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Multilingualism In Yogyakarta's Tourism: The Role Of English, French, And Japanese In Enhancing Visitor Experience

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the representation of English, French, and Japanese in Yogyakarta's tourism signage, focusing on Malioboro and Pentingsari Tourism Village, and explores the implications for visitor experience and cultural commodification. This study employs a qualitative approach, synthesizing secondary data from prior linguistic landscape studies in Yogyakarta, statistical reports, and global tourism literature. Drawing on statistical data, prior studies, and global comparisons, the findings reveal significant gaps: English signage is limited to 15% in Malioboro and 3.6% in Pentingsari, despite 70% of international tourists preferring it, while French and Japanese are absent despite notable visitor numbers (3,072 and 2,262 in 2024, respectively). These gaps hinder navigation, cultural immersion, and economic potential, particularly for Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) reliant on tourism. The study proposes three strategies—enhanced multilingual signage, language training for guides, and technology integration—to optimize communication, enhance visitor experience, and drive economic growth, which reached 14.21% in 2023. By targeting underserved markets like French and Japanese tourists, Yogyakarta can balance local identity with global accessibility, fostering sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape; Multilingualism; Tourism; Yogyakarta; Visitor Experience

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INTRODUCTION

Yogyakarta, renowned as the cultural heart of Java, is a key destination in Indonesia's tourism industry, featuring UNESCO World Heritage sites such as Borobudur and Prambanan, alongside vibrant urban centers like Malioboro. In 2024, the city welcomed 93,927 foreign tourists, with significant contributions from Japan (2,262), France (3,072), and English-speaking countries including the United Kingdom (1,997), the United States (2,274), Australia (1,114), and Canada (534), totaling 7,919 or 8.43% of all foreign arrivals (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, 2025). Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of these arrivals, highlighting the prominence of these key nationalities against the total foreign tourist arrivals.

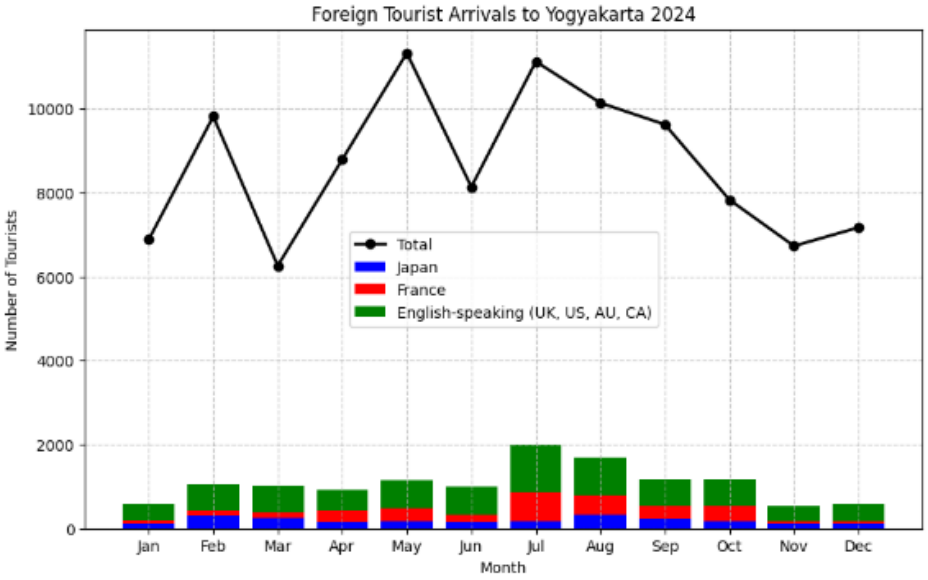


Figure 1. Foreign Tourist Arrivals to Yogyakarta 2024 – Japan, France, English-speaking Countries vs. Total

(*Source: Adapted from Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta (2025)*)

In 2023, Prambanan attracted 164,636 foreign visitors (Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Sleman, 2024), underscoring its prominence alongside Borobudur as a major draw. This diversity highlights Yogyakarta's growing international appeal but also underscores the need for a robust multilingual framework to cater to diverse linguistic backgrounds and enhance visitor satisfaction.

