



ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

## The context of Language Tourism in Mexico

*El contexto del Turismo Idiomático en México*

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## Abstract

Globally, the tourism sector has been greatly affected by the pandemic due to the social confinement, in the face of this situation, tourism is a key sector for social, economic, and cultural development; therefore the benefits of this activity are incalculable. This document presents reflections as well as an analysis of the current context of language tourism which is a relatively new field of study. The objective of this paper is to deepen the existing knowledge on the subject and to analyze the potential of language tourism and the state of the art of this important segment of cultural tourism.

**Keywords:** language tourism, tourism development, cultural tourism

## Resumen

En la actualidad, a nivel mundial el turismo ha sido muy afectado por la pandemia debido al confinamiento social, ante esta situación, se considera un sector clave para el desarrollo social, económico y cultural; por ende los beneficios de esta actividad son incalculables. El presente documento presenta reflexiones así como un análisis del contexto actual del turismo idiomático, que es un campo de estudio relativamente nuevo. El objetivo de este artículo es profundizar en el conocimiento existente sobre el tema y analizar el potencial del turismo idiomático y el estado del arte de este importante segmento del turismo cultural.

**Términos clave:** turismo idiomático, desarrollo turístico, turismo cultural

## 1. Introducción

In the middle of the twentieth-century tourism began to be an interesting activity, over time it has been growing in environmental, educational and technological terms. From the 1960s (Perez & Camberos, 2015) and at the beginning of the '70s tourism began to study (Ascanio, 2017). In view of the current conditions generated by the pandemic, the sector remains relevant for its contribution to the generation of foreign exchange through the attraction of tourists; therefore it is considered an important factor of socio-economic development (Gambarota & Lorda, 2017).

Tourism is an activity of great complexity (Freitas & Sevilha, 2017; Ruiz, 2017; Correa, 2020) with multiple benefits such as job creation (Pérez & Camberos, 2015; Jiménez & Cerezo, 2018); its main feature is that it significantly drives other productive sectors and impact key aspects of society such as economic, cultural, social, and traditional (Correa, 2020b), therefore, it is seen as a phenomenon that promotes regional development (Nava and others, 2017) and improving the average lifespan of the inhabitants (Ruiz, 2017), promotes the production of goods and services and is also a fundamental tool for combating poverty; confirming the importance of tourist activity (Olague, Flores & Garza, 2017).

It is undoubtedly one of the most important strategic – in the long term- sectors in our country, in this sense, academic, educational or cultural exchange activities stand out; of which there are several lines of investigation, however, this document studies cultural tourism, from which the sub-segment of language tourist emerges (Piédrola, Artacho & Villaseca, 2016; Ullauri, Rincón & Martínez, 2017); in literature is indistinctly defined as linguistic, training, or educational tourism (Jiménez & Cerezo, 2018).

It is produced by the motivation to learn a language in a different place of residence, its analysis stands out because the language tourism has a higher average expense compared to the standard tourist, because the time of stay in the destination location is longer, therefore diversifies the tourist product and also generates attraction of others visitors such as family and friends (Castillo, Rodríguez & López, 2017).

Language activity is proven to have a positive impact on economic and social development; therefore, the opportunities provided by learning another language as a tourist resource is wide as it has enormous potential due to an increase in Spanish speakers in the world. The revised literature highlights the economic importance the language segment, the product of extended stays, however, knowledge of this tourism is very scarce (Camargo & Quintanilla, 2018; Iglesias, 2018).

Language tourism has a positive impact on aspects related to accommodation, food, transport, and tourist products; it is usually done throughout the year increasing in spring and summer, it has as its fundamental feature the wide demand that is concentrated in urban and rural destinations; it is an alternative to raise the number of visitors and lengthen the stay, however, a weakness is the seasonality of language students, because it is less than a conventional tourist.

Regarding the limitations that may affect the attraction of language students in the Mexican Republic, they highlight the lack of investment in road infrastructure, low quality of tourist services and in air connectivity (Rodríguez & Granados, 2017), as well as the poor implementation of technology in rural areas. In the business field, it is worth noting decapitalization suffered by organizations, especially smaller ones; which leads to gaps in working capital and investment capital (Correa, 2020).

