



Enhancing Tourism graduate employability with English for Occupational Purposes: South African academic and industry perspectives

Dr Eunice Rautenbach
Tshwane University of Technology
Department of Applied Languages
Private Bag X680, Pretoria 0001
Republic of South Africa
Orchid ID 0000-0001-8513-4419
E-mail: RautenbachE@tut.ac.za

Prof Charles Carl Mann *
Department of Applied Languages
Tshwane University of Technology
Private Bag X680, Pretoria 0001
Republic of South Africa
Orchid ID 0000-0002-1757-9552
E-mail: MannC@tut.ac.za

Corresponding author*

Abstract

The concept of graduate employability is crucial in higher education; therefore, enhancing it is a key responsibility of all higher education institutions (HEIs) world-wide, and also in South Africa. English is universally considered a language of commerce, if not *the* language of commerce, and, thus, it very often forms part of a skills set required for employability in industry. English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), as part of curricula at HEIs, is especially imperative in the tourism industry, since this is a global service industry. In the process of developing curricula to prepare employable tourism graduates, the EOP wants and needs of both academics and industry practitioners should be taken into account, since these stakeholders often have differing perspectives. The focus of this paper, based on findings of a case study conducted at a South African university of technology is on the EOP wants and needs in the tourism industry, as perceived by the stakeholders. The study employed a focus group (six lecturers; three each from the Departments of Tourism Management, and Applied Languages), and individual semi-structured interviews (Heads of Department of both Tourism Management and Applied Languages; one Tourism Management Advisory Board member, and an alumna of Tourism Management, i.e., ten participants, in all), as methods for the qualitative data presented. The main conclusions drawn were that both the academic and industry stakeholders sampled regarded EOP as essential in the training of employable tourism graduates. They underlined EOP wants and needs specific to tourism, which would likely serve to enhance employability in the industry, including, specifically, extending the teaching of EOP beyond the current one year time allocated to this critical offering.

Keywords: tourism industry, English for Occupational Purposes, EOP wants and needs, higher education, graduate employability

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide are taking on the responsibility of producing graduates, regarded as employable by the industries they will enter after graduation, and are, therefore, under growing pressure to produce 'market-ready' graduates (Cabrera, Weertz & Zare,



2005: 5-17). Ladkin (2005) maintains that education for tourism graduates in HEIs should make use of the higher education platform for equipping skilled professionals, who can function in industry. HEIs should produce knowledge that is relevant to the requirements of employers in the tourism industry, and tourism education should be vocational. In order to achieve this, it will be imperative to understand what would make a graduate employable in a certain industry.

Since tourism is a global service industry, language and communication skills should form part of any curricula for students preparing to work in this industry. In South Africa, the Tourism Board states in the government White Paper (1996) that one of the requirements for improving tourism, and the services rendered therein, would be to enhance communication skills, and, by extension, the language skills of employees in this industry. According to research findings released by the World and Tourism Council in March 2018, tourism accounts for 10% of employment globally. In South Africa, this currently sits at 9.5 % of employment – a figure forecast to increase substantially in the coming years (Smith, 2018). This makes it incumbent on HEI curricula to promote language and communication skills, since research suggests that tourism graduates should develop good communication skills (Chan, 2011: 10), and English is regarded as an important world lingua franca for communication purposes. With this in mind, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and, in particular, English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), would have to be considered for such curricula.

It thus stands to reason that in the development of EOP curricula, the input of all stakeholders is vital as this would help to ensure that TM students receive education that is likely to make them more employable in the tourism industry. In order to achieve this, curricula should not be developed with a top-down approach, as it often happens, but, rather, bottom-up; this way, curricula reflect not only what academics perceive as essential. The design of EOP curricula is grounded in ESP, which, in turn, is based on wants and needs analyses of all stakeholders, and is not driven solely by theoretical academic knowledge.

