

Journeys to polyglotism: a case study of French, Spanish, and Japanese tourist guides

Dika Pranadwipa Koeswiryo¹, Francisca Titing Koerniawaty²

Institut Pariwisata dan Bisnis Internasional^{1,2}
Email: dika.pranadwipa@ipb-intl.ac.id¹

Abstract - The study aimed at discovering the process through which three tourist guides of French, Spanish, and Japanese acquired different foreign languages. The data was taken through in-depth interviews to explore the motivation that drove their language learning, the language interference, the technique they used to self-teach themselves the language, and their immersion in the language's native country. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and analyzed through data reduction, data display, and verification drawing. The results were then given to the subjects to ensure trustworthiness and to verify the researcher's interpretation of the interview. The study found that 1) one of the most crucial factors of language learning success was strong motivation, which led to consistency and risk-taking attitude; 2) a significant growth of language mastery took place when the subjects spent extended time in the language's native country; 3) both formal classroom instruction and informal independent learning were essential for their language improvement; 4) the subjects proactively consulted the native speakers to improve their vocabulary inventory, to correct inaccuracies or to gain new language expressions; and 5) due to the different nature of the languages they were learning, each subject had a diverse view on grammar and language interference. In pedagogical implication, teachers could foster students' willingness to learn with either instrumental motivation, i.e. by raising awareness of the benefit of foreign language ability, or with integrative motivation, i.e. by raising students' interest in the culture or people whose language was being studied. Besides, language learners, or language teachers, might reflect on this research to complement formal-classroom learning with a large degree of informal-independent learning.

Keywords: polyglotism, tourist, guide, language

1. Introduction

Besides serving as a source of knowledge for visitors, a professional tourist guide plays a wide range of roles. According to Vincent (2009), a tour guide has to inform, direct, advise and introduce and "to create the image of the country for the visitor in an appropriate manner". Apart from playing a role as a source of information about tourist destinations, tour guides are also in charge of entertaining the tourists. He is also responsible for turning phenomena into experience, offering a path to deeper meaning, and fostering respect for the heritage (Ludwig, 2015; O'Brien & Ham, 2012). Tour guides must also be qualified in various ways, especially in language skills and broad general knowledge of the history, geography, art and architecture, economics, politics, religion, and sociology of the country (Iriguler & Guler, 2016). In addition, as with any other tourism business, a tour guide is expected to be able to sell the product to the customers, in this case selling the tour program to guests. These can be accomplished only if the tour guides are proficient in the language of the guests.

All three subjects in this study, who were tourist guides, were polyglots, which refers to people with the ability to communicate in several languages with a high level of precision, ease, and fluency (Rodda, 2011). English was the language they had all mastered in common, but there were at least another foreign language they were proficient at French, Spanish, or Japanese. To achieve mastery in those multiple languages, the tourist guides developed certain learning methods. They learned both through formal-instructed courses and informal independent learning to hone their language skills. They also improved their fluency in both spoken and written communication, employing either traditional learning techniques or technology-aided ones. These learning techniques and devices worked for them and therefore might inspire other language learners.

Many language learners are unable to show the expected progress. Cases, where language learners had attempted and struggled to achieve a certain level but ended up unsuccessfully, are not uncommon. Despite years of study, a large number of students have difficulty holding basic conversations in a foreign language or using the knowledge they have acquired in class in interactions with foreigners. On the contrary, as polyglots, who were able to fluently communicate in multiple languages, the tour guides could be considered more successful language learners and might have valuable insights on the process they had been through to being multilingual.

This study aimed to discover the learning techniques used by tour guides to become a polyglot. This included the length of time they took to master the language, and the difficulties unique to their languages of choice. This study also investigated how they developed different techniques to acquire different language skills, and how consistent study had advanced their grammar and vocabulary. Language learners, especially beginners, may adopt their language learning techniques to accelerate their learning progress. The findings in this study will also benefit other tour guides - especially those who are still early in their careers - to enhance their professional competence. In addition, language teachers can also reflect on this research as a reference for their pedagogical practice.

