

THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN HERITAGE INTERPRETATION

Hristina NEDIALKOVA

Department of Economics of Tourism Management, Faculty of Management,
University of Economics –Varna
77, Knyaz Boris Str., 9000, Varna, Bulgaria
hnedjalkova@ue-varna.bg

Abstract: Intercultural Communication and Tourism are interdisciplinary linked. The paper provides a concise explanation of the logic of Intercultural Communication, regional Heritage Interpretation and their implications for some of the key actors within tourist industries, namely Tourist Guides. Empirical evidence is drawn from a questionnaire developed especially for the research of Intercultural competencies of Tourist Guides and the quality of the Tourist Guide service in Varna. The summary focuses on better service quality and local features as defining factors for regional tourism entrepreneurship.

Keywords: intercultural communication, Tourist Guides, intercultural competences, heritage interpretation, Black Sea.

INTRODUCTION

Tourist Guiding and Intercultural Communication are postmodern phenomena which received increased academic attention in the last twenty years. Not surprisingly they are complex and evade strict judgment in terms of utility and added value for the consumer. Yet, developed tourist destinations that were always part of the Grand Tour and that have a historic contribution towards the modern heritage interpretation, place great value not only on professional tourist guiding skills, but also on efficient Intercultural Communication. Intercultural Communication Competencies (ICCs) represent the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultural orientations. Most importantly they can be developed and are part of an ongoing learning and adaptive process. While Intercultural Communication Competence and Heritage Interpretation have been two different, but entangled aspects of the professional skills of the contemporary Tourist Guide, the Freiburg Declaration on Heritage Interpretation is bringing the understanding of the two together with the following statement: *Heritage interpretation plays an important role in presenting and explaining this heritage and encouraging people across Europe to appreciate both the distinct and the common elements of their shared and continually developing heritage.*¹ The essence of Intercultural Communication within tourism is indeed the provision of the establishment of cultural similarities and the respectful accent on uniqueness. Similarly, Tilden's principles² are still a basis for heritage interpretation, but if we modernize the language and contextualize them, they can be reframed as a process where the visitor is internalizing information thanks to a competent interpretation, whereas other visitors still have to cope with unimpressive information delivery. In a way, some of Tilden's principles are themselves related to the contextualization of information, or to the complex web of associations leading to the deep interpretative meaning of culture professed by Geertz's.³

Culture is not static but constantly changing after integration with other cultures,⁴ and cultures are constantly changing and each new contact leads to a new cultural adaptation.⁵ Heritage interpretation needs to remain flexible, while strategic long-term determinants of the common European image need to accommodate regional differences left best at the hands of local professionals. Conversely, the *opportunity*

¹ Interpret Europe 2011, 1.

² Tilden 1957.

³ Geertz 1973.

⁴ Lüsebrink 2012.

⁵ Thomas 1999.

to relate citizens to Europe's shared values⁶ is best established by taking into account the local specifics within broader cultural regions, such as the Black Sea.

Within this paper, the term Tourist Guiding is used in the same sense as in the definition adopted by the World Federation of Tour Guides Associations WFTGA,⁷ corresponding to the European standards EN 13809:2003 "Travel services - Terminology of travel agencies and tour operators". Similarly related are the Directive 2005/36/EC of 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications, European legislation is based on ENISO 18513:2003 as well as EN 15565:2008. Correspondingly, Tourist Guides are the ones responsible for the interpretation, and site-specific information. Tourist entrepreneurship is understood here as *the Advantage of social-economic goals; Association for public and/or collective benefit; Publicity and transparency; Independence from the state authorities*, which can be attributes to the non-profit legal entities for socially beneficial activities and social enterprises (SE) for the overcoming of social challenges, as well as jobs creations and larger social benefits.⁸ This way Sustainable Tourism and the issues of Heritage Interpretation are best linked to entrepreneurship.