However, education at HEIs often takes place in an environment removed from industry (and its demands), where graduates would eventually operate. Consultations with prospective employers, so that curricula could be developed to address industry demands, could remedy this. It would invite a process of HEIs and employers liaising to determine the required skills for industry, by means of clear communication (Moolman, 2017: 38). In terms of EOP curricula, this communication would refer to conducting an EOP wants and needs analysis with all stakeholders in the development of these curricula. The focus of this study was to determine the EOP wants and needs of the tourism industry, and what HEIs and the academics, who develop these TM curricula, would consider EOP wants and needs for the curricula as such.

The focus of this study was to ascertain which curricula should be developed for Tourism Management (TM) students at a university of technology (UoT) in South Africa, so as to increase their employability in this industry. UOTs in South Africa offer vocational education and training.

At the time of the study, EOP for TM students was offered at the first year level for only part of the academic year, since academic time was also spent on academic literacy, as a requirement of the various client departments to which EOP was rendered as a service subject across the university. These client departments request EOP per field of specialisation, per course that they offer, and English had to be tailor-made for the TM course. Furthermore, the sub-standard English proficiency of the TM students, as confirmed by the UoT's Directorate of Student Development and Support (SDS), influenced the successful teaching of EOP, and required English to be taught as a Foundation subject, to bridge the gap between school and higher education. Despite the ongoing problem of the sub-standard English proficiency of these students, industry wants and needs clearly indicated that they required TM graduates functioning appropriately in the lingua



franca, English, upon entry into the working world. No previous wants and needs analysis had been undertaken to develop EOP curricula for the Tourism Management course at the institution.

English for Occupational Purposes

In order to get a sense of the role that EOP could play in HEIs to prepare employable tourism students, it is essential to understand how EOP is perceived in the academic world. Firstly, EOP is regarded as one of the parts that make up ESP (Sifakis, 2003: 195). According to Popescu (2012: 4183), ESP is about the language used in a specific situation, and addresses learners' specific needs, and reasons for learning; it focuses on the learners' real needs and wishes in a particular field of specialisation per occupation in industry. Therefore, EOP would require language abilities that are essential for effective communication in industry. It also refers to the use of particular jargon characteristic of a specific occupation, and a set of skills to write documents, and communicate with clients and colleagues. This would apply to fields of specialisation across industry, including tourism, since employability is vital to success in the working world.

Thus, in order to train graduates who can communicate well upon entry into the tourism industry, the teaching of EOP would have to play an important role. According to Rivers (2008), many countries in the Asian region insist that all employees have 'very good English proficiency', as is the case in some European countries. Brunton (2009: 8) forecast that the demand for specific English courses in industry will rise, given increasing globalisation, the mobility of the world's workforce, and demand for workers with good English in the workplace.

The demand for ESP, including EOP, is equally underlined by the British Council (2012), which observed that ESP has become increasingly important, as there has been an increase in occupational training, teaching and learning throughout the world. Earlier, Dovey (2006: 388) described a 'new vocationalism' that developed from an alteration in industry, which has led to a change in the orientation of higher education, so that courses are now being designed very specifically to prepare graduates for the modern workplace. Sarudin, et al. (2013: 73) maintain that, in terms of employability, students are expected to not only display knowledge of technology in the world of work, but also a set of skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, and that industry is looking to higher education to develop this skills set. Jiajing (2007: 1) had proposed that students should be assisted to adapt to the challenges of modern society, by the design of ESP courses, which would train learners for the required conventions of occupational communication. This training would, by its very nature, make graduates more employable, because they would be able to communicate effectively in English in their specialised field of work, immediately upon entry. ESP courses would equip tourism graduates with skills to communicate competently and successfully in the field of tourism.

The increase in the teaching of ESP is worldwide. According to Szendrő (2010: 39), teaching ESP in Hungary is regarded as increasingly essential, since the teaching of General English (GE) in the language classroom is not part of higher education any more, but foreign language classes are being taught in a specialised language to prepare graduates for future occupations. According to Sujana (2012: 1), English is a compulsory subject in HEIs in Indonesia. The author adds that various course credits are allocated to English, and suggests that specific universities stipulate scores in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test as a prerequisite for graduation. This seems reasonable, since English is regarded as increasingly important as a medium for academic purposes, and a requirement in job competition for occupational purposes and employability.