The linguistic landscape—defined as the visibility and salience of languages in public spaces through signage, advertisements, and notices (Landry & Bourhis, 1997))—serves as a critical interface between local culture and global tourism demands. Multilingualism in tourism is a dynamic field at the intersection of sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and economic development, reflecting how languages facilitate communication and shape visitor perceptions (Monica Heller, Joan Pujolar, 2014). Ahmad et al. (2024) conducted a bibliometric review of 100 Scopus-indexed studies from 1980 to 2023, emphasizing that language barriers impede tourist satisfaction globally, with English emerging as the dominant lingua franca due to its widespread use in international exchanges (Žerajić, 2020). However, local languages like Javanese and foreign languages such as French and Japanese play critical roles in authenticating cultural heritage and meeting diverse visitor needs, a balance that destinations like Yogyakarta must navigate (Luo, 2022).

Previous research indicates a predominantly monolingual linguistic landscape in Yogyakarta dominated by Indonesian. Da Silva et al. (2021) surveyed 729 signage items in Malioboro, finding 73% in Indonesian, 15% in English, and less than 5% in Javanese, often used symbolically (e.g., "Klenting Kuning"). This reflects a focus on local and national visitors, with English as a secondary tool for international tourists. Similarly, Rastitiati et al. (2024) analyzed 28 signs in Pentingsari

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Tourism Village, reporting 32.1% in Indonesian, 25% in Indonesian-Arabic combinations, 10.7% in Javanese, and only 3.6% in English, driven by local cultural and religious priorities rather than tourism demands. Notably, neither study reports the presence of French or Japanese, despite significant visitor numbers from these countries, suggesting a disconnect between linguistic provisions and tourist demographics. This misalignment poses challenges to visitor experience and cultural accessibility, prompting this study to explore the representation of English, French, and Japanese in Yogyakarta's tourism linguistic landscape, their implications, and practical strategies for optimizing multilingual communication.

Multilingualism in tourism has gained attention for its role in enhancing visitor experience and driving economic growth. Gorter (2006) defines the linguistic landscape as the study of language visibility in public spaces, reflecting local identity while addressing global needs. Ahmad et al. (2024) found that language barriers reduce tourist satisfaction, with English as the dominant lingua franca (Žerajić, 2020). However, local languages like Javanese and foreign languages such as French and Japanese add value. Piller (2017) notes that English signifies modernity, French elegance, and Japanese authenticity—attributes Yogyakarta could leverage.

Language commodification, as outlined by Heller et al. (2014), involves using language as an economic asset. In Nepal, Sharma (2018, cited in Luo, 2022) showed that English training improves visitor engagement and employability. Carmen Moreno-Romero (2024) reported that multilingual websites in Spain (90% English, 30% French) boost trust, though translation errors pose a risk. Dr. Balogun (2024) emphasizes French's role in social relations and employment, while Savana & Lantang (2024) identify errors in Japanese usage among tourism trainees, indicating a need for training. Global studies, such as Ferenčík & Bariová (2023) in Slovakia, highlight the importance of adaptive signage, and Jiao & Singh (2024) in George Town, Malaysia, demonstrate the effectiveness of multilingual signage for diverse tourist groups.

In Indonesia, local research supports this approach. Da Silva et al. (2021) and Rastitiati et al. (2024) analyzed the linguistic landscapes of Malioboro and Pentingsari, revealing Indonesian dominance with limited English use. This imbalance affects visitor experience and economic potential, particularly for Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) reliant on tourism (Oelistina, 2021). This review affirms the need for multilingual strategies to balance local linguistic identity with global accessibility. The purpose of this study is to investigate the representation of English, French, and Japanese in Yogyakarta's tourism signage, to understand the implications that arise for visitor experience, and to determine what multilingual strategies can enhance tourism communication.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, emphasizing the interpretive analysis of existing knowledge rather than primary data collection. It relies on the systematic synthesis of secondary data drawn from three main sources: prior linguistic landscape studies conducted in Yogyakarta, official statistical reports, and global tourism literature. The linguistic landscape studies provide empirical insights into the visibility and distribution of languages in key tourism areas, enabling an examination of how multilingual signage reflects sociocultural and economic dynamics. Statistical reports contribute quantitative context, particularly regarding patterns of foreign visitor arrivals and site-specific tourism performance, which help ground the analysis in broader tourism trends. Meanwhile, global tourism literature offers a comparative perspective, allowing the study to situate Yogyakarta's linguistic practices within international discussions on multilingualism, globalization, and tourism development. This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which restricts direct observation and real-time verification of linguistic practices.

