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# THE ROLE OF TRAVEL-RELATED ASPECTS IN THE LANGUAGE TOURISM EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

*Language tourism as an educational travel niche and a subtype of cultural tourism is little by little generating interest from academicians. While previous research has focused on the language tourism market system demand and on some aspects relating to the supply, this article explores the language tourism product's travel components. A taxonomy of such components will be presented and constitutes the conceptual framework of a survey that was conducted in Barcelona (Spain) among 234 international university students between 2015 and 2017. The respondents had a major interest in learning Spanish and getting to know the local culture. They were requested to fill in a structured questionnaire with a combination of open and closed questions to find out different aspects concerning their profile, the opportunities for interacting with local residents, their accommodation, catering, leisure and transport arrangements in Barcelona, and the costs deriving from their academic stay. The results provide an overview of key travel-related features that must be taken into consideration in the conception, staging and evaluation of language tourism experiences.*

## KEYWORDS

*Language Tourism; Cultural Tourism; Educational Travel; Study Abroad.*

## ECONLIT KEYS

*Z300; Z320; I210.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Despite cultural tourism is a very old type of special interest tourism, it was not considered as a distinct product category until the late 1970s, according to DuCros and McKercher (2015). Actually, a wide range of definitions exist. Some of them are based on tourists' motivations, whereas others look at this phenomenon from an experiential point of view, and most definitions also encompass an operational aspect referring to specific activities.

Since cultural tourism capitalises upon the culture of a given population, it fosters tourists' interaction and appreciation of that culture's tangible and intangible manifestations (Campreciós, Aguilar, Fernández & Serra 2014). Cultural tourism can play a significant role in regional development, since a destination can become more attractive and competitive thanks to the mutually beneficial link between culture and tourism. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) maintains that culture is a very significant, differentiating constituent of the tourism product, while thanks to tourism culture can be enhanced and income can be created, which in turn can foster cultural heritage, cultural production and creativity (OECD, 2009).

For Ducros and McKercher (2015) cultural tourism transforms a destination's cultural heritage features into products and experiences for tourists' consumption. However, research still needs to address several misconceptions relating to this form of tourism, such as its nature, tourists' motivation degrees and the elements underlying optimal product development and sustainable management.

Destination management organisations regard cultural tourism as a differentiating factor allowing communities to gain sustainable competitiveness. Their main interest is increase the number of visitors, but when promoting their assets the impact on the local communities is usually overlooked. On the other hand, the visitors' expectations and behaviour will be influenced by the quality of the information they obtain before reaching a destination, and in this sense social media is not always a reliable source and can lead to disruptive attitudes (DuCros and McKercher, 2015). All these factors must be born in mind and identifying them is a first step towards successful cultural tourism experiences from both a supply and a demand perspective.

The UNWTO (2010) states that cultural tourism involves movements of people originated by cultural motivations, such as study tours, among others. Cultural tourism as a category in its own has progressively been broken down into different subtypes of activities or products with particular management approach and challenges, like educational tourism, which in turn includes the subcategory of language travel.

This article can be located in the intersection between language studies, the internationalisation processes carried out at educational institutions and the commercialisation of study abroad programmes. It follows from a line of study which in the last years has designed a conceptual framework for language tourism, it has identified and categorised its variables, and aims at analysing the impacts this tourism niche currently produces, as well as the ones it should generate.

The article further develops a part of the language tourism market system related to the supply, namely the travel component of the language tourism product, which was sketched in previous studies (see Iglesias, 2016a, 2017) and will be detailed in the literature review section. On the basis of this theoretical framework a quantitative survey was conducted, the results of which will be reported.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The language travel industry is quite immature and reliable data about how it works is scarce, not only in terms of inbound destinations, but also and particularly with respect to outbound markets. In order to strengthen the role of the language travel industry in the current global economic context the Association of Language Travel Organisations (ALTO) commissioned a world-wide survey. The ALTO 2015 report offers a general overview of the language travel sector.

A total of 122 respondents representing 228 schools took part in the survey. The results show that English courses were in high demand (57%), followed by Spanish (15%), French (10%) and German (6%). When it comes to the students' profile, 28% were younger than 18, 38% were aged between 19 and 25, 25% between 26 and 45, and 8% were older than 45. Juniors' study abroad stays took an average 3.3 weeks and the average length of adults' stays was 4.2 weeks. Adult students were the main

consumers, as 81% of student weeks were purchased by this segment in search for general language tuition, exam preparation, university pathway, specialised or executive language courses. Adults were in fact the source for 77% of the total net revenue.

The net revenue was USD\$586.6 million, and 60% of the school's net revenue derived from tuition fees, while 31% was generated by accommodation and 9% corresponded to other revenues. The most popular accommodation option was the host-family stay, followed by residential lodging. Generally speaking, average turnover per week was between \$700 and \$740 for juniors and between \$550 and \$600 for adults. More specifically, average turnover per week was \$636 in the UK, \$634 in the US, \$611 in Spain, \$598 in Malta, \$546 in Canada and \$337 in South Africa.

As for the origins of bookings on a weighted average basis, 70% were made by intermediary agencies and only 5% by walk-in users, while 12% of the courses were booked through the internet and 13% through other channels.