Comprehensive research has been done in the field of employability supported by tourism training in countries such as Canada, China, Indonesia, Germany, Italy, and Spain, but research still seems lacking on the role EOP could play in enhancing the skills sets required by the tourism industry (World Tourism Organization, 2010: 2). According to Eurico, Da Silva and Do Valle (2015), most HEIs responsible for tourism education still do not consider the tourism industry's point of view, when they develop strategies to enhance the employability of Tourism graduates. In essence, EOP curriculum developers should consider the input of all the stakeholders.

EOP and curriculum design

If EOP, under the umbrella of ESP, was considered the best curriculum option in preparing graduates from HEIs, it would be important to understand what it consists of. Swales (in Salmani-Nodoushan, 2002: 8), mentions five 'enduring' conceptions, as the underlying, essential principles of ESP: the use of field-specific, authentic learning materials; the register analysis of these authentic texts; the register used in these texts, based on lexicon and grammar; learners' needs, determined by a needs analysis; and, learning methodology, in view of the learner focus in ESP.

Nunan (1987: 75) asserts that EOP curriculum development cannot happen in isolation, and that all stakeholders have to be consulted during the curriculum review and design (as was done in this study). Indeed, Gatehouse (2001: 7) recommends that ESP requires a comprehensive needs analysis (such as formed the basis of this study).

The characteristics of an EOP curriculum are described by Sarudin, et al. (2013: 76) as having the clear purpose of teaching business skills, by focusing on language needs, and appropriate occupational vocabulary. Rautenbach, Mann, and Van Ryneveld (2017) maintain that, in order to teach tourism, EOP 'specialised occupational' vocabulary and phraseology would have to be taught, as determined appropriate to the tourism industry by means of content analysis. In similar vein, Sifakis (2003: 6) suggests that EOP curricula should be designed, based on the fact that abilities to perform professional tasks are linked to a learner's EOP skills set. Gatehouse (2001: 7) believes that the ESP curriculum developer should facilitate successful communication in industry. She adds that, in many cases, communication is the key to success or failure, and that English courses (ESP courses, in particular), should be part of the curriculum, as a compulsory subject, for at least two years of study.

EOP and English Proficiency

According to Dhandhukiya (2012: 1), ESP learners are usually adults who already have some English proficiency, and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills, and perform specified, job-related functions. This would also pertain to EOP, as a branch of ESP. Ahmadi and Bajelani (2012: 792) observe that many students are not prepared to study ESP, since their sub-standard English proficiency makes most authentic texts (which should be used to teach EOP) too difficult for them to understand. Ngoepe (2012: 61) agrees that students should have some language proficiency in GE, in order to master ESP materials. The fact that the successful teaching of EOP pre-supposes good English proficiency is reflected widely in the field of EOP research (Sheppard and Stoller, 2010; Jiajing, 2007; Pérez-Llantada, 2004). Sujana (2012: 1) reports that the results of English taught at most universities in Indonesia are not impressive, since most of the students taught have very poor English proficiency, and because the credits awarded to the subject are limited. Alexander (2012: 102) is also of the opinion that ESP learning and teaching presupposes good English proficiency, and maintains that some



approaches to language teaching, such as EOP, could be seen as being too complex, without knowledge of core grammatical structures.

In South Africa, specifically, the sub-standard English proficiency displayed by many learners exiting the school system makes the teaching of EOP problematic. Prince and Yeld (2012: 1) state that it is concerning that educational disadvantage in the South African education system seems to be accepted:

'...[I]ast month the national benchmark tests initiative, designed to address the alarming failure rates in higher education, found it necessary to reset its standards. This move reveals increasing concerns about the educational needs of students as they enter higher education and a growing acceptance that educational disadvantage is a common phenomenon in the system.'

