Foreign Language Skills in Business Communication

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Abstract
As one of the world’s largest and most pervasive industries, the travel and tourism sector is as exposed as any other to the forces of change that are being brought about by ongoing developments in the information and communication technologies. Good communication in foreign language becomes crucial in today’s world owing to the impact of globalization. For global competitors, the most important factor is the ability to communicate on a wider, quicker and clearer basis. The purpose of this research is to investigate the roles of foreign language in business communication and importance of foreign language skill from the managers’ point of view. This study was based on interviews with a sample of 73 managers working in tourist offices in the region of Istria. The results indicated that there is a demand for foreign language competencies in business communication. In sharing information among employees, employers and customers, foreign language plays important role both inside and outside the company.

Keywords: business communication, foreign language, tourism industry, managerial perspective

1 Introduction
Every step in the life of a human being needs to communicate unavoidably with others. Focusing on communication, Wood (2000) defined it as a universal process in which people interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings. In addition, every situation should contain effective communication that involves achieving one’s goals in a manner, and ideally, maintains or enhances the relationship in which the communication occurs (Adler and Rodman, 2000). In general, a communication that occurs once will consist of elements; senders (sources), receivers, messages, channels, noise and feedbacks. Language is a kind of channel at anytime a communication occurs, and communicating by using language usually takes place in face-to-face interactions when someone speaks and listens. This kind of channel is called as “vocal channel” (Devito, 2003). Thus, everyone needs language as a crucial tool to communicate with others in daily routines. If there is not a verbal
language included whenever a communication taken place, it cannot be a completely correct and effective communication. Accordingly, everyone will get panic with complicated understanding between each others.

Foreign languages play important roles in business communication. In business administration, foreign language plays several roles, such as a role in internal (Marchan et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekari et al., 1999; Davies, 2000) and external communication (Davies, 2000; Leslie and Russel, 2006), a role in having a chance to get a good job, and a role as a means to understand other cultures.

The importance of the roles of foreign language in business administration is for communication with customers, competitors, employers, employees and colleagues (Gordon, 2009).

Understanding the roles of foreign language will be beneficial because it assists understanding of conversations, communications and negotiations between practitioners and foreign customers. Practitioners can run businesses more smoothly with the use of foreign languages (Rasouli, Dyke and Mantler, 2008) and their foreign customers will feel more comfortable. In business administration, not only are speaking and listening skills important but also other skills including reading, writing and negotiating (Stewart, 1973). Language is, seemingly, omnipresent and successful communicators apply principles of human behavior (Stewart, 1985). Any foreign language can be used in business depending on customers and the nature of the business and market involved. Understanding the type of language required and the degree to which understanding of it is required is an important managerial skill.

Aside from advantages for employees, customers can also expect advantage from sophisticated language use. They can obtain the required appropriate products or services. For instance, with the productive foreign language communication, customers get what they order. In contrast, for the unproductive foreign language communication, the customers might face a confusing problem or do not get what they order. This problem seems small, but it can be the high-risk if it happens too often. Language creates customers’ satisfaction (Crystal, 1989) which will lead to competitiveness. Competitiveness cannot happen without ability to handle well with customers. Foreign language plays a role in assisting customers who face problems in communication (Cotton et al., 2007), especially in terms of communication with multi-national companies and companies outside a country. Moreover, foreign languages play a role in having more chance to get a good job. Many businesses are looking for people who are fluent in other languages. Foreign language skill provides a competitive edge in career choices in the contemporary job market (Ebling, 2005). Many companies want their new employees to possess foreign language skills and need people with high levels of proficiency. For existing employees, some companies will provide foreign language courses to sharpen their language skills so employees can use them more effectively.

Furthermore, foreign language plays a role as a means to understand other cultures (Walters, 1990). Understanding cultures of customers is beneficial in running businesses. The world opens widely to meet people from different cultures and understanding the customer’s culture helps organizations manage conflicts arising from cultural barriers or differences.

