

BUILDING TOUR-GUIDING SKILLS DURING THE ESP COURSE. TOURISM STUDENTS' VISION OF THEIR POTENTIAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT. *Building Tour-Guiding Skills During the ESP Course. Tourism Students' Vision of Their Potential Professional Development.* Faced with an abundant array of professional paths to follow upon graduation, some of them not even in their own domain, many tourism students steer their future career towards tour-guiding. After all, being paid to travel the world and meet new people is not at all a bad start to the hospitality industry. However, a tour guide's role is a very complex one: from facilitating the transmission of cultural/ historical/geographical information to mediating communication in a pluricultural space; from physically leading the tourists' group through the meandering city streets to solving tourist-host linguistic misunderstandings, to name just a few. A plethora of communication and soft skills are involved in exercising this job and in preparing students to practice it to the highest standards possible. The current presentation endeavors to delineate the skills and activities an ESP teacher should focus on for best preparing the students for this job. In this respect, the teacher's perspective has been generously influenced by the students' own perceptions on their potential new career and the knowledge they extracted from their specialism courses.

Keywords: *tour guiding, mediating communication, facilitating pluricultural space, cultural ambassadors, communication and soft skills.*

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Introduction & Theoretical Background

The devastating aftermath of the Covid pandemic can still be felt today in the tourism sector across the world, and the vicinity of a terrible war near Romania's borders has not helped the local hospitality industry recover to its pre-pandemic levels. To illustrate this, we can mention that according to the OECD 2022 study of the tourism trends and policies, post-pandemic Romanian tourism followed global decreasing trends: from a 2019 pre-pandemic 3.0 % contribution to the GDP and a 6.3 % contribution to the total employment, figures fell to a 6.1 % contribution to the total workforce and a 61 % decrease in international arrivals at the borders in 2020 (OECD, 2022, p. 342). The silver lining to this situation is that the government, national tourism associations, companies and the larger public realized just how important tourism is for a nation's economy and how many jobs are tightly related to this sector. In a country that still has considerable untapped potential in this domain, the necessity to have well-trained and well-educated tour guides cannot be underestimated. This aspect is also doubled by the tourism students' manifest interest in following such a career, which leads both specialism teachers and specialized foreign language teachers to investigate how they can best prepare their students for such a career path and, in particular, how can *English for Tourism* courses help students get the precise skills and competencies they need to successfully navigate the labor market.

Although not realized by the larger public, the tour guide profession is an old one, even in ancient Greece the precursors of the tour guides leading people to temples and oracles were divided into two categories "the *Periegetai*, or 'leaders around' and the *Exegetai*, or 'explainers'. Herodotus writing around 490 BC, noted the gullibility of travelers and their exploitation by many clearly less than professional guides" (Jafari, 2000, p. 584). Since then, the arrival of the *Grand Tour* in the 17th and 18th century refined the duties of the guides that became almost like tutors taking care of the young aristocrats in their charge who completed their education by travelling abroad (*idem*). Today this career requires in many countries formal education and/ or training and a formal certification in many places. Jafar Jafari even mentions that the role is often associated with that of an entertainer or amateur at historic sites offering a "historical interpretation of the site while acting out roles in appropriate period costume" (Jafari, 2000, p. 584). The modern-day attractions' visitor management checklist sets for the tour guide an explanatory role (to provide information about the sight, the history of the place, the culture of the local population), but also a controlling role, like that of a warden whose task is to role model

responsible behavior, “controlling the behavior of tourists at the destination, [...] the guide may inform the visitor of expected modes of behavior and remove or chastise tourists who do not conform” (Holloway et al., 2009, p. 493). Next to this protective dimension towards the sight, tour guides also embody the role of leaders selecting the attractions for the tour, setting the timing for each visit. They also work as the unofficial public relations officers for the destination, enhancing the image of the attraction by delivering captivating spiels and thus raising the tourists’ awareness of the importance of the visited places (*idem*).

Specialist literature has underlined the multiple roles a tour guide has to embody nowadays. In the sphere of tour management, a guide can have a *leadership* role that is group focused which can be either *instrumental* like navigating, providing physical access, group organizing / management, or it can be social like *entertaining* the group, managing the group dynamics and tension. In the sphere of experience management, guides also can have a *mediatory* role facilitating engagement and learning on an individual level. This can also take two forms: *interactionary* which creates connections, interactions with the locals and other tourism specialists, or guides can also have a *communicative* role by giving information, interpreting, mentoring (Weiler, Black, 2015, p. 22). In the third sphere of destination or resource management guides can have interpretative or role-modelling roles that help promote sustainable tourism (Weiler, Black, 2015, p. 28). Studies also have noted that nowadays the main role of a tour guide has shifted from mere provider of information and geographical orientation to that of a mediator, interpreter of both culture and knowledge, facilitator or broker of intercultural communication.

