



# Language Training as a Driver of Community Empowerment and Sustainable Heritage Tourism: A Case Study from the Yogyakarta Royal Palace

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## Abstract

Cultural heritage tourism increasingly requires skilled human mediation to ensure meaningful intercultural exchange and sustainable development. However, many heritage tour guides, particularly those operating within traditional cultural institutions, face limitations in foreign language competence that hinder effective communication with international visitors. Responding to this challenge, this study investigates a foreign language training program implemented for tour guides at Kawedhanan Hageng Panitrapura, Karaton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, Indonesia, and examines its role in community empowerment and local realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. The study aims to analyze how contextually grounded multilingual training contributes to guides' communicative competence, professional confidence, and cultural representation. A qualitative case study design was employed, drawing on data from post training questionnaires, non-participant observations, and participant reflective feedback involving 22 active heritage tour guides. Data were analyzed thematically using an interpretive framework informed by communicative competence theory, empowerment theory, and education for sustainable development. The findings reveal that the training enhanced participants' basic communicative abilities in English, French, and German, increased their confidence in interacting with foreign visitors, and strengthened their perception of multilingualism as cultural and professional capital. Contextual and communicative learning activities were identified as particularly effective, while online delivery-imposed constraints on oral interaction and sustained engagement. Beyond linguistic outcomes, the program fostered a stronger sense of professional identity and cultural responsibility among participants. The study concludes that foreign language training embedded within a traditional royal institution can function as a meaningful empowerment mechanism and contribute to multiple Sustainable Development Goals. It highlights the importance of culturally grounded, institutionally legitimate, and partnership-based approaches to language education in heritage tourism contexts.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Training, Heritage Tourism, Community Empowerment, Sustainable Development Goals, Cultural Institutions

## Introduction

Cultural heritage tourism has emerged as a strategic sector within global sustainable development agendas. Heritage sites are increasingly recognized not only as repositories of



collective memory and identity, but also as socio economic resources capable of generating inclusive growth, employment opportunities, and intercultural exchange. The United Nations World Tourism Organization consistently emphasizes that cultural tourism contributes to poverty reduction, community empowerment, and the preservation of intangible heritage when it is managed sustainably and inclusively (UNWTO, 2018). Central to these objectives is human capital, particularly actors who mediate between local heritage and global audiences, such as tour guides operating in historically and culturally significant sites.

Language occupies a critical position within this mediation process. A growing body of scholarship conceptualizes language not merely as a communicative tool, but as a form of social, cultural, and economic capital that enables access, participation, and symbolic legitimacy within global networks (Bourdieu, 1991; Block, 2017). In tourism contexts, foreign language competence has been shown to influence visitor satisfaction, interpretive quality, destination image, and the perceived authenticity of cultural encounters (Ap & Wong, 2001; Alrawadieh et al., 2020). Consequently, language training for tourism workers has become a key concern within applied linguistics, tourism studies, and education for sustainable development.

This attention aligns closely with several Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 4 emphasizes quality education and lifelong learning, SDG 8 focuses on decent work and inclusive economic growth, SDG 11 targets the safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage, and SDG 17 highlights partnerships across institutions and sectors. Researchers increasingly argue that language education functions as a cross-cutting enabler of these goals by enhancing employability, facilitating intercultural dialogue, and strengthening local participation in global systems (De Costa et al., 2016; Piller, 2016). However, despite its strategic importance, language training within heritage tourism remains unevenly theorized, particularly in contexts where traditional institutions play a central governance role.

Within tourism and applied linguistics research, studies on language training for tour guides have primarily focused on English for Specific Purposes programs, emphasizing needs analysis, communicative competence, and workplace relevance. Research across diverse contexts demonstrates that contextually designed language instruction improves guide confidence, narrative clarity, and interactional responsiveness (Cheng & Lam, 2019; Setiawan et al., 2020). Communicative Language Teaching and task-based approaches dominate this literature, reflecting a shared recognition that occupational language competence extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include pragmatic appropriateness, discourse management, and cultural sensitivity (Canale & Swain, 1980; Long, 2015).

At the same time, scholars in community-based tourism and development studies highlight that tour guides often function as cultural brokers and community representatives rather than mere service providers. Their narratives shape how visitors understand local history, social values, and cultural meaning structures (Salazar, 2012). Yet empirical studies consistently report a mismatch between the linguistic demands placed on guides and the limited training opportunities available to them, especially in sites located outside major commercial tourism circuits (Black & Weiler, 2020). This gap is particularly visible in multilingual tourism markets, where reliance on English alone constrains the depth of engagement with non-Anglophone visitors and reproduces asymmetries of access and representation.

