

English Communication in Tourism: A Qualitative Study on Applied Linguistics and Tour Guides

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ABSTRACT

Bali's tourism industry heavily relies on international visitors, making English proficiency essential for tour guides who serve as cultural ambassadors. This qualitative study examines the relationship between applied linguistics principles and the English communication skills of tour guides at PT. Indo Bali Tours. Through semi-structured interviews and observations, the study explores key linguistic aspects, including vocabulary usage, discourse structuring, and pragmatic competence. Findings indicate that a lack of specialized tourism vocabulary often leads to oversimplification of complex cultural and historical narratives. Additionally, language anxiety negatively impacts fluency and engagement. These insights underscore the need for structured, tourism-specific language training programs that integrate applied linguistics principles to enhance communication effectiveness. By bridging the gap between applied linguistics and the tourism industry, this study offers practical recommendations for improving English proficiency among tour guides, ultimately enriching the visitor experience.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a vital component of Bali's economy, drawing millions of international visitors annually, many of whom rely on English to engage with local culture, history, and sites. The number of tourists visiting Bali in the year 2023 was 5.273.258 and in the month, of September 2024 there were 593.909 foreign tourists directly came to Bali (BPS Provinsi Bali, 2024). Concerning international marketing, English language skills are very important to have to be able to communicate internationally (Widiastuti, et al., 2021). A large number of tourists need professional tour guides who can communicate well in English.

Culture is part of Balinese life and Balinese culture has become the most dominant tourist attraction in Bali (Mantra, Suparsa, and Handayani, 2023). Tour guides in Bali serve as cultural ambassadors, mediating the island's rich heritage for millions of international visitors. From prior observations conducted at PT. Indo Bali Tours shows that their ability to effectively communicate in English, especially when describing tourist sites and engaging with diverse audiences, often falls short. Tour guiding involves the art of leading and providing commentary for tourists, offering them insights into the cultural, historical, and environmental aspects of a destination (Lu, 2018, Sharma and Gao, 2020). It requires not only factual knowledge but also advanced communication skills. Guides must present information in an engaging, clear, and culturally sensitive manner, especially when addressing diverse international audiences.

For tour guides, English communication skills are crucial because they serve as the global lingua franca, enabling interaction between individuals of different linguistic backgrounds (Jenkins, 2006). In a tour-guiding context, the effectiveness of communication relies on more than correct grammar or vocabulary. It requires the guide to use language

that is engaging, culturally appropriate, and accessible to tourists with various levels of English proficiency. Effective communication ensures that tour guides can convey local knowledge, answer questions, and create a positive tourist experience (cf. Laba and Narlianti, 2024). Richards (2006) highlighted the importance of “communicative competence,” which refers to a speaker’s ability to use language in socially and culturally appropriate ways.

Cohen (1985) categorizes tour guides into two primary roles: the “**pathfinder**” who leads tourists physically, and the “**mentor**” who interprets sites and provides in-depth knowledge. In the context of Bali, where tourism is driven by cultural and historical richness, the role of the tour guide extends beyond logistical support to that of a cultural ambassador. Tour guides must blend their knowledge of local heritage and culture with an ability to communicate this information effectively in English. The concept of cultural brokerage states that guides serve as mediators between tourists and the local culture, requiring a fine balance between language, interpretation, and cultural awareness.

The ability of tour guides to communicate effectively in English, the global lingua franca, is essential. English communication skills refer to the ability to effectively transmit ideas, information, and emotions using the English language. These skills encompass not only language proficiency but also cultural competence, body language, and the ability to adapt speech to different contexts, and in different cultural backgrounds. Communication skill involves multiple components: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and pragmatics, which deal with how language is used appropriately in social situations. Communicative competence in English will also help tour guides adapt their language and communication strategies to meet the expectations of international tourists. However, many tour guides at PT. Indo Bali Tours faces significant challenges in delivering smooth, clear, and engaging narratives to international tourists. Despite their deep knowledge of local culture, history, and tourist sites, their communication skills often fall short due to several recurring phenomena.

Many tour guides at PT. Indo Bali Tours struggles to find the right words to convey detailed descriptions of tourist objects, historical sites, and cultural practices. This issue may arise from a lack of exposure to specialized vocabulary and phrases commonly used in tourism, history, and culture. Consequently, the guides tend to oversimplify their explanations or pause frequently to search for the correct words, leading to a less immersive experience for tourists.

