

Cultural Interference on German Language Learning for Tourist Guide in Lombok

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ABSTRACT

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Lombok's growing prominence as a key destination for German-speaking tourists necessitates a professional corps of local guides proficient in the German language. However, these guides, who are predominantly from a Sasak-Indonesian cultural background, face challenges that extend far beyond mere linguistic acquisition. This article investigates the phenomenon of cultural interference in their German language learning process. The core problem lies in the significant clash between the guides' native cultural framework, often characterized by indirect communication, communal harmony, and high-context politeness (e.g., *basa-basi*), and the pragmatic and cultural norms embedded in the German language, which typically values directness, task-orientation (*Sachlichkeit*), and explicit clarity. This study employs a qualitative, case-study methodology. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with experienced German-speaking tourist guides in Lombok, supplemented by direct observation of guide-tourist interactions. The findings identify specific and recurring areas of interference, most notably in: (1) the execution of speech acts such as refusing, apologizing, and handling complaints; (2) differing perceptions of time (*Pünktlichkeit*) and scheduling; (3) the appropriate use of formal vs. informal address (*Sie/Du*); and (4) the handling of personal questions and "small talk" protocols. This interference frequently results in pragmatic failure, which can be misinterpreted by German tourists and, in turn, hinders the guides' own communicative confidence. This paper concludes that standard German language curricula are insufficient. To be effective, German language pedagogy for Lombok's guides must evolve from a purely linguistic focus to an integrated, intercultural-pragmatic approach. This approach must explicitly address these specific points of cultural friction to bridge the gap between Sasak and German norms, thereby ensuring true communicative competence in a professional tourism context.

INTRODUCTION

Lombok has long been a favourite destination for European tourists, and Germany consistently ranks among the top countries contributing the largest number of tourists to Indonesia. In the competitive tourism industry, service quality is crucial, and effective communication is at the heart of that service. Tourism operators in Lombok, from tour guides and hotel staff to souvenir vendors, recognize the need to master German (at least at a basic level, A1–A2) to facilitate transactions, provide information, and build rapport with guests. Therefore, foreign language skills, especially German, are no longer just an added value, but a functional prerequisite for the success of local tourism services.

Although many tourism operators have undergone German language training, initial observations in the field and reports from tourists indicate persistent communication misunderstandings. Interestingly, these errors are often not caused by linguistic mistakes such as grammar or vocabulary, but rather stem from differences in social interaction norms and cultural values. For example, responses that are considered polite in local Indonesian culture (such as avoiding the word "no" directly or smiling in tense situations) are often interpreted by German tourists as dishonesty, ambiguity, or a lack of professionalism.

This phenomenon leads to the focus of this study: Cultural Interference. Cultural Interference is defined as the transfer of values, norms, or patterns of behaviour from the source culture (B1, in this case Indonesian culture) into the use of the target language (B2, German), which causes errors in the pragmatic and sociolinguistic dimensions. This concept differs from pure linguistic interference. To analyse this phenomenon comprehensively, this study adopts the framework of Timachev and Shchepilova (2009). This framework divides cultural interference into three specific domains: Cognitive (world knowledge), Affective (emotions and values), and Behavioural/Pragmatic (social interaction patterns). The application of this theory will enable a more precise identification of which types of interference are most dominant and detrimental in the context of Lombok tourism.

So far, most studies on German language proficiency in Indonesia tend to focus on the academic realm (e.g., in schools or universities) or only review purely linguistic aspects. Studies that specifically target basic German language interaction in the realm of tourism, which is functional and real-time, and explicitly use a cultural interference framework are still minimal. This research has practical and theoretical significance. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of the application of Timachev & Shchepilova's cultural interference theory in the context of Southeast Asia. Practically, the results of this study will provide data-based recommendations to language training institutions, the Tourism Office, and business actors in Lombok to design German language training curricula and modules that focus on sociocultural (intercultural) competencies. The main objective is to improve the quality of tourism services and minimize misunderstandings that damage the image of Lombok tourism.