Beyond technical language skills, theoretical work increasingly frames guide training as a form of empowerment. Empowerment in this context refers to processes through which individuals enhance their capacity to act, make choices, and influence socio economic outcomes within their communities (Zimmerman, 2000). Studies from community-based tourism settings demonstrate that training programs that integrate language, cultural knowledge, and local identity can strengthen professional legitimacy, self-efficacy, and collective participation (Scheyvens, 2011; Cole, 2017). However, much of this work remains grounded in modern organizational or community frameworks, with limited attention to traditional governance structures that continue to shape cultural life in many parts of the Global South.

Despite growing interest in the intersections of language education, tourism, and sustainable development, significant gaps remain. First, existing research tends to conceptualize training initiatives within universities, private sector providers, or community organizations, often overlooking traditional or indigenous institutions as active sites of knowledge production and

capacity building. This omission is theoretically problematic, as it marginalizes historically rooted governance systems that retain cultural authority and social legitimacy in many societies (Smith, 2012).

Second, while the SDGs provide an increasingly common policy framework in education and development research, empirical studies that explicitly examine how language training operationalizes SDG targets at the local institutional level remain scarce. Much of the literature treats the SDGs as a normative backdrop rather than an analytical lens through which program design, outcomes, and partnerships are critically examined (Tikly, 2019). As a result, there is limited understanding of how language education initiatives embedded in cultural heritage sites contribute simultaneously to educational, economic, and cultural sustainability goals.

Third, research on tour guide training often privileges English, reflecting broader global hierarchies of language value. This focus neglects the growing importance of linguistic diversity in tourism markets, particularly in relation to European and East Asian visitors whose expectations and engagement practices differ significantly across linguistic and cultural contexts (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Multilingual training that includes languages such as French and German remains understudied, especially when implemented outside formal vocational education systems.

These gaps are especially evident in the context of the Karaton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat in Indonesia. As a living royal institution with enduring cultural, symbolic, and administrative roles, the Karaton occupies a unique position at the intersection of heritage preservation, tourism, and community governance. Its internal administrative units, including those responsible for managing tour guides, operate according to norms and hierarchies distinct from modern bureaucratic institutions. Yet academic research has rarely examined how language-based capacity building unfolds within such traditional settings or how it contributes to broader sustainability agendas.

Responding to these gaps, the present study examines a foreign language training program implemented at Kawedhanan Hageng Panitrapura, one of the administrative units of the Karaton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat. The program, designed and delivered through a partnership with a public university, aimed to enhance the communicative competence of heritage tour guides in English, French, and German using communicative and context based pedagogical principles. Rather than treating the initiative as a short-term skills intervention, this study conceptualizes it as a form of community empowerment embedded within a traditional cultural institution and aligned with multiple SDG targets.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze how foreign language training functions as a mechanism of empowerment for heritage tour guides operating within a traditional institutional context. Specifically, the study seeks to examine participants perceived learning outcomes, changes in confidence and professional identity, and the broader cultural and developmental implications of the program. In doing so, it addresses the following research question: How does foreign language training implemented within a traditional royal institution contribute to community empowerment and the local realization of the Sustainable Development Goals?

This study makes several contributions to existing scholarships. Theoretically, it extends language for development research by demonstrating how traditional institutions can serve as active agents in language-based empowerment and SDGs implementation. By sitting in language training within the sociocultural structures of the Karaton, the study challenges modernist assumptions about where legitimate education and development practices occur. Empirically, it provides a detailed case study of multilingual training in heritage tourism that goes beyond English centered models and highlights the value of linguistic diversity for cultural diplomacy and visitor engagement.

Practically, the findings offer insights into policymakers, heritage managers, and educators seeking to design sustainable and culturally grounded capacity building programs. By foreground partnership, contextual learning, and institutional legitimacy, the study illustrates how language education can be integrated into heritage governance systems without undermining local authority or identity. In this sense, the article contributes not only to academic debates but also to ongoing discussions about inclusive and locally rooted approaches to sustainable development.

Taken together, this study positions foreign language training as more than a technical intervention. It frames language education as a strategic bridge between cultural heritage, community empowerment, and global sustainability agendas, offering a model that may be relevant to other heritage sites governed by traditional institutions across diverse cultural contexts.