Linguistic landscape data were sourced from Da Silva et al. (2021) for Malioboro and Rastitiati et al. (2024) for Pentingsari Tourism Village. Visitor statistics were obtained from Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta (2025) for 2024 foreign arrivals and Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Sleman (2024) for 2023 site-specific data on Borobudur and Prambanan. Economic impacts were analyzed using studies by Tyas (2022), Oelistina (2021), and Buana et al.

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(2025), alongside official reports (Warta Jogjakota, 2023). Global comparisons were drawn from hmad et al. (2024), Ferenčík and Bariová (2023), and Jiao and Singh (2024) to contextualize Yogyakarta's challenges within broader tourism trends. The analysis evaluates the representation of English, French, and Japanese, their implications for visitor experience and cultural commodification, and proposes strategies to optimize multilingual communication in Yogyakarta's tourism sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The linguistic landscape of Yogyakarta's tourism sector reveals a predominantly monolingual setting. In Malioboro, Da Silva et al. (2021) found that of 729 signage items, 73% were in Indonesian, 15% in English, and less than 5% in Javanese, often used symbolically (e.g., "Klenting Kuning"). In Pentingsari Tourism Village, Rastitiati et al. (2024) reported that of 28 signs, 32.1% were in Indonesian, 25% in Indonesian-Arabic combinations, 10.7% in Javanese, and only 3.6% in English, reflecting local cultural and religious priorities over tourist needs. Neither study identified French or Japanese signage, despite 3,072 French and 2,262 Japanese visitors in 2024 (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, 2025). Visitor preferences highlight the gap: 70% of international tourists in Malioboro prefer English signage for navigation (Da Silva et al., 2021), yet provision falls short for the 7,919 English-speaking visitors in 2024. The absence of French and Japanese signage overlooks significant markets, potentially impacting visitor satisfaction and economic outcomes, particularly for MSEs reliant on tourism (Oelistina, 2021).

Table 1: Language Distribution on Signage in Malioboro and Pentingsari Tourism Village

Language	Malioboro	Pentingsari
Indonesian	73% (532 signs)	32.1% (9 signs)
English	15% (109 signs)	3.6% (1 sign)
Javanese	<5% (<36 signs)	10.7% (3 signs)
Arabic	0%	25% (7 signs, combined with Indonesian)
Others (Multilingual)	7% (52 signs)	28.6% (8 signs, including language combinations)
Total Signs	729	28

[Source: (Da Silva et al., 2021); (Rastitiati et al., 2024)]

Visitor Experience

The limited representation of English, despite its status as a global lingua franca (Žerajić, 2020), indicates a significant opportunity gap in Yogyakarta's tourism sector. A clear mismatch exists between tourist preferences and available signage: while 70% of international tourists in Malioboro prefer English signage for navigation (Da Silva et al., 2021), only 15% of signs (109 of 729) are in English, leaving a 55% gap in linguistic provision for the 7,919 English-speaking visitors in 2024 (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, 2025). This issue is not unique to Yogyakarta; Hasni et al. (2022) reviewed linguistic landscapes in tourist spaces globally (2014-2022) and found that English dominance often marginalizes local languages, as seen in Sidoarjo, Indonesia, where English overshadowed local dialects. The absence of French and Japanese signage exacerbates the problem, despite the city hosting 3,072 French and 2,262 Japanese visitors in 2024 (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, 2025). This linguistic gap may lead to alienation or reduced satisfaction, as language mismatches can foster frustration and hinder cultural immersion (Jazone Cenoz, 2011). For instance, French visitors might struggle to locate facilities without signage like "toilettes," while Japanese tourists, known for seeking cultural authenticity (Luo, 2022), may miss contextual explanations available only in Indonesian, such as historical details at Borobudur. Jiao and Singh (2024) found in George Town, Malaysia, that multilingual signage (e.g., English, Chinese, Tamil) effectively targeted diverse tourist groups, a model Yogyakarta can adopt to enhance inclusivity for French and Japanese visitors. Such improvements could also extend tourists' length of stay, which increased by 1.86 days (22.37%) in 2023, contributing to a 14.21% growth in the tourism economy (Warta Jogjakota,

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2023). Multilingual signage can further enhance this trend by improving navigation and cultural engagement, thereby increasing economic returns through higher tourist expenditure.

