

# LANGUAGE READINESS IN TOURISM SECTORS: A CASE STUDY OF FIVE POPULAR DESTINATIONS IN PALEMBANG

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## Abstract

Tourism is a vital economic sector where effective communication bridges hosts and guests. Language readiness significantly influences tourist experience quality and destination competitiveness. This study examines language readiness in five popular Palembang tourist destinations: Ampera Bridge, Kemaro Island, Pempek Village, Kuto Besak Fortress, and Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II Museum. Findings reveal wide disparities, with the museum leading due to bilingual signage and QR code audio guides, while Pempek Village shows minimal multilingual support. Key communication barriers include limited vocabulary, accent differences, staff confidence issues, and lack of formal language training. The study recommends systematic language training, enhanced multilingual infrastructure, and adoption of assistive technologies to boost Palembang's tourism competitiveness.

Keywords: Language readiness, tourism communication, multilingual infrastructure, destination management, Palembang tourism

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism represents a critical economic sector that significantly contributes to regional development through job creation and income generation (Weaver & Lawton, 2014). In contemporary tourism discourse, effective communication emerges as a fundamental bridge connecting hosts and guests, facilitating meaningful cultural exchanges and enhancing overall tourist experiences (Richards, 2018). The concept of language readiness has gained prominence as a determinant factor in tourism destination competitiveness, encompassing

not merely linguistic competence but also comprehensive communication infrastructure that enables seamless interactions between diverse stakeholders.

The theoretical foundation of tourism communication rests upon Gudykunst and Kim's (2003) intercultural communication theory, which positions language as both a communication tool and cultural bridge connecting different worlds. This perspective emphasizes that successful tourism communication involves five interconnected dimensions: language readiness as the primary foundation,

cross-cultural communication capabilities, cultural exchange through language, communication effectiveness, and relationship harmonization. Language readiness serves as the cornerstone that enables other communication aspects to function effectively, ultimately creating harmonious relationships between tourists and local communities.

Empirical research demonstrates the critical role of language readiness in tourism success. Graddol's (2021) study reveals that tourist destinations with superior language readiness exhibit significantly higher revisit intention rates and positive correlations with tourist length of stay and per capita expenditure levels. Furthermore, effective communication directly impacts tourism economic sustainability through enhanced tourist satisfaction and loyalty development.

Palembang, Indonesia's oldest city with rich Sriwijaya Kingdom heritage, offers diverse tourist attractions spanning historical sites, cultural experiences, culinary specialties, and international-class sports venues from the 2018 Asian Games legacy (Siswanto & Moeljadi, 2021). Statistical data from the Palembang City Tourism Office (2023) reveals a 27% increase in foreign tourist visits in 2022, with majority visitors originating from Malaysia, Singapore, China, and European countries.

Five destinations represent Palembang's most popular attractions based on visitation patterns and cultural significance. Ampera Bridge serves as the city's primary icon with highest visit numbers (Siswanto & Moejiono, 2017). Kemaro Island offers unique spiritual and natural experiences, hosting annual Cap Go Meh celebrations (Dwi Maharani, 2014). Pemppek Village functions as a culinary tourism center with over 120 micro and small businesses (Rahmadani & Susilowati, 2021).

Kuto Besak Fortress represents significant cultural heritage (Adivanto et al., 2020), while Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II Museum serves as the primary cultural preservation center (Budi & Lestari, 2022).

Despite evident tourism potential and increasing foreign visitor numbers, comprehensive analysis of language readiness across these destinations remains unexplored. Previous studies have focused on individual aspects of tourism communication or single destinations, lacking systematic evaluation across multiple high-priority locations. This study addresses this gap by examining current language readiness states, identifying communication barriers, and providing evidence-based recommendations for enhancing Palembang's tourism competitiveness through improved language infrastructure and capabilities.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative approach with descriptive case study design to analyze language readiness in five popular tourist destinations in Palembang City. The qualitative methodology was selected to enable in-depth exploration of complex phenomena involving social interactions and cultural aspects (Creswell & Poth, 2018), providing holistic understanding of language readiness from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

### **Participants**

Research participants comprised 11 informants selected through purposive sampling to represent key tourism stakeholder categories. The informant distribution included five destination managers/field staff from each tourist location, two licensed tour guides from HPI (Indonesian Tour Guide Association), three traders from various destinations, and one

transportation provider. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from additional interviews, ensuring comprehensive coverage of stakeholder perspectives.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection utilized three complementary techniques. Structured observation was conducted using a standardized checklist based on Leslie and Russell's (2006) framework, documenting language infrastructure availability including bilingual signage, multilingual information materials, interpretation services, and staff language competencies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 11 informants using an interview guide developed from Simanjuntak & Wijaya's (2023) language readiness assessment framework, exploring language competence dimensions, infrastructure availability, and cross-cultural communication strategies. Documentation analysis systematically examined promotional materials, information boards, menus, and price lists across all five destinations.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and themes from respondent perspectives. Observation data were analyzed through systematic documentation of tourist-tourism actor interactions, recording communication types, languages used, infrastructure availability, and stakeholder responses. Document analysis employed qualitative content analysis to assess written and visual language readiness.

