



Empowering Heritage Tourism Communities through Foreign Language Capacity Building: Evidence from a Cultural Institution in Indonesia

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Abstract

Sustainable heritage tourism increasingly depends on the capacity of local communities to act as effective cultural mediators, yet limited attention has been given to the role of foreign language competence as a mechanism of empowerment within heritage institutions. In many heritage destinations, tour guides are expected to communicate complex cultural meanings to international visitors, but insufficient linguistic resources may constrain their professional agency and the quality of heritage interpretation. This study aims to examine how foreign language capacity building functions as a form of community empowerment in a heritage tourism context, with specific reference to heritage tour guides at the Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, Indonesia. The study adopted a qualitative case study design. Data was collected through systematic observations of training sessions and guided tours, reflective discussions with participating guides, and analysis of training materials and institutional documents. The data were analyzed thematically, guided by empowerment theory and communicative competence theory. The findings indicate that foreign language training enhanced guides' communicative confidence, interpretive depth, and intercultural awareness. Participants demonstrated greater flexibility in responding to visitor inquiries, improved narrative coherence in explaining cultural and historical meanings, and stronger perceptions of professional legitimacy as cultural representatives. While the training primarily supported psychological and social dimensions of empowerment, it contributed indirectly to cultural sustainability by strengthening heritage mediation practices. These findings suggest that foreign language capacity building has significant implications for sustainable heritage tourism and the operationalization of Sustainable Development Goal 11. Integrating language training into heritage management and community development initiatives can support more inclusive, high quality, and culturally grounded tourism practices.

Keywords: Heritage Tourism, Community Empowerment, Foreign Language Training, Communicative Competence, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Cultural heritage tourism has emerged as a key driver of sustainable urban development, particularly in regions where historical sites serve both as repositories of cultural identity and as



major economic assets. UNESCO emphasizes that heritage sites are not only monuments of the past but also living spaces whose sustainability depends heavily on local community participation and capacity development (UNESCO, 2019). In urban heritage destinations, local communities often function as cultural mediators who interpret historical narratives, values, and traditions for visitors. Their competencies therefore directly influence tourists' experiences, cultural understanding, and long-term support for heritage preservation (Richards, 2018; Su et al., 2019).

Within this context, human capacity development is increasingly recognized as a central pillar of sustainable tourism. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals underscore the importance of inclusive, participatory approaches in urban sustainability, particularly under SDG 11, which highlights the preservation of cultural heritage and the strengthening of local communities in sustainable cities (United Nations, 2015). Scholars have consistently argued that sustainability in heritage tourism cannot be achieved solely through infrastructure improvement or policy regulation, but must be grounded in the empowerment of local actors who engage directly with visitors (Bramwell et al., 2017; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). Among these actors, heritage tour guides occupy a strategic position, as they shape not only informational flows but also cultural meanings and perceptions of place.

Language competence is a critical yet often underestimated dimension of such community empowerment. In international tourism settings, foreign language proficiency enables effective communication, enhances service quality, and facilitates intercultural dialogue between hosts and visitors (Alvarez-García et al., 2018). Tour guides with limited foreign language skills may struggle to explain cultural concepts accurately, respond to visitors' inquiries, and convey the symbolic and philosophical values embedded in heritage sites. As a result, cultural narratives risk becoming simplified or distorted, which may undermine both visitor satisfaction and the integrity of cultural transmission (Zapata et al., 2019). Conversely, foreign language competence allows guides to articulate local knowledge with greater confidence and precision, reinforcing their professional agency and their role as custodians of cultural heritage.

Recent studies in tourism education and community development have increasingly emphasized the role of training and capacity-building programs in enhancing local participation and sustainability outcomes. Training interventions have been shown to strengthen community resilience, improve service performance, and foster a sense of ownership over tourism development processes (Moscardo, 2020; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). In heritage contexts, capacity-building initiatives that integrate cultural knowledge with practical skills can contribute to both economic opportunities and cultural preservation (García-Hernández et al., 2017). However, while the importance of training is well acknowledged, the specific role of foreign language training as an empowerment mechanism within heritage tourism remains relatively underexplored.

Despite the growing body of literature on sustainable tourism and community empowerment, several theoretical and empirical gaps persist. First, empowerment in tourism research has often been conceptualized primarily in economic or political terms, such as income generation, decision-making authority, or institutional participation (Scheyvens, 2002; Boley & McGehee, 2014). Although these dimensions are undoubtedly important, they tend to overlook communicative competence as a form of social and cultural capital that enables local actors to interact meaningfully within global tourism networks. Language skills are frequently treated as technical tools rather than as constitutive elements of empowerment that shape agency, confidence, and identity.