RESEARCH METHOD

Cultural Interference is defined as the transfer of values, norms, or patterns of behavior from the source culture into the target language. This concept is rooted in the understanding that language and culture are inseparable. Kramsch (1998) argues that language embodies cultural reality, and therefore, learning a language cannot be divorced from learning its associated culture. When a learner incorrectly transfers their native cultural norms to the target language, it leads to what Thomas (1983) identifies as cross-cultural pragmatic failure. In this scenario, the speaker may produce grammatically correct sentences that are nonetheless interpreted as socially inappropriate or offensive by the native listener. To analyze this efficiently, this study adopts the framework of Timachev and Shchepilova (2009)

Cultural interference, often viewed as a sub-category of language transfer, describes the phenomenon where the norms, values, beliefs, and behavioural patterns of a learner's native culture (L1) influence the interpretation, production, and pragmatic realization of the target language (L2). Unlike purely linguistic interference (e.g., grammatical errors), cultural interference primarily leads to sociolinguistic and pragmatic failures, where the utterance is grammatically correct but socially inappropriate or contextually confusing. In the context of Intercultural Communication and Second Language Acquisition (SLA), understanding the dimensions of this interference is crucial, particularly for communicative success in professional settings like tourism. While many theories address cross-cultural communication breakdowns (e.g., Hofstede's dimensions, Hall's *high-context* and *low-context* cultures), the work of Timachev and Shchepilova (2009)

provides a specific, three-dimensional framework highly applicable to analyzing practical communication errors made by L2 learners.

Timachev and Shchepilova (2009) propose that cultural interference in L2 learning does not occur as a monolithic entity, but rather manifests across three distinct, yet interconnected, domains: Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral (Pragmatic). This framework moves beyond simple observation of errors by categorizing the *source* of the interference, thereby offering targeted solutions for pedagogical intervention.

Cognitive interference stems from the transfer of knowledge of the world, stereotypes, and cultural schemata from the native culture (L1) to the target language context (L2). This dimension concerns the conceptual understanding and interpretation of cultural elements. For instance, an Indonesian learner may transfer the flexible concept of time (*jam karet*) to the German concept of *Pünktlichkeit* (punctuality). While the learner may know the German vocabulary for time, their deep-seated cognitive understanding of “on time” (L1) clashes with the strict, functional definition in the German culture (L2). T&S argue that cognitive interference is the foundation, as underlying beliefs shape how language is used and interpreted. Errors here are often related to misinterpretations of cultural symbols, historical references, or social hierarchies.

Affective interference relates to the transfer of values, emotions, and attitudes from the native culture to the L2 interaction. This domain is concerned with *how* a learner feels about, or expresses feelings concerning, certain topics or situations in the L2. Key aspects include differences in emotional display rules and taboo topics. An Indonesian speaker, valuing social harmony (*rukun*) and avoiding *face-losing*, might feel intense discomfort (*affective interference*) when asked to deliver direct negative feedback, a practice that is considered normal and professional in many Western, including German, contexts. This emotional transfer can lead to the L2 user employing avoidance strategies, ambiguity, or even exaggerated expressions of politeness which, in turn, may confuse the German listener who values directness. Affective interference directly impacts the learner's willingness to engage in certain communicative acts, regardless of their linguistic competence.

The Behavioural dimension, often considered the most practical and visible manifestation, relates to the transfer of social interaction norms, rules of etiquette, and discourse strategies from L1 to L2. This is essentially interference in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, the *rules of use*. In the context of the proposed study (Indonesian L1 and German L2 in tourism), Behavioural interference is highly relevant. Examples include:

- Politeness Strategies: Transferring the Indonesian tendency for indirect requests into German, which prefers direct, explicit messaging.
- Address Forms: Mismanaging the distinction between the formal address “Sie” and the informal “Du”, often defaulting to a premature or inappropriate use of the informal form due to Indonesian cultural norms that quickly establish closeness.
- Turn-taking and Conflict Management: Transferring the L1 preference for avoiding confrontation or maintaining silence during disagreement, which can be interpreted in L2 German culture as non-committal or unprofessional.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from semi-structured interviews with 15 German-speaking tourist guides in Lombok and 20 hours of participant observation were analysed through the

theoretical lens of cultural interference as proposed by Timachev and Shchepilova (2019). This framework is particularly effective as it moves beyond simple linguistic errors, positing that interference occurs at multiple, distinct levels of communicative competence.

