Educational Tourism: Spanish Schools and Their Consumers in a Dollarized Developing Country

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Globally, tourism has been growing annually despite more threats of terrorist acts. In the same way, educational tourism and schools that teach Spanish as a foreign language, which belong to this type of tourism, have benefited to this global phenomenon, at least this trend is noticeable in the Spanish schools that are in Spain. However, there is no academic or governmental study to know if the same has happened with the Spanish schools located in Ecuador, a developing country situated in South America, whose particularity has a dollarized economy. Consequently, the present study aims to analyze the situation of Spanish schools in that country.

Method: The study selected was the exploratory due to the lack of information on this topic. In addition, the approach adopted is the qualitative, to be able to have a better understanding of the phenomenon studied, using interviews with semi-structured questions to the eight institutions that make up the Ecuadorian Association of Teaching Spanish Centers. Results and conclusions: Spanish schools in Ecuador have not grown as other countries, because they have several difficulties. First, they have an unfair competition, especially by hostels which provide this service informally. Second, it is due to the higher costs compared to neighboring countries, because Ecuador adopted a strong currency for its economy. Third, idiomatic schools are in the middle of education and tourism, so they have complications in getting licenses and aids granted by the government. Despite these difficulties, they have innovated by offering more services, both educational and touristic, though, it is not a great profitable business. However, they have been able to maintain their business and earn a market share internationally.

Keywords: cultural and linguistic immersion, idiomatic tourism, international students, learning by traveling, Spanish schools

Introduction

In recent years educational tourism, also called edu-tourism, has gained an important position in the tourism sector; one of the main reasons of this success is due to its dual purpose: have fun abroad while learning (Future Market Insights, 2018); in other words, it is an excellent combination doing tourism and having a specific education (Lam, Ariffin, & Ahmad, 2011). In addition, the demand of this type of tourism is growing day a day worldwide. Moreover, some countries have benefited and obtained a significant income for their economies thanks to this kind of tourism (Hossain Bhuiyan, Islam, Siwar, & Mohamad Ismail, 2010).

Nowadays, if someone wants to experience edu-tourism, it is not necessary to go in a group; he or she may involve in it individually, choosing almost any destination all over the world. Commonly, this kind of traveler
wishes a practical learning experience (Rodger, 1998). These reasons have made the educational tourism a good option for anyone, with no age restrictions, only a strong desire to acquire a unique life experience, learning while traveling. For all these simple requirements and its growing importance globally, educational tourism deserves a more extensive research. However, a relatively little research has been done on this topic (Lam, Ariffin, & Ahmad, 2011).

Likewise, in Ecuador, a developing country located in South America whose particularity is to have a dollarized economy, there has been performed a very slight research about this kind of tourism. Even more, as far as we know, there is no academic or governmental study specifically related to schools that teach Spanish as a foreign language. Consequently, the present study aims to know more about them and analyze the situation of these schools that teach Spanish.

Next, to contextualize this study, there is a general review of the worldwide tourism’s situation. As a complement, there is a brief description of edu-tourism in Spain, which is undoubtedly the reference country regarding Spanish schools.

**Literature Review**

**Development of the Tourism (Worldwide and in Ecuador)**

There is an important growth of tourism worldwide with consecutive increases since 2009; it means after the global economic crisis of 2008. Only in 2017, this sector had a year-on-year growth of 7% which meant an increase of more than 80 million of tourists that have travelled internationally, only in that period (World Tourism Organization, 2018).

Thanks to this good moment, this industry is in going up, despite certain terrorist acts and political instability in some countries. Its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 10.2% in 2016, equivalent to USD $7.6 trillion. Besides, it is expected to grow until 2030 an interannual average of 4%. Moreover, tourism also contributes in an effective way to generate jobs; it is predicted that this sector will provide more than 380 million jobs worldwide for the year 2027, an equivalent of more than one in 10 jobs globally (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2017).

In Ecuador, tourism’s situation is not so different; it has been rising at a fast pace in the recent years. In 2017 reached 1,617,914 visitors with an interannual growth of 14%. In 2018, only in the first semester have arrived 1,170,958 tourists, as a consequence of this growth, there are more income of foreign exchange entering to the Ecuador’s economy, helping to prop up this dollarized economy, also its tourism industry gets more prominence. Nowadays, it is already among the five biggest industries that more contribute to create jobs in Ecuador (Ministry of de Tourism of Ecuador, 2018a).