Cultural Commodification

From a cultural perspective, the dominance of Indonesian and Javanese reinforces local identity, aligning with Luo's (2022) argument that languages authenticate heritage. In Pentingsari, Javanese (10.7%) and Arabic (25%) reflect community values tied to tradition and religion (e.g., "Ramadhan ora muno"), while in Malioboro, Javanese's symbolic use (<5%, e.g., "Klenting Kuning") adds local flavor (Rastitiati et al., 2024; Da Silva et al., 2021). However, this focus limits the potential for cultural commodification—the process of leveraging cultural assets for economic gain (Heller et al., 2014; Luo, 2022). In Nepal, Sharma (2018, cited in Luo, 2022) observed that tourism workers commodify English to meet market demands, enhancing visitor engagement and employability, yielding economic benefits. Similarly, Carmen Moreno-Romero (2024) found that multilingual websites in Spain (90% English, 30% French) improved trust, though poor translations undermined quality, a risk Yogyakarta must mitigate. Napu (2024) noted in Gorontalo, Indonesia, that Arabic alongside Indonesian and English on signage symbolized religious identity, suggesting that Javanese in Yogyakarta could similarly enhance cultural resonance for authenticity-seeking tourists, such as Japanese visitors. For instance, signage like "Sugeng Rawuh" (Javanese for "welcome") alongside "ようこそ" (yōkoso) could elevate Prambanan's appeal, aligning with Japanese tourists' preferences for authenticity (Luo, 2022). French, associated with elegance and refinement (Piller, 2017), could enhance Yogyakarta's allure for French visitors through phrases like "Bienvenue à Yogyakarta" at Borobudur. English, while catering to a broader market, is underutilized in signage, restricting its impact. Savana and Lantang (2024) identified errors in Japanese usage among trainees (e.g., grammatical inaccuracies in tour scripts), indicating that without proper skills, commodifying Yogyakarta's appeal to Japanese tourists remains challenging. Enhancing signage and training in these languages can position Yogyakarta as a culturally rich destination, aligning with global trends where languages are commodified to attract specific tourist demographics, thus amplifying economic benefits through increased spending on local products like batik and culinary experiences.

Economic Impact of Multilingualism

The tourism sector is a cornerstone of Yogyakarta's economy, and multilingual strategies can significantly enhance its contributions by targeting underserved markets like French and Japanese tourists. Table 1 summarizes key economic indicators of Yogyakarta's tourism sector, highlighting its role and potential for growth through multilingualism.

Table 2: Economic Indicators of Yogyakarta's Tourism Sector

Indicator	Value	Year	Source
Tourism economic growth	14.21%	2023	Warta Jogjakota (2023)
Increase in length of stay	1.86 days (22.37%)	2023	Warta Jogjakota (2023)
Pre-pandemic tourism growth	8.58%	2019	Tyas (2022)
Tourism contribution to economic structure (pre-pandemic)	10.91%	2019	Oelistina (2021)
Tourism contribution to economic structure (pandemic)	6.58%	2020	Oelistina (2021)
Economic contraction during pandemic	-6.74%	2020	Oelistina (2021)
Tourism contribution to GRDP	15.78%	2023	Buana et al. (2025)
Food and beverage subsector contribution to GRDP	8.38%	2023	Buana et al. (2025)
Projected economic growth with Rp1,000 billion investment	4.25%	2023	Buana et al. (2025)
Projected new jobs with Rp1,000 billion investment	40,707 jobs	2023	Buana et al. (2025)

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Projected unemployment reduction with Rp1,000 billion investment	1.832%	2023	Buana et al. (2025)
UMK reliance on tourism	75.09%	2019	Oelistina (2021)
UMK income drop during pandemic	80%	2020	Oelistina (2021)
UMK food industry share	41.73%	2019	Oelistina (2021)
UMK weaving industry share	15.18%	2019	Oelistina (2021)
UMK batik crafts share	13.02%	2019	Oelistina (2021)

[Source: Warta Jogjakota (2023); Tyas (2022); Oelistina (2021); Buana et al. (2025)]