2. Method

This research, which was carried on in Bali, is a qualitative study. Three tourist guides were purposefully selected based on the language they are working with. The first subject was a French tourist guide, the second one was a Spanish tourist guide, and the last was a Japanese tourist guide, who all have for years been in the tourism industry. The reason behind this choice was the language diversity. European language might require different techniques to master than that of Asian. The data was taken through in-depth interviews, where the subjects were inquired to report the journey they took to mastering the language.

The interview inquired the motivation that drives their language learning, the language interference, the technique they use to self-teach themselves the language, and their immersion in the language's native country. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and analyzed through the step of data reduction, data display, and verification drawing. The results were then given to the subjects to ensure trustworthiness and to verify the researcher's interpretation of the interview.

3. Results and Discussion

The journey each tourist guide had taken to master the language varied greatly from one another, and therefore impossible to generalize. For that reason, in this section, the result is presented based on the order of the language's closeness to English: French, Spanish, and Japanese.

3.1 French Tourist Guide

The first subject, Mr. Stephen, was a Francophone tourist guide who spoke advanced French and English, besides basic Dutch. His interest in French grew as he saw the language widely spoken in many countries, especially the ones belonging to the French colony. His exposure to the language began in the 1980s when he was preparing for a scholarship study.

Mr. Stephen was fortunate to have the opportunity to stay for an extended time in French's native country. He was awarded a scholarship to study marine science in Brest City, Western Britain. Before his departure, he enrolled in a 4.5-month intensive course to equip him with French skills. The lesson continued in France. For the next five months after his arrival, there was another course to further deepen his mastery. He wished the courses would be sufficient, but the opposite was true. A struggle challenged his attempt to comprehend the classroom oral instruction given by the lecturer. "I could read in French with little problem, but barely understood what the lecture said in the classroom". With the helpful assistance from some mentors, after more than a year of his study, he managed to have a gradually better grasp of spoken French.

Today, he has for several years been providing tour guiding service for French-speaking tourists. Unsurprisingly, as his job required a vast amount of spoken communications, he emphasized that speaking was the ultimate skill to hone. The French language is not very phonetically consistent - some syllables might have diverse sounds, depending on the words or context. It, therefore, takes extra effort to become fluent in pronouncing. But as the result of constant and extensive interaction with his guests, his French had significantly improved, not only in terms of pronunciation, but also the new words, phrases, or expressions. It is also noteworthy that his English did sometimes interfere with his French communication, due to the almost-equal proficiency of either language. For example, he mistakenly uttered the English word "travel", when what he meant is the French word "*travail*" (to work). Although most of the guide-guest interaction was oral, written communication in French did occasionally take place when he was *Whatsapp* chatting or emailing. However, extra attention was required when arranging the text. He had to ensure the accuracy of the spelling and the structure, and therefore avoid abbreviating the words, worrying that it would interfere with the communication.

When asked about the key to success in language learning, he insisted that nothing is comparable to constant practice, accompanied by a risk-taking attitude. Despite his advanced level, he was eager to keep improving his French. Interaction with French guests was the main learning method, so was the regular reading of French works of literature. In a full-day tour, which might cover up to eight hours, he would receive a vast amount of input from the guests. Being open to criticism, Stephen was glad to have the guests correct his language. He also regularly measured his French advancement by taking a regular test on smartphone applications, such as Duolingo, and was planning to enroll in a French advanced class to increase his mastery. Mr. Stephen also advised that a French learner should have a good understanding of the gender rules; whether a noun is classified as male or female.

3.2 Spanish Tourist Guide

The second subject, Bagus, is fluent in English but decided to be a Spanish tourist guide. Bagus had since childhood been familiar with the language as it is the one his father practiced in his job as also a tourist guide. Spanish songs and stories were his earliest exposures, but it was not until 2014 that he received his first formal Spanish instruction, when he enrolled in a language course.

