

## English language knowledge as a determinant of employability in hotel industry – The case of Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia

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**Abstract:** English has become widely accepted as the language of hotel industry and one of the core soft skills of employability. Since the perceptions of different stakeholders in education often differ to a certain extent, when designing a language course at a university level, it is of utmost importance to take into consideration the opinion of industry practitioners. The aim of the present diagnostic quantitative study employing case study methodology is to look into the importance of English language knowledge for employability in the hotel industry, define field-specific foreign language needs and identify the problems faced in supplier-consumer encounters. The obtained results point to the fact that hotel employees find English important for successful performance. The most necessary skills proved to be speaking and listening comprehension, followed by writing and reading. The identified problems faced in communication were related to inability to understand the interlocutor and the lack of proper lexical knowledge.

**Keywords:** English language knowledge, hotel industry, needs analysis, employability

**JEL classification:** I23, J24, Z13

## Znanje engleskog jezika kao faktor zapošljivosti u hotelskoj industriji – slučaj Vrnjačke Banje, Srbija

**Sažetak:** Engleski jezik je široko prihvaćen kao jezik hotelske industrije i jedna od osnovnih mekih veština zapošljivosti. Kako se percepcije različitih zainteresovanih strana u obrazovanju često razlikuju u manjoj ili većoj meri, pri osmišljavanju kurikuluma stranog jezika na univerzitetskom nivou od najveće važnosti je uzeti u obzir mišljenje zaposlenih u datoj industriji. Ovom dijagnostičkom kvantitativnom studijom, uz pomoć metoda studije slučaja, žele se ispitati značaj znanja engleskog jezika za zapošljivost u hotelijerstvu, definisati potrebe za stranim jezikom u svakodnevnom radu, kao i identifikovati problemi koji se javljaju pri susretu pružalac usluge-korisnik. Dobijeni rezultati ukazuju na to da su zaposleni u hotelima svesni značaja engleskog jezika za uspešno obavljanje poslovnih aktivnosti. Kao najznačajnije veštine izdvojili su se govor i razumevanje govora, praćeni pisanjem i čitanjem. Najčešći problemi identifikovani u komunikaciji tiču se nemogućnosti razumevanja sagovornika i nedostatka odgovarajućeg leksičkog znanja.

**Ključne reči:** znanje engleskog jezika, hotelska industrija, analiza potreba, zapošljivost

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## 1. Introduction

Globalisation has imposed a need for one common language to be used in international communication. On the other hand, being a service-based industry focused on the supplier-consumer interaction, which usually implies encounters in multicultural and multilingual contexts, tourism was also in a need of a language that would help overcome intercultural barriers and misunderstandings. Being considered the language of business, the English language (EL) has become widely accepted as the language of tourism and hotel industry.

Having the aforementioned in mind, the hotel industry employees are in a need of developing EL skills in order to answer the requirements of their workplace. According to [Amiradis \(2011\)](#), a research carried out by the Organisation of Tourism Education and Training in Greece points to 98.5% of Greek hotels requesting the EL knowledge as a precondition for employment, which only confirms the EL proficiency to be a determinant of employability in the field of hotel industry. On the other hand, as reported by the European Commission document *Languages Mean Business* ([European Commission, 2008](#)), “companies find it increasingly difficult to recruit qualified staff with language skills beyond basic English” (p. 9). Furthermore, the research by [Crossman and Clark \(2010\)](#) and [Clarke \(2017\)](#) stresses the lack of graduates’ soft skills, foreign languages included, which are basic for increasing employability. The blame for such a situation is often placed on higher education institutions ([Hurrell, 2016](#)).

A dialogue between business and education is the construct suggested in the European Commission publication compiled by independent experts of OMC (Open Method of Coordination) group *Languages for Jobs* ([European Commission, 2020](#)). It is stated that “Dialogue between education and business is vital if the supply of language skills from education systems is to be better matched to the needs of the labour market.” ([European Commission, 2020, p. 33](#)). However, the Report further recognises the gap in the goals of employers and educators. In order to overcome such a disparity, businesses are called to become more open and provide educators with the precise information on the type and level of the required competences and “be prepared to provide opportunities for teachers to gain an insight into their business processes” (p. 33). Such a stance supports the idea of carrying out needs analysis (NA) as a basis of bridging the gap between educational goals and workplace requirements leading to a closer tuning of educational activities to meet market needs. Having this in mind, the present study aims at gaining an insight into the needs of hotel industry concerning foreign language (FL) skills, to describe the problems faced by hotel employees in intercultural encounters and identify the employees’ perception of the importance of English language (EL) knowledge for employability.