However, not all tourists that come to Ecuador are potential customers to these Spanish schools, because only those who do not speak Spanish could be possible students, bad news considering that more than 60% of all visitors come from Hispanic countries. Nevertheless, the number of tourists from non-Hispanic countries still signifies hundreds of thousands of people, as the United States of America with 18.68% of all visitors, followed by Canada with 1.12%, Brazil 1.06%, Netherlands 1.79%, Germany 0.81%, France 0.57%, Italy 0.50%, and Switzerland 0.32%, as the most important countries (Ministry of de Tourism of Ecuador, 2018b).

**Brief Review of Edu-Tourism in Spain**

As other countries this kind of tourism is little known in Spain. However, it is relevant and important for
the Spanish economy, only in 2007 it came 240,000 idiomatic tourists to this country. The most preferred places are Andalucía, Castilla y Leon, Madrid, and Cataluña. Also, it is worthy to mention Salamanca and Alcalá de Henares (Abad, 2011).

According to Ortiz (2011), idiomatic tourists are very satisfied with the country and services received; besides their staying is for a much longer time in Spain comparing with regular tourists, this circumstance generates more income than other tourism’s ways. Hernández and Compón (2010) with Caiza and Molina (2012) agree with Ortiz and affirm that this kind of tourism creates employment and very good revenues to the schools, but also social and economic benefits to Spain due to their long stopping there.

**Methodology**

The study selected was the exploratory due to the lack of information on this topic. In addition, the approach adopted is the qualitative, to be able to have a better understanding of the phenomenon studied, using interviews with semi-structured questions to the eight institutions that make up the Ecuadorian Association of Spanish Language Centers (AECEE), whose schools are: “AGS”, “Amauta”, “Atahualpa”, “Vida Verde”, “Don Quijote”, “Español Intensivo”, “EIL Ecuador”, and “Simon Bolivar” (AECEE, 2018).

Concerning Spanish schools’ services, there are three main areas that this research covers: (a) teaching Spanish programs, (b) extracurricular programs, (c) tourist activities.

**Spanish Programs**

With no doubt, the cores of their business are the idiomatic programs that these schools offer in Ecuador.

**Extracurricular Programs**

Accompanying these instructional programs, all Spanish schools have additional leisure activities to bring a superior experience to their students.

**Tourist Activities**

There is no edu-tourism without tourism; for that reason, it is essential to know what touristic activities are presenting these educational institutions.

**Results**

**Spanish Schools in Ecuador**

According with “Vida Verde” and “Don Quijote”, the Spanish schools in Ecuador were born due to the necessity of communication of the foreigners who visit this country; some activities of these newcomers are: workers of international companies, diplomatic missions, volunteers, tourists, etc.

The first school to teach Spanish as a foreign language was named “Quito”, although, it did not last for many years. Since it disappeared, some teachers of this school decided to open their own; thus, it began the Spanish schools age in Ecuador, some moment at the beginning of the 1990’s; one of these pioneers was Simon Bolivar Academy which started its activities 24 years ago.

All these educational institutions started their operations without a clear legal frame as a company; for that motive, they decided to set up their business in different ways: as foundations, personal companies, and other forms. Additionally, only “Don Quijote” comes from an international franchise originally from Spain; the rest of schools are Ecuadorians with owners of different nationalities.
Other problem that faces Spanish schools is due to the Ministry of Education of Ecuador; it does not consider Spanish schools as teaching centers. About this issue, “Don Quijote” mentioned “the problem is related to the instruction’s period, we teach short courses of Spanish and to be considered an educational center for this ministry, we should comply an academic plan with a minimum of six or nine months”. Despite having this concern, Spanish schools can sell their services as any organization, but they are not recognized by any ministry, because of this, they are in a kind of legal limbo.

However, this situation has not been an impediment to grow; on the contrary, at least for a period, some schools revealed that this kind of business had a boom of sales from approximately 2004 to 2011, but nowadays, they have been decreasing; some of the reasons cited will be analyzed in the Ecuadorian Spanish schools’ challenges section.

All interviewed schools said that this potential to attract people to study Spanish in Ecuador is due to some particularities of this country, but specially of the city of Quito which is one of the few Hispanic places with a very clear pronunciation and slow way of talking, circumstance that benefits foreign beginner learners; furthermore, a tourist may find kind people, relatively affordable costs, and easiness to travel from this city to all Ecuador and other South American countries, becoming Quito an attractive spot for travelers.

Moreover, learning a new language and traveling around are not the only reasons to study Spanish in Ecuador. “EIL Ecuador” and “Atahualpa” stated, “they also come to know the culture in deep and to help vulnerable sectors through volunteer programs”. These peculiarities make these foreigners to be in a different segment than regular tourists. After all, they are students desiring to experience new different things abroad, whose nationalities are essentially from Germany and Switzerland, but there is an important group from the United States.

