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### **The importance of English language skills in the tourism sector: A comparative study of students/employees perceptions in Croatia**

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#### ABSTRACT

Communication skills are an important element of hospitality industry. Understanding of performance expectations are keys to the achievement of tourist satisfaction. Good oral and written communication skills are the top skills important to hospitality practitioners at different position levels. Good English communication during the study will add value to students' education. According to that fact the hospitality program itself will encourage critical thinking and for example tourism problem solving when it is necessary. In the tourism industry supply and demand side must communicate perfectly in order to ensure quality and needed performance standards. In the business tourism practice oral communication is a bit higher than written communication, but both categories are rated high. (Kay and Russette: 2000). The authoresses, through a questionnaire, explore the importance of communication skills (speaking, reading, listening and writing) in English language among hospitality employees and students studying business and tourism. The importance of good cooperation between the language/hospitality teaching programmes and the Croatia Tourism Authority is a high priority if the development of steady all-year-round tourism is to be a possibility. In concluding, the implications of the findings are discussed and concerns rose over the need to address evident weaknesses in order to enhance career options and tourism management in Croatia.

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Keywords: English language, communication skills, hospitality employees, students, Tourism Authority

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## 1. Introduction

In today's postindustrial society services have the greatest importance in meeting human needs. In sector of services, tourism plays an important role. In order to ensure the quality of hospitality services it is necessary to find common language between supply and demand sides. Since English has become an international language, it has become increasingly necessary for employees working in tourism to develop the language skills to be able to fulfil the requirements of tourists. Furthermore, globalization has increased competition in tourism markets, and destinations are exposed to tough price competition on homogenized products by rivals worldwide. Given these challenges and the desire by locales for sustainable tourism development, human resource development is critical to the success of tourism in many markets.

There is a growing acknowledgement that economies of the 21st century need to be knowledge based rather than commodity based and be driven by knowledge development innovation and commercialization. Experience economy and creative industries develop and sell products of experience based on creative labour (Ghisi, 2007). «Intangible assets» is a new concept invented by Karl Erik Sveiby, because the knowledge is immaterial, intangible and qualitative (Ateljević-Jureta, 2009). In today's tourism world only institutions with providing a platform for developing and producing the newly emerging globalized skills (management and language) can evaluate its potentials in the name of tourism. In the European hospitality and tourism management education (HTME) management and language skills are the bases in communication on the tourism market (Kivela, 1997). Future hotel and tourism industry needs educational establishments that provide hospitality management courses and language training.

It is now at a point where there is a sufficient base of theory that it can easily move well beyond vocational training and expose students to a wide range of ideas, knowledge and theory. The key challenge therefore, for tourism and hospitality education is not to stay with narrow vocationalism simply to satisfy the employments needs of industry but to harness the development of the knowledge that will provide a contribution to the successful development of tourism and hospitality industry as a whole. Tourism and hospitality management education is one segment of the larger tourism and hospitality industry. It could be argued that the formal preparation of industry professionals, via tourism and hospitality education programs, is the single most important segment.

Croatian tourism goes through similar challenges that face other countries which also have well established HTME programmes. In Croatian education programmes there is an extended record of the educational establishments that provides hospitality management courses and language training as future trends. Also, provision of foreign languages courses and the distance learning programs are dominant factors of methodical tourism education approach. Those programmes are very important in such a small Mediterranean country where tourism is an essential sector in its economy. According to Peršić (2001) development of Croatia's tourism depends on tourism strategy in spatial plans, tourism destinations network but also on tourism education. Croatian tourism is a part of the global economy. It is very important for a small country to recognize its educational goals and priorities.

During the past 20 years, the explosion in business and communications technology has revolutionized the field of English language teaching, and has radically shifted the attention of

course designers from teaching English for Academic purposes to teaching English for more specialized purposes. In the last few years, first and second language acquisition research into language teaching have led to an increased interest in investigating the most effective ways of improving the ability of workers in using English for specific purposes (ESP) in the workplace (Li So-mui and Mead, 2000; Louhiala-Salminen 1996). Several recent studies of ESP

have provided evidence of the importance of teaching English for specific purposes (Li So-mui and Mead, 2000; Edwards, 2000; Lohiala-Salinen, 1996; Huchinson and Waters,1987).