When asked about the negative impacts on the respondents' business activity some aspects were pinpointed, namely the increase in cross-country competition, low financial support for sojourners, poor accreditation repute, geographical disadvantage, service quality, critical media reports, political uncertainty, cost and safety issues. Economic aspects in outbound markets coupled with restrictive visa policies and currency exchange rates were perceived as affecting businesses rather negatively. Conversely, the schools' maturity and business experience in the sector, together with their enhanced financial management and marketing initiatives were regarded as having positive consequences for the language learning companies.

According to Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget and Pawlowska (2013), academic tourism is rather sustainable: it has a relatively greater economic impact than conventional tourism, it has no significant negative effects and its socio-cultural outcomes are considerable, since it fosters cross-cultural knowledge and relations. International students must be provided with an adequate welcome, clear information and support, particularly concerning administrative procedures, language difficulties or educational issues.

The benefits of student mobility in higher education contexts are well-known. The variety of inputs they receive enables students to learn from contrast. Furthermore, they develop their foreign language skills and international task management competences, which usually leads to an inclination towards future professional mobility (Teichler, 2013).

Two of the main challenges posed by international academic mobility have been identified: the first one refers to handling diversity, i.e. finding the balance between local and foreign students, and the second one is related to language policies, i.e. preserving linguistic identities while incorporating other languages and benefiting from it (Wilson, 2013). English continues to be the lingua franca worldwide, but in 20 years' time Spanish and Mandarin may also dominate the higher education scene, with Spanish universities opening new branches in Latin America (Wilkins, 2013).

A study based on 46,537 comments made by 16,861 higher education students on the platform [www.STeXX.eu](http://www.STeXX.eu) in 2013 concluded that they were generally very satisfied with their study abroad experience in Europe (Ellis & Van Aart, 2013). The most influential factors were the host city's atmosphere, looks and size (which accounted for 25% of all the positive reasons for student satisfaction), the quality and attitude of the host university's teachers (21%), the approachability and friendliness of the locals (14%), the services provided by the host university (11%), and the personal and professional development deriving from their stay (11%).

With respect to the latter, international students seemed to love discovering new cultures and were eager to learn new languages or enhance existing language competences during their study period. Developing language skills is usually considered a driver for international mobility, as living in a foreign country is regarded as the best way to improve linguistic ability. The respondents mentioned that they learned a foreign language for academic reasons or because it was a means to have better job prospects and it was part of discovering the local culture. In addition to learning the local language, some international students also took the chance to develop their English skills in a multilingual context.

High living costs were one of the most relevant causes of dissatisfaction when studying abroad, accounting for 15% of all the negative comments. Different European countries have noticeable dissimilarities in the cost of rent and everyday

items (e.g. groceries) and common expenses such as alcohol and student activities. To be more specific, almost one in ten negative comments referred to accommodation. Students claimed that university dorms were either located too far away from university and city amenities, or in a bad condition. As for private lodging, the respondents reported problems finding accommodation since they were not assisted by their host universities. This was indeed one of the first, most stressful challenges they had to face on arrival. They also complained of unhelpful landlords in addition to the above mentioned aspects.

Social life made up 13% of all comments overall and included any social aspects of the study-abroad experience: extra-curricular activities, making new friends, parties and opportunities for going out in the evenings, etc. The respondents gave importance to the availability of extra-curricular activities, such as sports clubs and societies, as well as the trips organised for international students by the university.

For international students being near to a major international airport was an advantage, as it not only allowed them to go home, but it also made it possible for them to travel around the European region where they were staying, particularly in the case of students coming from distant countries. Of course, travelling did not only involve air trips to another country, but it also entailed exploring the host country by rail, road or boat.

The travel constituents of international mobility programmes can also be found in language tourism products. As a matter of fact, such products consist of a combination of language learning and travel components (Iglesias, 2017). Table 1 provides a detailed taxonomy of aspects that are related to the latter. For a classification of tourism activities and products as well as a categorization of consumption products grouped by purpose see the lists published by UNWTO (2010).



