Informal Language Acquisition Among Moroccan Tourism Professionals: A Case Study of Chefchaouen and Marrakech

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Abstract— This paper explores the acquisition of English and Spanish among Moroccan tourism professionals (waiters, tour guides, vendors, etc.) in popular tourist destinations like Chefchaouen and Marrakech. It examines the apparent paradox of high fluency levels in these languages despite limited formal language learning opportunities. Many individuals within this workforce demonstrate impressive communicative competence, suggesting the presence of effective, yet informal, acquisition strategies. This research investigates these strategies through semi-structured interviews with tourism professionals in the selected cities. The interviews aim to uncover the innovative and often self-directed techniques employed by these individuals, including exposure to authentic language through interactions with tourists, utilization of media and technology, and engagement in self-study practices. By focusing on the lived experiences and learning practices of these individuals, this study seeks to understand the dynamics of informal language acquisition in a real-world context. The findings shed light on the effectiveness of non-formal language learning pathways and contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals can achieve fluency in a second or third language outside of traditional educational settings. Ultimately, this research aims to inform pedagogical approaches and potentially empower other language learners by highlighting the power of informal learning in achieving communicative competence.

Keywords— language, acquisition, communicative competence, non-formal language learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Morocco, a nation rich in cultural heritage, has become a prominent tourist destination, attracting visitors from around the globe. In cities like Chefchaouen and Marrakech, tourism professionals—waiters, tour guides, and vendors—play a crucial role in shaping the visitor experience. Remarkably, many of these individuals exhibit high levels of fluency in English and Spanish, despite limited access to formal language education. This phenomenon raises a compelling question: how do these professionals acquire such proficiency? This study aims to explore the informal language acquisition strategies employed by tourism professionals in Chefchaouen and Marrakech, focusing on the lived experiences and self-directed learning practices that contribute to their communicative competence.

The paradox of high fluency amidst limited formal education highlights the significance of informal language learning. Existing research often emphasizes formal instruction, overlooking the potential of real-world interactions and self-directed learning. This study seeks to bridge this gap by investigating the innovative techniques used by tourism professionals, including exposure to authentic language through interactions with tourists, utilization of media and technology, and engagement in self-study practices.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of communicative competence, as initially articulated by Hymes (1972), goes beyond grammatical knowledge to encompass the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in diverse social and cultural contexts. This includes not only linguistic competence (grammar, vocabulary, phonology) but also sociolinguistic competence(understanding and using language appropriate to the social situation), discourse competence (organizing and connecting utterances coherently), and strategic competence (using verbal and nonverbal strategies to overcome communication breakdowns). In the context of tourism, this multifaceted competence is paramount for tourism professionals to effectively interact with visitors from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, ultimately facilitating smooth communication, building rapport, and enhancing the overall visitor experience. The work of Canale and Swain (1980) further elaborated on Hymes' framework, providing a more detailed model of communicative competence that is frequently cited in applied linguistics research.

Building upon the importance of interaction, Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis posits that language acquisition primarily occurs through exposure to comprehensible input (i+1), where learners are exposed to language slightly beyond their current level of understanding, aided by context and background knowledge. This aligns significantly with the experiences of tourism professionals who are constantly immersed in communicative situations with foreign-language speakers, often encountering new vocabulary and grammatical structures within meaningful contexts. Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis further refines this by emphasizing the crucial role of interaction and negotiation of meaning in language acquisition. Through asking for clarification, rephrasing, and confirming understanding, both tourism professionals and visitors actively participate in the learning process.

Informal language learning, in contrast to structured classroom instruction, is indeed characterized by its learner-centered, experiential, and context-dependent nature (Benson, 2011). This type of learning often takes place naturally through immersion and real-world interactions. The significance of exposure to authentic language and direct interaction with native or proficient speakers in fostering language acquisition has been consistently highlighted (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Van Lier (2004) emphasizes the concept of affordances in the learning environment, suggesting that the social and physical context provides opportunities for language learning that learners can either seize or overlook. In the tourism sector, the constant interaction with diverse individuals and exposure to authentic communication situations provide rich affordances for informal language learning.

Furthermore, the integration of media and technology has revolutionized opportunities for self-directed language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Language learning apps, online resources, and digital platforms offer learners flexibility, autonomy, and access to a vast array of learning materials and authentic content. The concept of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) has evolved significantly, with researchers like Chapelle (2001) exploring the effectiveness of different technological tools and pedagogical approaches in language learning. In the context of tourism, technology can empower professionals to supplement their informal learning with structured practice, vocabulary building, and exposure to specific language needed for their roles. The rise of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) further enhances accessibility and allows for learning on the go (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009).