Therefore, it is considered of high relevance the learning of the Spanish language, it is necessary to take advantage geographical areas and climate that characterizes the Mexican Republic, as well as the consolidation as a tourist destination that had been experiencing until 2019. Therefore, language tourism is an optimal mechanism for generating economic spillage; another aspect that can be highlighted is that it favors the creation of service companies and the generation of jobs (Jiménez & Cerezo, 2018).

Tourism activity in Mexico has matured in recent years, based on the experiences offered and the dissemination of its cultural wealth, as the promotion of the customs, traditions and values of the various latitudes. In addition to the above, the language visitor generates an increase in the demand for complementary activities such as tourist product related to sport, adventure (Gimenez, 2017) or recreational. The language tourist, who wants to learn the Spanish language, is considered a fundamental resource that contributes to the capture of tourist currents from English-speaking countries.

It is a reality that tourism is consolidated as one of the great expressions of globalization and has a close relationship with the economy, there is no doubt the importance of linguistic tourism as a factor of development, because it is considered, that the language is transcendent for the development of tourism, the economy and culture (Baralo, 2015, Correa, 2020). Therefore, the analysis of tourist activity is relevant because it positive impacts the quality of life of people (Gambarota & Lorda, 2017). In this sense, this work is structured as follows: first the concept and context of language tourist are analyzed; followed by the theoretical section, the discussion is presented and finally there are the conclusions reached.

## 2. The concept and context of language tourism

For World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2021) the “Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business /professional purposes”. This concept is important because it allows it to be taken as a basis for analyzing the concept of language tourism.

According to Ullauri et al., (2017) language tourism has developed since the nineteenth century, with the exchange of students in European Universities. In the 1980s, large-scale student mobility was presented, explained by the creation of programs in the European Union

than in 1991 the World Tourism Organization recognized language tourism (Samperio, 2019). Since 1999 there has been an increase in the number of international students; for example: by 2010 the number of foreign students in the world was 1.4 million (Leonidas & Freitas, 2016).

In Mexico, the first records of people entering the country date back to 1909, between June and December of that year 24,500 people entered the country, of which 11,000 were Americans. Around 1922 the celebrated anthropologist Manuel Gamio pioneered proposing tourism as a source of economic development (Mercado, 2016). In 1969 The Tourism and Promotion and Infrastructure Found was established and in 1974 the trust called “National Fund for the Promotion of Tourism” –FONATUR- (Lagunas, Boggio & Guillén, 2016), was created, which to date is the institution responsible for the planning and development of tourism projects in the Mexican Republic.

With regard to the concept of language tourism, in the first instance Ullauri et al., (2017) define it as the trips that take place in order to carry out tourist activities and learn some language. For Iglesias (2015) is an activity made by travelers –educational tourism- who move at least one night to a destination outside their usual place of residence lasts no less than a year and for whom language learning is the purpose of their trip.

Another concept is that of Barra (2016) who points out that language tourism focuses on those trips on which education is a priority objective including independent travelers such as people who use accredited educational agencies. For its part Castillo et al., (2017) understands language tourism as the motivation in learning a language along with the culture, customs as well as getting to know the society of the destination and is combined with complementary tourist activities.

Camargo & Quintanilla (2018) conceptualize language tourism as academic stays lasting less than one year, held in higher education center outside the student’s country of residence. Another contribution is that of Baralo (2015) who defines it as a trip in study and leisure mode, which is made to a country to learn a language. Finally, for Leighton & Adriani (s.f.) language tourism is the trip that takes in order to carry out tourist activities and learn Spanish. Based on previous contributions in this work, language tourism is conceptualized as culture exchange carried out by people interested in learning a language other than that of their place of origin, lasting less than one year and can be considered formal stays at the university or informal independently where the experience gained through language learning is highlighted as the main aspect.

In contextual matters on the European Continent, Piedrola and others (2016) notes that the language tourist remains in the cities for a period of two weeks; has a total expense of 745 Euros, which equates to \$905 US Dollars (USD); and stay between six and twelve months, they spend an average of 4,990 Euros, the equates to \$6,063 USD. This results an average expense of \$505 USD per month, therefore, the profile of language student can be classified as high expense.

For its part, Iglesias (2015) provides that the language student is an important source of entry into Spain; their data indicate that it grew in 2012 and average of 28% compared to 2011.