The purposes of this study are to explore:
1. The roles of foreign language in business communication.
We investigated the use of foreign languages inside and outside the company and the ways of communication with customers.
2. To investigate the importance of foreign language skill from the managers’ point of view. We explore the requirement of foreign language knowledge for customer-contact employees and study the problems of foreign language usage in communication with customers.

2 Methods

2.1 Measures
A set of the interview guidelines in English was created as a research instrument by the researchers. Participation in the interview was voluntary. The interview guidelines consisted of questions related to the objectives of the study as identified above. Participants were very opened and compliant for that kind of interview.

2.2 Participants
During the quantitative interviews we questioned 73 employees who worked in travel agencies. First we measured employees working in front office, and then we moved onto the field of sales and marketing. While preparing for the survey we composed and tested the questionnaires and then the authors conducted the standard interviews themselves. The number of the employee respondents was predetermined: some of them were from Poreč, Umag and Rovinj, while the others came from Pula and its surroundings or from Rabac and Labin.

3 Results and discussion
The initial focus was on the following statement:

1. Roles of foreign language in business communication
From the interviews, it became apparent that foreign languages are significant in business communication, especially in the field of tourism.

Tourism industry is an important industry for a range of countries’ economic systems. This industry supports stimulating revenues to the government. It affects everyone, and intertwines throughout the entire structure of a country (Kostić-Bobanović and Gržinić, 2009). Currently, the tourism industries in many countries are facing with the financial and economic crisis and it reluctantly drives these countries to find out how to push forward their tourism industry.

Tourism represents a major source of income for Istria. Consequently, effective communications are significant for sending messages to customers and intermediaries. Foreign languages are used in promotions, invitations and service provision, as respondents explained. Also, foreign languages are important in making a first-impression with tourists. Often, with backpackers, the offers concerning accommodation are in foreign languages. As a result of a good first impression, international tourists and visitors will probably come back again to visit the country.
3.1 Use of foreign languages at work (inside and outside the company)

The participants in our research stated that in sharing information among employees, employers and customers, foreign language plays an important role both inside and outside the company.

Foreign language usage inside the company is a form of internal communication that employees need to interact between them and with co-workers, and employers (Lechner, 2008). It is important to use the correct grammar, syntax and spelling in order to promote understanding and to maintain the image of the organization. Foreign language usage also helps to build good relationships (Castro, 2006) that promote working processes through encouraging cooperation from employees in every section of the company. Most successful business communication comes from listening and talking (Theobald, 2006).

Foreign language usage outside the company is a form of external communication (Grosse, 2004). They use foreign language as a means of communication for services of the organization, to provide information and to persuade customers to purchase services. Foreign language usage with customers must be clear enough for them to understand and it should also be positive and friendly so that customers feel positive about using the services. For customers, it is very important for them to know and to understand all the details and conditions of services so as to make better decisions.

3.2 Ways of communication with customers

Communication with customers is important, because customers both local and foreign are the main factor in determining the profits and benefits available for the business. To achieve the goal in every business, informants indicated that they needed to make customers satisfied and loyal to their businesses or organization so that customers will use services again. Customer satisfaction with services is important in making customers feel comfortable and secure. The informants were asked to state which way of communication is the most frequent in performing successfully their job. A great number of managers answered that they use foreign language when communicating with customers in written form (e-mail) or when telephoning. Some of them, usually employees working in front office directly speak with tourists. In only a few agencies virtual communication with customers is used. The informants also expressed the view that customers might forward their feelings of loyalty to their friends and connections through word of mouth and this is another advantage for the businesses.

2. Importance of foreign language skill from the managers’ point of view.

Managers and all members of the business need to know the arts of communication to deal with different kinds of customers and this includes knowledge of foreign languages. The informants from the sample indicated that foreign languages are important because they play an important role in competing with competitors. In their opinion a successful manager should speak more than two foreign languages.
Importance of foreign language skills and respondents present competence of communicating in (1) English; (2) Italian; (3) German; (4) Russian; (5) Hungarian; (6) Czech

As can be seen from Figure 1, the dots number 1, 2 and 3 depicting the three languages English, Italian and German appear in the top right-hand quadrant of the graph, indicating that the respondents had rated both the importance of foreign languages fairly high and the respondents’ present competence fairly good. On the other hand, the dots number 5 and 6 depicting the two languages Hungarian and Czech appear in the bottom left-hand quadrant of the graph, indicating that the respondents had rated both the importance of foreign languages and the respondents’ present competence weak. Finally, our respondents had rated the importance of Russian language (dot number 4) fairly high but their present competence weak. The relative importance of six languages is demonstrated by their positions in relation to each other. The results obtained from such graphs thus reflect the respondents’ perception of the given factors visually rather than give exact values.

