Developing Foreign Language Competencies of Tourism Industry Oriented Undergraduates in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to identify key obstacles to develop foreign language competencies of tourism industry oriented undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities. Sri Lanka is a number one tourist destination which attracts the tourists all over the world. Tourism in Sri Lanka, despite its benefits for the local economy, it is one of the main foreign income sources of the country. Sri Lankan graduates who involve in the tourism industry have to frequently deal with different foreign tourists. Language proficiency of these graduate employees plays a key role for both career development of them and productivity improvement of the industry. Universities which generates such graduates has a huge responsibility to develop foreign language competencies of their under graduates. For identifying the key obstacles the pragmatic research approach was followed by the researchers. All tourism industry oriented undergraduates of Sri Lankan universities constituted the population of the study. Study’s sample comprised randomly selected 50 tourism industry oriented undergraduates from the University of Sabargamuwa Sri Lanka. Both questionnaires and interviews were used as the data collection methods and key obstacles were determined through the factor analysis. Lack of materials such as text books and work books, less lecture hours and lower motivation for language learning were found as major obstacles to develop the foreign language competencies of tourism industry oriented undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities.

Key Words: Foreign Language Competency, Obstacles, Tourism Industry

Introduction

Learning another language gives the learner the ability to step inside the mind and context of that other culture. Without the ability to communicate and understand a culture on its own terms, true access to that culture is barred. It is evident that in the field of tourism and hospitality, beside the communicative language ability it is extremely important to also develop the intercultural competence, or the ability of successful communication between members of different cultures. In the process of learning a new language it is important to be aware of its cultural aspects, because the knowledge of other cultures helps a learner to learn a certain language and to assess cultural values of that language (Ellis, 2005; Williams and Burden, 1999, in Luka, 2007). It’s true that in tourist areas English may be spoken. However, even if the natives know some English, many are uncomfortable speaking it, particularly beyond their limited interactions with tourists. In the
increasingly mobile and multilingual Europe, knowledge of foreign languages plays an important and sometimes a decisive role in the employability of graduates. It is also important to state that in today's world of globalization, tourism and mobility have a significant and important role, where intercultural contacts contribute to the development of intercultural dialogue. (Joško Sindik, Nikolina Božinović, 2013)

Therefore as an additional Language competency they have to follow four course units in German language or Japanese language. Learning a foreign Language is another way of developing four competencies reading, listening, speaking and writing – in various contexts. It is also about communication on and insight into the way others live and their views on life, values and cultures, which might lead to greater awareness of one's own culture and to new opportunities for experiences. The Graduates of BSc in Tourism Management and Hospitality Management degree programs in Sri Lanka are besieged in Tourism job market. More than 50 Students are passed out from university year by year. Two foreign Languages such as German Language and Japanese Language are taught in this degree program. 95% Students are studying German as a foreign Language and only 5% Students are learning Japanese as this course was implemented since last year. But in this study finds the main obstacles of Foreign Language leaning in the above mentioned degree programs.

The Common European Framework divides learners into three broad divisions that can be divided into six levels. The CEFR describes what a learner is supposed to be able to do in reading, listening, speaking and writing at each level.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level Group</th>
<th>Level Group Name</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Level Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</table>
| A           | Basic User       | A1    | Breakthrough or beginner | • Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type.  
• Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has.  
• Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. |
| A2          | Way stage or elementary | | | • Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas |

of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment).

- Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters.
- Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B</th>
<th>Independent User</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>Threshold or intermediate</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Vantage or upper intermediate</td>
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</table>

- Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.
- Can deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken.
- Can produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest.
- Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C</th>
<th>Proficient User</th>
<th>C1</th>
<th>Effective Operational Proficiency or advanced</th>
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- Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization.
- Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party.
- Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
- Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning.
- Can express ideas fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions.
According to the Common European Framework, in this course unit focused B1 Level language competency in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening in the curriculum. But at the end of the course unit the students should be able to perform according to their learning outcomes. But through final result analysis shows the low language competencies at the end of their course unit. Therefore in this study finds the main obstacles with foreign language learning of the students of Tourism Management and Hospitality Management students at Sabaragamuwa University Sri Lanka.

**Objectives**

The Students of Tourism and Hospitality Management in the BSc Degree program also have to acquire theoretical and practical cultural knowledge, which can be gained through intercultural communication and the development of intercultural competence (Božinović, Friganović Sain and Perić, 2011). If we transfer this into the area of tourism and hospitality, and try to distinguish what is important to know about the language that hotel and restaurant employees use, we will soon realize that it is not only the knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary that they need to apply but they need to be aware of the importance of socio-cultural aspect as well. (Petrovska, 2010) Although their grammatical and their lexical competence of a foreign language may be outstanding it still can cause cultural misunderstanding, or a final failure in communication with native speakers.