A gap exists in the current research on the relationship between applied linguistics and the tourism industry. While much has been written on language anxiety and language competencies in professional contexts (cf. De Costa & Norton, 2017), there is limited research that specifically examines the principles of linguistic theories in the tourism sector. Studies in hospitality and tourism education have focused on general communication skills, but there is a lack of targeted interventions that address the specific linguistic needs of tour guides (Zou & Liang, 2020). This study addresses that gap by focusing on the applied linguistics framework and its practical application to English communication in tour guiding, aiming to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving language programs. Operationally, the study defines three main constructs. These are; 1) limited vocabulary which refers to tour guides’ struggle to find appropriate terms to describe tourist attractions, cultural practices, and historical facts in English, which is a common issue in second-language professional communication (Lu, 2018); 2) lack of confidence which refers to the anxiety and hesitation tour guides experience when interacting with native English speakers, which is often driven by fear of errors or judgment (Woodrow, 2006); and 3) insufficient training which refers to the absence of structured, tourism-specific language education, an area where most existing language programs are deficient (Choi & Lee, 2020).

The significance of this study is rooted in the essential role of tour guides in shaping tourists’ experiences and perceptions of Bali. Research in tourism communication has emphasized the importance of clear and engaging narratives in enhancing visitor satisfaction (Wang & Pizam, 2011). However, many guides lack the specific communication skills necessary to meet the demands of an international audience (Gao; 2019, Laba, Dewi, Aqila; 2024), creating a gap between their subject matter expertise and their ability to convey it in a manner that resonates with tourists. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the relationship between applied linguistics principles and tour guiding in the context of the tourism industry, an area that has received relatively little attention in applied linguistics research.

Applied linguistics is an interdisciplinary field that addresses real-world language-related issues by applying linguistic theories and methodologies within the context and scope of language competencies. Rooted in general linguistics, applied linguistics has expanded to cover various domains, such as language teaching, second language acquisition (SLA), language assessment, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis. Central to the field is the belief that language is deeply connected to its social context, and understanding how language functions in communication can help address practical issues in the tourism industry (cf. Al-Jarf, 2021; Laba and Wijayanti, 2022)

A growing demand for English-speaking guides has revealed a gap in communication effectiveness, particularly in the ability to articulate complex cultural information. Many of the guides at PT. Indo Bali Tours possesses strong content knowledge but struggles to communicate fluently and clearly in English. This phenomenon highlights the importance of not just factual knowledge but also the ability to communicate that knowledge effectively in English.

This study investigates how applied linguistics principles relate to the English communication skills of tour guides, using tour guides at PT. Indo Bali Tours for a case study. To clarify key terms, "**applied linguistics**" in this study refers to the practical application of linguistic theories and principles to real-world problems, such as language used in tour guiding and communication in specific tourism contexts. **English communication skills** refer to the ability of tour guides to effectively convey information in English, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural sensitivity. Focusing on the guides' lived experiences and challenges, the research investigates how applied linguistics principles relate to tour guides' communication skills.

METHODS

A qualitative research method is used for this case study. It is an in-depth investigation of a single unit of English communication skills of tour guides who worked at PT. Indo Bali Tours in its real context. This research method is for exploring complex phenomena such as language use and communication challenges in tour guiding. This approach allows the researchers to collect rich, detailed data that can capture the nuances of how applied linguistics principles are used by tour guides at PT. Indo Bali Tours. Nine tour guides provided the data. Data are collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with tour guides and through observation at PT. Indo Bali Tours to explore their communication challenges and practices (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Observation is used to collect the data. The researcher observes the nine tour guides while they conduct tours and the observation is focused on how they use language to explain historical or cultural sites and interact with tourists. There are three key elements to observe in this study, namely 1) frequency and length of pauses when delivering explanations; 2) use of vocabulary and sentence structure; and 3) tourists' response levels. The content analysis method was applied to analyze interview transcripts and observation notes to identify key themes and patterns related to English communication skills and practices (Krippendorff, 2004; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Cresswell and Poth, 2018). Content analysis is used to systematically qualify the presence of specific linguistic features e.g., fluency, and vocabulary range during the observed tours (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This qualitative research investigates the relationship between applied linguistics principles and English communication skills among tour guides at PT. Indo Bali Tours. The study examines how linguistic principles influence tour guides' ability to convey information effectively to tourists, emphasizing key aspects such as vocabulary usage, discourse structuring, pragmatic competence, and phonological clarity. This qualitative research methodology supported by strong theoretical frameworks and analysis methods provides rich insights into an understanding of the relationship between applied linguistics principles and the English communication skills of tour guides. The qualitative approach ensures that the data gathered are reflective of real-touring interactions and offers practical recommendations for improving tour guides' communication skills in the tourism industry.