### **Trustworthiness**

Data validity was ensured through Lincoln and Guba's four-aspect framework: credibility, transferability, dependability,

and confirmability. Three verifiers with relevant expertise validated findings, including English lecturers and tourism professionals. This verification process enhanced research reliability and reduced potential researcher bias, ensuring findings accurately reflected actual conditions at studied destinations.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Language Infrastructure Assessment**

The assessment of language infrastructure across five destinations revealed substantial disparities in multilingual support capabilities. Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II Museum demonstrated the most comprehensive language infrastructure, featuring English signage, QR code audio guide technology, and information boards in multiple languages. This technological integration aligns with Wang & Fesenmaier's (2013) emphasis on technology's transformative role in bridging language gaps between tourists and local communities.

Conversely, Ampera Bridge, Kemaro Island, Pempek Village, and Kuto Besak Fortress exhibited limited multilingual infrastructure, with information primarily available in Indonesian. The absence of English signage and information boards at these locations contradicts Karcher's (2015) findings that multilingual signage serves both pragmatic navigation functions and psychological comfort dimensions for international tourists.

### **Multilingual Information Material Availability**

Analysis of information material availability revealed significant gaps across destinations. While Ampera Bridge, Kemaro Island, and Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II Museum provided English brochures, Pempek Village and Kuto Besak Fortress lacked multilingual promotional materi-

als. Restaurant menus and product information in foreign languages were notably absent across all culinary destinations, creating communication barriers for international tourists interested in local cuisine experiences.

The limited availability of multilingual materials contradicts Hakim et al.'s (2022) findings that diverse language information boards increase tourist comfort and destination accessibility. This deficiency particularly impacts culinary tourism experiences, where detailed food descriptions and ingredient explanations are crucial for tourist satisfaction and safety considerations.

### **Tourism Actor Language Competencies**

Interview analysis revealed varied language competency levels among different tourism actor categories. Professional tour guides from HPI demonstrated relatively strong English capabilities, with some possessing additional Mandarin language skills. Tour guide informant Zaim reporting: "I have guided approximately 40 foreign tourists over five years, indicating substantial practical experience despite acknowledging vocabulary limitations and accent comprehension challenges.

Destination field staff, traders, and transportation providers exhibit basic English competencies limited to essential phrases. Informant Bella from Pempek Village described her capability as "*basic English to name food and prices,*" while boat operator Sani expressed reluctance to communicate due to confidence concerns. These findings highlight systematic capacity building needs for frontline tourism service providers.

### **Communication Barriers and Challenges**

Four primary communication barrier categories emerged: language barriers (limited vocabulary, accent difficulties), confidence barriers (fear of mistakes), infrastructure barriers (technological limitations), and systemic barriers (absence of formal training programs).

Tour guide Wahyu identified "*limited vocabulary*" as the primary challenge, while Zaim emphasized difficulties explaining local cultural concepts, reflecting Shepherd's (2015) cultural translation complexities. Destination manager Nini acknowledged lacking structured language training, stating staff development relied on "*self-learning through YouTube and TikTok.*"

The heavy reliance on external tour guide services rather than developing internal capabilities suggests missed opportunities for building authentic local interactions and long-term destination competitiveness. This contradicts Blue & Harun's (2003) emphasis on language readiness as crucial for professional competitiveness.

### **Destination-Specific Analysis**

Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II Museum emerged as the exemplary model for language readiness implementation. The facility's QR code audio guide system enables tourists to access information in their preferred languages, while English-speaking staff provide additional assistance. This technological integration demonstrates practical application of Smith & Carmichael's (2020) integrated language infrastructure strategy encompassing static, interactive, and digital components.

Pempek Village represented the opposite spectrum, with minimal language

infrastructure and staff capabilities. The absence of English menus and limited staff English competencies create significant barriers for international tourists seeking authentic culinary experiences. This situation particularly impacts cultural exchange opportunities, as food represents a crucial medium for cultural understanding and appreciation.

Ampera Bridge, despite being Palembang's primary landmark, lacks comprehensive multilingual infrastructure despite having English brochures available. The reliance on external tour guide services rather than developing internal capabilities suggests missed opportunities for enhancing tourist experiences and building long-term destination competitiveness.

### **Implications for Tourism Development**

The research findings have significant implications for Palembang's tourism development strategy. The disparate language readiness levels across destinations indicate the need for standardized development approaches that ensure consistent quality experiences for international tourists. The heavy reliance on external tour guide services, while providing temporary solutions, may limit destinations' ability to provide immediate assistance and create authentic local interactions.

The absence of formal training programs represents a critical gap in human resource development that undermines long-term tourism competitiveness. Blue & Harun's (2003) emphasis on language readiness as a crucial professional competitiveness indicator supports the need for systematic investment in staff language capabilities across all tourism sectors.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study contributes novel insights into language readiness variations across

multiple high-priority tourist destinations within a single city context. The research reveals that current language readiness levels in Palembang's tourism sector are insufficient to fully capitalize on tourism potential and accommodate growing international visitor demands.

The findings indicate that current language readiness levels in Palembang's tourism sector are insufficient to fully capitalize on the city's tourism potential and accommodate growing international visitor demands. The reliance on ad-hoc solutions rather than systematic infrastructure development limits destinations' ability to provide consistent, high-quality experiences for international tourists.

Recommendations for improvement include developing comprehensive language training programs for tourism stakeholders, investing in multilingual infrastructure including signage and information materials, adopting assistive technologies such as translation applications and digital guides, and strengthening collaboration with professional tour guide associations. These interventions should be implemented through coordinated efforts between local government, destination managers, and tourism industry stakeholders to create a comprehensive language ecosystem that supports sustainable tourism development in Palembang.

Future research should explore the economic impact of language readiness improvements on tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness, while investigating innovative technological solutions for overcoming language barriers in resource-constrained tourism environments.

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