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Language travel demand: New insights into language tourists' perceptions

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Abstract

More and more students of English as a foreign language take part in study abroad (SA) programs in an English speaking country. The development of the learners' communicative competence has been largely examined, whereas their role as users of the services offered by language education providers in combination with the tourism industry has not been explored in depth. This paper will focus on the factors shaping language travellers' perceptions in terms of preferences, expectations, satisfaction and recommendations. The model depicted in this exploratory study can constitute the basis for empirical research on SA sojourners' perceptions to improve SA program design.

Keywords: Language tourism; study abroad; language travelers' perceptions

1. Introduction

Studying English as a foreign language in an English speaking country through study abroad (SA) programs has become in the last decades a common practice. This phenomenon can be examined from different perspectives. In terms of second language acquisition (SLA), the empirical evidence seems to suggest that the learners' communicative competence develops in every domain, but not always to a similar extent (Kinginger, 2013). While extensive research has been conducted in this area, the conceptualization of SA sojourners as language tourists who make use of tourist services and engage not only in language learning tasks but also in tourist activities has not raised much scholarly interest so far.

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Language tourism may be defined as "a tourist activity undertaken by those travelers (or educational tourists) taking a trip which includes at least an overnight stay in a destination outside their usual place of residence for less than a year and for whom language learning is a primary or secondary part of their trip" (Iglesias, 2014, p. 10). From this point of view, language students in SA contexts are part of the language tourism market system, and their profile, travel behavior, motivations and perceptions need to be analyzed as constituents of the demand. In this article SA sojourners' perceptions will be explored following the model of educational tourism market system devised by Ritchie (2003).

2. Language tourists' perceptions

In order to gain a better understanding of users' perceptions concerning their language travel experience from different perspectives, four areas will be looked at: their preferences, expectations, satisfaction and recommendations. Each one of these broad categories will be broken down into subcategories to create a taxonomy of aspects that need to be taken into account when analyzing language tourists' perceptions. Table 1 offers an overview.

Table 1. Demand: the language tourist's perceptions.

The language tourist: perceptions		
1. Preferences	1.1. Travel components	
	1.2. Language learning components	1.2.1. Educational input
		1.2.2. Language learning complements
		1.2.3. Learning styles
2. Expectations	2.1. Confirmation	
	2.2. Disconfirmation	2.2.1. Positive disconfirmation
		2.2.2. Negative disconfirmation
3. Satisfaction	3.1. Enhanced satisfaction	
	3.2. Optimal satisfaction	
	3.3. Dissatisfaction	
4. Recommendations	4.1. Customer feedback	
	4.2. References to prospective users	

The categorization of SA sojourners' perceptions will be presented in two separate subsections. The first will be concerned with language tourists' preferences, while expectations, satisfaction and recommendations will be dealt with in the second one.

2.1. Preferences

A detailed taxonomy of preferences with respect to every single constituent of the SA experience is a complex endeavor and should include those aspects related to the demand -i.e. the consumer- and the supply -i.e. the product. For practical reasons, this article will only focus on the preferred learning styles of SA sojourners. The travel components (transport, accommodation, catering and leisure) as well as those language learning components related to the educational input and the language learning complements will be described in future articles analyzing the language tourism product.

Table 2 shows a suggested classification of factors shaping learning preferences in terms of SLA based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the works of other authors.