English for Specific Purposes in Tourism Higher Education: Trends, Gaps, and Future Directions in Curriculum Design

**[1]Achmad Leofaragusta Kurniawan Komerendo*, [1]Herman,
[2]Muhammad Bambang Purwanto**
[1]Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya, Indonesia
[2]Politeknik Prasetiya Mandiri, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author
Email: leofaragusta@gmail.com

Abstract
English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become a crucial component in tourism higher education as the industry increasingly demands graduates who are communicatively competent, professionally confident, and interculturally aware. This article aims to provide a descriptive analysis of current trends, identify key gaps, and propose future directions in ESP curriculum design within tourism higher education. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study synthesizes relevant literature on ESP, tourism education, and curriculum development to map prevailing pedagogical practices and conceptual challenges. The findings indicate that contemporary ESP tourism curricula have shown a positive movement toward speaking-oriented, task-based, and performance-driven instruction that reflects the needs of workplace communication. However, significant gaps persist between students' linguistic competence and their readiness to perform professional communication in authentic tourism contexts. These gaps are primarily attributed to the limited integration of industry-based service scenarios, psychological readiness factors such as confidence and willingness to communicate, and the development of intercultural competence. The discussion highlights the need to reconceptualize ESP tourism not merely as linguistic pedagogy, but as professional communication pedagogy that emphasizes service-oriented discourse, authentic tasks, and learner readiness. This article concludes that a holistic ESP tourism curriculum, integrating linguistic, psychological, cultural, and professional dimensions, is essential to bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world tourism communication. The study offers conceptual implications for curriculum designers and educators and recommends future empirical research across diverse local and global tourism contexts to further validate and refine ESP tourism curriculum models.

Keywords: English for specific purposes; ESP curriculum design; professional communication; service-based learning; tourism higher education

INTRODUCTION

English has become a central medium of communication in the global tourism industry, functioning not only as a lingua franca but also as a professional tool for service encounters, intercultural interaction, and customer satisfaction. Tourism professionals are required to communicate effectively with guests from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a wide range of contexts, including hospitality services, travel operations, tour guiding, and complaint handling. In this sense, English competence in tourism is no longer limited to grammatical accuracy, but is closely linked to the ability to perform appropriate, polite, and context-sensitive communication in real service situations (Purwanto, 2024; Zahedpisheh et al., 2017).

Within this global context, higher education institutions in tourism play a strategic role in preparing students as future service professionals, rather than merely language learners. Graduates are expected to demonstrate communicative readiness, professional confidence, and

intercultural awareness when interacting with international guests. Therefore, English instruction in tourism programs should be aligned with workplace realities, emphasizing practical communication skills that reflect authentic service interactions (Handini et al., 2025). This professional orientation differentiates tourism education from general academic language programs and requires a curriculum that is responsive to industry demands and professional standards (Astawa et al., 2024; Fuentes, 2004).

Responding to these demands, there has been a gradual shift from General English to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in vocational and professional education, including higher education in tourism. ESP emphasizes goal-oriented learning, needs analysis, and context-specific language use, making it more relevant for students preparing for specific occupational roles (Fujita, 2019). In tourism education, ESP focuses on the functional use of language in service encounters, rather than abstract linguistic knowledge, positioning language as a tool for professional performance (Cravotta, 1990; Purwanto et al., 2025).

Despite the adoption of ESP in many tourism programs, existing curricula often remain predominantly linguistic-oriented (Rahmani & Supardi, 2021). Instruction frequently prioritizes vocabulary lists, grammar exercises, and scripted dialogues that are detached from the dynamic and unpredictable nature of honest tourism communication. As a result, students may demonstrate knowledge of tourism-related terminology but struggle to apply it effectively in authentic service interactions. This tendency indicates that ESP tourism curricula have not fully transitioned from language-centered instruction to service-oriented communication training (Jaisabai et al., 2019; Jannah, 2021).

Another critical issue lies in the mismatch between instructional content and the actual communicative demands of the tourism industry. Industry stakeholders emphasize the importance of soft skills, professional demeanor, intercultural sensitivity, and spontaneous interaction, whereas classroom practices often fail to simulate these conditions (Chen et al., 2011). This discrepancy results in graduates who are linguistically knowledgeable but insufficiently prepared for real-world workplace communication, particularly in high-pressure service situations such as handling complaints or addressing diverse guest expectations (Komerendo et al., 2025).