Second, studies on tourism-related language training have largely focused on formal education settings or hospitality professionals in large commercial enterprises, such as hotels and travel agencies (Blue & Harun, 2003; Kim et al., 2019). These studies tend to prioritize vocational outcomes, such as employability and customer satisfaction, without sufficiently addressing broader questions of cultural sustainability and community agency. Consequently, the implications of foreign language training for heritage interpretation, intercultural mediation, and local empowerment remain insufficiently theorized.

Third, although numerous studies have examined community-based tourism initiatives in developing and emerging economies, relatively few have provided empirically grounded analyses of capacity-building interventions within heritage institutions that retain strong cultural and

symbolic authority. Traditional urban heritage sites, particularly those managed by royal or historical institutions, present unique social dynamics in which cultural legitimacy, tradition, and modern tourism demands intersect. In such settings, community empowerment does not simply involve participation in tourism activities, but also negotiation of cultural representation and historical authenticity. Yet, empirical research that explores how language training supports these complex processes is scarce.

Furthermore, current scholarship on the Sustainable Development Goals in tourism has often focused on macro-level indicators and policy frameworks, leaving micro-level empowerment processes underexamined (Hall, 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). While SDG 11 explicitly emphasizes cultural heritage protection, limited attention has been given to the everyday practices through which local actors contribute to this goal. Understanding how foreign language capacity-building enhances guides' agency in heritage tourism offers an opportunity to link micro-level interventions with global sustainability agendas in a more concrete and empirically grounded manner.

Taken together, these gaps indicate a need for research that conceptualizes foreign language training not merely as a technical skill acquisition process, but as an empowerment mechanism that strengthens local agency, enhances cultural interpretation, and contributes to sustainable heritage tourism. Such research is particularly needed in non-Western contexts, where heritage tourism plays a vital role in urban identity and economic development, yet local voices often remain underrepresented in international scholarship.

Responding to these gaps, the present study examines a foreign language training program implemented for heritage tour guides at the Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, Indonesia. As an active cultural institution and a major heritage tourism destination, the Keraton represents a context in which cultural continuity, tourism development, and sustainability objectives converge. The study focuses on training in three foreign languages, namely English, French, and German, delivered through a communicative and context-based instructional approach that integrates linguistic skills with cultural content relevant to heritage interpretation.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze how foreign language capacity-building functions as a mechanism of community empowerment in heritage tourism settings. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how language training influences tour guides' communicative confidence, interpretative abilities, and perceived agency in engaging with international visitors. By examining these processes, the study aims to illuminate the role of language competence in supporting sustainable cultural tourism practices aligned with SDG 11.

In pursuing this objective, the study makes several contributions to the literature. Theoretically, it extends empowerment frameworks in tourism by incorporating communicative competence as a central dimension of agency. Rather than viewing language skills as ancillary or purely instrumental, the study conceptualizes foreign language competence as a form of cultural and social capital that enables local actors to negotiate meaning, represent heritage narratives, and assert their professional identity within global tourism flows. This perspective contributes to ongoing efforts to refine empowerment theory in tourism and development studies.

Empirically, the study provides evidence from a heritage tourism context that has received limited attention in international scholarship. By focusing on tour guides operating within a historically and culturally significant institution, the research offers insights into how capacity-building interventions unfold in settings characterized by strong cultural traditions and symbolic authority. These insights contribute to a more nuanced understanding of community empowerment that goes beyond community-based tourism in peripheral or rural contexts.

From a practical and policy perspective, the findings offer implications for the design of capacity-building programs in heritage tourism. The study highlights the potential of foreign language training to enhance not only service quality but also cultural sustainability, by enabling more accurate and meaningful heritage interpretation. This has relevance for policymakers, heritage managers, and educational institutions seeking to align tourism development initiatives with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Finally, by explicitly linking micro-level empowerment processes to the broader SDG framework, the study contributes to bridging the gap between global sustainability agendas and local practices. It demonstrates how targeted educational interventions can support sustainable

cities and communities through the empowerment of local cultural mediators, offering a transferable model for other heritage tourism destinations facing similar challenges.

In sum, this study positions foreign language capacity-building as a critical yet underexplored pathway toward community empowerment and sustainable heritage tourism. By integrating theoretical reflection with empirical analysis, it advances scholarly understanding of how language, culture, and sustainability intersect in contemporary tourism development.