In terms of language aspects, Bagus viewed listening as the foremost skill one needs to master. He believed that listening – especially in face-to-face conversation – is a way to prove and confirm what has been learned. "As there is almost no time to consult a dictionary, listening determines whether you have mastered the language" he added. Besides listening, grammar is the aspect he thought was the most challenging, yet very important to comprehend. He judged it as the key to grasping a language; the secret code to decipher how a language works.

When it comes to vocabulary mastery, a technique he employed was putting new words into some made-up sentences. He also found that it was easiest to comprehend new Spanish vocabularies through English, although both languages do not share too many commonalities. He advised that learning a language demands effort both in the classroom and outside. Despite the thorough lessons, the classroom learning did not satisfy his eagerness to develop the language. Bagus found he needed to rely on other

language supplies. The movie was his first additional resource, from which he absorbed abundant variations of vocabulary and expressions. A fragment of a movie scene, which was then paused, followed by a quick search of unfamiliar words, was his regular method of vocabulary enrichment. He asserted that movie provides more natural and wider language input, compared to formal Spanish textbooks.

Books or digital media is surely a supportive source for picking new Spanish words and expressions, but none is equivalent to learning from more proficient speakers. Bagus made an appointment with more senior Spanish guides, asking for permission to join their tours. The aim was to observe the way they give guiding service. Not only did Bagus acquire numerous useful phrases, but he also gain valuable insight on how to convincingly serve the guests. As a learner, Bagus perceived himself as open to correction. He was glad to hear input from the guests, which were Spanish native speakers, about a more proper way of conveying certain Spanish phrases.

Learning from a movie or native speaker and memorizing the new words through sentences are the steps anyone learning Spanish could follow. But what Bagus had, that not many other language learners did, is the opportunity to get immersed in the language's country of origin. He's staying for four months in Bogota, Columbia, as an awardee of a scholarship program, which brought him to a significant improvement. On the campus and around his neighborhood, he worked on the Spanish grammar in the classroom as much as he practiced speaking with the residents. He needed to force himself to practice and use his Spanish, as "finding an English-speaking person in the neighborhood would take too much effort".

When asked about the key to mastering a new language, he advised that nothing could result in success as much as motivation and consistency. He reported that these two kept him from quitting the effort, and emphasized that lack of motivation leads to language learning failure. "School students, for example, who learn a language for the sole purpose of passing an exam, would fail to see the benefit rewarding those who learn the language for getting a job.

3.3 Japanese Tourist Guide

The last subject was a Japanese tourist guide named Sudarsana. He, who had since 2001 been a tourist guide, spoke fluent Japanese and English, besides some basic Russian. His Japanese level had never been tested by any formal examination, but he self-judged himself as an advanced speaker. True to his word, during the interview there were occasions when he uttered some Japanese expressions effortlessly but faced difficulties finding their English or Indonesian equivalents, such as *ishoo-kemmei* or *zenzen*. Sudarsana picked Japanese as his language of choice due to his interest in its culture and work ethic, which he perceived as interesting and exemplary. His exposure to Japanese began in his high school class and continued outside the classroom. In Indonesia, he had never taken any Japanese course and relied his learning on self-tutoring.

Japanese's sentence structure is distinctly different from that of English or Bahasa Indonesia, but Sudarsana said that it was relatively easy to learn. English-loan Japanese words are abundant, for example, "supaa" (supermarket), "hoteru" (hotel), or "juusu" (juice). This helped Sudarsana to memorize vocabulary. Also easing the studying process was that he did not have to make extra effort practicing the subject-verb conjugation agreement. Unlike French, which requires different verb forms for different pronouns, in Japanese, the verbs remain consistent regardless of the subject. Therefore, the word "to drink" would translate into "nomu", no matter who does the drinking. Another factor is the absence of gender determination. Sudarsana did not have to deal with the struggle as faced by the Spanish guide who reported his effort when studying whether an object is masculine or feminine. When practicing speaking, Japanese consistent phonetics also helped Sudarsana learn the language. In English or French letters might be pronounced in various ways, depending on the word. In Japanese, by contrast, a learner can pronounce a word correctly by solely reading its letters, and can be easily understood by any listener.

