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English language preparation of tourism and hospitality undergraduates in Egypt: Does it meet their future workplace requirements?

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ABSTRACT

For Egyptian tourism and hospitality university students, mastering English is a prerequisite for getting a job related to their major after graduation. The study reported in this paper examined the English language preparation of tourism and hospitality undergraduates in Egypt and its adequacy as perceived by teachers and students. The interview data showed that the students' views on their English language preparation and on their perceived English language needs differed from those of their teachers. Highlighting some shortcomings of the English language instruction provided to these students, the study suggests reshaping it in a way that could optimally help them be well-prepared for meeting their future workplace requirements.

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1. Introduction

Mastering foreign language skills is essential for people working in the tourism sector as it is the means for communicating with tourists and understanding cultural differences, and for increasing employees' job opportunities in this international industry (Leslie & Russell, 2006). English for tourism is viewed as an area of business English (Cho, 2005), and integrates business English and English for academic purposes by bridging workplace communication and classroom use (Fuentes, 2004). That is, it deals with teaching the language needed for communication and interaction between people of different cultures in airports, tourism and travel firms, markets and hospitality (Afzali & Fakharzadeh, 2009; Jacob & Strutt, 1997; Seong, 2005). According to Hijirida (1980), knowledge of English is one of the major criteria in hiring people in the tourism field where poor English proficiency becomes a problem in attracting tourists and keeping them happy.

Tourism is one of the largest national income sources in Egypt. It provides jobs to two million Egyptians, represents 11% of the Egypt's economy (Jones, 2011). Since Egypt has a tremendous number of antiquities and many beach resorts, it attracts millions of tourists from all parts of the world annually. According to RNCOS (2011) research report, Egypt received 14.7 million international tourists in 2010, with an increase of about 17.6% over the previous year. Although the current political instability in Egypt has a tremendous negative influence on its inbound tourism, the report expects that tourism in Egypt will bounce back again and regain its lost momentum.

As in many other countries, English is used as a lingua franca to communicate with international tourists visiting Egypt. It is not surprising, therefore, to find English is taught as a core subject at tourism and hospitality higher education

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institutions in Egypt. To date, no previous study has tried to evaluate the English courses used in these institutions and to explore students and/or teachers' views of them. This study will fill this research gap by investigating how English is taught at tourism and hospitality higher education institutions in Egypt, and examining students' satisfaction with such instruction, and teachers' rationale for it. Before reviewing previous related studies, a brief description of the tourism and hospitality higher education institutions is given in the next section.

1.1. Tourism and hospitality higher education institutions in Egypt

Historically, tourism and hospitality university education in Egypt dates back to 1962 when two higher institutes were established. In 1968, the period of the study in these two-year higher institutes became four years, and then in 1975 the two institutes were merged in one institution under the name 'Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality' at the Helwan University. This was the first faculty of tourism and hospitality in the Middle East (Hamza, 2009). Over the last three decades, more tourism and hospitality faculties and higher institutes have been founded at public and private Egyptian universities and currently there are 11 faculties and 14 higher institutes of tourism and hospitality in Egypt (NAQAAE, 2009). The mission of these 4-year faculties and higher institutes is to prepare highly qualified students for joining the tourism labor market through providing them with various types of courses and training in tourism and hospitality (NAQAAE, 2009).

There is no tangible difference between the educational programmes and curricula offered at the various faculties or higher institutes of tourism and hospitality whether they are public or private. The main difference is that students attending the higher institutes and private faculties pay a much higher tuition fee than those attending public faculties. The reason for these higher fees is that students resort to joining a higher institute or a private faculty of tourism because their lower scores on high school examinations do not enable them to be admitted to public faculties. There are two foci for the instruction that students receive in these institutions: the major focus is related to their tourism and hospitality skills, and the secondary one is related to fostering their English language skills. After successfully passing the 38–40 courses taught in the four academic years, students are granted a B.Sc. degree in one of three specializations: tourism, hospitality, and tourist guidance.

While Arabic is the medium of instruction in these faculties and higher institutes, students study two core English courses annually, one in each term. That is, they are taught eight English language courses during their 4 years of university study. English is taught to students to help them acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to qualify them for the tourism labor market. The English courses taught should focus on four components: (a) a tourism and hospitality background knowledge component related to their major in order to increase their awareness of the language which will be used in their future workplaces; (b) a speaking component related to enhancing their English-speaking skills and oral fluency as being the prerequisite for graduates to work in the field of tourism; (c) a writing component targeting on developing the writing skills needed for tourism workplaces; and (d) a translation component to help them know how to translate the language of tourists. Though the history of university tourism education in Egypt exceeds four decades, there have been no previous studies on the evaluation of English language courses taught to tourism undergraduates. Overall, the studies investigating tourism English in the Egyptian context are very scarce. This will be shown in the next section.

1.2. Previous studies

While teaching English for tourism has been given much attention due to using English as a lingua franca in international tourism and travel contexts, there is a paucity of studies in this area. Researching tourism English in Egypt is no exception. Few previous studies on tourism English have dealt with issues such as testing the effectiveness of courses and interventions in developing tourism students' language competence (Akyel & Yalcin, 1991; Fuentes, 2004; Haggag, 2008; Lo & Sheu, 2008; Luka, 2009; Watts and Trim, 1999; Zayed, 2009), and investigating the language needs of students (Afzali & Fakharzadeh, 2009; Choi, 2010) and employees (Al-Khatib, 2005; Martin & Davies, 2006; Stapa, 2005; Tipmontree, 2007). These studies have also addressed the evaluation of language materials/coursebooks from the perspectives of trainee employees (Brunton, 2009), students (Laborda, 2005) or students and teachers (Kirkness & Neill, 2009), and the incorporation of computer-based activities in English courses for tourism students (Laborda, 2003, 2009). Other issues investigated by these studies included teachers' views on oral communication activities helpful in developing tourism students' oral English (Jing, 2010), and relationship of the most frequent tourism English vocabulary and general English high frequency words with tourism students' reading comprehension of texts in their English courses (Diaz & Scholfield, 2010).

Only two of the above studies (Haggag, 2008; Zayed, 2009) are related to tourism education in Egyptian universities. Haggag (2008) investigated the effectiveness of a content-based program administered to a sample of tourism and hospitality seniors in developing their English technical writing skills and language proficiency. Results revealed that the intervention enhanced the experimental group students' general language proficiency and their technical writing skills. As for Zayed's (2009) study, it examined the effectiveness of using active and proactive reflection in developing tourism juniors' English oracy skills. Results of the study indicated that the experimental group students outperformed the control group students in three areas: language awareness, oral performance and overall performance quality.

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