Exploring the link between pleasant tourist experiences and linguistic competence: A case study of the Gariep Dam, Free State

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Abstract

The success of any tourism business depends on the skill to communicate effectively with customers. Competence in English is no longer satisfactory in itself to find a job in the tourism industry. The aim of the study is to address the gap in research by investigating the interaction of language and tourist experiences by examining the association between pleasant tourist experiences and foreign language knowledge. For this purpose, the study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The efforts of tourism businesses and their preparedness to solve language barriers in the tourism industry were examined through semi-structured interviews with 15 tourism businesses inclusive of owners and managers. In addition to the qualitative data collected, quantitative data was obtained through 400 questionnaires from both domestic and international tourists at the Gariep Dam. The results suggest that despite the increase in foreign visitors, most tourism businesses are reluctant to appoint staff based on foreign language skills. The study concludes that a great number of tourists regard their English proficiency as poor which makes it difficult for them to communicate their required products and services clearly. This leads to misunderstandings and dissatisfaction tourists will leave a destination being frustrated. Although very few tourists indicated they have experienced language barriers and have complained about it to the manager, no perceptible solutions were put forward to resolve language barriers. In conclusion, the study urges tourism businesses to pay attention to the language issues and asserts that language barriers could be solved if larger tourism establishments have clear written language policies in place. Lastly, foreign language skills should also be considered as an employment criterion for employees in the tourism industry. Even though all staff have the right to communicate in the language they prefer for the purposes of job security, they need to learn new languages in order to perform their jobs optimally.

Keywords: Domestic tourist, international tourist, foreign languages, linguistic competence, Gariep Dam.

Introduction

In emerging economies, the tourism sector is regarded as a service sector with substantial potential to make contributions towards the economy generally and job creation specifically. In recent decades, many emerging economies especially in the developing world have resorted to tourism to supplement national incomes (Rogerson and Visser, 2004:26). South Africa is one such emerging economy in the developing world. However, against a backdrop of South Africa's peculiar history in which apartheid is the most notable aberration, apartheid's most noted impact on tourism was to dissuade international tourists from visiting the country and to give uneven access to citizens of the country to domestic tourist attractions based on race (Pluddemann, 1999: 328). However, South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 was a

watershed moment for the tourism sector because of the admittance of South Africa into the comity of nations a few years before the transition. As a result, the country became more accessible and appealing to international tourists and access for domestic tourists to some of the country's premier destinations and attractions became a norm. Before the democratic transition, the country had an insignificant number of international visitors. After the transition however, the government recognised that the tourism sector could contribute to economic and social empowerment and upliftment. In pursuit of this strategic national socioeconomic goal, Government spent vast amounts of resources to improve South Africa's tourism sector marketing infrastructure. This marketing infrastructure targeted both international and domestic tourists.

South Africa has done exceptionally well in terms of tourism to such an extent that currently, tourism contributes 10% to GDP and has created 1, 5 million job opportunities (Sawubona, 2016). The relevance of interrogating the intersections of language, hospitality industry and the tourism sector specifically, is to be found in the recognition that language is a resource that can, and often does, impact on optimisation of messaging, products and experiences. The tourism industry is made up of six main sectors namely: Accommodation/hospitality, Attractions, Food and Beverage, Transport, Meetings, Exhibitions and Special Events (MESE) and Tourism Services (Tourism Tattler, 2016). Each main sector consists of different sub-sectors and the accommodation sub-sector such as hotels, guesthouses, B&B and lodges will be included for the purposes of this study.

Tourism and language are interrelated and it is therefore important to study the nature of the relationship that exists between the two disciplines. Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and tourism is thus the purpose of this study. Most research that has been conducted on sociology and politics of language in a post democratic South Africa has focused mainly on the education sector because of the critical role of the sector in society. Researchers have given very little attention to the impact of language on the services sectors in South Africa such as tourism. For the effectiveness of the tourism industry, businesses depend on communication to establish strong relations with tourists (Manaliyo, 2009:11).

To sell and advertise tourism products to non-English-speaking tourists in South Africa there is a necessity for a *lingua franca* between the hosts and non-English speaking tourists to reduce language obstacles (Manaliyo, 2009:10). Research by Manaliyo (2009:10) states that despite the language barriers faced by non-English speaking tourists who frequently visit South Africa they still return to the destination each year. According to Manaliyo (2009:10) most tourists, visiting South Africa from English speaking countries travel on their own whilst almost every tourist from non-English speaking markets such as France, China, and Germany take organised trips. Language barriers were pointed out to be the primary motivation why tourists from non-English speaking countries choose organized tours (Rogerson & Visser, 2007b:44). English still dominates the tourism industry in terms of public signage and promotional material (Nortjé, 2015). Research has shown that in the tourism industry foreign languages are predominantly used by tour operators and travel agencies unlike the accommodation and food and beverage sector which mainly make use of English as medium of communication (Nortjé, 2015).

Cañas & Pérez (2014:299) claim that if a company has more access to foreign language skills, they are better prepared to attend to customers' diverse needs. In many instances being multilingual is regarded as an advantage when applying for a job in the tourism industry and a bonus when individuals are equipped with foreign language skills. The interaction between the client and the service provider is critical. The article argues that employees in the tourism industry are not expected to be fully conversant in a foreign language but should at least be able to construct basic expressions in the language of the tourists so as to satisfy the language needs of tourists.

