

Some Techniques to Improve the Language Ability of International Tour Guides in Vietnam in order to Develop the Economy of the Country: A Case of Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract

Vietnam's tourism industry is currently developing very quickly with a very fast integration rate. This is one of the key economic sectors for many years now with a huge demand for tour guide personnel. Although opening many attractive opportunities, but at the same time, this is a job with many challenges in the tourism industry with clear human screening standards, requiring a lot of knowledge and skills. Vietnam is growing in all areas such as economy, culture-society, education and tourism is also on the rise. However, the quality of tour guides in general and foreign language speaking guides in particular that has really met the requirement is still a question. This article is intended to provide an overview of some limitations of foreign language speaking guides in Ho Chi Minh City in order to identify the causes and ways to improve their level. The paper is completed thanks to the support of 40 tour guides and by analyzing related data from recent research. The results show that it is necessary to improve the quality of tour guides in Vietnam, especially language skills.

Keywords : Development, Knowledge, Guides, Tourist, Techniques

1. Introduction

Up to now, there have not been many articles on the current situation of foreign language guides. Provided that there were, the articles have not discussed deeply the quality of human resources working in the smokeless industry (Howard et al., 2001). Besides, the fact is that most of the guides can't really meet the needs of the growing society. The quality of the guides seems to be still low. What are the reasons for not being easy to solve this problem? How can we contribute to further improving the professional quality of the guides in order to create a force with the mission of "ambassadors" to promote the image of the country and the Vietnamese people to the a foreign language such as English, Japanese or Korean in particular and other ethnic groups in general (Carmody, 2013). A tourist guide is a person who uses language to introduce and explain to visitors about the beauty and features of the landscapes, culture and nature of the places where tourists are visiting (Mackenzie, & Raymond, 2020).

From the outside, this is quite a flashy job because when you become a tourist guide, you will be able to go everywhere without spending your own money, have an attractive salary and especially always have fresh smiles . In addition, the tourist guide job is ranked in the top of the professions with sustainable and long-term development with many opportunities for future development (Carmody, 2013).

2 Research content

2.1 Foreign language skills of tourist guides are low and inconsistent

2.1.1 Current situation

According to the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, the country currently has about 20,000 international tourist guide card holders, while the number of tourists is about 10 million in 2017. The training and further improvement of tourist guide quality is always a matter of concern (Ap & Wong, 2001). The system of universities, colleges and vocational schools providing tourism training in Vietnam is quite diverse. However, in reality, training programs at schools have not paid much attention to practical skills that are essential for tour guides, especially tourist guides who interact with foreign tourists like Chinese or Japanese tourists (Figure 1).

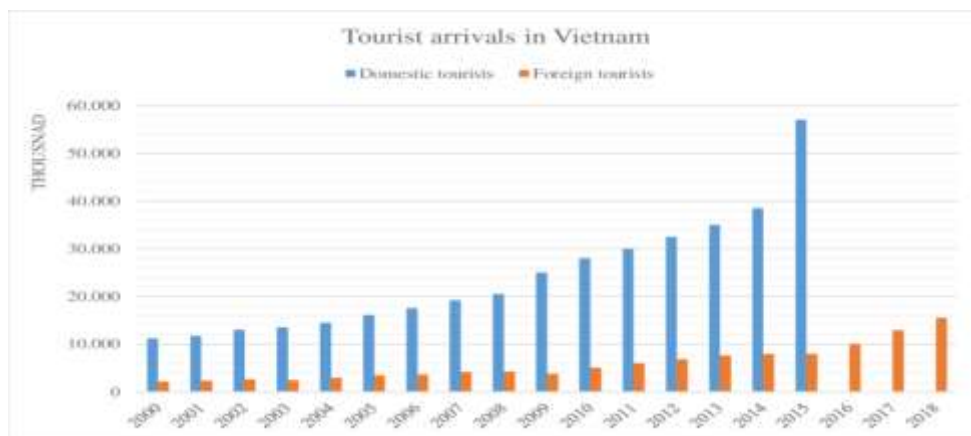


Figure 1. The numbers of international tourists going to Vietnam from 2000-2018

One of the current weaknesses of the tourist guide force is that the ability to communicate in foreign languages is still limited (Mackenzie, & Raymond, 2020). Current international certifications such as Toeic or Toefl only stop at testing and evaluating the general knowledge of the guide using this language. There is a shortcoming that the training of tourist guides using rare foreign languages such as Thai, Spanish, Thai, Russian and Japanese is limited and has not met the requirements of the ever-growing tourism market. The supply of rare foreign language instructors is inadequate and specialized foreign language training programs are lack of the diversity. To find a center or a foreign language school specializing in tourism is probably not easy, while the need to learn and improve knowledge of tour guides is not small (Black, & Ham, 2005).