## Literature Review

This study is grounded in interdisciplinary theories that connect language education, community empowerment, and sustainable development. At its core is Bourdieu's theory of language as symbolic capital, which posits that linguistic competence functions as a socially valued resource that enables access to economic opportunities, institutional legitimacy, and participation in transnational spaces (Bourdieu, 1991). Within tourism studies, language competence has been further theorized as a form of professional and cultural capital that shapes service quality, narrative authority, and power relations between hosts and visitors (Salazar, 2012). Complementing this perspective, empowerment theory emphasizes capacity building processes that enhance individuals' control over resources, decision making, and self-representation within their social environments (Zimmerman, 2000). From a sustainable development perspective, education, particularly skills oriented and context sensitive education, is viewed as a key driver for achieving SDGs related to quality education, decent work, cultural sustainability, and institutional partnerships (Tikly, 2019). Scholars consistently identify communicative competence, contextual relevance, institutional support, and learner confidence as core criteria determining the effectiveness of language-based empowerment initiatives (Canale & Swain, 1980; Piller, 2016). Factors such as pedagogical approach, cultural embeddedness, linguistic diversity, and alignment with local governance structures are therefore central to understanding how language training contributes to empowerment outcomes.

The literature reveals a wide range of theoretical approaches and analytical frameworks used to examine language training in tourism and community development contexts. These include Communicative Language Teaching frameworks that emphasize functional language use and interactional competence, English for Specific Purposes and Languages for Specific Purposes models that prioritize occupational relevance, and community-based tourism frameworks that foreground participation, local ownership, and cultural sustainability (Long, 2015; Richards, 2006; Scheyvens, 2011). In addition, education for sustainable development frameworks integrate dimensions such as social inclusion, economic relevance, cultural preservation, and institutional collaboration as key indicators of impact (UNESCO, 2017). Each of these frameworks operate different aspects, dimensions, and indicators, ranging from linguistic proficiency and confidence to employability, identity formation, and heritage transmission. Recent studies increasingly adopt adaptive and context specific frameworks, arguing that no single model can adequately capture the complexity of language learning within culturally embedded institutions (De Costa et al., 2016). Accordingly, the present study adapts relevant elements from these approaches to reflect the sociocultural, institutional, and historical context of a traditional royal institution.

The analytical framework employed in this study draws from the evolution of communicative competence theory and its subsequent integration into tourism and development research. Originally formulated by Canale and Swain, communicative competence encompasses grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic dimensions of language use (Canale & Swain, 1980). Subsequent researchers have expanded this concept to include intercultural competence and narrative competence, particularly in tourism settings where meaning making and cultural representation are central (Byram, 1997; Salazar, 2012). For practical and contextual reasons, scholars investigating tour guide training have often combined communicative language frameworks with empowerment and community-based tourism models in order to capture both linguistic and socio developmental outcomes (Black & Weiler, 2020). In heritage contexts, such integrative frameworks have been adapted to account for institutional authority, cultural norms, and historically situated governance systems, allowing researchers to examine how training initiatives interact with established social hierarchies and cultural mandates (Cole, 2017).

From a theoretical standpoint, the integrated framework adopted in this study is appropriate because it allows a formal object, namely communicative and empowerment-oriented language education, to be applied to material objects involving specific socio-cultural problems. These include limited multilingual competence among heritage tour guides, unequal access to professional development, and the underutilization of traditional institutions in sustainable development initiatives. The framework recognizes language training not simply as a pedagogical intervention but as a social system involving learners, institutions, cultural narratives, and external stakeholders. By linking communicative competence with empowerment theory, the framework enables analysis of how linguistic skills translate into increased confidence, agency, and professional legitimacy. At the same time, the inclusion of sustainable development perspectives allows these outcomes to be situated within broader policy goals concerning education, work, heritage preservation, and partnerships, thereby ensuring both analytical depth and practical relevance.

Within the context of this study, the material object of analysis is a foreign language training program designed for heritage tour guides operating under the authority of a traditional royal institution. This material object encompasses the pedagogical design of the training, the languages involved, the modes of delivery, and the experiential learning activities oriented towards guiding practice. It also includes participants' perceptions, learning experiences, and reported outcomes, particularly in relation to confidence, communicative ability, and cultural representation. Importantly, the material object is embedded in a culturally specific environment where historical legitimacy, ritual hierarchy, and institutional continuity shape professional roles and expectations. As such, the language training program cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural and institutional setting in which it is implemented.