Literature Review

Customer satisfaction

'Satisfaction' is defined as "the degree to which one believes that an experience evokes positive feelings" (Oliver & Rust, 1994:112). Several authors have contended that "satisfaction was considered as a collective evaluation of individual experiences" (Kyle, Lee & Scoot, 2012:756). This study contributes to the literature by providing an incorporating vision of the interactions that exists between the role of language and customer satisfaction. Truong and Foster (2006:843) define customer satisfaction in the tourism industry as the "conformity" between tourist expectations and the character of the tourist destination. Indisputably, satisfaction is one of the most appropriate variables when examining tourist behaviour, as it impacts on the selection of a destination, the consumption of services and products, and the decision to return (Jang & Feng, 2007:582; Kodak & Rimmington; 2000:263). For this reason, tourist satisfaction has been a priority subject of research in recent years (Kodak, Bigné & Andreu, 2003:191; Tsiotsou & Vasiotsi, 2006:70). Diverse understandings or theories have studied these variables in the literature of tourism. Prominent amongst them is the disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980:47; Oliver & Disarbo, 1988:497) which states that tourists have previous expectations before receiving the service which they compare with the perceived outcome of the service. In a sense we can thus relate to the works of Baksy & Labagh (1992:33) Bigné & Andreu, 2004, Chon (1989:10), Chon & Olsen (1991:12) or Pizam & Milamn (1993:199), amongst others.

A great deal of research has focused on the positive experiences of tourists, but very little research conducted has focused on the contributing factors to those positive experiences. Taking the contrary view Peter & Olson (1996:10) have argued that the level of satisfaction with a specific holiday is the outcome of different influences, which are generally measured as a comparison between the tourist's perception of the products, and services he or she receives, and the expectations generated before and during the trip. Michaela (2014:32) has noted that consumer satisfaction is not universally compelling, and that researchers over the years concluded that people recognize and assess quality service satisfaction differently, based on: cultural background, previous experiences and other outside influences that the tourism business has no control over. Michaela (2014:32) confirms that tourists coming from developed countries have higher expectations of quality services at a tourism business, compared to those from developing countries that have lower expectations regarding service delivery. Several authors have contended that positive experience is what drives satisfaction for a tourist and it is one of the most relevant areas of research for the tourism industry (Petrick 2003:252; Prebensen, 2004:135) as contented tourists tend to communicate their positive experience to others and to replicate their visit (Alén, Rodriguez & Friaz, 2007:155; Kozak & Rimmington 2000:263; Pizam 1994:233; Opperman, 2000:111).

Michaela (2014:33) argues that for tourists to return, the services should exceed their expectations, which will lead to satisfaction. In addition, Michaela (2014:33) believes that it is more profitable for tourists to return rather than to attract new ones because the satisfied tourist will be loyal customers and "free spokespersons" for the business. Yao Yuan (2013:10) has noted that the literature on tourist satisfaction was originally based on the larger concept of customer satisfaction found in general marketing contexts. Oliver's (1980) Expectancy Disconfirmation Model is one of the most commonly adopted approaches for understanding consumer satisfaction in literature (Hsu, Chiu, & Ju, 2004:768; Kivela, Inbakaran, & Reece, 1999:208; Montfort, Masurel, & Rijin, 2006:83; Phillips & Baumgatner, 2002:245; Santos & Boote, 2003:143; Yen & Lu, 2008:130; Yi, 1990:70). The "theory proposed that consumer satisfaction is a function of expectation and expectancy disconfirmation" (Oliver, 1980:460). "In the purchasing process, consumers compared the actual performance with their expectation of a product, and the gap between the two determines satisfaction" (Oliver, 1980:460). It is evident that language has never been considered by researchers as a

contributing factor to tourist satisfaction. This article therefore argues that language as such, plays a key role during host and tourist encounters which may lead to satisfactory tourist experiences.

Customer loyalty

The work of many researchers suggests that generating customer loyalty is crucial to sustain tourist destinations (Prayag & Ryan 2012:343; Taplin 2013:41). Oliver (1997:213) "defines customer loyalty as a deeply held commitment to re-purchase or re-patronize a chosen product/service consistently in the future, thereby initiating repetitive same brand or same brand set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour". He further builds on this definition and states that customer loyalty is "a deeply held commitment to re-buy and re-patronize a preferred product or service constantly in the future …" (Oliver 1999: 34). The research conducted by Albayrak and Caber (2015:01) defines customer loyalty as the probability of repeat visits, referring friends and family, being a strong spokesperson and supporting organisational publicity. Likewise, when customers have confirmed their expectation that a website is reliable, they will be more interested to repurchase from the same website. In addition, they argue that especially in the tourism industry it is important to have "loyal" customers because they offer a huge competitive advantage in the international market (Albayrak & Caber, 2015:01). Lee and Lin (2005:163) proposed that expectation encourages online purchasing which influences customer attitudes towards purchasing from e-retailers. "Loyalty contributes to the on-going process of continuing and maintaining an appreciated and important relationship that has been created by trust" (Chaudhuri & Holbrook 2001:44).