The fact that successful learning of EOP presupposes a certain English proficiency level creates a dilemma when curricula for courses (including EOP), on the request of academic departments at an institution, are developed. Industry expects graduates who can function on entering the world of work, but academic departments typically do not allocate adequate credits in the curriculum development of courses to address students' English proficiency, by means of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and EOP. This could have a direct effect on the employability of students, as is reflected in the EOP wants and needs of stakeholders in Tourism EOP curriculum development.

Employability of Tourism Management graduates

According to Feldman and Sprafke (2015: 2081), employers are seeking graduates who are employable, and who can manage the demands of industry. Yorke (2006: 3) adds that, to some extent, governments globally have made the aim of producing employable graduates the brief of HEIs. Many graduates from HEIs may misguidedly regard employability as simply being employed in their field of specialisation. Employability includes a set of skills to negotiate the employment process, function within the requirements of the job, and on the job (Yorke, 2006).

How is *graduate employability* defined, in general? McLennan and Keating (2008) see it as the different skills sets that a graduate should have to function immediately upon entering industry. These skills sets could include: being 'work ready'; the 'knowledge' and 'experience' to move into the working world; being 'career ready', and negotiating their way into industry independently; and, being 'future ready', in that they are able to sustain continued learning, and contribute as the citizenry. Chan (2011: 2) is of the opinion that industry not only requires academic qualifications, but that, in order to be employable, graduates should be taught certain soft skills sets, such as communication skills, team work, and problem-solving. This would imply that academics should have knowledge of what skills industry and employers would consider valuable. Chan (2011) adds that adhering to these industry requirements would constitute a significant challenge to all HEIs, and, specifically, for those more technical in focus (e.g., UoTs).

In terms of employability, there is a delicate balance between what HEIs, academics, and university management see as the core disciplinary knowledge and soft skills sets, including communication and language skills, which would make a graduate more employable in the eyes of industry. Chan (2011: 3) maintains that, for many HEIs and academics, who develop curricula, the inclusion of skills that would enhance employability could interfere with the teaching of 'disciplinary' knowledge.



Since tourism is regarded as a service and hospitality industry, an approach to curriculum design that would include employability, and certain skills and capabilities, as determined by the needs of industry, would be very valuable (Zehrer & Mössenlechner, 2009). Rautenbach (2014: 194) found that stakeholders responsible for the development of EOP curricula for TM at a UoT advise that companies, at which students complete Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), provide direct feedback on the English skills that students lack to make them employable. Such companies are ideally situated, since they would be able to assess whether students have the required skills sets, in terms of English and communication, to function successfully in the tourism industry.

Research design and approach

The research design and approach was pragmatic, and the sampling of participants was purposive and convenient, since they were considered best-placed and accessible to provide information, regarding the focus of the study.

To understand what should be included in the design of an EOP curriculum to make TM students more employable, the stakeholders approached included: three lecturers from the Department of TM and three English lecturers from Applied Languages (APL); their respective HoDs, who could provide perspectives from university management; and, from industry - the advisory board representative for TM, as well as an alumna from the Department of TM. The lecturers took part in a one-hour semi-structured focus group interview. All the other participants listed here took part in individual semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately half-an-hour each. The interviews were transcribed, and emergent themes, after coding, were grouped into categories of wants and needs per stakeholder.

The first TM lecturer was an Associate Professor, with a PhD, who supervised postgraduate students. The second lecturer, Section Head for undergraduate students in this department, was a Senior Lecturer, with an MTech in Tourism and Hospitality. The third TM lecturer was a BTech graduate. The three English lecturers from APL all taught students in the Department of TM. The first English lecturer managed the English Foundation programmes at the UoT, and had a PhD in English. The second English lecturer had an MTech in Language Practice, while the third one had a BA (Hons.) degree. The TM HoD was an Associate Professor, with a PhD in TM, while the APL HoD was an Associate Professor, with a DLitt et Phil (English). They were interviewed in their capacities as Management at the UoT. An interview was also conducted with the industry representative for TM on the Department's Advisory Board committee. He was the Commercial Services and Business Development Manager of the National Zoological Gardens of South Africa. He held a Master's degree in Tourism and Travel Services Management, and communicated with local and international tourists on a daily basis. He interviewed students from the UoT for positions at the zoo. He had 24 years' experience in the industry of Leisure, Travel, and Tourism. The alumna of the Department of TM interviewed had 25 years' experience in the tourism industry. She held an MTech in TM.