2.1.2 Survey and discussion results

Through the form of answering multiple-choice questionnaires, the questionnaire was made by professional guides and in Ho Chi Minh City. The questionnaire is divided into three parts. The first part consists of 3 questions revolving around issues related to the necessary knowledge and skills of tourist guides (Table 1).

Table 1. Knowledge and skills needed

Questions	Total: 40 tourist guides			
	A	B	C	D
1. What foreign language proficiency certificate have you got?	Bachelor	International certificate (Toeic, Toefl)	National certificate (B,C)	Not achieved yet
	7	23	10	0
2. What professional certificate have you got?	International tourist guide certificate	National tourist guide certificate	Not achieved yet	Studying
	10	17	7	6
3. What professional courses have you attended?	Professional course for outbound tourist guides	Professional course for inbound tourist guides	Foreign language for tourism	Not attended yet
4. Do you intend to attend courses in tourism or related to foreign language?	Totally agree	Agree	Not agree	Others
	8	20	5	7

The results show that, in the first question, the majority of tourist guides were interested in having equipped themselves with a necessary amount of foreign language knowledge to communicate and guide foreign language-speaking tourists. They were always aware of having a relevant certificate or degree, even though these qualifications were still not up to a certain standard for a person working in the tourism industry (Sirakaya et al., 2003). The second and third questions showed the fact that there were still many tourist guides who did not have international tourist cards. That means that the level of this group was still limited. Although experience is a very important thing in any field, owning a practicing card is a must for a guide working in the field of guiding and spreading Vietnamese culture to international visitors. Most of the tourist guides in question 4 said that they really wanted to improve their practical level but had lack of a reputable teaching institution or suitable courses (Mackenzie, & Raymond, 2020).

In the second part, the questionnaire includes four questions to find out the quality of foreign language guides (Table 2). Most guides were not confident to choose the answer "Excellent" because it was not always easy to convey a message correctly to native speakers. The way of serving and the ability to entertain is not the same for all tourist guides. Besides, they have limitation in their own ability.

Table 2. Knowledge of tourist guides

Questions	Total: 40 tourist guides			
	Excellent	Very good	Good	Average
1. How would you rate your foreign language ability?	0	20	10	6
2. How would you rate your general knowledge capacity?	Excellent	Very good	Good	Average
	2	12	16	6
3. How would you rate your animation ability?	Excellent	Very good	Good	Average
	0	10	17	9
4. How would you rate your customer service?	Excellent	Very good	Good	Average
	2	20	14	0

Becoming a professional and qualified tour guide (mentioned in Chapter 7 of the Law on Tourism) with excellent language skills as well as attentive service is a dream of many people operating in the tourism industry (Ap & Wong, 2001).

Appearance is absolutely a factor that helps a tourist guide to have a favorable judge from the visitors when they first meet. However, that is not very important because the spirit in the presentation for a long route. The way the tourist guide leads the story is really important. To be able to do it, the tourist guide must have a general knowledge from various fields such as socio-cultural, historical and even economic or political fields. With the results in the third table, it is obvious that knowledge and foreign languages determine the success of the tour guide. Certainly, when tour guides are busy of tours, then travel businesses will increase revenue and gain prestige from tourists who have participated in travel programs (Howard et al., 2001).

3. The reasons leading to the low quality of tourist guides

There are a number of reasons why the quality of a foreign language speaking has not been as expected.

3.1 There are no specialized courses in foreign languages in tourism

In order to maintain the existence and function well for a training institution, there must be two important first factors including teachers and learners. The next factors are how the program is, whether it is suitable with the reality of society, followed by the tuition fee or the location of the training institution suitable for learners (Hoi, 2019). The reality of foreign language training in some educational institutions in Ho Chi Minh City still has not had a certain synchronization of the curriculum framework. Most training institutions only enroll students in basic courses from elementary, intermediate to advanced levels, but do not have specific courses in favor of tourism. Specialized phrases and explanations for visitors are mostly composed by tourist guides thanks to their learning from previous guides or a few documents from the working agency. Currently, there is no overall framework for training an tourist guide from the beginning to mastery. Universities with foreign language departments only teach general foreign knowledge, while tourism departments teach foreign country culture and knowledge in Vietnamese (Huang et al., 2007).