If tourists received excellent service and are treated well, they will definitely return to the destination and spread positive word of mouth to their friends and family. This supports the findings of many researchers who believe loyal customers are keen to recommend their service provider and spread positive word of mouth (Akamavi et al. 2015:38; Kumar, Pozza, and Ganesh 2013:249; Magnini, Crotts, and Zehrer 2011:539; Taplin 2013:42; Žabkar, Brenčič, and Dmitrović 2010:540). Language generates customers' satisfaction (Crystal, 1989:78), which will also lead to competitiveness which cannot occur without the skill to handle customers well. This simply means that if tourists get assistance in their language, they will feel at home and will not hesitate to return to the same destination again. Such tourism businesses have a competitive advantage over other businesses and will attract more tourists than other businesses.

Language skills contributes to positive tourist experiences

Crystal (1989:78) has noted that language is a significant contributing factor to customer satisfaction. The role of language in tourism businesses has not yet been fully investigated, however, it can be concluded that language is crucial to the creation of networks and to the tourism organisational management. "The proficiency in multiple foreign languages is a basic assumption for successful communication in tourism" (Crystal, 1989:78). "Any foreign language can be used in business depending on customers and the nature of the business and market involved" (Crystal, 1989:78). "Foreign language plays a role in supporting customers who face communication obstacles especially in terms of communication with multi-national businesses and companies outside a country" (Cotton et al. 2007:88).

"Understanding the type of language required and the degree to which understanding of it is required is an important managerial skill" (Thitthongkam, 2010:221). Foreign language skills in tourism businesses should be an added advantage for employees to meet the requirements so as to be permanently employed in the tourism industry. On the other side of the coin, knowledge of foreign language skills in the tourism industry can be used as a selection criterion for employees to qualify for promotion in tourism businesses. For the purposes of this

study foreign languages are regarded as languages that are not spoken in South Africa languages (Bailey, 2014: Internet). "Overlooking the important roles of language may lead to loss of resources and limitations to tourism's organisational and managerial development due to the lack of communication and knowledge sharing" (Lauring, 2007: 255). Apart from the benefits for employees, customers can also expect to benefit from sophisticated language use.

In tourism businesses it not necessary for employers to master a foreign language completely but they should rather be conversant in the basics of that language when welcoming tourists at a destination, a simple greeting such as 'hello', 'how are you'. "are you enjoying your stay" can bring a smile to your face when in a foreign country (Nortjé, 2015: Internet). Tourists are helped to find the necessary products or services. For instance, with productive foreign language communication, customers get what they order. Tourists from non-English speaking countries such as Germany and Italy might have very limited knowledge of the English and very often their poor pronunciation of English might be mistaken for other words which might be offensive to the listeners, often resulting in conflict.

Promoting intercultural communication

"Tourism literature and intercultural communication literature commonly regard language as a constraining element for intercultural communication" (Edgell, & Haenisch, 1995; Gmelch, 1997:477; Kim, 2004:201). "In particular, the language gap in overseas travel has been studied as a constraint for intercultural communication between visitors and hosts (Cohen, 1989:180; Edgell & Haenisch, 1995:88), and it has also been interpreted as an obstacle in the approach to learning about the local culture" (Gmelch, 1997:79). "The research that has studied guests and hosts' intercultural communication through perceptions of tourists/visitors found that they experience role conflicts, quietness, and defensiveness during their international visits because of cultural differences, including lack of language fluency" (Cushner & Karim, 2004:300; Hottola, 2004:449; Yoo & Sohn, 2003:57). Foreign language skills play a role as a means to understand other cultures (Walters, 1990). It has become evident that acknowledging the diverse cultures of tourists is very valuable in running a tourism businesses. "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" (Sindik, & Božinović, 2013:123). These developments also support Menike and Pathmalatha's (2015:79) claim that access to intercultural skills also helps "develop cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies to contact those from other cultures".

Bobanović (2013:3) reports similar results and suggest that "intercultural competence is generally referred to as a skill to see and appreciate differences in one's own and other peoples' culture, to accept them and react accordingly (in conversation and behaviour, treating people in a way which is not offending or insulting to the members of other cultures". A recent study by Menike and Pathmalatha (2015:79) provides evidence that "learning another language gives the learner the ability to step inside the mind and context of that other culture". They further argued that without the ability to communicate and understand a culture on its own terms, "true access to that culture is barred" (Menike & Pathmalatha, 2015:79). Sindik and Božinović, (2013:01) clearly points out that it is also important to mention that in today's globalised world, tourism and movement have a significant and important role to play, where intercultural interactions contribute to the development of intercultural dialogue.

It is evident that learning a new language cannot be done without considering the cultural part. "Working in a culturally diverse environment is always a challenge, so it is not surprising that the lack of cultural knowledge and language ability, as well as a difficulty to adjust to the local culture, are major contributing factors" (Briscoe & Schuler; 2004; Dowling & Welch, 2005; Internet; Ko & Yang, 2011:10). The purpose of studying other languages is to prepare graduates to function in a multilingual environment and in global business. Graduates need

foreign languages to communicate with people of various nationalities (Sangpikul, 2009:09). "In the global working environment in which the tourism industry operates, competence in a foreign language is highly valued (Leslie & Russell, 2005:198), and should hence be included as one of the most important outcomes of a tourism-training program".