Findings and discussion

Employability supported by EOP stakeholder wants and needs

As stated in the literature on EOP, industry requires graduates who can communicate well in English immediately upon entry into industry, since these language and communication skills would make them more employable (Brunton, 2009; Gatehouse, 2001). The findings from this study confirm this requirement in the tourism industry.



In the semi-structured focus group interview, the TM and APL lecturers proposed the following tourism EOP wants to be included in EOP curricula in tourism education:

- English to be offered over a period of 2 years;
- English to bear a higher credit value, equal to that of the main content subjects;
- Some content subjects hours to be re-allocated to English;
- Critical thinking and persuasion skills to be developed and taught;
- Writing and reading business documents (including tenders) to be taught;
- A portfolio assignment for all topics in EOP; a Foundation Programme in English to precede EOP;
- Closer collaboration among TM content lecturers and English language lecturers; and,
- The WIL office to provide feedback on student performances during WIL.

The lecturers listed the following tourism EOP needs for inclusion in the EOP curricula:

- English proficiency;
- Reading and reading comprehension skills;
- Vocabulary;
- Writing skills;
- Speaking skills;
- Listening and listening comprehension skills;
- Oral presentation, and reading and writing skills, for postgraduate studies.

They were of the opinion that these EOP wants and needs would assist in preparing Tourism graduates for industry.

The two HoDs interviewed felt that offering EOP to TM students would be important to prepare them for industry, in the context of feedback from industry and other stakeholders that graduates emerging from the institution were not ready to function in the workplace. The TM HoD explained:

'We've just had a meeting with...a number of stakeholders, consisting of government officials, industry...other universities, [were present]...We hear this all the time...We're not producing students that have the required skills for the positions they're going into.'

She added that it was important to consider these remarks when designing curricula, preparing graduates for industry, and equipping them with the skills sets required for employability, so as 'to provide students with the skills to go out and do the job'.

The APL HoD felt that EOP would not only enhance students' capacity to communicate, it should be included in the curricula in such a way that it would be taught over a period of three years:

'I know that one of the challenges we have is that students basically believe that...Communication is...ancillary...they don't see it as being of significance...these students need...Communication, in order to enhance their capacities ... the reality is that...given the history of the students that we're dealing with...we (should) teach them over a period of three years, for example...the rule being structural challenges that we'll have to contend with within an institution...in terms of the hours that we need to teach'.

So, although these HoDs agreed that EOP would enhance the employability of tourism graduates, the APL HoD alluded to the fact that it would be a challenge within the current institutional structure to ensure that EOP was included for a period longer than one academic year. This was because, traditionally, EOP was only taught at first year level, and was not awarded sufficient credits as a subject, since it was not regarded as having the same importance in tourism education



as the main subjects that would transfer discipline-related content to students. The HoDs listed the following EOP wants for tourism education:

- EOP wants and needs analyses to be conducted per academic department (and by WIL companies);
- English to be offered over three years;
- English to bear the same credit value as the main subjects in tourism education; and,
- Using authentic teaching materials for EOP.

They also highlighted the following needs for tourism EOP:

- The English proficiency of tourism students to be improved; and,
- Students to be taught speaking, writing, and oral presentation skills - all relevant to tourism.

Interestingly, the TM HoD indicated that Advisory Board members should not be involved in the development of EOP curricula. She was of the view that these representatives were not in a position to contribute to an academic curriculum, unlike companies in the tourism industry, where students completed their experiential training – the WIL component of their studies. This perception of academics that some industry representatives cannot contribute to academic curricula is not an exception to the rule. Oftentimes, industry representatives believe the same about academics, since they regard them, justifiably or not, as being far removed from industry, and lacking the relevant industry experience to understand what would make graduates employable in a challenging tourism career.