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism subsector (accommodation and food services) contributed to an economic growth rate of 8.58% in Yogyakarta in 2019 (Tyas, 2022). However, the pandemic caused a sharp decline, with the sector's contribution to the economic structure dropping from 10.91% in 2019 to 6.58% in 2020, resulting in a -6.74% economic contraction (Oelistina, 2021). Recovery has been notable, with a 14.21% growth in the tourism economy in 2023, driven by an increased length of stay of 1.86 days (Warta Jogjakota, 2023). Buana et al. (2025) further quantify the sector's role, noting that tourism subsectors contribute 15.78% to Yogyakarta's GRDP, with the food and beverage subsector accounting for 8.38%. A simulation of a Rp1,000 billion investment per subsector projects a 4.25% increase in economic growth, the creation of 40,707 new jobs, and a 1.832% reduction in unemployment (Buana et al., 2025). Multilingual strategies can amplify these gains by targeting French and Japanese tourists, numbering 3,072 and 2,262 in 2024, respectively (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, 2025). For example, signage and guides in French and Japanese could enhance their experience, encouraging longer stays and higher spending, particularly on culinary offerings, a significant economic driver. Oelistina (2021) highlights that 75.09% of Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) in Yogyakarta rely on tourism, with the food industry (41.73%), weaving (15.18%), and batik crafts (13.02%) being the most prominent. These MSEs experienced an 80% income drop during the pandemic due to reduced tourist numbers, underscoring their vulnerability. By catering to French tourists seeking elegance (Piller, 2017) and Japanese tourists valuing authenticity (Luo, 2022), multilingualism can boost MSE sales—such as batik and culinary products—driving economic recovery and growth.

Proposed Strategies for Optimization

To address these linguistic gaps and leverage economic opportunities, three strategies are proposed, supported by a policy framework and training initiatives:

Enhanced Multilingual Signage:

Standardizing signage to include English, French, and Japanese alongside Indonesian and Javanese can improve accessibility. Sitohang et al. (2024) noted a top-down approach in Pentingsari's homestay signage, where uniform designs (e.g., "Pentingsari Tourism Village" headers) signaled authority control. Scaling this to Yogyakarta's key sites, as seen in Slovakia's adaptive policies during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ferenčík & Bariová, 2023), could ensure consistency. For example, signage at Borobudur and Prambanan could read "Welcome / Bienvenue / ようこそ" with "Sugeng Rawuh," catering to diverse visitors and aligning with peak demand in July-August, when French (683) and Japanese (333) arrivals surge (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, 2025). Jiao and Singh (2024) found in George Town, Malaysia, that multilingual signage (e.g., English, Chinese, Tamil) in Chinatown and Little India effectively targeted diverse tourist groups, a model Yogyakarta can adopt to enhance visitor inclusivity. This strategy can also increase tourist expenditure on local MSEs, supporting economic recovery, as 41.73% of MSEs are in the food sector, benefiting from the 8.38% GRDP contribution of the food and beverage subsector (Buana et al., 2025).

Language Training for Guides:

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Targeted programs in English, French, and Japanese can enhance intercultural communication. Žerajić (2020) and Balogun (2024) emphasize language skills for employability, while Nepal's four-week English courses (Sharma, 2018, cited in Luo, 2022) offer a model. A six-week intensive course, covering basic phrases (e.g., "Where is the temple?" in English, "Où est le temple?" in French, "お寺はどこですか？" in Japanese) and cultural nuances (e.g., Javanese etiquette), could equip Yogyakarta's guides for peak seasons. Malini et al. (2022) found that speaking skills were the most needed (96.6%) for tourism employees in Nusa Lembongan, Bali, highlighting the need for targeted training to address specific communication gaps, such as interacting with foreign tourists—a priority also evident in Yogyakarta. Savana and Lantang (2024) suggest current Japanese skills are error-prone, necessitating structured training, especially for sites like Prambanan. Drawing from Atiqah and Widiyanto (2023), incorporating interactive cultural activities like *ojigi* and *meishi koukan* into Japanese training can boost motivation and comprehension, while Lestari and Endi (2024) advocate using contrastive analysis to teach French by leveraging English knowledge, reducing interference from Indonesian. Fransiska et al. (2023) further support contextual training, noting that English materials for health emergencies improve practical communication, a method adaptable for tourism scenarios like assisting lost tourists. This training can indirectly boost economic growth by improving service quality, encouraging repeat visits, and increasing tourist spending, which directly benefits MSEs reliant on tourism (Oelistina, 2021).