Still, Ecuador has received students from all over the world, because every Spanish School has different agreements globally, including ONGs, multinational companies, travel agencies, etc. Some of these countries are located as far as Japan or China. For instance, “Español Intensivo” has been working with Hias Foundation, an international organization for refugees; therefore, it is receiving people from countries with serious problems as Syria, Afghanistan, and others.

Following, the three main Spanish schools’ services are described.

**Spanish programs.** The best-selling teaching program is the private class, in which each student has their own teacher; normally this class consists four hours per day from Monday to Friday, excluding homework and social activities. Nevertheless, schools also have group classes, with a maximum of four people per classroom. In addition, they offer specialized programs such as: Spanish for medical doctors, businessmen and people who need the DELE examination, which is “an official qualification that accredits the degree of competence and mastery of the Spanish language, awarded by the Cervantes Institute on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training of Spain” (Instituto Cervantes, 2018).

In addition, there are complementary programs for volunteers, who also come to Ecuador to give their support to communities, social institutions, even to places that work for the preservation of the environment. Finally, student and cultural exchange program is mainly offered by “EIL Ecuador”; this type of program is not commonly offered by all Spanish schools, because it involves another kind of logistics and participants, essentially high schools’ students around 18-year-old that must live with their host family for a period of 5-10 months.

**Extracurricular programs.** Spanish schools offer to their students a dynamic agenda to complement their
learning process. Every school has a great variety of activities, though there are three of them easy to find in almost all schools. “AGS” comments clarify these common programs, as follows:

**Salsa classes.** “Students really enjoy learning this tropical dance. At the same time is a good way to integrate them and create friendship”.

**Cooking lessons.** “Not all students like to cook, but there are many students that appreciate this kind of activity, because they feel that are learning an important part of the Ecuadorian culture and simultaneously tasting something new for their palate”.

**Field trips.** “Mostly once or twice per week our school organizes visits to museums, parks, monuments, cultural and touristic places close to the school. Some of them are: middle of the world, Quito’s historic center, cableway to 13,000 ft. high, and many others”.

**Tourist activities.** In order to maximize their students’ experience, Ecuadorian Spanish schools have innovated their touristic activities, taking into account Ecuador’s particularities as its relatively small size; just in a few hours, any person can travel by car from the Amazonian to the Ocean Pacific, passing through Los Andes mountain chain. For that reason, a program introduced by these institutes is to combine tourism and education, called as “learn and travel”. “Atahualpa” explained it in this way: “This consists in travelling with your teacher around Ecuador while you are discovering it and learning Spanish in a different way”.

Other schools have created several learning centers, particularly in cities preferred for tourists; therefore, students may stay for a while in different places exploring and learning without losing their academic progress. Mostly, these schools have their head school in the city of Quito—cosmopolitan city and capital of Ecuador, as Simon Bolivar and AGS, whose branches are in Cuenca—a beautiful location for those who like antique culture, Amazonia—worldwide famous, and Montañita—hippie beach with all modern conveniences (Andean Global Studies, 2018).

However, not all students apply for this way to do some tourism. Regarding this “Vida Verde” mentioned: “Some students stay only in one school and take advantage of the weekends to travel, others wait until finish their period of classes to organize excursions, and few of them take one week break to have a trip”.

According with the interviewers, the most visited places in Ecuador by their students, besides the cities where are located the schools, are: Galapagos—the enchanted islands, Cotopaxi and Chimborazo—the highest volcanoes of Ecuador, Otavalo—the biggest indigenous market, Baños—beautiful landscapes and hot springs, national parks of Yasuni, Cuyabeno, and Limoncocha—natural reserves in the Amazon jungle, Mindo—bird watching town, Puerto López—whale watching port, Manta and Península de Santa Elena—beautiful beaches. Nevertheless, tourists may find much more great places to visit in Ecuador.

**Ecuadorian Spanish Schools’ Challenges**

At a first glance, Spanish schools could be a perfect business to start up in Ecuador, with well-prepared Spanish teachers, diverse of touristic places, and more; although, as mentioned before, Spanish schools were only profitable from 2004 to 2011, after this period they reduced drastically their volume of sales. Nowadays some are stabilized, but others have contracted even more. Main reasons with their challenges are described next:

**Issues about Ecuador.** “Don Quijote” was direct to point citing the first problem: “several potential students think that our country still has problems triggered by the earthquake in 2016 and serious political problems. In definite for them, Ecuador is a risky country to go; though, there are numerous adventurous
students that come here, only here, they realized that these suppositions are not true”. Therefore, their first challenge is to be persuasive with potential students, showing that Ecuador is the perfect place for studying and having fun.