The aim of this study is to investigate the students and employees perception of their ability to speak, read, listen and write in English. By conducting this research we want to discover their motivations to learn English and determine the obstacles and other difficulties in developing necessary language skills. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) state that the teaching process of any kind of language for specific purposes (ESP) should take as a starting point the analysis of the four traditional skills within an appropriate context, that being, as far as possible, the conditions given in the workplace. Moreover, they subscribe to the idea that an effective syllabus must attempt to overcome the deficiencies of the educational system under which they are operating. ESP therefore encircles a reaction against the conventional humanistic approach wherein both teachers and students abide by the academic objective of knowing everything about the language being studied instead of concentrating attention on those skills most relevant within the workplace in the time allotted in the educational environment.

## **2. Methods**

The current study was undertaken at the University of Pula in the academic year 2008/2009 at the end of summer semester. A sample consists of 105 graduate students of a Department of Economics and tourism "Dr. Mijo Mirković" Pula studying the branch of tourism and the same number of employees working in tourist agencies in the commune of Pula. All the participant filled out the questionnaire. Students were given verbal and written instructions and completed the questionnaires during the first few minutes of class. In order to collect the data from employees, questionnaires were sent via e-mail to the agencies operating in this area. Questionnaires were handed out to be completed in their own time and handed back at their convenience. The respondents remain completely anonymous.

## **3. Measures**

For the purpose of this project special questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was divided into four sections according to the traditional four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking). Each section contained five questions with the offered answers. Participants were asked to circle the most appropriate answer.

## **4. Data analyses**

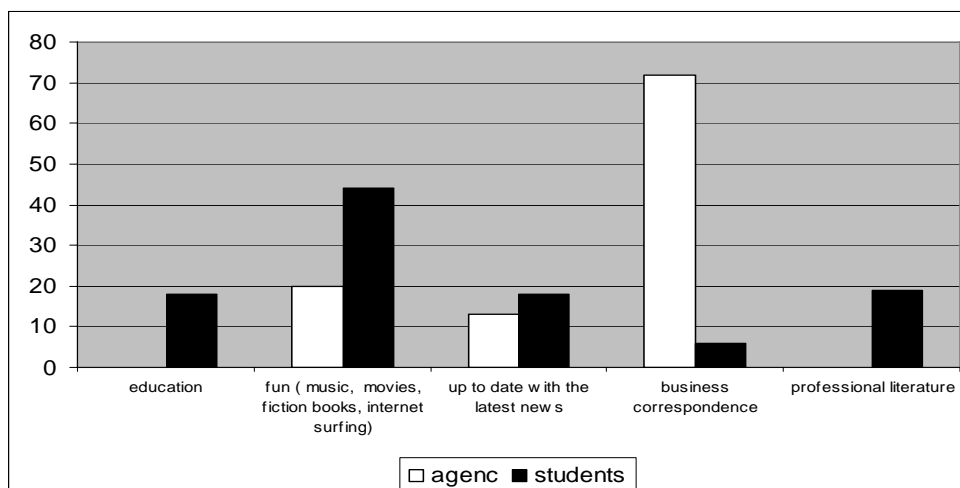
The statistical package, SPSS (11.0), was used to analyze the data received from the questionnaire. To enable ease of data entry, questions were pre-coded beforehand. This also confirmed that the design of the questionnaire was suitable for such analysis. Each questionnaire was individually numbered, with the first variable on the SPSS package reflecting this. This enabled the successful identification of errors, which when they did occur, were easy to correct.

## **5. Results and discuss**

Analyzing the answers from the questionnaires (see appendix 1.) we have come to the interesting results. In the following chapter, the most outstanding results that showed