1. Accommodation	1.1. Types of lodging according to local regulations		
	1.2. Operation	1.2.1. Ownership	1.2.1.1. Privately owned 1.2.1.2. Not privately owned
		1.2.2. Brand	1.2.2.1. Chain 1.2.2.2. Independent
	1.3. Cost	1.3.1. Low cost	
		1.3.2. Standard rate	
		1.3.3. Luxury	
	1.4. Provision of services	1.4.1. Categories according to rating system	
		1.4.2. Autonomy	1.4.2.1. Self-catering 1.4.2.2. Serviced
		1.4.3. Specialization	1.4.3.1. Mass 1.4.3.2. Targeted
	1.5. Demographic microsegmentation	1.5.1. Age	
		1.5.2. Gender	
		1.5.3. Travel party	
	1.6. Capacity	1.6.1. Small	
		1.6.2. Medium-sized	
		1.6.3. Large	
	1.7. Location	1.7.1. Geographical	1.7.1.1. Urban 1.7.1.2. Natural area
		1.7.2. Proximity	1.7.2.1. To educational/work setting 1.7.2.2. To destination's resources
	1.8. Interaction	1.8.1. Facilitated	1.8.1.1. Locals
1.8.1.2. Peers 1.8.1.3. Host family			
1.8.2. Not facilitated			
2. Transport	2.1. Operation	2.1.1. Ownership	2.1.1.1. Privately operated 2.1.1.2. Not privately operated
		2.1.2. Arrangement	2.1.2.1. Scheduled 2.1.2.2. Charter
	2.2. Cost	2.2.1. Low cost	
		2.2.2. Standard rate	
		2.2.3. Luxury	
	2.3. Provision of services	2.3.1. Integration	2.3.1.1. Included 2.3.1.2. Not included
		2.3.2. Categories according to rating system	
	2.4. Capacity	2.4.1. Individuals	
		2.4.2. Groups	
	2.5. Local regulations	2.5.1. Regulated transport system	
		2.5.2. Liberalised system	
	2.6. Scope	2.6.1. To travel to the destination	
		2.6.2. In the destination	
	2.7. Means	2.7.1. Air	
		2.7.2. Water	2.7.2.1. Sea 2.7.2.2. River
		2.7.3. Land	2.7.3.1. Road 2.7.3.2. Rail
	2.8. Route	2.8.1. Direct	
		2.8.2. With stopovers	
2.9. Connectivity	2.9.1. Point-to-point transit		
	2.9.2. Spoke-hub distribution network		
3. Catering	3.1. Board	3.1.1. All meals provided	
		3.1.2. Meals partially provided	3.1.2.1. Half board 3.1.2.2. Bed and breakfast
		3.1.3. Meals excluded	
	3.2. Consumption variables	3.2.1. Time	
		3.2.2. Gastronomic preferences	
		3.2.3. Cost	

		3.2.4. Setting
		3.2.5. Demographic microsegmentation
		3.2.6. Variety of offer
		3.2.7. Health requirements
		3.2.8. Socialization needs
	3.3. Establishments	Same taxonomy as accommodation
4. Leisure	4.1. Activities	4.1.1. Not related to language learning
		4.1.2. Language learning complements
	4.2. Consumption variables	4.2.1. Time
		4.2.2. Recreation preferences
		4.2.3. Cost
		4.2.4. Setting
		4.2.5. Demographic microsegmentation
		4.2.6. Variety of offer
		4.2.7. Physical features
	4.3. Establishments	Same taxonomy as accommodation

Table 1. Supply: Travel components.

Source: Own elaboration.

With respect to accommodation, establishments can be subject to different classifications following the local regulations of a given geographical area. For example, in the Spanish region of Catalonia the Decree 159/2012 enacted by the Catalan government stipulates that taking into account their basic characteristics, hotel establishments as a category are classified into two subcategories:

a) Group of hotels: including Hotels (H) and Apartment hotels (HA). The hotels and apartment hotels are classified into seven categories according to a star rating system: one star or basic, two stars, three stars, four stars, four stars superior, five stars, and GL or great luxury.

b) Group of hostels or pensions, classified in a unique category identified by a P.

Other distinct lodging categories for tourists' use specified in the Decree 159/2012 comprise:

a) Apartments (AT).

b) Campsites: categorised according to their buildings, facilities and services as luxury (L), first (1st), second (2nd) and third (3rd).

c) Rural tourism establishments (TR): classified into Farm houses and Rural lodges depending on whether or not the owner obtains income from agricultural activities, livestock or forestry. For each one of these two categories different modalities exist depending on the owner's place of residence (in the same region, in the neighbouring municipalities, or in the very same house).

d) Tourist dwellings: article 69 of the Decree 159/2012 cryptically states that such lodging may be categorised in accordance with voluntary systems of tourism categorisation.

Concerning the operational aspects of such establishments, ownership has a role to play, since the kind of relationship language tourists develop with the owners can be a key aspect of the tourism language experience (for example in home stays). Being independent or part of a chain has implications in terms of business marketing and exploitation.

Cost is usually a major concern for consumers. Once they get to their destination young language tourists sometimes spend their first nights in budget accommodation options like youth hostels. Inexpensive housing alternatives are increasingly sought, for example among Airbnb users who rent short-term lodging through this on line broker. Cost may correlate with the provision of services, and the facilities and services provided by the accommodation establishments determine their categorisation according to different rating systems.

Another ingredient linked to the provision of services is specialisation. Nowadays more and more accommodation providers exist specialising in targeted lodging for academic or educational tourists, for example in a student residence hall. On the other hand, the autonomy of the language tourists can be influenced by whether they are staying at a self-catering apartment, where they can be more independent, or at a serviced home stay, where they may integrate in the family's lifestyle and daily routines. The tourists' ages are determining in this sense, as children and teenagers tend to stay with host families if they travel alone and at student residence halls if they travel as a group, while apartments are mostly used by older language travellers. Age is an important variable in relation to housing arrangements, but it is not the only one. Other demographic features such as the tourists' gender and travel party also play a fundamental role (for an in-depth description of the elements associated to demographic microsegmentation in language tourism see Iglesias, 2015a).

Regarding housing capacity, large establishments providing accommodation for large groups are conducive to different relationships among the users and between the users and the hosts, owners or staff than small lodging options.

