

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# LANGUAGE TOURISM: CONCEPTUALIZATION AND STRATEGIC VALUE IN CONSOLIDATED DESTINATIONS

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In the current competitive tourism context, mature destinations face the challenge of developing new strategies that enable them to maintain their market share and increase the benefits of tourism. In addition to other diversification strategies, some consolidated destinations propose the development of tourism focused on language learning. Travelling with the aim of learning languages has become an increasingly frequent activity and it seems clear that its value as an economic resource should be recognised. However, beyond the extensive international research focused on the analysis of the relationship between language and economy, there are few studies on the link between language learning, tourism related to this activity and its economic and social impact on the destination.

### 1.OBJECTIVE

This research aims to demonstrate the profitability of language tourism from different perspectives as well as to show this form of tourism as an interesting strategy for diversification at traditional destinations, be it sun and beach, urban or cultural. The data offered in this study corroborates that it is an activity of great relevance and deserves special attention as it contributes to improve destination image and competitiveness.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

The research work has been divided into four sections in order to achieve the above objectives. The first section addresses the terminological confusion regarding language tourism and suggests a new approach for the definition of this typology of tourism. To this end, a detailed review of the research and technical reports on the concepts associated with this form of tourism has been conducted. Secondly, the different services offered by language centres teaching Spanish courses for foreigners (“ELE”) in Spain have been

analysed based on participant observation or direct consultations. Based on this information and following the model of Kotler and Armstrong (2013), the structure of elements and interactions that constitute the language tourism product has been described.

Hereafter, the relationship between the image of the destination and the experience of the language tourist has been analysed based on the proposal of Williams (2009). This model has been applied to language tourists' behaviour and to the factors that influence the formation of the destination image and the purchase decision. Finally, a comparison of the direct and indirect economic impact derived from this typology of tourism in different destinations has been made.

### 3. RESULTS

The term "language tourism", widely used by the institutions, has generated a strong division of opinion within the ELE industry due to its tourism perspective. Its detractors refuse to refer to students as tourists and demand the use of other terminology that implies a greater relationship with the education sector. Our work proposes the definition of language tourism by emphasizing the ultimate purpose of attending a Spanish course. Thus, the concept would refer to the activities carried out by a person who moves outside the borders of their country, in a period of duration greater than six days and less than a year, with the priority objective of attending a language course in the destination. This definition would solve many of the limitations of previous proposals as it covers a wide range of students, does not establish age ranges and does not differentiate between those who attend Spanish courses in private schools or in public centres and universities. In addition, it conforms to the description of tourists made by the UNWTO, but also takes into account academic activities. In our opinion, this definition will help overcome the reluctance of certain stakeholders in the industry.

The importance of the concept lies in the variety of elements that comprise it, since it includes not only physical goods, but also those considered intangible, as well as the possible combinations of all of them. Based on several authors' models (Levitt, 1969; Smith, 1994; Kotler and Armstrong, 2013, and Middleton *et al.*, 2009), the structure of the language tourism product is proposed. In this approach, three levels are differentiated. The tangible component of the tourism product is located in the centre of the circle surrounded by concentric circles that represent the complementary services, which are located further from the centre as the less tangible, controllable and measurable they are.

The reasons for boosting language tourism are varied. They are mainly based on its capacity to generate higher positive impacts on the destination than other types of tourism. On the one hand, its ability to create loyal tourists who recommend the destination among their relatives and friends; and on the other, the ability to generate direct and indirect economic benefits. In the first case, the experience of the language tourist in the destination would influence the destination image. A positive image would favour its selection as a destination and become a basic element to generate tourist loyalty, purchase repetition and recommendation to friends and family (Joppe *et al.*, 2001; Chi y Qu, 2008; Wang y Hsu, 2010).

The complexity of tourist behaviour is even deeper in the case of language tourists due to the undeniable emotional component associated with this type of tourism, not

only related to its specific characteristics but also to the length of the stay. The emotional connection with the destination is understandable as this visitor feels more as a resident than a tourist. In this context, the Williams (2009) model has been followed to describe the decision-making process undertaken by language tourists to select the destination as well as their overall experience. This experience will determine the image about the destination that the language tourist conveys. In addition, the tourist presence at that destination may become an attraction factor for family and friends. This demonstrates the role of the language tourist as a potential actor to promote the destination, which may be an interesting option to be considered by tourism managers in their expansion and growth strategies planning.

On the other hand, the direct and indirect economic impact of language tourism is higher in relative terms than the effect generated by other tourism typologies. However, the study of the economic impact of this tourism form has been scarcely studied in Spain. Three contributions have been reviewed in this research: Barra *et al.* (2019), García and Grasset (2018) and Martínez-Roget *et al.* (2013). All of them share the analysis of the direct and indirect economic impact derived from the expenditure made by language students, calculated from the cost of the courses, accommodation, cultural activities and other expenses incurred during their stay in our country. Similarly, these three investigations use the Input-Output methodology (Leontief, 1966) at different levels, namely local, regional and national. However, from a conceptual point of view, only the first of the cited works explicitly uses the term “language tourism”. The research work by Martínez-Roget *et al.* (2013) focuses on academic tourism, which would include both exchange students and Spanish language students studying at Galician universities. Finally, the work by García and Grasset (2018) assesses the economic impact of international students, including students from Erasmus exchange programs, Spanish Language and Culture courses, and Business Postgraduate courses, among others. Although the approach of the regional and national investigations differs from the vision of language tourism adopted in our research, it has been regarded convenient to draw the conclusions related to ELE students.

It seems clear that the number of language tourists still represents a very small percentage with respect to the total number of tourists but it shows a wide margin of growth. These studies show the significance of the economic impact derived from language tourism. However, its relevance in terms of average spending per tourist and average length of stay is more than notable. As an example, in Alicante, the language tourist’s average stay in the city is 62.51 days, which is much longer than 4.42 days for the traditional tourist, while the spending per tourist is almost 14 times higher than by the conventional tourist.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, language tourism, classified within educational tourism, has been scarcely analysed to date. The rejection to study the language teaching activity from the tourism point of view, leaving aside its cultural consideration, has generated controversy as well as a lack of understanding about the true objectives of the activity among the different actors involved. On the other hand, this divergence of approaches has resulted in the difficulty to define language tourism given the variety of nuances it admits. These

conditioning factors, together with the lack of homogeneous criteria to compile and provide updated figures, make it considerably difficult to study their evolution during these years and to compare destinations.

It has been proven that language tourism presents differentiating features, both in terms of its structure and the positive impact it has on the destinations where it is developed: tourists stays are longer and less seasonal; and the potential for influencing and attracting new tourists, not only language students, is significant. The higher level of spending and the variety of accommodation used, among many other aspects, make it a particularly interesting tourism product to be taken into consideration in the diversification strategies for consolidated destinations, be it sun and beach or associated with culture and heritage. In addition, the inclusion of this segment together with the traditional tourism typologies may facilitate a more efficient use of tourism resources. Therefore, we conclude that this form of tourism could become a powerful vector for the revitalization of certain mature destinations, at a time when it is essential to find effective key strategies to improve competitiveness in a complex and global market.