Mapping the English language competency of local Gayo tourism actors to enhance global competitiveness in the tourism industry

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Abstract: English communication skills play a crucial role in shaping service quality and international tourist satisfaction, yet empirical evidence on the linguistic readiness of tourism workers in the Gayo Highlands remains limited. This study examines their English proficiency, with emphasis on speaking and listening as the core competencies required for frontline service interactions. Using a quantitative descriptive design, data were collected from 34 tourism workers and analyzed through descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and Pearson correlation. The results show that listening and speaking exhibit low to moderate proficiency levels, with both identified as the most challenging skills. The chi-square analysis indicated no significant association between profession and perceived difficulty (χ^2 = 6.918, p = 0.733), suggesting uniform challenges across occupational groups. A weak negative correlation between work experience and overall proficiency (r = −0.25) further suggests that experience alone does not enhance communicative competence. These findings highlight systemic gaps in English for Tourism preparedness and underscore the need for targeted, needs-based, and simulation-driven training to support service quality and strengthen the competitiveness of rural destinations such as the Gayo Highlands.

Keywords: Gayo Highlands, Language Competence, Rural Tourism, Tourism Competitiveness

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Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively in English is increasingly recognized as a key competency for tourism workers, particularly in destinations seeking to compete within the global tourism market. As English functions as the most widely used lingua franca in international tourism settings, frontline personnel are required not only to understand basic expressions but also to perform service interactions that involve giving explanations, handling inquiries, resolving problems, and providing culturally appropriate responses. Research in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) highlights that language training for tourism should be grounded in real communicative needs and should reflect the authentic tasks that workers regularly perform (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Richard, 2021). Studies conducted across various tourism regions similarly show that communication gaps, especially in speaking and listening, can negatively influence service delivery and reduce the overall tourist experience (Aysu & Özcan, 2021; Chumphong & Chuai-in, 2020; Jantawong et al., 2023).

In rural destinations such as the Gayo Highlands, English communication plays an essential role in conveying local culture, providing accurate information, and building trust with visitors. However, previous studies in Indonesia and neighboring countries indicate that tourism workers in community-based or emerging destinations often receive limited language training, resulting in low oral proficiency and inconsistent service performance (Nomnian et al., 2020;

Koeswiryono, 2024). Weak English ability affects not only the clarity of communication but also the broader dimensions of service quality, including reliability, responsiveness, and assurance. These challenges can further influence customer satisfaction and ultimately shape the competitiveness of the destination as a whole (Shella & Putriningsih, 2023; Marasabessy et al., 2025).
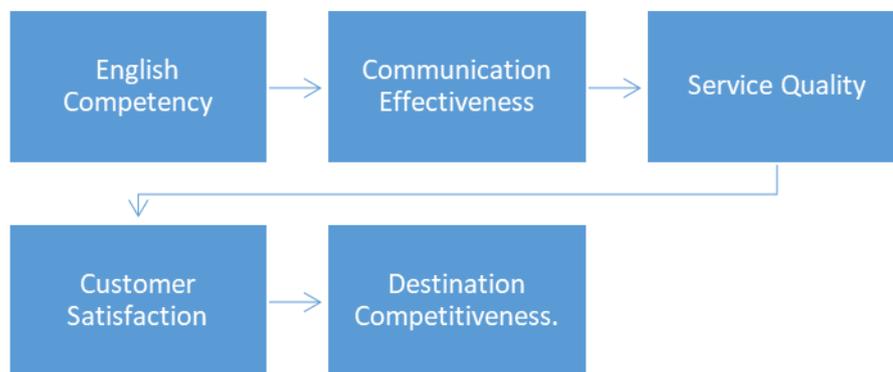

Figure 1. The conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1) illustrates how English competency contributes to tourism performance. Strong language skills enhance communication effectiveness, which in turn influences service quality. Improved service quality supports customer satisfaction, and satisfied customers are more likely to contribute positive perceptions that enhance destination competitiveness. This framework emphasizes that language ability is not merely a technical skill but a strategic asset for tourism development, especially in emerging rural destinations such as Gayo.

Despite these insights, limited empirical evidence exists on the actual English proficiency levels of tourism workers in the Gayo Highlands. Local tourism actors, including homestay operators, café owners, tour guides, and craft sellers, interact regularly with domestic and international visitors, yet their communication abilities have not been systematically documented. Existing regional studies focus more on the cultural tourism potential (Khaironi et al., 2017; Sudirman et al., 2020) rather than the human resource capacities needed to support tourism growth. This creates a clear research gap: the region lacks a data-driven understanding of its English communication readiness and the factors influencing workers' skills.

To address this gap, the present study aims to map the English communication abilities of Gayo tourism workers by examining their self-perceived proficiency in listening, speaking, and writing skills. In addition, the study investigates whether communication challenges differ across professions and whether work experience influences overall proficiency. By providing empirical evidence on these issues, this study seeks to inform local training programs and support the development of targeted English for Tourism strategies that align with the needs of rural tourism actors.