However, a challenge that Sudarsana faced, that the French or Spanish guide did not, is the alphabet system. While French is based on 26 letters, a learner of Japanese had to become proficient with at least 46 letters, both the *hiragana* and *katakana*. Sudarsana stated that it did not take him too long to grasp those basic letters, but when it comes to dealing with Kanji, he had no better choice other than relying on an online translator. "Japanese are so used to writing in Kanji. So when texting, I looked up on to the application to decipher the Kanji letters", said him in the interview. The word "Hashi", for example, might mean "bridge", "edge", or "chopstick", depending on the kanji character. Another aspect that needs attention was the *hatsuon* or the pronunciation. *Obasan* (aunt) might be mistakenly understood as "grandma" if the speaker pronounces it with *obaasan*.

Sudarsana was also fortunate to have the opportunity to get immersed in Japanese native country. For the whole three months, he enrolled in a Japanese course in Osaka, where he intensively developed his language mastery. Being in a country where not many spoke English, Sudarsana could only rely on his limited Japanese to interact with the local citizen. This is where significant growth of his vocabulary and grammar took place. Not only did he improve the language, but he also obtained numerous insights into Japanese culture and customs. Another valuable knowledge was the slang that not many non-Japanese knows of. Those two were beneficial for his future career as a tourist guide. When escorting guests, this cultural awareness and slangs inventory helped him build a relationship with the guests. When explaining about Balinese *penjor* (tall bamboo pole), for example, he would refer to Japanese *tanabata* to help the guest understand. He also used the word "nambo", a slang unique to Osaka, to replace the formal "ikura desu ka" to ask "how much".

When asked about the key to success in language learning, he emphasized that a language learner needed to have a clear and strong reason to study. "I decided that in six-month time I must have the license to escort big-group-sized tourists. That means my Japanese had to be very good. So I must learn". He also suggested that vast vocabulary mastery was an essential prerequisite. "Grammar may come later. It is more important to grasp as many vocabularies as possible", said him. He insisted that, based on his own experience, a learner should at least memorize five new words each day, which adds up to hundreds in a year. He also encouraged learners to always be ready to take notes on new expressions. On any occasion when he finds difficulties comprehending the Japanese guests' utterances, he would take the risk to ask the guest to elaborate. He was also very open to criticism, inviting the guests to correct the language mistakes he made during the tour.

This study aimed at discovering how several tourist guides in Bali gained foreign languages proficiency and became polyglots. Due to the different nature of each language, there is no one-size-fits-all technique that worked universally. However, this study identified that one of the most significant factors of language learning success is a strong motivation, which led to consistency and a risk-taking attitude. It also highlights that significant growth of language mastery took place when the subjects spent extended time in the society where the language is spoken. In addition, the finding demonstrates that both formal classroom and informal independent learning were essential for language improvement. The subjects proactively consulted the native speakers to improve their vocabulary inventory, correct inaccuracies, or gain new language expressions. However, due probably to the different nature of the language they are learning, each subject has a diverse view on grammar and language interference.