The key roles played by guides fall into one of three spheres: instrumental (tour management), mediatory (experience management) and interpretive/sustainability (destination/resource management). Generally, there has been a shift from guides playing largely an instrumental role to playing multiple roles. [...] In virtually all guiding contexts, guides can mediate or broker visitors’ physical access, encounters, understanding and empathy [...]. The guide’s role as a mediator in each of these domains can be positive as well as negative; that is, the guide can facilitate but can also constrain access, encounters, understanding and empathy. (Weiler, Black, 2015, p. 42, 43)

The study proposed by this article revolves around the qualities, skills and competencies required from tour guides, abilities that can be practiced and improved during the specialized English courses offered at university. The skills brought forth by many studies as currently necessary during the recruitment process and while being employed are also the skills our tourism students have

indicated as the ones they would like to practice more during English courses. When provided with extensive lists of skills and activities that they had to choose from for classroom practice, the students' answers positively correlated with those proposed by tourism specialists, indicating the high level of awareness tourism students have in what concerns the requirements they would have to fulfill in their future career.

The skills needed for any job, especially when it comes to customer service domains can be divided into hard skills – specific to a certain job (also called the technical expertise), and soft skills or interpersonal skills that help any employee better relate to their employers, colleagues and customers, regardless of the professional domain (also called transferable skills). The modern tour guide must be a multi-skilled individual, capable of sharing information with the tourists in a captivating way, in creating a memorable holiday experience, thus ensuring the promotion of the destination they visit. Their “front-line staff” status, as “unofficial ambassadors of their countries, tourism companies, tourist destinations and employers” (Kapa et al., 2022, p. 1351) require an outstanding moral profile, revealed through qualities such as authenticity, trustworthiness, a sense of humor, a positive attitude, courtesy, professionalism, willingness to help the customers, as well as intellectual qualities – being knowledgeable about tourism and cultural matters, being open-minded, a life-long learner willing to improve and update one's information on a constant basis (*idem*). To such a moral and intellectual profile, one must add the ability to transmit effectively the above-mentioned information by using communication and intercultural communication skills, the capability to plan and organize efficiently tours, the ability to mediate work-related tense situations with/ between colleagues, hosts and tourists. These people skills can be considered to be at the foundation of excellent customer care, an essential part of tour guiding. Here we can quote the advice G.E. Mitchell gives tour operators and travel agencies:

A host who forms a good opinion of your community is the most valuable asset to your country. That opinion cannot be bought. It must be earned for outstanding service. [...] Satisfied customers return for repeat visits and recommend your services to their friends. Dissatisfied customers [...] generate bad publicity for the tour company and results in complaints and demands for refunds. (Mitchell, 2005, pp. 20, 21)

Guides and tourists alike usually belong to different cultural, social, religious and ethnic backgrounds which makes communication skills, both in their productive (speaking) and receptive (listening) forms essential for

“higher levels of tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty and positive word-of-mouth advertising” (Kapa et al., 2022, p. 1352). Since tour guides help build a positive destination image through the ways they manage to offer “an interpretation” of the place, and the manner in which they help erase differences and diffuse (potential) conflicts, reinforcing communication skills – the core of foreign language courses – is essential for them. Not only do they need to make themselves understood, to give explanations, to transmit information, to captivate audiences through exquisite speaking skills, but they also need to refine their listening skills for understanding requests, questions, foreign accents. Good customer relations are built on timely and effective feedback which in turn requires notable listening skills.

Important topics for their communication skills include appropriate vocabulary and idiom usage, using grammar correctly based on the story, using correct word order and conjunction, clear pronunciation of words and sentences, intonation in the presentation, punctuation in storytelling, fluent storytelling. (Chanwanakul, 2021, p. 2)

Considering the important part communication plays in this domain, one should not forget that beyond verbal communication, proficient guiding skills are also experts in non-verbal communication. Gestures, movement, body position, eye-contact, facial expression, are an essential part of oral interaction and most importantly, these vary across cultures, an aspect guides should not forget! (Department for Education and Skills, 2007, p. 26) Their usage in storytelling, an essential part of presentation skills, can make or break a guide’s success in captivating audiences, gaining their trust, eliciting empathy and sympathy for the history and life of the local community. For example, keeping in mind that a story can be said from three different positions: the speaker’s viewpoint, the audience’s viewpoint, and the neutral observer’s viewpoint (‘the fly on the wall’) can be a useful technique to master (Bradbury, 2006, p. 16). Knowing they can switch from one position to another, they can add depth to their storytelling, they can avoid confrontation or conflict which arises from cultural differences and diverse expectation horizons that tourists might have. Using such techniques and presentation skills helps tour guides create opportunities for interaction which can bridge cultural differences as illustrated in Figures 1 & 2.



1.



2.

