

Blended learning of tourist guides: Cultural diversity and intercultural competence

Aprendizaje a distancia de los guías del turismo: diversidad y competencia intercultural

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes certain reflections in the creation of a conceptual scaffolding to evaluate the intercultural competence of German-language tourist guides, by making use of the theory of mediation in their professional tourism context. It begins with a discussion about the importance of the German market and examines the role of the tour guide in the intercultural setting. It is considered that the development of intercultural competence has not been sufficiently studied in courses for language improvement in the tourism sector. The objective is focused on developing distance training for the development of intercultural competence in tourist guides, by making use of the theory of mediation in their professional context. It focused on a new definition of intercultural competence and the form of distance learning was proposed to assume the design and application of training.

Keywords: word, word, word cultural diversity, intercultural competence, distance learning, tour guide

RESUMEN

En el artículo se analizan reflexiones en la creación de un andamiaje conceptual para evaluar la competencia intercultural de los guías de turismo de idioma alemán, al hacer uso de la teoría de la mediación en su contexto profesional turístico. Se inicia una discusión sobre de la importancia del mercado alemán y se examina el papel del guía de turismo en el escenario intercultural. Se considera que el desarrollo de la competencia intercultural no ha sido suficientemente estudiado en cursos para el perfeccionamiento idiomático en el sector turístico cubano. El objetivo se centra en desarrollar un entrenamiento de capacitación a distancia para el desarrollo de la competencia intercultural en guías turísticos, al hacer uso de la teoría de la mediación en su contexto profesional. El artículo reunió una nueva definición de competencia intercultural y se propuso la forma de aprendizaje a distancia para asumir el diseño y su aplicación.

Palabras clave: diversidad cultural, competencia intercultural, aprendizaje a distancia, guía de turismo

INTRODUCTION

The international tourism industry could face in the next 2021 a growing number of travelers to the Caribbean area. The tourist market has become the major source of resources in Cuba during the last decade and has shown strong growth until 2019 in arrivals to our country; specifically, from the German market that grew in 2019 by more than 243,000 travelers, so it is expected to be one of the largest sources of international tourists to Cuba beyond next year.

The increase in the proportion of the number of tourists from the German-speaking market against the number of travelers from other markets to Cuba will demand the development of new marketing strategies that need to be adapted to this tourism market. This increase is considered to have caught the tourism industry off guard. Its Cuban professionals are unable to distinguish between the peculiarities of the clients that come from this geographical area and are all contained under the label of "German market", which includes the German itself, which continues to be different according to which part of that "wall imaginario" meets and also the Austrian and Swiss client, as they do not have knowledge about the cultural particularities of these European visitors.

Consequently, the tourism training system will face new challenges and must continue to learn about the German-speaking tourism market; It has to develop more trainings with a cultural orientation more accentuated to the degree of cultural sensitivity of the visitors. According to this context, cultural sensitivity (Morales, 2017) is expressed in the "necessary capacity to assume the role of mediator between Cuban and German culture, when addressing, confronting and solving misunderstandings between these cultures and problematic situations of this nature.". It is considered a process of self-development and a resource in the face of conflicts in which the abandonment of ethnocentrism is required.

The success of retaining this still growing market in our country will depend on recognizing and responding quickly to the needs of the different clients coming from this area, especially the German, Swiss or Liechtenstein and Austrian clients and, at the same time, attend to their differences.

Tourists' perceptions of those who take care of them du-

ring their stay can reinforce their experiences or intimidate them into repeating the visit. These perceptions are extremely important, particularly for tourists of German origin. More needs to be learned about how cultural differences affect tourist behavior. Its influence on perceptions of the destination and on professionals in direct contact with visitors is considered to be of particular importance.

German-speaking tourists come to Cuba for a relatively short time, mainly in groups organized in circuits and in this environment that they develop they limit contact with local individuals. According to Armstrong and Mok (1997), "tourists develop their perceptions through direct contact with service providers who are often the only points of contact with visitors. Cultural differences between tourists and service providers can affect their social experiences and their satisfaction with each other". By understanding cultural differences, our professionals can develop and offer new cultural features of a tourism product as added values.

For a tourist destination like Cuba, it is considered vital to train its tourism employees on the cultural foundation of its visitors, especially German-speaking visitors. It is essential that suppliers understand and focus on the cultural needs of different markets. The growth of these markets with different cultural perceptions not only represents a challenge and an opportunity for the Cuban tourism sector worker but also for our tourism market. In the opinion of this author, it is of great importance to understand their cultural orientation when broadening the purpose of marketing and highlighting market segmentation and designing new advertising campaigns. Therefore, it is a challenge to possess the ability to respond to the peculiarities of each market and not simply adopt global marketing programs.