With a view to more efficient development of tourism industry, an emphasis should be placed on the development of multilingual competence, which is crucial for entering into intercultural dialogue. Multilingualism, as a key aspect of the European language identity, allows for a high-quality information exchange and raising awareness of the importance of multilingual education not only in tourism domain, but also with regard to other aspects of target language community. The development of multilingual competence will undoubtedly contribute to the establishment of more...
efficient communication and opinion exchange among different peoples. (Joško Sindik, Nikolina Božinović, 2013)

The differences among the third and fourth year Hospitality and Management students are also considered in the context of the identification of the importance of foreign language skills in different institutions and organizations, such as hotels, restaurants, tourist boards, local government and public sector institutions that are responsible for the development of Sri Lanka as a tourist destination. In view of the aforementioned importance of foreign languages for a career in tourism, the objective of our research was to identify the importance of developing language competencies in the degree program of BSc in Tourism and Hospitality Management in Sri Lanka. Therefore in this study finds the average marks of the students between two semesters and through the identification of obstacles in the foreign Language process. Finally, our research aimed to find differences in the students’ perception of the obstacles of learning certain foreign languages. Our initial hypothesis was that there are so many obstacles in the foreign language learning such as Emotional obstacles, mental obstacles, Time-based obstacles, Organizational obstacles, Motivational obstacles, Lack of mental flexibility etc.

Literature review

The proficiency in multiple foreign languages is a basic assumption for successful communication in tourism. Intercultural skills and different know-how skills include the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other (Jøshko Sindik, Nikolina Božinović, 2013). It also helps develop cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies to contact those from other cultures. Those strategies should also include the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations as well as the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001)

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2005) communicative language competence is seen as a key competence in modern foreign language. (Joško Sindik, Nikolina Božinović, 2013) Lasagabaster (2008) points out that one of the most important issues in many European education systems is whether it is better to start foreign language teaching at an early age, or whether it is better to include content and language integrated learning at a later stage without establishing an early first contact with the foreign language. Language thus becomes the true manifestation of a culture and people’s value systems. Language is the most important medium of human communication, since through it we express information, ideas, emotions, attitudes and so many other things. (Petrovska, 2010)

The researchers Gage and Beliner (1992) defined, that "Learning is easiest, most meaningful, and most effective when it takes place in a non-threatening situation" (pp. 480-485). According to different studies in general education and in foreign language learning, the learning environment is another powerful influence on students' emotional arousal, and consequently on the effort exercised in classroom activities (Gläser-Zikuda and Järvelä, 2008; Meyer and Turner, 2006; Pekrun

2 http://focuslanguage.com/blog/
et al., 2002; Yan and Horwitz, 2008). However, there are numerous scholars who have acknowledged that foreign language learning motivation is emotionally driven (MacIntyre, 2002; Dörnyei, 2005; Aki, 2006; Garret and Young, 2009; Bown and White, 2010; Imai, 2010). Therefore we consider fear as an Emotional Language obstacle, as some students are very nervous in foreign language classes. Some students don’t want to say something stupid and make a fool. Unfortunately, learning a language almost guarantees that you will say something stupid. That really is okay, you just have to convince yourself that it is okay. Even the best language learners experience this. You learn from your mistakes. This is part of the process.³ Attention to emotions engendered in language learning can help overcome problems of demotivation created by fear or anger which can risk foreign language learners' potential. In addition, trying to evoke emotions that enhance learners' self-esteem and promote empathy can contribute to reenergizing students' motivational energy and facilitating language learning. (López, 2011)

According to Lopez’s findings he has found in his research that the emotions decreased students' participation in classes due to their fear of being laughed at by their peers or being negatively evaluated by teachers. The negative emotions more reported by participants of the study were: fear, worry, nervousness, sadness, anger, frustration, insecurity, anxiety and boredom. These negative emotions were originated by diverse situations such as: fear of being laughed at while participating in class, fear of being mocked by their peers, worry about not being able to understand teachers, sad about their lack of vocabulary, frustrated when not being able to speak fluently in class activities, angry at themselves when not performing as expected in class activities, feeling down when comparing with their advanced peers, angry at some teacher approaches and grading systems, bored with some learning activities, sad because of some family situations, and worry about the lack of financial resources some were experiencing. (López, 2011) In the process of learning a new language it is important to be aware of its cultural aspect(s), because the knowledge of other cultures helps a learner to learn a certain language and to assess cultural values of that language (Ellis, 2005; Williams and Burden, 1999, in Luka, 2007).