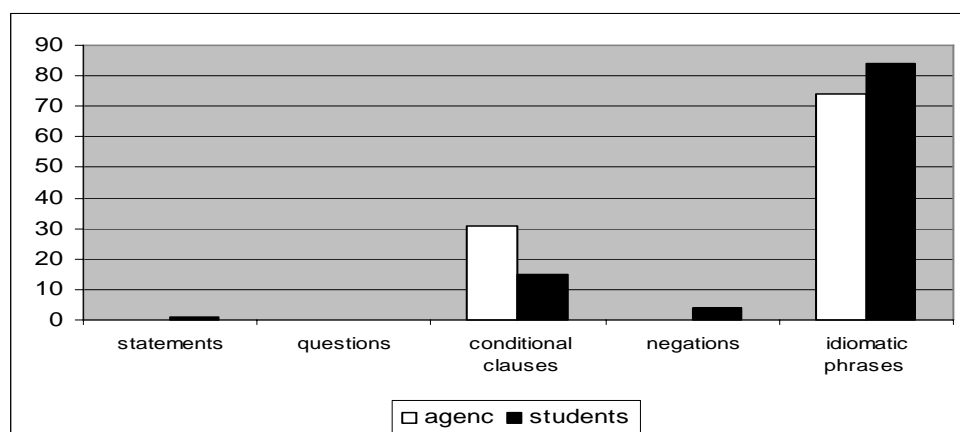
significant difference between employees and students in four language skills were discussed.

### 5.1. Reading



**Chart 1: Reasons/motives for reading in English**

A significant difference in answers is noted in the reason why the participants read in English (Chart 1.). Among the student population the main motive is fun and entertainment with the percentage of 41,90 while 68,57 percent of the tourist agency employees read English texts for business purposes. It was interesting to notice that only a few percent of students and even less employees read in English because of the education purposes and professional development.



**Chart 2: Parts of English that you find the most difficult to understand**

Both participants of surveyed groups found the most difficult to understand idiomatic phrases, while tourist agency employees also emphasized conditional clauses as the second problem on the difficulty scale. English as a foreign language students (EFL) always have trouble in correct usages of conditional clauses. In a survey of the most serious teaching problems encountered by EFL teachers in the Los Angeles area, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-

Freeman (1999) found that idiomatic phrases ranked third and conditional sentences ranked fifth. This result can help foreign language teachers to focus their lectures on the issues that students perceive as the most difficult to understand.

## 5.2. Writing

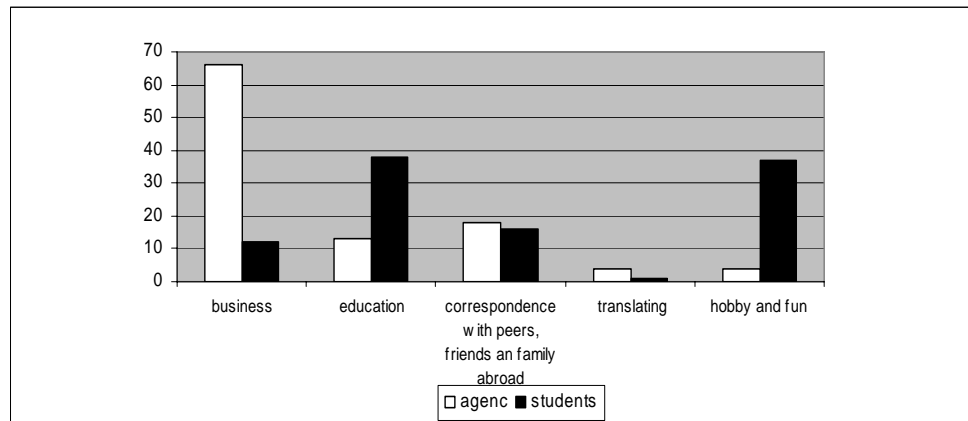


Chart 3: Reasons for writing in English

The main reason why tourist agency employees write in English (Chart 3.) is for business purpose (62,50%). Among students, 36,62 % of them write in English for educational purposes and 35,21% for fun and entertainment. It was interesting to remark that hobbies and fun is one of the biggest reasons why students write in English. Probably different entertainment content on the Internet such as Facebook, Tagged, Msn and other encourage students to use English in writing purposes. The number of the users of that kind of Internet content is increasing rapidly. For instance Facebook numbers 250 million active users and 120 million users log on to Facebook at least once a day.

The use of Internet can also facilitate the students' writing proficiency. According to the results of the study, the author (Zergollern-Miletić, 2007) remarked that with increased use of Internet writing proficiency in English also increases. This is a very important result, because it suggests the potential usefulness of the computer in teaching English.