The organizers of the circuits personify the first points of contact with tourists. Therefore, the cultural differences in interpersonal interaction in the context of tourism must be clarified in these two groups, tourists and organizers. The participants in this meeting in the field of Cuban-German tourism or other German-speaking countries, start from their own cultural assumptions, many subjectively justified, when selecting travel guides, observing images and advertising in the media. Its effect is decisive for the cultural perception of the message.

The success or failure of the intercultural encounter depends a lot on the perception of cultural differences. Therefore, it is essential to train professionals who have direct contact with tourists, in this specific case our tour guides, through the design of distance training training to improve their skills in specific intercultural situations.

There is no specialized material in the field of tourism that shows how to approach intercultural communication. In this specific case, working with the specialized vocabulary in the area of tourist orientation and gathering regional information on visitors from other German-speaking countries has been insufficient for Cuban tourist guides. The ignorance of the cultural arsenal of the foreign market and the lack of recognition of the values of our own culture have become important aspects that must be considered in the content of the education and training courses aimed at this profession. Hence, the objective of this work is framed in creating a distance training training and promoting from it the development of intercultural competence in Cuban tour guides who have a direct exchange with tourists from the German market.

The study proposes the use of the two main actors in the training process: the teacher-student binomial. This responds to the Blended Learning process (García Aretio, 2001), which can be used, in moments of blendedness and in others, where it is associated with distance learning of students. This process makes use of the advantages of online and face-to-face training, combining them with a type of training that streamlines the work of both the teacher and the student.

Professional training is considered a form of professional improvement aimed at enabling university graduates or upper secondary level, such is the case of professional tourism guides, to acquire, expand and continuously improve their knowledge and skills required to raise their skills in your job performance. Furthermore, from the methodological point of view, the qualitative paradigm and the ethnographic method are assumed in this work. This method is assumed in attention to appropriate techniques and instruments to collect and analyze information and for the description of students with previous professional experience within the training courses for tourism guides. The results allowed obtaining the internal perspective of the participants in this type of training.

The selected aspects are consistent with the interests re-

flected in the instruments previously applied. The undesirable aspects that the application of these instruments produced have a precise influence on the behavior of clients who travel to Cuba. This prevents them from becoming repeaters, mediating the results of their stay, the fulfillment of their expectations, the disclosure of the experience upon their return and the persuasion for others to visit us. This situation would be reversed if a broader training approach were taken into consideration, from the training process of these professionals. To this end, it was decided to frame intercultural competence in postgraduate German language training in the system for Cuban tourism training as the object of study of this work, while its objective was concentrated on developing a distance training training for the development of this competition in German-language tour guides.

The distance training training has as a secondary objective, the consolidation and promotion of habits and skills as well as the information and values of the profession through various exercises, such as descriptions, critical debates, simulation exercises and group discussions.

METHODOLOGY MATERIALS AND METHODS

Distance education (EaD), according to Collazo (2004), emerges as a form of teaching in which students do not need to physically attend the place of study. In this teaching system, the student receives the study material personally, by email or other possibilities offered by the Internet.

Currently, the use of innovative means of communication is a constitutive part of a training in foreign languages and provides a valuable tool to support us in both professional and general issues through an additional process of distance or semi-face-to-face teaching and learning. The characterization of distance training training, together with its two components, the methodological indications and the assumed evaluation system should contribute to the gradual development of strategies based on intercultural dialogue, aimed at promoting cultural sensitivity, through the use of the foreign language.

The strategies based on intercultural dialogue defined by Böhm (2014) include "the ability to relate the culture of origin and the foreign one; one's own cultural sensitivity; the ability to identify and use strategies to establish contact with people from other cultures, together with the

ability to promote the role of cultural mediator between the mother's culture and the target culture; to deal effectively with conflict situations and the ability to overcome relationships marked by negative stereotypes towards other cultures”.

In this regard, the researcher Bachmann (2017) deciphered certain questions from the study on intercultural sensitivity within the Development Model for Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), described in 1993 by Bennet and Hammer. The DMIS outlines the successive phases of cultural sensitivity and is understood through individual progress, associated with particular attitudes and behaviors. They are characterized by a phase of ethnocentric rejection, defense, and minimization, states in which the individual sees his own culture as the center and makes judgments about other cultures according to his own and another known as the ethno-relative phase, when the individual accepts, he adapts and integrates. In this phase, individuals recognize cultural differences and understand that their own culture is one of many and is considered equally valid.

The tour guide, if he does not have university training in the foreign language, is generally unaware of aspects of the target culture that should be addressed in the training. To achieve the desired ethnorelative phase, the experiences of the guides 'work will be considered and it is advocated to fill the students' gaps in the knowledge of their own culture. From the moment he begins to go through that phase, his role is not limited to that of a profession in the sector, but must be seen as cultural mediators. As the dependence of visitors on tour guides is high, their performance as a cultural mediator is a significant factor that contributes to the quality of intercultural encounters and their experiences.