Figures 1 & 2. Tour guide at Heidelberg Castle (Germany) dressed in period costume and presenting the history of the building & the lives of its rulers, from the point of view of a 17th century household chambermaid who knew both the public and the most intimate details regarding her masters' lives. A captivating, guided tour into a far-away epoch and land, warmly appreciated by a multicultural group of visitors from 10 different countries. (Photos from the personal archive)

The key role of both verbal and non-verbal communication abilities is also underlined by the training manuals tour guides receive. Next to these skills, leadership or group management skills, tour research, planning and design abilities are also necessary to ensure the success of the holiday experience. Moreover, guides need to handle well accidents and emergency situations even by improvising and being flexible (Confederation of Tourism and Hospitality, 2021, p. 71). The practice of these skills is less suited to language classes, yet effective communication and interpersonal capabilities are crucial for them. The afore-mentioned source also emphasizes the attentiveness guides should place on cultural sensitivity and intercultural awareness:

Different cultures may hold different views or interpretation of sites, historical events and customs. What may be funny and interesting to one group, may not be funny and interesting to another, due to past experiences, education, nationalities or even personalities. Historical events may also have different resonances for different people and 'facts' should be presented sensitively. (Confederation of Tourism and Hospitality, 2021, p. 79)

Tour guides' role as chief observers of tourism performance in a destination as local ambassadors, cultural brokers and even informal promotional agents has been continuously underlined in specialist literature: Aloudat et. al (2020), Woodward & Carnegie (2020), Donbak (2020). When mediating between ever changing groups of tourists with constantly different backgrounds and expectations, "all tours are a negotiation, continuously created and recreated" (Woodward & Carnegie, 2020, p. 70). In their *Tour Guiding Research. Insights, Issues and Implications* (2015), Weiler and Black have noted that today's tour

guides' most cherished role seems to be that of intercultural mediators / culture brokers that exhibit a role-model behavior that tourists are gently encouraged to follow. They can mediate empathy through storytelling, thus being able to touch upon sensitive, controversial issues otherwise "untouchable" like slavery, apartheid, climate change, poverty, xenophobia, discrimination. With a view to bridge cultural divides, in their interpretation techniques guides often may use local proverbs, analogies, metaphors, similes and humor, maybe even to support or gently criticize the destination's social/ political/ economic order. Noteworthy is the less discussed political role of a guide: by their choice of information, by their selection of what the tourists can see or experience or have access to, tour guides can shift between a positive to a negative interpretation and mediation of the destination.

The mediation itself comes in many shapes and sizes: "Social mediation involves acting as a go-between, linking visitors to the local community, facilitating access to tourist sites and ensuring that the host environment is non-threatening for the visitor, while cultural brokerage involves connecting visitors with host cultures on an intellectual (cognitive) level" (Weiler & Black, 2015, p. 32). Since mediation is not a block concept, the roles of the tour guides necessarily have to be multifaceted. Through their various tasks, guides can mediate physical access or encounters / interactions, but they can also broker understanding which means cultural access or empathy which refers to emotional access (*ibidem*, p. 34).

The mediator role of the guides is intimately connected with their communicative one, and interpretation is the main instrument guides use to bridge gaps between cultures. However, this tool involves more than just transmitting blunt information, because it is a process that harbors emotional and intellectual connections between tourists and the attraction or the local community, it "aims to reveal meaning and relationships rather than simply communicate factual information" (*ibidem*, p. 50). Tour guides are cosmopolitans par excellence, since they operate in multiple cultures. The techniques they use to transmit the meaning inherent in each resource can range from various non-verbal communication items (facial expression, gestures, etc.) to storytelling, drama performances and role play. All these help guides to build their intercultural skills and abilities:

In addition to being interpreters, guides must be effective intercultural communicators. To do so, guides require competence in languages, the ability to explain or interpret culture, an appreciation for cultural difference and for what is, and is not, appropriate to communicate; interest and a willingness to find a common ground, social-interpersonal competence such as respect; and enough pride to act as an ambassador for their culture. (Weiler & Black, 2015, p. 69)

These remarks bring forth the English teachers' duty to allocate time in their curriculum and classroom practice to building students' mediation and pluricultural repertoire, as they are generously described and provided by the *Common European Framework of References for Languages*³ (the upgraded 2020 edition) – the foreign language teachers' foremost guideline that sets the descriptors for the various levels of competence students can achieve. The CEFR recognizes the need for those engaged in mediation to have a well-developed emotional intelligence that would allow for empathy towards other viewpoints or emotional states. Learning how to cooperate, to diffuse delicate situations or even tensions, how to deal with “otherness”, how to identify similarities and difference and build on them is needed by all students nowadays, evermore so by those who will work in the hospitality industry. In tourism cross-linguistic interaction and mediation is mandatory, and this involves social, plurilingual and pluricultural competence as well:

“Mediating communication” aims to facilitate understanding and shape successful communication between users/ learners who may have individual, sociolinguistic or intellectual differences in standpoint. The mediator tries to have a positive influence on aspects of the dynamic relationship between all participants. [...] Mediating communications is thus primarily concerned with personal encounters. (CEFR, 2020, p. 91)

According to the CEFR oral mediation may be easily equated with interpretation in its multiple forms (simultaneous, consecutive, informal), and functions as one of the main goals of foreign language learning. Language specialists like Maria Stathopoulou (2015) also admit the necessity of mastering this ability in plurilinguistic and pluricultural milieus (most communities where tourism is developed can be said to be characterized by this cosmopolitan trait). When mediating, the guide uses more than just the multiple linguistic resources he/she has, cultural resources are also tapped into, because guides bring their own point of view to what they are mediating. It is not just simple translation from one language into another, the guide's “own voice” can be found in the spiels he/she delivers:

Retaining his/her own identity and participating at the same time in two cultures, the role of the mediator is to make the target audience understand information that otherwise would be impossible to understand. [...] The practice of mediation [...] is regarded as an important aspect of

³ The various types of mediation activities, concepts and strategies are described in the CEFR (2020) chapter 3.4. (pages 90-121), while the plurilingual and pluricultural competence is dealt with in chapter 4 (pages 123-128).

human intercultural communication. In today's multilingual and multicultural contexts, being able to cope with multiple intercultural experiences and to mediate effectively seem to be a prerequisite for individual's successful participation in them. (Stathopoulou, 2015, pp. 34, 39)

By all accounts, practicing presentation and storytelling, using mediation techniques to communicate effectively between cultures, practicing speaking and listening in a foreign language and enhancing students' intercultural awareness fall well within the scope of specialized language courses. This puts language teachers in a privileged position to help students prepare to become excellent tour guides.

