



The Challenges of Developing Students' Competencies in French for Specific Purposes in Ugandan Universities: the Case of Students of Leisure and Hospitality and Tourism Business

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify key difficulties to developing competencies in French for specific purposes of students of Leisure and hospitality and tourism business in Ugandan universities. French is a language spoken in East Africa Community (EAC), a "neighborhood" language, a language of Trade and Tourism businesses. Cross border activities are very important within the EAC as well as with its neighboring countries. The development of these activities includes the ability to share one or several regional languages and the ability to speak one of the continental languages, a case in point of French. In addition, Tourism is an important sector which is capable of significantly contributing towards socio-economic transformation of the Ugandan economy. For instance, France is the fourth biggest tourism spender in the world, with some 1.6 million French nationals visiting Africa every year. However, only 15,000 of these choose Uganda as a destination, a small number, especially when compared to the United Kingdom's 60,000. It can be logically derived that such a disparity occurs as a result of language and cultural barriers. Yet given Uganda's geographical location next to Rwanda, Burundi and Democratic Republic of Congo, there should be more French interest in the country. The key to realizing this potential lies in the development of local capacity to use French language in addition to English language and local languages in order to communicate, manage, interpret, and market the resources that are the foundation of sustainable tourism. Ugandan graduates who are products of Leisure and Hospitality and Tourism courses have to frequently deal with foreign tourists and this calls for the graduates to be proficient in the working languages to engage in effective communication. In the framework of the paper the author endeavors to analyze the hitches in French language skills in the Tourism graduates by identifying major challenges through exploratory research. Students of Leisure and Hospitality and Tourism of MUBS and Makerere University will constitute the population size. Random sampling method shall be used. Both questionnaires and interviews shall be used as data collection methods and key difficulties shall be determined through factor analysis.

Keywords: French for specific purposes competencies, challenge, Trade and Tourism businesses

1.0 Background and Justification

Tourism is Uganda's largest foreign exchange earner contributing more than 10 per cent to the annual gross domestic product and 23 per cent of export earnings. This is set to increase with efforts from Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) already penetrating more foreign tourism markets in the Nordic region that include Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Iceland and Norway and other markets in Asia, Arabic region and the Pan-African Market. In Uganda, the sector has enjoyed exponential growth since the turn of the century, with visitor arrivals increasing from 200,000 in 2000 to over a 1.3 million in 2016. Although France is the fourth biggest tourism spender in the world, with some 1.6 million French nationals visiting Africa every year, only 15,000 of these choose Uganda as a destination, a small number, especially when compared to the United Kingdom's 60,000. Logically speaking, such an inequality in tourist arrivals to Uganda could be attributed to language and cultural barriers as alluded to by the French Ambassador to Uganda, in the recent past. Yet given Uganda's geographical location next to Rwanda, Burundi and Democratic Republic of Congo, there should be more French interest in the country. The success to gigantic and constant marketing lies in embracing foreign languages acquisition in order to take advantage of the inbound tourist population. The development of French-speaking tourism in Uganda would produce a substantial demand for the travel, hotel & restaurant management sector. Future partnerships between the French

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Embassy, Alliance Française de Kampala and UTB, are certainly an excellent way of promoting French for specific and professional purposes within the Uganda Tourism Industry. Call centers looking for qualified and multilingual workers also represent a key target.

1.1 Problem Statement

The number of tourists that Uganda gets is still much lower than what it ought to be. Close to 15,000 French nationals choose Uganda as a touristic destination compared to the United Kingdom's 60,000. Such a disproportion occurs as a result of language and cultural barriers (Lauring, J. 2008) and to the low extent to which French language (FL) is used in Uganda to foster tourism development. The FL in particular has not been well developed to promote tourism in Uganda and in the region. Yet in the modern interpretation of its functions, the FL as a foreign language is considered not only an instrument of the cross-cultural communication, but also an essential tool for the international professional development and career growth of the specialists. The interest in French in Ugandan universities is increasing, particularly in the fields of hospitality, catering, tourism (see Atcero 2013, 2015) but as observed by JJ Richer in an expert mission organized from March 28 to April 1, 2016, it appears that all the curricula related to the teaching of French in Ugandan universities are not drawn from French for Specific Purposes (FSP) and therefore they do not target any specific profession hence the challenge of drawbacks and the question of employability. There is need to identify and target some priority jobs in the curricula and focus on them such as hotel receptionist, front office manager. Therefore in an increasingly multilingual, multicultural society like Uganda, high-quality hospitality care requires overcoming these 2 barriers (language and cultural barriers) to effective communication with tourists.