Literature Review

The present study is grounded in theories of community empowerment, sustainable tourism, and communicative competence within heritage contexts. Community empowerment theory conceptualizes empowerment as a multidimensional process through which individuals and groups gain the capacity to make meaningful choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes (Scheyvens, 2002; Boley & McGehee, 2014). In tourism studies, empowerment is commonly articulated through economic, psychological, social, and political dimensions, emphasizing agency, participation, and control over local development trajectories. Sustainable tourism theory complements this perspective by framing community involvement and capacity development as essential preconditions for long term environmental, cultural, and socio-economic sustainability (Bramwell et al., 2017; Hall, 2019). Within heritage tourism, interpretive theory further highlights the role of guides as cultural mediators whose communicative practices shape visitors' understanding and valuation of heritage assets (Su et al., 2019). From a linguistic perspective, theories of communicative competence stress that effective communication involves not only grammatical accuracy but also sociocultural knowledge, discourse competence, and strategic ability (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). Experts in tourism and heritage studies increasingly argue that these linguistic dimensions constitute a critical yet underrecognized form of cultural capital that influences service quality, visitor satisfaction, and the perceived authenticity of heritage interpretation (Richards, 2018). Accordingly, factors such as language proficiency, intercultural awareness, narrative competence, and communicative confidence emerge as specific theoretical components linking language training to empowerment and sustainability outcomes.

A wide range of theoretical approaches and analytical frameworks have been employed to examine empowerment and sustainability in tourism contexts. Prominent among these are Scheyvens' empowerment framework, which differentiates economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment, and the triple bottom line model of sustainability, which integrates economic viability, social equity, and environmental protection (Elkington, 1997; Scheyvens, 2002). In heritage tourism, interpretive planning models focus on dimensions such as meaning making, authenticity, and visitor engagement through narrative and communication (Moscardo, 2020). Language and tourism scholarship has introduced models of tourism discourse and service communication that emphasize sociolinguistic appropriateness, cultural sensitivity, and interactional competence (Blue & Harun, 2003; Kim et al., 2019). These approaches operationalize empowerment and sustainability through indicators such as communicative effectiveness, professional confidence, cultural representation, and participation in tourism governance. The present study draws selectively from these frameworks and adapts them to a heritage tourism context in which foreign language training functions as the primary intervention and empowerment mechanism.

The conceptual framework adopted in this study builds upon the intersection of empowerment theory and communicative competence theory as applied to heritage tourism. Historically, empowerment theory emerged from development studies and participatory planning, emphasizing grassroots agency and structural transformation (Friedmann, 1992). In tourism research, scholars later adapted this theory to assess how local communities benefit from and influence tourism development processes (Boley & McGehee, 2014). Separately, communicative competence theory evolved within sociolinguistics and applied linguistics to explain how language users deploy linguistic and cultural knowledge in specific social contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980). Previous researchers have begun integrating these perspectives to examine language as a resource for employability and service quality in tourism settings (Kim et al., 2019), although often without an explicit empowerment lens. In heritage tourism contexts,

some studies have adapted empowerment frameworks to incorporate interpretive skills and cultural knowledge as components of agency, particularly among indigenous or local guides (Zapata et al., 2019). These adaptations demonstrate that combining empowerment and communicative competence theories provides a coherent analytical model for understanding how language capacity building supports both individual agency and cultural sustainability.

From a theoretical standpoint, the integrated empowerment and communicative competence framework operates as a coherent system in which language skills function as enabling resources rather than isolated technical abilities. Empowerment theory provides formal analytical structure through which changes in agency, confidence, and participation can be examined, while communicative competence theory supplies the substantive mechanisms through which such changes occur. Within this system, language training enhances guides' ability to interpret heritage narratives, engage visitors interactively, and negotiate cultural meanings in multilingual encounters. These communicative processes, in turn, reinforce psychological empowerment by strengthening self-efficacy and professional identity, as well as social empowerment by facilitating recognition and respect from visitors and institutional stakeholders. Scholars have argued that such systemic relationships are particularly relevant in heritage tourism, where communication mediates the relationship between tangible sites and intangible cultural meanings (Su et al., 2019; Moscardo, 2020). Thus, the chosen framework enables systematic analysis of material problems related to tourism sustainability through a theoretically grounded examination of linguistic and social processes.

The material object of this study is foreign language capacity building for heritage tour guides operating in a culturally significant urban heritage institution. This object includes structured language training activities, communicative practices during guided tours, and the sociocultural interactions between guides and international visitors. Within this context, language functions not only as a medium of information transfer but also as a tool for articulating philosophical values, historical narratives, and cultural norms embedded in the heritage site. Previous studies have shown that inadequately trained guides may oversimplify or misrepresent cultural content, thereby weakening heritage interpretation and visitor understanding (Richards, 2018). By contrast, enhanced language competence allows guides to present more nuanced explanations and to respond effectively to visitors' inquiries, situating the material object of this study firmly within debates on cultural sustainability and community empowerment.

