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Language learners as cultural tourists: Development potential of the English language learning tourism market in South Africa

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Abstract

Travel in order to learn English has become an enormous global industry, and in recent years South Africa has started to feature more prominently in the plans of English language learning tourists from all over the world. While the academic product tends to be similar wherever it is offered, the potential for added value lies in the 'English Plus' market, where the learning of English is only part of the total product, the rest being made up of travel, cultural, sporting and other activities. While the international market for English language learning tourism is more than 1.4 million and growing, South Africa has managed to attract less than 2% of this market. A survey was conducted during 2015 among 250 English language learners at 16 English language schools throughout South Africa, the main objective being to gather information on the activity preferences of students. It was found that cultural activities feature prominently in students' activity preferences. In the increasingly competitive world of English language teaching and learning, the tourism attractiveness of the destination is certain to feature more prominently in the decision making of those who want to learn English, but need to decide where. South Africa can create competitive advantage by packaging its English language learning tourism offerings into something uniquely African, with a focus on location-based cultural activities, that will enable it to distinguish itself from destinations offering similar academic products.

Keywords: English, language learning, tourism, South Africa.

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Introduction

Learning is becoming an important part of the overall tourist experience. More and more people are seeking holidays during which they can actively participate in something, and such activity is ever more likely to be educational (Smith & Jenner, 1997). 'Education' could be anything from cooking to conservation activities, and increasingly includes learning a new language. There are education-first segments of educational tourism, where education is a primary motivating factor, e.g. academic study at universities, and tourism-first segments, where travel is the main motivator, and purposeful learning is present but secondary, e.g. cooking tours (Ritchie, Carr & Cooper, 2003). Language learning tourism is a combination of the above two types of educational tourism. Smith

and Jenner (1997) pointed out that language learning is probably the single most important purpose of educational tourism worldwide, but they added that it is the blending of education with leisure that would become significant in the future, which is of particular relevance to the travel and tourism industry. Today this is indeed the case, as in recent years the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has begun to play an increasingly important role in the international tourism industry, where the demand for EFL is not only related to the study of English academically, but is also about learning English in an English-speaking country in the most practical way possible that involves experiencing at first hand the culture and society of the host country (Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2007). EFL tourism is a form of educational tourism (the education-first segment), but it could also be regarded as a form of cultural tourism (the tourism-first segment). In the words of Kennett (2002: 557): “Language learners are cultural tourists, even though they have low visibility, spending time in non-tourist settings, such as private homes, ensconced in the language and culture of their hosts”. There are about 1.4 million English language tourism (EFL) students worldwide (International Association of Language Centres, 2015). The most important EFL destinations include the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Malta and South Africa. Currently, South Africa attracts less than 2% of this market. Top source countries include Saudi Arabia, China, South Korea, Japan, Brazil, Italy, Spain, Colombia, France, Thailand, Taiwan, Russia, Turkey, Switzerland, Germany, Venezuela, Vietnam, Mexico, Libya and Kuwait (International Association of Language Centres, 2015). Traditional EFL destinations are also facing competition from countries where English is the official second language, such as Singapore, India and the Philippines.

In Asia there is widespread recognition of English as the language of international trade and business (Batchelor, 2000), and language courses abroad are becoming the norm, both to improve general English communication skills, and also as a form of employee training to increase business skills. English makes a significant contribution to sustainable global development (British Council, 2013), easing trade between countries that do not share a common language, where it is used as a language of convenience, facilitating dialogue and building trust. English is increasingly the lingua franca that holds together international conversation and debate in areas such as climate change, terrorism and human rights. The emergence of the internet as a global phenomenon is reinforcing these trends, and English now allows rapid cross-pollination of ideas and innovation around the world, and the development of a new kind of supranational single market in knowledge and ideas (British Council, 2013). According to ALTO/Deloitte (2014), the language and educational travel industry is in many ways an immature industry. There is a lack of data available about the industry, where very few destination markets and even less source markets have, as yet, recognised and embraced the need for pertinent, useful and

comprehensive data. Authors such as Falk, Ballentine, Packer and Benckendorff (2012) acknowledge that the links between travel and learning are a somewhat neglected tourism research area. Nevertheless it is increasingly recognized that language learning tourism has considerable economic impacts for the countries and regions that students visit. Students stay for longer periods of time and they also tend to spend more in total than other types of tourists (Richards, 2009). Xamani (2015) has constructed a model of the language tourism market with demand side factors such as demographic information, travel behaviour, motivations and perceptions, as well as supply side factors, such as product composition, marketing and management, and the destination's environmental and social resource base.