The location in turn affects the product composition of study abroad stays, not just in terms of the travel components but also in relation to the language learning components, i.e. the educational input and language learning complements (Iglesias, 2017). Being geographically located in a city or in a natural area determines the kind of resources and tourist services language tourists have access to, and this can impact on their language tourism experience (Iglesias & Feng, 2017). Obviously, the nature of language learning programmes based on farm stays or work camps varies a great deal from those in coastal villages or in winter sport resorts, which in turn differ substantially from those in urban settings. The same can be said about their closeness to the educational or work setting, the destination's resources and their connectivity (Iglesias & Feng, 2017).

As mentioned above, some accommodation formats naturally facilitate the tourists' interaction with their peers (for example if taking part in a work camp or staying at a student residence hall, apartment or youth hostel), the locals (friends, service providers, or even teachers in home tuition language programmes) or the host families (for example in the case of au-pairs). This can have a direct effect on both the tourists' target language learning, on their perception of the local culture and host community, on their integration and identity transformation, and on the satisfaction with the overall language tourism experience. These aspects have been examined in detail in previous research (Iglesias, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Iglesias & Feng, 2017).

Let us focus on the second category of travel-related factors, namely those referring to transport. Transport carriers can be operated by a private company (e.g. coach companies) or not privately operated. An example of the latter is Transports Metropolitans de Barcelona (TMB), the main public transit operator in Barcelona. It runs most of the metro and local bus lines in Barcelona and the metropolitan area as well as other transport services, like Barcelona Bus Turístic (<https://www.tmb.cat>). Other operational arrangements can lead to distinguishing scheduled from charter transport. In aviation, for instance, airlines may publish in advance the arrangements for their regular scheduled flights, i.e. the date and time of departure and the points of departure and arrival. This enables the airline company to sell individual seats for a

scheduled flight as announced, whereas in the case of charter flights the customer and the airline agree on the date, time and remuneration for such flights.

Concerning cost, a low cost carrier has a relatively low-cost structure and offers low fares. Of course, the wide range of tariffs available nowadays, ranging from budget to luxury, are subject to the services offered by transportation companies. Services (e.g. food and beverages) can be included in the price of the ticket or not integrated and therefore be paid at an extra cost. As well as integration, another aspect of service provision is its classification in different categories. The rating system used by transport providers usually is an indication of the services offered on board. Some means of transport are not categorised following a rating system (e.g. taxis), while others distinguish between first and standard class, and use different names to refer to them (e.g. economy, tourist, business, etc.). On the other hand, although there are no golden rules when it comes to transportation capacity, the transportation of individuals may allow for independent travel, while collective transport may facilitate mass travel.

Local regulations affect the supply of transport services for tourists. For example, in terms of international air travel they can lead to a regulated transport system where a country controls its airspace or to a liberalised, unregulated system featuring an open-skies policy. In the context of aviation apart from IATA, the International Air Transport Association for the world's airlines which helps formulate industry policy at an international level (<http://www.iata.org>), national governments can also play a key role (Page, 1994).

With respect to the transportation scope, the means of transport used within a given destination can be differentiated from those enabling passengers to travel from their place of origin to their target destination, either on short or long haul journeys.

In relation to means of transport, they can be classically classified into air, water and land, and typically these categories can in turn be broken down into subcategories. Obviously, several alternative criteria can be considered to create subdivisions according, for example, to efficiency, speed, frequency, comfort, environmentally-friendly policies, carbon footprint, facilitation of interaction among passengers (on coach excursions, for instance), users' profile in terms of demographic features like age (e.g. in the case of transporting children and the

special needs they may have or the travel requirements they may be subject to), and location, both concerning the geographical area where a carrier operates (e.g. in urban vs. natural settings) and regarding the closeness to the context where educational or professional activities are carried out.

As regards travel to, from or within a specific destination, the route is another aspect to be taken into account, be it direct or with stopovers. Finally, the last characteristic to consider is connectivity. In this respect, point-to-point transit refers to a transportation system which takes users directly to a destination, whereas a spoke-hub distribution network entails travelling to a central location where passengers transfer to another vehicle to reach their final destination.

Moving on to the third category, i.e. catering, board type as a subcategory can be examined. The meals arrangements in language learning programmes can range from their total or partial inclusion to their total exclusion. The kind of accommodation used by language travellers may have a correlation with the type of board. For example, home stay usually contemplates breakfast, half board or even full board at weekends, breakfast or half board can be provided at a serviced residence hall, and apartments are self-catering and therefore include no meals.

The different consumption options depend on a number of variables. Time, both in terms of availability and schedules, can be an important constraint which affects meal arrangements. Other relevant factors comprise the language tourists' gastronomic preferences, budget and cost, location, the diversity of the offer to choose from, the users' specific health requirements and their social needs, which may just lead them to satisfy their basic necessity to eat or entail different socialisation degrees often associated to leisure. Moreover, some demographic aspects like the consumers' age, origins (both in relation to purchasing power and geographical provenance) and travel companions can allow for subcategorisation.