The Karaton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat represents a distinctive socio-cultural context characterized by the coexistence of traditional governance and contemporary tourism functions. Established as a royal institution with enduring symbolic and administrative authority, the Karaton plays a central role in the preservation and transmission of Javanese cultural heritage. Over time, it has also become a major cultural tourism destination, receiving visitors from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Tour guides operating within the Karaton are expected not only to convey historical information but also to embody cultural values and act as representatives of the institution. However, the growing linguistic diversity of visitors and the increasing professionalization of tourism services have introduced new demands that exceed traditional modes of knowledge transmission. From initial reliance on basic English mediation to the recent introduction of structured multilingual training, the context reflects an evolving process of adaptation aimed at sustaining cultural relevance and professional quality in a globalized environment.

Previous research on tour guide language training has largely focused on needs analysis, skill acquisition, and instructional effectiveness within modern educational or commercial tourism settings. While these studies provide valuable insights into pedagogical strategies and linguistic outcomes, they often underemphasize institutional context and cultural governance structures. Research that explicitly connects language training with traditional institutions and SDG oriented empowerment remains limited and fragmented. The current study addresses this gap by offering a more context specific and institutionally grounded analysis of language-based empowerment within a royal heritage setting. By examining how a foreign language training program operates within Kawedhanan Hageng Panitrapura and contributes to multiple SDG targets simultaneously, this study responds to an urgent need for empirically grounded models of culturally rooted and sustainable capacity building. Its focus on multilingualism, institutional partnership, and heritage-based empowerment distinguishes it from earlier research and underscores its relevance for both academic scholarship and development practice.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine foreign language training as a form of community empowerment within a traditional cultural institution. A case study approach was selected because it allows for an in depth and contextualized investigation of a bounded social phenomenon situated within its real-world setting. In the present research, the case comprised a

foreign language training program conducted at Kawedhanan Hageng Panitrapura, Karaton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, implemented through a partnership between a public university and a traditional royal institution. The qualitative design enabled the exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meaning making processes related to language learning, professional identity, and cultural representation, which are not adequately captured through quantitative measures alone.

The primary data sources consisted of human participants and program related documents. The participants were heritage tour guides formally affiliated with Kawedhanan Hageng Panitrapura and actively involved in guiding tourists at the Karaton. Supplementary data were drawn from training materials, session plans, and reflective notes prepared by instructors and organizers during the implementation of the program. These multiple data sources allowed for triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings by capturing both experiential and procedural dimensions of the training initiative.

Data was collected using three main instruments. First, a structured open-ended questionnaire was administered to participants at the end of the training program. The questionnaire elicited information on participants perceived learning outcomes, confidence in using foreign languages, perceived relevance of the training to their professional duties, and reflections on the learning process. Second, nonparticipant observation was conducted during selected training sessions. An observation guide was used to document instructional strategies, participant engagement, interaction patterns, and contextual features of online delivery. Third, short reflective feedback forms were collected from participants to capture immediate impressions and self-reported changes following the training. All instruments were designed to align with the study's analytical focus on communicative competence, empowerment, and contextual relevance.

Data collection was conducted sequentially over the course of the eight-session training program. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the institutional authorities of the Karaton and informed consent was secured from all participants. Observations were carried out during live online sessions without disrupting instructional activities. The questionnaire and feedback forms were distributed electronically after the completion of the final session to allow participants to reflect on the entire learning experience. To ensure ethical integrity, participation was voluntary, responses were anonymized, and all data were used solely for research purposes.

Measurement in this qualitative study did not involve numerical scoring but relied on interpretive indicators derived from relevant theoretical frameworks. Guided by communicative competence theory, empowerment theory, and education for sustainable development perspectives, the analysis focused on several analytical dimensions. These included perceived communicative ability in foreign languages, confidence and willingness to speak, awareness of professional and cultural roles, perceived applicability of training content to guiding practice, and institutional and contextual factors shaping learning experiences. These dimensions functioned as qualitative indicators that structured data interpretation while remaining sensitive to participants' subjective meanings and contextual specificity.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, conducted in several iterative stages. First, all qualitative data from questionnaires, observations, and feedback forms were transcribed and read repeatedly to achieve familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated inductively to capture recurring ideas, experiences, and evaluative expressions related to language learning and professional practice. Third, these codes were grouped into broader themes corresponding to the analytical dimensions identified in the measurement stage, such as confidence development, contextual relevance, and empowerment outcomes. Constantly the process, constant comparison was applied across data sources to identify convergence and divergence. The final stage involved interpreting the themes in relation to the theoretical framework and research objectives, allowing empirical findings to be linked to broader discussions on language training, heritage tourism, and sustainable development. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed methodological triangulation across instruments and data sources, maintained an audit trail of analytic decisions, and ensured transparency in linking data excerpts to interpretive claims. These strategies contributed to the rigor and credibility of the qualitative analysis.