South Africa's EFL industry

Traditionally countries such as the United Kingdom, the USA, Australia and New Zealand have been the preferred EFL destinations, but in recent years South Africa has started to feature more prominently in the plans of EFL travelers. It is estimated that there are 50 English language schools in South Africa (Urban-Econ Development Economists, 2011), almost half of which are situated in Cape Town. These schools offer various combinations of English language tuition, accommodation, entertainment, tours and other travel services. Courses on offer include General English, Business English, English for Academic Purposes, English for Special Purposes (Courses tailored to suit the specific requirements of learners, such as engineering, medicine, the oil and gas industry and the aviation industry), and preparation courses for various international English examinations required for entrance to many universities where the language of instruction is English. In addition to English tuition, English language learning programmes usually include accommodation (family home-stays, school-owned hostels, flats), day tours (museums, art galleries, township tours, day trips to nearby tourist attractions), longer tours (Garden Route, game reserves), social programmes (beach picnics, barbecues, visits to restaurants and pubs, shopping trips), outdoor adventure activities (river rafting, bungee jumping, hiking, diving, paragliding, surfing, mountain biking), and volunteer programmes (crèches in townships, orphanages, wildlife conservation). With the globalisation of English language learning the academic product tends to be similar wherever it is offered, and therefore the opportunity for added value, for the development of unique location-specific products, lies in the 'English Plus' market, where learning English is only part of the total product, the rest being made up of travel, cultural, sporting and leisure activities, such as wildlife viewing, golf, sailing, cooking, wine tasting, scuba diving, river rafting, surfing and photography. Consequently, a key attraction of South Africa as a destination for English language learners is its reputation for having an exciting array of tourism activities, augmented by its natural beauty, wildlife, beaches, good weather and value for money.

Education South Africa (EduSA) has been established as a national association of English language schools in South Africa, and is committed to developing and growing the English language travel industry in South Africa, ensuring that members meet guaranteed minimum standards of professionalism and quality. Currently, EduSA has 23 member schools, 15 of which are situated in Cape Town. In 2015 EduSA – affiliated schools reported a total of 7 336 EFL students, who spent a total of 45 342 weeks studying English in South Africa, an average of 6.2 study weeks per student (Knott, 2016). Students were mainly from Europe (43%), Africa (30%), South America (15%), the Middle East (9%), and Asia (4%), with the largest individual market being Angola, followed by Germany. A few studies have been undertaken on the EFL tourism market in South Africa. Frey and Nowotny (2004) conducted a survey to determine whether growth of the industry is resulting in real benefits for Cape Town. They point out that observed differences in behaviour of different EFL tourist nationalities highlights the necessity to tailor one’s marketing strategy to suit the unique needs of various nationalities. Boekstein (2010) produced a profile of English language learners in Cape Town, finding that the primary motivation of English language learners was to increase their knowledge, but that experiencing local culture was also important, featuring prominently in their activity preferences. Boekstein (2010) recommends an English language learning tourism product that considers both the academic and non-academic motivations and preferences of English language learners. Correia (2011) analysed the language travel industry in South Africa in light of the growing global youth travel market, concluding that language travel is a potentially high value segment for the South African tourism industry, not only because of longer stays and higher total spend, but also because many students return, or remain, to study at South African tertiary institutions. Urban-Econ Development Economists (2011) estimated the impact of the language training market as part of a broader study of the educational tourism market in South Africa, including the number of direct and indirect jobs being created.

Methodology

A questionnaire-based survey of English language learners was undertaken during 2015, as a follow-up to a similar survey done in 2008 (Boekstein, 2010) at English language schools around South Africa, most of them in Cape Town. The main purpose of the survey was to gain knowledge of the activity preferences of English language learners, to aid in product development for language learning tourism. A convenience sampling method was used, where language schools were asked to distribute questionnaires amongst learners during lessons. Participation was completely voluntary. A total of 250 English language learners completed the questionnaire, at 16 language schools.

Results and Discussion

Approximately half of the respondents were male, and half female, and most (66%) were on their first visit to South Africa. The respondents were mainly from Africa (41%), Europe (29%), South America (14%), the Middle East (11%) and Asia (5%). The largest national representations included Angolans (15%), Swiss (10%), Brazilians (9%), Congolese (6%), Gabonese (6%), Libyans (6%) and Germans (5%). Almost half of the respondents (48%) were between 20 and 30 years old, with a quarter (27%) aged 19 years or less. Only 6% had not yet finished high school, one-third (35%) had completed high school, 24% had started a university education or college diploma, and 35% had completed a university degree or diploma. The main reasons respondents gave for their wish to learn English are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Relative importance of activities to English language learning tourists