According to Torres (2003), a cultural mediator requires “a broader cultural and linguistic perspective than that of the average educated man or that of the professional in other spheres of knowledge”. The tour guide must have skills that allow him to act favorably on the quality of the interaction, that facilitate the establishment, maintenance and repair of communication between people of different languages and cultures. He must have knowledge in relation to the interaction processes at a social and individual level and know the characteristic social groups of both cultures, their beliefs, meanings and values and the expected behaviors.

The guide's performance influences the tourist's experience in a fundamental way. In the same way that the group depends on its guide for idiomatic interpretation, the latter establishes the mediation and interaction of the group with the communities of the mediator in different social settings. In his role as cultural mediator he facilitates communication, understanding and action between people who differ in language and culture. Guides play a direct role in mediating cultural exchange between visitors and representatives of the target culture and reinforcing the experiences of tourists.

The theory and research in this aspect of the mediation of tour guides have not anticipated the considerable increase in tourists from this market, despite its obvious importance. In this framework, for guides who lead tourist groups made up of different cultures, it is key to reflect on the reference frameworks used to understand and address, for example, cultural diversity, referred to by Costa and Ravetto (2018). These frameworks refer to the “degrees of knowledge that is handled about the cultures with which they are related, ways of understanding cultural diversity and the identification of their contributions in the processes to operate”. Likewise, it is pertinent to identify which are the skills that the organization promotes or tolerates of its members (for example, promoting meaningful experiences that allow interaction and exchange of meanings between members of different cultures).

From the activities to be developed during the training they will make the students reflect on their own social reality and contrast it with others so that the tasks contribute to training in the foreign working language, respect and tolerance of cultural diversity. As an example, it is correct to identify interaction features according to the relationships established between the Cuban guide and Latin American representatives and, on the other hand, the work of our professionals with German tourists or tourists of this origin. In the first case; Among members of collectivist cultures, such as ours, interaction is geared towards the group's interests and needs. Social relations between individuals are perceived as referring to their social utility and within the circuit these are characterized by group activities; sharing and doing things together establishes dependency, group loyalty and prevails general agreement, inclusion and immediacy as features to be highlighted.

In contrast, Germans or their German-speaking neighbors, belonging to a more individualistic culture, care

more about the needs of the individual and their well-being. They place greater emphasis on exclusive relationships and "perform the acts as their own" Müller-Jacquier, B. (2017). The perception of recollection is strong and the relationships between individuals that coincide within the groups in the most distant circuit. Isolation is positively perceived and withdrawal from other people is respected. Consequently, this is seen as a phenomenon with selfish nuances where individual benefit is detrimental to collective interests. Depending on the degree of cultural divergence, the guide must make use of their cultural competencies and assimilate that guiding is not conceived in the same way for a group of Spanish-speakers as for a German-speaking group, even when the same objects are observed in the same places.

The repertoire of the types of communicative interaction varies according to each culture in question. Solutions to communication problems within one culture need not correspond to solutions in another culture. Furthermore, a specific communication problem can be seen as something habitual within one culture, while the same problem emerges in another culture as something unusual. Held, G. (2019) expresses that "knowledge about the types of communicative interaction not only refers to the knowledge of the type or situations that are used, but also to the types that are also involved in this knowledge."

According to cultural and historical changes and on the basis of cultural variations, the types of communicative interaction have become an unavoidable topic in the intercultural research field, as well as the linguistic in the idiomatic context for professional purposes. The types of interaction are not only complex, but also generate an interactive model of performance during exchanges between professionals and visitors. They are built acting reciprocally by means of a scaffolding and represent a considerable palliative to communication; They relieve the individual of the need to reflect again on a specific model in each communicative situation and when deciding between uncertain possibilities.

German-speaking tourists come from different territories and try to become familiar with social and cultural practices, experiences and condition their habits explicitly or implicitly to the established models that reach them through communication. At this moment a mutual enrichment can originate, which would also involve our professional, as, in the same way, cooperation can be jeopardized by deriving

in the drag of stereotypical attitudes until developing an apprehensive and alarming behavior.

A trait identified by Ting-Toomey (1999) as important for the successful performance of our professionals is the so-called intercultural empathy, manifested in the "ability to respectfully observe and react to the other communication process through verbal language and non-verbal sensitivity". In fact, many intercultural communication theorists judge this perceptual acuity of certain individuals as important for observing and interpreting other actions through a broad cultural prism. This author also describes an important factor for the success of intercultural competence, highlighting the ability to manage psychological tension. The emotional aspect of facing failures, confusion and mistakes and continuing to work towards positive interactions is identified as an effective component for the development of intercultural communication skills.