## Findings

The findings are presented thematically to reflect the main outcomes of the foreign language training program implemented at Kawedhanan Hageng Panitrapura, Karaton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat. Analysis focuses on participants perceived linguistic development, professional confidence, relevance of multilingual competence, learning experiences, and contextual constraints influencing program effectiveness (Figure 1).

Participants consistently reported improvements in their basic communicative competence in foreign languages, particularly in English, French, and German. Out of 21 active participants, 16 respondents completed the post training questionnaire. All respondents indicated that English remained the most immediately applicable language in their guiding practice, with 100 percent identifying it as essential. French was identified as relevant by 81 percent of respondents, while German was selected by 31 percent. Other languages such as Dutch and Mandarin were also mentioned, with 50 percent and 38 percent respectively recognizing their relevance due to visitor demographics.

Participants reported observable gains in vocabulary range, pronunciation awareness, and the ability to perform routine communicative functions such as greeting visitors, introducing themselves, and describing key areas of the Karaton. One participant noted that after the training, they were able to “start conversations in French and German even if still limited, instead of avoiding interaction completely”. These gains were primarily concentrated at the level of formulaic and functional language use rather than extended narrative production.

A prominent finding across data sources was the increase in participants’ confidence and willingness to speak foreign languages with international visitors. Approximately 60 to 70 percent of respondents explicitly indicated that they felt more confident initiating interactions with tourists after the training. This change was evident even among participants who described their prior exposure to French and German as nonexistent.

Observational data supported these self-reported changes. During role play and dialog simulations, participants demonstrated greater readiness to attempt utterances, accept corrective feedback, and engage in turn taking activities. Several participants linked confidence development directly to the communicative and supportive nature of the training. One participant explained that “the practice sessions made mistakes feel normal, not something to be ashamed of”. This finding aligns with research emphasizing affective dimensions of language learning in professional contexts, where confidence functions as a prerequisite for communicative engagement (Horwitz, 2016).

Participants demonstrated an increased awareness of multilingual competence as a form of professional and cultural capital rather than merely a technical skill. Many respondents highlighted that foreign language ability enhanced their perceived professionalism and reinforced their role as cultural representatives of the Karaton. One participant stated that “using visitors’ language makes the story of the Karaton feel more respectful and meaningful”.

This perception extended beyond service delivery to include cultural preservation and international representation. Participants articulated that speaking foreign languages allowed them to convey historical narratives and cultural values more effectively, supporting the Karaton’s broader role in cultural diplomacy. These findings reflect conceptualizations of language as symbolic capital that mediates power, legitimacy, and representation in tourism encounters (Bourdieu, 1991; Salazar, 2012).

Participants identified contextual and communicative learning methods as the most effective aspects of the training. Approximately half of the respondents explicitly emphasized dialog practice, guided speaking exercises, and pronunciation drills as particularly helpful. Activities that simulated real guiding situations, such as explaining parts of the Keraton or responding to common visitor questions, were frequently cited as enhancing relevance and retention.

In contrast, more abstract language explanations or vocabulary lists were reported as less impactful unless directly linked to guiding contexts. These responses underscore the importance of occupational relevance in language training for tourism professionals and support findings from prior research on communicative and context-based language instruction in tourism settings (Richards, 2006; Long, 2015).