To address this limited empirical understanding of tourism workers' communication readiness, the present study aims to map the English communication competencies of tourism workers in the Gayo Highlands by examining their self-perceived proficiency in listening, speaking, and writing. Specifically, the study seeks to identify which English skill is considered the most difficult by local practitioners and to determine whether proficiency challenges differ across occupational groups. In addition, the study investigates the relationship between years of work experience and overall English ability. Through these objectives, the research intends to provide empirical insights that support the development of more targeted English for Tourism training initiatives for rural tourism contexts.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design, which is appropriate for identifying and describing existing conditions in a specific population using measurable indicators (Creswell, 2014; Sugiyono, 2018). A structured self-assessment questionnaire was used to examine the English communication abilities of tourism workers in the Gayo Highlands, focusing on listening, speaking, and writing skills. The instrument adopted a four-point Likert scale and was adapted from established English for Specific Purposes (ESP) frameworks proposed by (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and (Richard, 2021)., ensuring contextual relevance to communicative tasks in the tourism sector. A total of 34 participants were selected through purposive sampling, following recommendations by (Cohen et al., 2018), to represent active tourism-related occupations such as tour guides, homestay managers, café owners, souvenir sellers, destination managers, and transport drivers. This sample size was deemed adequate for exploratory descriptive analysis within a focused local context (Gay et al., 2012). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, to map overall proficiency levels, and inferential tests were employed to explore relationships among variables. A chi-square test was conducted to examine differences in skill difficulty across professions, while Pearson correlation was used to assess the relationship between years of experience and overall proficiency. This methodological approach provided both statistical clarity and contextual insight into the English communication needs of tourism workers in the Gayo Highlands.

Results and Discussions

Results

1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

    A total of 34 tourism actors from the Gayo highlands participated in the study. They represent six major occupational groups commonly involved in tourism services in the region. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents across professions.

2. English Communication Skill Levels

    Analysis of the self-assessment ratings shows that the respondents' listening and speaking abilities fall within the low to moderate range. Mean scores (on a scale of 1–4) indicate:

    - Listening: M = 2.03
    - Speaking: M = 1.98

    These results confirm that oral communication skills constitute the most pressing linguistic challenges among tourism workers in the Gayo region.

3. Most Difficult English Skills

    Respondents were asked to identify which English skill they found most difficult. Consistent with the mean scores, speaking was selected most frequently (50%), followed by listening (32.4%), while writing ranked lowest (17.6%). Table 2 summarizes the distribution across professions.

Table 1. Crosstabulation between the tourism profession and the perceived most difficult English skill

Tourism Profession	Speaking	Listening	Writing	Total
Tour Guide	3	2	2	7
Restaurant/Café Owner	1	3	1	5
Homestay Owner/Manager	5	2	1	8
Tourism Destination Manager	2	1	1	4
Tourism Transport Driver	3	0	1	4
Souvenir Seller	3	3	0	6
Total	17	11	6	34

4. Chi-Square Analysis

To determine whether certain professions struggle with different English skills, a chi-square test was conducted using the data from Table 1.

Table 2. Chi-square test results

Test	Value	df	p value
Pearson Chi-Square	6.918	10	0.733
Number of Valid Cases	34		

The chi-square test shows no significant association between the tourism profession and the English skill perceived as most difficult (p = 0.733).

This indicates that speaking and listening difficulties are consistent across all occupational categories, a pattern suggesting that oral communication challenges are systemic and widespread, not profession-specific. This strengthens the argument that tourism actors in rural regions like Gayo lack sufficient exposure, training, and communicative practice regardless of their occupational role.

5. Pearson Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation test was performed to examine whether years of work experience predict overall English proficiency.

Table 3. Correlation between work experience and overall English skill

Variable 1	Variable 2	Pearson r
Work Experience (years)	Overall English Skill Score	−0.250

The correlation analysis reveals a weak negative relationship (r = −0.25) between years of experience and English proficiency. This finding contradicts the expectation that longer work experience leads to improved communication ability. Instead, it suggests that:
1. English is rarely used in daily interactions, even by experienced workers.
2. On-the-job exposure does not automatically improve English.
3. Structured, continuous training, not workplace experience alone, is necessary to support skill development.

Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that speaking and listening remain the weakest English communication skills among tourism workers in the Gayo region. This pattern aligns with earlier needs analysis research, indicating that oral communication, especially spontaneous interaction, is the most challenging aspect for tourism practitioners in Southeast Asia (Jantawong et al., 2023; Luo, 2022; Ijabah & Amrullah, 2023). Such weaknesses often stem from insufficient workplace exposure, limited opportunities for authentic communication, and training programs that rely heavily on grammatical or textbook-based instruction rather than situational practice (Aysu & Özcan, 2021; Richard, 2021).