The Study

The motivation to investigate the students' perceptions regarding the importance of developing tour-guiding skills during the 'English for Tourism' course stems first from the empiric, classroom observation of the students' constant interest in a sparse number of tourism jobs (among which, that of a tour guide) and from the limited characteristics of the Romanian tourism labor market. In the context of a highly dynamic and changeable society and economy, it only seems natural for an English tutor and for a tourism one to look into the precise skills that are required by the recruiters and the abilities' profile for the most sought-after jobs. Romania has not yet reached its full potential in developing tourism as one of its most important economic boosters, and one of the areas that still require well-trained, knowledgeable professionals is the tour-guiding domain. A large array of attractions, events, and destinations are in dire need of an attentive, careful, and up-to-date promotion that can be supplied only by well-educated and enthusiastic tour guides. Tapping into the students' needs for a specific set of abilities and activities that could be developed during the English course was a necessity considering the above-mentioned reasons.

Data Collection and Analysis

The present article uses as a starting point the results of a questionnaire that was sent to the 1st year students specializing in the Geography of Tourism (at the Faculty of Geography) and the 2nd year students specializing in Cultural

Tourism (at the Faculty of History) from Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The survey was sent online, using the Google Forms format, to the 127 students enrolled in the two faculties at the beginning of the academic year and received 81 responses. The study was carried out over a period of two weeks in March and April 2023 and comprised a quantitative questionnaire based on 13 multiple-choice questions and an open-ended query.

Sampling

According to the sociometric measurements of the target group, the overwhelming majority of the respondents are young freshmen aged 18-20 years old (75 students out of a total of 81 respondents) and just 6 of them are slightly older, aged 21-25 years old. Most respondents were female (57) and for the occupational status, 67 mentioned being unemployed, only 5 of them declared having a job and 9 mentioned working as a volunteer. When considering the ones who declared being employed, the biggest percentage (40%) indicated already working in tourism, 25% chose the educational system and 10 % the retail industry, the rest of them mentioning other domains such as: public administration, sport and a students' association. The results are not surprising as the survey was directed toward young students that have just entered the higher educational system and for the most part are busy attending courses and seminars, having little time for pursuing a job at this level. Their inclination for the tourism domain and for working with the customers (the retail industry) is nonetheless visible even now, at the start of their academic training.

Main Findings

1. Picking a Tourism job as both a passion and a source of material fulfillment

Despite the drawbacks that tourism as an industry suffered post-Covid, the current students' interest in pursuing a related job seems to be less affected. Asked what professional path they ideally expect to follow, half of respondents (42 out of 81) professed their passion for the domain, regardless of the job they could get. Almost 20% (16 students) pointed out that they would rather start their own business in Tourism at some point in the future, even though right now they would like to work in a more profitable domain. Only 8 students

mentioned they would work in Tourism provided they found a well-paid job. The remaining 15 students either preferred a job in the educational system teaching geography and/ or tourism (8 of them) or they simply mentioned preferring a lucrative job in any domain.

Given a wide array of 16 jobs in Tourism they could choose from in the future, the students' top three choices were: being a travel agent (option picked by 27 students out of 81 respondents), being a tour guide (option picked by 19 respondents) and being a flight attendant (10 respondents). The rest of the options, in decreasing order were: being a receptionist (7 students), being a tour operator (6), being a tourism consultant (5), being a holiday representative or a chef (2 each), or being a hotel entertainer, a TIC clerk or a sports instructor (1 each). All of these jobs involve considerable customer care abilities but for the first three choices, working with an international clientele, quite often in a foreign country and being up to date with the latest developments in the industry, is paramount. The ideal candidates for these top three jobs must have exquisite communication skills in their mother tongue and at least one foreign language, so the English teacher's role in better preparing the students for their career should not be underestimated.

Considering their second favorite professional option – becoming a tour guide – students motivated the appeal this job has mostly through their passion for travelling and the financial benefits it would bring. “Getting the chance to visit places otherwise unreachable to you” was picked by 48 students as their first reason and “Getting paid (accommodation, meals, some expense) to travel” was picked as the second option by 46 students. The third reason to choose this job was for the students the idea that they will get a “dynamic, flexible job that doesn't keep you stuck in an office” – option indicated by 39 students. As it can be noticed in Figure 3, the other reason to become a guide were in decreasing order: “Having the chance to work and live abroad” (32 students), “Having the chance to interact with diverse tourists from around the world” (23 students), “Having the chance to earn a lot of money” (22 students), “Being your own boss as an independent tour guide” (19 students) and “Having the chance to work in an international environment” (18 students). Not surprisingly, the results point toward young people's need to have financial support from a company in their endeavor to discover the world and learn more about destinations and attractions and toward Generation Z's flexible and dynamic attitude, ready to adapt easily to new countries, new people, new challenges.