Increased globalization is forcing a growing number of business managers and employees to interact across linguistic boundaries (Lauring, 2008). Since language affects almost all aspects of everyday life, there needs more of a focus on communication barriers by researchers and practitioners engaged in international business and management (Henderson, 2005). Overall, previous studies suggest that language is more than just a communication tool. (Imberti, 2007; Lauring, 2008) Motivational psychology theories such as self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) attribution theory (Weiner, 1992), self-worth theory (Covington, 1998) and self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) conceive affectivity as the core of motivation behavior. Learners' behavior is determined by the need to protect their self-image and to preserve their self-worth, and is influenced by significant others and the socio-cultural context in which they live. Thus, motivation is powerfully influenced not only by learners' personalities but also by personal experiences, cognitive processes and the social context. (López, 2011) Maybe the students don't really want to learn another language or about another culture. Maybe some students don’t enjoy languages and study. Students' motivation may be increased by their desire to please the teacher or their parents because they like or appreciate them, or because they want to minimize their disapproval (Blumenfeld, 1992).

³ http://www.umich.edu/~lsastudy/foreignlang.html
(López, 2011) He shows a component refers to the teacher actively enhancing students' motivation through three different channels. They are modeling, task presentation and feedback. The modeling is the teachers as leaders in classroom spaces can directly develop students' motivation through their attitude and effort during classroom instruction. The task presentation is during the presentation of different activities and tasks during classroom instruction, teachers' ability to attract students' attention, state the purpose of an activity and suggest strategies that can be used for successful completion of the tasks can influence students' motivation by incrementing their interest and the effort made in those activities and the third one is the feedback. The feedback approach a teacher employs during classroom activities may enhance or hinder students' motivation. The students' interactions in class are modified because they see the teacher not as a facilitator but as an authority figure. (López, 2011)

**Methodology**

A qualitative study was designed since this approach was suitable to the purpose of this research. Qualitative methods allow us to gain a deep understanding of the motives behind human behavior (Barbour, 2008). Although presenting the 'real' truth is something that I consider we cannot fully accomplish, because we are all actors in the society in which we live and interact. (López, 2011) Qualitative interviews were used with randomly selected students as the main source of data.

The importance of knowledge of foreign languages was examined by a questionnaire that was designed by the authors of this paper as the quantitative data to examine the barriers to acquire a sound knowledge of foreign languages in specific areas of tourism. The Student’s marks sheets evaluation sheets in the two semesters and their performances in the oral tests and in the two academic semesters were used as the secondary data.

**Findings**

With a view to more efficient development of tourism industry, an emphasis should be placed on the development of multilingual competence, which is crucial for entering into intercultural dialogue. Multilingualism, as a key aspect of the European language identity, allows for a high-quality information exchange and raising awareness of the importance of multilingual education not only in tourism domain, but also with regard to other aspects of target language community. The development of multilingual competence will undoubtedly contribute to the establishment of more efficient communication and opinion exchange among different peoples. (Joško Sindik, Nikolina Božinović, 2013)

Language teachers know that not all students can achieve all goals and behavioral objectives to a desired level. Only a limited number of students meet the program requirements while many others may leave the program in the middle or lose their hopes. Such failures reduce student’s self-confidence since self-efficacy is formed by previous experience. (Bandura, 1977) Still some students, at the end of the course, may end up with increased self-confidence and positive attitude toward language learning even though they have not fully met the program requirements. Consequently, they most likely take up new learning situations with positive expectations. (Sultan, 2009) Therefore,
the program of studies needs to be adjusted in order to raise students’ awareness of the importance of multilingualism as earlier as possible. In this regard, in view of further development of tourism industry, it is necessary to promote the importance of integrating multilingual education in the teaching process which would include learning various foreign languages at an early age and which would undoubtedly contribute to more efficient communication and exchange of ideas among the participants in the educational process. (Joško Sindik, Nikolina Božinović, 2013)

Though the importance of foreign Language Learning is more admirable and there are some obstacles to identify as the difficulties of Language learning. As the major findings of this study five major obstacles are found in the learning of Foreign Language. They are Emotional Obstacles, Mental Obstacles, Motivational obstacles, Organizational obstacles and Time-based obstacles.