The role of language in the tourism industry

Linguistic skill has become an asset in the tourism industry-not only focusing on the advertising material but also in establishing good relations with the tourists (Nortjé, 2015). The "role of language in tourism businesses has not yet to be fully investigated, however, it can be concluded that language is crucial to the creation of network and to the tourism organisational management. It is an element of the effective organisational management" (Bonache & Brewster; 2001:12; Lauring, 2007:118). By acknowledging the importance of language, tourism businesses will flourish as result of recurring business and hands-on managerial structures that acknowledge tourist cultures. To execute the task, tourism organisations need to communicate across linguistic boundaries (Dowling & Welch, 2004; Lauring, 2007). Lauring (2007:118) states that "successful tourism organisational management relates to the ability to manage the communication crossing language". It is fundamental for staff in the tourism industry to communicate with tourists in their own languages to flourish in the industry and also to ensure customer satisfaction (Nortjé, 2015). During the past years, the role of language has advanced from a developing concept to a progressively universal function in tourism business organisations. Language is seen as being common to the tourism businesses. The success of tourism is centred on the ability to interact successfully with overseas tourists or "customers, suppliers, and government officials" (Sizoo & Serrie, 2009).

Research such as that by Luka & Donina (2012:87) and Zehrer & Mössenlechner, (2009:268) revealed that foreign language proficiency, communication and decision-making abilities are regarded as essential skills to be employed in the tourism and hospitality industry. Reinstein (2016) argues that language remains a main barrier particularly for Chinese tourists visiting South Africa. Bobanović, (2013) proposed that tourism businesses need to understand the role of foreign languages as it will be advantageous to them to assist in the understanding of conversations, communications and consultations between practitioners and foreign customers. Rasouli and others (2008:425) argue that practitioners can operate businesses more successfully when considering the use foreign languages. Foreign language skills are essential when communicating with international tourists and very little research has focused on this aspect.

Problem statement

Tourism connects people from diverse language backgrounds around the world. Research has shown that most of South Africa's international visitors come from non-English speaking countries such as France, Germany, Italy and China. The interplay that exists between language and tourism has been neglected by researchers and has not been fully investigated. Notwithstanding, the central role of communication during host and tourist encounters, there is a gap of research-based insights on how the South African tourism industry accommodates the language needs of non-English speaking tourists. It is essential to investigate if customers are struggling to communicate their needs or even get required information concerning tourism products or services in South Africa.

The study acknowledges that this study would permit the researcher to understand the extent of the commitment of tourism businesses to accommodate local and foreign languages. The aim of the study is to thus address this gap in research that would analyse the interplay between hosts and tourists by examining which group should be bilingual so as to communicate effectively to satisfy the needs of tourists. Consequently, the research will also analyse the languages used in both print and electronic marketing material which a very

significant tool is used to sell their products to tourists. Marketing material is read by a diverse audience and very often is the only link tourists have with a destination and if it is not convincing enough, tourists will choose to go to other destinations. The study will therefore investigate whether the Gariep dam as a tourist destination considers language as an important contributing factor to positive tourist experiences.

Research methodology

The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). Qualitative methods allow us to gain a deep understanding of the motives behind human behaviour (Barbour, 2008:08) and is thus important to use in such studies.

Instrument

The important link between pleasant tourist experiences and linguistic competence was examined by qualitative interviews as the main source of data. The interviews were structured in two ways: firstly, face-to-face interviews with tourism businesses (hostels or guesthouses) and secondly, semi-structured interviews with both domestic and international tourists were conducted in the Gariep Dam. The self-administered questionnaire for tourists was divided into 30 structured questions. The first 10 questions requested general information from tourists such as home language and how frequently they visit the Free State. The next set of questions from number 10 to 20 focused on the linguistic competence of tourists where they were expected to evaluate their competencies in English. Secondly, the usefulness of translation services in the Free State if any are available, and lastly, the steps taken by the manager to resolve a communication breakdown were investigated. In the last set of questions from numbers 21 to 30 tourists were expected to state if language barriers had spoilt their tourist experience in the Free State, elaborate on the usefulness of different language usage in marketing material and public signage, and lastly state what they may have lost as a result of a language barrier.

The second questionnaire for the 15 accommodation-providing establishments was a semi-structured questionnaire, divided into four sections of questions, which examined the importance of knowledge of languages in the tourism industry. The first section of the questionnaire was based on background information where participants had to respond to the number of years they have been operating and the number of employers, employed in the business. The second section was based on the language practice where the participants had to list the languages use to communicate with tourists and have to account for the role they play in helping employees to learn foreign languages and whether they consider foreign language skills as a criteria when recruiting employees.

Furthermore, they were expected to comment on the availability of translation services offered at the establishment. In the third section, respondents had to rate the effectiveness of the implementation of a language policy, if there is one available and challenges in executing the language policy. In last section participants had to give a detailed account of the types of marketing tools used to advertise their businesses and the languages they use for each tool.