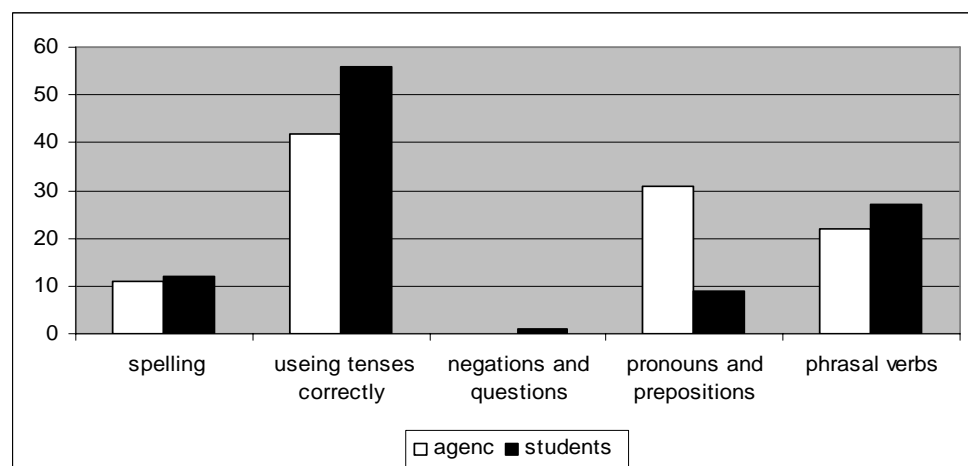


Chart 4: The most difficult parts in writing in English

Students (53,52%) as well as the tourist agency employees (39,58%) state that the most difficult part in writing in English is the proper use of tenses. Tourist agency employees show more difficulties with the appropriate use of pronouns and prepositions (29,17%), while students find phrasal verbs (25,35%) as a rather big obstacle when they want to write in English.

Our results are similar to those conducted by Uso Juan and Salazar Campillo (2002) among students who were studying English for tourism in Spain. According to the results of their research students state that they find very difficult to choose correct English tenses. The participants of the study remarked that using the correct tense and verb form is important in English grammar and is essential in business correspondence.

### 5.3. Speaking

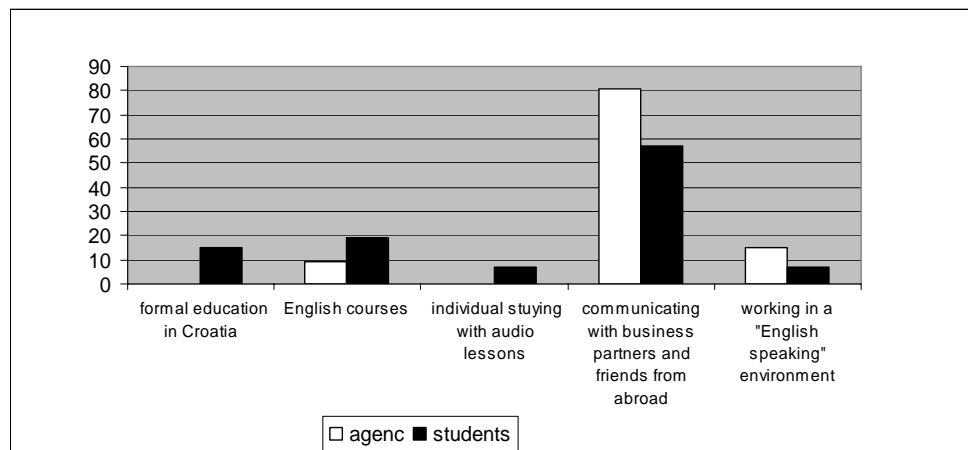
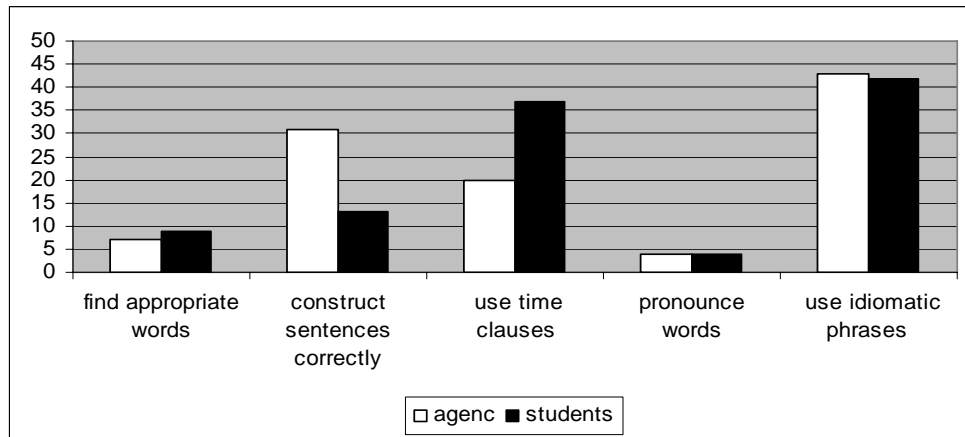