The same taxonomy related to accommodation is valid for food and beverage establishments. To illustrate different typologies according to the local regulations the case of Spain can be observed. Each Spanish autonomous community has the power to legislate and supervise catering establishments. Some communities, like the Canary Islands, disregard categorisation, whereas others, like Castile and Leon, classify their establishments using a fork rating system. For instance, in Asturias,

following the Decree 32/2003 on the management of catering activities, catering establishments are classified in accordance with their characteristics in the following groups:

a) Restaurants.

b) Cafeterias.

c) Bars, cafes or similar. Cider bars can be classified in groups a) or c) depending on their characteristics.

Furthermore, according to the quality of their facilities and services, restaurants are classified in these categories: luxury, first, second, third and fourth, identified by five, four, three, two and one fork respectively, while cafeterias are in turn classified in these categories: special, first and second, identified by three, two and one cup respectively.

To finish with, the last category that will be analysed is leisure. A crucial aspect is the type of activities carried out by language tourists. They can be directly or indirectly related and conducive to language learning, and can therefore be regarded as language learning complements. Nevertheless, language travellers may also take part in leisure events or pursuits that have no relation at all with learning the target language (for a detailed analysis of the role and nature of leisure in study abroad language programmes see Iglesias, 2017).

The variety of leisure options on offer at language stays is increasingly valued by consumers, and fierce competition among language programme providers originates an impressive array of diversified alternatives. Different leisure consumption choices may be influenced by a number of variables, such as the time or money spent on them. Another determining factor is the sojourners' hobbies or preferences, which may not necessarily have to do with having fun itself, but with living transformational or self-realisation experiences, volunteering or undertaking social work, and the need to interact and integrate in the host community. In addition, the geographical context where leisure takes place cannot be overlooked, as the weather, location, and natural and cultural resources available at the destination can be essential players. The same can be said with regard to demographic features, which can lead to microsegmentation, for example in terms of age, gender, origins, travel party,

education and occupation (Iglesias, 2015a). Of course, physical characteristics (e.g. being fit for sports) can also determine specific sorts of leisure.

Last but not least, most of the aspects used to categorise accommodation can be applied in relation to leisure establishments. As for types of establishments according to the local regulations, in Madrid, for instance, the Decree 184/1998 regulates public shows, recreational activities, establishments, venues and installations. Thus, establishments are classified (sometimes ambiguously) according to their main function as follows:

a) Entertainment and fun: party rooms, circuses, coffee-shops and restaurants offering shows, etc.

b) Culture and art: auditoriums, cinemas, bull rings, conference venues, concert halls, exhibition rooms, theatres, etc.

c) Sports: indoor facilities (e.g. football pitches, basketball courts, tennis courts, skating rinks, swimming pools, bowling alleys, billiard rooms, gyms, stadiums, etc.) and outdoor facilities where jogging, trekking, cycling, car racing, sailing, etc. can be practiced.

d) Dance: discos, dance halls, etc.

e) Recreational sports: public facilities where any recreational sport can be practiced without spectators.

f) Recreational and gambling games: casinos, games rooms, raffles and tombolas, etc.

g) Culture and leisure: amusement parks, fairs, water parks, zoos, etc.

h) Outdoor installations and roads where verbenas, parades, popular festivals and folkloric events can be held.

i) Leisure and fun: special cocktail bars with or without live musical performances.

j) Catering: taverns, coffee-shops and bars, tea rooms, ice cream parlours, restaurants, banquet rooms, terraces, etc.

The travel-related aspects that have been categorised are some of the constituents of the language tourism product composition. Nevertheless, the product itself is just one of the many elements that build up the language travel experience from a supply perspective, alongside the marketing and management structures, and the destination's environmental and social resource base. As to the demand, the key



elements are the language tourists' demographics, travel behaviour, motivations and perceptions (Iglesias, 2016a).

The need for the tourism industry to design, manage and deliver experiences that are unique and meaningful for users, lead to consumer retention and attraction and derive in increased sales revenues has been portrayed and well exemplified by Bulencea and Egger (2015). These authors offer an excellent account of how competitive advantage can be gained by tourism companies to face today's challenges, posed by high customer expectations and changing demand, fierce competition and low margins in globalised, saturated markets (Williams, 2002). In this environment, quality is taken for granted and consumers tend to focus on price and accessibility, easily facilitated by the omnipresent internet. Offering users customised, memorable experiences is a strategy for companies to aim at differentiation and avoid commoditisation.

Pine and Gilmore (1999) conceptualised the experience economy and the progression of economic value through the transition from extracting commodities to making goods, to shifting toward service delivery, to focusing on staging experiences. Tourism experiences have been defined by Tung and Ritchie (2011) as "an individual's subjective evaluation and undergoing (...) of events related to his/her tourist activities which begins before (...), during (...) and after the trip" (Tung & Ritchie, 2011:3). Therefore, we can live memorable experiences if the process is irreversible, unique and intrinsically valuable for us, we are emotionally involved and highly focused, all our senses are engaged, we lose track of time, we look forward to it, and we do challenging but feasible activities which have a playful component and a sense of authenticity (Boswijk, Peelen, Olthof & Beddow, 2012).