**Illegal competition.** Most of schools think that there is an unfair competition, especially coming by some hostels that provide this service informally. “Atahualpa” said concerning this: “the main problem of the legal Spanish schools is the unauthorized schools whose numbers are increasing. They harm our market because of their low prices”. “Vida Verde” added: “informal schools don’t have controls, adequate infrastructure, teaching methodology and legal salaries to pay”. Thus, their second challenge is to convince governmental entities to close all those illegal places.

**Dollarized country.** Due to Ecuador is a dollarized country, it cannot devaluate their currency; in fact, it does not have any. This situation has positives results, as a better standard of living of its citizens, but also negative ones, particularly for the edu-tourism, because neighboring countries with similar destinations can devaluate their currencies, becoming them in cheaper places to go.

“Simon Bolivar” mentioned about this regard: “Ecuador has higher costs comparing its bordering countries, thus, foreigners prefer to travel to Colombia or Peru where the cost of products and services are much economical”. “Yanapuma” complemented “the segment market has changed, there are more families and retired people who prefer to come to Ecuador instead youngsters. Even backpackers are preferring places cheaper than Latin America, as Asia”. Their third challenge is more complicated because of the higher costs, although, schools may target these new segments more aggressively and continuously innovate services to adequate to this new reality.

**Government’s policies and regulations.** One of these difficulties is about with the period allowed to stay in Ecuador; “Simon Bolivar” affirmed at this respect: “Nowadays a big concern is related with visas which are asking to the strangers, besides, higher education’s students need to renovate not only their student visa also their general visa, it means more expenses for them”. “Español Intensivo” explained more deeply this issue: “this year has been difficult, there are many tourists that are not coming to Ecuador because of the visas problem, therefore, they prefer to go to Colombia, Chile or Peru, where there are not such requirements”.

Another is due to Spanish schools which are in the middle of education and tourism, so they have complications in getting licenses and aids granted by the government. However, through this association, they are trying to open spaces in governmental and private institutions, as Pro Ecuador, organism that helps companies to export products and services. Moreover, “Español Intensivo” mentioned that thanks to these conversations “we are going to a fair in China”. Additionally, “Don Quijote” remarked the importance of getting a certificate from some ministry, “it is highly imperative to have an endorsement of a ministry, but specially by the education ministry”.

**Conclusions**

In general, tourism is growing in Ecuador and worldwide, even edu-tourism is getting bigger in Spain and other countries; though, Spanish schools in Ecuador do not have the same luck, they are going through some difficulties. First, they have an unfair competition, especially by some hostels, which provide this service informally. Second, it is due to the higher costs compared to neighboring countries, because Ecuador adopted a strong currency for its economy. Third, idiomatic schools are in the middle of education and tourism, so they have complications in getting licenses and aids granted by the government. Despite these difficulties, they have
innovated by offering more services, both educational and touristic. Nonetheless, it is not a great profitable business; however, they have been able to maintain their business and earn a market share internationally.

Even with all these problems, they are trying hard to be lucrative; one of their actions was the creation of the Ecuadorian Association of Spanish Language Centers; it does not matter if they built it for necessity or strategy; this institution is helping to get quality, improvements, and a way to be heard for important institutions. Nonetheless, they do not have an easy life for the next years; “Yanapuma” said “our future is uncertain, only the best schools will survive”.

Other action is the conception of new services, as distant learning; “Atahualpa” stated at this regard “we are working in presenting new services as Spanish classes online, which will help to increase the number of students, we do not want to get out of technological changes”. In addition, they are attacking new niches with specific programs as: Spanish for medical doctors, businessmen, etc., also, opportunities to study in different cities with the same curricular program, or travel around Ecuador and learn with a teacher.

Finally, as many researchers from Spain mentioned, idiomatic schools are very important in many aspects for all society, beginning with the opportunity of foreign students and some people of Ecuador to have an intercultural experience; additionally, the creation of jobs as teachers, tour guides, etc.; also, important inflows of currencies due to the longer staying of the students in the host country; in fact, there are countless of benefits. However, Ecuadorian Spanish schools are in danger and need urgently governmental support to overcome with some of their serious challenges. Hopefully, this study is going to raise awareness to public institutions and academic sectors, to work in favor of this important touristic area.

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