The subject of this study is a group of heritage tour guides engaged in a foreign language training program implemented within the Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, Indonesia. Historically, the Keraton has functioned as a political, cultural, and symbolic center of Javanese civilization, preserving rituals, architecture, and value systems that continue to shape regional identity. In recent decades, the Keraton has also become a major international tourism destination, receiving visitors from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As tourism intensified, the communicative demands placed on local guides increased, particularly with regard to explaining complex cultural concepts in foreign languages. The training program examined in this study was designed to address these demands through communicative, context-based language instruction in English, French, and German. From initial needs assessment through implementation and evaluation, the program sought to integrate linguistic development with heritage interpretation, thereby situating the subject of the study at the intersection of education, tourism, and cultural sustainability.

Previous research on heritage tourism has predominantly focused on visitor experiences, destination management, or macro level sustainability indicators, with comparatively limited attention to communicative empowerment among local guides (Hall, 2019; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). Studies that do address language training in tourism contexts often emphasize employability or service efficiency rather than empowerment and cultural sustainability (Kim et al., 2019). The present study differs from this body of work by adopting a more specific focus on foreign language capacity building as an empowerment mechanism within a heritage institution that holds significant cultural authority. This focus is particularly urgent given global policy emphasis on SDG 11, which calls for safeguarding cultural heritage through inclusive and participatory approaches. By examining how language training enhances guides' agency and interpretive capacity, the study addresses a critical gap between global sustainability agendas and

local empowerment practices, contributing empirically and theoretically to scholarship on sustainable heritage tourism.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine foreign language capacity building as a mechanism of community empowerment within a heritage tourism context. A case study approach was selected because it enables in depth exploration of complex social processes situated in a specific institutional and cultural setting. This design is particularly appropriate for investigating how educational interventions interact with local practices, meanings, and agency in real world contexts. By focusing on a single heritage institution with strong cultural and symbolic significance, the study sought to generate contextually grounded insights that remain analytically transferable to similar heritage tourism settings.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at the Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, a central cultural institution and major heritage tourism destination in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The research participants were heritage tour guides who were actively involved in guiding domestic and international visitors and who voluntarily participated in a foreign language training program organized as part of a community engagement initiative. The guides represented varying levels of guiding experience and prior language proficiency. Their participation provided access to diverse perspectives on linguistic needs, professional challenges, and perceived outcomes of the training.

Data Sources

Multiple data sources were used to ensure analytical depth and credibility through triangulation. Primary data were derived from observations of training sessions, guided tour practices, and reflective discussions with participants. In addition, qualitative feedback from participants during and after the training program constituted an important data source for understanding perceived changes in communicative confidence and interpretive capacity. Supplementary data included training materials, instructional modules, and institutional documents related to the design and objectives of the program. These sources provided contextual information necessary for interpreting participant experiences and situating the findings within broader institutional practices.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data collection was supported by several qualitative instruments. An observation protocol was developed to guide systematic recording of participant engagement, interaction patterns, and communicative practices during training sessions and guided tours. This protocol focused on indicators such as language use, responsiveness to visitor questions, narrative clarity, and interactional confidence. Semi structured interview guidelines were used in informal reflective conversations with participants to explore their perceptions of the training, challenges encountered, and perceived professional benefits. Document analysis guidelines were applied to training modules and instructional materials to examine how linguistic content was aligned with cultural and heritage interpretation goals.

Procedures

Data collection was conducted over the full duration of the training program, from initial sessions to post training application in guiding practice. At the outset, the researcher engaged in non-participant observation to understand baseline communicative practices and training dynamics. During the training, systematic observations were carried out in each session, with detailed field notes recorded immediately after activities to preserve contextual accuracy. Reflective conversations with participants were conducted at multiple points to capture changes in perceptions and confidence over time. Following the completion of the training program, observations of actual guided tours were undertaken to document how newly acquired language skills were applied in authentic heritage tourism interactions. All data collection procedures were

conducted with the informed consent of participants and with respect for institutional norms and cultural sensitivities.

Data Analysis

Rather than relying on numerical measurement, this study employed analytical categories derived from empowerment theory and communicative competence theory. Empowerment was examined through indicators such as perceived agency, professional confidence, and participation in communicative decision-making during tours. Communicative competence was analyzed through dimensions including lexical adequacy, contextual appropriateness, clarity of cultural explanation, and interactional responsiveness. These categories guided both data collection and analysis, allowing systematic interpretation of how language training influenced participants' practices and perceptions.