According to Bulencea and Egger (2015), experience design needs to take into account the push factors (inherent to users) and pull factors (relating to the supply, like the destination's attractiveness in terms of both tangible and intangible assets). Well-being is at the core of tourism experiences, and for Seligman (2011) the contributors to it are positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment, which in turn can be related to tourist motivations. For memorable experiences to take place in a tourist setting, positive emotions must be combined with familiarity and novelty. Following Kim, Ritchie and McCormick (2012) the key

factors that also intervene in the memorability of tourism experiences are refreshment, social interactions with locals, involvement, meaningfulness, knowledge, novelty and hedonism. Being aware of all these demand-related aspects can help to design, manage and deliver memorable experiences to enhance tourist satisfaction, even though the tourists' personal traits, current mood, background, prior experiences or expectations can also impact on how they subjectively perceive them.

For Pine and Gilmore (1999) the next stage in the experience economy consists in offering transformational experiences, so going beyond the sheer provision of isolated memories should be the aim of companies willing to distinguish themselves from the rest. Rather than satisfying customers' needs, the own customers should play an active role in fulfilling their aspirations, desires and dreams. The companies that outperform their competitors will be the ones that can stage a series of different events that lead to experiencing self-actualisation, so apart from creating the most propitious environment it is fundamental to diagnose personal aspirations, to set realistic goals and guiding processes that can strengthen individual weaknesses, to customise such processes to suit each tourist's profile, and to engage with them in a post-experience phase.

Reisinger (2013) states that tourism has a very significant transformational potential which actually underlies human well-being, and certain types are particularly conducive to it, such as educational, volunteer, cultural or community-based tourism. They have the power to enable human beings to rediscover themselves, to foster learning and skill development, and to change their world perspective (Pritchard & Morgan, 2013).

The above mentioned considerations regarding different aspects of the language travel experience constitute the conceptual framework underlying the research that will be reported henceforward.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

Data for this quantitative study were collected between April 2015 and March 2017 through a self-completed structured questionnaire distributed to a total of 303

foreign students who were not native Spanish speakers. To be more specific, 102 of them took part in a 4-month study abroad programme with Arcadia University (US) and had the possibility of taking courses from Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona (Spain). The rest enjoyed an academic stay at CETT-UB School of Tourism, Hospitality and Gastronomy, from the University of Barcelona. In the context of CETT-UB, 113 international students benefited from university mobility programmes and 88 used the services of different study abroad providers to arrange their academic sojourns, and almost all of them took some credits of the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism Management. They came from all over the world, most of them for 3 to 6 months, in the second semester of the academic year 2014-15 or between September and June of the academic years 2015-16 and 2016-17.

Most of the students were asked to fill in the questionnaire before or after a class. It consisted of 4 sections, each one made up of 5 questions, so it amounted to a total of 20 questions. The first 3 sections consisted of closed multiple choice questions which sometimes were combined with open-ended questions and required single answers or double answers, whereas section 4 exclusively posed open-ended questions.

The first section was related to the respondents' profile: 3 single choice questions on socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age and nationality), 1 question on travel motivations with up to 2 possible answers, and 1 single choice question on the respondents' perceived prior level of Spanish language proficiency.

The single choice options in the 4-scale questions included in the second section ranged from very positive to very negative: 3 of them were concerned with the respondents' interactive activity in Spanish (with their Spanish classmates, with other members of the local community, and with their international classmates), 1 with their immersion process and 1 with the perceived progress of their communicative competence in Spanish.

In the third section, questions of different nature were formulated relating to the tourist services that the international students had been using in Barcelona in terms of lodging, catering arrangements, transport and leisure activities.

To finish with, 4 questions in the last section referred to the expenses stemming from the above mentioned tourist services, while the last question intended to find out

the respondents' expected total length of their stay in Barcelona, taking account of its possible extension beyond the academic period.

Eventually 234 questionnaires were collected, yielding to a 77.2% response rate. The data corpus consisted in the information provided by international students coming from 24 different countries, but it must be highlighted that 59.8% of the respondents were from the US and that 3 of them had multiple nationalities. Each one of the 4 sections was processed separately by means of descriptive statistics in order to obtain data based on percentages and average figures.

#### **4. RESULTS**

To start with the data analysis, the respondents' demographics must be looked at. The initial filter questions Q4 and Q5 were particularly relevant when segmenting the data corpus on the basis of motivations and in terms of establishing correlations with the perceived improvement of communicative competence (Q10) and the complexity of the adaptation process (Q9). Table 2 illustrates the participants' profile.

		N	%
Q1. Gender	Female	166	71
	Male	68	29
Q2. Age (years)	18-21	178	76
	22-25	54	23
	Older than 25	2	1
Q3. Nationality	European	40	17
	Non European	197	84
Q5. Spanish level	Basic	135	58
	Intermediate	82	35
	Advanced	17	7

Table 2. Respondent profile.  
Source: Own elaboration.

Q4 was a multiple answer question concerned with the students' travel motivations. The results show that for 94% of the international students who took part in this study learning Spanish was one of their main reasons for academic mobility, and for 63% of them getting to know the Spanish culture was also an important motivation. On the other hand, 15% of the students were attracted by the educational

programme on offer at the target academic institution, and 19% had other various motives, like the city itself and the lifestyle.

