaints made by the customer.
8. Assurance. The provided services are supposed not to encompass danger, fear, or uncertainty. For example the planes of an air company are supposed to comply with the specifications of safety.
9. Tangibles: Equipment, communication materials, used to advertise services, should impress equitably the quality of services. This is reported particularly in the advertising booklets of tourism enterprises, that often try to mislead the customer, or they withhold certain negative elements.
10. Empathy. The employee should treat customers with a great deal of understanding, respect and be attentive to the clients' needs.

In the above criteria, we observe that a lot of them concern the communication and the contact of customers with the personnel of hotels. More specifically, the Communication, the Politeness, the Tangibles and the Empathy factors. In all the above criteria, the knowledge of foreigner languages constitutes a pre-condition for the achievement of this criteria.

3. Research parameters

Having as a base the 10 criteria outlined previously, there were selected, as parameters for the measurement of quality of communication and linguistic training, certain criteria which are presented below:

1. Number of Foreign Languages spoken in the main departments of Hotels

This parameter examined the number of foreign languages which a customer can converse in the departments of Reception, Restaurant and Cafeteria.

2. Percentage of Staff who speak Foreign languages

This parameter examined in this case was the percentage of personnel out of the total that spoke (at least) one foreigner language.

3. Information materials in Foreign Languages

This parameter examined which hotel brochures were translated in foreign languages. These brochures concerned the Hotel leaflet, the Price list, various Announcements, Information on the TV screen and others.

4. Information materials in a number of Foreign Languages

The present criterion acts as a supplement of the above parameter. It examined the number of different foreign languages that were used in the hotels information materials.

5. Website and Update of content

In the frame of communication it was considered important to examine if the Hotel enterprise has its own web page or generally if each hotel is presented at another web page (either individual or collective) and how often the information on the web site are being informed.

Apart from the primary research in hotels regarding the knowledge of foreign languages, what was also examined, was the structure of foreign tourists in Greece, so that a connection can be made between the knowledge of foreign languages of personnel of hotels, with the country of origin of tourists.

4. Structure of foreign tourists in Greece and foreign languages

In the framework of the present research the country of origin of foreign tourists in Greece was analysed and accordingly, so were the main foreign languages of visitors. For this reason, the arrival statistics data of foreign tourists in Greece for the years 2004 and 2005 were analysed, as is shown in table 1 below. From tables that follow, it only the arrivals that are included with a percentage of above 1,5% of the total arrivals.

From the elements of table 1 (cf. Appendices) it becomes clear that the 93% of foreign arrivals in Greece come from Europe, with main countries of origin the United Kingdom (19%) and Germany (15,7%). However, a large percentage of the arrivals come from Albania (10,4%) which are rather economic immigrants from the neighbour country, and cannot be considered as tourists.

For this reason, it was used the arrival statistics data of visitors with Charter flights, which in their majority are tourists, mainly organized (cf. table 2 Appendices).

According to these data, it is obvious that 29,9% of Charter arrivals originate from the United Kingdom and 17,8% from Germany. Furthermore, important percentages of arrivals originate from Holland (6,3%), France (5,8%), Austria (4,7%), Sweden (4%) and to smaller numbers from other EU countries, respectively (see table 2).

Combining the data of tables (1 & 2), in order to calculate percentages of the main languages of foreign tourist arrivals in Greece, table 3 was created, giving percentages for 15 foreign languages (see table 3).

Table 3 : Foreign Languages of Tourist in Greece

	Language	Percent	Aggregated	Countries
1	English	24,5	24,5	U.K., Ireland, USA, Australia
2	German	21,1	45,6	Germany, Austria
3	French	8,9	54,5	France, Belgium, Luxembourg
4	Italian	8,8	63,3	Italy
5	Dutch	5,2	68,5	Holland
6	Yugoslavian	4,8	73,3	FYROM, Slovenia, Serbia Mondenegro
7	Bulgarian	4,7	78,0	Bulgaria
8	Swedish	2,5	80,5	Sweden
9	Dansk	2,3	82,8	Denmark
10	Rumanian	1,8	84,6	Romania
11	Norwegian	1,6	86,2	Norway
12	Russian	1,4	87,6	Russia, Lithuania
13	Finnish	1,2	88,8	Finland
14	Spanish	1,2	90,0	Spain
15	Sub total	,00		

From the results of the above table (3), it is evident that almost 70% of tourists arriving in Greece, speak one of the following 5 languages, specifically English (24,5), German (21,1), French(8,9), Italian(8,8) and Dutch(5,2). If in these percentages, are added Yugoslavian and Bulgarian, (that concerns mainly tourists of Northern Greece, that come mainly by car), the percentage of foreign languages reaches up to nearly 80%. In addition, it must be noted that there are other 7 EU languages which range from 2,5% for Swedish to 1,2% for Finnish and Spanish respectively (see table 3).