THE ISSUE AT A GLANCE

A number of authors have emphasized the importance of intercultural communication in the field of tourism.⁹ *Intercultural communication* is a key concept referring to the symbolic exchange at the encounter of groups of people from different cultures.¹⁰ Related to the meaningful study of intercultural communication is the concept of "Intercultural Communication Competences" or ICCs, which is the finding of appropriate ways to carry out intercultural communication.¹¹ Intercultural communication within tourist guiding is not only about information delivery, but mainly about meaningful interpretation. Thus, it has different features of media and power relations, such as brevity, the introduction of positive patterns and embedded outcomes. Consequently, its mastery brings advantages and possibilities for some more complex and elegant concepts of the tourist service. On the contrary, improper application of intercultural communication might lead to negative results with potential long-term consequences. Tourist Guides practising advanced intercultural communication competencies (ICCs), indulge in a form of cultural entrepreneurship with high rewards for them and all interested parties, while risks of failure are endorsed mainly by them, as currently there are not so high expectations of the Tourist Guide profession at the regional level.

METHODS

This paper will explore shortly the relations between tourist guiding, intercultural communication and its meaning for heritage interpretations. Evidence is based on data gathered for a 2019 PhD thesis completion, within which two sets of tourist interactions were explored. On one hand, there are results from Tourist Guides working with visitors from Germany, during which the German language is used for communication. That set of data is referred to as K2, and it is an interaction with a foreign for the Tourist Guide culture thanks to mastering the native language of the group. The other set of data is named K3, as it is the case of communication between the local Tourist Guide and foreigners in a third language, foreign for both involved parties. Usually when we are studying the encounter of two cultures, very handy are the concepts from pragmatics about Culture 1 and Culture 2 (K1, K2). Normally K 1 is the source culture, and K 2 is the target, while a change of identification from K1 to K2 is possible as a result of the subject's intercultural awareness.¹² In the case of the data set English is the *lingua franca* for visitors from the Arabic countries. Hence from the point of view of the filled out by Tourist Guides questionnaires the representative of the visited place is part of K1. Following this logic, the visitors who are addressed in their native language belong to K2, while the visitors from the Arabic countries are addressed in English, foreign also to the Tourist Guide, and a specific group subculture K3.

⁶ Interpret Europe 2018, 25.

⁷ <https://wftga.org/>.

⁸ Martinov, Maslarova, Benkova 2020, 372.

⁹ Reisinger, Turner 2011; Scherle, Coles 2012; Coles, Hall 2008.

¹⁰ Gudykunst 2003, 260.

¹¹ Lüsebrink 2012; Scherle, Coles 2012; Byram 1997.

¹² Mikolič 2012, 344.

Table 1. Four interflowing areas of Tourist Guiding Service based on ICC (The table is adapted from the 2019 thesis "The Role of Intercultural Communications in Improving the Quality of Tourist Guiding" by the author of this paper.).

Area 1 Familiarity with the culture of the visitors	Area 2 Equality and Dignity
Area 3 Adequate communication	Area 4 Efficient group management

The theoretic model for the evaluation of the Quality of Tourist guiding is based on four areas that interconnect with each other. The same model could be applied to any other process related to learning, information exchange or even group management. The model is represented in a very simplistic way for a brief explanation in Table 1, without the four to five additional levels belonging to each square. Another missing part in this representation is the central tenet about service quality or respectively empathy. This concise model is used for the first time here, as a very concise representation of the main findings from a representative timeframe of the tourism development in Varna.