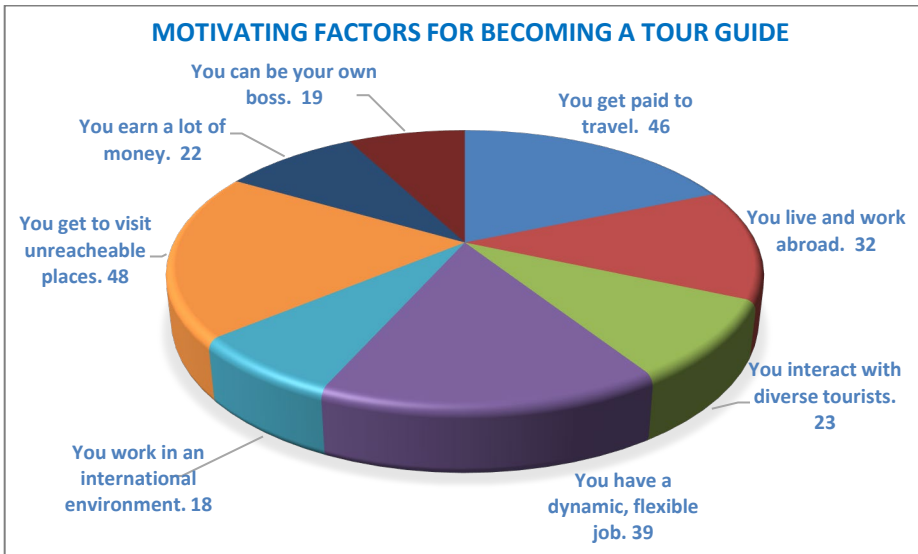


Fig. 3. Students' choices of motivating factors for becoming a tour guide. The figure shows how many of the total of 81 respondents picked a certain reason as their favorite top three ones.

2. The tour guide's "new" role as an intercultural mediator/destination ambassador

As discussed in the theoretical background, the roles a tour guide has to play are multiple, complex and interrelated. The students are also aware of the heterogenous set of skills they will have to master if they desire such a job. As illustrated in Figure 4, their top choices for the roles a tour guide has to embody, range from the very traditional "a presenter of detailed information about the attraction" picked by a large majority of students (62 out of 81), and that of "an entertainer" chosen by 51 students to a new role, in tune with the changing times, that of "an intercultural mediator between the local hosts and the (foreign) travelers, indicated by 38 students as being one of their top three choices. This choice points out the fact that students have become observant, attentive to the particulars of the society they live in. Having more access to information and foreign holidays than the previous generations, they are conscious of the cultural differences of the people they interact with. Understanding that a guide has to explain differences and make accessible and accepted by the tourists both new information about the attraction as well as information about the local customs, values, lifestyle is a great step forward toward bridging cultural gaps and silent conflicts.

The students pointed out in smaller numbers, that a guide also must be “a problem-solver” (33 students) as he/ she is the first one tourists would turn to for help. He/she must be today “a cultural ambassador for the attraction” (29 students) since on the effectiveness and attractiveness of the tours offered would depend the informal promotion of the attraction among other tourists by word-of-mouth. Last but not least, a guide needs to be “a daily program organizer” (28 students) as the route for the day, the attractions to be visited, the timing of the visits, the frequency of breaks, the places to stop for a meal or a comfort break, the rooming lists, etc. – all depend on the guides’ excellent organizational skills. What is surprising in the respondents’ answers is the fact that the students have noticed the latest changes in this job’s description parameters, and they have noticed how important the mediator role is in this world of heightened interconnectivity and globalization that often brings conflict and misunderstanding. The “soft power” type of promotion for an attraction that a guide performs by delivering an appropriate spiel, by drawing the tourists’ attention to the history, the culture, the values a certain place embodies can sometimes be more effective than an aggressive and repetitive tv campaign. The “personal touch” a guide offers to the experience of discovering a place may make most tourists repeat the visit or describe it in glorious terms to their relatives and acquaintances.