The gap between what is taught in tourism English classrooms and what is required in real-world tourism contexts remains a persistent challenge. Classroom activities are often controlled and predictable, while workplace communication is situational, interactive, and culturally embedded. Consequently, students may lack confidence and the willingness to communicate when faced with authentic service encounters. This gap highlights the need to reconceptualize ESP tourism curricula as a bridge between academic instruction and professional communicative practice (Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

In response to these challenges, this article aims to provide a descriptive analysis of the current state of English for Specific Purposes in tourism higher education, examining prevailing trends, identifying critical gaps, and exploring future directions in curriculum design. Rather than testing a specific pedagogical model, the study synthesizes existing literature and practices to provide a comprehensive overview of how ESP tourism curricula have evolved and where they need to progress in order to meet contemporary professional demands.

By providing a conceptual framework for understanding trends, gaps, and future directions, this article contributes to ongoing discussions on curriculum development in ESP tourism education. It provides a structured framework that can guide educators, curriculum designers, and researchers in rethinking how English is taught in tourism higher education, with a stronger emphasis on service-oriented communication, professional readiness, and contextual relevance. Ultimately, this article seeks to position ESP tourism not merely as a language subject but as a core component of professional formation in tourism higher education.

Conceptualizing ESP in tourism education

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is commonly defined as an approach to language teaching in which all decisions regarding content and method are based on learners' reasons for learning the language (Broughton, 2000). Vodopija-Krstanović & Marinac (2019) further emphasize that ESP is characterized by its focus on specific disciplines, professional practices, and communicative needs. In the context of tourism education, ESP is inherently needs-based, as it is designed to address the communicative requirements of future tourism professionals; context-specific, because language use is embedded in service encounters and workplace situations; and goal-oriented, aiming to develop functional communicative competence rather than general linguistic knowledge. Unlike General English, which prioritizes broad language proficiency for everyday communication, ESP tourism focuses on occupational discourse and service interaction. It also differs from Business English, which is oriented toward corporate and transactional communication, as ESP tourism emphasizes hospitality, intercultural sensitivity, and guest-oriented service discourse (Kaharuddin et al., 2019; Waluyo & Bakoko, 2022).

ESP curriculum design in tourism context

Previous studies on ESP curriculum design in tourism education indicate the widespread use of skill-based, task-based, and functional-notional approaches. Skill-based curricula typically prioritize speaking and listening skills as core competencies for tourism students, reflecting the interactive nature of service encounters in the tourism industry. Task-based approaches emphasize the use of authentic tasks that simulate real workplace activities, such as handling reservations, welcoming guests, or managing complaints, allowing learners to practice language in meaningful contexts (Robertson, 2011; Syakur et al., 2020). Meanwhile, functional-notional syllabi focus on communicative functions relevant to tourism settings, including requesting information, offering assistance, and responding to guest needs. Across these approaches, speaking and interaction emerge as the dominant skill focus, supported by service discourse as the primary language domain. Consequently, instructional activities commonly include role-play, simulations, and scenario-based tasks designed to mirror authentic tourism communication (Strevens, 1988; Tarnopolsky, 2013).

Key issues in ESP tourism learning

Despite the growing body of literature on ESP tourism pedagogy, several key issues remain unresolved, particularly the gap between linguistic competence and actual communicative performance. Many learners possess adequate vocabulary and grammatical knowledge but struggle to communicate effectively in real service situations. Research suggests that this gap is strongly influenced by non-linguistic factors such as confidence, anxiety, and Willingness to Communicate (WTC), which determine whether learners are prepared to use the language spontaneously in interaction (Boroujeni & Fard, 2013; Chen et al., 2011). Furthermore, existing ESP tourism curricula often lack a systematic integration of intercultural competence and professional identity development, despite tourism communication being inherently intercultural and identity-driven (Afzali & Fakharzadeh, 2009; Tsao, 2011). As a result, while the literature on ESP tourism is extensive, it remains fragmented, with linguistic, psychological, and professional dimensions frequently addressed in isolation rather than through a holistic curricular framework.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to examine trends, gaps, and future directions in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum design within tourism higher education. Rather than testing hypotheses or measuring causal relationships, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive and systematic description of existing theoretical perspectives and empirical findings related to ESP tourism education. A descriptive qualitative approach was

considered appropriate as it allows for in-depth interpretation of patterns, themes, and conceptual relationships across diverse sources of literature (Creswell, 2013).