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic analysis process. First, all field notes, interview summaries, and documents were read repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data. Initial coding was then conducted by identifying recurring patterns and meaningful units related to language use, empowerment experiences, and heritage interpretation. Codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes that reflected the study's analytical framework, such as communicative agency, cultural mediation, and professional empowerment. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison was used to examine similarities and differences across participants and data sources. Analytical memos were written to document interpretive decisions and to relate emerging themes to the theoretical framework. The integration of multiple data sources enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings and ensured that interpretations were grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations and Rigor

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the use of collected data. Anonymity was maintained in reporting findings to protect individual identities. Methodological rigor was ensured through triangulation of data sources, prolonged engagement in the field, and reflexive documentation of the researcher's analytical assumptions. These measures strengthened the credibility and dependability of the study while supporting a nuanced understanding of language capacity building as a community empowerment process in heritage tourism.

Findings

The findings are presented thematically to reflect how foreign language capacity building shaped communicative practices, professional agency, and cultural mediation among heritage tour guides at the Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat. The results are derived from systematic observations, participant reflections, and documented training activities, and are organized into five interrelated themes (Figure 1).

One of the most evident outcomes of the training program was a marked increase in participants' communicative confidence when interacting with international visitors. Initial observations during early training sessions indicated that several guides relied heavily on memorized phrases and exhibited hesitation when responding to spontaneous questions. By the end of the program, however, guides demonstrated greater fluency in initiating conversations, clarifying visitor inquiries, and sustaining interaction beyond scripted narratives.

For example, during post training observations, guides were able to rephrase explanations using alternative vocabulary when visitors appeared confused, rather than deferring or switching to Indonesian. One participant reflected, "Before the training, I was afraid of making mistakes, so I spoke very little. Now I feel more confident explaining even complex cultural meanings in English." This shift aligns with scholarship that identifies communicative self-efficacy as a central indicator of psychological empowerment in tourism contexts (Boley & McGehee, 2014).

The findings also indicate qualitative improvement in the depth and clarity of cultural interpretation delivered by guides. Analysis of guided tour observations revealed that participants increasingly incorporated culturally specific terms and historical explanations in a structured and

coherent manner. Rather than offering brief descriptive labels, guides contextualized architectural elements, rituals, and symbols within broader Javanese philosophical concepts, such as harmony between humanity, nature, and spirituality.

For instance, during a guided tour in English, one guide explained the symbolic alignment of the Keraton's spatial layout with cosmological beliefs, a topic that previously had been avoided due to limited vocabulary. This enhanced narrative capacity reflects what interpretive scholars describe as effective heritage mediation, where guides function as translators of meaning rather than mere providers of facts (Su et al., 2019). The finding suggests that foreign language training can strengthen guides' ability to sustain interpretive authenticity while communicating with international audiences.

Beyond linguistic accuracy, the training fostered greater intercultural awareness in participant interactions. Observations indicated that guides adapted their communicative style according to visitors' cultural backgrounds, adjusting levels of formality, explanatory detail, and examples used during tours. For example, guides guiding European visitors often employed comparative references to European heritage sites, while emphasizing different aspects when interacting with visitors from East Asia.

Participants acknowledged this change explicitly. One guide noted, "The training helped me understand not only the language, but also how foreigners usually ask questions and what they are interested in." This finding is consistent with communicative competence theory, which emphasizes sociocultural appropriateness as a core component of effective communication (Canale & Swain, 1980). The development of intercultural sensitivity further contributed to guides perceived professionalism and sense of legitimacy as cultural representatives.

The data revealed notable variation in participation levels across the three language streams offered. English classes attracted the largest number of participants, while German and French classes involved smaller, more focused groups. Quantitatively, English sessions accounted for approximately four fifths of total participants, whereas German and French classes each comprised fewer than ten participants. Despite the disparity in numbers, qualitative observations suggested that smaller class sizes facilitated more individualized interaction and immediate feedback, particularly in German and French sessions.