One of main barrier is the fear and mistrust that form the roots of our emotional barrier which stop us from communicating effectively with our co-workers. Most of the students feel of defeat worry or fear when they think of studying a language or when they first start. These emotional states will block them ability to learn a language, that’s for sure. Language learning is natural and should be somewhat easy for anyone to learn. The students need to feel this Moment and be positive. Think about the positives of learning. It’s interesting to learn a language and a culture, they meet new people and they can explore new opportunities. Most of the male students are having emotional obstacles with foreign language Learning. According to the cracked the areas of the brain responsible for language are over 17% larger in women than men, making them the well-hung studs in the horse stables of conversation. Not content to just be bigger, women’s brains also multi-task; processing language in both hemispheres while men generally keep the conversation going with just the dominant side of the brain. Usually the female students are maintaining their regular attendance until the course unit ends. But the male students are always weak in maintaining the attendance. Following figure shows the male and female difference in participating for the lectures.

![Chart Title](http://www.cracked.com/article_18529_6-absurd-gender-stereotypes-that-science-says-are-true_p2.html)

Figure 1:

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4 http://www.cracked.com/article_18529_6-absurd-gender-stereotypes-that-science-says-are-true_p2.html

Papers from the 7th Tourism Outlook Conference/Tropical Tourism Outlook Conference, 8-10 August 2014, Dambulla - Kandalama, Sri Lanka <http://geog.nau.edu/igust/srilanka2014/> (Copyright: CC-BY-NC-ND)
According to the data of figure 2, the 30% of students also believe, that they have no regular attendance to the language class. Most of the students are engaged in extracurricular activities. Most of the male students are very weak in regular attendance, when compared to the attendance of female students. But in last four weeks shows that they are maintaining better performance at the semester end, because the male students are afraid of written exams and continuous assessments. 6% male students are not interesting to learn foreign language and 18% students are having fear to speak in front of the class at the same 26% students have mistrust for language.

Student A - We are afraid to speak in German, because we

Student B - I do not care about grammar when I speak in mother tongue. But when I speak in German I am afraid that I do grammar mistakes and I speak wrong German, therefore I have a fear to speak in German

Mental obstacles are holding arbitrary thoughts about learning in general and learning for themselves specifically as immovable truths. These arbitrary thoughts we also call beliefs: they can completely paralyze a student and prevent fast systematic learning. But because they seem to be reality, we accept them unthinkingly and they are very difficult to change. They will surface as self-evident statement: I can’t learn, I can’t memorize, I’m stupid, I am wasting my time, I’m too old to learn a foreign language. I am unable to learn, I feel sad and angry at myself. Emotions regulate changes and adjustments students go through at university. The result of this developmental process may be positive or negative and its result depends on the ability students have to organize these changes into a positive psychosocial identity (Erickson, 1968). The formation of a positive identity is a task that should be supported not only by parents but also by teachers. Supporting students’ emotions in language learning classrooms can help students to cope with feelings inherent to language learning experiences and to the development of a positive attitude towards themselves as language learners. (López, 2011) Teachers need to develop strategies to make the learning environment a supportive one in which students feel confident and willing to participate.

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5 http://focuslanguage.com/blog/
According to the figure 3 it is proven that 54% students believe that German Grammar is so difficult, as the grammar forms are always appearing in both written and spoken language. But another 20% think the gender case with articles are difficult in the Language Learning, as the article plays an important role in the German Grammar, because each and every noun has a gender. Most world languages have nouns that are either masculine or feminine. German besides capitalizing all nouns goes them one better and adds a third gender: neuter. The masculine definite article (“the”) is der, feminine is die, and neuter is das. 10% of students believe that German is more difficult due to the Pronunciation. At the same time 16% students are having these all problems. These problems are coming clearly under the emotional obstacles.

According to the semester end examination curriculum program the students are having supplementary work load with doing presentations assignments and preparing for their written exams. Therefore they are always complaining that they do not have enough time to dedicate extra hours for another language. Because all degree programs are taught in English language and some students are having problems with English medium rather than German or Japanese. There are only two lecture hours allocated for the German for Tourism and Japanese for Tourism e the degree program. But perhaps the students can juggle a few responsibilities or trade-off some of that “wasted time” like if the students watch a lot of television, spending the time on face book or play video games or maybe they sleep a lot.