Marinova et al (2000, Zólyomi, 2021) state that aptitude, which is the learner's cognitive ability, is strongly correlated with success in language learning. In the same line, Gardner and MacIntyre (1992, in Sykes, 2015) propose that aptitude is the "best predictor of achievement" in language learning. On the other hand, contrary to this notion, the subjects in this study view that this conception is somehow exaggerated; they did not feel to have a specific talent to learn the languages. Instead, they affirm that what keeps them on the track of pursuing proficiency is the strong reason to learn the language. What encouraged their persistence is both their interest in the countries whose language they are learning and their job as tourists guide, which requires advanced proficiency. This resonates with the views that motivation is a significant factor to enhance language learning (Hanyeq, 2018; Hong & Ganapathy, 2017). In classroom application, teachers could encourage students with either instrumental motivation, i.e. by raising awareness of the benefit of foreign language ability, or with integrative motivation, i.e. by raising students' interest in the culture or people whose language is being studied. However, regardless of whether language learning success is determined by their aptitude or motivation, it is reasonable to agree with Muth'im & Sutiono (2021) who proposed that the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) – an innate language-learning mechanism – played crucial roles in the tour guide's language acquisition.

The subjects had indeed enrolled in classroom learning to accelerate their language mastery. However, the tutored learning is comparably very short compared to their long years of self-learning, meaning that the presence of the teacher does not always determine the learning success. This finding is not to say that classroom instruction is unnecessary, but according to (Rodda, (2011) we should recognize that successful language learners have control of their learning. This can also be linked to Noprival's (2019) perspective that "those who want to succeed in increasing their multilingual ability cannot depend on a formal institutional study, but more on informal learning", or Kozub's (2020) finding that polyglots can acquire language often without teachers. Language learners, or even language teachers, might reflect on this perspective to complement formal-institutional learning with a large degree of informal-independent learning.

A language learner needs to get immersed in the society where the language is being learned for an extended period. This migration, along with adjustment with culture, helps them to past the discomfort they have when communicating with the native speakers (Kozub, 2020; Noprival, 2019). This is true for the subjects who spent months in the language's native community. During this period of residence, they forced themselves to use the language inventory they have to communicate with the locals. However, this should not demotivate learners who do not have equal opportunity. Rodda (2011) warned that lack of immersion in the language's native country is not an excuse for poor progress. He adds that the immersion gives only little benefit for early-stage learners and that many examples of polyglots did not even have a chance to live in the language's country.

Learning motivations, such as interest in the language and culture, along with professional demand for language competence, might help initiate language learning. But what is also essential for progress is a risk-taking attitude and consistent learning. Delivering guiding service to foreign visitors does take courage, but the tour guides took the risk and were willing to accept any criticism or correction. Besides, despite their advanced proficiency, the tour guide kept maintaining their sustainable learning, by taking note of any new vocabularies, taking even more advanced courses, or escorting more senior tourist guides. This is parallel to the study by Sykes (2015) that good language learners take the risk and "constantly revises his or her understanding and use of the second language", meaning that consistency and dedication are key factors in language learning accomplishment.

4. Conclusion

This study found that one of the most important factors in successful language learning is a strong motivation, which led to perseverance and a risk-taking attitude. There was a sign in their language when the subjects spent a lot of time in the country of origin of the language. It was also found that formal classroom education and informal independent learning are very important for the improvement of the language of the tour guides. The Subjects proactively consulted with native speakers to enrich their vocabulary inventory, correct inaccuracies, or acquire new linguistic expressions. Due to the different nature of the language they studied, each subject has a different view of grammar and language interference.

All subjects in this research have not for long taken formal examination, hence the lack of sufficient data about their language level. Their proficiencies were therefore subjectively measured by mere self-judgment. Next researcher can take a more accurate measurement of the subjects' language level to better assess their mastery. In addition, this research does not specifically explore strategies used by the subjects to improve certain language skills. Future studies might pick only one language and focus on each skill, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, or writing, in addition to grammar, to obtain clearer and more elaborate findings.

In pedagogical implication, teachers could foster students' willingness to learn with either instrumental motivation, i.e. by raising awareness of the benefit of foreign language ability, or with integrative motivation, i.e. by raising students' interest in the culture or people whose language is being studied. Besides, language learners, or language teachers, might reflect on this research to complement formal-classroom learning with a large degree of informal-independent learning. Awareness that a risk-taking attitude is an important factor to accelerate language acquisition should also be grown among students.

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