

IMPROVING COMMUNICATORS' SKILLS IN TOURISM AND AGRITOURISM

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Abstract: Our changing world, characterised by increasing mobility of skilled workers, needs, more than ever, to improve the quality and effectiveness of services, hence the necessity to improve the effectiveness and quality of the training systems. Tourism and agri-tourism are increasingly important in an increasing number of countries in the world. High-quality, effective tourism services rely on good communication skills. Though some professionals in the field seem more concerned with the skills that could improve an individual and some educators seem to focus on skills that could help individuals work with others, the need to improve communication skills is shared by both stakeholders. This paper clearly defines concepts such as communication and communication skills (confidence, critical thinking, customer service, emotional intelligence, empathy, leadership, patience, project management, public speaking, social skills, and time management). Other authors group basic communication skills into behavioural characteristics, event planning and management, fluency in a foreign language, new media acumen, presentation skills, relationship building, relationships with vendors and agencies, visual communication skills, and writing and editing skills. In tourism, the most important communication skills are diplomacy, elective oral and written communication skills, human relations skills, and professional ethical standards. The paper emphasises what educators – body language, good instructions, and transfer of knowledge to their students – through case studies, educational games, group work, internship, out-of-class assignment, pair work, psychodrama, role-play, and simulation – and educational materials (language sue, teaching rules, and visual aids) should focus on in their attempt to improve communicators' skills in tourism and agritourism. Tourism actors should manage to build up. The conclusion of the study is that, in order to be good communicators, students majoring in tourism should be able to build up reports effortless, to be good listeners, and to observe the 7 principles of the feedback given that adequate training of staff (employee, farmer, members of farmer's family) is important in ensuring high-level customer satisfaction.

Keywords: Communication skills, communicators, improvement, tourism, agritourism

INTRODUCTION

The International Labour Organisation [17] emphasised, more than a decade ago, that “The need to improve the quality and effectiveness of training systems and the increasing mobility of skilled workers have been the main driving forces behind the need to develop new approaches to skills recognition together with new skills standards.” [17].

Communication is, probably, the most important factor in the tourism industry. Therefore, communicators involved in tourism (no matter the type) need to master very good **communication skills**.

Communication skills are defined as “the ability to convey or share ideas and feelings effectively” (*Oxford Dictionaries*) and “the ability [i.e. the acquired or natural capacity or talent that enables an individual to perform a particular job or task successfully] to convey [i.e. to transfer] information [i.e. data that are accurate and timely, specific and organised for a purpose, presented within a context that gives it meaning and relevance, and that can lead to an increase in understanding and decrease in uncertainty] to another effectively and efficiently” [6].

Good business managers have **good verbal (including written) and non-verbal communication skills** allowing them to facilitate the sharing of information between both the people in their company and the people outside their company (customers, partners, supplies, etc.).

Communication skills are defined as the acquired or natural ability to convey information: this means that someone who does not have this ability naturally, must acquire it by training. This paper deals

with the ways **communication skills** can be improved in **tourism** (defined as the “marketing of enjoyable and other features of a travel destination, and provision of facilities and services for the pleasure travellers (tourists)” – cf. *Business Dictionary*), in general, and **agri-tourism** (defined as “a type of tourism where visitors can help out on a working farm, buy produce from a farm shop or be involved in other leisure activities on the farm’s land” [9], in particular.

Communication skills are closely related to **soft skills**, “a term often associated with a person's EQ (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, *communication*, language, personal habits, interpersonal skills, managing people, leadership, etc. that characterize relationships with other people” [37].

Soft skills include a wide range of concepts in which **communication** plays a key role:

- **Confidence**, “belief in oneself and one’s powers or abilities; self-confidence; self-reliance; assurance” [10];
- **Critical thinking**, “disciplined thinking that is clear, rational, open-minded, and informed by evidence” [10];
- **Customer service**, “all interactions between a customer and a product provider at the same time of sale, and thereafter” [6];
- **Emotional intelligence**, “skill in perceiving, understanding, and managing emotions and feelings” [10];
- **Empathy**, “the psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another” [10];
- **Leadership**, “the ability to lead” [10];
- **Patience**, “the quality of being patient, as the bearing of provocation, annoyance, misfortune, or pain, without complaint, loss of temper, irritation, or the like” [10];
- **Project management**, “the body of knowledge concerned with principles, techniques, and tools used in planning, control, monitoring, and review of projects” [6];
- **Public speaking**, “the art or skill of addressing an audience effectively” [10];
- **Social skills**, “ability to communicate, persuade, and interact with other members of the society, without undue conflict or disharmony” [6];
- **Time management**, “the analysis of how working hours are spent and the prioritization of tasks in order to maximize personal efficiency in the workplace” [10].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The **research method** used is *comparative*.