RESULTS AND DISCUSION

In this study, intercultural competence is assumed as the ability of the learner with command of the foreign language to exercise self-awareness about their culture, possess knowledge of the target culture and know how to interact and behave between both, making use of knowledge, strategies or skills and attitudes in his conversion as a cultural mediator. Knowing and being able to sensitize, raise awareness, relativize and get involved in effectively solving specific problems of a social nature fosters this ability, by properly handling situations that arise from communication with people from other cultural settings.

The achievement of intercultural competence is the result of the adaptability or the individual's ability to suspend or modify some archaic cultural behaviors, to learn and accommodate new ones, and to find ways to handle the dynamics of difference, assuming an intergroup position and diminishing the tension. Certainly, Kim (2001) proposed three dimensions related to the concept of intercultural adaptability and made them correspond with the cognitive dimension that is established when the interpretive mechanisms of an individual or structures that assign meaning to the messages, the affective dimension linked to motivation intercultural of an individual and the behavioral dimension, by reflecting the abilities of an individual to be flexible and be willing using their cognitive and affective abilities.

Success before the cultural mediation of a tour guide depends largely on three essential factors, such as: knowledge of the language and of their own culture, their organizational attitudes and their skills in interpersonal communication. These three dimensions, as well as cognitive, affective and behavioral factors contribute to understanding and analyzing intercultural communicative competence in the context of the tour guide. According to Sommer (2018), effective guides have an “arsenal of extensive knowledge about tourist sites and attractions. In addition, they must have a solid foundation of the culture they interpret, as well as the culture of their clients”. Your cultural arsenal could be considered the most important and includes cultural values, idiomatic, communication styles, customs and gadgets. Armed with such knowledge, guides can provide their clients with insightful insights into a destination, leading to an understanding of what is presumed to be "real" and "authentic" in a way; which is considered unlikely of success without attending cultural trainings for these professionals or having been “culturally immersed”.

From the communicative point of view, the anecdotes of the tour guides help tourists to understand and accept local customs without the superfluous value judgments that are made on them, and they can show visitors how to act in a way that Do not consider the opposite of the norms and the projections of local thought, by personifying, according to the tourist's vision, many of the national characteristics of the indigenous population. The attitude that the guides project, in the eyes of the visitor, reflects a lot about the local culture and makes a lasting impression on the destination that the visitors will take home with them. It is perhaps this element that exerts a notable influence on the psyche of the tourist, when it is taken up again in the narrations about the tourist destination visited before friends, family and other new potential clients.

However, just the knowledge of a tour guide is not enough in mediation. Guides also need to have the right attitudes for effective mediation, including fostering empathy and respect for visitors. In a given situation, cultural mistakes and misunderstandings can be avoided or they can be more easily reconciled by the intervention of the guide who possesses this intercultural heritage and the ability to communicate effectively between the two cultures. Effective communication means that guides negotiate shared meanings by appropriating them and deploying dissimilar strategies and effective behaviors to achieve the results that they and their clients desire.

The intercultural communicative competence of a tour guide has a positive effect on visitor satisfaction by contributing to the quality of the intercultural experience during their trip. The narration of historical anecdotes and the proper use of sayings should be present on the tourist route. For this, the guide must show off his previous personal knowledge and observe frequently how the group is manifesting itself. It is vitally important how people and groups are socially categorized during the sightseeing tour.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the experiences gathered in the exchanges with some tour guides, it is concluded that this training should be designed and implemented to improve their skills in certain intercultural situations. Its design is feasible to encourage the mediation of situations, with the outline of the following reasons: The tourist guide, if he does not have university training in the foreign language, does not know aspects of the target culture. The experiences of the work of the tour guides will be considered, the students' gaps in the knowledge of their own culture will be supplied, activities for group work will be incorporated, as the daily performance of the professional tour guide is considered.

The exposed reflections have prepared a basis for evaluating, from there to the intercultural competence of these professionals, when making use of intercultural communication and the theory of mediation in the tourist context. The factors that affect the intercultural competence of the guide are contained in this framework, together with the characteristics of the visitor and their combined influence on tourist satisfaction. The conceptual framework that has been outlined suggests that a combination of these factors will determine the level of understanding of the visitors and their satisfaction with the intercultural experience in the guided tour.

These reflections are expected to contribute to further research on the role of this competence in the work of the tour guide. Given the scarcity of explorations in this area, scaffolding should prove useful in capturing a good understanding of the intercultural experience during a tourist trip and the role of the guide in that experience. On a practical level, it is expected that the factors of intercultural competence can be applied in training, according to the needs, as well as in experimental behaviors that help to regenerate and further expand the growing flow of visitors from the German market to our country.

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