

English Language Competence of Tourism Human Resources in Parapat: A Competency-Based Tourism (CBT) Perspective

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Abstract: This study investigates the level of English language competence among tourism human resources in Parapat, Indonesia, and examines the relevance of a Competency-Based Tourism (CBT) approach for improving communication skills in tourism services. Adopting a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis involving tour guides, hotel front office staff, culinary business operators, souvenir vendors, and members of tourism awareness groups. The findings reveal that most tourism actors demonstrate only basic functional English competence, limited to routine expressions such as greetings and simple service interactions. Key constraints include insufficient access to relevant training, diverse educational backgrounds, and weak institutional support. The study also indicates that practice-oriented training aligned with CBT principles—particularly role-play and service simulations—can enhance communicative confidence and functional language use among tourism workers. These findings underscore the importance of contextualised, competency-based English training programmes for improving service quality and tourist satisfaction in emerging tourism destinations. The study contributes to hospitality and tourism literature by demonstrating the applicability of CBT principles to English language development in a developing destination context.

Keywords: English for tourism, tourism human resources, Competency Based Tourism, Parapat-Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality and tourism industry increasingly operates within a globalised service environment in which effective communication skills are essential for service quality and destination competitiveness. English, functioning as a global lingua franca, plays a central role in facilitating interactions between tourism workers and international visitors (UNWTO, 2020; Page and Connell, 2014). In contemporary tourism settings, communication extends beyond transactional exchanges to include interpersonal engagement, cultural mediation and

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experience delivery. Consequently, the ability of tourism workers to communicate confidently and appropriately in English has become a critical determinant of perceived service quality, visitor satisfaction and overall destination image (Blue and Harun, 2003; Leslie and Russell, 2006). A prior study have consistently shown that inadequate English proficiency among tourism personnel can negatively affect service encounters, limit information exchange and reduce tourists' perceived professionalism of service providers (Harahap, 2024).

From a service management perspective, communication is recognised as a fundamental component of service encounters, particularly in high-contact industries such as tourism and hospitality (Baum, 2015). Tourism workers are not only expected to deliver services but also to interpret visitor needs, explain local culture and attractions, manage complaints and create memorable experiences through effective interaction. Research in service quality (Berry, 1988) highlights that reliability, responsiveness and assurance—key dimensions of service quality—are closely tied to communicative competence. Without adequate language skills, tourism workers may struggle to meet these dimensions, even when they possess strong technical or operational abilities. This indicates that English competence is inseparable from broader issues of service professionalism and customer satisfaction in tourism contexts.

Research on English for Tourism and Hospitality further emphasises that communicative competence—rather than grammatical accuracy alone—is central to effective service encounters (Marbun, 2019). Tourism workers are required to perform a range of communicative tasks, including providing directions, explaining attractions, handling complaints, recommending services and engaging in interpersonal interactions that shape visitor experiences. These communicative demands align with principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where language learning is contextualised according to occupational needs (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). However, recent studies indicate that limited English proficiency among tourism workers remains a widespread issue, particularly in developing destinations. Language barriers often lead to reduced confidence, avoidance of interaction and reliance on non-verbal communication, which may negatively influence perceived service quality (Simanjuntak, 2022). These findings underscore the importance of contextualised language training tailored to specific service roles and workplace situations.

In many developing tourism destinations, human resource development has not progressed in parallel with destination promotion and infrastructure development. Investments in physical facilities, attractions and marketing strategies are often not accompanied by systematic efforts to improve the communicative competence of frontline tourism workers. Training initiatives frequently remain generic, short-term or ceremonial, providing limited opportunities for tourism workers to develop practical communication skills applicable to daily service encounters (OECD, 2017). This imbalance between infrastructure development and human resource readiness has been identified as a persistent issue in emerging tourism regions, where workforce capacity often lags behind destination growth (Baum, 2015). As a result, English competence among frontline tourism workers frequently remains at a basic or survival level, insufficient for managing diverse and dynamic interactions with international tourists.