The **material** used consists in *books, articles, Master theses, and PhD theses* on **communication skills in tourism and on the ways these communication skills can be improved**, materials published all over the world in the last two decades and made available to the wide public via the Internet.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Communication Skills: Definition

“[...] communication skills have always been an important factor for employees, but it is becoming an absolutely essential behaviour today, especially in the face of virtual and flexible work environments” [26].

Communication skills in tourism are among competencies for hotel-manager trainees [33] – diplomacy, *elective oral and written communication skills*, human relations skills, and professional ethical standards. They are important factors determining good cooperation [20] – and for tour guides [2], and a necessity for the good functioning of arrivals, attractions, of departures, of event planning, of the front office, of the tour operations, of the transport sector, of the travel agencies, of the travel services, etc. [1].

Other authors speak of **communications ability** as one of the seven key themes of curricula in schools of hotel administration [33]: “analytical ability and sufficient mastery of technical skills and industry concepts to couple knowledge with excellence in implementation, *communications ability*, ethical awareness, international scope, leadership skills such as the ability to persuade, motivate and encourage, management style, principally working as teams, and strategic orientation or the capability to see the big picture”.

Valachis [33] mentions the hospitality management competencies delivered by the establishments: ability to self-promote, critical analysis, dealing with guests’ complaints,

developing positive customer relationships, interviewing, leadership, motivation, problem solving, self-discipline, time management, training, work under pressure, and *written communications*.

Other authors speak of **communication** alone when mentioning the most important competencies from the perspective of hotel managers [33]: achievement of positive working relationships with employees, development of positive customer relations, *effective communication in written/oral form*, management of guest problems with understanding and sensitivity, motivations of employees to achieve the desired performance, professional appearance and poise.

A more detailed description of **basic communication skills** belongs to Gillis [15]:

- **Behavioural characteristics**: ability to be flexible and handle ambiguity, ability to observe deadlines, ability to cooperate with others, attention to detail, being a self-starter (showing initiative), critical listening skills, critical thinking skills, good interpersonal skills, positive attitude, punctuality, etc.;
- **Event planning and management**: “planning and implementation necessary for events that fulfil objectives related to internal communication, public relations and marketing goals” (i.e., annual meetings, charity events, community events, cultural events, receptions, recruitment fairs, seminars, sponsored events, trade shows, etc.);
- **Fluency in a foreign language**: “a high level of language proficiency in both written and oral communication” (4, 16, 22, 23, 29, 30, 31);
- **New media acumen**: “managing the corporate intranet and Internet; monitoring and participation in other online media; monitoring and participation in the blogosphere; monitoring new technologies; participation in online social networking; understanding the impact, planning, and implementation of new media technology to improve the internal and external communication and productivity of the enterprise”;
- **Presentation skills**: ability to deliver public presentations; “understanding concepts and applying theories in the use of oral presentations, including images and information”;
- **Relationship building**: “the process of developing and maintaining relationships with specifically segmented audience (publics/markets) identified by the organization as strategic and necessary for reaching organizational goals and objectives, including peer-to-peer relationships to facilitate daily work activities as well as specific audience groups that might be related to another concept (i.e., donors, employees, government bodies and media, etc.)” [18];
- **Relationships with vendors and agencies**: “assessing the capabilities of a vendor/agency to meet communication needs, participating in vendor/agency selection, providing day-to-day management and oversight of projects, and raising issues when barriers surface”;
- **Visual communication skills**: “graphic design skills associated with publication and new media production; photography, publication design, videography, etc., including identity management such as graphic design standards maintained by the use of logos, slogans and trademark identity marks”;
- **Writing and editing skills**: “ability to produce informative and persuasive writing; writing correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communication audiences, professions and purposes they serve”.

2. Communication Skills: Improvement

“The professionals seem more concerned with skills that would improve an individual whereas educators seem to focus on skills that would help individuals work with others.” [25]. Zehrer & Mössenlechner [38] share the same point of view.

Improving tourism communication skills starts in college, in parallel with the improvement of theoretical knowledge (3, 11, 14, 19, 21, 27, 33, 35, 36), and it largely depends on the improvement of *educators* and of *educational materials*.