Activity	Mean/5	Not at all important	Not important	Slightly important	Important	Very important
Meeting and interacting with local people	4.05	3	6	16	36	40
Experiencing local culture/way of life	3.80	4	9	21	36	30
Visiting historical sites	3.75	4	8	22	42	24
Going to see wildlife/animals	3.74	3	11	23	34	29
Attending cultural events and/or festivals	3.57	7	9	27	35	22
Visiting museums/art galleries	3.53	4	13	28	36	19
Going to the beach	3.50	9	11	22	35	22
Walking, hiking, trekking in nature/the mountains	3.46	5	13	30	33	18
Shopping in markets (food, arts & crafts)	3.45	5	14	29	35	17
Sightseeing in the countryside	3.43	9	16	22	30	24
Visiting small towns and villages	3.39	9	12	29	31	19
Going to shopping malls	3.38	5	18	32	26	19
Sampling local food	3.38	8	16	27	29	20
Eating in restaurants	3.36	4	18	34	28	17
Buying souvenirs to take home	3.27	8	22	26	25	19
Taking part in adrenaline sports activities (mountain biking, abseiling, bungee jumping)	3.25	10	17	29	27	17
Going on organised, guided day tours	3.24	9	17	30	28	16
Driving to scenic places	3.10	14	17	30	24	16
Working as a volunteer, contributing to the destination	3.02	15	22	26	22	16
Going to bars, pubs or nightclubs	2.89	22	20	23	20	16
Buying arts & crafts	2.77	16	26	32	16	10
Drinking coffee in coffee shops	2.69	18	31	24	18	9
Visiting a spa or hot spring resort	2.43	23	34	25	15	4

Source: Fieldwork, 2015.

Many indicated more than one reason, which included that English would help for travelling in general (36%), that they needed it to study at an English language university/college in South Africa (34%), that it would help them to get a job in their own country (31%), that it would help in their present job in their own country (24%), that it would help them to get a job in a country where the language is English (23%), or because they wanted to study at an English language university/college in a country other than South Africa (18%). Respondents chose South Africa for learning English mainly because of the price (30%), because it was nearest to their own country (12%), or because they had they had a family member living, working or studying in South Africa (12%).

Levels of satisfaction among the respondents were generally high, both regarding the academic product, and the destination itself. Almost all of the respondents (94%) indicated that they were happy with the quality of teaching at the language school where they were studying, that South Africa is good value for money (66%) and that they would recommend South Africa to others for learning English (89%). According to the respondents, the best things about their stay in South Africa included being able to learn English fast, with the opportunity to speak English daily (14%), friendly and hospitable people (14%), meeting new people and making new friends (10%) and the landscapes, natural environment and views (10%). The worst things about their experience in South Africa include crime, the perception of danger and the feeling of being unsafe, not being able to walk alone at night, and being a victim of theft (35%), xenophobia and attacks on foreigners (6%), winter weather (5%), and people asking for money in the streets (5%).

Table 1 illustrates the relative importance, according to respondents, of a variety of activities, measured on a scale of 1 (Not at all Important) to 5 (Very important). It can be seen that certain cultural activities are considered to be important or very important by the majority of respondents, such as 'Meeting and interacting with local people' (76%), 'Experiencing local culture/way of life' (66%), as well as 'Visiting historical sites' (66%), and 'Attending cultural events and festivals' (57%). Some typical tourist activities, such as 'Going to see wildlife/animals' (63%) and 'Going to the beach' (57%) are equally important to the respondents. Other activities, such as 'Visiting a spa or hot spring resort' (19%), 'Buying arts & crafts' (26%), 'Drinking coffee in coffee shops' (27%), and 'Going to bars, pubs or nightclubs' (36%), appear to attract considerably less interest. Thus most English language learners are particularly interested in cultural activities, but they also have a strong interest in certain tourist activities, although it is apparent that there is at least some keen interest in all of the listed activities. The results of the survey suggest that the English language learning market in South Africa, which is relatively homogeneous in terms of the academic product desired, may contain smaller subgroups, possibly related to countries of origin, as suggested by Frey and Nowotny (2004), with specific

combinations of cultural and other interests. There is no doubt that these activities add value to the academic experience, but may also serve to encourage English language learners to spend more time in South Africa as tourists, or more specifically cultural tourists, both during and after their language courses. In fact some 52% of the respondents indicated that they intended to travel to other parts of South Africa after completing their English course; 83% would like to return to South Africa again on holiday, and 91% would recommend South Africa to others as a holiday destination.

Conclusions

English language learners appear to be particularly interested in learning about other cultures, and experiencing local culture and way of life. Therefore it can be concluded that experiencing the culture of the destination is an important part of learning the language of the destination. The EFL tourism market in South Africa is a niche market that may differ in a number of respects from traditional backpacker and leisure tourism markets, such as length of stay and total spend, but also activity preferences, and thus deserves individual attention from tourism marketing organisations. In the increasingly competitive world of English language teaching and learning, the tourism attractiveness of the destination is certain to feature more prominently in the decision making of those who want to learn English, but need to decide where. While it is mainly proximity and price that attract the African market, something more will be needed to attract the European and Asian markets away from their traditional English language learning destinations.

South Africa can create competitive advantage by packaging its English language learning tourism offerings into something uniquely African, with a focus on the cultural attractiveness of South Africa, that will distinguish it from destinations that offer similar academic products. However, this can only succeed if local, regional and national tourism organisations work together to reduce the obstacles to learning English in South Africa, particularly those regarding visas. English language learning, in combination with South Africa's culture, wildlife and other natural attractions, together with good weather and excellent value for money, are the ingredients for a range of interesting and unique tourism products with enormous growth potential.

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