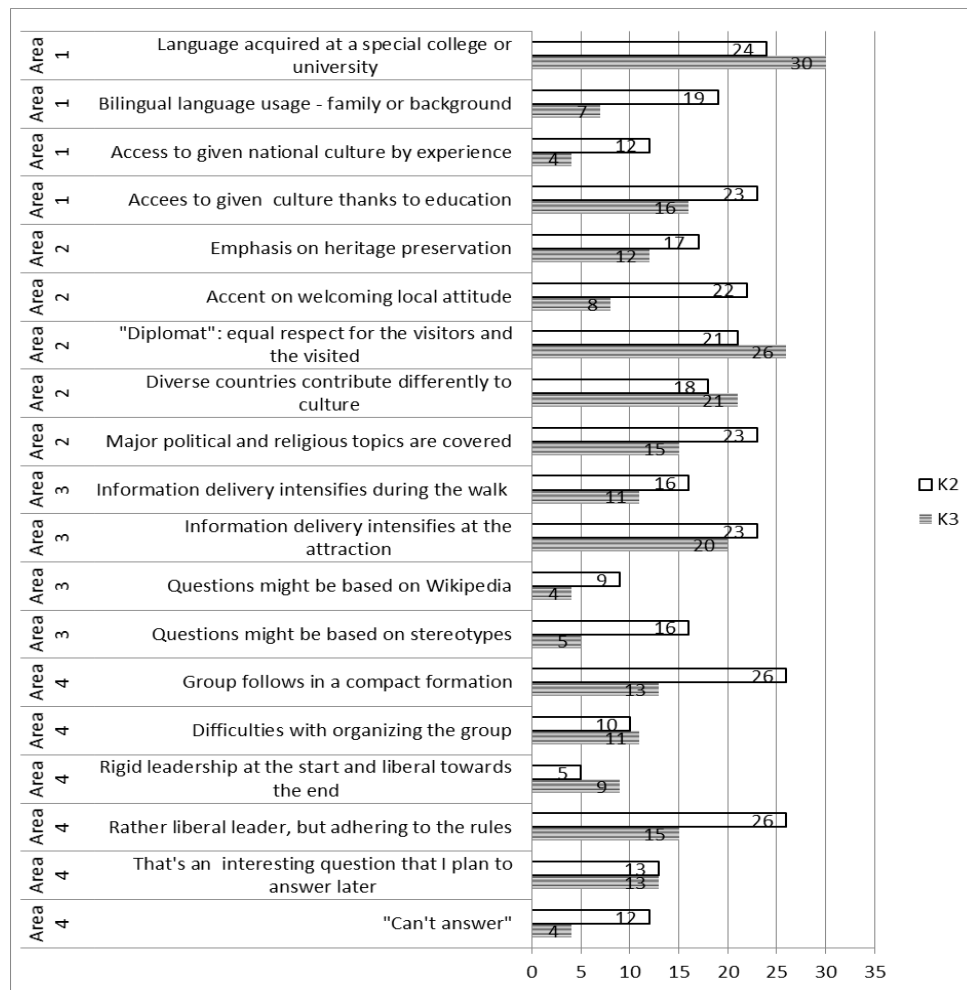


Fig. 1. Concise representation of the differences between Tourist Guiding with enhanced ICC (or the K2 set), and a more rudimentary knowledge of the culture of the group and ICC competences in general (K3) based on a 2019 research by the same author, that mirrors a mature development of the tourist industry at the Black Sea Coast in Varna.

FINDINGS

The model of the four intermingled competencies was built after a review of existing literature and was based on initial research, such as observation, interviews with Tourist Guides with different levels of professional integration, and most importantly on interviews with tour operators who gave completely different indications depending on their understanding of boutique tourism and adequate heritage interpretation. These initial findings hinted at a very fragmented dispersion of best practices and mutually exclusive contestation. The so developed questionnaire featured 35 predominantly multiple choice questions, with a nearly equal number for the four areas. Figure 2 is showing excerpts of the overall finding, which demonstrate graphically the varying results for the German groups with interpretation in German language (K2) versus the Arabic visitors with interpretation in English (K3). 21 surveys were completed in different languages representing 29% of the target sample of possible 72 people (18% by number of respondents) in weighted averages.

The results for *Area 1* are demonstrating a definitive advantage for the K2, where German language speakers are versatile in cultural understanding. Many of them are bilingual and can use specific concise key phrases in the correct context. Also, the Bulgarian education system is providing for the mastering of the German language and culture even for users without privileged access to German culture.

Area 2 is related to the positioning of the culture of the visited place represented by a Tourist Guide (K1) and all facts and assertions related to the conveyance of mutual respect. The K2 data set related to the German speaking Tourist Guides is linked to a demonstrably free control on interpretation related to more complex topics. For example, politics and religion are even disinvited subjects of conversation according to some tour operators who deal mainly with mass tourism, who do not specialize in heritage entrepreneurship. For both data sets heritage interpretation is a very important matter, while interviewees from the K3 data set implied that visitors from the Arabic countries complained that they do not receive enough access to heritage and specific cultural explanation. The representatives of the K2 data set have a better understanding of the cultural norms that are common to the Bulgarian and German society, and they can refer readily to the welcoming and kind attitude of the locals. Also, they talk about the country and its cultural standard or *Land und Leute* in German. Interestingly enough the expanded usage of the word "Diplomat" (as ambassador) for the tourist guiding profession has received much less emphasis in the culturally competent K2 set, and is gradually displaced by other more universalistic arguments. Its predominance in the K3 data set is related much more to careful decisions and weighted arguments.