Participants

A total of 400 tourists (domestic and international) from across the world were interviewed during their stay at the Gariep Dam and the second questionnaire was a semi-structured interview distributed to all 15 accommodation establishments at the Gariep Dam

Data collection

The data in the questionnaire were collected between January and September 2016 during high peak season in the tourism industry. The reason for this is because the high peak season in the tourism industry is associated with a high influx of tourists at different holiday destinations. The same type of questions were asked to both domestic and international tourists. Respondents and were not informed prior to their visit about the questionnaire. An informed consent form was sent to the manager of the Gariep Dam (Forever Resort) to request permission to interview the tourists. The questionnaire was completed anonymously to provide truthful and sincere answers. Four unemployed matric graduates from Gariep Dam were trained by the researcher as fieldworkers and were used to disseminate the questionnaires. They were instructed to wait until the completion of questionnaires and were remunerated for each completed questionnaire. Semi structured interviews were used to collect data from tourism service providers, mainly hotels and guesthouses at the Gariep Dam. Interviews with all respondents were scheduled two months in advance. All 15 respondents were interviewed during the visit to the accommodation establishments. The interviews with respondents were conducted in both Afrikaans and English in July 2016 and each interview ranged on average from 30-60 minutes.

Data analysis

A grounded theory approach (Babbie, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967:20; Strauss & Corbin, 1998:46) to data analysis was undertaken since the study was exploratory, and the data collection appeared to specify emerging patterns and themes. These patterns and themes were found to be agreeable for effective consolidation by means of an organized and scientific approach to analyse and organized data, while simultaneously allowing for originality in the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998:47). This approach is appropriate for this study. "Concepts identified to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning were grouped into categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998:47). Even though the opinions, comments and suggestions of the respondents were quite distinctive, there were several frequent common responses that were found to direct the attitudes and making of these tourist experiences.

Results and discussions

Language barriers encounter in tourism businesses

The results showed that most tourism businesses (73%) claim that they had never encountered any language barriers in their businesses (Figure 4). Tourism owners responded that most foreign tourists visiting Gariep Dam understand English and those who do not, use sign language and hand signals to communicate with employees at the accommodation establishment. One manager pointed out that if he speaks slower, non-English speaking tourists can understand what he is saying. In extreme cases when tourists struggle to understand what they are trying to say, they go and show them what they need to do or see. "Tourists cannot speak English, but they can communicate their request in writing to us" (Front Office manager 2).
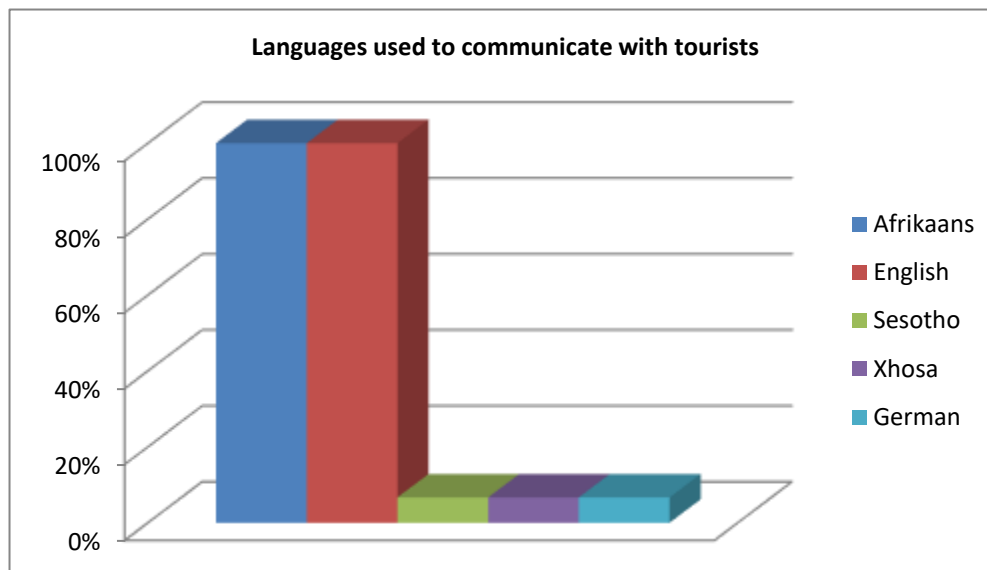
"Germans understand Afrikaans, so we communicate in Afrikaans"(Manager 3).

Recruiting multilingual employees for tourism businesses

All tourism businesses admitted during the interviews that it is not a priority for the business to employ multilingual employees. This could be because most tourism businesses are small and do not see the need to employ staff with foreign language skills because they have never experienced language barriers and tourists always return to the business. The results revealed that only one business owner (7%) is German speaking and communicates with tourists in

German. More surprisingly, only one tourism business (7%) uses African languages to communicate with tourists. Most tourism businesses (95%) only use Afrikaans and English to communicate with customers regardless of whether tourists understand these languages. It is evident that Afrikaans and English are the two dominant languages used in tourism businesses in Gariep Dam to communicate to tourists as indicated in Figure 1. The findings of this research explain the existing problem in the tourism industry, namely, the lack of foreign language skills of tourism employees to communicate effectively with non- English-speaking tourists (Khanh, 2012; Thao, 2012; Vi, 2010 as cited in Khuong, 2015:561).