The study involved nine tour guides working for PT. Indo Bali Tours, all of whom were non-native English speakers. The participants had varying levels of English proficiency, but all expressed challenges in delivering clear and engaging explanations during tours. The applied linguistics concepts provided to the tour guides focused on several key areas such as simplifying complex ideas for non-native English speakers; structuring explanations using concise language; and using paralinguistic features such as tone, pauses, and body language based on audience reactions and cultural differences. Effective communication is critical for tour guides, as their ability to explain cultural and historical details clearly and engagingly significantly impacts the tourists' experience. Tour guides who operate in non-native English-speaking countries face unique challenges, especially when interacting with international tourists.

Data were collected through semi-interviews and observations of tour performances. Thematic and content analysis is used for analyzing qualitative data in this study. This method helps identify, analyze, and report patterns within data, which are crucial in understanding the tour guides' communication skills. Data were coded accordingly in which the first tour guide was coded TG1, the second tour guide was coded TG2 and so on. The first observation data was coded OB1, the second observation data was coded OB2 and so on. Key themes such as clarity, fluency, and audience engagement were identified, compared, and discussed. One of the primary phenomena identified was that the tour guides at PT. Indo Bali Tours lacked sufficient English vocabulary to describe complex cultural and historical sites effectively.

The result findings reveal that tour guides vary in their lexical repertoire, affecting the clarity and engagement of their explanations. Guides with a broader vocabulary tend to provide richer, more detailed descriptions, while those with limited vocabulary frequently rely on basic terms and paraphrasing. The data indicate that difficulties in retrieving precise words lead to pauses and hesitations during guided tours.

Data 1 – TG1 *"I often struggle with explaining certain historical details. I know the information, but it's hard to find the right English words to make it clear for the tourists."*

Observational data support this finding, as pauses and hesitations were frequently noted during tour narratives.

Data 2 – OB1 *"The guide paused frequently and seemed to struggle with explaining the historical significance of the site. There were long gaps in the explanation, and tourists asked many follow-up questions for clarification."*

Tour guides employ various discourse strategies to engage with tourists, including the use of politeness markers, hedging, and contextual adaptations. Some guides successfully adjust their speech depending on the tourists' backgrounds, while others experience difficulty maintaining audience engagement due to rigid or overly formal speech patterns.

Data 3 – TG2 *"I get nervous when tourists ask me questions that I don't expect. It's not that I don't know the answer, but sometimes it's hard to express myself in English."*

Interview data and observations highlight that guides who demonstrate stronger pragmatic awareness are more effective in adapting their explanations and maintaining tourist interest. The analysis of these pragmatics as an integral part of applied linguistic features indicates that pronunciation variations influence communication effectiveness. Guides with clear pronunciation and proper stress patterns are more intelligible to tourists, whereas those with heavy regional accents or inconsistent intonation require frequent repetition for comprehension.

Data 4 – TG3 *"I feel more confident now, especially when describing complex cultural topics."*

Applied linguistics principles, in terms of discourse structure and coherence, tour guides who employ cohesive devices, such as transition markers and logical sequencing, enhance the coherence of their narratives. Conversely, those who lack structured discourse often deliver fragmented explanations, leading to misunderstandings and disengagement from tourists.

Tour guides demonstrated an awareness of structured phrasing and sentence organization, facilitating clearer explanations of historical and cultural information. Effective use of syntactic structures and cohesive devices contributed to better communication flow and comprehension. From an applied linguistics perspective, structuring language appropriately ensures information is conveyed logically, reducing ambiguity and enhancing comprehension for non-native listeners.

This finding is consistent with Jenkins (2006), who argued that English as a global lingua franca requires tour guides to employ clear, structured, and engaging communication strategies that transcend grammatical accuracy alone. Similarly, Richards (2006) emphasized “communicative competence” as essential for effective tour guiding, highlighting the importance of discourse cohesion and structured explanations.

Observational data confirmed that guides who utilized structured phrases provided more coherent and detailed narratives, reducing ambiguity and enhancing listener engagement. Applied linguistics principles such as syntax and discourse analysis play a key role in this aspect, as they help identify effective sentence construction patterns that facilitate meaning-making. Guides exhibited improved fluency in their speech, marked by fewer hesitations and self-corrections. The use of transition markers and discourse connectors contributed to smoother delivery and reduced interruptions in explanations. Fluency in communication is a crucial component of applied linguistics, where psycholinguistic factors such as lexical retrieval and cognitive processing speed influence language production.