Chart 5: The best way to improve speaking skill

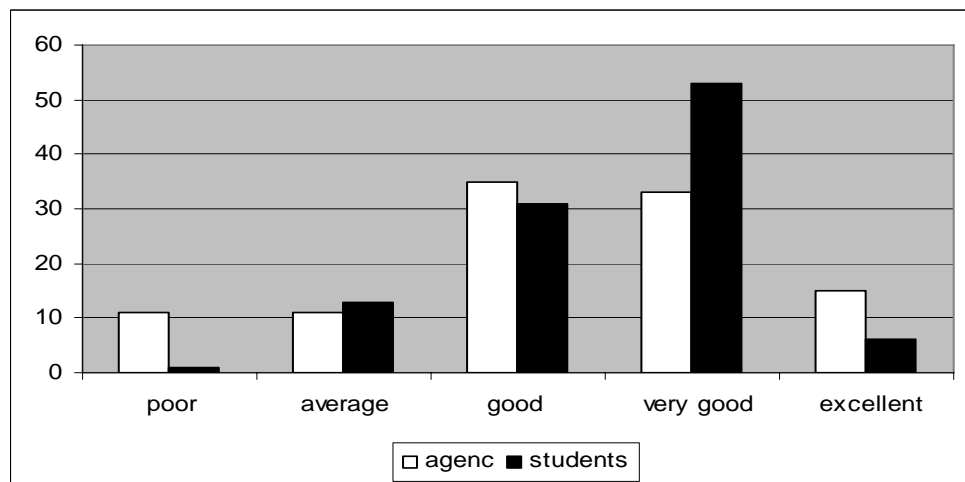
Not a single employee valued regular education as the best way to improve English speaking skills, on the other hand 14,08 % of students think that formal education is important in practicing and improving their knowledge of English. Individual studying is not perceived as an effective way of improving speaking skills. On the other hand, both students (58,26) and employees (81,32%) think that communicating with business partners and friends from abroad is the best way to improve English. Nowadays students, thanks to the different exchange programs, have more opportunities to go abroad, spend some time there and improve their language skills. One of the programs that encourage and support academic mobility of higher education students and teachers is ERASMUS. There are currently 2,199 higher education institutions participating in it across the 31 countries involved in the Socrates programme and over 1.6 million students have already taken part.

Employees may also participate in different seminars and vocational trainings held abroad. One of the examples of successful tourist industry employee's education is the programme conducted by the AMIDEAST and the Egyptian Tourism Federation (Alm, 2003). The programme provided English language training to more than 100,000 workers in Egypt's fast-growing tourism industry. The training enabled hospitality managers, hotel employees, and other frontline tourism workers to communicate more effectively with international tourists and provide better customer service, thereby improving guest satisfaction and ultimately boosting the tourism industry.