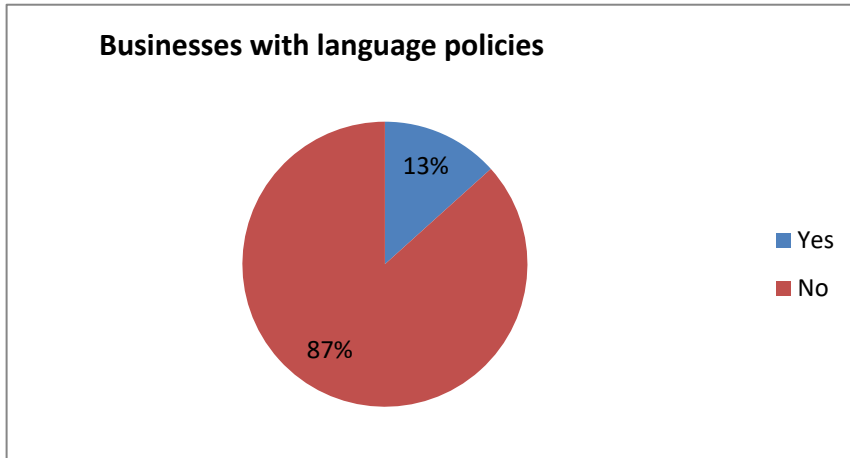**Figure 1: Languages used in tourism businesses**

The respondents revealed that the core employees employed in tourism businesses are bilingual and only speak Afrikaans and English, and only the semi-skilled workers such as cleaners, porters, kitchen staff and gardeners speak African languages. Despite the growing interest of blacks to participate in tourism activities, business owners do not make any effort to employ staff from the African languages groups or send existing staff for training. All the business owners responded that they do not consider foreign language skills when appointing staff but consider other skills such as communication and people skills.

Some tourism businesses (40%) realised the importance of employing people who can converse with tourists in their native language but also acknowledge that they will have to pay them more for assisting with interpersonal translation and interpreting services. This implies that tourism businesses do not want employ people with foreign language skills because they must be paid higher wages should they be employed permanently in the business.

 A business owner and a manager supported this observation by stating: "I once employed a deaf employee at my guesthouse, and the tourists were very fond of her. She was able to communicate with them using sign language and we did not experience any communication barriers" (Owner 4) and "The business is too small to offer translation and interpreting services" (Manager 1), respectively.
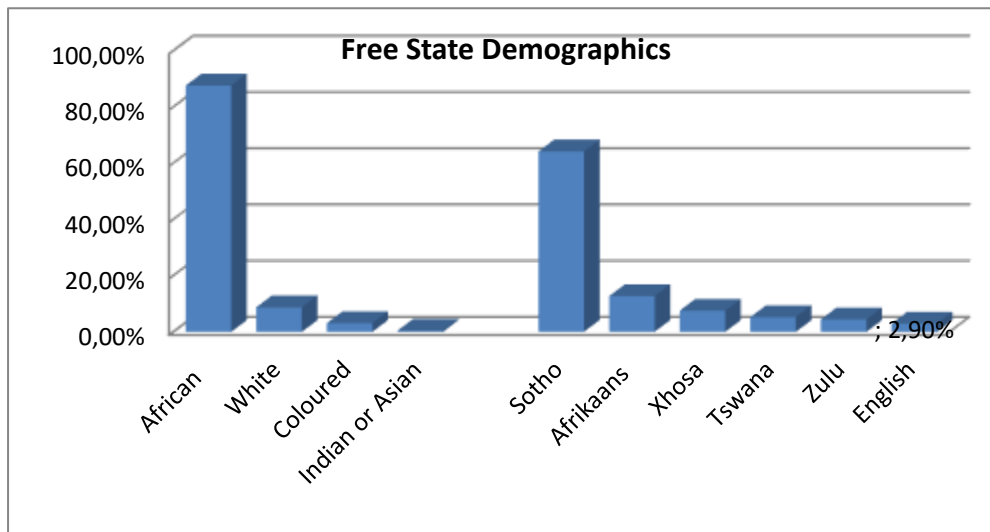
Adopting and implementing language policies for tourism businesses

Figure 2: Number of businesses that implements language policies

A small number of tourism businesses (13%) claims to have a language policy in place, but when asked to present a copy of the language policy, such a language policy was not written anywhere. From the data, 87% of businesses do not have a formal language policy. These businesses have not adopted a formal language policy for the business and all of them use Afrikaans and English to serve the tourists. Most of the tourism businesses do not have employees that can speak foreign languages and do not see the need to employ such employees based on their foreign language skills. The findings showed that tourism businesses claim that they acknowledge the importance of multilingual practices but do not adopt formal language policies (Figure 2). The business owners reported that they do not use foreign languages as a criterion to appoint employees and all those appointed are only conversant in Afrikaans and English. It is thus clear Afrikaans and English dominates tourism businesses in the Free State. This is no surprise because all the tourism business owners and managers were white and Afrikaans-speaking.

Figure 3: Free State language demographics. Source: Census 2011

Afrikaans is the second widely spoken language in the Free State (12.7%) and English has the least number of speakers (2.9%). Most of the people staying in the Free State are Sesotho-speaking (64.2 %) but Sesotho is not used in tourism businesses to communicate with tourists

(Figure 3). All the businesses responded that they use English to communicate with overseas tourists despite the fact that not all international tourists can speak English. Only 30% of all tourist visiting the Gariep Dam are overseas visitors. One manager commented that Afrikaans and German are close to one another and that the business use Afrikaans to communicate with German tourists and they understand one another. Most tourist businesses could not produce records of the countries from where they receive most of their tourists.

It became clear during the interviews that businesses were unable to identify their target markets. Almost all business owners reported that their businesses are too small to employ staff with foreign language skills despite the steady influx of foreign tourists. The success of the tourism industry depends to some extent on the ability of staff members to service tourists in their native languages. Greeting and serving tourists in their preferred languages will make them feel welcomed and tourists will return to the same destination.