In such a way, the study is supposed to make a proper contribution to educational policy and practice at tertiary-level hospitality-related educational contexts. Consequently, authorities in charge of vocational secondary school curricula would be provided with the information on the lacks of proper language knowledge that should be addressed and overcome at this level of education. Furthermore, prosperous material writers should also feel the benefit of research results. Finally, based on the study results, the employers would be able to make an informed decision on whether and how much to invest into language training.

## 2. Literature review

Developing language skills and the overall language proficiency is the basic aim of tertiary-level education, as suggested by [Rahayu \(2020\)](#). In order to do so, it is vital to identify employees’ needs for EL at their workplace. Thus, NA should make a base of any English for Specific Purposes programme, including that of hotel industry English, as well. When deciding

on a type of NA, one should be careful, since there are different stakeholders involved in the process of educating hotel staff. Namely, there is the Ministry of Education and Higher Education Institutions as educational policy makers, then secondary vocational institutions, instructors/teachers, students, i.e. prosperous employees and hoteliers as employers. In considering realistic needs of a future workplace, it would be most fruitful to take into account the opinion of employees as most valid. Such a stance is in line with *Languages for Jobs Report* (European Commission, 2020): “Many employers (especially monolingual employers) know neither how to identify and articulate language skill needs correctly nor how to deploy the existing skills of their employees effectively.” (p. 39). Nevertheless, the current literature treating the issue of NA undertaken with employees is based on papers which studied hotel industry in Asian (Blue & Harun, 2003; Hieu & Cheng, 2021; Namtapi, 2022; Prachanant, 2012; Rahayu, 2020) and European contexts (Martin & Davies, 2006). On the other hand, there are few studies dealing with tourism needs in Croatia (Kostić-Bobanović & Bobanović, 2013), whereas hotel industry needs have been studied in Latvia (Luka, 2015). However, the NA research dealing with hotel industry in Serbia took into consideration the needs of student population only (Pešić, 2017; Pešić & Radovanović, 2016) and the writing needs of hotel employees (Vuković Vojnović & Jerković, 2018). Thus, there is a notable gap in literature related to the overall foreign language needs of hotel employees in Serbian business context. The problems faced by hotel employees is the issue treated within NA research.

### 3. Research design and methods

The study is based on a survey conducted in hotel facilities located in Vrnjačka Banja, which is the most frequented spa resort in Serbia. Namely, the pre-Covid period statistical records report on 52,604 foreign visits in the first half of 2019, with the total of 133,686 overnight stays paid by foreign visitors (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020). The given figures only emphasise the need for EL knowledge by hotel employees operating within the destination. Apart from being the most visited spa resort, this is where a secondary vocational school of tourism and catering is located, as well as the faculty of hotel management, which means that a large number of stakeholders with direct interest in a quality educational process, be it at the secondary or tertiary level, are concentrated here.

The aim of this diagnostic quantitative study is threefold – it (1) looks into the perceptions of the importance of EL for employability in the hotel industry, (2) identifies the importance of EL skills and topics necessary to meet the needs of a future work place and (3) identifies the problems encountered in spoken/written communication. Given such an aim, the following research questions were set:

1. Do hotel employees in Serbia perceive EL knowledge important for employability?
2. What are the needs for EL in day-to-day work in hotel industry?
3. What are the problems faced in supplier-consumer encounters in hotels?

The subjects of the study comprise 32 hospitality employees working at different positions at 8 hotel facilities in Vrnjačka Banja.

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire which was distributed in a form of e-survey to 32 subjects performing in different sectors of hotel industry, i.e. front desk, restaurant, and household. The questionnaire had 27 questions divided into three groups and was translated in Serbian for the purpose of the study, so as to avoid any misunderstanding on the part of the subjects. The opening section gathered general information on the subjects. The second part of the questionnaire collected data on the hotel employees perceptions on the importance of EL knowledge for employability in the hotel industry, whereas the final part

draw data on the EL use at workplace including problems faced in spoken and written communication. The type of questions varied depending on the type of the targeted information. There were 11 questions employing 5-point Likert scale, 2 Yes/No questions, 8 open-ended ones and 6 questions implying box-checking. The data collected by open-ended questions were classified prior to analysis. The collected data were computed by means of mathematical statistics.

## 4. Results

The first part of the questionnaire collected general information on the subjects. There were 22 female and 10 male subjects, their age ranging between 20 and 54. Their working experience ranged between 5 and 15 years, whereas one of the subjects was working in the hotel industry for more than 15 years. As far as educational background is concerned, 12 had an MA degree, followed by 8 subjects with secondary-school education and an equal number of those having a college or university degree (6).

