

Shutterbug: Empowering Tourism Students through Visual Literacy and Language Proficiency

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Objectives | The Shutterbug Project is an innovative initiative aimed at redefining language learning in the context of Tourism Education. Its primary objective is to enhance the language proficiency and visual literacy of students enrolled in an English for Tourism course. The aim of the study was to analyze how the strategic integration of photography and digital storytelling within the project served as a means to identify and evaluate the specific language skills required in the context of tourism communication. By immersing students in practical, real-world experiences, the project aimed to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in the dynamic tourism industry. The innovative initiative of the Shutterbug Project thus goes beyond traditional methodologies, providing a comprehensive approach to redefine language learning in the context of Tourism Education while contributing to the analysis of language skills crucial for successful communication with tourists.

Methodology | The project was conducted within the framework of an English course, an integral component of a second-year curriculum in a Tourism bachelor's degree program. Leveraging a student-centric approach, the project began with a comprehensive needs analysis survey administered to 48 enrolled students. This survey was developed on Google Forms and divided into four sections related to: the role of photos in students' lives; photography in tourism; photography and English language learning; Viseu as a tourist destination. Following the needs analysis, the project unfolded in five distinct stages. The first stage involved a guided tour of the city, providing students with practical exposure to tourism-related language in real-world contexts. The second stage comprised a photography workshop, where students learned the technical aspects of photography and explored its role in conveying tourism narratives. Subsequently, a digital storytelling workshop constituted the third stage, focusing on equipping students with skills to craft compelling narratives through digital mediums. The fourth stage involved students actively applying their newfound knowledge and skills by photographing various aspects of the city, connecting theory with practical experience. The final stage centered on the creation of a digital narrative using the captured photographs.

Main Results and Contributions | The overall results of the needs analysis survey revealed that the majority of students like taking photos, agree that photography makes people more aware of their surroundings and that photos help remember a tourist destination and have an impact on tourism. These overall results were a strong indication that the students understood the relevance of the Shutterbug Project and therefore were actively involved in the different stages of the project. This project resulted in 19 digital narratives grouped according to the following themes: historical figures, landmarks, art and customs and traditions.

This project empowered students to act as content creators, utilizing their own original photos to showcase the city where they attend school as an appealing tourist destination. This collaborative initiative provided students with the chance to develop and enhance essential skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity—skills vital for success in the tourism workforce—while working both independently and together on the project.

Limitations | While the Shutterbug Project demonstrated remarkable success, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, some students faced challenges in developing proficient media skills, which impacted the quality of their visual content. Moreover, time constraints may influence the extent to which similar projects can be implemented across diverse educational contexts. These limitations highlight the importance of providing additional support to ensure all students can fully participate and benefit from such initiatives.

Conclusions | The Shutterbug Project has demonstrated the immense potential of integrating visual literacy into language learning within the field of Tourism Education. By immersing students in practical, hands-on experiences, the project significantly enhanced their language proficiency, which will enable them to communicate effectively with tourists through the powerful medium of visual media. Furthermore, the project's impact extended beyond the classroom, fostering a deeper connection between students, their educational institution, and the local tourism community. This approach not only equips students for their future careers in tourism but also serves as a model for integrating practical language learning strategies into specialized fields of study.

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