Parapat, located in Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra, serves as a primary gateway to the Lake Toba tourism area and attracts a growing number of international visitors. As part of Indonesia's National Strategic Tourism Area (KSPN), Parapat holds significant potential for tourism expansion and international exposure. Despite its strategic role, service quality in Parapat is constrained by limited English language competence among local tourism actors. Observation in similar destination suggests that language barriers often lead to communication avoidance, dependence on a small number of workers with slightly better language skills and limited confidence in engaging with foreign tourists (Simanjuntak, 2022). Research in tourism and hospitality contexts emphasises that language competence is not merely a technical skill but a key component of professional service delivery, cross-cultural interaction and destination branding (Page and Connell, 2014; Baum, 2015).

Competency-Based Tourism (CBT) has emerged as a relevant framework for tourism human resource development by emphasising job-specific competencies, workplace relevance and measurable performance outcomes (Darmadi, 2018). Competency-based approaches prioritise practical skill mastery, task-based learning, simulation and experiential activities that closely reflect real workplace situations. In tourism contexts, competency-based training has been associated with improved job readiness, service consistency and professional confidence (Naibaho, 2019). Rather than focusing on theoretical instruction, CBT emphasises the demonstration of skills in authentic scenarios, making it highly suitable for addressing communication challenges faced by tourism workers.

Within the context of English language training, CBT enables learning activities to be designed around authentic service tasks such as greeting guests, explaining attractions, handling complaints and providing directions. Such task-oriented training aligns closely with principles of ESP, which emphasise contextualised language learning tailored to occupational needs (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Blue and Harun, 2003). This integration of CBT and ESP perspectives provides a practical pathway for transforming English training from abstract classroom instruction into applied workplace competence. Despite the growing interest in competency frameworks for tourism and hospitality workforce development at both international and regional levels (OECD, 2017; UNWTO, 2020), studies integrating competency-based approaches with English language training in tourism remain limited, particularly in emerging destinations.

This indicates a clear research gap concerning how CBT principles can be operationalised to address English competence challenges among tourism workers in real service environments. Most existing studies discuss tourism competencies or English for tourism separately, with limited attention to how these two domains intersect in practice. There is a need for empirical research that demonstrates how competency-based frameworks can be utilised to improve functional English communication in tourism settings, particularly in destinations where formal training opportunities remain scarce.

This study addresses this gap by examining the current level of English language competence among tourism human resources in Parapat and exploring the relevance of a CBT approach for improving English communication skills in tourism services. By focusing on a strategic but under-researched destination, this study contributes to discussions on

tourism workforce development, English for tourism, competency-based training and service quality enhancement in developing tourism contexts.

METHOD

Research approach

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the level of English language competence among tourism human resources in the Parapat area, Simalungun Regency. A qualitative approach was regarded appropriate because the study sought to understand the real conditions, experiences, and perspectives of tourism actors regarding their use of English in service interactions (Creswell, 2014). The research also adopted a case study perspective, focusing on Parapat as a tourism destination with strong potential for international visitation but ongoing challenges in human resource capacity.

Research object and participants

The research was conducted in Parapat, located in Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra Province. Parapat was selected due to its strategic role as a gateway to Lake Toba and as one of the region's primary tourism destinations. Despite its importance, the area continues to face limitations in service quality, particularly in foreign language communication. The object of this study was the English language competence of tourism human resources, while the subjects were tourism actors directly involved in service delivery.

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews and direct field observations involving hotel staff, tour guides, culinary business operators, souvenir sellers, members of tourism awareness groups, and other relevant stakeholders. Secondary data were gathered from official documents, institutional reports, and related literature to support and contextualize the primary findings (Miles et al., 2014). Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in tourism activities and their interactions with domestic and international tourists.

Technique of data collection

Data collection employed semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences and perspectives regarding English use in tourism services. The interviews focused on daily communication practices, perceived difficulties in using English, prior training experiences, and attitudes toward capacity-building programs. Direct observations were also conducted to examine service interactions between tourism actors and tourists, particularly in situations requiring English communication. Documentation techniques were used to obtain supporting data from institutional records and relevant publications.