The data for this study were drawn from a purposive selection of academic sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference proceedings, that focused on ESP, tourism education, and curriculum design. The literature was selected based on its relevance to higher education contexts, explicit focus on tourism or hospitality English, and contribution to discussions on pedagogy, curriculum structure, or learning outcomes. Foundational ESP theories and contemporary studies were both included to ensure a balanced representation of classical and current perspectives (Jackson, 2008; Metcalfe, 2017).

Data analysis was conducted through a thematic descriptive procedure. The selected literature was read iteratively and categorized into thematic clusters reflecting (1) prevailing trends in ESP tourism curriculum design, (2) recurring challenges and gaps in implementation, and (3) proposed or implied future directions. This process involved comparing and synthesizing key arguments across studies to identify convergent and divergent viewpoints. The analysis focused on interpreting how ESP principles have been operationalized in tourism education and where inconsistencies or omissions persist.

To enhance analytical rigor, the study adopted a systematic process of classification and interpretation, ensuring that themes were grounded in repeated patterns across multiple sources rather than isolated findings. By emphasizing descriptive synthesis rather than evaluative judgment, this methodology provides a coherent overview of the current landscape of ESP tourism curriculum design. The approach allows the findings to serve as a conceptual foundation for future empirical research and curriculum innovation in tourism higher education.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive analysis of the selected literature reveals several dominant trends in ESP curriculum design within tourism higher education. First, there is a clear shift toward speaking-oriented instruction, reflecting the interactive and service-driven nature of tourism professions. Most ESP tourism programs prioritize oral communication skills such as greeting guests, providing information, handling complaints, and managing service encounters. This trend indicates a growing recognition that communicative effectiveness, rather than grammatical mastery alone, is the primary outcome expected from tourism graduates.

Another prominent trend is the widespread adoption of task-based and scenario-based pedagogical approaches. ESP tourism curricula are increasingly incorporating authentic tasks that mirror workplace realities, including hotel check-in simulations, tour-guiding role-plays, and customer service scenarios. These tasks are designed to situate language learning within meaningful professional contexts, allowing learners to practice language as a functional tool for service delivery. The literature consistently emphasizes that such approaches enhance relevance and learner engagement, aligning classroom activities with industry expectations.

In addition, performance-based assessment has emerged as a preferred evaluation method in ESP tourism education. Instead of traditional written tests, many programs assess students through role-plays, simulations, and oral performance tasks. These assessment practices aim to capture learners' ability to communicate appropriately and professionally in real-time interactions. Collectively, these trends indicate a gradual shift toward more contextually oriented and practice-based ESP tourism curricula.

Identified gaps in ESP tourism learning practices

Despite these positive developments, the findings also reveal persistent gaps in current ESP tourism practices. One significant gap lies in the imbalance between linguistic competence and communicative performance. While students often acquire tourism-related vocabulary and expressions, they frequently struggle to apply this knowledge spontaneously in authentic service situations. This indicates that language knowledge does not automatically translate into communicative readiness in professional contexts.

Another significant gap concerns the limited attention given to psychological and affective factors in ESP tourism learning. Elements such as confidence, anxiety, and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) are often underrepresented in curriculum design, despite their strong influence on learners' participation in speaking activities. As a result, some students remain reluctant to communicate despite having sufficient linguistic resources. This finding highlights the need to view ESP tourism learning not only as a linguistic process but also as a psychological and social one.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals insufficient integration of intercultural competence and professional identity development. Tourism communication inherently involves cross-cultural interaction and the performance of professional roles; however, many ESP curricula treat language learning as culturally neutral. The absence of explicit cultural and identity-oriented components limits students' ability to engage in culturally appropriate and professionally confident communication.

Emerging needs and directions identified in the literature

The literature also points to emerging needs that are reshaping expectations for ESP tourism curricula. One key need is the ability to handle intercultural and multilingual service encounters in increasingly diverse tourism environments. As tourism becomes more globalized, students must be prepared to negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries while maintaining professional service standards.

Another emerging direction is the demand for adaptive communication skills in digital and hybrid tourism contexts. Online reservations, virtual tours, and technology-mediated guest interactions require new forms of communicative competence that go beyond traditional face-to-face service encounters. ESP tourism curricula are therefore expected to evolve in response to these changing professional realities. Overall, the findings suggest that while ESP tourism education has made progress in adopting contextualized and task-based approaches, it has yet to achieve a holistic integration of linguistic, psychological, cultural, and professional dimensions. This fragmentation underscores the need for a more comprehensive curriculum framework that aligns language learning with the complex communicative demands of contemporary tourism professions.