In his interview, the TM Advisory Board member agreed that learning EOP is essential in tourism education, since graduates would need the skills provided by studying EOP to function successfully in their respective, chosen sectors in tourism:

‘Tourism industry, I think a critical component of it is being able to, to connect with...people...sometimes language skills... are missing...we work in a language-oriented environment that’s predominantly English. And the moment you can’t articulate yourself, you’re at a disadvantage. So, irrespective of how great technically you are, you can’t sell a concept. If you can’t engage with people around you, you are lost...So, for me, it’s, it’s very important.’

This TM Advisory Board member identified the following as Tourism EOP wants:

- English, as an essential subject, to be offered over a 3-year period;
- English to bear the same credits as main subjects in tourism education;

and needs:

- Speaking skills;
- Reading and reading comprehension skills;
- Writing skills; and,
- Vocabulary.

He elaborated on why these skills sets would be imperative, not only to function in the tourism industry, but also for initial employment:

‘...our industry, we deal...quite a bit with the international visitors...vocabulary is quite a problem. They (graduates) have a very limited vocabulary; so, that automatically places them at a disadvantage...when people apply for our internships...just the quality of, of writing...is really, really appalling...And then



you start doing the interviewing, and there seems to be...this huge mismatch between the questions that you're asking, and the answers that are given to you...fundamentally, the language is very lacking'.

He explained why writing skills would be essential in the tourism industry: 'Writing, because you must learn to write reports...very often, those reports involve things that can't be put down in multiple choice, they have to be dealt with ...with regard to a specific event'.

He regarded the key component of a service delivery industry as the ability to connect:

'...I think it's one of the key things...is getting a practical student...the practical component of tourism, is the ability to communicate...in the South African context, that's one of our key selling points as a country...ability to attract tourism...we constantly need to up our game. And we can up our game, in terms of our service delivery. And the key component of our service delivery is the ability to communicate...it's the ability to connect. And you connect through language'.

The TM alumna listed the following TM EOP wants to be included in the EOP curriculum for Tourism students:

- English is essential;
- English to bear the same credit value as a main subject;
- Authentic teaching materials;
- Basic communication skills;
- English offered over a 3-year period;
- Collaboration between English and TM lecturers;

and the following needs:

- Oral presentation skills;
- Listening and listening comprehension skills;
- Pronunciation skills; and,
- Reading and reading comprehension skills.

She regarded these as essential to skills sets that TM graduates should have, to be able to function in industry.

In sum, these stakeholders mostly agreed on the tourism EOP wants and needs that would contribute to preparing Tourism graduates for employability. The evident differences between tourism academic and industry EOP wants were that academics: recommended an EOP wants and needs analysis; identified tenders as specific documents to be taught; wanted EOP to support students in developing critical thinking skills; wanted Tourism and English lecturers to all be involved in assessments, so that authentic situations could be used in portfolio assignments; and, recommended a Foundation programme to address English proficiency, as a precursor to the teaching of EOP. Industry representatives did not highlight any wants not indicated as well by the academics.

In terms of needs, academics highlighted the following not addressed by industry: English proficiency; and, reading and writing skills for postgraduate students. This reflects the academics' focus on academic skills, rather than employability for industry. Industry representatives pointed to pronunciation as a need not listed by academics - which emerged from industry experience,



and possible consequences, if clients failed to understand the oral communication of employees in the tourism industry.

Consequences of low English proficiency on employability and functioning in industry

The Advisory Board member warned that the consequences of HEIs not meeting tourism graduates' language needs would be dire for their ability to function successfully upon entering industry, and would influence their employability negatively.