If the students can think that language learning is a positive choice in their life and that It’s Time! Think of it this way, learning another language is a healthy outlet for us. Here we can define such these obstacle are Time based Obstacles. According to one of the question of the given questionnaire, the data was found as follows. The most of the students think they have More Lecture Hours (MLH) per week; therefore they have not enough time to dedicate for the foreign language learning. Some Students think they have MCA. (More Continues Assessments) and the few students are thinking they have to engage with MECA (More Extra Curricular Activities). Only two lecture hours and two practical hours are allocated for week, but most of the students wish to have more lecture hours per week, as it is hard to grasp from the beginner’s level.
When it is focusing the development of language competencies Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking, it is very important to identify the organizational obstacles. Most of the Language teachers are complaining they do not have enough teaching materials such as lack of audio visual equipments, labs, text books library facilities to conduct a lecture. Therefore a lecture hall and a Language Lecturer are not enough to conduct a lecture. There should be a language oriented atmosphere class room .The tables and chairs should be moveable to makes the class room in to groups. The necessary electronic equipments are needed to do E-learning system. Language lab is also more precious to develop speaking and listening competencies. There will be a successful language lecture after solving these organizational obstacles. There isn’t a Language Lab and a Library with books for foreign Language Learners. Therefore in this study highlighted a question to ask which facility you need to develop your language skills. The Figure 5 explains theirs willingness and their need.

**Figure 4:**

**Figure 5:**

Why don’t you have enough time for Language Learning?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why don’t you have enough time for Language Learning?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MLH</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
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</table>

What do you need to develop your Language competencies?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you need to develop your Language competencies?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text books</td>
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<td>-------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
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</tbody>
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Series1
Most of the students have rated that they need a language lab for foreign Language Learning. But the researcher wants to observe that is it essential a language lab for foreign Language learning as the students wish. Modern language labs are known by many names, digital language lab, multimedia language lab, language media center and multimedia learning center to name but a few. There are Common components in a modern language lab.

- Teacher has a computer with appropriate software for conducting language exercises
- Teacher and students wear headsets that block outside sounds and disturbances
- Students have a media player/recorder for listening to audio and recording speech
- Teacher and student positions are connected via LAN (local area network), in some cases also via separate audio cabling
- A server computer or a separate storage device is often used to store lesson materials in a digital format

In an average foreign-language class, all students combined speak only 23.5% of the class time (DESI 2006). In a 45-minute long class 23.5% equals approximately 10 ½ minutes. As this number is the speaking time of all students put together, the time each student gets to practice speaking becomes less as class size is increased. How much speaking practice each student gets during a 45-minute foreign-language class, depending on class size:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>10 student class</th>
<th>30 student class</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional classroom</td>
<td>~1 minute</td>
<td>~21 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom with language lab</td>
<td>~11 minutes*</td>
<td>~11 minutes*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With a language lab, all students in the class can speak simultaneously without distracting each other regardless of the class size. Without a language lab, in a class of more than 10 students, each student gets less than one minute of speaking practice.⁶

**Conclusion**

As the conclusion of this study, the following can be found and suggested. Most of the female students are maintaining the regular attendance, as they are more interesting in foreign language learning than male learners. Therefore the most obstacles in the foreign language learning are found on the male minds, because most of the males have emotional obstacles like fear and mistrust and mental obstacles like negative thoughts and beliefs *I can’t and it is very difficult etc.* Therefore the teacher who starts teaching should be aware of and try to wash away the negative effects of their previous negative experience. Most of the male students are engaging with other extra activities, but at the end of the semester they are troubling with facing to foreign language exams. The regular attendance is 100% important to gain a proper knowledge and develop their language skills.

⁶ http://www.sanako.com/en-us/what-is-language-lab/
Therefore it is better to implement at least 80% attendance compulsory for sitting the written examination, because most of the students are having lot of errors with their spellings pronunciation and vocabulary. Sri Lanka as a south Asian country it is very rare to meet the European language speaking people in day today life. Therefore online radio and television programs are very useful to develop their language competencies. Fast Internet access or Wi-Fi access will be also more functional.

In addition, the teacher should encourage and even force their students to take part in activities since participation increases sense of belongingness. Before concluding of this study, the following can be suggested. Accordingly, the teacher should plan and conduct activities that may increase student’s interest and participation. Besides, in language learning, a short segment of intensive study may not claim effectiveness, while a long period of regular study, though not necessarily intensive, is seen to be more useful. Therefore, students should be informed about the importance about the foreign Language Learning to seek their ambition in the tourism and hospitality trade. Finally we can suggest that the implementation of language lab also more benefiters for developing all language competencies.

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