Table 1. Synthesis of Key Findings of the ESP Tourism Curriculum

Aspects Analyzed	Dominant Trends	Gaps Found	Implications
Skill Focus	Speaking & interaction	Lack of spontaneous communication readiness	Need to strengthen readiness & WTC
Pedagogical Approach	Task-based, scenario-based	The task has not touched on the psychological aspect	Integrasi confidence-building
Assessment	Performance-based	Assessment of output focus, not process	Add reflection & formative feedback
Cultural Dimension	Work context introduced	Intercultural competence minim	Need for cultural and identity expression
Curriculum Orientation	Occupational communication	Fragmentation between components	ESP tourism holistic curriculum

Table 1 illustrates that the dominant orientation of ESP tourism curricula has gradually shifted toward speaking and interaction as core learning outcomes, supported by task-based and scenario-based pedagogical approaches. This trend reflects an increased awareness of the communicative nature of tourism professions, where graduates are expected to perform service encounters rather than merely demonstrate linguistic knowledge. However, the table also highlights a critical gap between instructional focus and learning outcomes, particularly in terms of learners' readiness to communicate spontaneously. While speaking activities are emphasized, students often lack psychological preparedness—such as confidence and willingness to communicate—which limits their ability to transfer classroom learning to authentic professional contexts.

Furthermore, Table 1 reveals that although performance-based assessment and occupational communication are widely adopted, curriculum design remains fragmented across linguistic, psychological, and cultural dimensions. Assessment practices often prioritize observable outputs without adequately addressing the learning process, reflective development, or intercultural sensitivity. The limited integration of intercultural competence and professional identity suggests that many ESP tourism curricula still treat language learning as a technical skill rather than a form of professional socialization. This fragmentation underscores the need for a more holistic ESP tourism curriculum framework that systematically integrates language skills, affective readiness, and cultural awareness to better prepare students for the complex communicative demands of the tourism industry.
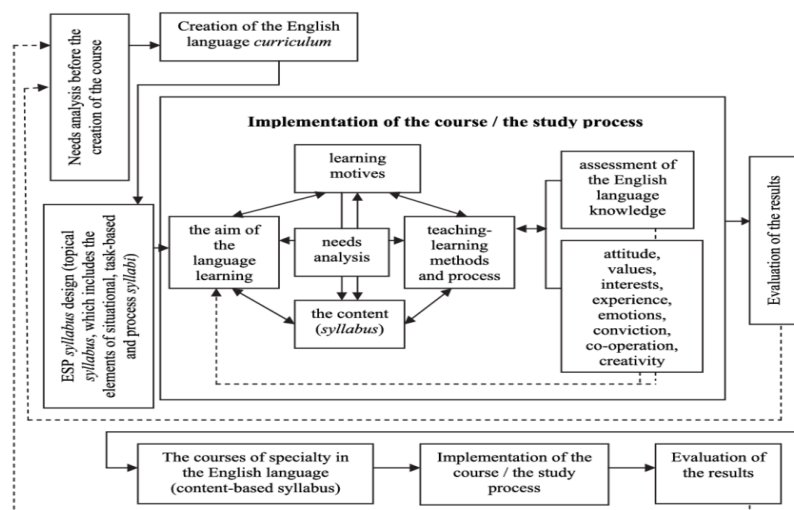

Figure 1. Curriculum Design in Hospitality Course

Figure 1 illustrates ESP as a systemic and cyclical process, which begins with a needs analysis prior to course design and continues through the evaluation of learning outcomes. The initial stage emphasizes the importance of needs analysis as the primary foundation for creating an English curriculum, which is then reflected in the design of an ESP syllabus based on topics, tasks, situations, and processes. In the learning implementation stage, it is evident that the relationship between language learning goals, needs analysis, content (syllabus), and learning methods and processes is mutually influential. The element *of learning motives* is centrally placed,

indicating that learning motivation is not just a by-product, but an active component that influences and is influenced by the objectives, content, and learning process of ESP.