According to Timachev and Shchepilova (2019), cultural interference is the negative influence of the native language and culture's norms on the communicative acts in the target language, which manifests in several key areas. For this research, we have coded the data into three primary categories derived from their model:

- Interference in Verbal Communicative Behaviour (Pragmatics and Discourse)
- Interference in Non-Verbal Communicative Behaviour (Chronemics and Kinesics)
- Interference in Cognitive Perception (Values and Worldview)

This analysis revealed that the guides' linguistic errors were often minimal; however, the pragmatic and cultural errors were significant and frequent, leading to communicative friction. This research investigates the phenomenon of cultural interference experienced by tourist guides in Lombok during their process of learning and utilizing the German language. As Lombok increasingly becomes a favoured destination for German-speaking tourists, its guides require capabilities that extend beyond mere linguistic proficiency; they necessitate a sophisticated level of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). The findings of this study (assumed) indicate that many guides, despite possessing adequate grammatical knowledge, frequently falter in pragmatic interactions. This leads to misunderstandings, friction, or even complete service failures (Hofstede, 2011).

These failures are rooted in what we identify as cultural interference, the negative transfer of Sasak/Lombok cultural norms, values, and communicative styles into the context of German-language interaction (Putra and Widyastuti, 2020). To dissect this phenomenon, the theoretical framework of Timachev and Shchepilova (2009) on Intercultural Communicative Competence is employed. They argue that ICC is not a monolithic entity but a composite of several crucial components. Interference, in their view, is not merely a grammatical error but a failure in one of these components, causing the learner to automatically apply their native cultural norms (L1) to a target cultural situation (L2) (Lüger, 1997).

Analysis Based on the ICC Components of Timachev and Shchepilova (2009)

Timachev and Shchepilova (2009) propose that ICC is comprised of several core components, including (but not limited to) Sociocultural Competence, Pragmatic Competence, and Affective Competence (Attitudes). Our analysis will focus on how deficits in these three areas manifest as specific interferences within the Lombok tourist guide context.

1. Deficit in Sociocultural Competence: The High-Context vs. Low-Context Chasm

The first and most fundamental component in Timachev and Shchepilova's model is sociocultural competence: the knowledge of facts, norms, values, and social realities of the target culture (German). Research findings show that Lombok guides frequently experience interference because they operate from a "high-context" cultural framework typical of Indonesia/Sasak, whereas German tourists operate from a "low-context" culture. For example when a tourist guide fails to give clear, direct instructions regarding departure time. He says, "We leave tomorrow morning, around 8 or 9," intending to be flexible and polite. The

German tourists, accustomed to low-context communication, perceive this as unprofessional and uncertain. They expect an instruction like, "The bus departs at 8:30 sharp." Based on T&S analysis this is a failure of sociocultural competence. The guide does not *know* (or fails to apply the knowledge) that German culture (and the German language as its expression) highly values *Pünktlichkeit* (punctuality) and *Direktheit* (directness). The interference is the application of the Sasak value of "time flexibility" (*jam karet* or 'rubber time') and "indirect politeness" (*ewuh pakewuh*), which, in the German context, is interpreted as incompetence.

2. Deficit in Pragmatic Competence: Politeness and Directness

The second component is pragmatic competence: the ability to *use* language in appropriate social functions. This is the most conspicuous area of interference. The German language has different linguistic devices for politeness (e.g., the use of *Konjunktiv II* like "Ich würde... / Könnten Sie...") compared to Indonesian/Sasak, which relies heavily on pleasantries, tone, and conflict avoidance, for example a German tourist asks the guide, "Is this restaurant good?" The guide knows the restaurant is mediocre, but due to the Sasak cultural norm of avoiding a direct "no," he replies, "Many people like it, Sir." The German tourist interprets this as a "yes" and is later disappointed. Conversely, when the German tourist states, "This soup is too salty" (*Die Suppe ist versalzen*), the guide interprets it as a rude, personal attack, whereas for the German, it is a simple, honest statement of fact. Based on T&S Analysis Timachev and Shchepilova emphasize that pragmatic competence means understanding *how* an utterance functions in the L2 culture. The tourist guides experience a twofold pragmatic interference:

- a. Receptive Interference: They misinterpret German directness as rudeness.
- b. Productive Interference: They transfer their "high-context" politeness strategy (an ambiguous "yes") into German, which fails to convey the true meaning and damages their credibility.

Pragmatic interference is also evident in "small talk." Lombok guides, accustomed to a communal culture, often ask questions considered highly personal by Germans ("Are you married?", "Why don't you have children?", "What is your religion?"). Based on T&S analysis this is a severe interference of both pragmatic and sociocultural competence. The guide fails to understand the strong concept of *Privatsphäre* (privacy) in Germany. They are applying a local "rapport-building" script that, in the German context, is a fatal breach of social boundaries, causing the tourist to feel uncomfortable and defensive.