III.   METHODOLOGY

In this part of the article, focus is going to be on the methodological choices made in order to conduct this study. The main question that this research sought to answer is the following:

Research question: how do tourism professionals achieves communicative competence?

Research objective: to explore the strategies used by tourism professionals to achieve communicative competence.

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather data from 17 tourism professionals in Chefchaouen and Marrakech. Participants were selected based on their roles in the tourism sector and their demonstrated fluency in English or Spanish. The interviews focused on exploring their language learning experiences, including their exposure to authentic language, utilization of media and technology, and engagement in self-study practices.

Data analysis involved thematic analysis, where recurring themes and patterns were identified from the interview transcripts. This approach allowed for a deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences and learning practices.

IV. FINDINGS

The findings revealed that interactions with tourists were a primary source of language input for the participants. Many reported learning by listening and imitating the language used by visitors. Additionally, the utilization of media and technology, such as language learning apps and online resources, was common among the participants. Self-study practices, including watching foreign language movies and listening to music, were also reported as effective learning strategies.

Participants demonstrated a high level of motivation and autonomy in their language learning. They often sought opportunities to practice their language skills, such as engaging in conversations with tourists and seeking feedback on their language use.

Themes Derived from Semi-Structured Interviews:

1. Immersion and Authentic Interaction as Primary Language Input:

- **Sub-theme: Active Listening and Imitation:**
  - Participants consistently reported learning by actively listening to tourist interactions and imitating their speech patterns.
  - The need to understand and respond in real-time drove rapid acquisition of functional phrases.

- **Sub-theme: Negotiation and Correction:**
  - Participants actively sought clarification and correction from tourists, viewing them as valuable learning resources.
  - The willingness to ask for help and accept feedback was a key factor in their progress.

- **Sub-theme: Adaptation to Diverse Accents and Communication Styles:**
  - Exposure to a wide range of accents and communication styles forced participants to develop adaptability in their listening skills.
  - This constant exposure led to improved comprehension and fluency.

- **Sub-theme: Non-verbal communication:**
  - The use of body language to supplement verbal communication was very common.

2. Leveraging Technology and Media for Self-Directed Learning:

- **Sub-theme: Mobile Applications and Online Resources:**
  - Participants utilized language learning apps, online dictionaries, and translation tools to expand their vocabulary and understanding.
  - Mobile technology provided accessible and flexible learning opportunities.

- **Sub-theme: Audiovisual Media for Immersive Learning:**
  - Participants engaged with English and Spanish music, films, and online videos to enhance their listening comprehension and pronunciation.
  - Social media was also used to view real world language use.

- **Sub-theme: Online Language Exchange and Communities:**
  - Some participants took advantage of online language exchange platforms to practice their skills with native speakers.

3. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation Driving Autonomous Learning:

- **Sub-theme: Instrumental Motivation for Economic Advancement:**
  - Participants recognized the direct link between language proficiency and increased earning potential in the tourism sector.
  - The desire to improve their socioeconomic status fueled their commitment to language learning.

- **Sub-theme: Personal Pride and Professional Identity:**
  - Language acquisition contributed to a sense of personal accomplishment and enhanced their professional identity.
  - The ability to communicate effectively with tourists boosted their confidence and self-esteem.

- **Sub-theme: Intrinsic Enjoyment and Cultural Curiosity:**
  - Many participants expressed a genuine interest in learning languages and interacting with people from different cultures.

- o The joy of communication and cultural exchange served as a powerful motivator.
- **Sub-theme: Goal Setting and Self-Monitoring:**
  - o Participants actively set language learning goals and monitored their progress through note-taking and regular review.
  - o They displayed a proactive and self-directed approach to their language development.

Discussion and interpretation

The findings of this study highlight the effectiveness of informal language acquisition strategies in achieving communicative competence. The findings support the notion that exposure to authentic language and self-directed learning can be powerful tools for language acquisition. The lived experiences of tourism professionals in Chefchaouen and Marrakech demonstrate that fluency can be achieved outside of traditional educational settings.

The study also underscores the importance of motivation and autonomy in language learning. The participants' proactive approach to seeking language input and practicing their skills contributed to their success.