Technique of data analysis

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying information from interviews and observations to identify patterns related to English language competence. Data display was carried out by organizing findings into



coherent narrative descriptions to facilitate interpretation. Conclusions were drawn through continuous comparison and verification across data sources to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Trustworthiness of the data

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several validation strategies were applied. Triangulation of data sources and data collection methods enhanced credibility by comparing information from different informants and techniques. Repeated observations and cross-checking of interview responses were also conducted to minimize bias and strengthen the reliability of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

RESULTS

The findings reveal that English language competence among tourism human resources in Parapat remains predominantly at a basic functional level, characterised by the use of memorised expressions, limited vocabulary and dependence on routine service phrases. Most participants were able to produce simple greetings, provide very short directions and respond to predictable service questions such as prices, locations and basic facilities. However, they experienced considerable difficulty when communication moved beyond routine exchanges, particularly when tourists asked follow-up questions, requested detailed explanations about local attractions or attempted casual conversation. In such situations, communication often broke down, resulting in awkward pauses, reliance on gestures or the involvement of other individuals perceived to have slightly better English skills.

Field observations confirmed that communication challenges were most visible during spontaneous and unstructured interactions. For example, when tourists asked about transportation schedules, cultural practices or recommendations for nearby destinations, many tourism actors struggled to construct coherent responses. Some participants resorted to mixing Indonesian words with limited English vocabulary, while others avoided engagement altogether. This pattern indicates that English use in Parapat tourism services is largely formulaic rather than communicative, limiting workers' ability to adapt language to varied service contexts.

Variations in English competence were clearly observed across occupational groups. Hotel front office staff demonstrated relatively higher functional competence due to more frequent exposure to international guests and standard operating procedures requiring basic English use. They were generally able to handle check-in and check-out procedures, explain room facilities and respond to common service requests. Nevertheless, their communication remained confined to scripted routines, and difficulties emerged when conversations deviated from predictable patterns. Tour guides displayed basic communicative ability, often acquired through self-directed learning, peer interaction or experiential learning rather than formal training. While some guides were capable of explaining main attractions using simple English sentences, their explanations lacked detail, fluency and confidence. Guides frequently paused to search for vocabulary and simplified explanations to the extent that important cultural and historical information was omitted. This limitation affected the depth

of interpretation delivered to tourists and reduced the overall quality of the guiding experience.

Informal tourism actors, including culinary business operators and souvenir vendors, exhibited minimal English competence. Their communication relied heavily on pointing at objects, using calculators to show prices or calling others for translation assistance. Observations revealed that these actors often smiled and gestured politely but avoided verbal interaction due to fear of making mistakes. As a result, transactions were functional but lacked interpersonal warmth or engagement that typically enhances visitor experience.

A recurring theme across participants was low confidence in using English, which significantly influenced their willingness to communicate. Many participants reported feeling anxious or embarrassed when attempting to speak English, particularly in front of fluent speakers. This psychological barrier often led them to limit communication to the shortest possible exchanges. Participants acknowledged that their limited vocabulary and lack of practice contributed to this lack of confidence, creating a cycle where avoidance further reduced opportunities for improvement. Participants identified limited access to relevant training programmes as a major constraint to English competence development. Several informants mentioned having attended short workshops or seminars in the past, but these were described as overly theoretical, short in duration and not directly related to their daily service tasks. Training sessions often focused on general English rather than situational communication required in tourism settings. Consequently, participants felt that such programmes did not significantly improve their ability to communicate with tourists in real situations.

Diverse educational backgrounds also contributed to the variation in English competence. Some participants had completed secondary education with minimal English exposure, while others had not received formal English instruction beyond basic schooling. This disparity created uneven skill levels across tourism actors, making collaborative communication challenging. In many cases, tourism workers relied on a small number of individuals perceived to have better English skills, leading to unequal distribution of communicative responsibility.