The more advanced the level of language study, the more opportunities for interaction with community residents are required. Another contribution is that of the author Álvarez (2015) who points out that the Spanish tourist has various motivations that encourage him to travel such as: being in contact with nature, performing sports and physical activation, meeting with friends and interacting with new people, as well as knowing the cultural and gastronomic heritage.

In Continent American, Baralo (2015) notes that language tourists amount to more than 7 million students, of whom 6 million are located in the United States, due to the presence of Hispanics and about one million students are concentrated in Brazil which is the country that receives the most students in Latin America, secondly in Mexico and then Colombia (Camargo & Quintanilla, 2018).

Freitas & Sevilha (2017) studied the factor of tourist attraction in Brazil, and they found that the most important variable is the environment perceived by tourists, this dimension relates to tourist services and products, hygiene and safety, as well as empathy and cooperation of people and tourist professionals; other important variables are the tourist resources of the destination such as accommodation and gastronomy; as well as basic and tourist infrastructure.

In the Republic of Ecuador Ullauri et al., (2017) study the average expenditure of the language tourist ranging from \$1,500 to \$3,000 USD, however, do not precised the transversality of the information, an important contribution is that for each language student five people receive the direct and ten indirect benefit, they conclude that the main destinations for this tourist segment are: Spain, Argentina, Mexico and Costa Rica.

In the Republic of Uruguay; the authors Brida, González & Lanzilotta (2017) reveal that the variables that influence the attraction of tourists is the accessibility of the destination, tourist attractions, historical sites, the number of museums, the availability of accommodation, the number of restaurants, and security levels; all these factors are evaluated by language students to take the decision.

Leighton & Adriani (s.f.) provide that in Argentina, language tourists are young university students between 20 and 25 years of age, precedent from Brazil, the United States, Germany, France, and students from Great Britain. The language tourist present two-month stays and they choose Argentina for the country's culture and landscapes, low cost, family presence, and recommendations. Giménez (2017) note that language students are young foreigners, between 18 and 30 years old, with an average stay of 4 to 6 weeks and spend of 87 USD. Continuing the analysis, table one exhibits the main recipient countries of language tourists, as well as the jobs generated and the estimation of the economic spill due to cultural exchange.

Table 1. Economic spillage and jobs generated.

Economic Spill	Jobs generated	Country of origin	Year of information
32.8 billion USD	400,812	United States	2015
19.7 billion USD	Information not available	Australia	2013
9.7 billion USD	62,380	United Kingdom	2012

Source: Camargo & Quintanilla (2018).

Table one shows that destination that receives the most revenue from language tourist are the United States, then Australia and the United Kingdom; the economic spillage is generated by university tuition and maintenance, such as renting accommodation and the food, as well as tourist spending. Most international students are mainly concentrated in these three countries.

The authors Jiménez & Cerezo (2018) in their study in the Dominican Republic find that at a higher level of education and income, it relates to motivation and this, in turn, affects the satisfaction and loyalty of the tourist, these variables are the main characteristics of the language tourist, however, research does not precise the average spend per visitor.

In the case of the Mexican Republic, language tourism is an important sector explained by the economic spillage generated by students, unfortunately to date no official specific data were found about language tourist visiting the country; however, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) publishes information where it classifies resident tourists traveling abroad to study, without specifying the destination, educational level, academic motif, or type of cultural exchange such as: gastronomic, idiomatic, anthropological, or technological. Table two showcases Mexican Students traveling abroad by study and average spending.

Table 2. Number of international students.

Concept	2018 (August-December)	2019	2020 (January–November)
Number of students	64,668	143,931	26,229
Average spending on USD	\$9,600	\$14,065	\$5,249

Source: Own elaboration based on INEGI (2021).

Table 3. Average expenditure in USD according to means of transport.

Means of transport	2018 (August –December)	2019	2020 (January-November)
Airway	\$7,189	\$10,744	\$4,915
Land	\$2,410	\$3,320	\$334

Source: Own elaboration based on INEGI (2021).

From the tables above, a total of 234, 828 peoples traveling for study from August 2018 to November 2020, the total average expenditure generated was \$28,914 USD. It is observed that tourists traveling by air have a higher average expense compared to land tourists.