### 4.1. The employees' perceptions on the importance of the English language in the field of hotel industry

According to the results presented in Table 1, the subjects confirmed EL knowledge importance for employability and career development. Furthermore, it could be seen that they are motivated to improve the current level of EL proficiency.

Table 1: The importance of EL knowledge for employability in hospitality

Statement	Rating (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5
I think the EL knowledge is important to get the job at my current position.	-	-	28.13	37.50	34.37
My knowledge of EL influenced the possibility of being employed.	6.25	6.25	34.37	18.75	34.37
Regular language workplace checks would motivate me to further improve my EL ability.	6.25	3.12	21.87	28.13	40.63
EL knowledge has enabled my promotion.	15.62	15.62	25.00	25.00	18.75
I think that EL knowledge should positively influence the possibility of promotion.	-	3.12	18.75	31.25	46.87

Source: Author's research

Regarding the results obtained by Yes/No questions, although 71.87% of the subjects found the EL knowledge to be important for employability, only 21.87% testified to EL proficiency being checked at the job interview. Namely, either they were tested or the job interview was carried out in English. However, there were employers who found the information stated in CVs or the enclosed language knowledge certificates to be sufficient proof of the candidate's EL proficiency. Certain number of hotel facilities (15.62%) would do occasional checks of EL knowledge by means of either formal tests (once a month to once a year) or daily observations of the employee's performance. Despite such an attitude of the employers, 93.75% of subjects found it important to take regular checks of their language knowledge at the workplace. As far as the advice to future colleagues was concerned, all subjects recommended the improvement of FL skills, emphasising the importance of speaking more than one FL.

## 4.2. Needs analysis

Table 2 results show that the subjects are highly aware of the fact that EL use at a workplace would make a positive contribution to their daily performance. However, their use of English at work is rather occasional.

Table 2: EFL knowledge needs in everyday business activities

Statement	Rating (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5
EL knowledge is important for successful performance of my daily business activities.	-	3.13	21.87	28.13	46.87
Rate the frequency of using EL at your work.	-	28.13	37.5	21.87	12.5

Source: Author's research

The obtained results further identify the contexts in which the EL was used, most often this being a conversation with clients, telephone conversations and writing e-mails. Almost negligible number of the subjects stated using the EL in negotiations. Other contexts of communication that stood out were communicating about sales in the fields of hospitality, tourism and medical services; cooperation; describing spa centre services; and food and beverage. The forms of written communication that were identified as important were sending/answering to enquiries, i.e. checking room capacity, taking bookings, and providing information on hotel or destination features.

Table 3: The need for language skills

Statement		Rating (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
How often do you use English for	reading?	28.13	25.00	25.00	15.62	6.25
	writing?	40.63	21.88	15.62	15.62	6.25
	speaking?	6.25	37.50	28.13	12.50	15.62
	listening comprehension?	6.25	18.75	18.75	40.63	15.62

Source: Author's research

As for the language skills used, speaking proved to be the most important one, followed by reading and writing and listening comprehension which share the same mean (2.25).

Table 4: EL knowledge self-estimation

Statement		Rating (%)				
		1	2	3	4	5
Rate your EL proficiency in	reading	-	25.00	21.87	28.13	25.00
	writing	9.37	28.13	18.75	31.25	12.50
	speaking	-	37.50	28.13	21.87	12.50
	listening comprehension	-	18.75	31.25	25.00	25.00

Source: Author's research

The self-estimation of the language skills proficiency testified to reading being the most successfully used followed by listening comprehension. On the other hand, the subjects found themselves to be less able in speaking and writing.

Regarding the language level necessary to perform daily business activities in hospitality, 68.75% of the subjects maintained that intermediate level would be satisfactory to answer the needs of the current position, whereas 31.25% of the subjects found that it would be advanced level of language knowledge.

Table 5: Influence of different aspects of language knowledge on successful performance

Language knowledge aspects	Rating (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5
General language knowledge.	-	6.25	31.25	25.00	37.50
The knowledge of technical vocabulary.	-	12.50	43.75	12.50	31.25
Knowledge of grammar.	6.25	34.37	25.00	18.75	15.62
Business correspondence rules.	6.25	15.62	37.50	9.37	31.25

Source: Author's research

The obtained results point to the fact that more importance was given to the knowledge of general English and technical vocabulary compared to grammatical knowledge and business correspondence.

As far as language functions were concerned, the most important (rated 4 and 5, i.e. described as *very important* and *most important*) proved to be the language of describing hotel services and facilities (43.75%), providing information on sights (40.63%), giving directions (34.37%), telephoning English (31.25%) and problem solving (31.25%).