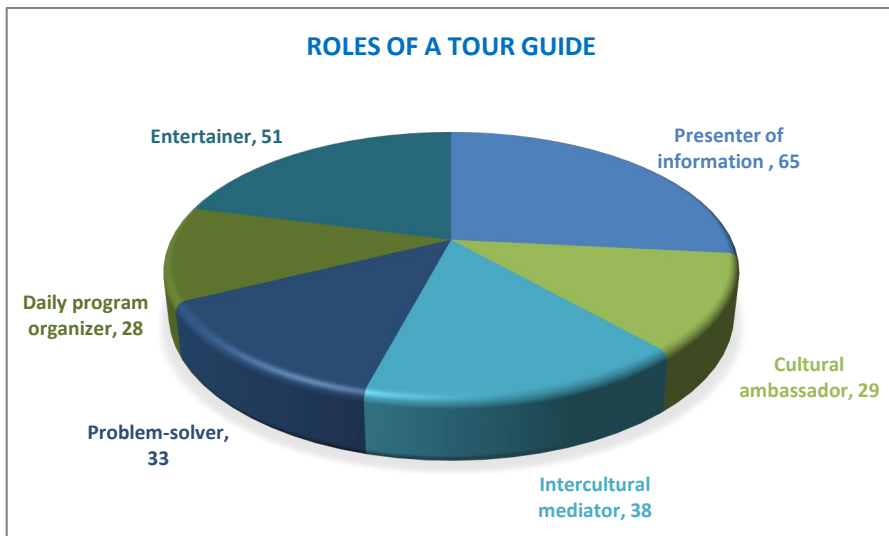


Fig. 4. The roles a tour guide has to embody according to the students. The figure shows how many of the total of 81 respondents picked a certain role as their favorite top three ones.

Knowing that such skillful guides need some precise qualities to perform the afore-mentioned roles, is important especially for recruiters, but students are well aware that having the right set of qualities and skills equals with success in finding the desired job. Asked which are the top five most important qualities a tour guide must have, students have indicated being “sociable/ friendly” as their first choice, picked by 85.2/%, being “communicative” was chosen by 70.4%, being “flexible/ open-minded” was preferred by 66.7 %. Being “knowledgeable about the attractions, local culture and people, the terminology to use” and “punctual” were their fourth and fifth options (chosen by 63% of the students, respectively 60.5% of them). Other options, in decreasing order of importance for the students were being “polite/ courteous”, being “charismatic/ charming”, being “presentable/ well-groomed”, “reliable/ dependable”, “entertaining/ artistic bent”, “physically fit, with a lot of stamina” and lastly, being “proactive”. These qualities that reveal an ideal portrait of a communicative and sociable tour guide correlate with the next findings regarding the skills that tour guides have to master to do their job to the best standards.

In determining how to modulate the teaching of specialized English to the particular necessities of the job market today, or even to those of a specific job students would like to have in the future, the foreign language tutor must know very well the duties that a tour guide (in this case) will have on his/her employment contract and tightly connected to these, the skills recruiters look for. As noted in the introduction, specialist literature points out an array of skills that fit very well the skills language courses have been developing for decades. Even though at the beginning of their education in the academia, and having relatively little experience with all the tourism stakeholders and their requirements, students have nevertheless correctly identified some of the most important skills they would need for becoming a tour guide as illustrated in Figure 5. Asked in the survey to pick their top five choices for the most important skills a guide must have, our tourism students have opted for the first place with an equal number of choices (61 students out of 81 respondents) “presentation skills including storytelling” and “communication skills for explaining the daily program, interacting with the locals, other experts and tourists”. Their second choice was “organizing skills” picked by a majority of 53 students (65.4% of respondents), then “foreign language skills” indicated by 51 students, “problem-solving skills” indicated by 44 students and “listening skills for better understanding and helping tourists” preferred by 34 students. Some of these are considered transversal skills that are useful in a plethora of domains, but some are clearly in the scope of the English courses at the university and can be easily practiced there.

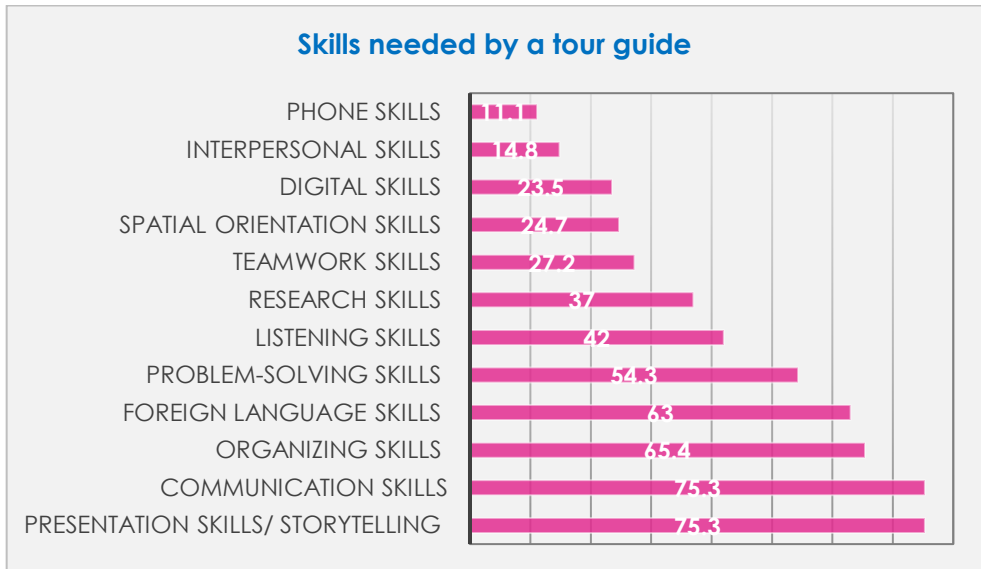


Fig. 5. The skills needed by tour guides in their daily work according to the students. The figure shows the percentage of students that picked a certain skill as being one of their top five ones.