**Chart 6: Difficulties in talking in English**

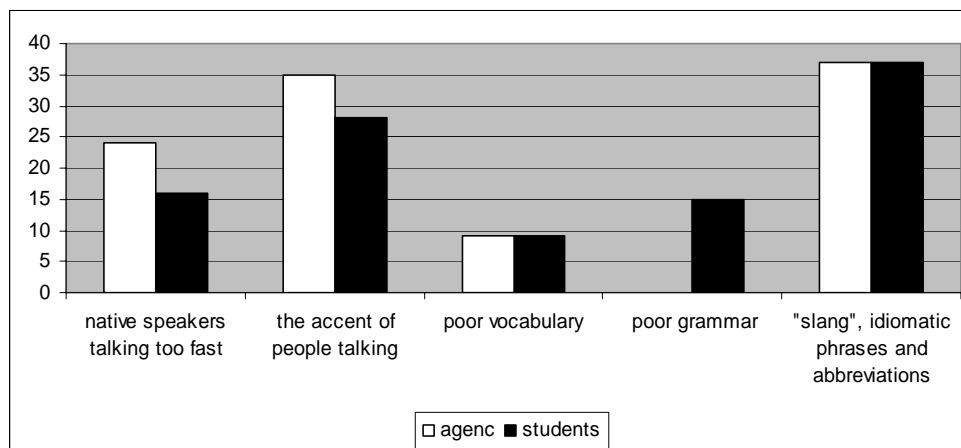
The most difficult part in talking in English for both students and employees are idiomatic phrases (39,44% and 41,47%). While speaking in English students have also difficulties in using time clauses (35,21%). In order to learn and understand idioms in English it is necessary to emphasize the importance of their usage in everyday communication.



**Chart 7: Perception of speaking skills**

The answers to the above mention question shows that students either speak English better then tourist agency employees, or they are less critical towards their speaking skills. Analyzing data presented in the Chart 6. we may realize that only 1,41% of students and 10,42% of tourist agency employees think that their knowledge of English is poor, on the other hand 14,58% of employees and only 5,63% of students perceive their knowledge of English as excellent. More than the half of the students value their speaking skills as very good and 31, 25 % of tourist agency employees state the same.

#### 5.4. Listening



**Chart 8: The biggest obstacles in understanding English when listening**

In understanding English the biggest obstacle for students and employees are 'slang', abbreviations, idiomatic phrases and the accents of people. Idioms and slang are special words and language used within a culture or group of people. If an idiomatic expression or slang becomes popular enough, it may spread across the country or even around the world. Language changes very quickly now because of TV and the Internet. Old slang may become outdated and be replaced by new words and phrases. When someone uses a new idiom or slang it can be difficult to understand what they mean. But if it is used by enough people, it may become part of common, everyday conversation. English as a Second Language (ESL) programs cannot adequately prepare students for the slang, idioms and colloquialisms that colour everyday speech in English speaking countries. It is also very difficult to teach them different accents of speaking.

According to Algren (2005) the best way to learn them is through everyday speech through colleges and universities which offer Host Family and Peer Mentoring programs.

#### 6. Conclusion

For the purposes of this research two sample groups have been chosen and the members of this groups use English language more often than an average person in Croatia.

The research has shown some predictable similarities among the two groups, such as Internet being the most used media in communicating in English language. It is not a surprising fact, since Internet has become such a huge source of easily accessible information. Students use it for finding demanding data that is sometimes not available in Croatian language or in libraries. Tourist agency employees use it for a quick, cheap and easy communication with business partners all over the world, as well as a handy source of information.

The obstacles in using English language are not very different among the two sample groups since most of the interviewed people see the idiomatic phrases and slang as the biggest problem in their communication. Public media such as TV, broadcasting, and widely spread mass culture has had a significant influence on both sample groups.

The main differences noticed in this research are the motives for using English language. The tourist agency employees mostly use English language for business purposes, which was the expected answer. Students use it predominantly for fun and entertainment. It seems that a great deal of students' knowledge of the English language is due to fun and entertainment,



which is a valuable support to the formal education. However, there is a potential danger that could undermine the academic knowledge which is crucial for the future young entrepreneurs, bankers, accountants, i.e. business generation of the present and future global economy. A powerful influence of the American lifestyle and American mass culture has been noticed among students. Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of the student population prefer American English over British English. Another conclusion can be derived from the valuation of the knowledge of the English language which shows that student population value their own knowledge better than tourist agents and are more critical towards the knowledge of English language of public figures in Croatia. These facts have several explanations: students either have a high level of knowledge of English language and a high level of self confidence, or they lack experience in the business world. People working in tourism are more often faced with the complex terminology from the financing, banking, or other business sectors. That might be the reason why they are more critical toward their knowledge of English language. On the other hand, students showed more criticism towards the knowledge of English among public figures (see appendix 1) that raises the possible question of criteria, which is a good theme for some other research.