The reason for excluding all other African languages such as isiXhosa, Setswana and isiZulu in tourism businesses is because they are targeting Afrikaans and English-speaking tourists. Even though white people only make up 8.7% of the total population they are still dominant in the tourism industry in the Free State. Business owners believe that all international tourists visiting South Africa are conversant with English.
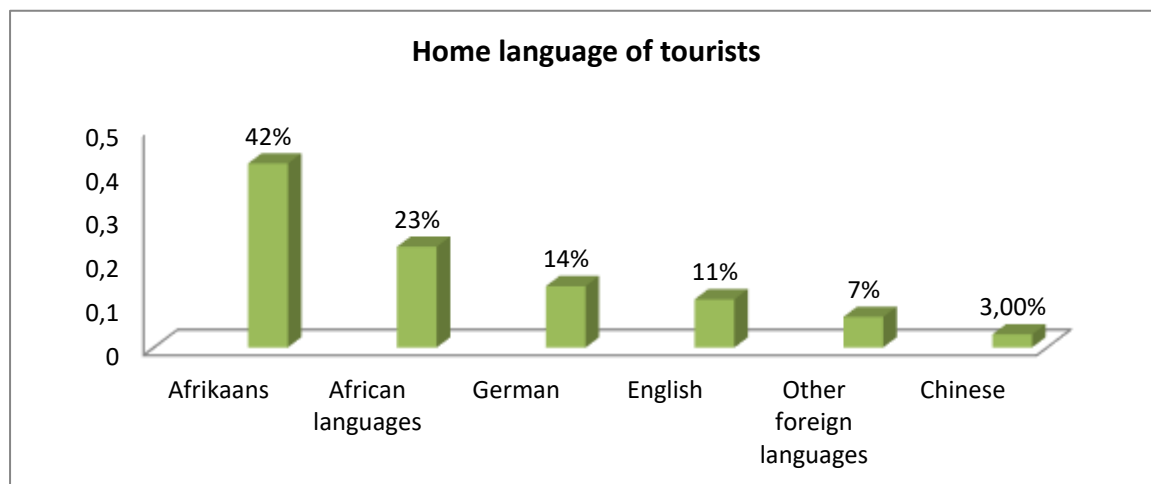

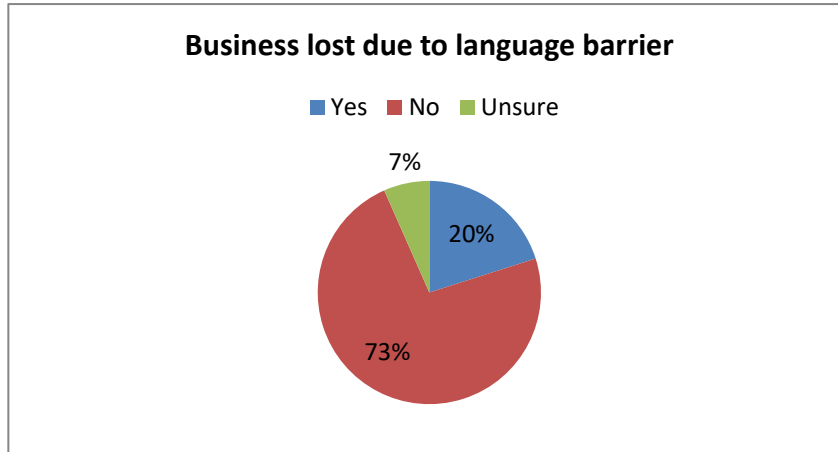**Figure 4: Languages spoken by tourists**

Most of the tourists (42%) visiting the Gariep Dam are Afrikaans speaking (Figure 4). Only 11% of all tourists visiting the Gariep Dam are English speaking but English is the dominant language used in most advertising material to attract tourists (figure 5). Surprisingly, a significant number (23%) of visitors are from African language groups but marketing material is not available in any African language. The number of foreign visitors seem to grow with German visitors at (14%), Chinese (3%) and other foreign languages visitors at (7%).

Tourism business loss as a result of language barriers

Most of the businesses in the study (73%) reported that they have never lost any business as a result of language barriers (Figure 4). Only owners and managers stated that they experienced some misunderstandings with foreign tourists because of language barriers and they believe they have lost business as a result. Very few businesses (7%) claim that they were not sure if they had lost business due to language barriers. Most managers however, admitted that they are happy when a tourist guide accompanies tourists during their stay at the accommodation establishment, since they could communicate directly to the tour guide because he or she can speak English. The research by Manaliyo (2009) found that in such

instances, tourists choose to give business to competitors and are likely to convince friends and family not to use the services of the business in which their language needs were not catered for.