The other skills offered by the survey's question and chosen to a lesser degree were, in decreasing numbers, "research skills for being up-to-date on information about attractions and local culture" (30 students), "teamwork skills" (22 students), "spatial orientation skills" (20 students), "digital skills for searching information online and liaising with the home company or other companies" (19 students), "interpersonal skills" (12 students), "phone skills" (9 students). According to specialist literature, all of these skills are needed on the ground, when conducting tours, however, just a few of these can be routinely practiced during the English course to ensure professional success later. As a result, the next questions of the survey dealt with the skills and activities that English courses should focus on to better equip the students with knowledge and abilities they would surely need in their profession.

3. The focus the *English for Tourism* course must place on fostering communication and mediation

The duty of any dedicated language teacher in the higher educational system is to better prepare the students for the specific domain they are willing to follow, and even to carefully arm these students with the precise skills they

will have to demonstrate during the recruitment process for a specific job. Just teaching them general English or even specialized terminology for a certain domain is not enough by today's standards of a highly competitive labor market. Therefore, considering the skills tour guides need for their job, and considering the limitations imposed by the particulars of a specialized English course, the next question of the survey dealt with the skills the "English for Tourism" course offered at Babeş-Bolyai University could focus on to make students ready to meet the demands of the tourism company managers.

Asked about the skills the specialized English course needs to focus on to better prepare them to be an ideal tour guide, students' top 5 options from a list of 8 skills were as follows: "speaking skills (for answering questions, explaining the daily program, interacting with the locals, other experts and tourists)" which was preferred by 81.5% of students as illustrated in Figure 6. Second came the "listening skills for understanding and identifying requests/problems / the need for specific information", picked by 69% of students. Their third option was "Public speaking/ presentation skills (e.g. for Power Point projects, storytelling)" – 67.9%. Next came "specialized terminology for various types of tours and attractions" which was indicated by 60.5% of students as being very useful and the fifth option, picked by 51.9% of students was "problem-solving skills". Obviously, according to these options and knowing the profile of an ideal guide, an English tutor's effort should be concentrated on developing the students' oral communication skills (for both reception and

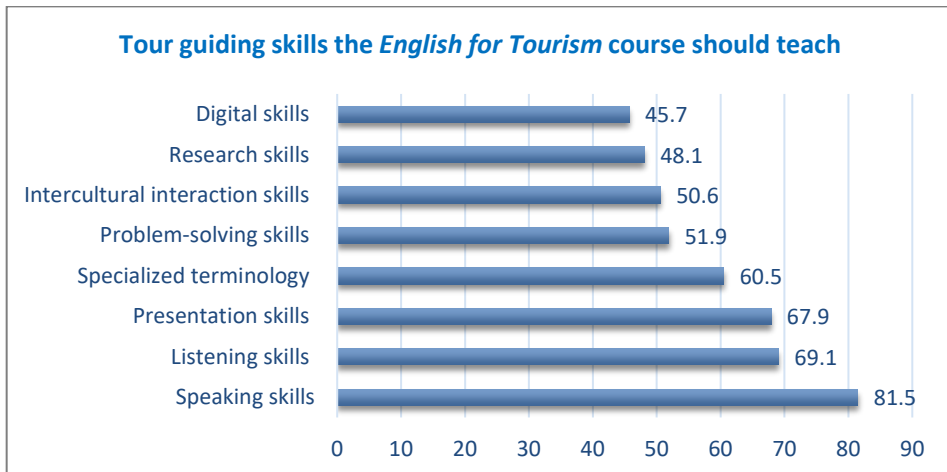


Fig. 6. Students' perception of the skills the English for Tourism course should help them acquire. The figure shows the percentage of students that picked a certain skill as being one of their top five ones.

production) that can help them better provide information and interact with guests and tourism experts. The other options, in decreasing order were: “intercultural awareness and intercultural interaction skills” (50.6%), “research skills for being up-to-date on information about attractions and local culture” (48.1%) and “digital skills for searching information online and liaising with the home company/ other companies” (45.7%). It is to be noted that most of these skills were picked by more than 50% of the respondents, the differences between results were narrow, indicating that all are considered to be important and useful for this specific line of work – tour guiding.

Another aspect that would help delineate the trajectory an English tutor would have to follow to give top-notch preparation for the students wanting to become tour guides refers to the actual activities that can be practiced during the practical courses to enhance the acquisition of the afore mentioned skills (see Figure 7). As illustrated in the next figure, Figure 7, students’ top five favorite activities during the English course, in view of the preparation for becoming a guide were: “reading texts about the differences between cultures and interacting with foreign tourists” preferred by 50 students out of 81 respondents; “speaking activities for practicing answering requests/ explaining problems/ suggesting solutions” (49 students); “going out in the city to actually practice presenting attractions in English (maybe in collaboration with other tourism professors)” (45 students mentioned this); “listening activities for understanding foreign accents” (43 students); “practicing more vocabulary exercises for specific terminology” (41 students).