In her interview, the TM alumna also advised that EOP be taught, so that graduates could function in industry. She felt that graduates would not be employed, if their language needs were not met while studying: 'I think, first of all...students won't be employed...cause they cannot take instructions...they might not understand the language spoken...it will come directly back to the university'. It appeared evident she regarded it as the UoT's responsibility to provide tourism education that would prepare graduates for employability via EOP.

Students' English proficiency on entering HEIs

The lack of English proficiency of many learners at the point of entering HEIs in South Africa ties in with findings reported globally by researchers on ESP (Dhandhukiya, 2012; Popescu, 2012). Also, academic risk-profiling conducted by Student Development Services (SDS) at the UoT, by means of the English Literacy Skills Assessment (ELSA) test, indicated that TM students' English proficiency was not at the level required. These results reflect a lack of student English proficiency at entry level into HEIs, which is reported not only in South Africa, but also internationally [Ahmadi and Bajelani, 2012; Sujana, 2012; Jiajing, 2007).

It is evident that this sub-standard English proficiency would hinder students from successfully studying EOP immediately upon entry into university.

In the focus group interview, lecturers had indicated that admission requirements at the institution should ensure that students admitted straight into the first year had adequate English proficiency levels. A TM lecturer suggested that students without these minimum requirements, should, instead, enroll on a Foundation programme, to address their poor English proficiency: '...with the quality of students, we need to start with Grade 6...we're currently planning a foundation programme'. She added that the department was already trying to address the poor English proficiency, but that they were not sure of the success of their efforts: '...we started last year... with the extra English proficiency...It's not mandatory, they don't have to attend. Some of them obviously do...why are we doing it? Obviously, because of the huge problem we have. But whether it's making a difference, I don't know'.

The TM HoD confirmed this point: 'In the beginning of each year, we...test for English studies...They can't read, they can't understand...So now, how would you address those gaps, and then also...address the gaps of industry needs?'

Thus, HEIs, specifically in developing countries, should give serious thought to the inclusion of EOP in their curricula for the successful preparation of graduates for industry. However, they would also have to put parallel measures in place to contend with students' inadequate English proficiency levels, with specific reference to tourism education in HEIs, since the tourism industry is a service industry in which English, as a lingua franca, would be indispensable.



Tourism EOP curriculum implications for HEIs

As previously stated, this study confirmed that EOP is required, in order to prepare Tourism students for industry. However, the current one-year offering of EOP cannot address both the required English proficiency for teaching EOP, and the teaching of EOP itself. In order to ensure the successful learning of EOP, stakeholders recommended that English be taught over a minimum period of two years. They suggested that, after an acceptable level of English proficiency may have been attained in the first year of study, EOP could then be taught in the second year.

In the focus group interview with lecturers, they were of the view that restructuring programmes could address the lack of English proficiency, and allow for a more effective teaching of EOP. APL lecturer 1 observed that students arrive underprepared, and need time to catch up. She wondered whether 'we cannot structure these over two years?' APL lecturer 2 highlighted her frustration with the lack of basic English proficiency skills, because she specifically chooses authentic tourism texts to teach EOP, which, however, students struggle with immensely: '...when these students come in their first year, they can't even write normal English, let alone [ESP]...That's different, difficult for them'. It was clear that the lecturers felt that EOP could not be taught successfully within the one academic year usually allocated in the curriculum.

The TM alumna stated that students' knowledge of GE should be improved in the first year, and then EOP be taught in the second: 'I think if we can first improve their general knowledge and then definitely, from second year onwards, um, for occupational purposes... reading, writing in the first year. Second year...they learn how to do a presentation'.

The stakeholders indicated that, in order to teach English over more than one year, more credits should be allocated to it in the curriculum. In the South African context, one credit equals 10 notional (teaching) hours. The lecturers in the focus group were of the opinion that, if credit values attached to English were to remain low, teaching hours could be allocated to EOP within existing content subjects. Whilst they all agreed that more time should be allocated to both English proficiency and EOP, they raised concerns about the possible financial and staffing constraints that may result at the UoT.