In Mexico, the variables that influence travel reasons are visiting cultural and historical sites, getting to know the main tourist attractions and experiencing the atmosphere of the destination city (Olague, 2016). However, in recent years the climate of insecurity and violence that has presented has negatively impacted the reception of foreign students (Camargo & Quintanilla, 2018). Martínez & Trejoluna (2017) mention that safety is a reason for selection or not by the tourist. Finally, Samperio (2019) point outs that in Mexico language tourist is an economic activity that has an incipient regulation for promotion and incentives.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Cultural tourism and the language sub-segment

According to Ascanio (2017), tourism can be studied from various perspectives such as economic, social, geographical, and behavior. However, the General Theory of Systems developed by the German Biologist Bertalanffy is the one that allows it to be better understood and facilitates the study of aspects related to tourism as an open system and the subsystems that make up it as is the case with cultural tourism.

Of the above, language tourism is regarded as a sub-segment of cultural tourism (Castillo et al., 2017; Jiménez & Cerezo, 2018; Iglesias, 2018) this is because both manifestations involve immersing themselves and understanding the lifestyle of the inhabitants, the local environment and the aspects that determine the identity of the place. For Barra (2016) cultural tourism refers to the traveler that focuses exclusively on cultural heritage, however, in the revised literature there is quite a lot of complexity in the accuracy of this sub-segment of tourism, because some authors study tourism and the culture separately, some other together, this is explained by the difficulty in quantifying the type of tourist.

A relevant feature is that cultural tourism is distributed more evenly throughout the year, it is not governed by seasons such as beach destination and usually cultural tourism stays are four times longer than those of traditional tourists. According to Samperio (2019) cultural tourism considers the stay, time and purpose of the visitors, for example: to know the historical and artistic, gastronomic, musical and artisanal heritage.

This type of tourism has a positive impact directly on cultural heritage, because they allow its conservation and improvement. On the contrary, Varisco (2016) points out that tourism has negative effects on culture, since there is a loss of authenticity and degradation when there is a relationship between economy and culture.

With regard to language tourism, Barra (2016) states that this sub-segment has little specialized research, she emphasizes its importance and points out that it can be found in lit-



erature with various nomenclatures such as educational tourism, linguistics, academics and trilingualism. It is a type of complex tourism and those who practice it have as their main objective the education and training, the impact of cultural tourism is on economic and social activity due to the great period of stay (Aliaga et al., 2018).

For their part, Leonidas y Freitas (2016) provide that the study of a language motivates study exchange and influences the choice of a student in the type of destination. The authors refer that language tourism relates to the possibility of enjoying an intercultural experience and strengthens professional opportunities. Because language tourism focuses on the studio, it requires accommodation and food options, as well as the offer of associated services such as transportation or visits to the place of interest, natural attractions and the cultural aspect such as interaction with handicrafts or their festivities.

Castillo et al., (2017) refer that language tourism bring the possibility of staying in a different country for a long time, so it can be formed in another language which leads to knowing other cultures, customs and traditions, therefore, this type of tourism is constituted as an impulse to existing tourist products. Another perspective is of Camargo & Quintanilla (2018), they point out that language tourism is a potential segment for the boost of tourism activity. By last, Baralo (2015) provides that the language students must have the economic capacity for the trip, know the immigration procedures and estimate the exchange rates between the currencies.

#### 4. Discussion

The world is changing in significant aspects on the tourism issue, so the cultural tourism segment is an excellent tool for the exchange of knowledge and the growth of the economy of emerging countries as is the case of Mexico. According to Piketty (2014:88), the main mechanism that stimulates convergence between countries is the dissemination of knowledge; from lines above it can be discussed that linguistic tourism is a good choice for the development of tourism and education.

The tourism industry has been badly hurt by social confinement, resulting in job losses and rising levels of social inequality; therefore, decisions need to be made with the aim of reviving tourism activity some actions can be:

- Ensure security to linguistic students.
- Establishment of appropriate health measures.
- Financing in infrastructure, equipment and technology investment directed to tourism sector small business.
- Development of servuction model by the municipality.
- Encourage tourism self-employment in rural areas.
- Training to create new tourist experiences.

The points noted above, contribute to rescuing jobs and to improving the standard of living of the population, generating poverty reduction (SECTUR, 2018:12; Correa, 2020b).