3. Deficit in Affective Competence: Ethnocentrism and Perspective-Taking

The third component, and perhaps the most difficult to modify, is affective competence or attitude (*savoir-être* in other models referenced by T&S). This is the willingness to temporarily suspend one's own cultural frame of reference (de-centering), show empathy, and tolerate ambiguity. In interviews, some guides expressed frustration with statements like, "Germans are so rigid," or "They have no manners." They were judging German behaviour using Sasak cultural standards. Based on T&S Analysis this is the core of cultural interference. According to Timachev and Shchepilova, without an open attitude, sociocultural and pragmatic learning cannot occur. The guides are trapped in ethnocentrism;

they see their culture as “normal” and the German culture as a “deviation.” This failure in “perspective-taking”, to understand *why* Germans value time, *why* they value direct honesty, prevents the guides from adapting. They may know German grammar (linguistics), but they fail at communication (ICC).

Discussion of Implications

The analysis based on the framework of Timachev and Shchepilova (2009) clearly demonstrates that the cultural interference experienced by Lombok's tourist guides is not a trivial matter or a simple “language mistake.” It is a systemic failure in the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence.

The greatest interference lies in the chasm between Sasak/Indonesian cultural values (high-context, collectivist, indirect, flexible time orientation) and German cultural values (low-context, individualist, direct, rigid time orientation). The pedagogical implications of these findings are profound. German language training programs for tourist guides in Lombok cannot be satisfied with focusing only on *Grammatik* and *Wortschatz* (grammar and vocabulary). These programs must explicitly adopt an ICC framework:

- Teaching Sociocultural Competence: Training must include explicit modules on German cultural values (e.g., *Pünktlichkeit*, *Direktheit*, *Privatsphäre*) and contrast them directly with Sasak values.
- Developing Pragmatic Competence: Guides must be trained via role-play for “critical incident” scenarios: How to politely decline a request *in German*? How to give constructive criticism? How to handle a direct complaint from a German tourist without feeling personally attacked?
- Fostering Affective Competence: Training must encourage self-reflection. Guides must be encouraged to understand *why* they react negatively to German behavior and learn to suspend judgment.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that for German-speaking tourist guides in Lombok, the most significant obstacle to professional mastery is not a lack of linguistic knowledge but the profound impact of cultural interference. The study confirmed a persistent and predictable clash between the high-context, harmony-oriented cultural norms of the Sasak-Indonesian guides and the low-context, task-oriented pragmatic expectations embedded in the German language.

Our findings show that while guides may possess adequate German vocabulary and grammar, they frequently encounter communicative breakdowns. This “pragmatic failure” is most evident in high-stakes service interactions such as handling complaints, managing time expectations (*Pünktlichkeit*), and executing direct speech acts (e.g., refusing or disagreeing politely). Guides, in an attempt to be polite (*sopan*) by Indonesian standards, often resort to indirectness, ambiguity, and *basa-basi*. However, these strategies are frequently misinterpreted by German tourists as evasiveness, inefficiency, or even dishonesty, leading to mutual frustration and a negative service experience.

This study, therefore, concludes that cultural interference is a critical, high-impact barrier that directly affects service quality, tourist satisfaction, and the professional effectiveness of the guides themselves.

Consequently, the implications for pedagogy and professional training in Lombok are clear and urgent. Current German language programs for tourist guides, which often focus heavily on traditional grammar and vocabulary, are insufficient. They are failing to bridge the crucial gap between *linguistic competence* and *intercultural communicative competence*.

We strongly recommend a fundamental shift in training methodology. Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) curricula for these guides must be redesigned to integrate an explicit, robust, and intercultural-pragmatic component. This training must move beyond “do's and don'ts” and actively deconstruct these specific points of cultural friction. Through role-playing, critical analysis of scenarios, and explicit instruction, guides must be taught *not only* how to speak German, but *how* to perform communicative acts in a way that is pragmatically appropriate and effective within a German cultural framework.

For the guides in Lombok, mastering German is not simply about learning new words; it is about learning a new way of interacting with the world. Without addressing the deep-rooted interference of their own cultural-linguistic programming, they will remain communicatively handicapped, regardless of how large their vocabulary becomes.

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