3.2 There are no specialized textbooks

Currently, the major bookstores in the city have a variety of foreign language learning books, but to find a book for advanced practice guides, there may not be any. If there were, then they would be just books written about very simple conversations not enough to serve the depth and breadth of knowledge a professional tour guide needs to have. Guide books for foreign people are usually only sold in foreign countries so not all tourist guides can easily own them. Even if they have them, specialized knowledge and complex Chinese characters cannot be fully understood by all instructors (Hoi, 2019).

3.3 The training classes are not up to standard

Except for a few prestigious foreign language centers and some high-quality foreign language classes from Ho Chi Minh City University of Pedagogy and Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, there are rare centers with high quality. The quality of teachers is also diverse. To teach classes, there are many teaching institutions only recruiting teachers with intermediate level, while this level is not enough to teach well. It is not easy to recruit teachers with higher qualifications with advanced or Master's level. It is rare for foreign language teachers specializing in tourism to have experienced leading groups of tourists. The output standards of each center are also different and it is not easy to achieve a level of proficiency with the orientation of being a foreign language speaking guide (Huang et al., 2007).

3.4 The low motivation to raise the level of tourist guide

Although the tables mentioned above show that the guides have a desire to improve their professional skills and industry knowledge, it is not always easy (Sirakaya et al., 2003). For tourist guides working in the tourism industry, it is hard to leave the group for going to an advanced school to study as travel programs often include a complicated dinner schedule or airport pick-up.

Moreover, when tourist guides have more certificates, whether they can increase their income or not is also an issue that needs to be discussed.

4. Recommended solutions

It is necessary to develop and design specific programs to train new tourist guides and improve the quality of existing guides. If the proposed program is not suitable in terms of content and duration, it should be designed to suit reality. A program of study cannot be too short in a month or two, nor should it be too long in order to avoid unnecessary waste. It is necessary to develop an output standard when the tourist guide begins to study a general, specialized foreign language program or a related tourism study program. If the output standard is low, it can be raised to most reasonable (Weiler & Black, 2015).

It is necessary to focus on learning presentations methodically with standard pronunciation, appropriate voice up and down. At the same time, tourist guides also need to be equipped with pragmatic tourism terms and phrases. For example, when explaining about the Reunification Palace in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, the tourist guide must know how to use the phrases correctly, not arbitrarily translate them. When explaining about Cu Chi Tunnel, it must be introduced considerably so as to avoid encountering sensitive factors or offending visitors (Black, & Ham, 2005).

Focusing on recruiting and training qualified and experienced teachers is also a solution. It can be experienced tourist guides, have tourist guide cards and have good leadership and animation skills. The lecturers of universities or overseas Vietnamese students from a foreign country can also be a source of knowledge that can be used to train the guides effectively (Tan, 2021).



Figure 2. Real activities during training sessions

It is recommended to train bilingual foreign language – Vietnamese language in knowledge and general skills so that tour guides can operate in the field of domestic (inbound) and foreign (outbound) in tourism. The tour guides are not only limited to one type of foreign language tourists going to Vietnam, but also Vietnamese tourists traveling to a foreign country (Figure 2). When coming to that country, the tour guides will not find it embarrassed to act as a translator and narrator since they experienced real cases already (Black, & Ham, 2005).

There should be investment in building standard foreign language classes with the most appropriate and effective teaching aids and equipment. foreign language clubs and travel talks also need to be paid more attention to create a playground and exchange between new and old tourist guides (Ap & Wong, 2001).

5. Conclusion

In order to further improve the quality of tourism services, especially foreign tourist guide services, businesses and related agencies need to pay more attention to the process of foreign language training for students, encourage tourist guides to improve their own skills and participate in necessary courses to serve the delegations in the best way. In addition, the competent authorities in the tourism industry need to take measures to correct and bring Vietnam's tourism activities to a higher, more professional level so as to be able to compete with other countries. To become a professional guide, tourist guides need to improve their English and other languages depending on specific working environment. Proficiency in foreign languages is a huge advantage when working in the tourism industry, making it easy for employees to have many attractive opportunities.

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