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## Perceptions of university students of ‘tourism-focused English’ as a second language: The case of Korean universities

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### ABSTRACT

The study aims to (a) assess the level of student satisfaction with the tourism English courses provided by Korean universities; and (b) look at the ability of these courses to train students in the correct responses to the specific linguistic needs of the tourism profession. The Importance-Satisfaction Analysis (ISA) technique was used to increase the efficiency and success of the concentration on the alternative language needs of the tourism industry in Korea, and provide important practical data for those countries in which English is not the native language, in their quest to proactively develop potential employees for their tourism industries.

### 1. Introduction

Tourism has become an essential part of everyday life across the world in the 21st century (Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002; McCabe & Stokoe, 2010). For those who travel abroad, the need to cope with cross-cultural, host-guest communication from different linguistic backgrounds is important (Hsu, 2014; Leslie & Russell, 2006; Stainton, 2018). Blue and Harun (2003) argued that there are specific standards and requirements for foreign language competence in relation to host-guest interactions. Thus, communicative competence in foreign languages is considered necessary in diverse cross-cultural tourism situations, as either a guest or a host (Harun & Din, 2002; Laborda, 2009). In the 21st century, English is the most important global language; thus the requirement to teach English to tertiary tourism students (Afzali & Fakharzadeh, 2009; Blue & Harun, 2003; Lee, Sun, Lee, & Law, 2017). As a result of these trends, Blue and Harun (2003) and Leslie and Russell (2006) have drawn attention to the necessity to acquire at least a basic, practically-oriented English language education for those who wish to work in the tourism industry internationally.

The purpose of the current study, therefore, was twofold: first, it assesses the level of student satisfaction with the tourism English courses provided by Korean universities; and second, it aimed to contribute to the ability of these courses to respond to the specific needs of the tourism profession (Hsu, 2011; Stainton, 2018). To achieve these aims, the Importance-Satisfaction Analysis (ISA) technique was employed. ISA is a diagnostic method that combines importance and satisfaction attributes into an importance-performance analysis (IPA) model of behavior (Graf, Hemmasi, & Nielsen, 1992). This technique has attracted a great deal of interest in the management sector as a tool for obtaining consumer evaluations to aid in the development of marketing strategies, as well as in the performance of services (Kim & Oh, 2001). ISA is an effective method to identify the critical factors that will allow the formulation of improvement priorities for achieving the highest level of satisfaction (Im, 2005) for visitors.

To achieve this outcome, this study begins by clarifying the concepts that provide the theoretical background of ISA and the

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framework for its application. This is followed by the development of a set of significant attributes that help discriminate student satisfaction from importance; and the paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the study for the development of such courses at Korean Universities. The study compared student rated importance of various ESAL class attributes and then asked them how satisfied they were with each. Comparison of the results obtained from year 1 and year 2 students was also sought. The literature review starts with discussing the ESP, tourism-related teaching programs and tourism English courses taught in Korean universities, and the importance-performance analysis is followed by the academic application of importance-satisfaction analysis in the field.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. English for specific purposes (ESP)

Hsu (2014) investigated the effectiveness of English for specific purposes (ESP) courses in a hospitality and tourism university in Taiwan. The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores were collected from 1884 participants in 14 waves and used for latent growth curve analysis. This study discovered that students from hospitality programs showed significant longitudinal improvement in TOEIC scores, while their peers in tourism and culinary arts programs were found to have less ability over time. Abdel Ghany and Abdel Latif (2012) examined the English for specific purposes (ESP) preparation of tourism and hospitality undergraduate students in Egypt and its adequacy as perceived by teachers and students. Their qualitative data emphasize that the students' views on their English language preparation and on their perceived English language needs are different from those of their teachers. This study suggests an innovative approach in a way that could optimally help them become well-prepared for meeting their future workplace requirements. Stainton (2018) stresses the importance of and the recent trends in learning and teaching ESP, in a world of surging globalization and increased pressure on countries to develop their English language education. From a qualitative review of agency websites, blog analyses and quantitative survey data, that study found that teaching English as a foreign language facilitates the consumption of a post-modern tourist experience, where the TEFL experience is packaged and sold as a commodified product.

Given the importance of English language proficiency in the tourism sector, certain tourism programs in South Korean (*hereafter* Korean) universities offer tourism English courses. These courses have adopted the principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which is a sub-field of English language education. ESP suggests that the English language skills taught in a discipline should be tied to the employment needs of students in the future (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Harun & Din, 2002; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Kim, 2003; Veal, 2002). Thus, tourism English courses should be designed to impart the key elements of that language that are needed in the tourism sub-sectors of hotels, restaurants, tourist attraction sites, information centers, airports, and so on. However, the research findings of Song (2003) and Lee (2005) reveal that most tourism English courses tend to focus on reading and repeating words and sentences, even though students actually need communicative and task-based language skills. The focus of Laborda (2009) was also on the development of both written and verbal communication skills for better performance of job requirements. Thus, it is now argued that students need and want more effective curricula, and that courses should continue to evolve towards this ideal (Lee et al., 2017). However, little research has been undertaken on identifying the actual needs of the industry and the students in this area, or the degree of their satisfaction with the courses that are offered by universities.

### 2.2. Tourism-related teaching programs and tourism English courses in Korean universities

Korea, which had only 11,109 foreign tourist arrivals in 1961, started to recognize the tourism industry as a national strategic business by establishing the International Tourism Corporation in 1962. In 1975, the Korean Government began to seek foreign tourists by incorporating basic directions for promoting international tourism into the national economic development plan. This has been so successful that in 2016 more than 17 million foreign tourists visited the country. Table 1 gives the overseas tourist arrival numbers in Korea between 2001 and 2017 (The Ministry of Culture, Sports & Tourism, 2018).

In 1962, the Department of Tourism Management at a private university in Seoul started to introduce an academically rigorous approach to tourism studies designed to cultivate human resources for leadership in the industry. Now, there are 229 departments providing courses in the tourism and hospitality discipline in technical colleges (2 or 3 year-programs) and universities (4-year programs). Korea has continued to expand access to tertiary education in line with its economic growth, and through this has achieved one of the world's highest levels of university enrollments. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2015) notes that Korea's university entrance rate (age range between 25 and 34) was 68% in 2014, the highest among OECD member countries. This rate is not only well above the OECD average of 41%, but it is also 10% higher than that of Canada (58%), the country in second place. Due to this higher education demand and continuing economic growth, there are 201 four-year universities with 2,173,939 students, and 138 two-year colleges with 720,466 students. By 2015, the total number of departments teaching tourism disciplines in four-year universities in Korea was 105, with a total enrolment of 13,274 students. In addition, there are 124 2-year colleges with departments related to tourism and hospitality enrolling a total of 26,992 students (The Ministry of Education, 2016).

The requisite subjects needed for tourism-related English education are established in almost all the tourism-related departments mentioned above. *Tourism English* has become one of the most fundamental and important subjects in tourism studies (The Ministry of Education, 2016). However, the annual report on overseas inbound tourists by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (2016, p. 49) in Table 2 shows that the overall satisfaction rate for 'language communication' was the lowest among the inconveniences experienced by foreign tourists in Korea, with 6.8% in the < unsatisfied > and < very unsatisfied > groups. In addition, the most

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