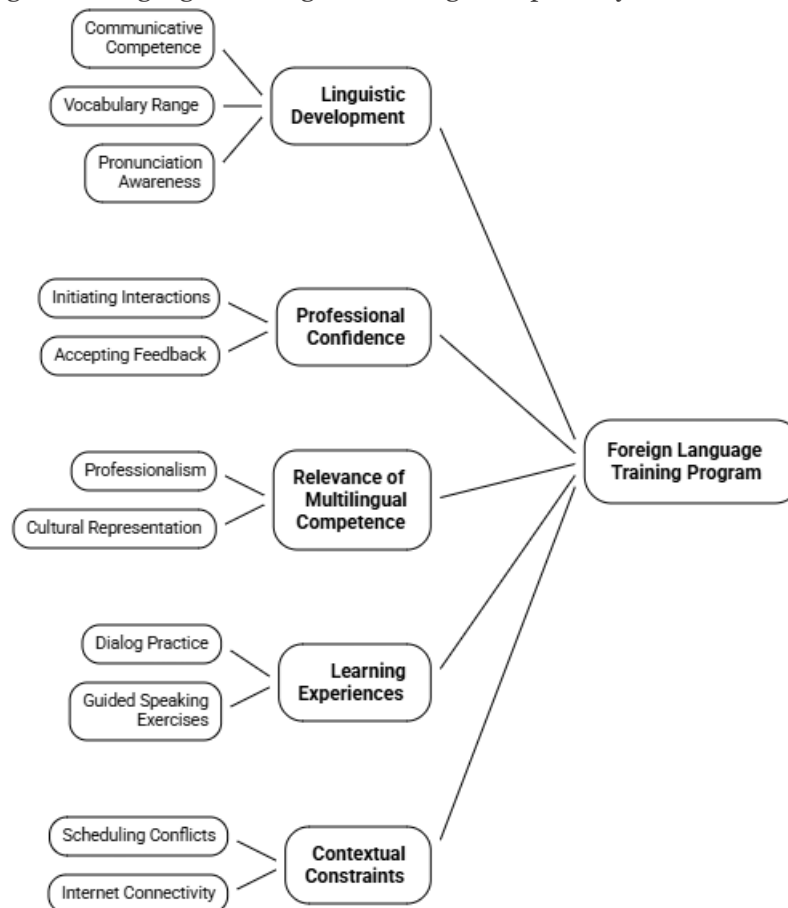
Despite acknowledging the flexibility of online delivery, a majority of participants expressed a preference for face to face or hybrid learning formats. Questionnaire data showed that 69 percent of respondents favored offline training, 25 percent preferred blended learning, and only 6 percent selected fully online instruction as the most effective mode.

Participants cited limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction, delayed feedback, and physical fatigue after work hours as challenges associated with online sessions. One respondent noted that “speaking practice feels more natural when we meet in person, especially for pronunciation”. These observations align with existing evidence that oral skill development benefits from direct interaction and immediate feedback, particularly for learners at beginner levels (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

Several structural constraints affected participants’ engagement and learning experience. Scheduling conflicts emerged as the most frequently reported challenge, affecting 38 percent of respondents, followed by unstable internet connectivity reported by 31 percent. Additional constraints included work related fatigue at 13 percent and perceived difficulty of materials at 25 percent.

Data also indicated heterogeneity in participants’ initial language proficiency, which influenced perceived learning pace. Some participants suggested that future programs should implement proficiency-based grouping and more differentiated instruction. These constraints highlight the importance of contextual sensitivity in designing sustainable professional development programs within heritage tourism settings, particularly those embedded in traditional institutions with fixed operational routines.

Figure 1: Language Training of Multilingual Diplomacy



## Discussion

Several reports have shown that foreign language competence among tourism professionals plays a critical role in mediating visitor experience, service quality, and intercultural understanding in heritage destinations (Ap & Wong, 2001; Black & Weiler, 2020). As mentioned in the literature review, language ability is increasingly conceptualized not only as a technical skill but also as a

form of symbolic and cultural capital that shapes professional legitimacy and representation (Bourdieu, 1991). Prior studies that have noted the importance of language training for tour guides emphasize confidence development, contextual relevance, and communicative effectiveness in real work settings (Cheng & Lam, 2019). Very little was found in the literature on the question of how such training functions when embedded within traditional or royal institutions rather than modern organizational structures. Previous studies evaluating language training interventions observed inconsistent results on whether short term programs can generate sustained empowerment outcomes beyond basic competence (Scheyvens, 2011). A strong relationship between communicative confidence and willingness to interact with tourists has been reported in the literature (Horwitz, 2016). In reviewing the literature, no data was found on the association between foreign language training, traditional cultural governance, and SDGs implementation within a single integrated framework.