The participants of our study stated that the most important foreign language in performing successfully their job is English language which they use every day. A good level of English is required for communication with the customers.

Foreign language competency can enable the company to operate in the international market while serving customers in their own language. A great number of managers stated that use Italian and German languages once a week; Russian once in two weeks and Czech and Hungarian once a month.

3.3 The problems of foreign language usage in communication with the customers

The researchers found that some problems occurred because of differences between customers. Not all foreign customers can communicate in a foreign language, whether or not it is English. Many could speak only their own language, whether it is Russian, Czech or Hungarian. They could not speak English very well and sent in requires in very bad English in terms of grammar and spelling mistakes. In some cases, the receivers did not know any Russian or Hungarian and so they did not know how to respond to the customers, or were not
sure they understood the message in English, because of their lack of knowledge. In this situation, the informants pointed out that they could not blame their customers’ language skills because it is not their responsibility to speak a foreign language well. Limited language skills of tourist professionals are considered as a barrier to communication. For companies which faced the problem frequently, informants stated that studying other foreign languages was beneficial for them. According to Thill and Bovee (2005) a key to be successful in running a business is the ability to communicate with tourists by using their own languages. Actually, tourists are always looking for something extra that make them feel special. Being worthy for what they have paid a little bit more for a product or service. This can be a way to make them have more satisfaction in paying for services (Maloney, 2004)

The survey results draw our attention to the fact that education and training programmes must be rearranged in accordance with the changing supply of products. There is a gap between the labour force demand for tourism and the supply of those graduating from schools.

Consequently, more practical training programmes must be introduced. Systems of exchange, facilitating acquisition of practical experiences abroad, must be developed, since tourism expects its manpower to be familiar with as many cultures and languages as possible.

Others findings involved the mode of developing employees’ foreign language ability or skills training for company staff. The informants realized that English is not only important but is necessary for administrating business. They also stated that companies should invite professional trainers to help improve foreign language skills, especially Russian, in vocabulary and conversation. Writing skill for employees is also important, so that employees can complete written tasks such as letters, memos, reports and so forth. The respondents also emphasized that the company should strongly consider providing support for language skill development.

4 Conclusion

Communication is the key to business growth. Without strong communication between both managers and their customers and internally between staff members, business will not progress. Foreign language certainly plays an important role in communication (Hammar, 1997; Sokoloval and Lapalme, 2007). It should be correct, clear and concise. Otherwise, it will affect negatively in a working process.

Communication is maybe the most important tool for ensuring customer satisfaction in a service encounter. Customer-contact employees depend heavily on language to get their message across and performance is dependent on a combination of abilities and attitudes. When either one is lacking, performance suffers (Davidoff, 1994).

The purpose of this research was to investigate the roles of foreign language in business communication and the importance of foreign language skill from the managers’ point of view. The results of the study indicated that a successful manager should speak more than two foreign languages. The most important foreign language in performing successfully their job is English which they use every day. The foreign language communication and intercultural proficiency of those working in tourism should be developed. Studying other foreign languages would be beneficial for them. This requires the adequately trained professional teachers who have good language competences at the same time.
Very little was written about the role of languages in tourism and about the impact of the lack of language skills of tourist professionals. This absence of sources is significant in itself, it can be considered as a research finding in its own right, since it reveals the topic is generally not seen as a problem and therefore does not raise interest.

We hope that our findings will be of use in other areas of business communication as well.

**Literature**


Marschan-Piekkari, R., Welch, D., & Welch, L. (1999). In the shadow: The impact of language on structure, power and communication in the multinational. *International Business Review*, 8


