Usage of Technology by Tourists to Overcome Language Barriers

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Overcoming language barriers is a necessity for the tourism industry. In the words of Cohen and Cooper, "Language barriers are, as everyone knows, an important obstacle to transcultural communication" (1986, p. 534). Studies have shown that language barriers impacts the tourists' choice of destination (Cohen & Cooper, 1986, p. 534) and expense decisions (Chen & Hsu, 2000, p. 415). The tourism industry thus puts in a lot of effort to overcome the language barriers between host and tourist.

Owing to the large count of languages in the world, it is very likely that the tourist's language differs from the language of the host. In order to accommodate to the needs of tourists (Cohen & Cooper, 1986, p. 539; Leslie & Russell, 2006, p. 1397) as well as to "ensure their international competitiveness and maximise their traditional markets," (Leslie & Russell, 2006, p. 1397) the tourism industry learns the language of the tourist, thus reducing the language barrier between the host and the tourist. The locals who are stakeholders of the tourism industry, such as local businesses and beggars, are economically motivated to learn the tourist language (Cohen & Cooper, 1986, p. 545). With tourism establishments now working on a global level, and the increasing number of intercultural interactions between the hosts and the visitors, the logical outcome is to develop the foreign language skills of the tourism industry employees (Leslie & Russell, 2006, p. 1397). This is evident in the study by Wozniak, where it is shown that it is required that French mountain guides finish a certification in a foreign language (2012, p. 244).

Due to multiple constraints like recruitment processes, the demand for foreign language skills in the tourism industry is not being completely met (Leslie et al, 2004, p. 262). This affects the "information and support services" provided to tourists (László Márkus & Wagner, 2011, p. 25). With information technology being a big part and parcel of everyday life (MacKay & Vogt, 2012, p. 1381), tourists now look towards more "real-time and tailored information services", information that is "dynamic and interactive". The tourism industry can provide better services by using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which can help overcome these language barriers (László Márkus & Wagner, 2011, p. 25). Some examples where ICT is being used in tourism industry would be mobile tourist guides (Beer et al, 2009; Gretzel et al, 2007) and geo based technology (Tussyadiah & Zach, 2012). However, language barriers is two way process and tourists too can play a role in overcoming it.

According to Cohen, tourists can be categorized into institutionalized tourists and noninstitutionalized tourists (1972, p. 177). Cohen and Cooper suggest that the institutionalized tourists extensively use tourism services, and hence are less likely to face language barriers. The noninstitutionalized tourists, like backpackers, whose use of tourism services is very minimal, have more interactions with people who do know the tourist's language (1986, p. 548). This causes a communication gap and raises a need for the tourist to learn the host's language. Some of these tourists do learn the host language, but most of them do not have the motivation to do so. They rely mostly on "nonverbal communication" and/or carry "phrase books or simplified dictionaries" to assist them. (Cohen & Cooper, 1986, p. 545)

Cohen also points out that institutionalized tourists miss out on the "natural texture of the host society" (1972, p. 178). A study on German tourists at New Zealand supports this theory (Huisman & Moore, 1999). The tourists felt that with information being provided in their own language, the trip became less challenging and enjoyable, and this would impact the chances of them revisiting New Zealand (Huisman & Moore, 1999, p. 448). However, such cases, which may be special but not rare, contradict the case study by Cohen and Cooper, and suggest that it is the tourists who should try to adopt to the language of the locals (Huisman & Moore, 1999, p. 449).

Learning a new language takes time, and it is not expected of the tourists to learn the language of the destination, either before the trip or during the trip (Cohen & Cooper, 1986). "Tourists do not like everything translated to them" (Huisman & Moore, 1999, p. 448) nor do they like to take efforts to learn the local language (Adler, 1980, p. 35). If the degree of foreignness, determined by "material, cultural and linguistic distances" is small, it is more likely for a person to learn the language (Labrie & Quell, 1997, p. 4). Even if the host or the tourist learn a new language, there are usually problems associated with improper usage of words or expressions, difficulty with comprehending the foreign accents, incorrect grammar etc. In Thailand, hosts still assisted the tourists with limited language skills by "using gestures or by asking tourists to write down what they needed" (Prachanant, 2012, p. 124).

There are two areas where ICT can be used to overcome language barriers between the host and the guest. Firstly, ICT can be used during direct communication between the host and guest during the trip. There are multiple studies that show how the host uses ICT to assist in overcoming the language barriers (Gretzel et al, 2007; Beer et al, 2009). However, there is no research that shows how a tourist can use ICT to translate text and speech of the host language to tourist language and vice versa, thus enabling some form of communication. For e.g., as mentioned above, Thai tourism employees, who could not understand English accent of visitors asked them to communicate through written form (Prachanant, 2012, p. 124). This could be replaced by text or speech translation technology which can make it faster and probably more interactive in case of speech translation.

Secondly, ICT can be used before the trip. It can assist the host in promoting the destination, and consequently enable tourist bookings. Some hosts provide website content translated in multiple languages to assist in tourist booking (Rattrat, Stork, & Williams, 2004). However, there is no research on how tourists make use of translation technologies on websites that do not provide content in their language. Research on how tourists use translation technologies before and during the trip can help the tourism industry in understanding how helpful it would be to invest financial resources to develop technology that can translate its language to other languages. Thus, moving one step further in overcoming language barriers.

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