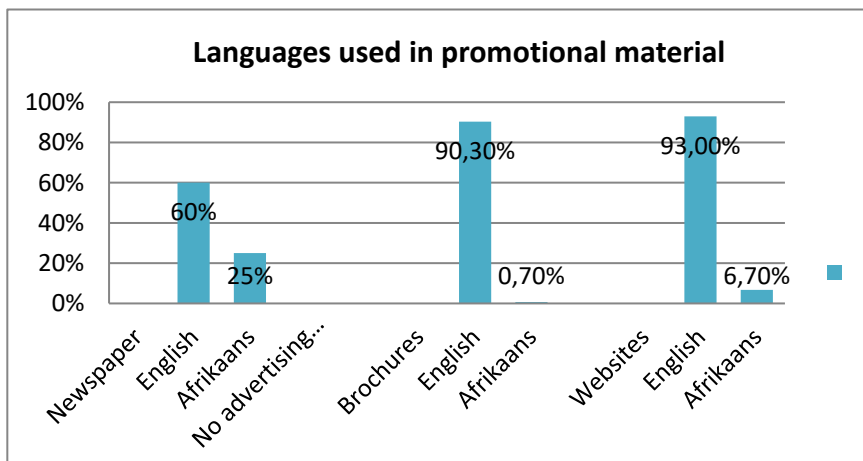**Figure 5: Businesses that admitted they lost business due to language barriers**

Tourists from non-English speaking countries might decide to stay away from destinations such as the Gariep Dam out of fear that they will experience language barriers. If tourism businesses do not pay attention to the language issue by learning the language of their target markets, tourists may as well choose other destinations and tourism business may thus lose business. The inability of tourism service providers to communicate with tourists in their own language can lead to mistrust and misunderstandings developing.

Languages used in advertising/ marketing material

The researcher found that English and Afrikaans dominate all marketing material for all the tourism businesses which are in the Gariep Dam vicinity (Figure 5). The interviews revealed that more than three quarters (81%) of all print and electronic advertising material is only available in English (Figure 5). Even though the Gariep Dam receives a great deal of foreign tourists (30%) all the businesses use only Afrikaans and English in their promotional material to sell their products to tourists. Information on accommodation rates of the Gariep Dam is also only available in English. General tourist information on the Gariep Dam is only available in Afrikaans and English. Most brochures (90%) are only available in English (Figure 6). The reason for the large number of promotional materials in English is because the brochures and flyers are only available at tourist's destinations and not at the tourists' point of origin.

Figure 5: Languages used in advertising material

More than half of all tourism businesses (60%) in the Gariep Dam use Afrikaans to market their businesses online, which is one of the eleven official South African languages. None of the surveyed tourism businesses used foreign languages in their printed and electronic promotional material to promote their products to tourists (Figure 5). English is mainly used on websites to offer information to tourists in comparison with other promotional material results show that the number of websites (Figure 5).

The results indicate that 93% of accommodation establishments advertise their businesses on websites in English while a smaller number (6.7%) still use Afrikaans websites such as "Groudtravel" to advertise their businesses. The reason for this could be that most people around the world have access to the internet and websites are their connection with South Africa. Therefore, this paper argues that it is inevitable for tourism business to adapt their printed and electronic promotional material to suit the language needs of the target tourist population. In many instances the internet is the first impression a tourist has of a tourist destination and often first impressions last.

Conclusion and recommendations

The main objective of the study was to determine why language is important in the tourism industry. The findings of the research corresponded with literature that language is regarded as an important means of communication in the tourism industry. The results proved that for any tourism business to flourish they need to communicate with tourist in their own language. The inability of tourism service providers to communicate with tourists in their own language can lead to mistrust, misunderstandings and ultimately tourists not returning to the same destination. The researcher recommended that for tourism businesses to pay attention to the language issue they should develop and implement written policies that specify which language/s to use when serving tourists depending on the size of the tourism business. This should not only be the responsibility of tourism businesses but also the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) which should govern language policies by including language proficiency as a criterion for grading.

The research showed that all the tourism business owners only use Afrikaans and/or English in verbal and non-verbal communication with tourists despite the overwhelming number of foreign visitors to the Gariep Dam. Most managers use English to communicate with foreign visitors and still believe that each overseas tourist can speak English. There is a need for tourism businesses to employ staff with foreign language skills. Almost all tourism businesses do not prioritise to appoint staff based on language proficiency as a criterion as they feel that they would limit themselves to recruit the perfect candidate. In addition, business owners also pointed out that their businesses are too small to offer interpreting services and that they will be expected to pay higher salaries based on such skills. Most businesses confirmed that they do not consider language proficiency as a requirement but prefer other skills such as *people skills* and *communication skills* as criteria to appoint employees.

The host population is not expected to learn tourist languages fully but by greeting visitors in their own language will make most likely make them feel welcome and eager to return to the same destination at a later stage. This problem can easily be avoided if large tourism businesses have formal languages policies in place. If tourists are happy with the services at a destination, they will remain loyal and will spread positive word of mouth to friends and family back home. The research proved that lack of host language proficiency is not one of the reasons why tourists do not return to the same destinations, but since tourists are adventurous people and enjoy exploring, they prefer visiting as many destinations as possible.

Many tourism businesses do not regard language as a barrier and therefore do not pay attention to this important issue. Some tourism businesses pointed out that they prefer a tour

guide who speaks English and always accompanies tourists travelling in a group. They believe it is easier to welcome groups as the tour guide acts as a translator for the group. Despite the shortage of employees with foreign language skills employed in the tourism industry, there is also a lack of promotional material such as brochures, menus, book guides and websites available in foreign languages. Most websites and promotional material only advertised their business in English. Included as problematic, is also a lack of multilingual public signage in the Gariep Dam to provide instructions to tourists in the event that they become lost, most public signage is only available in Afrikaans and English.

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