The third question in this research was concerned with how foreign language training contributes to empowerment outcomes within a traditional institutional setting. An initial objective of the project was to identify the forms of linguistic, professional, and cultural benefits perceived by heritage tour guides participating in the training. The first question in this study sought to determine whether the training enhanced participants' basic communicative competence and confidence in using foreign languages with international visitors. It was hypothesized that participants with a history of limited exposure to languages other than English would report significant affective and perceptual changes following contextual and communicative instruction. The present study was designed to determine the effect of a multilingual training program on tour guides' readiness to act as cultural mediators within the Karaton. With respect to the first research question, it was found that participants perceived clear improvements in functional language use and professional confidence. This study is set out with the aim of assessing the importance of context embedded language training in supporting sustainable cultural tourism and community empowerment.

This study found that participants reported increased basic communicative competence in English, French, and German, particularly in routine guiding functions such as greeting, introduction, and short explanations. Another finding is that confidence levels improved markedly, with a majority of respondents indicating greater willingness to initiate interaction with foreign visitors. The results of this study show that perceived improvement was concentrated at the level of formulaic and functional language rather than extended discourse production. The current investigation found that even minimal exposure to additional foreign languages beyond English altered participants' perceptions of their professional role. In this study, communicative practices were found to contribute directly to feelings of empowerment and professional legitimacy. On the question of multilingual relevance, this study found that participants recognized the growing importance of French, German, and other non-English languages due to visitor diversity. The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that communicative confidence functioned as a pivotal outcome linking language learning and empowerment.

One interesting finding is the way participants framed foreign language competence as a form of cultural responsibility rather than merely a service requirement. Another important finding is that language learning reinforced participants' self-perception as representatives and narrators of Karaton heritage. The most important result was that empowerment outcomes extended beyond linguistic skills to include identity affirmation and increased awareness of cultural diplomacy. Most striking was the substantial difference in participants' willingness to speak compared to their initial reluctance to engage with non-English-speaking tourists. Another finding that stands out from the results reported earlier is the emphasis participants placed on contextual learning activities that mirrored real guiding situations within the Karaton.

What is surprising is that participants reported substantial confidence gains despite the limited duration and online format of the training. One unanticipated result was that exposure to French and German, even at a very basic level, altered participants' sense of professional adequacy and preparedness. What is curious about this result is that perceived empowerment emerged even in the absence of advanced proficiency or certification. Surprisingly, no clear relationship was found between length of guiding experience and degree of confidence gain, suggesting that seniority did not necessarily predict openness to language learning. This finding

was unexpected and suggests that affective dimensions of language learning may be more influential than prior experience. One unexpected finding was the extent to which participants associated multilingual ability with cultural prestige and institutional dignity. Contrary to expectations, this study did not find a significant difference between participants who primarily guided domestic visitors and those who regularly served international tourists.

This study confirms that communicative confidence is strongly associated with the willingness to use foreign languages in professional tourism contexts. This finding was also reported by Ap and Wong (2001) in their analysis of tour guide professionalism. This finding is consistent with that of Horwitz (2016), who emphasized the role of affective factors in language use. Comparison of the findings with those of other studies confirms that contextual and communicative approaches enhance perceived relevance and engagement in tourism language training (Long, 2015). These results corroborate the findings of Salazar (2012) who also found that tour guides act as cultural brokers whose narratives shape visitor understanding. In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that language training linked to occupational contexts promotes confidence and professional identity (Cheng & Lam, 2019). There are similarities between the attitudes expressed by participants in this study and those described by Black and Weiler (2020) regarding guide empowerment through skills development.

This study has been unable to demonstrate that online delivery alone is sufficient to support advanced oral proficiency development. This outcome is contrary to that of some recent studies which have suggested that well-structured online language learning can approximate face to face outcomes (Derwing & Munro, 2015). In contrast to earlier findings, however, no evidence of sustained interactional fluency was detected. The overall level of discourse competence remained lower than that of previously reported levels in extended training programs. However, the findings of the current study do not fully support research advocating fully online formats for oral skill development in professional contexts. This differs from the findings presented in blended learning studies which emphasized the importance of physical co presence for spoken interaction.

A possible explanation for this might be the limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction and immediate feedback in online sessions. Several factors could explain this observation. Firstly, participants attended training after full workdays, which may have reduced cognitive and physical readiness. Another possible explanation for this is that heterogeneity in initial proficiency levels created uneven learning experiences. These relationships may partly be explained by the cultural norms of difference and reluctance to speak incorrectly in public settings. It seems possible that these results are due to the combination of institutional hierarchy and unfamiliarity with digital learning environments. It may be that these participants benefitted most from affective support rather than technical instruction.