From the perspective of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Hutchinson & Waters (1987) emphasize that language education must be needs-driven and context-responsive. However, the present findings show a mismatch between the linguistic demands of tourism encounters and the existing training experiences of local workers. Many respondents reported never having participated in profession-specific English training, confirming Nomnian et al. (2020) observation that local tourism communities often lack systematic linguistic preparation despite increasing dependence on international visitors. Moreover, the absence of contextually tailored materials reinforces Richard's (2021) argument that curriculum design in vocational settings must be tightly aligned with real workplace tasks to ensure transferability.

The chi-square analysis further demonstrates that the difficulty in speaking and listening is consistent across all professions, including tour guides, café owners, homestay operators, transport drivers, and souvenir sellers. This cross-occupational pattern supports findings from (Chumphong & Chuai-in, 2020), who reported that tourism workers across job roles share

similar communicative barriers due to shared contextual constraints, namely, limited English use, insufficient training infrastructure, and inconsistent exposure to international guests. The uniformity of challenges suggests that the issue is not skill-specific to certain professions but instead reflects a systemic regional deficiency in tourism communication readiness.

Similarly, the Pearson correlation analysis revealed a weak negative relationship between work experience and English proficiency. This indicates that years of service in the tourism sector do not necessarily result in improved linguistic ability. Such a result aligns with the findings of (Kholidi et al., 2022), who noted that tourism workers in Malaysia also showed stagnant English proficiency despite substantial professional experience, due to limited communicative demand and lack of structured training within their work environment. In the context of Gayo, where English-speaking guests may not frequently visit, experience alone fails to provide meaningful linguistic input, highlighting the need for deliberate and sustained language development programs.

These linguistic limitations have tangible implications for service quality and destination competitiveness. Previous research in Indonesian tourism contexts (Koeswiryono, 2024; Suadnyana & Koeswiryono, 2024) shows that inadequate English communication can lead to misunderstandings, lowered service responsiveness, and reduced visitor satisfaction. In Gayo, similar patterns are reflected in respondents' experiences with miscommunication, particularly in giving directions, explaining products, and handling complaints. This aligns with international studies demonstrating that tourists' perceptions of hospitality, professionalism, and trust are strongly influenced by the clarity of frontline communication (Marasabessy et al., 2025). Thus, weaknesses in speaking and listening may directly impact the region's image and competitiveness as a tourism destination, reinforcing (Saptiany et al., 2023) argument that English proficiency is a central determinant of tourism quality.

Given these implications, several training and policy recommendations emerge. Previous studies on English for tourism training (Prassetyo et al., 2023; Indriani et al., 2022) demonstrate that targeted, context-specific language programs can significantly enhance communicative performance when integrated with real-world scenarios. Hence, training for Gayo tourism workers should adopt:

1. Task-based and simulation-driven modules (e.g., complaint handling, storytelling, service recovery), consistent with ESP principles (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).
2. Work-integrated learning approaches, involving collaboration between local government, universities, and tourism businesses, echoing the recommendations by (Yusra et al., 2021) for CEFR-aligned vocational English programs.
3. Regular assessment and follow-up coaching, in line with (Creswell, 2014) and Gay et al.'s (2012) emphasis on continuous professional development in applied educational contexts.

Such interventions would help overcome the structural challenges noted by (Kurniarini et al., 2021), who identified significant skill gaps among tourism students despite existing curricula, and by Khaironi et al. (2017), who highlighted the importance of aligning tourism training with local cultural and service needs.

Finally, this study acknowledges its limitations, including reliance on self-assessed proficiency known to introduce subjective bias and a modest sample size limited to the Gayo region. However, these limitations are common in exploratory tourism linguistics research (Cohen et al., 2018; Sugiyono, 2018), and the findings provide a meaningful baseline for future studies employing objective proficiency tests or broader regional sampling.

Conclusions

This study provides an empirical account of English communication competencies among tourism workers in the Gayo Highlands, revealing consistently low levels of speaking and listening proficiency across occupational groups. The absence of significant differences between professions, alongside the weak negative correlation between work experience and overall proficiency, underscores that these limitations are structural rather than individual, reflecting longstanding constraints in exposure, training design, and contextually relevant pedagogical support. These findings reinforce theoretical perspectives in English for Specific Purposes, which

emphasize the centrality of needs-driven, task-oriented instruction, and align with prior research demonstrating that inadequate oral communication skills compromise service quality, tourist satisfaction, and destination competitiveness. Accordingly, the enhancement of English for Tourism competence in Gayo necessitates systematic, simulation-based training embedded within a collaborative framework involving educational institutions, local government, and tourism stakeholders. While constrained by a modest sample size and the inherent subjectivity of self-assessed measures, this study provides a foundational evidence base for future investigations incorporating objective proficiency assessments, longitudinal designs, and broader sampling to inform more robust curriculum development and policy interventions aimed at strengthening communicative readiness in rural tourism destinations.

Acknowledgment

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