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**Appendix 1.**

**Questionnaire**

AGEN	STUD	Quest	% AGENC	% STUD.
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**1. READING**

The most common media you read English texts:

a) books					4	5	a)	3,81%	4,76%
b) newspapers and magazines						4	b)	0,00%	3,81%
c) advertising material, flyers and leaflets					11	6	c)	10,48%	5,71%
d) instructions and operation manuals						4	d)	0,00%	3,81%
e) Internet (web, e-mail...)					90	86	e)	85,71%	81,90%
					105	105		100%	100%

**1.2. The reason/motive for reading in English**

a) education						18	a)		17,14%
b) fun (music, movies, fiction, Internet surfing)					20	44	b)	19,05%	41,90%
c) up to date with the latest news					13	18	c)	12,38%	17,14%
d) business correspondence					72	6	d)	68,57%	5,71%
e) professional literature						19	e)		18,10%
					105	105		100%	100%

**1.3. The grade of understanding the texts you read:**

a) 0-20%							a)		
b) 20-40%					2	1	b)	2,08%	1,41%
c) 40-60%					22	18	c)	20,83%	16,90%
d) 60-80%					42	38	d)	39,58%	36,62%
e) 80-100%					39	47	e)	37,50%	45,07%
					105	105		100%	100,00%

**1.4. The easiest texts you understand in English:**

a) song lyrics, movies subtitles and entertainment material					22	65	a)	20,83%	61,97%
b) material related to my work and profession					68	4	b)	64,58%	4,23%
c) advertising material					9	7	c)	8,33%	7,04%
d) "how to" material, instruction and operating manuals for products/machines					2	21	d)	2,08%	19,72%
e) correspondence in English with peers abroad					4	7	e)	4,17%	7,04%
					105	105		100%	100%

**1.5. Parts of English which you find the most difficult to understand**

a) statement						1	a)		1,41%
b) question							b)		
c) conditional clauses					31	15	c)	29,17%	14,08%
d) negation						4	d)		4,23%
e) idiomatic phrases					74	84	e)	70,83%	80,28%
					105	105		100%	100%

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**2. WRITING**

**2.1. Reasons for writing in English**

a) business						66	12	a)	62,50%	11,27%
b) education						13	38	b)	12,50%	36,62%
c) correspondence with peers, friends and family abroad						18	16	c)	16,67%	15,49%
d) translating						4	1	d)	4,17%	1,41%
e) hobby and fun						4	37	e)	4,17%	35,21%
						105	105		100,00%	100%

**2.2. Which media you most commonly use to write in English:**

a) letters ( business and private)							4	a)		4,23%
b) communication via e-mail						79	53	b)	75,00%	50,70%
c) hobby and fun (advertising, greeting cards and flyers)						15	13	c)	14,58%	12,68%
d) education and courses (notebooks, PowerPoint presentations, etc)						11	33	d)	10,42%	30,99%
e) mobile phone							1	e)		1,41%
						105	105		100%	100%

**2.3. The most difficult part in English is:**

a) spelling						11	12	a)	10,42%	11,27%
b) using tenses correctly						42	56	b)	39,58%	53,52%
c) negations and questions						0	1	c)		1,41%
d) pronouns and prepositions						31	9	d)	29,17%	8,45%
e) phrasal verbs						22	27	e)	20,83%	25,35%
						105	105		100,00%	100%

**2.4. Your texts in English are:**

a) clear and simple						55	71	a)	52,08%	67,61%
b) colorful and complex						22	16	b)	20,83%	15,49%
c) I use much "slang" and idiomatic phrases						13	3	c)	12,50%	2,82%
d) I "copy/paste"						11	10	d)	10,42%	9,86%
e) I use a lot of "cyber" language such as: B4N( by for now ); CUL8R(see you later); B/C ( because )						0	0			
B2B ( business to business)						4	4	e)	4,17%	4,23%
						105	105		100,00%	100%

**2.5. Where did you learn to write in English:**

a) formal education						59	84	a)	56,25%	80,28%
b) courses						18	6	b)	16,67%	5,63%
c) work						15	4	c)	14,58%	4,23%
d) traveling and living abroad						13	3	d)	12,50%	2,82%
e) SMS, chat, e-mail, forums, Facebook							7	e)		7,04%
						105	105		100,00%	100%