Area 3 is related to adequate communication. Again, the K2 Tourist Guides are better informed what is the right timing for interpretation, and have a better grasp on the communication needs of the visitors. Conclusively, the K2 respondents are well aware of the possibility of tricky questions, possible data conflicts or other veracity issues. They openly and readily work with stereotypes, as they are a needed part of destination marketing and an undeniable result of the modern media and information overflow.

Connected to all the previous points, *Area 4* is mirroring the overall group management. At that stage, thanks to the usage of adequate intercultural communication, the Tourist Guide is already being perceived as an expert, the exchange is based on mutual respect and efficient communication, and group management is naturally operating on the same premises. Most issues related to the sustainability of the heritage site can be solved thanks to that liberal form of group control. The results of the questionnaire are showing a distinct leverage for the German speaking Tourist Guides against the Tourist Guides who use English as a *lingua franca* for the visitors from the Arabic countries. More examples were provided for *Area 4*, as to emphasize the importance of efficient ICC for Heritage Interpretation. There are definitely differences between the two different cultures of visitors, and the way they visit heritage sites, but the composite formation of a German speaking group is always a positive sign for the interaction between the Tourist Guide and the organized tourists. The ease with which the Tourist Guide from the K2 data set is working is also defined by the adopted leadership style. The apparently liberal leader in this case has transgressed successfully through all the enumerated areas and steps in order to conquer and retain the attention and trust of the visiting group. This kind of control is again based on ICC and is the complex result of invisible intercultural processes. Most importantly this kind of "liberal" leadership is fundamental for the positive consumer experience. It allows for a better grasp of the uniqueness of the destination and of the appreciation of the common European heritage and cultural advantages, as expected by the

Interpret Europe papers. The two last examples demonstrate an aptitude to react to tricky questions, which falls somewhere between *Area 3* and *Area 4*. Interestingly, there is an evasion technique used by both groups, while the reputedly no go "Can't answer" has been reported by the K2 set. Apparently, ICC, based on factual information goes hand in hand with more liberty and possibilities for improvisation. In a similar setting the Tourist Guide can be open-minded for changes within the culture of the visitors, and adopt long term strategies with a positive outcome for the image of the visited place, or a sustainable experience at the heritage site.

RESULTS

Tourist Guides who are versatile in intercultural communication can control much more efficiently the four areas related to group interaction, namely knowledge, dignity, communication and management. Intercultural communication competencies (ICCs), just like culture itself are an ongoing process of interaction and self-actualization. Recently, developed tourist destinations with a very rich heritage like Italy, do focus much more on contemporary social issues, or on the so-called *Land und Leute* theme. Thus, local values are easily explained as unique features, and act as an argument for knowledge transfer of basic social rules and explanation of regional civility. Results of the questionnaire hint at a vast dependence on implicit knowledge that can be acquired by bilingual Tourist Guides. Nevertheless, ICCs can be transferred and reorganized, when there are teams or associations or other forms of social entrepreneurship aiming at some more general benefits for the local society as a whole. Other findings that may be useful for the concept of Heritage Interpretation related to the K2 and K3 dissection are that interculturally competent professionals are more prone to improvisation, have empathy for the group, and are able to participate in a polite and informed debate. They master the unique selling point of the destination and therefore can provide a rewarding experience. As independent professionals with a rather international code of ethics, they do not think of the different aspects of interpretation, but do anyhow organize their work in a manner that visitors can grasp both the similarities between the two cultures, while remembering the uniqueness of the place in a positive manner.

CONCLUSION

Identified issues within Heritage Interpretation of organized groups of visitors in this paper are the restraining function of the language that is used for communication, the handicap of fixed rules, and the limited margin for reaction when the Tourist Guide does not know their audience well. These are very telling findings for the future of Heritage Entrepreneurship. Firstly, the common language for Heritage Interpretation could be English, but at the expense of the goals set up on the European level. Secondly, tourist associations should not be left out from the process of flexible standardization within the ever changing realm of tourism and cultural dialogue. Thirdly, ICC has been much more explored and is now understood much better than the principles of sustainable Heritage Interoperation, therefore it can provide for its application in the practice.

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