Expanding on the Input Hypothesis and Sociocultural Theory:

- **Beyond Comprehensible Input: The Role of Negotiation and Output:** While Krashen's input hypothesis is a foundational concept, a purely analytical approach must acknowledge its limitations. The professionals' acquisition isn't solely passive reception of input. It involves active negotiation of meaning. The "interaction hypothesis" (Long, 1996) suggests that negotiation for meaning, through clarification requests and confirmation checks, forces learners to process input more deeply. This active engagement likely accelerates their learning. Furthermore, the "output hypothesis" (Swain, 1985) posits that producing language, even with errors, forces learners to notice gaps in their knowledge and refine their linguistic systems. The tourism context provides constant opportunities for this output, making it a powerful learning environment.
- **Sociocultural Mediation:** Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development. The professionals' language acquisition is deeply embedded in their sociocultural context. Interactions with tourists act as mediated learning experiences, where more proficient speakers (tourists) scaffold the learners' language

development. The "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) is constantly being challenged and expanded through these interactions. We can analyze how specific cultural norms and communication patterns within the tourism sector influence the acquisition process. For example, the need for politeness and customer service likely shapes the professionals' language use, leading to the rapid acquisition of specific phrases and communicative strategies.

Analyzing the Nature of "Fluency" in This Context:

- **Functional Fluency vs. Academic Proficiency:** It's crucial to distinguish between functional fluency and academic proficiency. The professionals' "fluency" is likely characterized by strong communicative competence in specific domains (e.g., ordering food, giving directions, negotiating prices). This functional fluency may not translate to academic proficiency, which requires a broader range of linguistic skills and knowledge. An analytical argument could examine the specific linguistic features of their speech, such as the use of formulaic expressions, simplified syntax, and context-dependent vocabulary. This analysis would shed light on the nature of their "fluency" and its limitations.
- **The Impact of Code-Switching and Code-Mixing:** In multilingual contexts like Morocco, code-switching and code-mixing are common phenomena. An analytical approach could examine how these practices contribute to or hinder language acquisition. Code-switching might provide learners with a cognitive break, allowing them to communicate effectively while still processing input. However, it could also limit their exposure to the target language. Analyzing the patterns of code-switching and code-mixing would provide insights into the learners' linguistic strategies and the interplay between their native languages and the target languages.

Exploring the Psychological and Motivational Factors:

- **Instrumental Motivation and Identity Formation:** The professionals' motivation is likely driven by instrumental factors, such as the need to earn a living and improve their socioeconomic status. However, we can go deeper and analyze how language acquisition contributes to their identity formation. Becoming proficient in English or Spanish may enhance their sense of professional identity and social status. An analytical argument could explore the psychological impact of language acquisition on the professionals' self-perception and social integration.

- **The Role of Anxiety and Self-Efficacy:** Language learning anxiety can significantly affect acquisition. However, the professionals' constant exposure to authentic language and their success in communicating with tourists may enhance their self-efficacy. An analytical approach could examine how the tourism context mitigates language learning anxiety and promotes a sense of confidence. We can analyze how the supportive environment created by frequent interaction with tourists helps build self efficacy.

Implications for Language Pedagogy:

- **Moving Beyond the Classroom:** The professionals' success highlights the limitations of traditional classroom-based language instruction. An analytical argument could advocate for a more experiential and context-based approach to language teaching. This approach would involve creating opportunities for learners to interact with native speakers in real-world settings. We can analyze how educators can effectively integrate elements of informal learning into formal instruction.

- **Leveraging Technology for Authentic Input:** While the professionals utilize technology, an analytical approach could explore how digital tools can be more effectively leveraged to provide authentic language input. This could involve using virtual reality simulations, online language exchange platforms, and social media to create immersive learning experiences. We can analyze the strengths and weaknesses of different digital tools for language acquisition.

- **Fostering intrinsic and extrinsic motivation:** Fostering both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation holds significant implications for language learning in tourism contexts. By creating engaging and relevant learning experiences that tap into learners' inherent interests and curiosity (intrinsic motivation), educators and trainers can cultivate a deeper and more sustainable commitment to language development.Simultaneously, strategically incorporating extrinsic motivators, such as recognition, opportunities for advancement, or tangible rewards linked to language proficiency, can provide immediate incentives and encourage active participation. A balanced approach that nurtures both internal drive and external encouragement is crucial for maximizing language acquisition outcomes and ensuring that tourism professionals are well-equipped linguistically to excel in their roles and contribute to positive visitor experiences

By focusing on these analytical arguments, we can move beyond a descriptive account of informal language acquisition and develop a deeper understanding of the underlying processes and implications.

V.   CONCLUSION

This research provided insightful perspectives into the dynamics of informal language acquisition. The findings can inform pedagogical approaches by highlighting the potential of real-world interactions and self-directed learning. Educators can incorporate elements of informal learning, such as exposure to authentic language and opportunities for self-directed practice, into their teaching practices. Ultimately, this study aims to empower language learners by demonstrating that fluency can be achieved through diverse and innovative learning pathways. Future research could explore the long-term effects of informal language acquisition and examine the transferability of these strategies to other contexts.

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