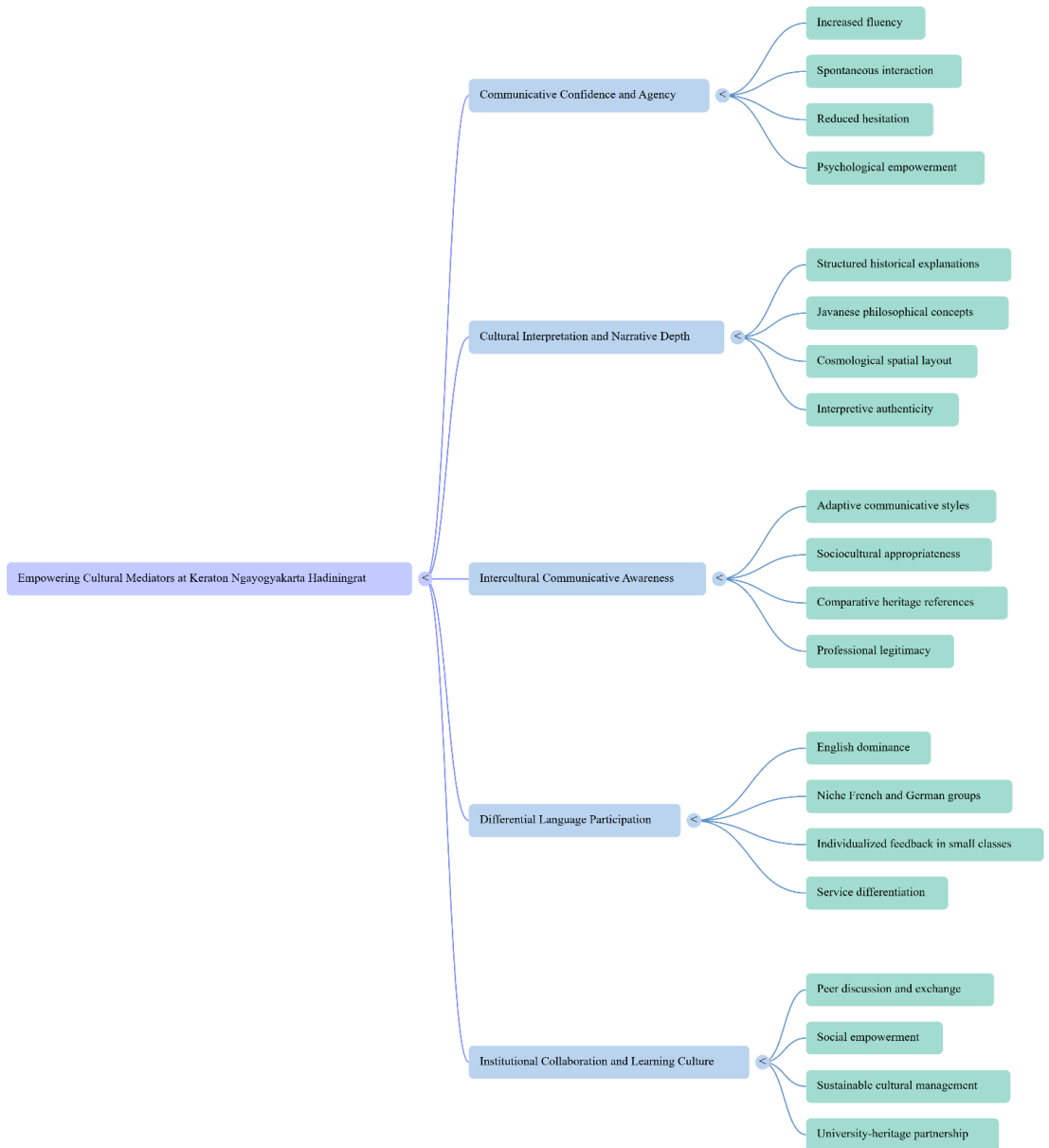
Guides enrolled in less commonly used languages reported strong motivation linked to niche visitor groups. One participant from the French class stated, "Even if French tourists are fewer, when they come, they really appreciate being guided in their own language." This finding illustrates how language diversification contributes to service differentiation and supports arguments that capacity building should address both dominant and less dominant tourism markets (Richards, 2018).

At the institutional level, the training initiative contributed to a stronger learning culture within the heritage tourism setting. Guides increasingly engaged in peer discussion, exchanged expressions across languages, and reflected collectively on guiding experiences. Observations during later sessions showed guides voluntarily practicing language use outside formal instructional time, particularly in preparation for anticipated visits by foreign delegations.

This collective engagement reflects social empowerment, understood as strengthened networks and shared identity among participants (Scheyvens, 2002). The collaboration between the university team and the heritage institution also reinforced guides' perception that language development was valued as part of sustainable cultural management rather than as an individual skill deficit. Such institutional recognition has been shown to reinforce long term capacity building outcomes in community-based tourism initiatives (Moscardo, 2020).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that foreign language capacity building functioned as a multidimensional empowerment process affecting individual confidence, cultural interpretation, and institutional practice. Language training enhanced guides' agencies as communicators and cultural mediators, enabling more meaningful interaction with international visitors while supporting the sustainability of heritage interpretation. These results provide empirical support for integrating communicative competence into empowerment-oriented frameworks in heritage tourism, particularly within the aims of sustainable cities and communities under SDG 11 (United Nations, 2015).