Another source of uncertainty is the relatively small sample size and the reliance on self-reported perceptions. A note of caution is due here since empowerment outcomes were assessed through participant reflections rather than longitudinal performance measures. These findings may be somewhat limited by the short duration of the training program. This data must be interpreted with caution because reported confidence may not directly translate into sustained communicative competence in complex guiding situations. It is important to bear in mind the possible bias in socially desirable responses, particularly within a hierarchical institutional context. With a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be generalized to all heritage tourism settings.

These findings suggest that foreign language training embedded in traditional institutions can function as a catalyst for professional empowerment. The present study raises the possibility that institutional legitimacy amplifies the perceived value of language learning. It may be the case therefore that culturally grounded training environments enhance learner motivation and identity alignment. According to these data, we can infer that multilingual exposure contributes to confidence even at introductory levels. These results provide further support for the hypothesis that language functions as symbolic capital within heritage tourism. It is therefore likely that such connections exist between language competence, cultural representation, and sustainable development outcomes.

These findings suggest that language training programs can contribute simultaneously to SDG 4, SDG 8, SDG 11, and SDG 17 when designed contextually. An implication of this finding is the possibility that traditional institutions can serve as effective partners in sustainable development initiatives. One of the issues that emerges from these findings relates specifically to the need for differentiated and staged training models. The results of this observational study suggest that hybrid delivery formats may better support oral skill development and empowerment outcomes.

The present results are significant in at least two major respects. First, they demonstrate that empowerment effects can emerge even from short term and introductory language programs. Second, they highlight the importance of institutional context in shaping learning meaning and outcomes. This finding is reassuring since it underscores the relevance of culturally embedded approaches. Unfortunately, these findings are rather difficult to interpret because empowerment is multidimensional and context dependent.

This is an important issue for future research. Several questions remain unanswered at present. Additional research is needed to better understand the long-term impact of multilingual training on guiding performance and visitor experience. Further work is needed to develop reliable analytical methods for assessing empowerment outcomes over time. Future studies on the current topic are therefore recommended, particularly those employing longitudinal and mixed methods designs. To develop a full picture of language-based empowerment in heritage contexts, additional studies will be needed that examine different institutional settings and levels of training.

## Conclusion

This study sets out to examine how foreign language training implemented within a traditional cultural institution contributes to community empowerment and sustainable development outcomes. Drawing on a qualitative case study of a multilingual training program for heritage tour guides at Kawedhanan Hageng Panitrapura, Karaton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, the findings demonstrate that even short term and introductory language interventions can generate meaningful professional and affective benefits when they are contextually grounded and institutionally supported. Participants reported increased basic communicative competence, greater confidence in interacting with international visitors, and a heightened awareness of their role as cultural mediators and representatives of the Karaton.

Beyond linguistic gains, the study highlights the broader empowerment effects of foreign language training. The program supported participants' professional identity formation by reinforcing the value of multilingualism as both cultural and symbolic capital. Guides did not perceive language skills merely as tools for service provision but as integral to conveying historical narratives, cultural values, and institutional dignity. This finding underscores the importance of situating language education within locally meaningful cultural frameworks, particularly in heritage tourism settings governed by traditional institutions. It also illustrates how language training can contribute simultaneously to multiple Sustainable Development Goals, notably those related to quality education, decent work, cultural sustainability, and partnerships.

The study further reveals that pedagogical approach and delivery mode significantly shape learning experiences. Contextual and communicative activities closely aligned with guiding practices were perceived as especially effective, while fully online delivery presented limitations for oral skill development and sustained interaction. Structural constraints such as scheduling conflicts, variable proficiency levels, and technological challenges also influenced participation and outcomes. These factors point to the need for more differentiated, staged, and hybrid training models that accommodate the realities of heritage tourism while supporting deeper communicative development.

Taken together, the findings suggest that traditional cultural institutions can function as active and credible sites of language-based empowerment rather than as passive cultural backdrops. By leveraging institutional legitimacy, cultural continuity, and strategic partnerships with higher education, foreign language training programs can enhance both individual capacities and collective cultural sustainability. As heritage tourism continues to operate within increasingly multilingual and globalized contexts, this study underscores the value of culturally

embedded language education as a bridge between local identity and global engagement. Such approaches invite a rethink of how language, culture, and development can be integrated in ways that respect tradition while fostering adaptive and sustainable futures.

### **Ethics approval**

Not required.

### **Competing interests**

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

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### **Underlying data**

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

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