Technology Integration:

Carmen Moreno-Romero (2024) advocate using tools like DeepL, followed by human proofreading, for accurate multilingual content, as seen in Spain's tourism websites. In Yogyakarta, this could extend to digital signage and mobile apps, translating phrases like "Prambanan Temple" into French ("Temple de Prambanan") and Japanese ("プランバナン寺院"). Nguyen et al. (2021) demonstrated that virtual learning environments like Second Life improved communication skills by 25% in hospitality training, suggesting that Yogyakarta could adopt similar technologies for guide training, such as virtual simulations of tourist interactions. Kusumastiti (2024) highlights that blended learning models, combining online and face-to-face methods, enhance English acquisition in higher education, a strategy that can be adapted for multilingual training in Yogyakarta, addressing access barriers through flexible learning.

Tyas (2022) recommends investment in technology to enhance the competitiveness of the tourism subsector, aligning with this strategy. Digital signage in multiple languages can also provide real-time information, improving visitor experience and potentially increasing their length of stay by 1.86 days, as seen in 2023 (Warta Jogjakota, 2023), thereby amplifying economic contributions to sectors like food and beverage, which contribute 8.38% to GRDP (Buana et al., 2025). Challenges include translation errors—e.g., Savana and Lantang (2024)—requiring collaboration with native speakers.

Table 3. Comparison of Multilingual Strategies in Tourism Destinations

Destination	Strategy	Languages Used	Implementation	Source
Nepal	Language Training	English	4-week courses for guides	Sharma (2018, cited in Luo, 2022)
Spain	Multilingual Websites	English, French, Spanish	Machine translation + proofreading	Carmen Moreno-Romero (2024)
Slovakia	Adaptive Signage	Slovak, English	Top-down policy during crisis	Ferenčík & Bariová (2023)
Bali (Nusa Lembongan)	Language Training	English	Needs-based speaking training	Malini et al. (2022)
George Town, Malaysia	Multilingual Signage	English, Chinese, Tamil	Targeted signage for diverse groups	Jiao & Singh (2024)

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Yogyakarta (Proposed)	Signage + Training	English, French, Japanese	Standardized signs, 6-week courses	This study

[Source: Sharma (2018, cited in Luo, 2022); Carmen Moreno-Romero (2024); Ferenčík & Bariová (2023); Malini et al., (2022); Jiao & Singh (2024); This study]

Table 2 illustrates how Nepal's training enhances guide skills, Spain's websites improve digital access, Slovakia's signage adapts to crises, Bali's needs-based training targets specific skills, and George Town's multilingual signage promotes inclusivity—all applicable to Yogyakarta. A coordinated policy framework involving Yogyakarta's tourism authority, the Himpunan Pramuwisata Indonesia (HPI), and universities like Universitas Gadjah Mada could mandate multilingual signage in key sites like Malioboro, Borobudur, and Prambanan, which attract significant international visitors (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, 2025; Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Magelang, 2023; Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Sleman, 2024). Training initiatives could prioritize peak seasons (July-August), offering subsidized six-week courses for 100 guides annually, with evaluations to assess impact on visitor satisfaction, mirroring Slovakia's adaptability (Ferenčík & Bariová, 2023). Funding could leverage tourism revenue, ensuring sustainability (Jafari & Way, 1994), especially given the sector's 14.21% economic growth in 2023 (Warta Jogjakota, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Yogyakarta's tourism sector, though culturally rich, faces significant linguistic barriers that hinder its global appeal. English, French, and Japanese are underrepresented in the linguistic landscape, with English signage at only 15% in Malioboro and 3.6% in Pentingsari, and French and Japanese absent, despite substantial visitor numbers from these markets. This mismatch impacts visitor experience, cultural commodification, and economic potential, particularly for MSEs, which rely on tourism for 75.09% of their income. Multilingual strategies—enhanced signage, language training, and technology integration—can bridge these gaps, targeting underserved French and Japanese markets to boost visitor satisfaction, extend stays, and increase spending. Economically, these strategies align with the sector's 14.21% growth in 2023 and its 15.78% contribution to GRDP, offering potential for further growth, job creation, and MSE recovery. The limitation of this study is that it only looks at the role of three languages (French, English, Japanese); future researchers are expected to be able to study more than these three languages. Future research could explore the effectiveness of these strategies through visitor surveys and economic impact assessments, ensuring Yogyakarta balances local identity with global accessibility.

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