Figure: Empowering Heritage Tourism Through Language Capacity



Discussion

Several reports have shown that sustainable heritage tourism depends heavily on the capacity of local actors to mediate cultural meanings while meeting the communicative demands of international visitors. As mentioned in the literature review, empowerment theory emphasizes agency, confidence, and participation as central outcomes of capacity building initiatives (Scheyvens, 2002; Boley & McGehee, 2014). Prior studies that have noted the importance of language skills in tourism contexts have largely framed them as vocational assets linked to service quality and employability (Blue & Harun, 2003; Kim et al., 2019). Very little was found in the literature on the question of foreign language training as a mechanism of cultural and social empowerment in heritage institutions with strong symbolic authority. Previous studies evaluating training interventions observed inconsistent results on whether language competence alone translates into greater local agency (Moscardo, 2020). A strong relationship between communicative competence and visitor satisfaction has been reported in the literature (Su et al., 2019; Richards, 2018). In reviewing the literature, no data was found on the association between structured multilingual training and empowerment outcomes aligned explicitly with SDG 11 in royal or institutional heritage settings.

The third question in this research was how foreign language capacity building influences heritage tour guides' agency and cultural mediation practices. An initial objective of the project

was to identify whether language training contributes to empowerment beyond technical communication skills. The first question in this study sought to determine changes in communicative confidence and interpretive capacity following participation in the training program. It was hypothesised that participants with a history of limited language exposure would show measurable growth in confidence and interactional competence. The present study was designed to determine the effect of contextual and communicative language training on guides' professional practices within a heritage tourism environment. With respect to the first research question, it was found that guides demonstrated increased confidence, flexibility, and engagement during guided tours. This study sets out with the aim of assessing the importance of communicative competence in enhancing community empowerment within sustainable heritage tourism.

This study found that foreign language capacity building significantly enhanced guides' communicative confidence and professional agency. Another finding is that participants moved from reliance on memorized scripts toward more adaptive and responsive communication during tours. The results of this study show that guides were able to explain complex cultural concepts more coherently and to manage spontaneous interactions with international visitors. The current investigation found that language training facilitated deeper narrative articulation of heritage meanings rather than superficial description. In this study, communicative practices were found to contribute to psychological and social dimensions of empowerment. On the question of cultural mediation, this study found that enhanced linguistic resources enabled guides to present heritage narratives with greater accuracy and confidence. The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that language competence functioned as an enabling condition for agency rather than as an isolated technical skill.

One interesting finding is the extent to which intercultural awareness developed alongside linguistic competence. Another important finding is that guides increasingly adjusted their communicative strategies in response to visitors' cultural backgrounds. The most important result was that improved communication supported guides' perception of themselves as legitimate cultural representatives. Most striking was the substantial difference in narrative depth observed between pretraining and post training guided tours. Another finding that stands out from the results reported earlier is that smaller language groups, particularly in French and German, fostered intensive interaction and individualized feedback, contributing to strong perceived benefits despite lower participation numbers.

What is surprising is that participation in less dominant foreign languages generated high levels of perceived professional value among participants. Surprisingly, niche language skills were found to enhance guides' confidence even when visitor numbers were relatively limited. One unanticipated result was that guides enrolled in smaller language classes demonstrated faster gains in interactional confidence. What is curious about this result is that it challenges assumptions that training impact scales directly with participant numbers. Contrary to expectations, this study did not find a significant difference in perceived empowerment between guides training in dominant and less dominant languages. These findings are somewhat surprising given the fact that other research shows language demand often shapes training motivation (Kim et al., 2019).

This study confirms that communicative competence is associated with psychological empowerment and professional agency. This finding was also reported by Boley and McGehee (2014), who identified confidence and self-efficacy as key empowerment indicators in tourism contexts. This finding is consistent with that of Su et al. (2019), who emphasized the role of guides as active cultural mediators. Comparison of the findings with those of other studies confirms that effective interpretation enhances visitor engagement and satisfaction (Richards, 2018). These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of previous work in sustainable tourism emphasizing capacity building as a foundation for community participation (Bramwell et al., 2017). In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that locally grounded skills development supports cultural sustainability and social inclusion (Moscardo, 2020).