Tourism in Mexico accounted for about 8.8% of Gross Domestic Product generates nearly 10 million direct and indirect jobs (SECTUR, 2018:16). According to data from the DATA-TUR platform (2021) from January to November 2019; 17 million tourists arrived, of which 9.4 million tourists are from the United States and 2 million from Canada, respectively; both countries were rank one and two at air tickets for foreign visitors, in the same period of 2020 arrived 6.9 million tourists by air. The above data clearly reflect the size of the English-speaking market that can be used for the language tourism segment.

Another important variable is Migration; it is estimated that there are 11.6 million Mexicans residing in the United States legally (CONAPRED, 2021). According to the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME, 2021), the main states of origin of Mexican migrants in The United States are Michoacán, Guerrero, Guanajuato, Jalisco and Puebla. Migrant recipient states are California, Texas, Illinois, New York, and Florida; referent to the gender of migrants, 42.3% are women and 57.7% men; the majority of the population is between 29 and 39 years of age. From the above, we can discuss that there is exist a large segment of the population living in the neighboring country who possibly have children born in the United States who do not master the Spanish language.

Because of the proximity to Mexico with Texas and California, both states can be considered the target market for the attraction of language students, the first segment may be the children of non-Spanish-speaking migrants and second the students from Universities in Texas and California through agreements with Mexican Educational Institutions.

In Mexico, urban areas have the necessary infrastructure to meet the demand for cultural tourists. In rural areas linguistic students are an excellent means to development; due to the municipalities present problems for the attraction of investments, it is undoubtedly, a key tool to raise hotel occupation in marginalized areas due to the prolonged stay of language visitors, the advantage is that this segment is far from mass tourism and occupies personalized services such as food, so the production of traditional food can be benefited.

As discussed above, the language tourist promotes other economic activities such as artisanal micro business and other services as transport; which connects with the tourist product offered in the municipalities of the Mexican Republic. An example may be the combination of the Spanish language along with the experience of learning an indigenous dialect such as Wixarika in the state of Jalisco or Zapotec in Oaxaca.

## 5. Conclusions

Cultural tourism is a viable option for the development in the Mexican Republic explained by the expense of a language the student that on average is \$1,731 USD per month, obtained from tourist European and American. In studying the subject, it was found that there are few investigations in Mexico that allows us to understand this activity in a broad way, from this perspective linguistic tourism is an aspect that has enormous potential, especially if you take into account the closeness with the United States; however, it is considered important to analyze the current economic and cultural political factors of both nations.

Language tourism is a complex activity that requires cooperation from public and private universities for the generation of academic offer, because it arises from the need to learn a language other than that of origin. It is concluded that its promotion should focus on students between 20 and 25 years old, preferably university with high socioeconomic level, through programs or agreements of academic cooperation to attract linguistic tourist with the purpose of generating socio-economic development especially in rural areas.

It is necessary to stimulate language tourism in our country through the collaboration of municipal, state and federal institutions, focused on the young Americans and Canadian students, offering Spanish language learning courses; lasting four weeks up to six months, for involving tourist in Mexican culture in order to be part of the experiences and tourist products they offer throughout the national territory.

It is concluded that in our country, thanks to its culture and academic offer; it is an excellent choice for linguistic tourist (Camargo & Quintanilla, 2018). However, the offer of Spanish language programs as well as collaboration agreements with universities is limited; this can be explained because in the Language Centers they prioritize teaching the English, French and German languages to their students.

Language tourism is a sector of great potential for Mexico, it is advisable to incorporate initiatives in legislative matters, because in the General Law on Tourism in none of its articles addresses language tourism, therefore, is an area of opportunity to promote and attract foreign students visiting Mexico with the aim of learning Spanish.

About the limitation of this study, not specific data generated by official institutions were found, or in the DATATUR system administered by the Secretary of Tourism. In subsequent research it is advisable to collect information with language students of the Mexican Universities to know their motivations and the economic investment they make.

Finally, it should be noted that every day despite the pandemic there are direct flights with the main cities of the neighboring countries of the north, so the air infrastructure of the country could considered adequate and is a means that allows the transfer quickly and effectively. From a tourist perspective, there are countless activities in urban cities such as in the “pueblos mágicos” and rural communities. Mexicans have unmatched warmth and hospitality, what is needed is to invest in promotion and advertising in American as well as Canadian universities, and most importantly, a change in the mindset of legislators and officials in tourism matters.

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