Weak institutional support further limited opportunities for systematic skill development. Participants indicated that there were no sustained language development initiatives from local authorities or tourism management bodies. English learning was largely perceived as an individual responsibility rather than a structured professional requirement. This lack of institutional emphasis reduced motivation for continuous learning and limited the integration of language competence into service quality standards. Despite these challenges, participants expressed strong interest in practical, work-oriented training aligned with their daily service needs. Many informants suggested that they would benefit from learning specific phrases and dialogues directly related to their occupations, such as explaining menu items, describing local products, guiding tourists or handling complaints. Role-play, simulation and practice-based learning were frequently mentioned as preferred methods because they closely resemble real service situations.

Observations also indicated that when participants were guided through simple role-play scenarios during interviews, they showed noticeable improvement in confidence and

willingness to communicate. This suggests that structured, competency-based practice could effectively enhance functional English use. Participants responded positively to examples of situational dialogues and demonstrated an ability to imitate and adapt phrases when provided with contextual support. Overall, the findings indicate that English competence among tourism human resources in Parapat is constrained not only by linguistic limitations but also by psychological, educational and institutional factors. Communication practices remain routine, memorised and avoidance-driven rather than adaptive and interactive. However, the strong willingness of participants to engage in practical, task-oriented learning highlights the potential effectiveness of a Competency-Based Tourism approach in improving English communication skills aligned with real service demands.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that English language competence among tourism human resources in Parapat remains predominantly at a basic functional level, corroborating patterns observed in similar research across tourism contexts. Limited communicative skills were evident not only in routine tasks such as greetings or directions but also in more dynamic interactions, particularly when tourists requested detailed explanations or engaged in casual conversation. This aligns with broader evidence demonstrating that frontline tourism workers often struggle with authentic communicative demands, despite recognising the importance of English in service delivery (Rahayu et al., 2025). Such functional limitations have direct implications for service quality, as identified in studies highlighting how inadequate English skills reduce clarity, increase miscommunication and diminish visitor satisfaction (Williandani, 2024).

The observed variation in English competence across occupational groups within Parapat reflects differences in exposure and task requirements. Hotel front office staff, who interact frequently with international visitors, displayed somewhat higher functional competence, albeit still limited to structured situations. This pattern parallels findings from other Indonesian settings where hotel employees perceive speaking and listening skills as critical to professional performance, yet struggle with spontaneous dialogue due to limited practice and contextual training (Prima, 2022). Tour guides, although more exposed than informal actors, also exhibited constrained communicative ability, largely developed through experiential rather than formal learning. Similar shortcomings in tour guide English proficiency have been reported in community-based tourism settings, underscoring the need for deliberate language training to bridge the gap between grammatical knowledge and practical communicative competence (Damayanti, 2025).

Informal tourism actors, such as culinary business operators and souvenir vendors, demonstrated the lowest levels of English competence, often avoiding verbal interaction altogether. This avoidance behaviour resonates with research showing tourism workers in rural or emerging destinations frequently resort to non-verbal strategies, body language, or reliance on intermediaries due to low confidence and limited vocabulary (Rusmawan et al., 2025). These coping strategies, while facilitating basic exchanges, do not fulfil the communicative demands of contemporary globalised tourism, where English functions as a

lingua franca enabling deeper engagement and personalised service (Astawa & Wijaya, 2024).

One of the most salient findings in the present study is the pervasive lack of confidence among tourism actors in engaging with tourists in English. Participants reported anxiety, fear of mistakes and reluctance to initiate conversations. This echoes the literature on communicative willingness and psychological barriers in language use within tourism contexts, where limited self-efficacy inhibits performance even when basic linguistic knowledge exists (Miqawati et al., 2024). Such psychological factors are not merely individual issues but arise from structural constraints in training, practice opportunities and supportive feedback mechanisms embedded within workplaces.