The vast majority of the respondents (93%) did not have an advanced level of Spanish and considered that their prior level was basic (58%) or intermediate (35%), so there was room for improvement. As a matter of fact, 43% believed that their communicative competence in Spanish had improved a little and 40% felt their progress had been quite noticeable. Actually, 57% thought it had been quite easy to adapt to a Spanish speaking environment. The interaction with locals, reported as quite frequent by 46% of the respondents, may have facilitated such adjustment, even though more than half of them did not interact very often in Spanish with Spanish university students (59%) or with other international students (51%). Table 3 shows the participants' perceptions regarding their contact with the target community and culture from a very negative point of view (--) to a very positive one (++), including the ones in between, which may be rather negative (-) or rather positive (+).

	--	-	+	++
Q6. Spanish students	11%	59%	24%	6%
Q7. Local people	6%	35%	46%	13%
Q8. Erasmus students	29%	51%	16%	3%
Q9. Adaptation	3%	25%	57%	15%
Q10. Progress	6%	43%	40%	12%

Table 3. Interaction.  
Source: Own elaboration.

Moving on to the findings related to the use of tourist services in Barcelona, 76% of the respondents reported to share apartments, and 10% lodged at a student residence hall. As they could give a multiple response, other accommodation options were accounted for: home stay with a host family (11%), individual apartments (2%), hotels or hostels (1%), and staying with friends or relatives (1%). Additionally, 3% stated that they had used the services of Airbnb. For most of the respondents (73%) meals were excluded from the accommodation arrangements, while some meals or even all of the meals were included for 23% and 4%, respectively. Therefore, generally speaking they ate out one or twice a week (46%), between 3 and 7 times a week (46%) or even more than 7 times a week (8%). Almost everybody (99%) used

public transport during their stay, in combination with taxis (42%) or private transport (4%), such as their own cars, bicycles or skateboards.

The respondents engaged in leisure activities such as cultural visits (82%), night activities (78%) and sport activities (32%). Concerning the local culture, 25% had gone on sightseeing tours around Barcelona. In addition, another 25% mentioned visiting museums, e.g. the Picasso Museum or the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA). They also visited local monumental constructions such as Sagrada Familia (18%) or Parc Güell (12%), as well as Football Club Barcelona stadium (13%) or Tibidabo amusement park (3%). Moreover, 6% also enjoyed some cultural events and festivals, like the human towers (castellers). Besides, 15% made excursions to surrounding areas, such as the sacred mountain of Montserrat or the picturesque coastal village of Sitges, and 3% also travelled to other Spanish regions or European countries. Incidentally, 1% took part in volunteering tasks. In this respect, it must be pointed out that Arcadia University students are usually offered the opportunity to cooperate with t-oigo, a Spanish association which helps children with hearing impairment through their program Allies in English (<http://www.t-oigo.com>). Thus, foreign students can visit families with hearing-impaired children and spend an afternoon playing in English with them. Other more specialised volunteering tasks can also be arranged, e.g. physiotherapy students can cooperate with a multiple sclerosis centre.

In terms of nightlife, the majority of the students (67%) used to go to pubs, clubs or discos, whereas going to restaurants (14%), to the cinema or theatre (3%), and to friends' parties (3%) were less popular options. As for sport pursuits, a wide range of sports were practiced, mainly jogging or hiking (12%), working out in the gym (8%), football (4%), swimming (3%) and yoga (3%).

All in all, the academic stay in Barcelona had some associated costs for the respondents. Accommodation was often the main expense for most students every month, ranging from around €200 to €1,000 (for students with all-inclusive packages). Renting a room in Barcelona (with no meals included) was reported to cost €350-400 a month near Sagrada Familia, but the rent could actually be lower in other districts which are not in demand or higher in popular tourist areas like Barceloneta. The monthly catering expenditure ranged from €30 to €1,000 and it also

depended on whether it was included in the package and on the accommodation arrangements. Staying with a host family or at a student residence hall usually involved some sort of meal provision (breakfast, half-board or even full board), whereas shared apartments were self-catering.

Regarding leisure, on average the respondents who answered this question (91%) spent about €200 per month. As mentioned above, while some students made little investment on inexpensive leisure options (€10 was the lowest reported amount), others had a more substantial budget of up to €1,500 for domestic excursions and international trips. As for transportation costs, 92% of the respondents paid €105 for a 3-month travel card allowing them to use the public transport network in Barcelona. The highest reported amount was €500 a month to cover short trips abroad.

To finish with, 83% of the respondents stayed in Barcelona for between 3 and 6 months, and the rest stayed for 7 to 10 months (3%) or even for up to 12 months (5%). Besides, 9% intended to extend their stay for a longer period of more than one year, so they will no longer be considered tourists, eventually.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The taxonomy of factors that has been outlined in this paper complements the one resulting from previous research so as to map the market system of language tourism. All in all, it offers an account of the different variables that need to be taken into consideration when planning, implementing and assessing study abroad stays. The survey, in turn, will hopefully contribute to provide a better understanding of how the language tourism market works, gather data which can be effectively used for benchmarking purposes and point out weaknesses and areas for improvement. This real industry insight can help organisations to make informed decisions for their effective management.

The main limitations of this conceptual framework as regards the categorisation of the travel-related aspects intervening in language tourism lie in the risk of either overgeneralising and being too vague or obvious (e.g. in terms of cost) or being too narrow (e.g. with respect to the types of accommodation, catering or leisure establishments according to local regulations). The convenience of taking a broad

view to cover different realities ought to balance the need to adjust to specific contexts, and while classifications can be very finely grained, simplicity must be not overlooked for practical reasons. This is why categorisation has been limited to a maximum of four levels, in this case.