Educators should improve their teaching style by paying special attention to:

- **Body language**, i.e. *active movement* (impressive pacing, etc.), *eye contact* (making appropriate eye contact, etc.), *facial expression* (smiling warmly, not too little, not too much, etc.), *gestures* (keeping arms/hands/legs uncrossed/un-wrung, etc.), *physical distance* (not very close, not very far, etc.), *posture* (head up and alert, leaning forward, not drooping/slouching/stooping, etc.), *voice tone* (assuring, confident, not inaudible, not rude, not timid, etc.), *voice volume* (audible, pleasant, etc.), etc.;
- **Good instructions** (demonstrated, easy to follow, precise, repeated, short, simple, etc.);
- **Transfer of knowledge to their students** (accepting individual differences; acknowledging; appreciating; asking a variety of question types; asking follow-up questions; being thoroughly intelligible; being clear and concise; checking students' listening skills; drawing students' attention; expressing ideas clearly; expressing ideas explicitly; holding students' attention; involving all students; knowing his/her students; letting his tone & body speak; letting students formulate; letting students think; listening; making classes interactive – through activities; eliciting – i.e. asking, not telling, games, good instructions, group work, pair work, thought-provoking questions; making sure he/she is understood exactly as intended; making things simple; motivating inhibitions; organising well; preparing well; removing inhibitions; not ridiculing bad answers; showing a clean sense of humour; showing interest in students' answers; speaking clearly; speaking slowly; suiting his/her students; using verbal tools; using visual tools; using vocal tools; etc.).

Educators should improve their **students' soft skills** through a variety of *teaching/training methods* such as:

- **Case study**, “a study of an individual unit, as a person, family, or social group, usually emphasizing developmental issues and relationships with the environment, especially in order to compare a larger group to the individual unit” [10];
- **Educational game**, “games explicitly designed with educational purposes, now which have incidental or secondary educational value” [37];
- **Group work**, “a technique [...] wherein [educational groups] are guided by an agency leader to more effective personal adjustment and community participation” [24];
- **Internship**, “any period of time during which a beginner acquires experience in an occupation, profession, or pursuit” [10];
- **Out-of-class assignment**, “the full-time performance of the significant duties of a vacant, funded position in a [job] for a [determined] period of time” [12];
- **Pair work**, “learners working together in pairs” [5];
- **Psychodrama**, “an action method [often used as psychotherapy] in which [students] use spontaneous dramatization, role-playing and dramatic self-presentation to investigate and gain insight into their [future careers/jobs]” [37];
- **Role-play**, “the act of imitating the character and behaviour of someone who is different from yourself, for example as a training exercise” [8];
- **Simulation**, “a model of a real activity, created for training purposes or to solve a problem” [7].

Educational materials aimed at improving students' communication skills should focus on the following:

- **Language use** (grammar appropriateness, language fluency, language variety, pronunciation accuracy, vocabulary richness, word combination acceptability, etc.) with dictionaries, language textbooks, student's textbooks, etc.;
- **Teaching rules** (*the 2-for-2 rule*, which helps identify when fatigue is no longer happening; *the 6/6 rule*, which keeps each bulleted item to no more than 6 words and including no more than six bullet items on a slide, when working in PowerPoint);
- **Visual aids** (which should be clear, easy to use, legible, not distracting, relevant, reusable, etc.).

In addition to all this, **great communicators**:

- **Manage to build up reports effortlessly** by [13]:
 - Matching the person's sensory modality;

- Mirroring the person's physiology;
- Matching the person's voice;
- Matching the person's breathing;
- Matching how the person deals with information;
- Matching common experiences;
- *Are good listeners* – they understand what other people like to talk about [13]:
 - Themselves;
 - Their own opinions;
 - Other people;
 - Things;
 - You;
- *Observe the 7 principles of feedback* [13]:
 - Choose correct timing for feedback;
 - Ask for self-assessment;
 - Focus on specifics;
 - Limit feedback to a few important points;
 - Provide more praise than corrective feedback;
 - Give praise for expected performance;
 - Develop action plans.

CONCLUSIONS

Adequate training of staff (employee, farmer, members of farmer's family) is important in ensuring **high-level customer satisfaction**. Thus, staff should [32]:

- Know about how the product was grown and processed, or about the community and the surrounding area;
- Be able to assist customers in selecting the best product for their needs;
- Be able to calmly ask questions to make sure everyone understands the situation in case of problems;
- Explain how to pick fruits & vegetables without damaging plants and where to walk in the plantation without causing damage, what makes their produce better/different than others, what quantities are more desirable for different purposes, or what the facility offers;
- Give the visitors the courtesy of making their own decisions;
- Indicate if they provide recipes, recommendations for preserving the product for long drives, and if they can ship the produce;
- Be able to listen to visitors' complaints/concerns without interruption, remaining calm and attempting to completely understand their frustrations or problems [34];
- Be able to welcome visitors with enthusiasm and a smile;
- Work with a local chef to develop and offer recipes for the produce on sale or promoted [28];
- Be courteous, pleasant, and sincere;
- Be easily identified by their dress and nametags;
- Be familiar with area attractions, accommodations, local restaurants, etc.;
- Be knowledgeable about the operation, about the operation's amenities, about the operation's services and/or products;
- Be sure to post prices for products/services easily visible to customers;

- Provide a guest book for the visitors to add their names, postal code, and e-mail addresses that could be used later to send newsletters or reminder notices.

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