The study also highlights limited access to relevant and contextualised training as a major factor constraining English competence development. Most existing programmes were described as short, generic and disconnected from real service needs. This finding aligns with broader research on English for Tourism and Hospitality training, where mismatches between educational input and workplace communicative demands lead to a persistent skills gap (Rahmani & Laratmase, 2024). A classic case is documented in studies of Tourism English curricula in Jordan, where substantial gaps exist between classroom focus and industry requirements, undermining graduates' readiness for authentic service communication (Hutchinson & Waters, 2019). Educational background emerged as another constraint. Varied schooling experiences meant that some participants had minimal formal exposure to English, limiting their baseline competence. This issue is similarly reported in assessments of tourism students' English skills, where low proficiency is widespread even among learners predicted to enter hospitality roles (Kurniarini et al., 2021). This suggests a systemic gap in English education aligned with tourism workforce needs, indicating a need for more specialised, industry-responsive curricula that integrate both linguistic and intercultural competencies.

The absence of institutional support for continuous language development further exacerbates these gaps. Unlike technical and operational training often provided by local tourism authorities or enterprises, English language development appears to be left to individual initiative. Comparable research in tourism-oriented regions highlights that effective institutional commitment—including structured in-service training and supportive language policies—is essential to sustain skill growth and reinforce service quality standards (Saber & Kamaruddin, 2025). Despite these constraints, the study reveals a strong interest in practical, work-oriented training among participants. They expressed preference for learning methods that closely mirror real service tasks, such as role-plays and situational dialogues. This finding echoes evidence on task-based and experiential learning approaches, which have been shown to significantly enhance English communication skills and professional readiness among hospitality learners (Wilson, 2025). Moreover, early indications from role-plays during interviews suggest that competency-based and practice-focused approaches can boost both competence and confidence, supporting the argument that such training methodologies are more effective than conventional, lecture-style instruction (Yahya et al., 2025).

In summary, the discussion confirms that English language competence among tourism human resources in Parapat is constrained not only by linguistic limitations but by psychological, educational and institutional factors. These constraints mirror broader patterns documented in tourism and hospitality literature, highlighting global and local challenges in aligning English language development with service quality expectations. The findings support a shift toward competency-based and contextualised training paradigms that integrate authentic communicative tasks, workplace relevance and continuous support mechanisms. Such approaches are crucial to equipping tourism workers with the skills needed to engage confidently and effectively with diverse international visitors, thereby enhancing service quality and destination competitiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the level of English language competence among tourism human resources in Parapat and explored the relevance of a Competency-Based Tourism (CBT) approach for improving communication skills in tourism services. The findings demonstrate that English use among tourism actors remains largely basic, routine and formulaic, enabling only predictable service exchanges while limiting their ability to engage in spontaneous and meaningful interaction with international visitors. Variations in competence across occupational groups indicate that exposure to tourists and job demands influence language use, yet overall communicative ability remains constrained. The study also reveals that these challenges are not purely linguistic. Psychological barriers such as low confidence, diverse educational backgrounds and the absence of sustained institutional support significantly affect workers' willingness and ability to communicate. Existing training initiatives were perceived as too general, short-term and disconnected from real service contexts, limiting their practical impact. However, the strong interest shown by participants in practice-oriented, situational learning indicates a high level of readiness for more relevant forms of training.

These findings suggest important practical directions for tourism stakeholders, including local authorities, training institutions and tourism businesses. English training programmes should be redesigned using a competency-based framework that prioritises task-based learning, role-play, simulations and situational dialogues reflecting real service scenarios such as handling complaints, explaining attractions and interacting with guests. Continuous, workplace-embedded training rather than one-off workshops is necessary to ensure sustainable skill development and to build both communicative competence and confidence. At the policy level, English competence should be recognised as a core component of tourism service quality standards rather than an optional skill. Structured language development initiatives need to be integrated into tourism development planning, particularly in strategic destinations with high potential for international visitation. Institutional commitment is essential to embed language competence within broader tourism professionalism frameworks.

The study also contributes theoretically by demonstrating how English for tourism can be meaningfully linked with Competency-Based Tourism principles, extending discussions on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) into practical tourism workforce development. It

highlights the multidimensional nature of language competence, encompassing linguistic, psychological and institutional dimensions that interact to shape service performance. These insights open opportunities for future research to design and evaluate CBT-based English training models in tourism contexts and to conduct comparative studies across destinations to develop more generalisable frameworks for tourism workforce language development.

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