1.2 Objective

To examine the key difficulties to developing competencies in FSP of students of Leisure and hospitality and tourism business in Ugandan universities and identify best practices that may contribute to the improvement of the current language situation.

1.3 Review of relevant literature

The travel and tourism sector has emerged as one of the most important sectors for developing and developed countries. Tourism incorporates many of the features of the information society such as globalization, mobility and information richness. Additionally, increased globalization is forcing a growing number of business managers and employees to interact across linguistic boundaries (Lauring, 2008). Since language affects almost all aspects of everyday life, there is need for more of focus on communication barriers by researchers and practitioners engaged in international business and management (Henderson, 2005). The issue of language barriers is particularly critical during intercultural service encounters. Intercultural service encounters, where the customer and the service provider are from different cultures, is very common in the service sector, especially in the Tourism Industry. (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 2002)

In view of the above, Uganda service providers in tourism sector need to acquire the ability to understand and be understood in the languages of the worldwide neighborhood, as expounded by Ntakirutimana (2014). "Foreign language is crucial to our nation's economic competitiveness and national security. Multilingualism enhances cognitive and social growth, competitiveness in the global marketplace (four out of five new jobs in the United States are created from foreign trade), national security, and understanding of diverse people and cultures. As we approach a new century where global communication will be essential for survival, we cannot afford the luxury of international ignorance..." In this light, in order to enhance regional and global competitiveness, of Ugandan graduates *who are products of Leisure and Hospitality and Tourism courses*, foreign language programmes need to become an essential part of Uganda's strategic plan. The latter calls for the speakers to be proficient in the working languages in order to ensure effective professional business and social communication. This way Uganda will contribute to an increased number of speakers of diverse foreign languages required for effective participation in regional and international platforms that are pervading the world and which are embraced by many countries especially in the field of tourism, trade and commerce, peacekeeping, innovation and also the technological advancements. These principles call for the speakers to be proficient in the working languages to engage in effective communication.



According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment, a Proficient user or a person who has mastery of the French language can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes among others. In addition, existing literature also indicates that language use and language-learning are social activities. They occur best in situations which encourage negotiation of meaning and learner collaboration with other learners. Language learning necessarily involves active participation through taking risks, testing hypotheses, making plans and decisions, and making judgments about one's own progress (Wilheim: 1999). When these approaches are implemented, students learn to help themselves learn; ask for help from each other and from the teacher; learn language by using it in real settings (ibid). Studies conducted by SLA researchers found out that through collaboration on a project, students use and manipulate language in a natural language environment.

1.4 Recommendation

In the light of the above, in order to enhance regional and global competitiveness, of Ugandan graduates who are products of Leisure and Hospitality and Tourism courses, the following observations could generate some strategies:

- French language could be developed in Uganda of today alongside English language and local languages to foster tourism development far and beyond.
- Many organizations in the travel and tourism industry and/or Service Providers in Tourism sector in Uganda could employ French in addition, as a language to market touristic destinations and products for the benefit of the potential customer.
- Ugandan Universities could promote FSP in order to help different service providers acquire FL for tourism, trade and exchanges at regional, continental and international levels. As part of language acquisition, the Universities could place a particular emphasis on helping the employees gain advanced oral proficiency in French while developing a concern for, awareness of, and appreciation of the diversity of local, international, and global cultures.
- There is need for Ugandan government to institute a clear policy and strategy at national level that encourages students at all levels to learn an extra foreign language beyond English and to support Educational institutions
- Graduates should be able to view the world, not from the single perspective of their own first language and culture, but from the multiple perspectives gained through the study of additional languages and cultures.

2. Conclusion

It is therefore my understanding that as service providers, the Ugandan graduates working with UTB, have the social responsibility to inform tourists about issues that may affect the environment and social situation of an area. The key to realizing this potential lies in the development of the capacity of Ugandan graduates to use FL in addition to English language and local languages in order to communicate, manage, interpret, and market the resources that are the foundation of sustainable tourism. Ugandan universities have a crucial role to play in order to enhance the global competitiveness, internationalization of their under graduates. FSP competencies programs should become an essential part of Ugandan universities' strategic plan.

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