Data 5 – OB3 "The guide spoke with minimal pauses and maintained a steady flow of information. Their explanations were clear, and tourists asked fewer follow-up questions for clarification."

This finding aligns with Woodrow (2006), who identified fluency and confidence as central factors in second-language professional communication. Hesitation and speech disruptions can significantly impact the effectiveness of message delivery, as confirmed in this study’s observations.

Tour guides displayed an ability to modify their speech based on audience reactions, a key aspect of pragmatic competence. Adjusting explanations according to the tourists’ background knowledge and feedback enhanced comprehension and engagement. Pragmatics, a core subfield of applied linguistics, examines how meaning is negotiated in context and how speakers adjust their utterances to suit their audience.

Data 6 – TG4 "I now think about how tourists from different countries might interpret my words differently. I now adjust my speech based on their reactions."

Observation notes supported this claim, highlighting how guides adjusted their tone, vocabulary, and sentence complexity in response to audience engagement levels.

Data 7 – OB4 "The guide modified explanations dynamically, using simpler terms when tourists appeared confused and providing additional details when interest was expressed."

Cohen (1985) categorized tour guides into “pathfinders” and “mentors,” with the latter focusing on interpreting cultural and historical information. This study supports Cohen’s framework, indicating that successful tour guides act as cultural mediators by adjusting their speech patterns to match audience expectations, reinforcing the pragmatic adaptability outlined in applied linguistics.

Guides who employed descriptive language and contextually relevant details enhanced the engagement of tourists, making explanations more vivid and relatable. The relationship between lexicon choice and communicative effectiveness is central to applied linguistics, particularly in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis.

Data 8 – TG5 "I try to describe the places using comparisons and examples so that tourists can imagine them better. It helps them connect to the story."

Observation data indicated that tourists responded positively to guides who incorporated vivid descriptions, leading to greater interest and fewer clarification requests.

Data 9 – OB5 *"The guide used analogies and comparisons to describe historical sites, which appeared to keep the tourists engaged and eager to learn more."*

This corresponds with Laba and Narlianti (2024), who highlighted the necessity for tour guides to use culturally appropriate descriptions and storytelling techniques that enhance audience engagement. Zou & Liang (2020) further emphasized the role of discourse strategies in shaping visitor perceptions of cultural sites.

Tour guides' ability to handle spontaneous tourist questions effectively was linked to their understanding of discourse management as part of applied linguistics principles. Those who structured responses clearly and maintained coherence in their explanations ensured better tourist comprehension. Question-response sequences are a key focus in conversation analysis, a branch of applied linguistics that examines turn-taking patterns in spoken discourse.

Data 10 – TG6 *"When tourists ask unexpected questions, I take a moment to organize my answer before responding. This helps me give clearer explanations."*

Observations revealed that guides who structured their responses before answering were more successful in maintaining tourist engagement and minimizing confusion.

Data 11 – OB6 *"The guide paused briefly before answering questions, then provided clear and logical responses, ensuring tourists understood the explanations."*

These findings align with Choi & Lee (2020), who examined how effective discourse management reduces communication breakdowns in tourism contexts. Additionally, Gao (2019) found that guides who actively manage turn-taking and repair strategies demonstrate stronger communicative competence. This study highlights the practical application of applied linguistics in the field of tourism in the context of tour guiding, demonstrating that applied linguistics is strongly related to communication skills.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the crucial role of applied linguistics principles in enhancing the English communication skills of tour guides, particularly in structured phrasing, discourse coherence, fluency, audience adaptation, and interactive engagement. The findings reveal that key linguistic components—such as lexical variety, pragmatic competence, phonological clarity, and discourse structuring—directly impact the clarity, fluency, and effectiveness of tour narratives. Tour guides who effectively applied these principles were better able to engage international audiences, convey complex cultural and historical information, and maintain fluency in their explanations.

These insights emphasize the necessity of linguistic awareness in professional tour guiding to optimize communication and enrich the visitor experience. Given the challenges observed, there is a clear need for structured, tourism-specific language training programs that integrate applied linguistics principles.

Future research should further explore additional linguistic aspects relevant to tour guiding to refine training approaches and enhance communication strategies. By bridging the gap between applied linguistics and the tourism industry, this study provides valuable recommendations for improving English proficiency among tour guides, ultimately contributing to a more immersive and informative tourism experience.

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