5. Research Methodology

In Greece with Act 43/2002 (Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic 43/A/7.3.2002), as was modified with the article of 16 n. 3190/2003 (Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic 249/A/30-10-03), was established the new system of classification of hotels in categories of stars (from 1 star to 5 stars maximum) based on a classification system, that takes into consideration very many parameters (Hatzinikolaou, E. 2002). The research was carried out all over Greece, in the interval from 1/4/2006 to 2/5/2006, in hotels of superior categories, more specifically in hotels of five stars (5*), four stars (4*) three stars (3*) and two stars (2*), respectively, operating, either all year round or on a seasonal basis, in order to measure the quality of services provided. In this study were not included hotels of 1 star category, because these are usually very small, old and are not included in the lists of Tour operators. Initially it must be noted, that according to the published data of the Greek Hotel Chamber, the number of hotels in Greece, in categories 5 stars up to 2 stars (Greek Chamber of Hoteliers 2006) including the research sample, are given in the table 4 below.

Table 4 : Hotel Capacity in Greece

Hotel Category	Number of Hotels	Number of Beds	Beds/Hotel	% per category
5*	155	56888	367	9,13%
4*	944	173431	184	27,84%
3*	1712	159351	93	25,58%
2*	4496	233315	52	37,45%
SUM	7307	622985	85	100,00%

The research was conducted all over Greece and included 180 hotels from the 13 Regions of Greece. The research was based on a structured questionnaire, which was used during interviews, while the questions concerned the parameters that are presented in chapter 3. The questionnaire was completed by the hotel directors (as for the small hotels) and by the person in charge of personnel (Human Resource Manager) in the larger hotels. It should be noted that the initial randomly selected sample used, included 250 hotels. However, in low categories (3* and 2*) the correspondence was very small, comparing to hotels of 5* and 4*.

The final sample, which was used in the present research, constitutes the 15,67% of the 5* hotel capacity, the 8,77% of the 4* hotel capacity, the 5,19% of 3* hotels capacity and only the 1,14% of 2* hotel capacity respectively. The small percentage in hotels 2* is owed in that the medium capacity is hardly 52 beds. The study sample concerned was 5,63% of the total hotel beds in categories 5, 4, 3 and 2 stars. The results of sample of hotels in each category were according to the percentage distribution of categories in the total number of beds (5*, 4*, 3* and 2*) in Greece (5*=9,13%, 4*=27,84%, 3*=25,58% and 2*=37,45%), in order to calculate the weighted mean (Christou, 1999), in the four categories of total hotels in Greece.

Table 5 : Hotel Capacity in Greece and Sample Hotel Data

Hotel Category	Number of Beds	Sample	% sample of beds
5*	56888	8916	15,67%
4*	173431	15211	8,77%
3*	159351	8269	5,19%
2*	233315	2661	1,14%
SUM 5*-2*	622985	35057	5,63%

6. Research Results

The results of the research for each one of the above fields, are given in table form and comments follow. It is important to point out that data were based on the interviewees' answers and comments (Hotel Directors and Human Resource Managers) and verification was not feasible.

In the tables below, Seasonal Hotels of all star categories, are presented as a separately. These hotels operate on a seasonal basis, mainly from the mid April to mid October. It must be noted that seasonal hotels belong mainly in 5* and 4* categories. On the other hand, a small number of seasonal hotels belong in 2* category. The category of seasonal hotel enterprises is very importance, because these are the hotels which mainly receive the largest percentage of foreign tourists over the summer.

Table 6 : Season Hotels in the sample

Sample	Seasonal hotels	% of seasonal hotels to the sample
35057	13680	39,02%

The seasonal hotels, as shown in table 6 above, represent 39% of the total research sample.

6.1. Number of Foreign Languages Usage in Hotels

The results on the knowledge of foreign languages were particularly positive. More specifically, in the Reception of 5* Hotels, customers could communicate on average in 4,1 foreign languages, while in the total of 5* to 2* hotels the percentage drops to 2,9. Moreover, in the Restaurant and Bar/Café departments, the number of languages used was high enough. More specifically, in the Restaurant department, the spoken languages are 2,5, whereas in the Coffee/Bar it is 2,2 (see table 7).