### 4.3. Problems encountered in communication

The problems encountered in communication with foreign clients could be classified into two groups - those that appeared as the consequence of poor command of EL on the part of the subject, i.e. hospitality employee and those caused by deficiencies in clients' language knowledge. The inability to use the appropriate lexical item(s) in a particular spoken situation (34.37%), or general lack of lexical knowledge (28.13%) were recognised as the most serious obstacles to efficient communication. These were followed by the unusual accent of the clients and the rate of speech delivery (25%). The least rated problems were the knowledge of grammatical system (12.5%) and the lack of self-confidence in communication (9.37%).

Most subjects found the way to deal with the problems in communication either on their own or with the help of colleagues. They managed to handle the lacks in lexical knowledge by using synonymous forms or other relevant explanations, and/or gesticulating. Otherwise, they would ask for help of the more proficient colleagues.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. The hospitality employees' perceptions on the importance of EL knowledge for employability

The obtained results testify to the subjects' awareness of EL knowledge importance for employability, which is in line with [Kostić-Bobanović and Bobanović \(2013\)](#), who state that FLs are significant in business communication, especially in the field of tourism. Apart from being aware of FL importance for performing daily activities at their positions, the subjects proved to be willing to improve their language proficiency. On the other hand, the employers' lack of interest in their employees' language proficiency is rather surprising. Such an attitude is confirmed by the lack of any form of language checks in job interviews, scarce number of employee observations, the lack of in-company language training or language checks. It might

be due to the fact that most subjects perform low level hospitality jobs. However, they are the first to face potential clients or loyal customers in a hotel facility, which would only impose a more urgent need for their language knowledge. The positive attitude of employees should be used to further develop their FL skills, i.e. disseminate the findings among two groups of stakeholders – one being the student population, in order to raise their motivation for FL acquisition, and the other prosperous employers, in order to make them aware of the importance of in-company FL training and regular checks.

## **5.2. The use of EL in hotel industry**

The fact that EL is not used to a high degree in a leading spa resort in Serbia is rather surprising having in mind tourism traffic results. However, the fact that the subjects are aware of an increased performance level due to the use of EL is encouraging and it can be used as an instigator of their further improvement.

As for the language skills needed, speaking was found to be most used, which is in line with [Prachanant \(2012\)](#), [Hieu and Cheng \(2021\)](#) and [Namtapi \(2022\)](#). Namely, being mostly at the positions which imply direct contact with clients, the hospitality employees quite naturally, found speaking to be of the utmost importance. At the same time, the use of listening comprehension, which is inseparable from speaking, was rated somewhat lower. Besides being quite contrary to the results obtained in most studies treating the same issue ([Prachanant, 2012](#); [Hieu & Cheng, 2021](#); [Namtapi, 2022](#)), such results are also surprising, since the ability to identify communicated information is vital, especially in service industries. Namely, understanding customers' needs is a precondition of delivering a prompt and efficient service. In support of the importance of listening comprehension, [Namtapi \(2022\)](#) reports on failure in communication caused by listening problems. A possible reason of rating listening in such a way might be affected by the fact that the subjects face more problems in speaking compared to listening comprehension, which led to their underestimation of its importance for the overall communication. Regarding the remaining two skills, reading was given slight precedence over writing. Rating reading as the third most used skill is in line with [Prachanant \(2012\)](#) and [Hieu and Cheng \(2021\)](#). This could be justified by the hospitality employees' need to read instructions or find necessary information on a destination, sight or hotel services. The least often used skill proved to be writing, which is also confirmed by [Prachanant \(2012\)](#). Namely, writing is most often used by receptionists, whereas other positions in hospitality are less prone to using this skill. Despite rating reading and writing as less used skills, the results obtained by [Hieu and Chang \(2021\)](#) describe these skills as equally important, since inability to read e.g. e-mails or documents and provide an adequate written answer may lead to serious consequences. The same importance is confirmed by [Kay and Russette \(2000\)](#).

Despite speaking being most often used skill, the subjects maintain that they are the least skilful in its use. On the other hand, according to their self-evaluation, they use listening comprehension more successfully. Such a stance is supported by one of the identified problems in communication - the subjects state that they can understand the person speaking, but feel unable to provide the proper answer. On the other hand, rating reading as most successfully used skill is not surprising. Namely, due to the nature of the reading input that is all-time available, written texts can be read and reread until the comprehension is reached. Furthermore, it is not used very often by the observed population, which might contribute to the subjective feeling of having mastered it successfully.