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### 3. SPEAKING

#### 3.1. Your language skills you would rate as:

a) poor					11	1	a)	10,42%	1,41%
b) average					11	13	b)	10,42%	12,68%
c) good					35	31	c)	33,33%	29,58%
d) very good					33	53	d)	31,25%	50,70%
e) excellent					15	6	e)	14,58%	5,63%
					105	105		100,00%	100%

#### 3.2. Your best chance to speak in English is:

a) at school/at work					70	35	a)	66,67%	33,80%
b) on vacations and business travels					24	12	b)	22,92%	11,27%
c) with friends and on parties					4	13	c)	4,17%	12,68%
d) with family and relatives from abroad					4	4	d)	4,17%	4,23%
e) through random meetings with tourists in my hometown					2	40	e)	2,08%	38,03%
					105	105		100,00%	100%

#### 3.3. When you speak in English your biggest problem is:

a) find appropriate words					7	9	a)	6,25%	8,45%
b) construct sentences correctly					31	13	b)	29,17%	12,68%
c) use time clauses					20	37	c)	18,75%	35,21%
d) pronounce words					4	4	d)	4,17%	4,23%
e) use idiomatic phrases					44	41	e)	41,67%	39,44%
					105	105		100,00%	100%

#### 3.4. In your opinion, the best way to improve your speaking skill is:

a) formal education in Croatia						15	a)		14,08%
b) English courses					9	19	b)	8,33%	18,31%
c) individual studying with audio lessons						7	c)		7,04%
d) communicating with business partners and friends from abroad					81	56	d)	77,08%	53,52%
e) working in an English speaking environment					15	7	e)	14,58%	7,04%
					105	105		100,00%	100%

#### 3.5. If you had to speak in front of an audience, you would choose:

a) participate in a debate					26	30	a)	25,00%	28,17%
b) present a subject I have prepared before					35	52	b)	33,33%	49,30%
c) take part in "impromptu" speech with short notice					7	3	c)	6,25%	2,82%
d) do a demonstration speech					11	12	d)	10,42%	11,27%
e) interpret someone else's text (poetry)					26	9	e)	25,00%	8,45%
					105	105		100,00%	100%

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**4. LISTENING**

4.1. The most frequent English you listen:

a) by television and audio equipment						63	68	a)	60,42%	64,79%
b) at work/school/college						31	28	b)	29,17%	26,76%
c) among friends/relatives/family						4	4	c)	4,17%	4,23%
d) on travels						4	1	d)	4,17%	1,41%
e) on Courses, seminars etc.						2	3	e)	2,08%	2,82%
						105	105		100,00%	100%

4.2. You prefer the English language spoken in:

a) Great Britain						72	13	a)	68,75%	12,68%
b) U.S.A.						33	78	b)	31,25%	74,65%
c) Australia							12	c)		11,27%
d) South Africa								d)		
e) countries in which English is not the native tongue							1	e)		1,41%
						105	105		100,00%	100%

4.3. You learned English listening through:

a) movies and music						39	64	a)	37,50%	60,56%
b) lectures at school and college						22	30	b)	20,83%	28,17%
c) colleagues and business partners						22	3	c)	20,83%	2,82%
d) English speaking friends and relatives						11	6	d)	10,42%	5,63%
e) lectures at English courses and seminars						11	3	e)	10,42%	2,82%
						105	105		100,00%	100%

4.4. Listening to English, your biggest obstacle is:

a) native speakers talking too fast						24	16	a)	22,92%	15,49%
b) the accent of the person talking						35	28	b)	33,33%	26,76%
c) poor vocabulary						9	9	c)	8,33%	8,45%
d) poor grammar						0	15	d)	0,00%	14,08%
e) "slang", idiomatic phrases and abbreviations						37	37	e)	35,42%	35,21%
						105	105		100%	100%

4.5. How would you rate the knowledge of English when listening to media and public people in your nation:

a) poor						2	37	a)	2,08%	35,21%
b) sufficient						44	40	b)	41,67%	38,03%
c) good						53	24	c)	50,00%	22,54%
d) very good						7	4	d)	6,25%	4,23%
e) excellent								e)		
						105	105		100%	100%