Table 7 : Number of Foreign Languages in Hotels

Hotel category	Reception	Restaurant	Bar / Café
5*	4,09	2,70	2,65
4*	3,313	2,681	2,646
3*	2,746	2,271	2,088
2*	2,390	-	1,780
5*-2*	2,89	2,52	2,18
Seasonal Hotels	3,5	2,8	2,6

In the seasonal hotels, the number of languages used is higher to the mean of the total sample in the study; for Reception the number is 3,5 languages, whereas for the Restaurant it is 2,8 and for the Coffee/Bar it is 2,6. (table 7 above).

6.2. Percentage of Staff who speak foreign languages

The 82,8% of total personnel of 5 star hotels, spoke at least one foreign language, while in 3 * and 2 * hotels the percentage was at a lower 50,2%. In seasonal hotels, the percentage of personnel that spoke at least one foreign language was 56,6% (table 8 below).

Table 8 : Percentage of Staff who speak foreign languages

Hotel category	Staff foreign speaking
5*	82,86%
4*	58,84%
3*	50,18%
2*	50,29%
5*-2*	55,62%
Season Hotels	56,58%

6.3. Information materials in Foreign Languages

In the question as for the existence of informative materials in foreign languages, the percentages varied both as far as hotel categories are concerned, as well as in the type of information material. In 5* hotels, the percentages were particularly high. Hotel leaflets, price lists and announcements in foreign languages, while as the hotel category dropped, so did the percentages of the informative material, as is shown in table 9.

Table 9 : Information materials in Foreign Languages

Hotel category	Hotel leaflets	Price list	Announcements	TV screen	Other
5*	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	95,7%	73,9%
4*	97,8%	95,6%	93,3%	84,4%	48,9%
3*	89,3%	89,3%	71,4%	71,4%	26,8%
2*	73,2%	65,9%	36,6%	36,6%	12,2%
5*-2*	86,61%	83,25%	67,08%	64,21%	31,78%
Season Hotels	91,9%	89,2%	83,8%	83,8%	32,4%

It is worth mentioning that in 5* hotels, the informative material were translated in other foreign languages, beyond those presented in the present study, up to a percentage of 73,9%, while in 2* hotels this percentage dropped in 12,2%. (table 9).

Table 10 : Information materials in Foreign Languages per Language

Hotel category	YES	English	German	French	Other	Other
5*	100,0%	100,0%	34,8%	26,1%	21,7%	8,7%
4*	93,5%	93,5%	43,5%	32,6%	26,1%	8,7%
3*	87,5%	85,7%	32,1%	10,7%	8,9%	1,8%
2*	66,7%	64,3%	19,0%	4,8%	11,9%	0,0%
5*-2*	83,73%	81,16%	30,62%	15,98%	15,98%	3,68%
Season Hotels	86,5	83,8%	51,4%	37,8%	27,0%	8,1%

The question as to which languages informative material is available to tourists, the answers were: by far, English was the highest with 81,2%, followed by German (30,6%) and French (16%). It is of most interest to note that in many hotels, were available, informative materials in more foreign languages, as is Italian, Russian etc (see table 10 above)

6.4. Website and Update of content

In table 11 below, the results of the research regarding the existence of a website of hotels, are presented below. It has shown that 83,4% of hotels have a web page, or at least their hotels are presented in collective web pages. Naturally, this percentage differs considerably from one category to the next.

It is of interest to note that in the question "how often the information content of the web page is updated - Every month", the 5* hotels responded positively at a 57,1%, whereas the lowest 2* category, responded 24%

positive, with a 20% that have never updated their web page. (see table 11 below)

Table 11 : Website and Update of content

Hotel Category	Website - YES	Web page content update				Possibility of Booking
		Every month	Every 3 months	One or twice per Year	Never	
5*	100,0	57,1	28,6%	14,3%	0	90,9
4*	97,9	34,8	39,1	19,6	6,5	82,6
3*	87,5	30,6	24,5	34,7	10,2	77,6
2*	65,8	24	32	24	20	76,0
5*-2*	83,41	31,72	59,14	24,63	11,91	79,61
Seasonal Hotels	91,9	29,4	32,4	32,4	5,9	78,4

Finally, as to the question of internet room reservation, a large percentage of hoteliers, offered this service (79,6%).

7. Conclusions

In the present study, initially were examined the main countries of origin of visitors in Greece and it showed that the countries of origin are limited. More specifically in the arrivals of Charter flights, U.K. represents the 30% of total arrivals, Germany 19%, from Holland 6%, and three countries (Italy, France and Austria) each with 5%, respectively. About 70% of tourists in Greece come from 6 counties of Europe. As a result of the above, the foreign languages required for the service of tourists are limited to 5 and more specifically in English (24,5%) German (21,1%) French (8,9%), and Italian (8,8%).