As most important language functions, the subjects identified providing information on hotel services and facilities and sights, giving directions, the language of telephoning and problem solving. The obtained results are partially consistent with [Blue and Harun \(2003\)](#), who maintain that English for information, providing services and offering help makes the language



of hospitality, and partly to those of [Namtapi \(2022\)](#), who point to greetings, giving directions, providing information, and offering and asking for help to be of vital importance. On the other hand, [Kostić-Bobanović and Bobanović \(2013\)](#) find writing e-mails and telephoning among most important functions needed in hospitality. However, it would be important to note that all identified functions imply two-way communication and interaction with customers, which should have direct implications for organising class activity.

### **5.3. Problems faced in communication with foreign clients**

The problems that the subjects most often face in encounters with foreign guests are the lack of either general or technical vocabulary, the lack of grammatical knowledge and being unconfident in communication. Namtapi's findings ([Namtapi, 2022](#)) also report poor vocabulary range and confidence in communication to be problematic areas of hospitality staff. Moreover, customers' poor command of English was also identified as one of the serious obstacles disabling efficient communication, which supports the results obtained by [Kostić-Bobanović and Bobanović \(2013\)](#), including difficult accents and the rate of speech delivery, which is also confirmed by [Hieu and Cheng \(2021\)](#) and [Namtapi \(2022\)](#). One of the positive findings of the present study is the subjects' ability to use avoidance and socio-affective language learning strategies to overcome the problems in communication. Namely, improving language knowledge at tertiary-level education mostly relies on making students aware of the possibility to control and manage their own learning process by use of language learning strategies. Being aware of the possibility to take hold of the learning process has a key motivational role in improving language knowledge.

## **6. Conclusions and pedagogical implications**

Given that there is the gap in literature dealing with the problem of EL knowledge influence on the employability of hotel staff in Serbia and the surrounding countries, the aim of the study presented in the paper was to try to overcome it by looking into the hotel employees' perceptions on the importance of EL knowledge for employability, their needs for EL in day-to-day work and the problems faced in supplier-consumer encounters in hotel industry. The obtained results provide valuable information to hoteliers, educational policy makers, both in secondary- and tertiary-level education, and FL material writers, regardless of the FL used.

The emphasis given to communicational skills and in particular to FL proficiency by the [European Commission \(2012\)](#) as an important factor of employability is well recognised by the hotel employees operating in one of the most visited spa resorts in Serbia. Although they perceive EL proficiency as important, they do not find themselves skilled enough to efficiently perform daily activities which imply intercultural encounters. On the other hand, there is only a partial formal recognition of FL skills importance by employers working at the same hotels, since language testing was not a part of the assessment of job candidates. In that sense, the results may raise the employers' awareness about the importance of EL knowledge, i.e. provide them with the information of how to exploit the employees' language ability.

As for the English language needs in a realistic setting, although slight precedence is given to speaking and listening, reading and writing skills should be treated as equally important. The identified contexts in which multilingual/multicultural encounters take place imply two-way communication, which would mean that role-plays and simulations should be widely used in equipping future hospitality employees with the skills that are necessary to cope with everyday assignments. The functions that came to fore are the language of information, telephoning and problem solving, which should be taken into consideration when making decisions on curriculum design. On the overall, in organising ESP training, be it as a pre-service or in-company, communicative approach to language learning and teaching should be employed,



which implies the use of real-life tasks in the classroom with learners taking an active role in developing all four language skills with emphasis given to speaking and listening comprehension. The fact that there is a strong motivation among hotel employees to improve their language knowledge level should be taken as an advantage, with special attention given to raising the employees awareness of the possibility to take control over their learning process by use of language learning strategies, which would enable making them independent learners.

The problems experienced in communication also point to the need of further training. Namely, the loss of words or the choice of an inappropriate lexical item, inability to keep up with a faster rate of speech or non-native speakers' accents as well as noticing grammatical mistakes in writing, all point to a necessity of improving the current proficiency level. These problems could be overcome in additional training that would comprise using listening material that promotes the use of World Englishes, i.e. the use of English by non-native speakers, with the varying rate of speech. Furthermore, by becoming more proficient in language use, the employees would be able to understand a message regardless of the rate of speech. Furthermore, secondary vocational school policy makers should take into consideration the employment of CLILL, which has already become the practice of some European countries (European Commission, 2020).

Apart from positive implications, the study has certain limitations. First, it is the size of sample. Future research should address a larger group of hotel employees operating at different destinations. Furthermore, the needs should be observed within different sectors, which would enable a more detailed description of hotel staff needs based on the sector they operate in. Finally, apart from using quantitative research, qualitative should also be employed, which would enable an in-depth analysis of the treated issue.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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