What seems to be surprising here is their first choice that demonstrates interest not necessary in reading skills but in indirectly acquiring intercultural awareness and interaction skills. Throughout the English course so far, the students’ attention has been drawn repeatedly to the idea that they have to be careful when interacting with tourists coming from different countries, with a different culture and background and to the fact that for a career in tourism they need to research constantly the appropriate way to behave and talk to these guests. Their first choice to this particular survey question seems to indicate they have already internalized this requirement for better tour guiding. At the other end of the spectrum, it comes as no surprise that students would rather practice on site, outside, in the city, the attractions’ presentations as they would benefit from the feeling that everything “is for real” as they would say. The students’ other options for English course activities were in decreasing order: “listening activities for identifying tourists’ needs (requesting information, complaining, etc.)” picked by 39 students; “presenting a Power Point project about a favorite destination/attraction in front of the class” (32); “writing description of attractions; writing stories about (historical) events” (30); “role-play exercises

(tour guide-tourists)” (21); “online exercises that use both digital skills and communication skills” (21); “online search for specific information and discussing/ debating it with colleagues” (17); “creating personal websites for self-promotion as tour guide or for promoting personal tours” (14).

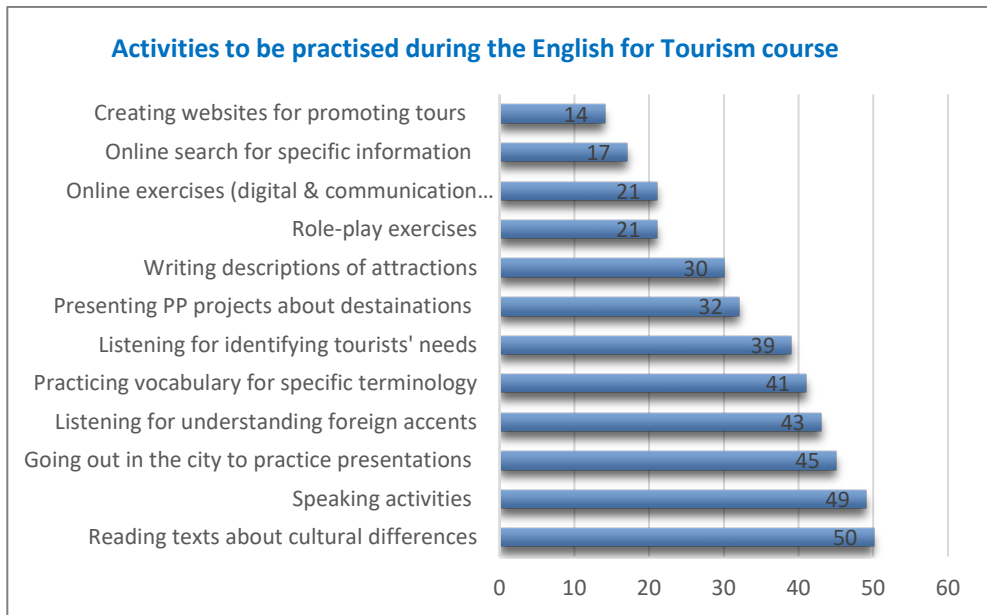


Fig. 7. Students’ perception of the activities the English for Tourism course should focus on to help them be better tour guides. The figure shows how many of the total of 81 respondents picked a certain classroom activity as their favorite top five ones.

Similar to the previous survey question’s results, the close number of respondents that picked their favorite five English classroom activities and the fact that more than half of the respondents indicated the same options, demonstrates the students’ predilection for practicing more oral communication and intercultural skills under different formats.

Asked in what way can the English course and the university in general better prepare them for becoming excellent tour guides, the students’ responses to the only open-ended, qualitative question were illustrative of the diverse points and tasks a specialized language course needs to tackle in order to provide the students with the best possible training in their domain. One student said: “I mean I think we can learn here how to be more charismatic and

how to entertain the tourists”. [student 1]⁴ Another one pointed out that: “The specialized English course of this faculty can help me greatly understand the terminology used in tourism, and also help me understand the people of foreign countries and their various cultures and beliefs”. [student 2] Others mentioned that:

I think that the English course/University could prepare me for the job by teaching me how to use proper terminology when presenting attractions, maybe trying some role play to get us more accommodated to the task of presenting an attraction, and also doing more speaking exercises to improve vocabulary. [student 3]

The English course can help me improve and prepare me for this job by learning [sic!] about cultural diversity and the differences around the world so there’s no cultural shock, by focusing more on speaking and spelling activities and I believe public speaking activities can also help us students, as many of us have a fear of public speaking. [student 4]

Conclusion

Being in the privileged position to open the door to a fascinating professional path for the students, both language professors and specialist ones should cooperate better to maximize the transmission of knowledge, specialized terminology, technical expertise as well as the soft skills young people need today. English teachers need to provide students with more opportunities to practice (on site) tour guiding skills during language courses, maybe even with the collaboration of specialism professors. Teachers need to collaborate better across domains and to reconsider their curriculum planning by keeping an eye on the requirements of the labor market. As far as students are concerned, they should practice more intercultural communication and presentation/ storytelling skills / activities if they desire to have a successful career in tour guiding. Their professional future will also benefit from having a better understanding of their mediator role in a cosmopolitan hospitality industry.

⁴ These quotes are taken verbatim from the answers provided by the students at the last survey question.

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