This study has been unable to demonstrate that language training automatically translates into political empowerment or decision-making authority. However, this result has not previously

been described in institutional heritage settings where governance structures are highly centralized. This finding is contrary to previous studies which have suggested that empowerment initiatives directly increase participatory control in tourism planning (Scheyvens, 2002). In contrast to earlier findings, however, no evidence of structural empowerment was detected. The findings of the current study do not support the assumption that communicative capacity alone alters institutional power relations. These results differ from broader community-based tourism models but remain broadly consistent with earlier observations that empowerment is context dependent.

A possible explanation for this might be the hierarchical and symbolic nature of the heritage institution examined. Another possible explanation for this is that language training primarily affects interactional domains rather than governance structures. Several factors could explain this observation. Firstly, institutional roles and authority may delimit the scope of empowerment achievable through training alone. Secondly, empowerment processes may require longer timeframes to influence political participation. These differences can be explained in part by the distinction between individual agencies and structural power. It seems possible that these results are due to the program's focus on communicative practice rather than institutional reform.

Another source of uncertainty is the qualitative and context specific nature of the data. These findings may be somewhat limited by the focus on a single heritage institution. This data must be interpreted with caution because participant reflections may be influenced by social desirability and institutional affiliation. In observational studies, there is a potential for bias from researcher interpretation. However, with a relatively small participant pool, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be generalizable across all heritage tourism contexts.

These findings suggest that communicative competence plays a mediating role between training and empowerment outcomes. It is possible, therefore, that language capacity building enhances agency primarily through psychological and social dimensions. According to these data, we can infer that empowerment in heritage tourism is incremental and layered. The present study raises the possibility that language training functions as a gateway to broader forms of empowerment over time. This observation may support the hypothesis that communicative agencies precedes structural participation in sustainable tourism contexts.

These findings suggest that capacity building initiatives should integrate language training with heritage interpretation and intercultural communication. An implication of this finding is the possibility that sustainable tourism policies can operationalize SDG 11 through targeted educational interventions. One of the issues that emerges from these findings is the need to recognize language competence as cultural capital within heritage management. The results of this study suggest that foreign language training may help strengthen cultural sustainability by empowering local guides as knowledgeable mediators.

This finding is reassuring since it confirms the relevance of empowerment theory in explaining micro level processes in heritage tourism. The present results are significant in at least two major respects. First, they extend empowerment theory by incorporating communicative competence. Second, they demonstrate the relevance of language training to sustainable heritage practice. Unfortunately, these findings are rather difficult to interpret because empowerment unfolds differently across institutional contexts.

This is an important issue for future research. Several questions remain unanswered at present, particularly regarding the long-term impacts of language training on institutional participation. Additional research is needed to better understand how communicative empowerment evolves over time. A further study with more focus on longitudinal outcomes is therefore suggested. Future studies on the current topic are recommended to integrate comparative heritage sites. Further studies, which take these variables into account, will need to be undertaken to develop a comprehensive model of language-based empowerment in sustainable heritage tourism.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine foreign language capacity building as a mechanism for community empowerment within a heritage tourism context. Drawing on qualitative evidence from a training program implemented for heritage tour guides at the Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, the

findings demonstrate that foreign language training plays a meaningful role in strengthening guides' communicative confidence, interpretive competence, and intercultural awareness. Participants were better equipped to articulate complex cultural and historical narratives, respond flexibly to visitor inquiries, and position themselves as credible cultural mediators in interactions with international tourists. These outcomes indicate that communicative competence functions not merely as a technical skill, but as a form of social and cultural capital that enhances professional agency.

Beyond individual outcomes, the study highlights broader implications for sustainable heritage tourism. By enabling guides to convey cultural meanings more accurately and confidently, language capacity building contributes to the preservation and transmission of intangible heritage, thereby supporting the cultural dimension of sustainability. The findings also suggest that empowerment effects are most evident at the psychological and social levels, where confidence, identity, and peer collaboration are strengthened. While structural or political empowerment was not directly observed, the enhanced agency documented in this study represents an important foundation upon which more inclusive and participatory heritage management practices may gradually develop.

From a policy and practice perspective, the results underscore the importance of integrating foreign language training into heritage tourism and community development strategies, particularly in urban heritage settings that attract diverse international audiences. Capacity building initiatives that combine linguistic development with cultural interpretation can contribute to the aims of Sustainable Development Goal 11 by promoting inclusive, high quality, and culturally grounded tourism.

In closing, this study affirms that empowering heritage tourism communities requires attention not only to economic and institutional factors, but also to communicative capacities that shape how culture is represented and negotiated. Foreign language capacity building emerges as a strategic tool for reinforcing the agency of local guides and for sustaining the cultural vitality of heritage destinations in an increasingly global tourism landscape.

Ethics approval

Not required.

Competing interests

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Underlying data

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

How to cite

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