On the other hand, categories and subcategories sometimes overlap as they are interrelated, and sometimes boundaries are blurred. For instance, the opportunities for interaction between language tourists and residents can be linked to housing, catering, leisure and even transport for those who students who stay with a host family, have breakfast and dinner with them and go on family excursions sharing the same means of transport. Actually, the fact that alternative classifications are possible must be acknowledged.

As for the survey's shortcomings, its restricted scope allows for limited extrapolation. In addition, some aspects were superficially looked into and need to be investigated more extensively, such as cost analysis or the collateral effects of different travel arrangements.

Future lines of research can examine different types of accommodation in terms of cost and interaction potential in order to study lodging as a key factor to enhance linguistic development and socio-cultural integration. Thus, the immersion levels of study abroad sojourners can be looked into, as well as the benefits for themselves and for the host community members. On the other hand, given that the cost of accommodation may be similar to the cost of tuition, various lodging options can be investigated to reduce its economic impact on the total budget. Besides, the influence of prior language tourism experiences on both tourists and locals can also be analysed since they can shape customer expectations, satisfaction and loyalty (Iglesias, 2015b). Moreover, the way motivations for international mobility are shifting can be observed, for example towards social goals or specialised content. All these aspects are of vital importance in programme design and destination promotion.

Different impacts can be researched focusing not only on the language tourism industry (i.e. on companies, structures and services) but also on sustainability of the destinations at a micro or macro level (e.g. on the host societies, on the local culture, on the consolidation or promotion of a city, region, country, etc.). Furthermore, the impacts on the individuals' identity can also be explored: the power of language as a



means to know and appreciate a culture and the effects of both linguistic and cultural knowledge on emotional aspects and on the creation of affective bonds, how such bonds increase the perceived attractiveness of a destination from the language tourists' point of view, how individual contact can derive into cultural ambassadorship contributing to a destination's promotion and consolidation for both tourists and residents, and how values and personality traits can change in both cases and make them grow as individuals. This is the added value of language tourism experiences and hence the need for authenticity in the relationships between those who take part in them.

Language tourism as a subtype of educational tourism provides the perfect ground for transformational experiences which are truly memorable from the two-fold perspective of tourism activity and foreign language acquisition (Iglesias, 2014). As we have seen in the survey results, language tourists engage with the local culture through language learning and interact with the host community (the host families, their classmates and the locals they deal with) at different integration levels. They also interact with other international students and establish meaningful relationships.

Different aspects of their experience, i.e. accommodation arrangements, tuition and leisure activities, carry them through a series of interrelated events with a converging aim: acquiring a foreign language and living in a different culture, which can have an impact on their linguistic identity and the way they see themselves and the rest of the world, including their own background. The fact of discovering and adapting to new life styles can turn them into more open-minded, tolerant individuals.

The language tourism product can draw on some of the elements that have been mentioned in the theoretical framework. For example, home stays can be the perfect ground for familiarity and novelty, i.e. living well-known situations with a new family, and can endow the students with a sense of authenticity while they engage emotionally in significant social interactions with their host families and their friends as well as having fun with them and discovering the local culture from the inside. Sharing apartments or student residence halls can offer opportunities for strong emotional involvement and recreation. The leisure activities sojourners undertake can be a source of positive emotions, hedonism, entertainment, familiarity and novelty (if they spend time on their usual hobbies in a new setting), and social

relationships. They can also foster the acquisition of new knowledge or skills through challenging but achievable tasks that require the participants to be highly focused, all five senses involved, so that time flies and once it has finished they are willing to continue. The survey results show that some students also like to take part in volunteering activities, which is a further step towards both integration and self-actualisation. Furthermore, language classes can be the context for social contact, familiarity and novelty, meaning and accomplishment, challenging inputs and knowledge that require the learners' attention, and skill development through amusing innovative methodologies.

On the other hand, language tourism providers can customise each experience to suit individuals realistically, creating the proper conditions and context according to their needs, preferences, personality traits, expectations, prior knowledge and background so as to favour the fulfilment of their aspirations taking into account that nowadays intense vital experiences in shorter periods of time are sought.

Moreover, language tourists can engage in post experience actions which promote a continued contact with the host community and culture and make it possible for them to go on improving their language skills. This paves the way for consumer loyalty and customer retention, and it can be the origin of follow-up visits to a destination they are already familiar with but which they can see with new eyes under new circumstances, for instance if they take part in a different programme or if they travel with their family or friends, for whom they become tour guides. If the language tourism experience has been satisfactory, favourable word-of-mouth can also lead to customer attraction and positive anticipation.

In conclusion, the language tourism providers who can design and stage such memorable transformational experiences will stand out from the rest. The most successful ones will be those which make sure that these elements are paramount in their programmes: motivating learning methodologies and materials, challenging but accessible contents, opportunities for authentic, stimulating contact with locals which promote emotional involvement and long-lasting relationships, purposeful social activities, and enjoyable leisure options according to each individual's profile and taking into account personal push factors.

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