The field study in Hotel accommodations of 5 to 2 stars category in Greece showed that the level of knowledge and use of foreign languages, is particularly high. These percentages were found to be higher to the mean values in seasonal hotels. More specifically the 56,6% of the employees speak at least one foreigner language, while in the Hotel reception, tourists can be served in 3,5 languages on average. Furthermore, the 91,9% of Hotels offer informative material in foreign languages, whereas satisfactory is the information presented through the webpages.

Judging from the results of the research, it is observed that the Greek hotels give particular importance in the knowledge and use of foreign languages. This is due, on the one side, to the fact, that the Greek language is not widespread and on the other side (mainly) that Greece traditionally receives, from middle Sixties, a great deal of foreign tourists, so there has been created the conditions for the good communication with the tourists.

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APPENDICES

Table 1 : Arrivals of foreigners classified by citizenship, in Greece in the years 2004 and 2005

		Year 2004		Year 2005	
			%		%
I. EUROPEAN COUNTRIES		12470379	93,67%	13279429	93,0%
1	United Kingdom	2869737	21,56%	2718721	19,0%
2	Germany	2189222	16,44%	2241942	15,7%
3	Albania	1193936	8,97%	1478197	10,4%
4	Italy	898208	6,75%	1128506	7,9%
5	France	621407	4,67%	676658	4,7%
6	Holland	611990	4,60%	666287	4,7%
7	Bulgaria	440263	3,31%	599872	4,2%
8	Austria	440391	3,31%	464470	3,3%
9	FYROM	411103	3,09%	411103	2,9%
10	Belgium -Luxembourg	374557	2,81%	401066	2,8%
11	Sweden	334150	2,51%	316042	2,2%
12	Denmark	282340	2,12%	288858	2,0%
13	Romania	148853	1,12%	225570	1,6%
14	Switzerland	229448	1,72%	223360	1,6%
15	Norway	232222	1,74%	210847	1,5%
16	Serbia -Montenegro	172474	1,30%	208084	1,5%
17	Russia	142346	1,07%	182334	1,3%
18	Cyprus	146405	1,10%	168415	1,2%
19	Finland	148197	1,11%	150198	1,1%
20	Remaining countries of Europe	583130	4,38%	518899	3,6%
II. COUNTRIES OF ASIA		488366	3,67%	555657	3,9%
21	Turkey	201816	1,52%	181308	1,3%
22	Israel	94029	0,71%	132511	0,9%
23	Remaining countries of Asia	192521	1,45%	241838	1,7%
III. COUNTRIES OF AFRICA		49165	0,37%	54686	0,4%
IV. COUNTRIES OF AMERICA		236274	1,77%	297189	2,1%
24	U.S.A.	161398	1,21%	205656	1,4%
25	Remaining countries of America	74876	0,56%	91533	0,6%
V. COUNTRIES OF OCEANIA		68445	0,51%	89504	0,6%
VI. FOREIGN ARRIVALS (TOTAL)		13312629	100,00%	14276465	100,0%

Source : General secretariat of national statistical service of Greece
(www.statistics.gr)

Table 2 : Arrivals of Charter passengers, by country of aircraft's* departure in Greece (2004 - 2005)

		Year 2004	%	Year 2005	%
EUROPEAN COUNTRIES		7041799	98,87%	7215099	98,79%
1	United Kingdom	2317423	32,54%	2189034	29,97%
2	Germany	1373347	19,28%	1351927	18,51%
3	Holland	408889	5,74%	462269	6,33%
4	France	361357	5,07%	419740	5,75%
5	Italy	335734	4,71%	392507	5,37%
6	Austria	341746	4,80%	333857	4,57%
7	Sweden	302777	4,25%	284340	3,89%
8	Belgium - Luxembourg	245554	3,45%	272040	3,72%
9	Czech Republic	237554	3,34%	263332	3,61%
10	Norway	226133	3,18%	230588	3,16%
11	Denmark	209000	2,93%	214607	2,94%
12	Switzerland	144967	2,04%	138521	1,90%
13	Finland	133370	1,87%	130859	1,79%
14	Poland	87791	1,23%	123238	1,69%
15	Russia	66755	0,94%	111656	1,53%
16	Ireland	66029	0,93%	65707	0,90%
17	Remaining countries of Europe	183373	2,57%	230877	3,16%
18	Other countries except of Europe	80141	1,13%	88379	1,21%
Total Arrivals per Charter		7121940	100,00%	7303478	100,00%

* Charter passengers are mostly citizens of the country of aircraft's departure.

Source : General secretariat of national statistical service of Greece
(www.statistics.gr)