The general impression was that, if English could be offered over two years, it would be possible to improve students' English proficiency sufficiently to better prepare them for employability, and the world of work, on graduation. The TM alumna proposed the following:

'I think it should have exactly the same...weighting as any other subject...in the tourism industry...they deal...on a one-to-one basis with clients...And they have to...be...well-equipped with...communication skills. I really do see it as a very, very important aspect'.

In the focus group, the lecturers discussed the origin of the problem, and one suggestion was that the quality of basic education was to blame. However, a TM lecturer was also realistic: 'If they change what happens in schools, it's going to take us twelve years before we have students with better Communication or English skills...we are in a difficult situation...'.

The lecturers also expressed their frustration with the UoT management's perceived lack of understanding, as well as the limitations that financial constraints placed on possible solutions to the problem:

'...everybody complains about the lack of English proficiency, especially...the powers that be [Management of the university]. But when you tell them that this [more credits, and more contact hours for English as a subject] is what



has to happen, then it can't happen. Because of money, or how the system has worked for twenty years' (APL lecturer).

The TM and APL lecturers proposed that the credit value attached to English in the tourism curriculum be increased, and that the UoT Management make funds available to improve the students' English proficiency. It was agreed that, if EOP could be offered over at least two years of the Tourism curriculum, it would offer a possible solution to the English proficiency problem: 'So, is the idea to get more money as well...or is it only about the perception of the students? But if there's a practical...collaboration... can't the credits then be kind of joined together?' (APL lecturer 3).

The APL HoD agreed that EOP should be awarded the same credits as the main subjects in tourism education: 'I'll propose a situation where, in terms of credit value...Communication...it's even the same value as a major subject'.

The TM Advisory Board member concurred:

'I think it's [English] a crucial component of it [undergraduate studies]...irrespective of which cultural background you come from, or what your own mother tongue is. We work in a language-oriented environment that's predominantly English, and the moment you can't articulate yourself, you're at a disadvantage'.

It is, thus, clear that all the stakeholders – academics and industry representatives alike - agreed that the current Tourism EOP curriculum is not fit-for-purpose, i.e., preparing graduates perceived as employable in the tourism industry.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The data gathered from the stakeholders, regarding the planning of an EOP curriculum for TM, confirmed the importance of the role that EOP should play in HEIs. Tourism EOP skills would support the employability of tourism graduates, and enable them to function in the tourism industry immediately upon entering the job market. As maintained in the literature, and agreed upon by the stakeholders, if students' English proficiency is lacking, it would prevent the successful learning of EOP (Dhandhukiya, 2012; Ngoepe, 2012). This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that students in developing countries oftentimes enter HEIs with low English proficiency levels. These drawbacks to the successful learning of EOP would have implications for EOP curricula for TM at these institutions. In order to address the existing problem of offering EOP to students with sub-standard English proficiency over only one year of their undergraduate studies, it is necessary to reconsider both the credits and time allocated to the subject.

In a developing country, the majority of students might not even be aware of their poor English proficiency. This means that the successful learning of EOP in tourism education might not be viable at first year level in developing countries, where tertiary level students' English proficiency is often still inadequate, despite years of learning English at school. This is in contrast to the emphasis placed on EOP as learner-focused by the literature, i.e., the control that learners of EOP ought to have over the content, pace, and setting of their learning (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2002: 8).

Thus, in order to ensure that Tourism students learn EOP successfully, a considerable longer period than one year should be allocated to the teaching of EOP. HEIs could achieve this by considering the credits allocated to main content subjects in courses, and then allocate the same credits to EOP. This could also afford EOP the same status as a main Tourism content subject.



If academics at HEIs, and industry representatives, acknowledged that all stakeholders could make valuable contributions to the development of EOP curricula for TM, graduate employability may get the focus it deserves.

Whilst it is acknowledged that these suggestions may prove difficult to implement, due to funding and limited human resources, it would go a long way in preparing TM students in HEIs to graduate with attributes and vocational skills sets that are valued, and sought after, in the tourism industry, and make them more employable.

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