Furthermore, this chart confirms that the evaluation in ESP focuses not only on the mastery of language knowledge, but also on the affective and professional dimensions of students, such as attitudes, values, interests, experiences, emotions, beliefs, cooperation, and creativity. This indicates that the success of ESP learning is viewed holistically, encompassing both linguistic development and the formation of identity and professional readiness. The outcome evaluation flow then provides feedback on the entire system, including the curriculum and learning process, so that ESP is positioned as a dynamic and adaptive curriculum. In the context of tourism education, this model emphasizes that ESP cannot be separated from the needs of the workplace and the personal development of students as prospective service professionals.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a persistent imbalance between students' linguistic competence and their readiness to engage in professional communication within tourism contexts. Although ESP tourism curricula increasingly emphasize speaking skills and service-related vocabulary, many learners remain hesitant or ineffective in real-time service encounters. This confirms previous studies indicating that language knowledge alone does not guarantee communicative performance, particularly in high-stakes, interactive service environments such as tourism and hospitality (Luka, 2023; Purwanto & Umar, 2024). The gap identified in the findings suggests that communicative competence in tourism must be understood as a combination of linguistic resources and situational readiness.

In response to this imbalance, the discussion highlights the need for ESP tourism to shift its focus from a language-centered orientation to a more service-centered pedagogical framework. Traditional ESP instruction often prioritizes accuracy, terminology, and scripted dialogues, which may limit learners' ability to adapt to the unpredictable nature of guest interactions. A service-centered approach, by contrast, positions language as a tool for professional action, emphasizing responsiveness, politeness strategies, and interactional effectiveness. This shift aligns with views that ESP should be grounded in workplace discourse and professional practices rather than abstract linguistic forms (Novita & Refnaldi, 2020; Sagal, 2022).

The findings further highlight the critical role of authentic tasks in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Task-based and scenario-based activities allow learners to rehearse real-world service encounters, thereby increasing relevance and engagement. However, the effectiveness of authentic tasks depends on how they are designed and supported. Without adequate scaffolding and feedback, tasks may remain performative rather than developmental in nature. Consistent with task-based language teaching literature, authentic tasks should be integrated as iterative learning experiences that gradually build communicative competence and confidence (Haggag, 2008; Poznanskyy & Davis, 2021).

Another key issue emerging from the discussion is the importance of psychological readiness as a prerequisite for communicative performance. Factors such as confidence, anxiety, and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) significantly influence whether learners choose to use English in service interactions. Even well-designed curricula may fail to produce communicatively competent graduates if these affective dimensions are overlooked. Research in second language communication consistently demonstrates that WTC mediates the relationship between language competence and actual language use, particularly in classroom and professional contexts (Mantra et al., 2020). Therefore, ESP tourism curricula should explicitly incorporate strategies that foster a supportive learning environment and reduce communication anxiety.

Taken together, these insights suggest that ESP tourism curricula must be both contextual and adaptive to the evolving dynamics of the tourism industry. As tourism communication

increasingly involves intercultural encounters, digital platforms, and personalized services, curriculum design must remain flexible and responsive. A static syllabus focused solely on linguistic forms risks becoming obsolete in rapidly changing professional contexts. Instead, ESP tourism should be conceptualized as a dynamic curriculum that integrates industry practices, learner psychology, and contextual communication needs (Sienny Thio, 2001).

Overall, the discussion reinforces the view that ESP in tourism higher education should not be regarded merely as a branch of linguistic pedagogy, but as a form of professional communication pedagogy. The findings and theoretical interpretations indicate that effective ESP tourism curricula must holistically integrate language competence, psychological readiness, authentic professional tasks, and contextual relevance. By reframing ESP tourism in this way, educators and curriculum designers can better prepare students for the complex communicative demands of contemporary tourism professions, while also providing a robust theoretical foundation for future empirical research.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant potential of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in tourism higher education to enhance graduates' professional readiness and employability. The descriptive analysis reveals that ESP tourism has been shifting increasingly toward communicative and task-based orientations, aligning language learning with service encounters in the tourism industry. However, the findings also reveal persistent gaps in curriculum design, particularly in the limited integration of authentic industry contexts and the insufficient attention to learners' psychological and intercultural readiness. These gaps indicate that linguistic competence alone remains an inadequate indicator of students' preparedness for real-world tourism communication. In response to these challenges, this article emphasizes the need to develop ESP tourism curricula that are firmly grounded in service-based contexts and systematically integrate psychological factors, such as confidence and willingness to communicate, alongside cultural and professional dimensions. A more comprehensive curriculum framework is needed to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and workplace communication. Future research is therefore encouraged to empirically investigate ESP tourism models across diverse local and global contexts, with particular attention to how contextualized tasks, affective readiness, and intercultural competence interact to support sustainable professional communication in tourism education.

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